

HAVING FUN AT THE WAKE // Peter O'Brien

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James Joyce's final book *Finnegans Wake* is simultaneously the most resistant and the most generous artwork that exists.

Resistant because although Joyce said that he could justify everything within it, this circular linguistic extravaganza remains labyrinthine, intransigent, and largely impenetrable to anyone approaching it (exactly, I think, how Joyce wanted it, overflowing as it is with riddles and inventions, and cross-historical and instantaneous perambulations).

Generous because it is continuously inviting us into its expansive, ubiquitous, and welcoming sui generis existence (this process, as Ovid and Giambattista Vico and Nature itself inform us, has to be continuous because that is the way the world effortlessly and insistently and without cease reprocesses and recreates and repossesses itself). (And what do artists do except reprocess, recreate, and repossess?)

I've been reading *Finnegans Wake* for about 45 years and still have a long way to go.

Some years ago I decided to annotate the book for myself, and to draw upon (both drink from and decorate), and to disrupt it – sticking my inquisitive nose where it wanted to go, intertwining my meandering musings with its body, and jabbing it with marks and colours (and



various found objects, including the whole range of bodily fluids and humours) as I saw fit and as I hoped would fit.

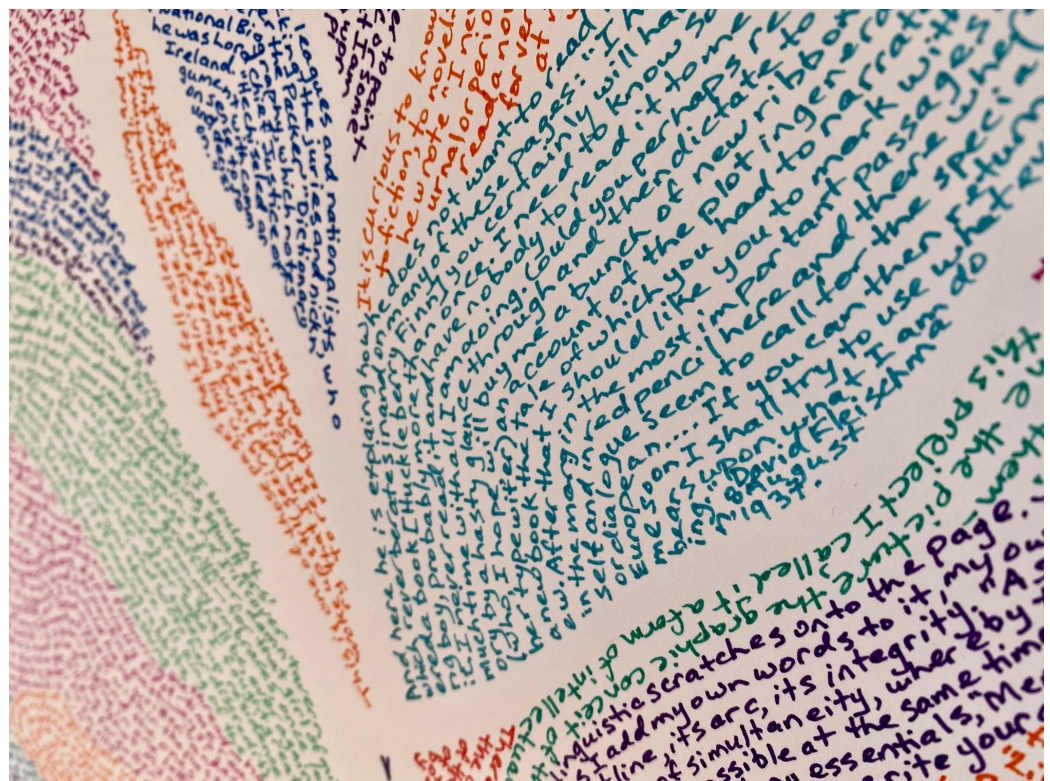


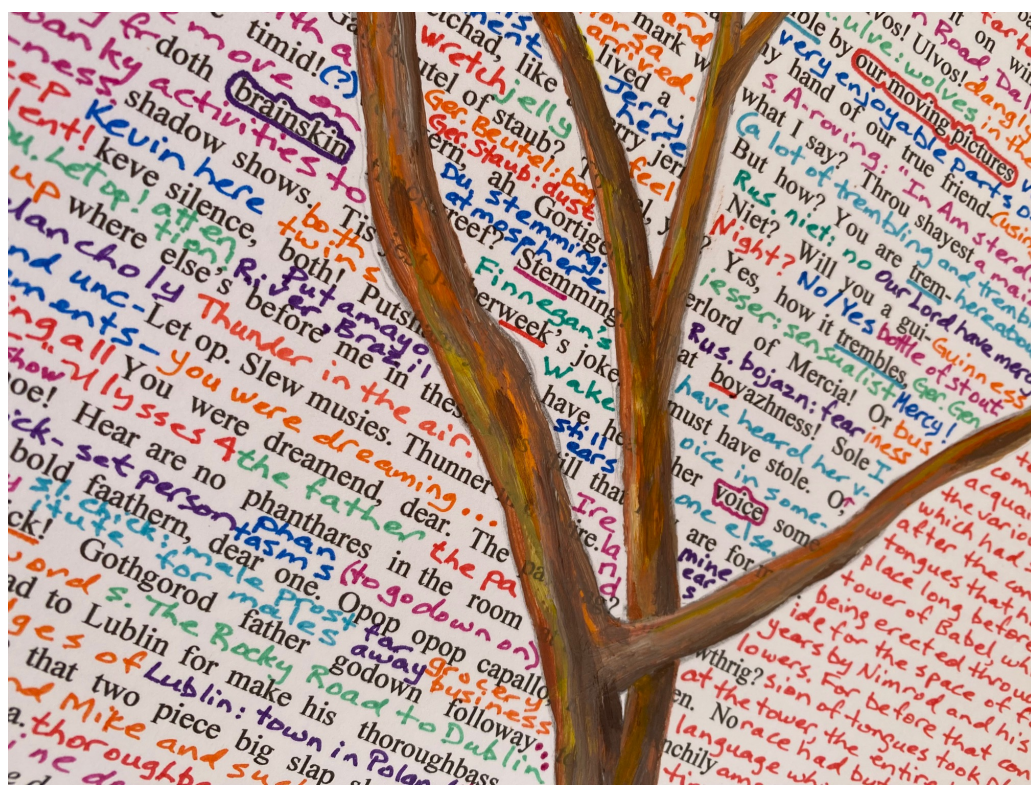
Yoking together my twinning interests in the illustrative and the intellectual, the verbal and the visual, the pallet and the palette, LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE, my current multi-year artwork, is a way for me to have some fun with the book that Joyce spent 17 years building.

The tree outside my window is a simple place to start.

Covid-bound as I am, it's often the first and last thing I see. In the midst of my own idiosyncratic glossings – I integrate the research of various guidebooks (my knowledge of Persian, Rhaeto-Romanic, and Shelta is pretty shaky, to say nothing of my familiarity with the artificial language Volapük) and then embroider the text with my own specific amusements – I've painted and depicted various versions of this tree onto the pages.

The roots and the trunk and the crotches and the branches: trees can take on an uplifting amount of words and weight. I jigsaw as I go, fitting a few letters or words here and there,





crafting the edges just so, making room for the thing to breath, and then trying to prevent myself from following my natural horror vacui instincts.

So is my artwork an artist's book? At the end of my project (if such a thing will or should exist) I'll have one copy of 628 pages of words and colours. But some of the originals are already being

dispersed, so the entirety of LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE may never be entire. If I think too much about that, I begin to tire. So I just keep marking the time.

Who knows what an artist's book is? Do I know? I've always been partial to Marcel Duchamp: "It's an artist's book if an artist made it, or if an artist says it is."

Peter O'Brien's most recent book, *Dream Visions: The Art of Alanis Obomsawin*, was published in October 2021 by Viggo Mortensen / Perceval Press. His next book, *Love & Let Go*, will appear in March 2022. He has been working on LOTS OF FUN WITH FINNEGANS WAKE for about six years. More on the project: www.peterobrienart.com.