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KNITTING *FINNEGANS WAKE*: A NEW TAKE ON JOYCE

John Shoemith
Outreach Librarian, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

THE LIST OF never-read literary classics tends to run long. The great Irish writer James Joyce (1882–1941), however, has the distinction of having two of his most famous works in the well-known-but-not-widely-read canon: *Ulysses*, generally acknowledged to be one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most influential, novels of the twentieth century, and *Finnegans Wake*, his last published novel before his death. The latter is a particularly impenetrable, some might say unreadable, text. Joyce began working on it about a year after the publication of *Ulysses*, and it took seventeen years before it was published in full, although it was serialized in different

literary journals over the years. Largely written in a stream of consciousness and experimental style—it has been suggested that the prose is meant to recreate the experience of sleeping and dreaming—it is a novel where one even struggles to describe its plot or its main characters. Let's just say it's not a book for the beach.

It was, however, a book much loved and studied by famed media theorist and long-time University of Toronto English professor Marshall McLuhan (1911–1980). It was so adored and researched, in fact, that the Marshall McLuhan Library held at the Fisher includes four separate copies of the novel, each

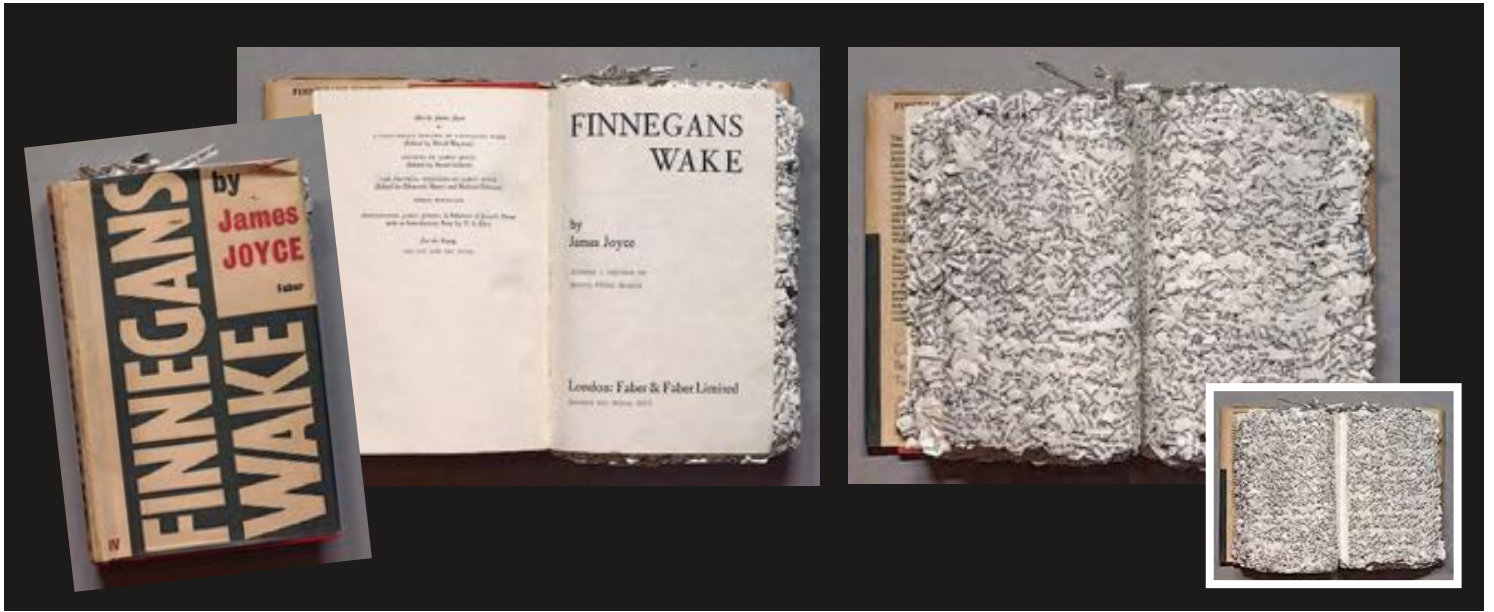
one heavily annotated by McLuhan along with his academic son and frequent collaborator, Eric (1942–2018). Their interest in Joyce's arcane and difficult text is not a surprise, given their own studies in the complexities of language. The McLuhans surely delighted in Joyce's use of linguistic devices and word games, and his means of practically inventing a new language. Moreover, the McLuhans claimed to have 'cracked the code' of *Finnegans Wake*. One of the four copies of the novel in the McLuhan Library, the 1939 Faber and Faber first edition, is a rare copy on its own, and its extensive annotations, which contribute to our understanding of a significant thinker's own reading and interpretation of the work, add another layer of rarity to this particular volume.

McLuhan's 1939 copy is not the only first edition of *Finnegans Wake* in the library. Additional copies can be found in our Delury Irish Literature Collection, which features numerous editions of all of Joyce's work. The collection holds not only first and subsequent editions, but also the original publications in which Joyce's work was serialized, including the Paris-based literary journals *transition* and *The Transatlantic Review*, which first published excerpts from *Finnegans Wake* in the mid-1920s. Between the McLuhan Library and the Delury Collection, we have an ample selection of James Joyce's work, particularly *Finnegans Wake*. About the only thing missing was some type of unique 'one off' copy of the Joyce classic, say an artist book version.

In early March 2020 when I was in New York City, coincidentally presenting at a conference at NYU called 'Reading McLuhan Reading', I found myself roaming the cavernous Park Avenue Armory for the New York International Antiquarian Book Fair, where I came upon the booth of the antiquarian book dealer Lux Mentis. Much to my delight, a copy of *Finnegans Wake* that I had never before seen, and that was certainly not in our collection, caught my eye: it was an altered artist's book version by Barcelona-based artist Ximena Pérez Grobet, titled *Reading Finnegans Wake*. While the Fisher did not acquire the book at the time, we had the opportunity to purchase it several months later, and it is now part of the library's collection.

Ximena Pérez Grobet is the founder and owner of Nowhereman Press, and has been creating her own artists books since 1994. She is well represented around the world as her work has been shown in galleries, museums, and at book fairs throughout Europe, the United States, Mexico, and Latin America. The Fisher,

FACING PAGE: Video capture showing Ximena Pérez Grobet knitting a page of *Reading Finnegans Wake*. **THIS PAGE, LEFT TO RIGHT:** Dust jacket, title page, and page spread; the inset photo reveals how the signatures are constructed.



however, did not have any of her works in its collections. What better way to start than with her wonderful artistic interpretation of the famously difficult Joyce classic, which perfectly complements our existing Joyce holdings as well as our collection of artists' books?

'The topic is language and language is the topic,' wrote Joyce scholar Margot Norris about *Finnegans Wake*. Pérez Grobet used this as her mantra when approaching the complexity and density of Joyce's text. More to the point, she embraced this complexity visually by creating an altered version of the book. She began by first removing the binding and cutting the 1965 Faber and Faber edition of *Finnegans Wake* up line by line to create thin strips of paper out of the text. She then took those strips and, using knitting needles, connected them together to create new pages, all the while respecting Joyce's text by keeping it in the same order as the original. There is a [video](#) of her on YouTube showing the creation of the book. Using these newly reconstructed woven pages, she then rebound the book. The new edition, which she retitled *Reading Finnegans Wake*, consists of four volumes covering the four parts and 450 pages of the original.

All told, the book took her several years to create. In fact, Ian Kahn of Lux Mentis booksellers first met Pérez Grobet when she had a booth at the CODEX book fair several years ago. What initially captured his attention was that she was sitting at her table and casually

knitting strips of paper together—she was working on *Reading Finnegans Wake*. Pérez Grobet writes about her conception of the novel and the creative process in her artist statement that accompanies the book:

'This new mise en papier highlights the enormous complexity of Finnegans Wake in a different, artistic way. I thereby turn Joyce's language into matter and establish a new visual interpretation that not only respects the original structure, but also seeks to preserve the rhythm and form of the style, beyond its meaning, while also maintaining the format and original material of the publication, paying a visual tribute to the novel and the author.'

The artistic means taken by Pérez Grobet also pays tribute to how Joyce's work tends to be approached, particularly *Finnegans Wake*. Due to its complexity as a text, not to mention its uncertain and indiscernible plot, it is a novel open to many interpretations. She has taken that approach literally by visually re-interpreting the entire book, while still adhering to its basic structure: every word that appears on the first page of the 1965 edition remains on the first page of *Reading Finnegans Wake*, but in an alternative format. The process she uses, knitting, is also deliberate, meant to evoke a theme she interprets via her own interaction with the novel: 'As a result of this work by Joyce,' she writes in the artist statement, 'I understand reading as a slow, meticulous creative act, like that of a person who knits.

Therefore, true to Joyce's lines, I set out to show here, in a different way, what words do when they are visibly combined and twisted, and in so doing, reveal another dimension.'

Altered books like *Reading Finnegans Wake* are a popular format within the broader definition of 'artists' books'. While it may seem sacrilegious to some to take an existing intact book and cut and carve it up, what an artist hopes to do with this technique is to reinterpret or re-represent that work—not only to remind a reader or viewer that the book exists as a physical object, but to provide a new and unique perspective on it. In Pérez Grobet's case, her altered text is not unlike Joyce's own playful and idiosyncratic approach to words and syntax. Just as he required a new language to tell his story, Pérez Grobet first needed to disassemble Joyce's language, or the physical text, to reinterpret it.

Even though I often show the McLuhan copy of *Finnegans Wake* to classes and seminars, I will usually come clean and say that I myself have in fact never read the novel, but that if I were tempted to read it, it might well be McLuhan's copy, as he would be a helpful guide through the arcane text. Now I can add Pérez Grobet's altered copy to my preferred reading list. After all, her re-imagined version of *Finnegans Wake* can't be any more difficult to wade through than the original Joyce text, and it would certainly be more fun to flip through.