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JAMES JOYCE BROADSHEET

READING THE *WAKE* AS PERFORMANCE ART

by Richard Brown

THESE BOOKS WERE ALIVE; THEY SPOKE TO ME! was a remarkable exhibition of printed materials and performances of reading by Barcelona-based artist, Dora García. It was held at the Tetley Gallery in Leeds in March-April 2017 (https://thetetley.org/dora-garcia-books-alive-spoke/). A certain context for the approach to books and reading in the show was apparent in its title, which is a quotation from Ray Bradbury's 1953 dystopian novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, set in a future society where all books are destroyed by Firemen. The book was the subject of a period-styled 1966 film adaptation by François Truffaut, which has become something of a cult, and a 2018 remake of the film underlines the timeliness of its theme for a contemporary society which is often said to be postliterate, post-bibliocene. For this exhibition, Garcia and her collaborator, Michaelangelo Miccolis, recruited and trained volunteers to engage in various performances of reading. Exhibits included display cases associated with Garcia's various projects and interests (in Lacan, in Joyce) and even a displayed book (different each day) which visitors were invited to steal. A cropped version of the well-known 1970's black-covered Penguin paperback *Ulysses* alluded to the history of censorship of Joyce's work (*fig. 1*).

Joyce has been central in Garcia's work at least since her strikingly thoughtful and effective 2013 film, *The Joycean Society*, based on the work of the Zürich *Finnegans Wake* Reading Group, chaired by Fritz Senn. This was reviewed in the *Broadsheet* in 2014 (*JJB* #97). The film formed part of the Spanish contribution to the 2013 Venice Biennale and the accompanying book, edited by Abdellah Karroum, is referenced in another book form on display here (*fig. 2*). For Christa-Maria Lerm Hayes, *The Joycean Society* and other Joyce-inspired works by Garcia are especially important because they 'inscribe themselves into a lineage of practices that extend his writing, and add new understandings of his visual legacies,' expanding the 'complex relationships between artistic responses to Joyce and "artistic research"'.

One room of the Leeds Tetley show contained a table featuring open copies of *Finnegans Wake* and some loosely-associated materials (*fig. 3*) and Garcia invited the long-established University of Leeds School of English *Finnegans Wake* Reading Group to relocate its regular meetings and hold a specially-scheduled reading of the 'Willingdone Museyroom' episode around this table. The room was filled with readers, including Garcia herself, regular group members, Georgina Binnie, Richard Brown, Pieter Bekker, Alistair Stead and Joe Gilmore, newcomers to the *Wake* recruited as readers for the Tetley show, including Chris Blanchard and Kath Wheatley, and distinguished visitors. The table for the reading event itself was filled with notes, images and ideas brought by contributors, and Garcia and Miccolis listed Joyce's *Wake* sigla on a blackboard to set the scene.

Reading the readings

Wake group regulars Ian Garvie (local resident and organiser of the annual Bloomsday gathering in Leeds), James Garza (from the School of Languages, University of Leeds), and novelist and Visiting Leverhulme Professor, Tabish Khair, contributed their own readings of the event.

'TO READ as part of an installation is to allow oneself to be curated – *to be read* reading Joyce. The gallery location of the event made me confront an aspect of group reading that had mostly escaped my attention. But it is something that is present whenever we meet as a group. That is the performativity of the act: the way that the interpretations we offer reflect what we need the text to be. I find myself thinking of a quote from an essay by Jonathan Culler: "Interpretation itself needs no defence; it is with us always, but like most intellectual activities, interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme." I wonder if this is true. It is easier for me to imagine extreme responses to Joyce's text than appropriate or even adequate ones. Dora's event raised these issues to consciousness for me, and I am grateful for the opportunity to have taken part.' **(James Garza)**

'IT IS RARE FOR A PASSAGE in *Finnegans Wake* not to produce in the reader a desire to enquire more deeply into some arcane knowledge referred to by Joyce. The pages we read were about battles: Camel, Flodden Field, Solferino, Thermopylae, Bannockburn ("panickburns"), though the battle this passage is mostly concerned with is Waterloo. The mention of "scotcher grey" reminded me of the painting in Leeds Art Gallery which portrays the cavalry charge by the Royal Scots Greys early in the battle. It is by Lady Butler and entitled "Scotland Forever", The gallery was closed until October of 2017 but its curator, Nigel Walsh, who was himself present at the reading, was able to tell me that it had been loaned to the nearby Royal Armouries Museum. Inspired by the *Wake* reading, I paid a visit to the Armories the day after in order to reacquaint myself with the painting and to find out more about the battle of Waterloo. I found an extensive and informative display with maps, descriptions and a timeline of the battle, together with the uniforms and weapons of day. The centrepiece was a large scale model of the battlefield by William Siborne, one of two he made in the 1830s.' **(Ian Garvie)**.

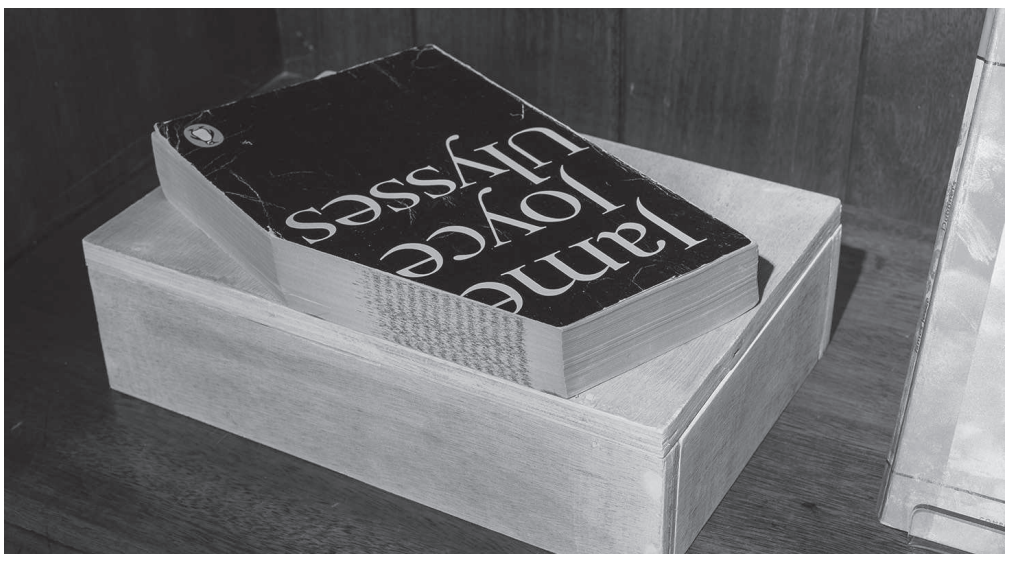

Fig. 1: *Ulysses* guillotined

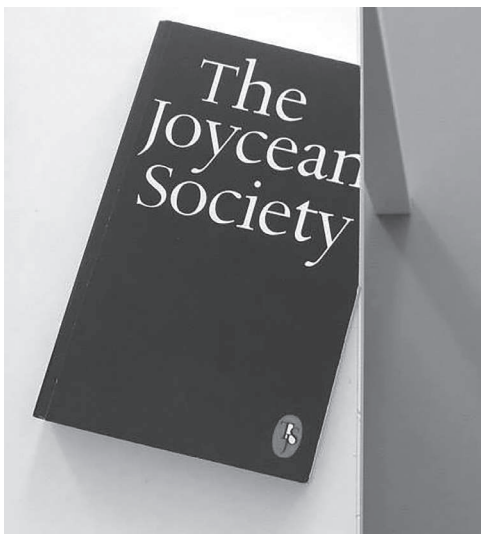

Fig. 2: Apropos the Zürich reading group

Real Reading

'DIGITAL READING, at least as it exists right now, is not real reading. It is significant that in all Indo-European languages, 'to read' also means to 'think, suppose and guess'. In some, as in Sanskrit, the root of the word 'read' bears the imprint of 'to accomplish.' That is the point I would make: digital reading speeds you up and usually prevents the mind from going beyond the surface of the screen. Because it is usually done on an 'interactive' medium, this also involves various distractions: pop-ups, permission requests, the urge to click on a tempting icon and check your Facebook.

This is not exactly reading in the sense of 'thinking, supposing, guessing.'

My prejudice against the prevalent kind of digital reading today was reinforced when I participated in the group reading as part of "These Books Were Alive; They Spoke To Me" at Leeds's new Tetley Gallery, converted from the Tetley, then Carlsberg brewery, which (being on leave from my usual job at Aarhus University, Denmark), had an additional Danish resonance for me.

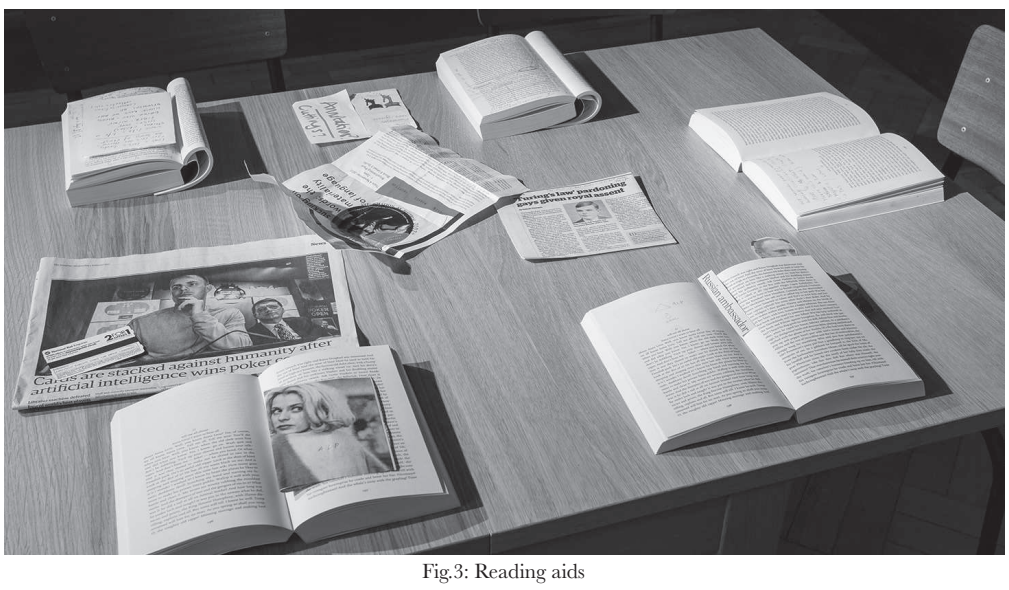

Fig.3: Reading aids

As the readers delved into about two and a half pages of Joyce's novel – for around three hours – what came across was exactly the capacity of great literature to provide space to, as Seamus Heaney says of his pen, "dig". As we read the extract over and over again, we threw up new meanings and possibilities. Both silent reading and reading aloud helped in that, attesting to the fact that a good work of literature is, for us, a piece of writing, but the writing itself depends on the fact that it is in a language with a predominantly oral provenance. What I am trying to say is both conservative and radical: I am trying to say that literature is writing (the notion of oral literature is an oxymoron) and that this writing exists within orality. Or, to be exact, at least "secondary orality", as defined by Walter J. Ong. James Joyce is among the few writers who makes an extremely rich and complex use of this chirographic-oral nature of literature. You need to read his lines from *Finnegans Wake* or *Ulysses* on the page, which allows certain kinds of excavation of meaning, and then you also need to spell them out aloud to release them back into the atmosphere of orality that surrounds all living languages.

"Culture presumes an environment in which deep attention is possible", writes Byung-Chul Han: "Increasingly, such immersive reflection is being displaced by an entirely different form of attention: hyperattention". He goes on to argue that a hectic rush into activity and a low tolerance threshold for "boredom" are not conducive to culture, just as "multitasking" is not a progress but a regress. Animals have always multitasked, for instance, by eating, grooming and keeping a watch for other predators at the same time. "Multitasking," Han suggests, is the common plight of all animals, including humans, in a hostile environment. What humans had partly achieved, and are now gradually losing, is the space and capacity for contemplation.

This is part of my lament in my talks that tend to offend digita crusaders. But I would not leave it there, because literature – literature as reading a book – provides a particular kind of space for and a varying pace of contemplation. One can pay deep attention to a flower, or to a piece of music. One can contemplate the cosmos or a painting. But as anyone who has read more than one book knows, reading books enables different – and differing – types of contemplation. Literature speeds you up, slows you down, even stops you dead from page to page, line to line, and, at least in poetry and the prose of James Joyce, word to word, space to punctuation mark. Here, contemplation is just another word for thinking, and literature – as I have argued elsewhere – remains humanity's earliest thinking device.

To read James Joyce online, while checking your email, responding to the various pop-ups your gadget regurgitates at regular intervals, with the cursor moving Joyce's lines quickly downwards while your eyes travel upwards? I am sure it is being done. But I am relieved it was not being done that day at the Tetley Gallery. Because, then, I fear we would not have read Joyce. Or literature. Not really.' **(Tabish Khair)**

Reading after Joyce

WHILST ONE ACHIEVEMENT of reading the *Wake* as performance art was to defamiliarise and re-animate the experience of the thinginess of the printed book in the digital age, another was to invite a re-articulation of the radical variety, value and interest of reading books as an activity in our world. In such a re-articulation the distinctive challenge of reading Joyce clearly has a formative role to play. Can we unsettle the reader-writer binary enough to see the group-reading of *Finnegans Wake*, as, in some sense, a form of artistic expression in itself? How would such an art form contribute to current debates, especially prominent in the academy, around the evaluation of practice and performance as kinds of knowledge and research? In its foregrounding of such questions the value of the exhibition went beyond the reading of Joyce as conventionally understood and invited a cool reconsideration of what reading, after Joyce, can and indeed has become.