

"Where are we at all? and whenabouts in the name of space"

Darren Tofts

When Dante entered the abject world of hell, it was Virgil, a classical poet who accompanied him and explained its mysteries. In a similar retro gesture, it is James Joyce, as opposed to William Gibson or R.U. Sirius, whom I adopt as my guide to cyberspace. Part of Virgil's appeal for Dante was ancestral, for he had previously taken a journey into the underworld in *The Aeneid*. As we continue to forge a brave new electronic frontier that goes by the name of cyberspace, Joyce seems a most appropriate guide. He too has been there before, and *Finnegans Wake* is my *Aeneid*, since it embodies the convergence of paperspace and cyberspace.

Marshall McLuhan was one of the first to recognize Joyce's importance in the age of media, describing him as a clairvoyant (McLuhan 1968: 74). The radio, telephone and cinema feature prominently in *Finnegans Wake*, as does the emergent apparatus of television ("the bairdboard bombardment screen") (Joyce 1975: 349). On the basis of the way television is represented in the *Wake*, predominantly in Book two, chapter three, Joyce's interest in its historical formation as a mode of communication is bound up with his familiarity with contemporary understandings on the nature of time and space. We should, of course, expect nothing less. One of the first discussions of television occurs in the context of references to Einsteinian physics (1975: 149) and Planck's quantum mechanics (1975: 149-50). Joyce was quick to recognize that television warps perceptions of space (his "faroscope" [1975: 150] is not so far removed from our "telepresence"). He was even quicker to recognize that new technologies also warp language, and provide the opportunity for invention. To someone who felt that he could do anything with words, the emergent invention of television must have excited Joyce's verbal membranes, an excitement detected in formations such as "teleframe" (1975: 349) and "teilweisioned" (1975: 345). His conceits seem to also indicate a fascination with the luminous nature of the new "medium" (new in the sense that through language and imagination he was contributing to its invention). The charge of light down this "nightlife instrument" (1975: 150) stimulated ideas of representability, producing very early in the piece some of the grammar of the medium (the "fade" [1975: 345], the "double focus" [1975: 349]). Contemporary screen theorists don't seem, though, to have mastered Joyce's language. The term "verbivocovisual" (1975: 341) doesn't have any currency in contemporary discourse. This is a great pity, for no other term in use suggests as efficiently the interdiscursive nature of television as a medium.

The television program also makes its first appearance in the *Wake*, well before it was cultural fact. In typically Joycean presentiment, the two staple television genres, domestic drama and comedy, are broadcast in the *Wake* with an air of routine network programming: and tonight on BBC1, the "Taff and Butt Show" and "The Charge of the Light Brigade". The episode in Earwicker's bar in book two has all the trademarks of late channel surfing (the pun in this context has not been lost on me) between "swapstick quackchancers" (1975: 342) and "the scanning firespot of the sgunners" (1975: 349), complete with commercials "from our sponsor" ("The Irish Race and World" [1975: 341]), and, of course, a favourite "compeer" ("Tancred Artaxerxes Flavin" and "Barnabas Ulick Dunne" [1975: 337]). Dream logic proved for Joyce to be a useful, and indeed accurate model for imagining the shifting, collage-like qualities of television; a feature of the medium that has been increasingly discussed in recent years by communications theorists and the like.

Apart from the uncanny sense of commonplaceness about the television show, there is also in this chapter an undeniable wonder generated by the novelty of moving pictures. Earwicker's customers bawl for the show to begin ("We want Bud. We want Bud Budderly. We want Bud Budderly boddily" [1975: 337]). Joyce seemed to be in no doubt that television would become the dominant form of popular culture in this century. The social context of the medium as spectacle, which creates its own audience and sustains the desire for continuous theatricality, is indicated in the setting of this chapter in a "public plouse" (1975: 338). Joyce's timing here is superb in the way that television program and pub rattle and hum blend into a soundscape in which there is no identifiable foreground and background. As a cultural apparatus, the television is very much *mise en scène*.

The *Wake* has also proven to be something of an index of telecommunicative change, anticipating the cultural impact of the succession of different media forms ("Television kills telephony... Our eyes demand their turn") (1975: 52), as well as the advent of hypermedia, such as virtual reality ("a dreariodreama setting, glowing and very vidual") and hypertext ("The proteiform graph itself is a polyhedron of scripture") (1975: 107). In their predictable search for ancestry, commentators from William Gibson to Michael Heim frequently describe *Finnegans Wake* as an exemplar of hypertext. Ted Nelson, too, has drawn attention to the literary characteristics of the medium; indeed, his most famous axiom, "everything is deeply intertwined", is distinctly *Wakeian*. Joyce's exploitation of equivocation is well recognised as a method of dreamwork. But it is less well known as a form of electronic thought, of hyperlogic. Joyce extended verbal freeplay to such a degree that his language space becomes a manifestation of the marvelous, the phantasmagoric, where diversity and convergence know no bounds. The inclusiveness made possible by the *Wake* in this respect makes Lautréamont's chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table seem positively banal. We can learn also learn a lot about the concept of extension from the *Wake*, for its systematic patterns of self-reference create the dense, web-like organization of information ("messes of mottage") (1975: 183) that we associate with the term "network". All this was not lost on Jacques Derrida who, in the burgeoning days of the personal computer, recognised such parallels, describing the *Wake* as a "hypermnesiac machine" that links information about different cultures, religions, philosophies and mythologies at incalculable speed (Derrida 1984: 148). As a dream of human history, it is a collective unconscious ("[the law of the jungerl](#)") (1975: 268), where all language, all identity fuses into the public domain of universal memory. Nelson's dream of Xanadu still awaits fruition (it is, as the *Wake* was called before publication, a *Work in Progress*). Joyce has already created Babel.

The parallels between Joyce's "nightmaze" (1975: 411) and the Internet are, of course, irresistible. The common response of newcomers to both is of unmanageable excess; in their own ways they are both unreadable. The lack of co-ordinates entails untelligibility in Joyce, disorientation on the Net (they are "too dimensional") (1975: 154). The defining metaphors of both suggest liquidity, formlessness; Joyce's "riverrun" is cyclical, without beginning or end, and the Net is a bit-stream, a data-sphere. It's worth remembering that cyber is Greek for [navigate](#); a fitting prefix for an environment that, by its very nature, lacks pre-determined grids. The type of involved textual analysis that has persistently been applied to the *Wake*, exegesis (from the Greek, *egeomai*, to lead) is also aptly named. In both cases the need for guidance contributed to the rapid formation of communal identity. On-line help, bulletin boards, chat groups and the overall ambience of a shareware culture are the Net's equivalent to the reading groups and collective study seminars that enabled a generation of Joyceans to negotiate the matrix of *Finnegans Wake*.

Cyberspace, in Michael Benedikt's words, is "a territory swarming with data and lies, with mind stuff and memories of nature, with a million voices and two million eyes in a silent, invisible concert of enquiry, dealmaking, dream sharing, and simple beholding" (Benedikt 1993: 2). Joyce's "babbblers" (1975: 15) are no less garrulous than today's virtual community, and just as various. The *Wake*'s central character, H. C. Earwicker, is impossible to "idendifine" (1975: 51), and the abundant permutations of his name (Here Comes Everybody, Haroun Childeric Eggeberth, Heinz cans everywhere) parallel the diverse interest groups populating today's Huge Cyber Ecology, as well as the role-playing and shifting subjectivities that takes place in IRCs and MOOs.

Both cyberspace and *Wake* are parallel realities, consensual hallucinations that allow for infinite variety and difference. But a crucial question, equally applicable to both, is asked in the *Wake* of itself: "Where are we at all? and whenabouts in the name of space?" (1975: 558). Joyce, as we know, was besotted with the written word. The *Wake*, a space literally made of words, is an "allaphbed" (1975: 18), a verbal terrain where the same letters are combined and recombined in ways that hypertext culture struggles to compete with (perhaps there's something of a Joycean reference in the initials HTML). *Finnegans Wake* is as much concerned with *Finnegans Wake* as with anything else in its orbit. Whoever it is that speaks to us in the name of the narrator is hyper conscious of the formidable challenge of entering this language space, especially when armed with literary assumptions formed by *critique vraisemblable*; assumptions that involve passing beyond writing to a represented world: "(Stoop) if you are abcedminded, to this claybook,

what curios of signs (please stoop), in this allaphbed! Can you rede (since We and Thou had it out already) its world?" (1975: 18). You've got to hand it to the guy. It wasn't just any group of professors he sought to keep busy. Anyone who would play around with the word "Peirce" clearly had a certain audience in mind.

Book two, chapter five is Joyce's most sustained exposition of the grammatological nature of the *Wake's* "spatiality" (1975: 172). In a fit of diacritical pique, writing in this chapter almost collapses to its barest scriptural essentials. Morphology, signification, clear the decks of this claybook. Like that postcard (so beloved of Derrida) of Socrates writing and erasing at the same time, Joyce reminds us here that literature (understood as an imaginary world created by writing) begins its life as so many marks, or "paper wounds" (1975: 124):

These paper wounds, four in type, were gradually and correctly understood to mean stop, please stop, do please stop, and O do please stop respectively, and following up their one true clue, the circumflexous wall of a singleminded men's asylum, accentuated by bi tso fb rok engl a ssan dspl itch ina,-- Yard inquiries pointed out -- that they ad bîn "provoked" ay ^ fork, of à grave Brofèsor; àth é's Brèak -- fast -- table; ;acùtely professionally *piquéd*, to=introduèe a notion of time [ùpon à plane (?) sù ' ' façade'e'] by pùnc! ingh oles (sic) in iSpace?! (1975: 124). [N.B.: Certain symbols which appear in the original text are impossible to incorporate into WWW files.]

Remarkably (thanks to plenty of Heavy Critical Exegesis), out of the "riot of blots and blurs" (1975: 118) that is the punctured space of the *Wake*, we manage to form something beyond the page; it's "the same told of all ... They lived und laughed ant loved end left" (1975: 18), "... as human a little story as paper could well carry" (1975: 115). Some kind of imaginary space comes into being when the *scriptible* insomniac reader begins "again to make soundsense and sensesound kin again" (1975: 121). I've always been struck by the astonishing sleight of hand in this chapter, which deconstructs the very language of the *Wake* itself, through the very language of the *Wake* itself. Here, as in many passages throughout the text, Joyce anticipates the janus-faced textuality so characteristic of postmodern fiction (think of Borges and Calvino). If you want to create a world, an imaginary space, dear Reader, you had better like words, and be prepared to play with a them "a full trillion times for ever and a night" (1975: 120).

Imaginary space, in Joyce's verbal universe, comes into being through the reader's negotiation of textuality, which is in itself the activation of certain learned habits about the nature of language as representation. But where are we, exactly, in cyberspace? [The cyberpunk vision](#) of being jacked into the machine imagines an alternative sensory condition beyond language altogether, a downloading of the mind into the matrix of pure information. While virtual reality environments offer convincing experiences of immersion in artificial worlds, other media such as Internet are inevitably rehearsing familiar terrain. The predominantly text-based character of Internet clearly means that if we are somewhere else, we are there notionally (to use William Gibson's term). The people we communicate with, perhaps fall in love with, swap ideas with, or simply chat with, are imagined in much the same way that we have traditionally come to know fictional characters, or the person whose letter we are reading. Writing entails a virtual reality through acts of faith and consent, the conceptual location of its participants in an "elsewhere", be it novel, office memo or MUD. Cyberspace, itself, is something many Netcruisers would have initially "entered" in just this manner, through reading cyberpunk novels such as *Neuromancer*. The *Wake* clearly occupies "paperspace" (1975: 115), but it doesn't behave according to the predictable logic of typography and its associated reading practices. Its hyperlogic necessitates the use of an augmented form of artificial memory only conceivable in the computer age (which was not that far away, for in 1939 Vannevar Bush postulated the idea of Memex, or memory extender, the theoretical system recognized as the foundation of hypertext). The best Joyce could hope for in 1939 was "an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia" (1975: 120).

The place of the *Wake* within the lineage of [hypermedia](#) clearly evidences the ongoing evolution of writing as a technology, which needs to continually extend itself to accommodate cultural change: Thoth begat Joyce begat Xanadu. McLuhan asks the question at the end of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*: "What will be the new configurations of mechanisms and of literacy as... older forms of perception and judgement are

interpenetrated by the new electric age?" (1968: 278) With Joyce the writing was on the wall, "telesphorously" (1975: 154) speaking. He was, as the vanguard saying goes, ahead of his time in making the jump from paperspace to cyberspace. However it is a mistake to think that with the *Wake* he simply wrote a book that *looks like* hypertext. In fact he didn't write a book at all. He provided a complex system of prompting, the primary node in an interface to be activated by the reader. [Interface design](#) is in the process of reflecting this generative principle, for as Brenda Laurel has noted, computer scientists have only just begun to incorporate into software development an awareness of the collaborative nature of the human/computer relationship (Laurel 1993). Before software there was "joyceware" (Derrida 1984: 147).

The *Wake* embodies the fundamental desire implicit in the history of writing: the artificial extension of memory, and the displacement of the self through technology. Hypertext and Internet respectively have become Western culture's most advanced response to this grammatological desire. In this new media formations are not merely catching up with Joyce. They are, as Derrida has noted, "*in memory of him*" (147).

References

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