

“Beyond the Orality/Literacy Dichotomy: James Joyce and the Pre-history of Cyberspace”: A Case Study

Citation

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Abstract

Orality and literacy, famously explored by Walter Ong, have been significant topics of literary and cultural theorists, including Marshall McLuhan, long before the age of cyberspace. One of the main influences on McLuhan and his ideas of orality and literacy is James Joyce, also often referred to as a precursor to hypertext and new media. From the “global village” to virtual reality, Joyce can be seen to have planted seeds with his “pre-cybernetic vision” (11), most notably in *Finnegan’s Wake*. Joyce’s unique use of language brings sound to the forefront of text. The *Wake* also addresses technology’s influence on culture—foremost speech and writing and hints at aspects of technology, such as “bits,” relevant today. Many of the ideas found in Joyce’s writing, both thematically and structurally, are echoed throughout McLuhan’s own writing, and are still applicable to those studying new media today.

Author

Dr. Donald Francis Theall is Professor Emeritus of cultural studies and English at, and former president of, Trent University. He holds a BA from Yale and a Master's and PhD from the University of Toronto. He was Marshall McLuhan's first PhD student and in 2001 published a biography of McLuhan called *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*. He is also author of *The Medium is the Rearview Mirror: Understanding McLuhan* and *Beyond the Word: reconstructing Sense in the Joyce Era of Technology, Culture, and Communication*, and *Joyce's Techno-Poetics*. He has also published numerous articles on communication theory as well as online versions of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* and *Ulysses* (<http://www.trentu.ca/faculty/jjoyce/>). (Theall).



Interests listed on his current faculty webpage include “cyberspace and virtual reality; relation between communications theory, artistic theory and practice and poststructuralism; James Joyce; McLuhan and Canadian communications theory” (Theall, Trent University Faculty Webpage).

Journal

Postmodern Culture is an entirely online, peer-reviewed, refereed, abstracted, indexed, and scholarly journal and calls itself “an electronic journal of interdisciplinary criticism” (*PMC* and Ulrich’s). It is published by Johns Hopkins University Press with support from the University of California, Irvine, and the University of Virginia. It is published three times a year and the current editors are James English and Lisa Browley. The journal was started in 1990 as “an experiment in scholarly publishing on the internet” and is now considered “the leading electronic journal of interdisciplinary thought on contemporary cultures” (*PMC*). John Unsworth, currently in Virginia, is one of the founding editors responsible for the technical design and implementation in the early years and still serves on the editorial board. He says of *PMC*: “It was not just the first publication of its kind: it is also the longest-surviving electronic journal, the first electronic journal to be published by a university press, the first peer-reviewed journal to appear on the World-Wide Web, the first academic journal to publish networked multimedia, and the first scholarly journal distributed free of charge” (Unsworth).

Ulrich’s expounds on *PMC*’s submission policy: submission are accepted by e-mail, attached as a Word document if possible, or through “snail mail” (actual wording on *PMC*’s website). Submissions are sent to Claire Chatell, managing editor at the University of Virginia’s department of English. Articles must be in MLA format with works cited. There is no word length requirement, but articles are typically 6,000 to 11,000 words. Their submissions guidelines also include an author’s guide with specific, detailed information on various file format requirement for multimedia, images, video, and html code. They no longer accept unsolicited works of fiction or poetry.

Research

(by endnote number or in-text citation)

20A

In *The Presence of the Word*, Walter Ong, the famous theorist of orality and literacy, refers to Marcel Jousse's study of gesture and the use of voice. The chapter is called "Word as Sound" and the section Jousse comes up in, "The affinity of sound and thought." The comparison includes how gesture develops from the interior, as does sound, and how we understand words and gestures in similar ways. Both also "progress through time" (147). For example: "The meaning of a bow is in its progression from uprightness to the inclined position" (147). I'm not sure this reference was necessary. Ong's mention of Jousse is brief, but it does add to the other Jousse references, providing more credibility to the discussion, and ties in Ong, a forerunner in the orality and literacy discussion.

B

Lorraine Weir's article, "The Choreography of Gesture: Marcel Jousse and *Finnegan's Wake*" was found in *James Joyce Quarterly* 14.3 spring 1977. Although it would have helped to have the journal or article referenced in the note, the article was not too difficult to locate. This article further explicates Joyce's relation to Marcel Jousse and his possible influence on *Finnegan's Wake*. Joyce had said that Jousse was "a source—albeit somewhat tardy—of gesture, logos, cry, and linguistic evolution in *Finnegan's Wake*" (314). Weir claims that Joyce saw his work as not the concept of gesture itself, but "a structure, a choreography, a handful of elaborations which reaffirmed what he already knew" and states that "Jousse's work can help us as readers to perceive a pattern which we had only dimly apprehended before" (322). She also references

Eugene Jolas who appears in Theall's article as well (see note 31). She also cites other sources relevant to the topic, such as the Gutenberg Galaxy, and Joyce scholars Jackson Cope and Mary Colum, who wrote an article called "Our Friend Joyce," possibly in reference to Jolas' famous work. It is a well-researched, well-documented scholarly article and *James Joyce Quarterly* the most well-known, well-respected journal of Joyce scholarship. If someone were interested in following the study of Jousse and gesture, this would be a great follow-up article.

Finnegan's Wake (267.7-9)

The quotation is found on page 267, lines 7-9 as the note states and is an affirming example of how Joyce uses orality and song, particularly lyrical phrasing, even though it could be perceived as nonsensical, to express ideas orally. None of the in-text references to *The Wake* seem superfluous, as they are provided to illustrate the points and Joyce's own use of linguistic provisions, only explicable through direct quotations from the text.

(268.7-9)

This quote is found on page 268, lines 7-9 and accurately expresses Joyce's use of rhythm, particularly with the word "rythmatick," as well as addressing the idea of rhythm, the point of this section of the article.

(36.8-9)

This quote is found on page 36, lines 8-9. It is partially taken out of context, as in *The Wake* after "word" is a rather lengthy qualifying parenthetical. However, the spirit of the quote is preserved, and it accurately completes Theall's sentence, the purpose of this particular line, while still maintaining this expression of Joyce's use of linguistic play and focus on "rhythmics" throughout the text.

The Global Village is a book of McLuhan's collected notes published posthumously in 1989, written then by McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers. Originally I assumed the quoted words in this section: "reconstricted" and "wordcraft" were undoubtedly McLuhanisms but I could not locate any mention of the terms on page 182, where this note directed me. I discovered later (earlier in the text if I had looked up the in-text quotations before the footnotes), that these terms came from Joyce and *Finnegan's Wake* itself. Instead, I believe the connection is the very last idea addressed about "hieroglyphs and primitive script based on drawings or mnemonic devices" (8). Page 182 is located in the Notes and References section of *The Global Village*. Note 10 from Chapter One, "The Resonating Interval," is directly after an explanation of tetradic patterns (mathematically) in Note 9, and explains "the mirror down through history"—that it "obsolesces a sense of tribal self, the corporate masks, and prompts private idiosyncratic dress" (182). Because this note only referred to Cf. McLuhan (1989), I had a somewhat complicated time finding the referenced text. Since I was first looking for coined McLuhanisms, I then looked in the other McLuhan book referenced in the article, *The Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, edited by Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan and William Toye. Of course, this book was dated 1987 and so I made my way back to the Notes and References section of *The Global Village*, realizing that sometimes just a very basic idea is referenced and not always blatantly recognized.

This note comes several pages later in the text of the article, when Theall is more into this idea of Joyce's "pre-cybernetic vision" (11). *Understanding Finnegan's Wake* by Danis Rose and John O'Hanlon appears to be a helpful (and possibly necessary tool) to use in conjunction with

Joyce's text, to more fully explain some of the more intricate and complex sections and themes of *The Wake*. This section, with a scene from the end of the novel, explains in more detail the metaphor of the eggs and the technological implications. The metaphor is brought out in a detailed comparison of the human body's digestive system to a machine and how Joyce has accomplished this. It is a helpful reference, thoughtful even, for anyone not entirely familiar with *Finnegan's Wake* or who may have found it challenging to decipher this metaphor.

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Chapter nine, "Earwickerwork," of *Joyce's Book of the Dark* by John Bishop focuses on the sounds in *the Wake* and gives special consideration to their "meoptics." This note comes in a section of Theall's text dealing with the sense of hearing and the direct quote from *the Wake* is about the ear specifically. The note directs the reader to Bishop's text for a detailed discussion of the ear and that is exactly what the reader finds. On page 266 there is a two-page etymological chart that is even more complex than Joyce's writing; there is another one further on, also a diagram of an ear, and a discussion of earwigs. The chapter not only delves into representational meaning in some of the lyrical words in the text, but also Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, the "sleeper" as an embodiment of the sense of hearing. Joyce himself said: "in sleep our senses are dormant, except the sense of hearing, which is always awake, since you can't close your ears" (273). Bishop even explores the derivation of the name from various backgrounds. The chapter, I did not even attempt to read the entire book, is interesting but most definitely for a serious Joyce scholar and perhaps someone with a background in linguistics.

27

Jorge Luis Borges' *Other Inquisitions*, more specifically pages 6-9, entitled, "Pascal's Sphere," is steeped in philosophy. From Plato, Dante, and Milton, Borges' eloquently describes the

metaphor and mythology of the sphere, from our own beings to the infinite universe. Theall obviously gleaned from Borges' writing on the subject something he found comparable to McLuhan's "acoustic space" (14), ending up in a comparison of Pascal's sphere to virtual reality. This was a very powerful way to attach the ideas of emerging technology to ancient philosophy and myth—even religion—a stretch, possibly, but effective in giving the idea of VR as an immersive globe of multimedia. The Borges reference chapter was beautiful to read, particularly after the "Earwickerwork" reading and, really, I think meant for readers who might be skeptical as to how technology fits into the future of humanity. Scholars with a more classical background, who either identify with Borges as a brilliant postmodernist or with the philosophy and the sphere, would find this tie-in reassuring. And the idea is quite well done on Theall's part—very romantic, idealistic, McLahanesque.

31

The quest for *James Joyce: two decades of criticism*, which ended happily, resulted in yet another search for the one-page citation. Eugene Jolas' article, "My Friend James Joyce," in the 1948 edition, the one referenced, was not on the same pages in the 1963 edition, the one found, and so kindly delivered by, the University of Richmond. The search for one very short quote was, however, worth it, as the article was a rather intimate biographical account of and homage to Joyce and very fun to read. Jolas' tells the story of how *Finnegan's Wake* was named and how Joyce, himself, felt the last part to be prophetic (which I wonder why Theall didn't pick up on and add to the article). I almost felt that this one small Joyce quote was Theall's way of saying he read and acknowledged Jolas' accounts of his friendship with Joyce and also provided the article with that intimacy of the author's own words. Jolas has been cited in many articles on Joyce so it may also be a Joyce scholar courtesy. For the curious, it provides a rare look at Joyce's creative

process, personal relations, sense of humor, and awareness of his prophetic vision. It gives a new perspective of Theall's article when Joyce is quoted as saying: "I have discovered that I can do anything with language I want" (13).

However, the quote is not to be found in the Jolas article, but actually on the page cited in Theall's note, 24, which, it turns out, is an article by Frank Budgen. Had I not disregarded the page number because it was not the article I was looking for, I would have found the referenced quote much sooner but would have missed out on the Jolas article, which would have been unfortunate. I realize that miss-quotes and references happen frequently in scholarship but, nonetheless, I had to go back to it several times to make sure. Since this was my last note, it felt like coming to the end of the treasure hunt. I would imagine Theall would be quite embarrassed if he knew. I wondered too if Theall had read the Jolas article, since it had several anecdotes and quotes that would have added a personal perspective to his article. Also, the first word of the quote should have been capitalized but that seems like such a minor thing when it is attributed to the wrong article/author.

Article

In “Beyond the Orality/Literacy Dichotomy: James Joyce and the Pre-history of Cyberspace,” Theall is extending the connection, via inductive scholarly research, between James Joyce’s unique grasp of orality and his foreshadowing notion of technology. He assumes his reader has a familiarity with Joyce and, perhaps also, at least limited, a priori knowledge of the works of Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan. Ong, though not mentioned at great length in the article, is widely known to be the foremost scholar on orality and literacy, with a book of that name as well. McLuhan, who gleaned some of Ong’s notions of orality, is considered a disseminating scholar of culture and media. He also establishes backgrounds of cyberspace, electronic communication, orality and literacy, and virtual reality.

“Beyond the Orality/Literacy Dichotomy: James Joyce and the Pre-history of Cyberspace” has been cited in *James Joyce Quarterly* 40.4 (Summer 2003) by AJ O’Brien, “The Virtual Marshall McLuhan,” a review of Theall’s book published in 2001. It is comprehensible that the article itself is not cited as often as this book or his others on McLuhan and Joyce, since the books often discuss the themes of this article, and in more detail. It is possible, however, that the article might have been quoted more if it were found in a print journal, as online scholarly work has not been widely recognized or well-received in the humanities (as of yet).

O’Brien’s book review begins with the article, stating: “As early as 1992, in an article entitled “Beyond the Orality/Literacy Dichotomy: James Joyce and the Pre-history of Cyberspace,” Donald Theall argued that we have yet to recognize the significance of Joyce’s writing for major cultural and intellectual figures such as Marshall McLuhan, Jorge Luis Borges, John Cage, Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, and Jacques Lacan” (O’Brien). The review discusses Theall and his connection to Joyce and McLuhan and their connection to each other. He quotes

directly from “Beyond the Orality/Literacy Dichotomy” by stating, “He [Theall] called McLuhan “the most enthusiastic Joycean of them all” as well as the “bridge linking the work of Joyce and his modernist contemporaries to the development of electric communication and to the prehistory of cyberspaces and virtual reality” (885). When introducing *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*, O’Brien says “a decade and two Joycean books later” (885). The entire review really gives the sense that the book sprung from Theall’s interests and primary claims in the *Postmodern Culture* article. Of the book, O’Brien says, “each chapter stands alone as an independent story written with wit and care, offering new insights into Joyce’s comic trickery in *the Wake* and his construction of a newly emerging communication culture that evolved into cybermedia” (887). It is clear that even by disseminating classical Joyce scholars, such as those who would subscribe to *James Joyce Quarterly*, Theall is seen as a strong writer and expert on both McLuhan and Joyce.

As he goes into more depth in *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan*, in the article Theall affirms the connection of Joyce’s use of language as a prominent influence on theories of orality. He is also discussing Joyce’s “prophetic” (13) technological vision, for example the association of “the structure of communication” to bits, or “data” (12). The idea of lyrical sound-based poetic language in Joyce’s work and his allusions to the orality of language is more well-known and researched, but really solidly developed by Theall. However, it seems that the main claim is on the prophetic vision, how Joyce’s writing was prophetic of the upcoming cultural changes towards technology, and even virtual reality. His thesis can be found on the very first page in the quote also found in the book review:

While all of these connections should be explored, the most enthusiastic Joycean of them all, McLuhan, provides the most specific bridge linking the work of Joyce

and his modernist contemporaries to the development of electric communication and to the prehistory of cyberspace and virtual reality (1).

Theall establishes his own ethos by referencing influential scholars such as McLuhan and Walter Ong. He appeals to the reader's logic with explicit examples from the text. By this use of direct quotations from *Finnegan's Wake* for examples alongside noteworthy scholarship on the idea, Theall really grounds his article in classical scholarship, as far back as Plato with the Borges' citation, and moves the reader to the conclusion that Joyce really did predict aspects of our current technology-immersed society. His connection with McLuhan, and use of his scholarship, provides an idealistic vision of the future of the book in the realm of virtual reality technologies. Like McLuhan, there is no prediction of the death of the book, in fact Theall argues against these types of insinuations, but merely a move towards cultural change and a redefining of multimedia with regards to text, not a "second orality" but an adaptive one.

Optional

Besides the glaring error with the Jolas citation, Theall is quite obviously a trustworthy, knowledgeable, respected scholar in the areas of McLuhan and Joyce. The fact that he published this article in *Postmodern Culture* speaks to his own belief and optimism about the emerging possibilities in internet scholarship. Although not cited extensively, the article has become a voice in the scholarship on the topic through Theall's books, which descended from his initial thoughts found in this article. Also, in 1992, internet scholarship was still in its extreme infancy, whereas now *Postmodern Culture* is a well-respected scholarly journal. Their process of peer-review includes e-mail and a listserv, their submission guidelines examples of appropriate format html code, something a print journal would not have to grapple with. The possibilities provided by distributing scholarly materials in this manner is ground-breaking and inspiring—additions of not only images, but audio, video, and multimodal compositions are possible in this realm. So long as there are guidelines and scholars such as Theall are willing, even enthusiastic about submitting their work in this format, online scholarship will continue to grow, develop, and improve.

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