

From *Finnegans Wake* to *The Skriker*: Morphing Language in James Joyce and Caryl Churchill

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Finnegans Wake, however great an achievement in itself, has acquired the reputation of a literary dead-end, a work without successors. In large part, it seems to me, this reputation is justified, at least when we look at what has been written in the sixty-odd years since its publication. This is not to say that the *Wake* has been without influence: the course of literature in a number of languages would have been quite different if it had never been written. In 1977 David Hayman and Elliott Anderson collected a number of specimens of and commentaries on literary writing that, in their view, bore the imprint of Joyce's last book; their work appeared as a special issue of *Tri-Quarterly*, later published as a book entitled *In the Wake of the "Wake."* Among the authors they selected were Christine Brooke-Rose, Gilbert Sorrentino, and John Cage (writing in English), Maurice Roche, Philippe Sollers, and Hélène Cixous (originally writing in French), Amo Schmidt (originally writing in German), and Samuel Beckett (writing in French and English). Since 1977, the influence of the *Wake* has, if anything, increased, and Joyce's exhilarating freedom with language (and with languages), his blending of popular and high culture, and his comic exorbitance must be seen as one of the inspirations for the wave of postmodern experiment of the past twenty-five years.

Being influenced by a predecessor is not the same as building upon his or her work, however. The writers mentioned may use one or more of the techniques we associate with *Finnegans Wake*, and they may feel emboldened in their literary experimentation by Joyce's example, but I don't think any of them could be said to have profitably exploited or extended the particular stylistic innovations of the *Wake*. One of the remarkable features of Joyce's final style is that its dense linguistic deformations and reformations do not result in a text that works only for the eye; as thousands of readers have testified, it is a style that calls out

for, and responds wonderfully to, vocal performance. A common characteristic of the post-Joyceans brought together by Hayman and Anderson, however, is their exploitation of the visual dimension of the printed page, a spatial exuberance which frequently makes reading aloud difficult and perhaps unnecessary. For example, the work most commonly cited as a successor to *Finnegans Wake*, Amo Schmidt's magnum opus *Zettels Traum*, although it is as obsessively concerned with multilingual punning as Joyce's book, cannot be performed as an adventure of the human voice in the way Joyce's can; it is emphatically a work that lives on the page, deriving from the Nightlessons episode¹ of the *Wake* its use of columns and notes but employing typescript, handwriting, erasures, corrections, and variations in spacing in ways that cannot be represented aloud. Christine Brooke-Rose and Maurice Roche are other examples of writers in the *Tri-Quarterly* collection who play with the visual more than the aural medium, and the spatial imperative remains strong in much recent anti-conventional fiction such as the large-scale novels by William Gass (*The Tunnel*, published in 1995) and Mark Z. Danielewski (*House of Leaves*, published in 2000)—novels whose debt is finally much more to *Ulysses* than to *Finnegans Wake*². Authors such as these can be said to be writing in the wake not only of Joyce but also of Pound, Mallarmé, Steme, and ultimately of the Greek “figure-poems” ascribed to Simias of Rhodes, a poet of the early third century BC.³ Joyce, it has to be said, does not play a particularly significant role in this history of visual experimenters.

An alternative post-Joycean style that eschews visual delights and allows the voice, or imagined voice, to dominate is the use of unpunctuated, run-on language, exemplified in the Hayman and Anderson collection by Philippe Sollers and Raymond Federman. Here are a few lines from Carl Lovitt's translation of part of Sollers's *Paradis*:

. . . that's it sunder flounder your death coma grossily inverted
 placenta cáncer aureola fi-orn where i sit i see them drip drop by
 drop bazooka siphoned typhoon I'm back on the track bascule
 mask crackied stares from forebears' portraits galleries pupiis
 starred waxed flash foundation of aspiration trumpet pump passing
 on the quotient tidbit idiot famishing flashflood chromos of men. .
 .⁴

This is quite unlike the *Wake*, both in its respect for the lexical integrity of the language and in its disrespect for syntax, punctuation, and capitalization. The model is clearly the “Penelope” episode of *Ulysses*,

but the greater liberties taken with syntax produce a text much less suited to oral performance.

What is extraordinary about *Finnegans Wake* is its productive combination of an aurally inviting style, in which rhythm and syntactic organization play an important role, and the feature of the work that caused (and still causes) the most immediate, but also probably the most lasting, difficulty for its readers: its systematic use of lexical distortion. Deformation of syntax, dismantling of the traditional plot, fusion of distinct times and places, fragmentation and transformation of characters: these were not entirely new when *Work in Progress* began to appear, and ways could be found of dealing with them. But to modify the very words themselves, so that they seemed to belong to no known language: this was a challenge of a different sort.⁵ At the same time, it was this portmanteau technique which provided the special comedy of *Finnegans Wake*, making it, for those readers who took to it, one of the funniest, as well as one of the linguistically richest, books ever written.

It is this combination that has proved resistant to further development. Though many of the writers mentioned above use puns and portmanteaus, the effect they produce is very different from that produced by Wakean language: less immediate, less comic, less pleasurable. The effort required to get to grips with a page of Brooke-Rose or Sollers can seem too great for the rewards it has to offer, the struggle with the language seldom lifting it off the page. Although many of those who have encountered the *Wake* would say the same about Joyce's baffling book, its language can work very directly on the reader who is not crippled by preconceptions about its difficulty and who takes the trouble to perform the text aloud (or who hears it read by a skilled performer). It is of course possible to go on picking meanings out of a passage of the *Wake* till the cows come home, but it is also possible to get enough of its sense (or rather senses) on a first reading or hearing to produce a certain degree of comprehension and a considerable charge of pleasure. Further study increases both comprehension and pleasure, filling in many of the gaps left on the first encounter; but it is that initial experience of meanings tumbling out in rich profusion, sometimes in coherent sequences, sometimes in baffling disjunction, and always carried forward by the rhythms and intonations of the spoken language, that marks the *Wake*'s uniqueness, and its unique winningness. None of its successors has offered the reader or hearer this experience—with one exception.

Caryl Churchill's play, *The Skriker*, was first performed in London (to great acclaim) in 1994, and was published in the same year. In 1996 it had a short run at the Public Theater in New York, again to critical praise,

where I was lucky enough to see it. The play focuses on the relationship between a shape-changing fairy, the Skriker (taken from the folklore of Northern England), and two young women struggling to get along in a harsh late twentieth-century urban setting. Moving between the human world and the underworld, the play shows the fairies engaged in a constant struggle to tempt humans into their domain, since it is through the imbibing of human blood that they prolong their lives. But the gradual degradation of the earthly environment by human exploitation is producing problems for both worlds, and the Skriker views her task with frustration and despair.⁶

It is in the Skriker's language that Churchill crystallizes the concerns of the play while at the same time giving her character an unworldly distinctiveness and an eerie power. The play begins, like *Finnegans Wake*, without concessions: it opens with a long monologue from the Skriker (four-and-a-half pages in the printed text), demanding of the audience that they undergo a rapid learning process in order to make some sense of the strange language. Here are the opening sentences:

Heard her boast beast a roast befeater, daughter could spin span
spick and spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into
roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under
the castie for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a
king size well beloved. Chop chip pan chap finger chirrup chirrup
cheer up off with you're making no headway. Weeps seeps deeps
her pretty puffy cream cake hole in the heart operation. Sees a little
blackjack thingalingo with a long long tale awinding. May day,
she cries, may pole axed me to help her. So I spin the sheaves
shoves shivers into golden guild and geld and if she can't guessing
game and safety match my name then I'll take her no mistake no
mister no missed her no mist no miss no me no.⁷

The Skriker, we realize, is telling the story of a girl whose mother's boast that her daughter can spin straw into gold leads to a bargain with a little supernatural creature: he will carry out the magical feat but claims the girl herself as his reward—unless she can guess his name. It is best known, perhaps, as the story of Rumpelstiltskin, but in this northern English version the otherworldly figure is called Tom Tit Tot, and is none other than the Skriker in one of her many guises. The point of the story, of course, is that the Skriker fails to get her hands on the girl, and it thus provides the first example of the shape-changer's difficulties and desperation:

Then pointing her finger says Tom tit tot! Tomtom tiny tot blue tit tit! Out of her pinkie lippety loppety, out of her mouthtrap, out carne my secreted garden flower of my youth and beauty and the beast is six six six o'clock in the morning becomes electric stormy petrel bomb. Shriek! shrink! shuck off to a shack, sick, soak, seek a sleep slope slap of the dark to shelter skelter away, a wail a whiri a world away.⁸

A number of critics have called the Skriker's peculiar variant of English "Joycean language," though none has attempted to specify its precise relation to Joyce's variety of styles.⁹ What Churchill has done is to substitute for Joyce's technique of lexical and phrasal *superimposition* a technique of lexical and phrasal *overlapping*, maintaining the *Wake*'s ability to present quite disparate meanings simultaneously (often with comic effect) but achieving this by having one word or phrase ending at the same time as the next one begins, or sometimes cutting off the end of the first word or phrase as it morphs into the second one. Like Joyce, Churchill renders it easier for the listener by making extensive use of familiar phrases. To take one relatively simple example: "Never marry a king size well beloved" concentrates into seven words the phrases or words "Never marry a king," "king size," "Sizeweil" (the name of a British nuclear reactor—echoing the reference to "Dungeness" in the previous sentence and drawing our attention at the outset to environmental concerns), and the Biblical (and Hardy-esque) "well beloved."

A second technique, also common in the *Wake*, is to conjoin words by affinities of sound as well as, or sometimes instead of, sense. Thus in the first sentence "boast" leads to "beast" and then to "roast," while "beast" in turn leads to "beef" (while "roast beef" and "beef eater"—or Beefeater—indicate the Englishness of the woman who is boasting about her daughter's skill), creating an interlacing pattern of echoes. The continuation of the sentence also shows both these techniques at work: "spin" is echoed by "span," which provokes the remainder of the phrase "spick and span" (in inverted order) before coming up with a third inflection, "spun." "Spun" is then treated as if it were a Joycean portmanteau, in a self-referential allusion to the familiar saying "a pun is the lowest form of wit"—except that "wit" becomes "wheat," which leads to "straw," and we are back with the claim being made about the daughter's prowess as a spinner: "straw into gold."

The effect is one of language following its own inclinations, no longer under the control of the speaker; only when a sequence of overlapping phrases and puns has played itself out can the Skriker

reassert control in a fresh sentence. Thus her mention of the girl's utterance of her "secret" (itself combined with "secreted," meaning both hidden and discharged) leads to "garden" (*The Secret Garden* being a tale of illness and mystery), which leads to "flower," which leads to the phrase "flower of my youth" (the Skriker is hundreds of years old); "youth" is then absorbed into "youth and beauty," and "beauty" into "Beauty and the Beast" (another story of the entrapment of a young girl); the beast's number, 666, follows, the last "six" setting off the phrase "six o'clock in the morning," which in turn sets off a rapid overlapping series of phrases: "Mourning Becomes Electra" (crime and revenge), "electric storm," "stormy petrel," "petrol bomb." Not all of these seem relevant to the matter at hand, and sense seems to ebb and flow, though as is often the case with *Finnegans Wake* the more you work on a passage the less random its connections become. Certainly, the final word brings us back to the bombshell that the girl's correct guess represents for the Skriker, and leads to the shriek that sets going another series that conveys like a dying echo the fairy's miserable exit from the scene.

Naturally, an audience can't take all this in on first hearing; just as a first-time (or, for that matter, umpteenth-time) reader of the *Wake* is aware of missing a great deal. But the important point is that the fragments that do make immediate sense (which may be different for different auditors), together with a general understanding of what is being said, provide enough semantic satisfaction to be going on with; at the same time, a vivid impression is given of a unique being with a strange, oblique relation to the English language and to British culture. The stage direction describes the Skriker as "ancient and damaged," and the sense of utterances constantly going out of control, as, at the mercy of sound echoes and clichés, they follow the path of least resistance, is one aspect of the damage.

Churchill has succeeded in developing a stylistic technique that builds on Joyce's distinctive linguistic methods in *Finnegans Wake* while at the same time taking them in a new direction, a direction particularly suited to the stage. We can compare two brief passages to highlight both the similarities and the differences between the two works:

It was of a night, late, lang time ago, in an auldstane eld, when Adam was delvin and his madameen spinning watersilts, when mulk mountynotty man was everybully and the first leal ribberrobber that ever had her ainway everybuddy to his lovesaking eyes and everybilly lived alove with everybidy else, and Jarl van Hooter had his bumt head high up in his lamphouse, laying cold hands on himself. (*FW* 21.5-11)

We'll be under the bedrock a bye and by. We'll follow you on the dark road at nightingale blowing. No but they're danger thin ice pick in your head long ago away. Blood run cold comfort me with apple pie. Roast cats alive alive oh dear what can the matterhorn piping down the valley wild horses wouldn't drag me.¹⁰

Whereas my spellchecker highlights every second or third word in the *Wake* passage, the language Churchill has invented for the Skriker breaks no lexical rules. Where Joyce combines two or more words into one—"ago," "gone," and "alone" becoming "agone"; "elm," "old," and "age" becoming "eld" (the third of these only by virtue of the implied phrase "Old Stone Age"); "alone" and "in love" becoming "alove," and so on—Churchill blends beginnings and ends of phrases and, less frequently, words—"Oh dear what can the matter [be]," "Matterhorn," "hornpipe," "piping down the valley wild," "wild horses wouldn't drag me." Joyce's double or triple meanings are usually signalled by the oddity of the resulting combination, both on the page and in the ear; Churchill's by the unusual context or contexts of a word which in itself is perfectly normal.

Where she does combine different meanings in a single lexical unit, which happens infrequently, she prefers puns to portmanteaus: if two phrases overlap by a word that has a different meaning in each phrase, for instance, as in "safety match my name" and "stormy petrel bomb," the hinge-word is usually a straightforward pun. If it is a homophonic pun like *petrel/petrol* it doesn't matter how the word is spelled, since it is the overlapping phrases which create the double meaning. All this means that Churchill's language relies less on its existence on the page than Joyce's; instead of requiring both visual and aural dimensions to produce the multiple meanings, it can convey its overlappings and morphings to the ear alone.

As a playwright, Caryl Churchill aims to write speeches that will lend themselves to vocal articulation and that will make an impact in the theatre. *Finnegans Wake* might seem an unlikely place to turn for a model, were it not for the fact that, as I have stressed, it is most engaging and meaningful when read aloud.¹¹ Churchill has accomplished what previous writers in the wake of the *Wake* have for the most part failed to achieve: the creation of a distinctive language, richer and funnier (and sometimes more disturbing) than the one we normally encounter, that can be immediately, and profoundly, enjoyed. Joyce, I think, would have approved. .

Notes

¹ This is the episode that poses most problems for recordings of *Finnegans Wake*. Patrick Healy makes a hash of it, jumping from main text to notes at arbitrary places; Jim Norton, in the reading directed by Roger Marsh, omits it. See James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Read by Patrick Healy (Dublin: Rennicks Auriton Publishing, RAPCD01.1992; James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, Abridged and dir. Roger Marsh, Read by Jim Norton with Marcella Riordan (Naxos AudioBooks, NA516312, 1998).

² William Gass, *The Tunnel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (London: Transworld Publishers, 2000).

³ For a valuable discussion of this tradition as it developed in poetry, see John Hollander, "The Poem in the Eye", *Vision and Resonance: Two Senses of Poetic Form*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985) 245-306.

⁴ See David Hayman and Elliot Anderson, eds., *In the Wake of the "Wake"* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1978) 101.

⁵ See my "Unpacking the Portmanteau; or, Who's Afraid of *Finnegans Wake*?", *Peculiar Language: Literature as Difference from the Renaissance to James Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell UP and London: Methuen, 1988) 188-209.

⁶ The recurrent emphasis on the deleterious effects of advanced technology and human disregard of the environment in the play is, surprisingly, often missed by critics; one who does not is Vigouroux-Frey, who links *The Skriker* with Churchill's radio play about atmospheric pollution, *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*. See Nicole Vigouroux-Frey, "Pour des mythologies profanées: *The Skriker* (Caryl Churchill, 1994)", *Études Anglaises* 52 (1999) 182.

⁷ Caryl Churchill, *The Skriker* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1994) 1.

⁸ Churchill 1-2. The playwright uses this unusual style primarily for the Skriker's soliloquies, which punctuate the action; when the fairy is conversing with humans she is given a language that suits her disguise of the moment. In the underworld, however, both the Skriker and the spirits employ the morphing style.

⁹ Thus Reineit calls it "a Joycean-like [sic] language, part fairy-like, part gibberish," and Remshardt "a Joycean language," describing it as "a hodge-podge of resonances, references, and puns; a word-salad and cascade of constantly self-subverting, slippery sentences, as if all human parlance had penetrated the earth's crust in shards and were [sic] being manically regurgitated by the Skriker." Aston notes that "reviewers invariably characterized the Skriker's fragmented, associated speech patterns as 'Joycean.'" See Janelle Reineit, "Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style," *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights*, eds. Elaine Aston and Janelle Reineit (Cambridge: Cambridge UP) 188; Ralf Erik Remshardt, Review of *The Skriker*,

by Caryl Churchill, Royal National Theatre, London, 12 March 1994, *Theatre Journal* 47 (1995) 121; Elaine Aston, *Caryl Churchill* (London: Northcote House, 1997) 101.

¹⁰ Churchill 4-5.

¹¹ The best-known dramatic offspring of *Finnegans Wake*—apart from Mary Manning’s stage version of the *Wake* itself, used by Mary Ellen Bute as the basis for her film version—is Wilder’s *The Skin of Our Teeth*. Wilder, however, made no attempt to imitate the linguistic peculiarities of Joyce’s last book. See Mary Manning, *Passages from “Finnegans Wake”* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1957); Thornton Wilder, *The Skin of Our Teeth, “Our Town” and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962) 93-178.