"Joyce the Post"

SPURR, David Anton

Abstract

This essay proposes a reading of Joyce as intervening in the system of spatial mastery which we may designate in a general way as the "post": the deployment and regulation of language as conditioned by its media of transmission and its function as that which is sent, dispatched, or delivered through space. We owe this notion of language implies a dispositif or putting-into-place that organizes human communication according to the identification of subjects with names and addresses that fix their locations, thereby designating them as senders and receivers between the relay-points of the message-systems that constitute the post. Joyce's characters are constantly solicited by the post in this sense; they are both subjected to and constituted as subjects by letters, post cards and other transmitted and circulated texts. Like other technologies, the post functions as an extension of the human that increases the power of the subject while diminishing its value. As a writer, Joyce is concerned with the consequences of this predicament for his own language, and for language in general.

Reference


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Among the materials to be found in the archives of the James Joyce Centre in Zurich is a postcard sent from Joyce to his Zurich friends Carola and Siegfried Giedion. It is dated August 15, 1937, and is sent from the Hotel zur Krone in Rheinfelden, the Swiss town on the Rhine where Joyce is staying on holiday with his family. It is one of more than two dozen such cards Joyce sent to the Giedions between 1933 and 1938, and this one is fairly typical. Like the others, it shows an architectural monument, perhaps in acknowledgment of Siegfried Giedion's standing as one of the foremost architectural historians of his time. The picture shows a view of the town through the pointed arch in the stone tower (the “Oberturm”) that marks the medieval entrance to the city, still one of the icons of Rheinfelden.

Orthographically, the inscription on the card corresponds to the nonchalance of the genre: in naming his place of lodging Joyce misuses the dative case in German (“Hotel zur Kronen”) and misspells the surname of his friends as “Gideon,” using the biblical form of the name. The message reads, “Greetings to you both from here where we are to you there if you are there or wherever you are. James Joyce.” This bit of wit applied to the banality of the occasion seems to confirm an insight of Joyce’s implicit everywhere in his writing: that the instrumental technology of the postal system serves to organize the space of human communication according to the identification of subjects as senders and receivers, and as the poles and relay points of the various message systems that constitute the post.

In the postcard from Rheinfelden, Joyce strips the message down to its fundamental functions as if to call attention to them: the deictic, which designates the respective positions of sender and addressee as “here” and “there,” and the phatic, which confirms the contact between sender and receiver, and assures that the channel of communication is open and functioning. The postcard is the purest and, in Joyce’s day, the most modern element of the postal system, in its reducibility to the essential functions of the system emptied of content: hence its reliance on cliché and its relative anonymity, its ephemerality, and lack of intrinsic value. Joyce has a penchant for postcards: he sends them regularly to family and friends, like any tourist. But in his works of fiction they seem designed to show that even the
most neutral and banal form of postal communication is not innocent insofar as Joyce’s characters, and Joyce himself, are interpellated or solicited by what Jacques Derrida calls the “postal principle”: they are both subjected to and constituted as subjects by post cards, letters, and other transmitted and circulated texts. In the “Proteus” episode of *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus muses ironically on the destinations he intended for his youthful “epiphanies”: “copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria” (*U* 3.141–142). But there is evidence that Joyce as well thought of his works as dispatches sent from the various cities in which they were written. The final words of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* give the place-names and dates of the composition of the work: “Dublin 1904,” “Trieste 1914.” *Ulysses* ends with the compound “Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914–1921,” and, contrary to popular belief, *Finnegans Wake* does in fact have a full stop at the end of the last page, with “Paris, 1922–1939.” The formula resembles the postmark, giving both a date and the place from which the dispatch is sent. These inscriptions mark the stations of an itinerary; they are not so much return addresses as a series of addresses from each of which a work is sent off as an *envoi*. They allow us to map Joyce’s movements through space and time, to locate and identify him as *expéditeur* and ourselves as *destinataires*, and therefore to situate his work within the spatial logic of the tekhnè of the post. Joyce’s “postmarks” locate the composition of his works in several European cities of the twentieth century, thus accounting for their form and content in terms of a given historical setting and moment. Their destination is in fact all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria, and therefore posterity, which is to say that their destination constitutes their destiny: “le destinal se poste” (Derrida 72). Joyce is what I shall call a postal writer in that, on the one hand, his work intervenes in the global network of the transmission of texts, while on the other, it reproduces on its own terms the spatial mastery that connects a provincial capital to every other part of the world. We shall see, however, that in Joyce the function of the post as a means of delivering the written word from sender to addressee is ultimately indissociable from the problematic of desire as it mediates between the subject and its other.

The history of philosophical reflections on the postal system dates at least from its emergence in modern form. Voltaire conceives of the postal system as a triumph of the age of enlightenment, whereby if one of your friends needs to draw money in St. Petersburg and the other at Smyrna, the post office takes care of the matter. Or, if you are stationed with your regiment near Prague and your mistress has stayed in Bordeaux, she will inform you of all the goings-on at home except her own infidelities. The post is “le lien de toutes les affaires, de toutes les négociations; les absents deviennent par elle présents; elle est la consolation de la vie [the connection between all affairs, all negotiations; through it those absent become present; it is the consolation of life].” This sentiment is echoed in Jane
Austen’s *Emma* (1816), where even the risk of catching cold in the rain will not deter Jane Fairfax from walking to the post office in search of news from those dear to her:

“The post-office is a wonderful establishment!” said she . . . “So seldom that a letter, among the thousands that are constantly passing about the kingdom, is even carried wrong—and not one in a million, I suppose, actually lost! And when one considers the variety of hands, and of bad hands too, that are to be deciphered, it increases the wonder!”

Twelve chapters later, the reader learns the reason for Miss Fairfax’s solicitude in fetching her own letters: they come from Frank Churchill in Yorkshire, to whom she is secretly engaged.

Nonetheless, her speech reflects a view, characteristic of the age, of the post office as a great regulator and omniscient decipherer, able to transform the scrawl of every bad hand into the uniform legibility of a precise destination, and to deliver it with unfailing regularity and dispatch. Miss Fairfax’s wonder reflects Austen’s more general faith in the institutions of England, such as the Established Church and the Navy—if not always in the persons who occupy positions of authority in those institutions.

The modern postal system dates from the General Postal Union established by the Treaty of Bern in 1874, and providing for the free exchange of international mail, initially among twenty-two countries, so that, for example, a letter sent from Dublin to Trieste could be forwarded from Paris without extra fees being added on the way. Before the formation of the postal union, mail was carried by private firms such as the one owned by the Italian-Austrian family of Thurn und Taxis, which in the eighteenth century employed more than 20,000 persons and several thousand horses to assure mail service over a territory ranging from Brussels to Innsbrück. Joyce pays homage to this family when, at the end of the “Haveth Childers Everywhere” section of *Finnegans Wake* (FW 532–554), he evokes the building of the city of Dublin and, by extension, of cities throughout the world endowed with modern forms of transport such as “poster shays and turnintaxis” (FW 554.1). The postal service thus ensures the mastery of urban as well as international space. In the twentieth century, the possession of a postal address became not only a means of receiving mail, but also, for any individual, the single most important condition for civil recognition of any kind. In contemporary society, as every homeless person knows, to be without a postal address is, for all practical purposes, not to exist. What is true for homeless persons is equally true for certain countries, such as Turkish Cyprus, Palestine, or the Western Sahara, to which the Universal Postal Union (so named since 1878) does not make direct international deliveries. Even in the age of Internet, the postal union remains an extremely powerful institution in its organization of geographical space at every level from international boundaries to separate rooms on
the same floor of a single building. This universal organization of space is accomplished in part by the increasingly rigid syntax of the postal address, according to which, in theory and almost literally in practice, every person on earth can be identified according to name, domicile, place of residence, postal code, and country.

Given that the written document is the primary mode of communication for an institution at once so far-reaching geographically and so deeply penetrating socially, it is not surprising that the major European philosopher of the latter half of the twentieth century has reflected on the nature of the relation between, on the one hand, letters and their destinations and, on the other, the destiny of letters in the literary sense. So it is that what was a source of consolation for a philosopher of the eighteenth century can be for a philosopher of the twentieth the figure of division, difference, absence, and metaphysical homelessness. Jacques Derrida’s meditation on the transmission of knowledge from Plato to the present-day sees the entire history of writing as a massive, oppressive accumulation of letters sent to no known destination:

Dès lors que, à la seconde, le premier trait d’une lettre se divise et doit bien supporter la partition pour s’identifier, il n’y plus que des cartes postales, des morceaux anonymes et sans domicile fixe, sans destinataire attitré, lettres ouvertes, mais comme des cryptes. Toute notre bibliothèque, toute notre encyclopédie, nos mots, nos images, nos figures, nos secrets, un immense château de cartes postales.

[At the very second when the first stroke of a letter divides and must suffer this partition in order to be identified, there is no longer anything but postcards—anonymous, homeless pieces without proper addressees, open letters, but open like crypts. Our entire library, our entire encyclopaedia, our words, our images, our figures, our secrets—an immense house of postcards]. (Derrida 60)

According to this view, the fate of the subject is analogous to what happens to the letter: in order to acquire an identity it must suffer division and be assigned a destiny. The postal system is therefore the technological figure of the machinery that determines the disposition, distribution, and positionality of the modern subject: “Toute l’histoire de la tekhnè postale tend à river la destination à l’identité [The entire history of the postal tekhnè tends to rivet destination to identity]” (Derrida 207).” In this sense the postal system functions as a rationalized and technologized form of the symbolic order. But to the extent that the post is a technology, it extends beyond the merely instrumental function performed by the global machinery of the organization, transportation, and distribution of the mail. In its effects on the subject, the post, in contrast to more ancient forms of tekhnè, may be characterized in terms of what Heidegger calls Herausfordern, the summoning or challenging forth “which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply
energy that can be extracted and stored as such,” rather than relying on the energy that nature supplies spontaneously, such as the wind that drives the windmill; modern technology is thus a setting-in-order which sets upon (stellt) nature. The postal system conforms to this account of modern technology in its summoning forth of subjects to serve as senders and receivers, and to remain perpetually as it were on call, that is, to occupy positions of permanent availability to the demands of the network as a whole. Like other technologies, the post functions as an extension of the human that increases the power of the subject while diminishing its value. As a writer, Joyce is concerned with the consequences of this predicament for his own language, and for language in general. He seems to foresee the situation diagnosed by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben in a recent interview:

D’une part il y a les êtres vivants, les hommes, d’autre part les dispositifs, celui des téléphones portables, par exemple. Les hommes ont toujours eu affaire a des dispositifs, mais cette dimension s’est accrue au point que tout est organisé par des dispositifs.

[On the one hand there are living human beings, on the other hand mechanisms of organisation, portable telephones, for example. Human beings have always had to do with mechanisms of organisation, but this dimension has increased to the point where everything is organised by these mechanisms].

The two most prominent evocations of the postal system in Joyce’s work occur, respectively, in the “Aeolus” episode of *Ulysses* and in Chapter III.1 of *Finnegans Wake*, where Shaun appears in full postman’s regalia. In “Aeolus,” the paragraph on the general post office is placed between the opening paragraph on the Dublin tram system and the following section set in the quarters of the *Freeman’s Journal* and *Evening Telegraph*. The chapter opens, then, with a survey of the three powers located “[i]n the heart of the Hibernian metropolis” (*U* 7.1) which together ensure institutional mastery of the space of the city: the respective systems of transportation, communication, and information. It is the General Post Office, however, that is distinguished as “The Wearer of the Crown” (*U* 7.14), the institution that reaches out from the center of Dublin to the far corners of the British Empire and beyond. It is not by accident that, twelve years after the events related in *Ulysses* and two years before the writing of this chapter, the General Post Office became the site from which the rebels of Easter 1916 attempted to liberate Ireland from the Empire. In “Aeolus,” however, we do not penetrate inside the royal institution; like the shoeblacks working under the porch, we have access only to the temple precincts. Even here, however, there is enough to indicate the universal extension of the postal system:

Parked in North Prince’s street His Majesty’s vermilion mailcars, bearing on their sides the royal initials, E.R., received loudly flung sacks
Such an impressive display lacks only the personification of the post. This personification is supplied in almost mythic form by the figure, in *Finnegans Wake*, of Shaun resplendent in his postman’s uniform: a classy but rugged indigo overcoat with fur collar and lace swinging from the shoulder, a jacket with soft rolling lapels and great sealingwax buttons, a surpliced front with the embroidered motto “Or for royal, Am for Mail, R.M.D” (*FW* 404.30).

Thus arrayed, Shaun receives an Irish blessing from an admiring multitude: “[M]ay his hundred thousand welcome stewed letters, relayed wand post-chased, multiply, ay faith, and plutiply!” (*FW* 404.36–405.1). Shaun the Post is an immense figure, recruiting his strength with “meals of spadefuls of mounded food” (*FW* 405.30), and speaking in “general address” (*FW* 407.28) with a voice “pure as a churchmode” (*FW* 409.11–12) heard over the sea from Brittany to Nova Scotia, modestly declaring himself “a mere mailman of peace” (*FW* 408.10) while acknowledging his eminence as “the bearer extraordinary of these postoomany missive on his majesty’s service” (*FW* 408.13–14).

The power and omnipresence of the post evoked in such passages have ambiguous and paradoxical effects in Joyce’s work. On the one hand, the persons of Joyce’s fictions are subjected to this power even as they seek to use it to their own ends. In a caricature of such a position, Garrett Deasy appears in the “Circe” episode as a racing jockey, urged on by the Orange Lodges, and riding a racehorse called Cock of the North. His face is plastered with postage stamps, and he shouts triumphantly, *Per vias rectas!* (*U* 15.3989). However hallucinatory it may be, this scene is nonetheless susceptible to an allegorical reading: Deasy the Orangeman is not just a messenger of empire but he is the letter itself, plastered over with postage stamps. He is what the empire has sent to Ireland by the straight and swift ways of the postal system, here understood metonymically as the entire system of imperial domination. Deasy is both product and reproducer of the postal principle; it is he who in the “Nestor” episode presses Stephen Dedalus into service to deliver his letter on the hoof and mouth disease to the editor of the *Evening Telegraph*, an errand which Stephen carries out dutifully if without enthusiasm.

As figures of the post in its spatial mastery, the examples of Deasy and Shaun are sufficient in themselves to show that Joyce’s representation of space is never merely deictic, in the sense of locating objects and persons on a Cartesian grid. Joyce’s space is not just there; it is rather something produced, ultimately, by the forces of power and desire. Shaun’s glory as *Überbriefträger* derives not just from his status as the object of desire—“the Bel of Beaus’ Walk, a prime card if ever was!” (*FW* 405.13–14)—but also as the main relay or point-man in a postal system that reproduces the effects of desire in its overflowing multiplication of missives. The study of how
space is made in Joyce thus needs to take into account, as Shari Benstock suggests, both “the space between desire and its object” and “the path of this desire” (169–170). Lacan makes the point even more radically when he states in one of his essays on Joyce that “Il n’y a aucun espace réel. C’est une construction purement verbale qu’on a épélée en trois dimensions, selon les lois, qu’on appelle ça, de la géométrie [There is no real space. It’s a purely verbal construction spelled out in three dimensions according to the laws of what is called geometry].” In any case for Lacan the orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real are entangled (embrouilléés) to the point that each one overlaps into the other. Joyce reminds us of this entanglement in his use of the post as a figure not just for the institutional mastery of geographical and political space, but also as a metaphor for the envoi of desire from the subject to the other. A remarkable use of the metaphor in this sense occurs in the “Circe” episode, where, in the full throes of masochistic desire, Leopold Bloom resorts to a postal metaphor to express his abject submission to the massive whoremistress, Bella Cohen:

(cowed) Exuberant female. Enormously I desiderate your domination. I am exhausted, abandoned, no more young. I stand, so to speak, with an unposted letter bearing the extra regulation fee before the too late box of the general postoffice of human life. (U 15.2777–2780)

This little speech resonates in so many and in such complex ways with our theme that one can do little more than enumerate them. First, Bloom shows himself to be the antithesis of Shaun: where Shaun masters space in his role as both object and subject of desire, Bloom confesses his exclusion from the system and thus his inability to “send” his desire, essentially his castration. This confession can be made only in the secret space of the brothel. The brothel’s removal from the space of daily life, the fact that its clients are incommunicado there and beyond the reach of the post, makes it the clandestine space of the imaginary of desire.

Second, for contemporary readers acquainted with psychoanalysis, the language of Bloom’s speech, in its juxtaposition of desire, power, and the letter, recalls Lacan’s reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” in his seminar of 1955. Let us recall that in Poe’s story the possession of the letter, because its contents can create a scandal, confers power on whoever possesses it, and for this reason it is first stolen and then retaken in a desperate round of circulation. For Lacan, Poe’s letter represents the symbolic order in relation to which the human subject is constituted. As the letter passes, by successive thefts, from hand to hand, it undergoes a symbolic transformation corresponding to the new configuration of power and desire brought about by its transfer. At each of these stages the respective functions of the persons in the story are defined solely by their position with respect to the letter. However, if the letter stands for the inevitable displacement of subjective identity according to its position in the chain of intersubjectivity,
it also stands for the unconscious, because its shifting position determines for each character his desire: “C’est son inconscient avec toutes ses conséquences, c’est-à-dire qu’à chaque moment du circuit symbolique, chacun devient un autre homme” [It is his unconscious with all its consequences, that is to say, at each successive moment of the symbolic circuit, each person becomes another].

In Bloom’s speech everything is there to invite a similar interpretation: transformation, desire, domination, the letter. However, where Lacan sees the purloined letter as a metaphorical illustration of the unconscious in its relation to the symbolic order, Joyce in this instance as in others suggests a metonymic and therefore more complex account of what connects desire, the letter, and the post. On the one hand, the letter is the envoy of desire to the other: “Envoy: Love me, love my umbrella” (GJ 16). It represents the formulation of desire in a manner adapted to the ways of the post, and subordinated to the syntax of address and destination. On the other hand, this very transfer represents a translation of desire made possible only by the otherness of the addressee, so that the envoy of desire serves, paradoxically, to distance the object of desire from its sender. What I am calling the letter here stands for that aspect of desire that goes to the encounter of the other, but only as other. It is in this sense that a letter is never truly readable, never really reaches its destination, and functions rather as a commemoration than a communication of desire. Bloom’s speech seems to acknowledge this predicament in confessing a constitutional inability to post or mobilize his desire, while actively expressing his desire for Bella’s domination, as if desire could be satisfied only through his own oblivion, only by annihilating the identity that subjects him to the symbolic order, here metonymically figured as the post.

A final point to be made about Bloom’s speech is that its mise en scène requires us to relate the problematic of desire and the letter to the specific phenomenon of masochism. Gilles Deleuze is of assistance here in his contribution to the theory of masochism, which he regards as being of a completely different order from sadism. For him, masochism is not symmetrical to sadism, does not derive pleasure from pain, and does not cultivate violence or cruelty for the sake of these things alone. The masochist does not seek to suffer, but has to suffer in the process of driving away pleasure, which threatens to interrupt the “field of immanence” that he seeks:

Dès lors, le plaisir qui est un mode d’interruption . . . du plaisir, le masochiste ne cesse pas de le repousser. Au profit de quoi ? Au profit, à la lettre, d’un véritable “champ d’immanence”, champ d’immanence du désir, où le désir doit ne pas cesser de se reproduire lui-même.

[From then on, the pleasure that takes the form of the interruption of pleasure is that which the masochist ceaselessly drives away. To what advantage? For the sake, literally, of a true “field of immanence,”
suspense, delay, and deferral are the modes of the masochist. Here we have a possible means of connecting Bloom’s “unposted letter” to his desire for domination: it is not that one is to be remedied by the other, but rather that they represent the same thing: the turning away from pleasure in search of an immanent desire as constituting in some sense the condition of being. In his book on that other Leopold, Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze stresses the importance of classified advertisements and of anonymous or pseudonymous letters in initiating masochistic relations; such relations are contractual, dialectical, and imaginative in nature, whereas those of sadism are based on the model of the institutional figure who rules by compulsion and repetition.13 Already, then, in Sacher-Masoch, the post is the institution that makes possible a set of imagined relations that are themselves free of institutionality.

Deleuze’s account of masochism is not unrelated to Lacan’s observation that “le désir est la métonymie du manque à être [desire is the metonym of the lack of being],”14 and that “dès que le sujet lui-même vient à l’être, il le doit à un certain non-être sur lequel il élève son être [at the moment when the subject himself comes into being, he owes it to a certain non-being on which he raises his being].”15 Deleuze’s version of this is that the masochist’s desexualization through dominance prepares for a resexualization of the self newly liberated from the demands of the superego.16 Bloom’s complete abjection before the imposing presence of the “exuberant female” returns him in effect to the state of nonbeing which is both the condition of being and of the mobilisation of desire. Simply put, Bloom wants not so much to satisfy as to realize his desire; he wants to live, but, “abandoned” by life itself, he must begin again by means of a return to the original state of submission to the life-giving exuberant female. The manner in which this predicament is rendered in the figurative language of the post is symptomatic of the complex relation in Joyce’s work between the construction of the subject and its implication in the system according to which subjects are defined according to identities, addresses, and destinations: “the general postoffice of human life.”

If the postal system serves as a kind of concrete figuration of the symbolic order in time and space, then it, like the symbolic order itself, is the object of subversion and subterfuge by the forces of desire that it otherwise seeks to channel through the network of its own connections. Joyce’s work is thus full of the perverse effects of the postal system, as those who, marginalized within the symbolic order, seek the mobilization of their own desires through “working the system” or undermining it. Included in such abuses or misappropriations of the system are Bloom’s clandestine correspondence under an assumed name with “Martha Clifford,” the obscene letters sent to several highly respectable Dublin ladies, the anonymous and possibly insulting postcard sent to Denis Breen, the postcard of dubious
taste and provenance displayed by the sailor D. B. Murphy, and, in a differ-
ent register, the cryptic and proteiform letter minutely if somewhat deliri-
ously examined in the fifth chapter of *Finnegans Wake*.

The first reference to the “too late box” occurs early in the “Lotus Eaters” episode of *Ulysses*, as Bloom surreptitiously enters the Westland Row post office: “Too late box. Post here. No-one. In” (*U* 5.53). Although this time Bloom is not too late to enter the post office, his errand there bespeaks a more fundamental condition of belatedness with respect to his deepest desires. Among other things, it is too late for Bloom to have a son to replace the one lost eleven years ago. A sign of this belatedness is the letter addressed impudently to “Mrs Marion Bloom” in the “bold hand” of Blazes Boylan (*U* 4.244), a letter of which Bloom himself makes unwilling delivery, only to see it disappear behind Molly’s pillow, an epistolary prelude to whatever pillow talk may take place there later in the day (*U* 4.251–257). The morning’s post has also brought Bloom a letter from his daughter. “A letter for me from Milly, he said carefully, and a card to you” (*U* 4.251). The shift in preposition (*for* me vs. *to* you) and the difference in modes of correspondence (the letter vs. the card) privilege the father–daughter relationship over the daughter’s relation to the mother. But the letter itself, which Bloom reads in the privacy of the kitchen, disquiets him with its hurried script, its breezy news of the young student Bannon and its instruction to greet Boylan on Milly’s behalf. Bloom’s relationship with his daughter has been marked by the postal principle ever since she was four years old, when her father put pieces of brown paper in the letterbox for her (*U* 4.285–286). Now, the signs of awakening sexuality in her letter mark the fatal term of that relation—“Destiny. Ripening now” (*U* 4.430)—a destiny to be reached through the designation of the father as *destinataire*: her sexual independence, bodily figured here in the form of the “torn envelope” (*U* 4.439), can be won only by declaring it to her father, a declaration most readily made by means of the indirection and distance rendered possible by the letter. It is too late for him to prevent it. The morning’s post has therefore brought Bloom a double blow of emasculation, as husband and as father, with its consequent feelings of paralysis: “Useless: can’t move . . . Useless to move now” (*U* 4.448–450).

Viewed in this light, Bloom’s secret correspondence with Martha Clifford appears as a rather pathetic and belated attempt to turn the post to his own advantage in a displacement of his desire for Molly, he himself having been displaced as Molly’s lover. The mechanism is elaborate: Bloom writes under an assumed name with a correspondent whose status as a subject is purely postal, in the sense that she exists for him, like he for her, only as a name in a postal relation, the name “Martha Clifford” being possibly quite as fictitious as “Henry Flower,” and even as an alias not necessarily corresponding to the author of the letters sent over that signature: “Wonder did she wrote it herself” (*U* 5.268–269). Whereas Molly receives her letter from Boylan in bed, where she can read it at her leisure once her husband is
gone, Bloom, in order to receive his letter from Martha, enters the Westland Row post office surreptitiously, collects it under an assumed name, retreats to an isolated location in order to read it, then tears the incriminating envelope in shreds, which he scatters on the road. The nature of the correspondence anticipates the sadomasochistic scene with Bella Cohen: on Martha’s side, the demand for ever more complete confession backed by a coy threat of punishment: “Please write me a long letter and tell me more. Remember if you do not I will punish you” (U 5.251–252). On Bloom’s side, the expression of gradually increased doses of profanation: “Go further next time . . . Brutal, why not? Try it anyhow. A bit at a time” (U 5.272–274). Bloom carries out this resolution later in the day at the Ormond Hotel. As Boylan is leaving the hotel bar for his assignation with Molly, Bloom, in the hotel dining room, writes his response to Martha: “[I]t will excite me. You know how . . . How will you pun? You punish me?” (U 11.888–891).

The fact that such letters are exchanged without any possibility of Martha and “Henry” ever meeting—“Could meet one Sunday after the Rosary. Thank you: not having any” (U 5.270–271)—make them perfect illustrations of the love letter as the *mise en œuvre* of the writer’s sexual fantasy while sparing the expense of any actual communication of love. Colette Soler, following Lacan, explains the paradox of the love letter in general as follows: the love letter seems to speak of the Other, is in fact addressed to him (her), but being made out of the unconscious of the writing subject, it is more properly understood as the product of his own *jouissance*. “You see the paradox: the love letters are in fact a wall between subject and partner. So, we can conclude that the lover who writes too many love letters is just a lover of himself as unconscious.”

In “Circe,” the episode of *Ulysses* that most resembles what the unconscious might look like if it were rendered in language, the obscene letters addressed to several highly respectable Dublin ladies represent the sublime culmination of the Henry Flower–Martha Clifford correspondence in its role as enjoyment of the unconscious. The erotic staging of the postal exchange between Henry and Martha is one in which Henry makes ever more obscene remarks in the anticipation of punishment. For her part, the petit-bourgeois Martha feigns increasing indignation in proportion to the progressively heightened provocation of Henry’s profanations: “Doing the indignant: a girl of good family like me, respectable character” (U 5.269–270). The letters addressed to the society ladies in “Circe” are simply the logical extension, in the realm of the imaginary, of the pursuit of *jouissance* already begun in the Henry–Martha correspondence. In the latter scene, Bloom’s letters are addressed to a socially sublime ideal of Martha “doing the indignant” in the form of several ladies drawn from the highest rank of Dublin society. In proportion to the higher stakes being played for in the social order, the obscenity of the letters themselves is heightened to a delirious degree. As the Honourable Mrs. Mervyn Talboys testifies, “He implored me to soil his letter in an unspeakable manner, to chastise
him as he richly deserves, to bestride and ride him, to give him a most vicious horsewhipping” (U 15.1070–1073). According to the postal principle which allows for several persons to be addressed simultaneously, the obscenity is multiplied as well as intensified, so that several Dublin ladies are able to hold up improper letters received from Bloom, with calls of “Me too. . . . Me too” (U 15.1075–1077). On Bloom’s part, the form of enjoyment derived from this heightened obscenity is that of his own increased debasement. Bloom’s letters to the Dublin ladies have in common with his scene with Bella the search, through abjection, of what Deleuze calls the “immanence of desire” that unceasingly reproduces itself.

In Joyce, the motifs of immanence, debasement, and profanation related to the sending and receiving of letters combine to destabilize the order of identities and destinations represented by the postal system in its role as an institutional guarantor of the symbolic order. When Mrs. Mervyn Talboys is implored to soil Bloom’s letter “in an unspeakable manner” (U 15.1071), the appeal is to a disruption of the symbolic order of the letter by the real substance of the body as the site of the immanence of desire. The unspeakable manner of soiling the letter is presumably intended to produce a sign, a trace, or a stain which in its unreadability becomes nonetheless an obscure vector of desire. We are now close to the universe of Finnegans Wake, where Shem’s body produces an “obscene matter” to serve as the ink in which he writes “over every square inch of the only foolscap available, his own body” (FW 185.35–36). From the “inspissated grime of his gaucous den” he writes his “uslessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles,” telling himself that “every splurge on the vellum he blundered over” is “an entire operahouse . . . of enthusiastic noblewomen flinging every coronet-crimsoned stitch they had off at his proscenium” (FW 179.25–180.3). In Shem’s fantasy, as in Bloom’s and no doubt Joyce’s as well, the filth and defilement of the letter incites an upper-class feminine readership to jouissance rather than outrage, though it is not certain that these two responses are as distinct from one another as they might at first appear. In any case, we have here a moment where, in Finnegans Wake, the scene of writing Ulysses is represented in terms of the material production of the letter from the substance of the body. Indeed, a good way of understanding Ulysses is to read it as the body made word, from the anti-Eucharist of the first page to the breath and heartbeat of the last. It is as if everywhere Joyce sought to preserve the immanence of desire in the form of the letter itself, rather than be content with the representation of desire as the mere object of signification.

If in Ulysses Joyce has succeeded in rendering the body, and by extension the entire material world, into word, then what remains for him after 1922 is to write a work in which the word is made body. This may be said to be the great project of Finnegans Wake. The letter of I.v. serves both as a figure and as a concrete instance of the letter made matter. Its status as a letter in the postal sense is indicated by its material support (“a goodish-sized sheet
of letterpaper”), its provenance, (“originating by tranship from Boston (Mass.),” its date (“of the last of the first”), its opening, (“to Dear whom”), certain elements of its body which resemble those of a letter sent home from an Irish emigrant to America (“it proceeded to mention Maggy well & allathome's health . . . & Muggy well how are you Maggy & hopes soon to hear well”), its closing (“must now close it with fondest to the twoinns with four crosskisses”) its postscript (“pee ess from . . . affectionate”) and its signature obscured by a large-looking tea stain (FW 111.8–20). The generally reassuring signs of conformity to postal convention are soon eclipsed, however, by a host of elements that undermine any prospect of what is called a few lines later “establishing the identities in the writer complexus” (FW 114.33), that is, the identities of sender, addressee, and other potential readers, the nature of their relation to one another, and that existing between the letter itself and any of these persons. What is undermined, in other words, is the prospect of legibility as a stabilizing feature of the symbolic order. These destabilizing elements include the initial reference to the letter as the “untitled mamafesta” (FW 104.04) of ALP in her function as “Bringer of Plurabilities” (FW 104.02), the letter’s “many names at disjointed times” (FW 104.05), its “proteiform” writing (FW 107.08), the “accretions of terricious matter” (FW 114.28–29) acquired by the letter while buried in the dump of the past, the continually altered conditions of its composition, including the transformations of its “changeably meaning vocable scriptsigns” (FW 118.27–28), the inconclusive investigations of the scholar Duff-Muggli (FW 123.11), and the “numerous stabs and foliated gashes” made in the document by a pronged instrument (FW 124.2–3), accentuated by “bi tso fb rok engl a ssan dspl itch ina” (FW 124.7–8).

In this last formula, the shattering of the text into bits and pieces of type achieves in graphic manner the collapse of the symbolic import of the letter into its material body, elsewhere rendered by the letter’s subjection to stains, smears, soiling, and puncture wounds. What happens to the letter here may be understood as a textual analogy to masochistic abjection insofar as it represents the disintegration of identity in the name of the immanence of desire. The text of the Wake exposes itself to every possible wound, gash, and fracture in driving away the satisfaction of any resolution of meaning, because the pleasure of such resolution always brings its own closure. Instead, the suspension of legibility implied in the figure of the Bringer of Plurabilities may well be understood, in Deleuze’s terms, as a textual field of the immanence of desire, in which desire, the desire inherent in language, does not cease to reproduce itself: “and he passing out of one desire into its fellow” (FW 125.08). In this sense the “untitled mamafesta” denotes the condition of a text devoted to its own unauthorized manifestation, made without right or title conferred by external authority—a text defined by self-exposure to the infinite modes of desire to which the letter is subject. Again, the Lacanian reading of Finnegans Wake is relevant. Meaning, for Lacan, is produced by the intersection of the imaginary and
symbolic orders, even when it is equivocal, that is, even if a given linguistic formula can mean one thing as well as another. What takes place in the *Wake*, however, is a *pulvérulence*, a virulent pulverization of equivocation to the point where the letter becomes a signifier in the real, outside the chain of signification which connects the imaginary to the symbolic orders: as in certain psychoses, the language is ground into matter that can be compared to an explosive powder which, once ignited, flashes meaning from all sides, from every word and every syllable. By short-circuiting the mediation of the imaginary, the symbolic has been converted directly into the real, with the consequences of an unreadability which nonetheless shines forth as the immanence of desire in language. The letter thus signifies according to the logic of the symptom rather than that of the symbol. In Lacan’s diagnosis, Joyce’s writing is symptomatic of a response to the deficiency of the father, and takes the form of progressively radical attempts to shatter or dismantle the imposition of language (*les paroles imposées*): “Il finit par imposer au langage même une sorte de brisure, de décomposition, qui fait qu’il n’y a plus d’identité phonatoire [He ends up imposing on language itself a sort of shattering, a decomposition that does away with any phonatory identity].” By the absence of phonatory identity Lacan means the absence of an identifiable voice, of a speaking subject. He nonetheless hesitates between an analysis of the *Wake* which sees in it, on the one hand, an attempt at liberation from the parasitism of the imposed word (“le parasite parolier”) and, on the other hand, a total surrender to the polyphony of the word. In any case, either strategy would have led to the text we know as the *Wake*, and either would have undermined the order of positionalities, identities, titles and authorities from which the *Wake* seeks to escape.

In the chapter devoted to Shaun’s postal duties (III.1), the unreadability of the letter is combined with its undeliverability. Despite the best efforts of the postman, every attempt at delivery is frustrated: “Nave unlodgeable . . . No such no. . . . None so strait . . . Place scent on . . . Wrongly spilled . . . Search Unclaimed Male . . . Back in Few Minutes . . . Missing . . . Back to the P.O.” (*FW* 420.23–421.07). This episode denotes the limits of the postal system while nonetheless identifying the letter itself, with all its ambiguities, as binding the four principal persons of the *Wake* to one another (“carried of Shaun, son of Hek, written of Shem, brother of Shaun, uttered for Alp, mother of Shem, for Hek, father of Shaun,” *FW* 420.17–19), as well as to Joyce himself, whose old addresses figure among those to which the letter is unsuccessfully carried. The episode reminds us that despite the antagonism between Shem the Penman and Shaun the Post, they are inextricably bound as brothers and equally related, on an allegorical level, to Joyce, who as a writer must join the private and insular act of composition to the open, public act of transmission and publication. Like Shem, he is the writer writing what Derrida calls the proper name, the “self exiled in upon his ego” (*FW* 184.6–7), while yet “interminablement confil[e] aux détours et aux errances de Shaun le postman” (Derrida 179),
the writer interminably bound to the detours and wanderings of Shaun, who seeks an audience and universal acclaim: “Sireland calls you . . . And may the mosse of prosperousness gather you rolling home! . . . right royal post” (FW 428.7–15).

The letter of *Finnegans Wake* is prefigured by the postcards sent and received in *Ulysses* in their relative illegibility, which is the condition for their endless hermeneutic potential, and in their ultimate undeliverability, which is the condition for their endless circulation. The crazed eccentric Denis Breen may be considered an early example of the pathology known in the American popular idiom as “going postal,” that is, a violent paranoid response to the conditions imposed on the subject by the postal system. The post in fact has everything to incite the fears of the paranoiac: the possibilities of accusation, of denunciation, of exposure—all committed by the persecutor in the safety of anonymity. When Breen receives an anonymous postcard with the inscription “U.p: up,” it is difficult to know what conventional form to assign to this text: a message, an error, a fragment, an insult, a practical joke? Mrs. Breen’s interpretation, more a reading of her husband’s reaction than of what is written on the card itself, is to see “Someone taking a rise out of him” (*U* 8.258). But the ambiguity of the pronouns used in her next statement, “It’s a great shame for them whoever he is” (*U* 8.258–259) suggests that the postcard cannot be limited to a single sender and receiver. However, what is more important than the text of the inscription or the identity of its sender is its function in sending Breen on an endless round of errands in search of legal redress. Breen’s postcard is one of many documents in *Ulysses*, like the throwaway flyer “Elijah is Coming” (*U* 8.13), that pursue their itineraries through the space of Dublin. First produced from Mrs Breen’s handbag in the “Lestrygonians” episode, the postcard is subsequently taken by Breen and his wife, in “Wandering Rocks,” to the solicitor John Henry Menton’s office in Bachelor’s Walk, then to Collis and Ward’s office in Dame St. In “Cyclops,” we learn that Tom Rochford has sent Breen “for a lark” to the subsheriff’s office, where he has received less than a warm reception: “the long fellow gave him an eye as good as a process” (*U* 12.270). He has then gone to the Metropolitan Police station in Green St. From there, advised by Corny Kelleher to get the handwriting examined, he has gone looking for a private detective, and is shortly thereafter seen passing by the pub in Little Britain St., where his movements are reported with unfailing amusement and incredulity. A propos of the postman’s duties, Shaun remarks that “[t]here’s no sabbath for nomads” (FW 410.32), and indeed Breen seems to have been transformed into another nomadic postman, wandering through the city in search of a further destination for the postcard that he cannot allow to stop at his own address. In this respect he is also, like Shaun, a failed postman, whose attempt at delivering the famous letter of the *Wake* is thwarted at every potential destination by the absence, refusal, or non-existence of the addressee. Breen’s postcard, like that letter, seems designed...
both to generate an endless series of readings of its cryptic inscription, and
to circulate endlessly throughout the space of Dublin, here conceived as a
potentially infinite number of addresses constituting the sum of the post-
card’s possible destinations.

Like Breen’s postcard, the postcard produced by the sailor D. B. Murphy
in the “Eumaeus” episode is post-postal, that is, it continues to circulate
even after having completed its round in the official mails. It also has a
symmetrical relation to the earlier case. Where Breen shows his postcard
in a futile attempt to discredit the story he reads it as telling (he wants to
sue the sender for libel), Murphy shows his card in an equally futile attempt
to verify his own story. Put another way, where one man seeks in vain to
legitimize his identity by dissociating himself from the post, the other seeks
in vain to legitimate his identity by associating himself with it. Let us recall
that, in the place of transit known as the cabman’s shelter, Murphy (if that
is his name) produces the card in order to document his claim to have seen
“maneaters in Peru that eats corpses and the livers of horses” (U 16.470–
471), thus inscribing his discourse in the tradition of a long line of voyagers,
including Odysseus himself, who tell of their encounters with cannibals
and other anthropophages. However, the postcard, showing “Choza de Indios”
in Beni, Bolivia, does little to document this claim (U 16.474). Instead of
maneaters in Peru, its image is a ludicrous colonial parody of the Homeric
Sirens: Indian women shown in variously degraded postures (“squatted,
blinking, suckling, frowning”) amid a “swarm of infants,” outside primitive
shanties in Bolivia, far from any seacoast (U 16.475–478). Like the
“partly obliterated” letter in Finnegans Wake (FW 111.34–35), this post-
card has a “partially obliterated address and postmark” which nonethe-
less bears the words “Tarjeta Postal, Señor A. Boudin, Galeria Becche,
Santiago, Chile” (U 16.488–489), causing Bloom to notice the discrepancy
between the name of Murphy and that of the “fictitious addressee of the
missive” (U 16.497–498). There is no evidence, however, that the name
Boudin is fictitious. What Bloom perhaps means is that Murphy himself is
creating a fiction in claiming to be the postcard’s addressee. In any case, the
postcard remains of unknown provenance and mysterious address; it bears
no message and is of dubious value in documenting either the sailor’s story
or his identity. In these respects it anticipate all the aporia of the letter in
the Wake, whereas, like the later letter, it nonetheless has the interest of
having travelled from afar. The postmark alone shows that, of all the docu-
ments that circulate in Ulysses, this is the one that has covered the greatest
distance, so that, as with the letter of the Wake,

we ought really to rest thankful that at this deleteful hour of dungflies
dawning we have even a written on with dried ink scrap of paper at all
to show for ourselves . . . after all that we lost and plundered of it even
to the hidmost coignings of the earth and all it has gone through and
by all means. (FW 118.31–119.01)
The postcard and the letter, themselves postal nomads, are what remain of the wanderings over the earth—spatially, linguistically, and imaginatively—that constitute the greater subject of both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Whatever its costs, the post is the modern figure of the voyage and circulation of the word. Like the many wanderings of Odysseus, the letter and the postcard serve, finally, as testimony to the many ways of Joyce’s two major works.

NOTES

1. Cf. *FW* 362.36–363.02: “were you always (for that time only) what we knew how when we (from that point solely) were you know where?”
3. The catalogue of the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, Egypt, contains all of the major works of James Joyce.
6. A number of essays have been devoted to the relation between Derrida’s *La carte postale* and Joyce’s work, principally *Finnegans Wake*. The series begins in the 1980s with Shari Benstock’s “The Letter of the Law: *La Carte Postale* in *Finnegans Wake*,” *Philological Quarterly* 63:2 (1984), 169–170, which shows how the postal system in Derrida’s work serves as an analogy for the dynamic of desire in Joyce: “This trajectory of desire, which is also a system of *postes*, begins in the necessity to discover desire’s destination and authority, to chart the space between desire and its object, to act out the sexual impulse for which dreaming and writing are only transferences. To trace the path of this desire, to follow the system of the *postes*, is to discover desire and its object, to know the destination of the love/lust letter, and to know why it must always be lost.” A decade later, Murray McArthur’s “The Example of Joyce: Derrida Reading Joyce,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 32 (Winter 1995), 227–241, examines the double structure of desire (as impulse toward both death and reproduction) and sees *Giacomo Joyce* as particularly important to Derrida’s work. A lucid account of both essays is given in Alan Roughley’s *Reading Derrida Reading Joyce* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999). Most recently, Andrew J. Mitchell’s “Meaning Postponed: *Finnegans Wake* and *The Post Card*,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 44:1 (2006), 59–76, reads the figure of Shaun as a kind of martyr to “postality” as *différerence*, deferral, and dispersal, one who seeks in vain to achieve self-presence and, through his nationalism, a pure identity with Ireland.
17. In response to my inquiry, Fritz Senn provides this note: “It seems that if you posted before midnight the letter would be delivered the following day. You had to pay an extra 6d for that service. The only late box still in existence in 2005 was at Trafalgar Square, according to one source. Another one seems to imply that there were “Too late” marks stamped on envelopes posted in the late box.”
18. In “Circe,” Gerty McDowell is accused of “writing the gentleman false letters,” suggesting that possibly she is “Martha Clifford” (U 15.380). However, Martha later confesses, “My real name is Peggy Griffin” (U 15.765–766).
20. Commenting on a draft of this essay, Guillemette Bolens remarks that Lacan’s neologism “pulvérulence” suggests, in addition to “pulvérisation,” the words “virulence” et “verrue” (wart). “It creates the image of a pulverization the effect of which is virulent, like that of a virus, and the symptom of which appears on the surface of the body.”