"Aeolus": Reading Backward

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"The ghost walks," Professor McHugh murmurs "biscuitfully" in the Aeolus episode of *Ulysses* (U-GP 7:237). What his expression means is that the treasury is full and that the wages will be paid, an important issue in a chapter so concerned with circulation and short-circuitry. The episode begins with a vision of the transportation system circulating Dubliners around the city; then the perspective shifts abruptly to the general post office, where "loudly flung sacks of letters, postcards, lettercards, parcels, insured and paid," are dispatched upon their sundry odysseys, "for local, provincial, British and overseas delivery" (U-GP 7:18–19). However, the word "ghost" is haunted by the shades of former meanings, and the central themes of Aeolus may be detected in its obsolete associations. For instance, "ghost" has been used to translate *spiritus* from Latin, meaning "breath" or "wind," both of which are dominant motifs of "Aeolus." In Homer's version of the episode, Aeolus speeds Odysseus on his homeward journey by giving him a wallet full of winds, instructing him to keep it firmly sealed; but the crew, suspecting hidden treasure, untie the silver thong, and the resulting tempest blows their vessel back to Aeolus's floating isle. In *Ulysses*, Joyce transforms these backward-blowing winds into the breath that the windbags of the chapter waste in bombast; the flatulence of Irish Nationalism and the wind that breaks out of the R.I.A. in mockery of the divine afflatus.

Yet if "ghost" suggests the breath of life, the living voice, it is also associated with the death that the voice, the transportation system, and the post can never overcome, because they owe their very presence to the absence that they strive to hold at bay. In "Aeolus" this absence erupts into the narrative itself, dismembering the speeches of the orators. Curiously, the word "ghost" signified dismemberment long before it came to be allied with breath, for it derives from a pre-Teutonic root meaning "to wound, to tear, to pull to pieces."
In "Aeolus" it is Bloom who is commissioned to enact this ghostly principle of laceration. Indeed, the first words that he utters in the episode are "cut it out" (U-GP 7:26). He is asking that the ad for Alexander Keyes be cut out of the Evening Telegraph, so that he can sport this "cutting" (a word that reverberates throughout the chapter) at the Freeman's Journal. Red Murray guillotines the page with chilling expertise: "Red Murray's long shears sliced out the advertisement from the newspaper in four clean strokes." Bloom, as he witnesses the amputation, muses: "scissors and paste" (U-GP 7:31-32). A telling phrase, for Bloom himself performs the role of scissors in this episode: he intrudes into the Freeman's office as a stranger, "a perverted jew," and thereby undermines the orators' attempts to forge a unitary national identity. In his role as interloper, he conspires with the headlines of the chapter to disrupt the voice of Irish Nationalism and to hollow out a "cleft" in speech (to borrow one of "Aeolus"'s stranger formulations [U-GP 7:860]). Being keyless, like Stephen, whom he fails to meet (in one of many missed encounters of the episode), and having also failed to place his ad for Keyes, Bloom stands for the castrative aesthetic of the newspaper, for the demonic "slit" of a writing machine that "speaks in its own way" (U-GP 7:175-77), slitting through the phallic inflation of the voice, through all the bluster of the "GREAT DAILY ORGAN" (U-GP 7:84), and substituting for the art of rhetoric the blind mechanical effects of shock, which Walter Benjamin regarded as the hallmark of the Modernist aesthetic. The modern newspaper, for instance, by juxtaposing random fragments of events, disrupts the delusory coherence of experience, and thus subverts the very notion of a "Pisgah Sight" (U-GP 7:1057), of a central and commanding overview.

In "Aeolus" Bloom's task is to defy the voice of rhetoric, just as his task in "Sirens" is to overthrow the voice of music. These voices both belong almost exclusively to men. In either case, Bloom finds himself marooned, a floating island in a sea of sound, resisting the temptation to compete with men for vocal prowess. In "Sirens" the voice is equated with the penis, in that it violates the virgin sanctuary of the ear: "Sure, you'd burst the tympanum of her ear, man, with an organ like yours" (U-GP 11:536-37). In "Aeolus" voice is also associated with the masculine, proceeding "FROM THE FATHERS" (U-GP 7:841): this is the headline that titles the speech by John F. Taylor which relates the story of Moses, the father of the Jews, ascending Mount Sinai in order to receive the word of God the Father. Stephen mocks this fable of the apostolic succession of the voice from father to father, "from only begetter to only begotten" (U-GP 9:838-39), with his countervision of two "FRISKY FRUMPS" (U-GP 7:1070), who climb up Nelson's pillar to spill their plumseeds over the Hibernian metropolis, under the very "PROBOSCIS" of "the onehandled adulterer" (U-GP 7:1033, 1019).

Bloom is unconsciously in league with Stephen, but he sabotages voice in subtler ways. Just as he uses writing to elude the blandishments of song in
“Sirens,” so he uses spelling to wind his way out of the winds of “Aeolus.” Under the headline ORTHOGRAPHICAL (U-GP 7:164), Bloom proves that “PEN IS CHAMP” (U-GP 7:1034) by showing that the way a word is spelled can never be identified with how it sounds. What this means is that a residue of writing necessarily eludes the jurisdiction of the voice and opens up the possibility of new modalities. While the spoken word moves forward, like the favorable winds of “Aeolus,” the written word moves backward: Bloom observes that the typesetter “reads backwards first” in order to be sure of his orthography. It is no accident, moreover, that the letters he is reading backward spell the name of the most impotent of all the dead or fallen fathers of Ulysses, “mangiD. kcirtaP,” that is, Patrick Dignam. The backward reading of this nom du père launches Bloom himself upon a backward journey through the seas of memory, for he remembers how his own “poor papa” used to read the Hebrew Haggadah backward at the feast of Passover. “Dear, O dear,” Bloom misremembers, “All that long business about that brought us out of the land of Egypt and into the house of bondage alleluia” (U-GP 7:208–9). Here Bloom sends the Jews back into the bondage they were trying to escape, just as Odysseus was driven back to Aeolus’s floating island when his crewmen let the winds out of the bag. Reading backward could be seen as the textual equivalent of both of these Aeolian inverted odysseys. Indeed, the very layout of the page in “Aeolus” instructs us in the art of reading backward, “rere regardant” (U-GP 3:503), and undermines the teleology of speech. For example, the reference to the posterior in K.M.R.I.A. is only decodable a posteriori:

K.M.R.I.A.

—He can kiss my royal Irish arse, Myles Crawford cried loudly over his shoulder. Any time he likes, tell him. (U-GP 7:991–92)

Bloom’s task in “Aeolus” is to reveal the mutinous orthography within the word that undermines the linearity of language and opens up a “cleft” within the father’s voice, the father’s name. It is therefore symptomatic that names are constantly mistaken or forgotten in Ulysses, particularly names associated with paternity. In “Hades” Bloom forgets the name of Father Coffey, partly because “his name is like a coffin,” as he realizes when it resurfaces into his mind (U-GP 6:595). Similarly, Nannetti forgets the name of Monks the Dayfather in “Aeolus”: “Where’s what’s his name?” he barks (U-GP 7:182). In “Lestrygonians” Bloom forgets the name of the “priesty-looking chap” Penrose, which reminds him of Nannetti’s amnesia with regard to Monks: “Well, if he couldn’t remember the dayfather’s name that he sees every day . . .” (U-GP 8:179–80). The “dayfather” of a printing office performed the role of a shop steward; but the loaded term father (as well as the name Monks), probably contributes to Bloom’s lapse of memory. Reading backward, we realize he forgets Penrose because the “rose” reminds him of his father’s floral name and of his own.
Freud, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, devotes the whole of his first chapter to the forgetting of proper names; and he draws an eerie analogy between those forces that rob the mind of names and thieves who ambush their victims in the night:

Let us suppose that I have been imprudent enough to go for a walk at night in a deserted quarter of the city, and have been attacked and robbed of my watch and purse. I report the matter at the nearest police station in the following words: "I was in such and such a street, and there *loneliness* and *darkness* took away my watch and purse." Although I should not have said anything in this statement that was not true, the wording of my report would put me in danger of being thought not quite right in the head. The state of affairs could only be described correctly by saying that *favoured* by the loneliness of the place and under the *shield* of darkness *unknown* *malefactors* robbed me of my valuables. Now the state of affairs in the forgetting of names need not be any different; favoured by tiredness, circulatory disturbances and intoxication, an unknown psychical force robs me of my access to the proper names belonging to my memory. (21–22)

What "Aeolus" reveals is that the loneliness and darkness that rob us of our speech are not reducible to the "unconscious," if the unconscious is conceived of as a secret self or a concealed intentionality. On the contrary, these forces represent the mindless and autonomous effects of writing, to which we are subjected as inexorably as the prisoners of Kafka's penal colony, whose legal sentences are drilled into their flesh by the needles of a monstrous printing press. It is writing that pounces on the voice, like a thief in the night, and strips the speaker of memory and consciousness. "Everything speaks in its own way," Bloom tells us (U-GP 7:177), and in "Aeolus" the voice of intention is supplanted by a writing machine—by the headlines, for example, whose styles are too multifarious to be ascribed to any single human consciousness. In "Aeolus" it speaks, not I, and it dismembers me in the very *silt* by which it calls me into being. *Silt*.

**WORK CITED**
