FULLSTOPPERS AND FOOLS TOPS: THE “COMPUNCTION” OF PUNCTUATION AND GEOMETRY IN FINNEGANS WAKE

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Abstract: This paper explores Joyce’s experimental use of punctuation in Finnegans Wake, with particular reference to the “punctum”, the full stop. Joyce uses the period not only to mark a pause or interruption, but also, paradoxically, as a sign of continuous openness, an integral feature of the Wake’s famous “continuarration” and its circular structure and shape. By closely reading and commenting on selected passages of the Wake, this essay shows how Joyce’s ironical treatment of punctuation and his numerous definitions of the full stop clearly connect with the geometrical point as conceived in non-Euclidean Geometries. The Wake draws upon Henry Poincaré’s argument that the point is to be seen as a micro sign capable of infinite extension and permutations. Such an assumption triggers further connections with both Giordano Bruno’s and Giambattista Vico’s ideas on the point within their philosophical investigations into geometry.

1 Introduction
By borrowing Joyce’s term “compunction”, this essay explores Joyce’s experimental use of punctuation in Finnegans Wake, with particular reference to the “punctum”, i.e., the full stop. Joyce conceives of this mark of punctuation, as I intend to suggest, not (only) as the strongest among the marks of pause or interruption, but also as a potential sign of continuous openness, so as to further illuminate the famous “continuarration” in the Wake and the structure and shape of the novel itself. Reflection on Joyce’s experimental language and narrative in the light of his equally experimental use of punctuation thus sheds further light on both Finnegans Wake’s circularity and also on Joyce’s (Brunonian) idea of the “coincidence of
contraries”, for in the *Wake* the full stop functions as a micro sign capable of a startling number of permutations and, simultaneously, reversals of meaning. The term “compunction” ("Hip confiners help compunction. Never park your brief stays in the men’s convenience” *(FW 433.23-25)*) suggests both its primary meaning of remorse and contrition, and also its etymological meaning, namely the one deriving from Latin “compunctus”. This is the past participle of the verb “compungere” that means “to severely prick, sting” and is composed of the intensive prefix “com” and “pungere” (“to prick”), so as to convey the idea of a very strong piercing aperture in one’s soul, causing affliction and torment. The word may also read as a “conjunction” through the “punct”, since “punct” is one of the expressions most widely employed in the *Wake* to refer to the point and/or to the grammatical full stop. In this light, the reference to confinement (“hip confiners”) followed by “help compunction” may be read as an invitation to a continuous expansion despite the confining quality of the mark. Moreover, the idea of punctuation as something piercing that perforates the page, thereby opening to potentially infinite space, is made apparent in a famous passage devoted to punctuation itself:

The original document was in what is known as Hanno O’Nonnanno’s unbrookable script, that is to say, it *showed no signs of punctuation of any sort*. Yet on holding the verso against a lit rush this new book of Morses responded most remarkably to the silent query of our world’s oldest light and its recto let out the piquant fact that *it was but pierced butnot punctured* (in the university sense of the term) by numerous stabs and foliated gashes *made by a pronged instrument*. These paper wounds, four in type, were gradually and correctly understood to mean stop, please stop, do please stop, and O do please stop respectively, and following up their one true clue, the circumflexuous wall of a singleminded men’s asylum, accentuated by bi tso fb rok engl a ssan dspl itch ina, — Yard inquiries pointed out → that they ad bin “provoked” ay ∧ fork, of à grave Brofèsor; ãth é’s Brèak — fast — table; ; acûte profèššionally piquéd, to=introducé a notion of time [upon à plane (?) su ‘ fàc’e”] by punct! ingh oles (sic) in iSpace?! *(FW 123.31-124.12; italics added)*

The marks of punctuation are then variously defined as “paper wounds”, as things that perforate the page and that, in the “ispaces” of