

the telling falls in the full of time

an interview with

Michael Joyce

by Erin Lewenauer

Michael Joyce's love of language and travel reverberates in all of his writing.

From hypertext to fiction to poetry, his writing has appeared in numerous forms, spanned many countries, and has been translated into many languages. Since his first print novel *The War Outside Ireland* (Tinkers Dam Press, 1982) won the Great Lakes New Writers Award in 1983, he has authored fourteen books, but he is likely forever to be associated with electronic literature due to his groundbreaking work *afternoon, a story* (Eastgate Systems, 1990), dubbed by *The New York Times* as “the granddaddy of hypertext fictions.” His latest book, *Remedia: A Picaresque* (Steerage Press, \$16.99) is a sequel of sorts to his “novel of internet” *Was: Annales Nomadique* (FC2, 2007), although readers don’t need to have read that earlier work in order to enjoy this new one, an examination of our media culture in the guise of a spiritual odyssey.

Joyce has been a Professor of English at Vassar College for almost three decades, and was integral in the creation of Vassar’s Media Studies program. In the following interview, we discuss how he writes, the philosophers he reads, and the name of his latest novel’s main character, who shall remain nameless.

Erin Lewenauer: You have written in many forms and styles (poetry, hypertext, fiction, etc.). Do you aim for a style or channel it?

Michael Joyce: There is a little pantomime I do sometimes in trying to describe when I was first beginning to write in my twenties and wondered where (or if) I would find my style or form or vision or whatever one dared call it at that age. What I say is that after I despaired about ever channeling a vision, I took aim by default at the way language worked itself into sentences and paragraphs—at which point in my pantomime looking down at a page with splayed fingers over my eyes as an absurdly primitive visual aid. When in time I looked up from the page, I continue, it was as if I had stared too long at the sun and the shapes on the page had burned themselves into my eyes so now when I look out on the world—here holding up my fanned fingers

over my eyes like an absurd Mardi Gras mask—sometimes I see grids, sometimes labyrinths, sometimes lens flares, sometimes seismic spatters, and look for ways to represent what I see. “A language is . . . a horizon,” Roland Barthes says in *Writing Degree Zero*, “and style a vertical dimension, which together map out for the writer a Nature, since he does not choose either.”

EL: How do you think differently—how does your approach change—when writing poetry versus fiction?

MJ: The short answer is that each shows itself differently, I suppose, but I rather like the place in your question along the slope of the virgule where thinking gives way to approaching and difference shifts to change. The versus—as your question acknowledges—doesn’t



photo by Jake Brody

exist in the forms themselves but the act, loping or vectored, drawn to or through one or the other or both by turns. Poetry and fiction being Blakean contraries not opposites, in our time are increasingly in suspension, permeated or emulsified, flows rather than solids.

EL: You write "It was as if one frame of the film had slipped from the gate, tearing the outline of the image away from its sequence which nonetheless paradoxically continued, a hallucinatory blink then, before she began speaking and the camera moved in to frame her lips in a tight close-up. That lost moment of slippage took on for me the form of longing, leaving me briefly overwhelmed by a vertiginous feeling of loss that left me panicky and sick to my stomach. I was having regular such episodes of what were then called anxiety attacks and at the same time began to become aware of the doors appearing in various sorts of situations, public and private, sleeping and awake, with much more frequency than before." How does anxiety inform (enhance/hinder) your writing? How do you define it?

MJ: Writing novels is in many ways both an antidote and a goad to anxiety. It takes so long to write, to publish, to find readers (or not), to hear from them (or not), that you simply have to let go. Which might be how I define anxiety (although I confess you are the first ever to ask me to do so); that is, the fear of letting go. In an interview Wim

Wenders quotes Cezanne, "Things are disappearing. If you want to see anything you have to hurry." Thus the goad of getting it down. Down from where? someone might ask, as did the person who before you came closest to asking me to define anxiety, a therapist who, when as a young man I confessed to taking my pulse multiple times during a day "to see if I was still there," asked "Where else would you be?" Which by commodius vicus of recirculation brings us back to the antidote-ish qualities of writing, how it keeps you from wondering where you are by so consistently changing your location without your having to move. Cezanne, again, says it best, "Here, on the river's verge, I could be busy for months without changing my place, simply leaning a little more to right or left." Writing a novel, even a poem, is like that for me, parallax rather than paralysis.

EL: You write, "What's a philosopher do for a living? he asked me that day in the truck. See things, I said, just to test him. Things in his head or at the bottom of a tray of darkroom chemicals. Or in the sky? he asked. That too, yes, I said." Which philosophers taught you the best? Which writers?

MJ: The two philosophers I immediately think of, Hélène Cixous and Alphonso Lingis, are both fine writers and both write beautifully about seeing. "Thought is seeing what exceeds the possibility of seeing, what is intolerable to see, what exceeds the possibility of thinking," Lingis writes of compassion, and elsewhere

how "The elemental is sensed in a pure sense of depth, not by an intentional direction of the viewing eye and the grasping hand aiming at objectives, but by a movement of involution . . . a movement of immersion in a plenum." The plenum being another way to describe what *Remedia's* picaro hero summons in the section you quoted, drawing out the whole of the world from the bottom of a tray of darkroom chemicals just as my own photographer father did. The hazy nature of such elemental and immanent worlds likewise occupies Cixous in her extraordinary autofictional essay and memoir "Savoir," the first part of the book *Veils*, a diptych of essays about losing and gaining seeing for which Derrida writes the bookend. Cixous's account of a myopic childhood in which "seeing was a tottering believing" leads to her reflections following an eye operation in her adulthood that, while lifting the veil over her eyes, unexpectedly and paradoxically brings on "nostalgia for the secret non-seeing." In language worthy of Gertrude Stein who also taught best, Cixous concludes with a fugal meditation considering "What the seers have never seen: presence-before-the-world. But 'before,' not knowing that that's what she saw, did she see it? Do the seers know that they see? Do the non-seers know that they see differently? What do we see? Do eyes see that they see?" In some sense, though I confess I didn't have it in mind as I wrote the novel, that last question is what its hero asks in his peregrinations from

world to world traversing a history of visual media.

EL: You write, “The sea of memory deceives us in its placidity; wave on wave—the standard phrase—at best describes a surface succession, the blanket pulled over the restless sleeper caught in a series of dreams that, beneath, roll over each other in a roil of silt and scrub of backwash, yesterday mixed with tomorrow’s yesterday, and a long-lost day that once retrieved has no name to fix it to but this current one, not today exactly but without a better name, where it spins listlessly out of place like polished driftwood, grain raised, bleached, spinning on its axis between floating and sinking as another wave washes over.” You continue to explore memory and time and age and place. How do you feel they are linked?

MJ: You’re right, I think, to situate the question as a matter of feeling, even if the word “feel” here arises as part of a common expression. We feel our way in commonplace, like sleepers in the night whose dream worlds and proprioceptive worlds alike are contiguous, mapped as is the lover’s body, whether in dream, imagination, or the bed, making sense of it all in literally feeling our way. More and more we’ve come to know that questions of the nature of space and the space of nature ultimately reside equally in the shared domain of physics and poetry. Memory, like Barthes’s capital-N Nature, is a space we do not choose and where, as the quantum physicist and philosopher Karen Barad says, “In an important sense, the ‘past’ is open to change. It can be redeemed, productively reconfigured in an iterative unfolding of space-timematter. But its sedimenting effects, its trace, cannot be erased. The memory of its materializing effects is written into the world.” A world, I would note, which includes our embodied perceptions. Long ago I wrote that as writers we often function despite both our unchosen nature and the ensemble of space-time events that we witness, and in our witnessing participate in their making. We sometimes seem fearless in our ability to process our experiences in writing—more fearless there, in fact, than our lives otherwise allow us to be.

EL: I found your book to have an ethereal spirit. Each time I picked it up I felt I was in a different place and time, and sometimes, story. You are often called “the granddaddy” or pioneer of hypertext fiction, which is sometimes called unconstrained narrative. How do you approach plot?

MJ: Ha! Here, if I did social media, I suppose I’d have written LOL, since I actually did laugh aloud at the gentle kindness of a question that I’m used to others putting more confrontationally. When you asked above about writers who taught me best, I should have added John Hawkes, who more accurately confirmed rather than taught a practice I had already found my way into, one which it turned out Hawkes years before had famously formulated in an apologia. “I began to write fiction on the assumption that the true enemies of the novel were plot, character, setting, and theme,” he wrote, “and having once abandoned these familiar ways of thinking about fiction, totality of vision or structure was really all that remained.” For Hawkes this totality however was not totalizing but rather a quantum dynamic, the kind of unconstrained narrative that, when I met him at Iowa, Jack generously pronounced upon me, speaking of what he characterized as our shared affinity for “energized language.” To which he instantly

cautioned “it will make for a difficult life as a writer.” I’ve at least managed to live up to (or into) the latter if not always the former.

Still I’m happy that you characterize *Remedia*’s ethereal spirit as moving through different places, times, and stories, since that for me is the essence of what constitutes a picaresque novel. Our search for why the ethereal spirit moves so is perhaps what takes the place of plot in a picaresque. I’m fond of the definition one critic long ago said “clearly marked” that the most un-unconstrained of realist writers, Maupassant, characterizing “the picaresque spirit as the comparison by an ironical skeptic of the outer shows of society with its inner reality.” Such a showing may not be a plot but very much is, I think, our current story in this woeful moment in history and spectacle.

EL: If this is your last book, as you have mentioned, I have to wonder, first, why? And second, do you view death as walking forwards/backwards through a portal or door?

MJ: My oh my, you surely got to the questionably indulgent, if not self-sorry, heart of the matter here, passing GO and instead heading directly to the implicit headstone and its second question of which way is in, or out, or as you (or I) will. Before addressing that, however, I might say as regards your first that in response to a similar question for an interview with Kass Fleisher on the Steerage site, I joked that “Two things Irish-Americans are good at are leaving things behind and lingering goodbyes” and then went on more seriously to say “I’ve taken to calling this ‘my last novel,’ not out of any fatalist impulses but because I’m not writing at present and no longer certain why I should.” Which is to say (or to have said, twice too many times) there is less a why than a what-about my perhaps unfortunate, increasingly public confession of withdrawing from a space in which my absence (or, I rush to say, most any writer’s) will not be widely noticed. Indeed since I retreated from digital literature in much the same fashion via an equally leaky communication among friends some years ago, this whole thing admittedly seems vaguely shameful and worthy of ridicule even, or especially, to me. I wouldn’t take me seriously.

That said, I do take seriously, your second, profound question, to which I can easily respond: Yes, I view death as walking forward through a portal, in much the same way that one walks through a like portal again and again in writing any one sentence or line of verse. There is no knowing where you are going nor, when all is said, any one to tell what really you have done. For the telling falls in the full of time to the one who reads the evidences of your having traversed this moment in time and space, whose lips form what is left of your voice, whose breath attempts to capture the rhythm of yours like notes in the score of each line or sentence, and whose eyes bring forth from the page or screen what you could not have imagined seeing for yourself whether in the world you’ve passed through or the one you are going to.

EL: Since this is a book that includes traveling through dreams . . . what question do you wish I had asked?

MJ: I wish you had asked what name the nameless main character of the novel really has, although I do not think I could have told you. ☞