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Wires

The sociable motto offered by E. M. Forster in his novel *Howards End* seems to apply everywhere today, but with a different meaning: 'only connect'.[1] Nowadays, getting a connection tends to mean hooking up to a network, rather than necessarily establishing any physical link. Ours is a world increasingly of wireless rather than wired connections. In fact, the dream of dispensing with wires is an old and recurrent one. The wireless world that opened up at the beginning of the twentieth century was going to be a world of communications effected by waves, radiation, vibration, emanation; we would live as the angels had once been thought to live, in a world of instantaneously transmitted thoughts and impulses. The wireless world promised to cut our connection to the sluggish and impeded and annoyingly chopped-up world of time and place and bodies and distances and matter.

Wires and waves are very different things. A world of communication by waves and vibrations and emanations is a world of permeated lives, in which individual identities are dissolved, ecstatically or uneasily as it may be, in universally shared experiences. A world of communication along wires offers the delights of communication across vast distances, but with the preservation of intimacy and secrecy. The person on the end of the telephone line, whether God or grandma, could speak to you and to you alone. Waves belong to the magic or angelic otherworld; wires knit us tightly into this one. Waves are expansively, inclusively utopian; wires are suspiciously conspiratorial (there is no such thing as 'wave-tapping').

The current return of the dream of 'wireless' connection and communication has to contend with the fact that, by the end of the twentieth century, the word 'wireless' had itself developed a very antique aroma, conjuring up associations of crystal radios, Glenn Miller and Churchillian broadcasts to the nation. When I think of the word 'wireless', I think, not of the newly immaterial world of virtual, or out-of-the-body, experience opening up for us once again, but of a vast, mythical apparatus, the wireless which occupied most of our rather cramped council house living room in the 1960s. I remember it mostly as a thing of textures; the dark, glassily polished wood of its frame, that seemed both to solicit and to forbid the smeary, mortal touch of fingers; the bonier, beakish feel of the hard, yellowing plastic knobs; the coarse, hempy roughness of the fabric stretched over the loudspeaker, which would well and gulp and belly as though taking breath when you turned up the bass. And, most of all, the thing I remember about the thing we called our wireless was the electric cable that connected it to the mains: insulated with tough, woven fabric, inside which was a rubber sleeve, which in its

turn enclosed the copper wire along which the power passed. I played perilously with this and other wires, razoring through the epidermal layers, laying bare the gleaming copper ore at their hearts, which, being by this ravishment still unsatisfied, I then spread and splayed and plaited.

Nearly everything is much older than we think, including and especially electricity. The word 'electricity' comes from the Greek word for amber which was known to produce sparks when rubbed. Strange and powerful though it is, human beings habituated themselves early to electricity. By the end of the eighteenth century, the effects of electricity on and in the human body were being intensively investigated by curious physicists, such as the Abbé Jean-Antoine Nollet, who memorably performed an experiment to determine the speed of electricity; he joined 200 Carthusian monks into a ring to see how long it took an electric current to get round, and greatly enjoyed the ensuing yelps and spasms: 'It is singular to see the multitude of different gestures, and to hear the instantaneous exclamation of those surprised by the shock'. The Abbé's speciality was bodily electricity, but he was followed by many others who tried to find or imagine ways of taking this new force into the body, often for medical purposes, to invigorate, or to assist healing. But many thought that there was a strong affinity between external and internal forms of electricity; Nollet himself thought that electricity went both outwards and inwards from electrified bodies, alternating 'affluence' and 'effluence' in a sort of breathing pattern.[2]

The nineteenth-century practice of mesmerism, which depended upon the theory of a transmissible animal magnetism, or soul-force, threw up many examples of people starting to conceive of themselves as kinds of electrical apparatus formed by wire-like

connections. The inventor of mesmerism, Anton Mesmer, would conduct therapeutic seances, in which the assembled group would join hands to conduct and contain the force. If we sometimes think of wires as the world's nervous system, pulsing with messages and information, then this is amply anticipated in the ways in which human bodies began to be thought of, not as a hydraulic mechanism, but as wired together, and therefore sometimes capable of being rewired. It was believed that mesmeric trance, for example, could bring about a relocation of the sense organs, so that people who became deaf and blind could nevertheless see and hear from their stomachs. An early nineteenth-century investigator called Jacques-Henri Petetin claimed to have demonstrated an electrical basis for this phenomenon; he said that a subject who would show no sign of response to a question directed to her ears would respond if the mesmeriser placed the fingertips of one hand on her abdomen and whispered his remarks to the fingertips of the other hand.[3]

Spiritualist practice inherited from mesmerism the idea of wiring that connected the body to various kinds of imaginary ether. This idea took its most spectacular form in the images of a medium called Mina Stinson Crandon, who was extensively investigated in Boston during the 1920s. 'Margery', as she was known, specialised in producing the voices of her dead brother Walter, sometimes producing for the photographer a rather ghastly looking talking head made of ectoplasm for the purpose. In one remarkable photograph, the ectoplasmic amplifier sits on her head like a caul, while a thin but perfectly visible thread runs into her ear; in others a smaller teleplasmic mass rests on her shoulder, connected to her by a thick cable that runs into her nose.[4] Hearing, speaking, eating, telephoning, excretion and birth are here wired up in a fantastic and

grotesque synthesis, as though in an attempt to keep up with the new ways of hooking up bodies with machines in communicative technologies like telephones, phonographs, typewriters, radios and cinema projectors, which were promising and threatening to change the human body's experience of itself.

One of the ways in which human beings seem most literally to be wired to each other is through the umbilical cord, a linking of times as well as places. Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses* imagines a cable knotted together from all the umbilical cords of human beings, that would give you access to the first telephone number: 'The cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh ... Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one'.[5]

If an umbilical cord offers one way of breathing through a wire, the venerable metaphor of the Aeolian harp offers another way of imagining the susceptibility of wires to the action of the breath. This metaphor was sometimes transposed to telegraph and telephone cables, in an effort to link the new and uncanny moaning they made in the wind to the messages they were conveying. In a poem called 'The Telephone Harp' published in 1908, John Payne imagined telephone cables as a harp swept by the 'hand of the storm-wind', which provided a 'concert of wail that comes from other worlds than ours, / The inarticulate cry of things that till now were mute / And speak out their need through the strings of this monstrous man-made lute'.[6]

Wires are magical objects because they are so small, and capable of wreaking effects far disproportionate to their size and fragility. Human beings are captivated by the idea of infinite force moving through near-infinite littleness. Wires effect transformation, carry messages and impulses. They bring the world to life; they transmit

sentience itself. The life that wires transmit passes into them: all wires are live wires, they are all life forms. In my childhood home, we always, superstitiously, unplugged all our electrical apparatus during thunderstorms, in an acknowledgement that our domestic wiring hooked us up to the skies. Lightning, which can turn anything into a conductor, seems to be the confirmation that nature craves the chance to disclose its hidden wirings. Wires not only transform the things they connect, they are themselves subject to all kinds of imaginary collusion and metamorphosis. Wires are like threads, like pipes, like nerves, veins and stems. Dylan Thomas memorably twists together all these ideas in the poem that begins and is titled 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower'.[7]

We live in a wireless age that has reinvented the wire, as though it continued to put us under some ligatory obligation. We know perfectly well that wires are different from threads and strings and ropes that we can handle, but we seem not to be able to do without the sense of physical involvement with wires. Somebody who turns aside from one mobile phone to take a call from another may still refer to the caller 'on the other line'. When we invite somebody to stay in touch, we are likely to have in mind the special kind of attenuated, arachnid touch involved in contact by wires. Telephones are linked to touching in a way that radio is not: your interlocutor seems still to be at the end of the line, which is perhaps why telephones have retained such surprisingly various erotic possibilities.

Wires, which we will sometimes also call lines, also have the magical power of *the straight*. Although nature everywhere implies and approximates to straight lines – in the force of gravity which pulls a plumb line into verticality, for example – it rarely actually

supplies them. Because the idea of the straight is an absolute or counterfactual ideal, straight lines imposed upon nature seem to imply the possibility of magical power. Lines – the lines of architecture and geometry, ley lines, songlines, and the laminar rows imparted by combs – out-nature nature. Lines signify mortality and the irreversibility of time. Wires have the magical property of being able to preserve their inhuman straightness amid convolution. You can knot and wind wires together, but you cannot fold a wire in on itself like clay or dough. The wire retains its linearity through every contortion and insinuation.

Coils, those strange amalgams of the straight and the curved, had always been full of marvel. It is perhaps no surprise that the phonograph, invented almost simultaneously with the telephone, in 1876, should depend upon the principle of coiling, spiralling and winding up, as though it were itself based upon the powers of the wire to compact and store up time. Winding and unwinding continued to be the principles which governed recording and playback when the gramophone record replaced the cylinder-phonograph and persisted in the tape recorder and cine-camera, which turn the line of time into a loop or coil. The neat reversibility of recording and playback is the promise of Ariadne's thread, that will lead us safely out of the labyrinth.

Wires effect their actions very largely invisibly, like our veins and nerves. Whenever and wherever a wire becomes visible, ideas of injury and obscenity stir. A cut or disconnected wire seems dangerous and pitiable at once; something has bitten it, but its wounded condition makes it look menacing, too, as though it were about to bite. The invention of barbed wire, and the use of electric wires for fencing of animals and human beings, made some of this buried

threat visible and explicit. This is why, for the most part, wires are so elaborately and decently, as we say, 'clad'; it means that we can be spared the sight and touch of the wire itself, the copper performing its ferocious, invisible and unthinkably rapid business inside the wire.

If wires are life forms, and borrow some of the features of our bodies, they are alien life forms, whose bodies are organised like those of snakes, worms, or other memberless creatures. Wires are venomous, verminous, parasitic parody-life. For me there has always been a peculiar disgust associated with the idea that there really could be a creature called a 'wireworm'. The laying of the transatlantic telephone cable in the nineteenth century was accompanied by much heroic fanfaring, but I think that people may also have been haunted by the idea of that wire lying there, indifferently pervaded by our rages, musings and despairs, out of sight, but never satisfactorily out of mind, slithered over by blind, white things, amid the cold and dark that were its natural element. Wires, like serpents and dragons, belong to unseen, inhospitable, inhuman places; they make our words and impulses and feelings pass through invisibility and uninhabitability. The magic of coils – which associates Faraday's electromagnetic coil with the power invested in amulets showing interwoven forms – is itself tangled up with the peculiar, phobic fascination with the bodies of creatures like snakes capable of coiling over themselves and others of their species, creatures whose singularity is dubious, creatures of the labyrinth whose bodies are themselves labyrinthine. No matter what I do with bits of Sellotape and string, the connections behind my audio system insist on writhing together into this kind of Medusan tangle.

If wires, like pipes, intimate a simplified, abstracted, rationalised

world, a world arranged in clean lines and squares, it is in their nature to betray that into convolution; for wires breed on themselves; they seem to touch themselves up, and touch each other off. I comb out the wires at the back of my music system or television so that they hang in a neat and orderly fringe, but when next I pull the unit out, they have coiled and moiled together. They are all middle, heads and tails obscenely muddled. A wired world is the promise of the world recomposed as a vast telephone exchange, in which everything can make contact with everything else, all calls will be returned, and everything will loop magically back on itself; but there was, and is, a vileness that breeds within wires, with their whispers of dropped stitches and disconnections, crossed wires, mazes and black magic.

But, because of this, wires also suggest a thrilling fragility and risk. We depend on them, because our words, and lives, hang on them by a thread. If wires suggest the possibility of binding, they are also closely associated with ideas of hanging on. Callers are asked to 'hold'; the telephone thins our being into a thread. Creatures who hang, like bats, spiders and monkeys, are creatures who live in the worlds of earth and air at once. For all our dreams of flight, we seem to find hanging a more congenial way of occupying the air. The fact that wires are almost not there at all makes them aerial as well as eerie. Our networks of wires, though buried under the ground or even under the ocean, form an imaginary hammock that seems to hold us ecstatically suspended in thin air, even as we go our ways about the earth. During the nineteenth century there were slack-rope and tightrope walkers in the circuses; by the end of the century, they were just as often known as high-wire artists. We had all come to know something of the giddiness of walking on wires. Wires

suggest fragility and vertigo, theirs and ours, as well as power. If the connection is cut, if the line goes dead, then we may fall back to earth.

But it is just this tension that keeps us strung out on wires. High-wire walking has become an image of the refinement of the accidents and approximations of human life to the absolute concentration of purpose required to walk the wire. In his essay 'Le funambule' (1958) Jean Genet made the tightrope walker the figure of the solitary, self-communing artist and sexual outsider.

> With his first movements on the wire, we will see that this monster with purple eyelids could dance only there. Doubtless, one will say, it is his singularity which has him balanced on a thread, it is that elongated eye, those painted cheeks, those gilded nails, which oblige him to be there, where we, thank God, would never go.[8]

In August 1974, the high-wire artist Philippe Petit stole into the newly constructed World Trade Center in New York, shot a cable between the buildings with a bow and arrow, and spent 45 minutes walking back and forth between the towers. It seemed to show, as his associate Jean-Louis Blondeau remarked in *Man on Wire* (2008), the documentary film made of the episode, 'what the buildings were for'. This reveals how little Nietzsche really understood about walking the wire when he wrote 'Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman – a rope over an abyss ... What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is a *going-across*'.[9] But rope-dancers and wire-walkers do not, any more than chickens, want to get to the other side. In fact, the most characteristic gesture of the wire-walker is, once they have

apparently completed their walk safely, to go back out on the wire, as Philippe Petit did for forty-five rapturous, electrifying minutes above the streets of Manhattan, in order to invent different, even more improbably serene things to do on it. Wire-walkers are not heroes but clowns, who offer better company, seem better, as the Americans say, to hang with – 'come on up, come on out, it's lovely!' – than Nietzsche's nobly aquiline souls, perched on high. Like the tap dancer on a staircase, whose task is not to effect a simple ascent or descent, but to come up with as many different ways as possible to combine going up with coming down, the wire-walker aims to occupy rather than merely to penetrate space, to tangle up the line into a cat's-cradle, to dither the infinitesimally thin itinerary of the wire into a five-miles-meandering mazy habitat. The wire-walker wants to persuade us that the perilous wire is in fact a safety net. The destiny of the wire-walker is an indefinite deferral of destination, a putting off of coming to ground. Not an infiltrator but an expatiator, not a courier but a semi-conductor, not a transient but a temporiser, not a metre but a rhythm, the wire-walker offers a joyously perilous set of variations on ways for the performance to be spun out a little longer. The dallying business of the wire-walker is to insinuate a discourse with the wire, forming an amalgam with it of flesh and geometry. For Genet, the role of the wire-walker is to bring his wire to life – 'you will perfect your leaps … not for your own glory, but so that a dead, voiceless steel wire at last may sing'.[10]

When I gave a radio talk on wires in 2000, I was contacted shortly afterwards by the editor of *Wire Industry*, who asked me if I would be willing for them to publish my talk. I wondered quite what he was expecting his readers to get from what I had written. For *Wire Industry* is a trade journal mostly taken up with the

technicalities of wires and cables and with wire-related products such as extruders, capstans, stranders and respoolers; it publishes articles with titles like 'Neural Networks for Quality Control in the Wire Rod Industry' and 'The Bending Stiffness of Spiral Strands'. I felt humbled and reproved when I was sent my copy, and found that it was headed with a trail of red hearts fluttering round the caption 'Rekindle Your Love Affair … With Wire'. We should never underestimate the capacity of human beings to get wound up in things.[11]