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Sylvain Belluc

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Chance and Punishment: An Etymological Reading of James Joyce's "A Painful Case"

A fundamental characteristic of Joyce's writing is its constant activation of the past meanings of words and of the intertexts with which they are associated. Although that strategy is on obvious display in *Finnegans Wake*, where it is taken to extreme limits, it is in fact at work throughout Joyce's oeuvre. The reason behind that inclination can be found in the essay entitled "The Study of Languages," which Joyce wrote during his first year at University College, in 1898/99. In it, he makes a clear case in favour of the capacity of etymology to open our eyes to the myriad information locked up within language, stating, for instance, that "in the history of words there is much that indicates the history of men, and in comparing the speech of to-day with that of years ago, we have a useful illustration of the effect of external influences on the very words of a race" (*OCPW* 15). Joyce was therefore made aware, from an early age, of the cultural value of etymology, that is to say, of its potential role as a door of access to historical knowledge.

From that role derived, in turn, its potential usefulness for writers. Joyce, whose entire essay is a passionate defence of language study, goes on to write: "this knowledge tends to make our language purer and more lucid, and therefore tends also to improve style and composition" (*OCPW* 15). Such an argumentative jump might strike the modern reader as old-fashioned at best, and as completely misplaced at worst. Although the capacity of words to provide information on past historical customs or events seems today undeniable, as is testified by the ever-increasing flow of books on the subject, the rhetorical shortcut Joyce takes from cultural knowledge to stylistics looks nothing short of arbitrary. For who, a century after the emergence of structuralism, would deny that a language operates in a manner which is entirely independent of its past, and that etymology should therefore have no influence on the way words are used?

Joyce, however, makes the exactly opposite claim in his early writings. And the reason he does so is that he was born at a time when historical linguistics was in its heyday. Historical linguistics, as its name implies, is concerned with describing and accounting for observed changes in particular languages, and with reconstructing the pre-history of languages and determining their relatedness, grouping them into language families (comparative linguistics). And research, in this area, had made leaps forward in the 19th century. The most revolutionary changes had been taking place. They had culminated in the formulation of Grimm's Law, a set of systematic rules based on phonetic correspondences between Greco-Latin and Germanic languages which proved their common ancestry. It is important for historical linguistics because it clearly demonstrates the principle that sound change is a regular phenomenon and not a random process affecting only some words, as had been thought previously. For instance, the letter /p/ at the start of words was changed to the letter /f/: thus, Sanskrit *pada*, Latin, *pes*, *pedis*, Russian *pod*, French *piéd* became English *foot* and German *Fuß*.

These new findings generated considerable interest and changed the very nature of etymological dictionaries, which gradually abandoned the former model of enquiry based on guesswork (that of Dr. Johnson, for instance, which derived the word "crocodile" from the Greek κρόκος, *saffron*, and δειλὼν, *fearing*¹) to adopt a new approach focusing on the changes in the phonetic and morphological structure of words. Those advances spawned dictionaries of a new kind, which had explicit scientific claims. The brothers Grimm, besides collecting lots of ancient Germanic fairy tales, compiled a monumental German dictionary which traced in minute detail the history of German words, while in Britain, the most ground-breaking of the

¹ Le mot grec dérive de κρόκος, *krokos* (« safran, crocus ») et δέρας, *deiras* (« peau, cuir »), littéralement : « à la peau jaunâtre » ; or alteration of Latin *crocodilus*, from Greek *krokodilos* lizard, crocodile, from *krokē* shingle, pebble + *drilos* worm; akin to Sanskrit *śarkara* pebble.

new dictionaries was that of Walter Skeat, published in 1882, the year Joyce was born, and which the young Stephen in *Stephen Hero* is said to read “by the hour” (Slide 1).

He read Skeat’s *Etymological Dictionary* by the hour and his mind, which had from the first been only too submissive to the infant sense of wonder, was often hypnotised by the most commonplace conversation. People seemed to him strangely ignorant of the value of the words they used so glibly.

The breakthroughs achieved in historical linguistics obviously had a huge impact on etymology, which is the study of the history of words, that is to say, the changes both its phonetic shape and its semantic contents have undergone (Slides 2 & 3). However, etymology remained tied to a much older tradition, one which preceded the discoveries which showed that mankind was much older than one used to think. This tradition sees in etymology the quest for an original, a pure, an authentic meaning. Indeed, the term “etymology” itself can refer to the original meaning of a particular word. It derives from the Greek word *ἐτυμολογία* (*etumología*), itself from *ἔτυμον* (*étumon*), meaning “true sense,” and the suffix *-logia*, meaning “discourse on”.

With the advent of historical linguistics, therefore, a tension started to arise at the heart of the very concept of etymology, a tension that one finds in the young Stephen’s approach to words in *Stephen Hero* (Slide 4). The Latin *ex-planare* means “to make smooth,” “to spread out flat”. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the verb referred to the growth of a plant, a seed or a bud, that is to say to the process of its unfolding or unfurling (*déploiement*) from a condensed, concentrated form. Similarly, the word “garner” is synonymous with “granary,” the place where seeds or grains are housed (from Latin *granum*).

Joyce didn’t devise such an approach to language himself, however, he borrowed it from Richard Trench, an Anglican minister and one of the architects of the *Oxford English Dictionary* who wrote in *On the Study of Words*, a collection of the lectures Trench gave to schoolchildren (Slide 5):

This entire moral and visible world from first to last, with its kings and its subjects, its parents and its children, its sun and its moon, its sowing and its harvest, its light and its darkness, its sleeping and its waking, its birth and its death, is from beginning to end a mighty parable, a great teaching of supersensuous truth, a help at once to our faith and to our understanding.

What Trench articulates here is the religious and philosophical concept known as of the **Book of Nature**, which originated in the Middle Ages and viewed nature as a book to be read for knowledge and understanding. Early theologians believed the Book of Nature was a source of God’s revelation to mankind: when read alongside Sacred Scripture, the “Book” of Nature and the study of God’s creations would lead to a knowledge of God himself. Nature being the manifestation and design of a divine plan, it became a font of divine revelation.

The originality of Richard Trench lay in his applying that *topos* not just to nature, but to language itself. He was influenced by empiricism, a theory that states that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience. According to Trench, the new advances achieved in etymology would make the retrieval of the etymon at the basis of each word possible, an etymon which would firmly be rooted in the natural world. He writes (Slide 6):

Many a single word also is itself a concentrated poem, having stores of poetical thought and imagery laid up in it. Examine it, and it will be found to rest on some deep analogy of things natural and things spiritual; bringing those to illustrate and to give an abiding form and body to these. The image may have grown trite and ordinary now; perhaps through the help of this very word may have become so entirely the heritage of all, as to seem little better than a commonplace; yet not the less he who first discerned the relation, and devised the new word which should express

it, or gave to an old, never before but literally used, this new and figurative sense, this man was in his degree a poet.

Words therefore are, for Trench, « concentrated poems ». This notion of « concentration » or « condensation » is essential, because therein lies the originality of Trench's discourse, and because it is of great help in understanding how the stories of *Dubliners* work. Trench sees in the development of words from a concrete root borrowed from nature a process akin to that of the parable, which rests on the principle of natural analogy. If Jesus borrows images from the natural world to give his hearers an insight into the kingdom of God, it is because God the Father has originally designed Nature for such an end. This is why Trench, in the passage quoted earlier, describes the world as a “mighty parable”.

Hence the call to his readers to “explain” (flatten out) the etymon of words. Such an exercise is bound to provide one with a better understanding of God's designs. To illustrate the urgency of the need to do so, Trench compares words to coins (Slide 7):

Then shall we often rub off the dust and rust from what seemed to us but a common token, which as such we had taken and given a thousand times; but which now we shall perceive to be a precious coin, bearing the “image and superscription” of the great King; then shall we often stand in surprise and in something of shame, while we behold the great spiritual realities which underlie our common speech, the marvellous truths which we have been witnessing *for* in our words, but, it may be, witnessing *against* in our lives.

As this quote shows, Trench condemns the impoverished use made of words in day-to-day conversation. The implication, therefore, is that it is down to writers to redeem language, and the redemption will be both a linguistic and a spiritual one.

Unsurprisingly, Trench's book left a deep mark on the young Joyce's mind, as is testified by Stephen's shock, in *Stephen Hero*, when he realizes people's ignorance “of the value of the words they used so glibly,” as well as by the use of the word “thesaurus,” which shares a common origin with the word “treasure”. What seems to have particularly aroused Joyce's attention, however, is the concept of *explanation*, that is to say, the idea that there are entire stories hidden within words which are only waiting to be unfolded, or that proverbs can be extended or flattened out into entire stories.

Dubliners accordingly illustrates that model, but illustrates it with a twist. To understand the nature of the change, we need to remind ourselves of Joyce's aim in *Dubliners*. Joyce set out to open the eyes of his fellow Dubliners to the spiritual, intellectual and social crisis in which they were mired. In the several passages from his letters in which he gives details about this objective, he makes clear that it is the city, not the people who live in it, which is the source or the “centre” of paralysis. In other words, Dublin is a space of powerlessness or “helplessness” which preexists its population. Or in other words still, Dubliners are nothing but the emanation, the outgrowth of the city in which they dwell. Whether first or last in the progression of the story, powerlessness precedes the characters who experience it. Which is why their eventual failure is always a foregone conclusion.

And the logical over-determination of which they are the preys does not lie outside language but is inscribed within it; in other words, Joyce does not set out coolly to describe or depict this over-determination. In the stories, characters do not so much use language as they are controlled by it. Each one of their actions is, in effect, a product of language.

Which brings us back to Trench's concept of the explanation of words. Joyce, in *Dubliners*, makes his that model, but subverts it in the process. Just as the concrete image at the root of each word, according to Trench, potentially contains an entire story, and this story can be read provided it is flattened out or “unfurled” for everyone to see, the progress (or rather lack of progress) charted in each story of *Dubliners* is already contained within its title or its

incipit, just like a seed potentially contains in very condensed form the plant or tree that will eventually grow out of it. But the whole ruse of Joyce's writing lies in the fact that the characters themselves are not aware of it. Each story, therefore, does not so much retrace the different stages of the process leading to the powerlessness of the character (who is powerless from the very start), as his or her sudden awareness of this powerlessness.

A good illustration of the manner in which a character's trajectory is often encapsulated, albeit cryptically, in the title of the story in which he or she features is "A Painful Case". For the narrative of Mr Duffy and of Mrs Sinico's death is nothing but the unrolling or unfurling of the etymological potentialities contained within the title. The word "case" comes from the Latin "casus," which is the past participle of the verb "cadere," which means "to fall". Walter Skeat translates it as "fall, accident, case". A case would thus be the product of pure chance. Indeed, Walter Skeat points out that the words "case" and "chance" share the same root (Slide 8). As to "pain," it derives from the classical Latin "pœna," which the *OED*, in the etymological note it provides, glosses as follows (Slide 9). The adjective "painful," therefore, didn't originally apply to something which causes pain, but to an act which requires a reparation, a vengeance or a penalty. Richard Trench even draws a moral lesson from this double meaning at the heart of the word "pain" (Slide 10).

Once seen in this light, the title of Joyce's story clearly suggests the motif of the Fall in the Book of Genesis, a parallel which is strengthened by the numerous allusions to this episode in the story, whether it be, among many others, the "sin" in "Sinico" or the comparison of the train Mr Duffy sees in the distance to a worm.

The relationship between the Biblical episode and the title "A Painful Case" is rendered particularly complex, however, by the fact that the expression "A Painful Case" is borrowed from the obituary notice read by Mr Duffy in a newspaper and transcribed in its entirety in the story. This notice suggests two radically different ways of activating the etymological potentialities contained in the title, and it is in this gap that the real meaning of the story lies.

The obituary notice might seem, at first sight, to substantiate the parallel with the Bible. It portrays the accident to which Mrs Sinico fell victim as the consequence of the infringement of a set of rules and warnings, such as the ban on "crossing the line," both in the literal and in the figurative sense. It is because Mrs Sinico's act is the unpredictable transgression of such a ban that it constitutes a "case" and can be labelled an "accident". The original meaning of the word "pain," in its turn, would be reactivated. The notion of "punishment" it carries would then apply to the lethal blow dealt by the locomotive to Mrs Sinico for having breached the law. Hence also the allegorical reading suggested by several elements of the article, such as the question "you saw the lady fall?" posed by the juror to a witness.

The rest of the story, however, suggests another reading, one diametrically opposed to this one. For one thing, Mr Duffy doesn't yield to the temptation of an affair with Mrs Sinico, since the gesture of affection she makes when she lays her hand on his cheek immediately spells the end of their relationship. This break, however, is nothing but the crystallisation of an over-determination which means that the relationship between the two characters was always doomed to failure. From the very start of the narrative, Mr Duffy's daily life is depicted as organized with the utmost discipline and rigour, away from the city centre, where chance prevails, and where, indeed, he meets Mrs Sinico during one of his few incursions there. The irruption of Mrs Sinico into his life would then constitute an unbearable aberration that threatens the whole fabric of his life, hence his decision to put an end to their relationship as soon as she shows him a sign of affection. Mrs Sinico's death, far from being a chance event, would then constitute the logical outcome of an implacable logical process. The newspaper article, it is be noted, gives it to understand that her act may have been a deliberate one.

The etymological potentialities contained within the title of the story suddenly get activated in a radically new way: instead of being, just like Eve's act, an unforeseen transgression which

led to a painful punishment, the tragic end met by Mrs Sinico turns out to have been a foregone conclusion, and an eminently predictable one at that. It thus provides another illustration of Joyce's diagnosis of the spiritual and moral crisis in which his fellow Dubliners, whom he blamed for being "afraid to live," were stuck, and of Dublin as a centre of paralysis.