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The Sense of a Meaning:
***A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and the Rise of Semantics**

As a *Künstlerroman*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* charts Stephen's gradual discovery of his artistic calling, a discovery which eventually crystallises in his wish to become "a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life." Stephen's slow realisation of his vocation, however, goes hand in hand with his evolving approach to the medium used for that transmutation, namely language. Interestingly, the latter decades of the nineteenth century, which is the period in which the action of Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel is set, saw huge advances made and new directions taken in the field of language study. It is not surprising, therefore, that just as Stephen fashions his political ideas as a response to the competing discourses which echo around him on some of the burning issues of the time, his attitude toward language, far from evolving in a historical vacuum, bears the unmistakable imprint of the linguistic concerns of his age.

Indeed, a case can be made that Stephen's constantly changing ideas on the relationship between words and reality in *A Portrait* mirrors the evolution of Western linguistic thought in those crucial few decades of its history which coincide with Joyce's early life. That period witnessed the discipline known as "comparative philology" supersede an approach to language which still very much relied on guesswork. While scholars, until then, had been positing often fanciful links to account for resemblances between given words, their time and energy were now devoted to sifting out textual evidence in order to trace out subtle shifts in meaning over time. That new direction in language study also led to the elaboration of evermore precise phonetic laws, thus contributing to the emergence of linguistics as a science in its own right. Those twin ground-breaking approaches led to the publication of dictionaries of a new type, such as Walter Skeat's *Etymological Dictionary*, which came out in 1882, the very year of Joyce's birth, and which Stephen is said to "read by the hour" in *Stephen Hero*, or the *OED*, which soon came to be regarded as the most accomplished exemplar of the new method. The period also saw the publication of books by Richard Trench aimed at popularising etymology, which, as I have shown elsewhere, was a great source of fascination and inspiration for Joyce. It fell, however, to Michel Bréal, in France, to give the field of semantics its true scientific credentials and thus place it on a firm institutional footing.

That radical departure entailed, of course, an entirely new conception of language, which accorded with contemporary discoveries in science, especially in biology, geology, and palaeontology. The age-old belief, based on a literal reading of the Bible, in a potentially retrievable Ur-language which functioned as a fountainhead of purity suddenly left room for an interest in developmental processes, whether they be phonetic, morphological and semantic. And yet, the shift from one approach to the other didn't go without tensions or contradictions, as the new publications contained clues implying that scholars who were contemporary to Joyce still clung, in some respects, to the former model. Richard Trench thus refers to Jacob Boehme's concept of the signature of things (*signatura rerum*), according to which Adam, in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, had managed, thanks to a particular capacity given him by God, to see through the very essence of every creature he named and give it a name that matched its nature, a theory which rests on a belief in a transparent and direct relationship between word and world. At the end of the preface to the first edition of his dictionary, Walter Skeat, for his part, compares the "physical laws" which preside over the evolution of the lexicon to "the

working of divine power”, adding “It is therefore possible to pursue the study of language in a spirit of reverence similar to that in which we study what are called the works of nature; and by aid of that spirit we may gladly perceive a new meaning in the sublime line of our poet Coleridge, that “Earth, with her thousand voices, praises God” (*EDEL* xii). Such remarks testify to a belief in an immanent conception of language, one not so dissimilar, ultimately, to Boehme’s.

Such a context is crucial to understanding Stephen’s intellectual trajectory in *A Portrait*. A core element of it is his gradual discovery that the supposedly direct and univocal link between words and single objects is illusory, and that each word, instead, has a semantic and phonetic history of its own. That realisation is a step-by-step process which the novel charts. It starts on the very first page of the book with the words “moocow” and “baby tuckoo”, which are used in such a way that they undermine the conception of language as a nomenclature made up of discrete units whose shape is the product of a mimetic link with the thing they designate in real life. The passage as a whole demonstrates that no word stands outside history since language is inevitably received as a legacy from previous generations, and that our relationship to reality is always already textualized in some way or another. Another key stage in Stephen’s growth is the slow, and in some ways painful, realisation that each word literally “makes sense” through its different types of relationship with other items in the lexicon. In an earlier paper, I attempted to show that that discovery starts in the famous episode in which Stephen hears Rody Kickham hurl an insult at Simon Moonan (“We all know why you speak. You are McGlade’s suck”). It sets off a whole train of thought going in his mind about the unsettling aura that surrounds the word “suck,” leading him to remember the image of dirty water going down the hole of a basin:

Suck was a queer word. The fellow called Simon Moonan that name because Simon Moonan used to tie the prefect’s false sleeves behind his back and the prefect used to let on to be angry. But the sound was ugly. Once he had washed his hands in the lavatory of the Wicklow Hotel and his father pulled the stopper up by the chain after and the dirty water went down through the hole in the basin. And when it had all gone down slowly the hole in the basin had made a sound like that: suck. Only louder.

As Derek Attridge has shown, the trouble that the word “suck” creates in Stephen is not so much due to the supposedly mimetic relationship it entertains with the action of water going down a basin as to its polysemy, since the word “echoes the primary taboo word “fuck,” and it names a specific sexual activity that could have taken place between the two males in question”. The troubling effect caused by the word “suck” is thus due to its phonetic and semantic relationship with another item in the lexicon. Ironically, however, Stephen still clings to his belief in a tight, univocal and somehow mimetic relationship between words and things. Unable to understand that the link between reality and the phonemes of which “suck” is made up is arbitrary and that the agitation he feels is the consequence of language’s organization as a close-knit system of phonetically and semantically inter-dependent units, he has no other option than to turn to a meaning of the word “suck” different to the one used by Rody Kickham, and to conclude that the ugly sound the word has to his ears can only be put down to the dirtiness of that other action it supposedly designates, namely the aspiration of dirty water down a hole.

At that point of the narrative, therefore, Stephen still equates language with a nomenclature, that is to say, with a system for naming things. As the etymology of the word “nomenclature,” which derives from the Latin “nomen,” meaning “name”, shows, each word is thus reduced to a label and functions as a proper name. His mind privileges things over ideas, making the very notion of meaning redundant. His understanding of the nature and use of language is still rudimentary, or, one might say, in its infancy. It will take another episode, again with Rody Kickham, for it to develop further. It is on that precise episode which I would like to focus today. It witnesses Stephen’s conception of language being attacked on its own ground, as it were, namely (pun intended) that of proper names. While thus far, he has regarded ordinary

words as proper names, he suddenly realizes that it is precisely proper names which, because they have an indirect motivation, function, conversely, like ordinary words. The scene presents itself to the reader in the shape of a memory which emerges in Stephen's mind while he is on the rugby pitch with his classmates. Keeping as far away from them as he can not to take part in the match, Stephen compares his frail constitution to Rody Kickham's sturdier one. His mind then moves away from Kickham to Nasty Roche, another classmate of his who distinguishes himself by his coarse hands and colloquial language, and he remembers a series of questions that Nasty Roche once put to him:

—What is your name?

Stephen had answered:

—Stephen Dedalus.

—What kind of a name is that?

And when Stephen had not been able to answer Nasty had asked:

—What is your father?

Stephen had answered:

—A gentleman.

Then Nasty Roche had asked:

—Is he a magistrate? (P 6)

The question “What kind of a name is that?”, where the demonstrative pronoun “that” is used to refer to language and not to reality, is bound to unnerve Stephen. In his eyes, there are no “kinds” or “sorts” of names, only names, each of which refers to a specific individual, hence his silence and confusion. Nasty Roche is thus forced to reformulate his question so that it expresses his true intention. He changes its form and shows that each proper name, for him, works as an index to its bearer’s social status: “What is your father?”

Such an attitude to names and to words in general, equating them with vessels in which stores of information are locked up, accords with the method adopted in historical linguistics in the 19th century. Richard Trench’s *On the Study of Words* contains numerous illustrations of it. For instance, he mentions the story according to which the German Emperor Maximilian 1st learned by chance the meaning of the name of his House, the Habsburgs, when he heard a Swiss peasant pronounce it in its unabbreviated form:

Leibnitz tells us, and one can quite understand, the delight with which a great German Emperor, Maximilian I, discovered that “Habsburg,” or “Hapsburg,” the ancestral name of his house, really had a meaning, one moreover full of vigor and poetry. This he did, when he heard it by accident on the lips of a Swiss peasant, no longer cut short and thus disguised, but in its original fullness, “Habichtsburg,” or “Hawk’s tower,” being no doubt the name of the castle which was the cradle of his race (SW 326).

Maximilian’s feeling of surprise is comparable to Stephen’s, as both result from a sudden awareness that even proper names can have a meaning. Although Nasty Roche doesn’t resort to the so-called “historical method”, his question testifies to the very same attitude to language as the one on which that method rests, since it consists in seeing Stephen’s family name not simply as a label, but as a record of his family history, and therefore as a guide to his social standing. Stephen’s foreign-sounding name, however, gives it an opacity which defeats Roche’s attempts at deciphering it. His remark, nevertheless, is enough to open Stephen’s eyes to the historical information contained within words, including his own family name.

Shortly later in the novel, another episode will serve to bring that lesson more fully home to Stephen. Lying on a bed in the school infirmary next to a classmate called Athy, he starts chatting with him, and the conversation soon turns to their respective family names: « You have a queer name, Dedalus, and I have a queer name too, Athy. My name is the name of a town. Your name is like Latin » (P 20). Athy here shows particular insight in noting the Latin ring of

the name “Dedalus”. His remark further muddles the line between common and proper names, for he has managed to identify the Latin origin of “Dedalus” only by isolating its “us” suffix. The analysis he has carried out proves to be accurate, as the Latin noun “daedalus” comes from the Greek “daídalos,” which is made up of the verbal basis “daídále,” meaning “to adorn,” “to embellish,” and of the suffix “os”.

Athy’s remark thus proves that proper nouns, just like any other words, are affected by the organisation of language as a system, not so much because each of them was originally formed out of one or several nouns, but because speakers submit them to mental processes which are exactly the same as those to which ordinary words are submitted. By mentally separating the last two letters from the rest of Stephen’s name, Athy treats it in precisely the same fashion as he does the Latin words taught to him daily at school, such as the noun “mare” which Father Arnall asks him to declinate a few pages later. Such a process may accord with the results of so-called “scientific etymology” in the case of “Dedalus”, but it can just as well result in analyses which pertain to folk etymology.

The “Nestor” episode of *Ulysses* provides a fitting illustration of it when a pupil of Stephen’s draws a fanciful link between the word “pier” and the name of King Pyrrhus from Ancient Greece:

—You, Armstrong, Stephen said. What was the end of Pyrrhus?

—End of Pyrrhus, sir?

—I know, sir. Ask me, sir, Comyn said.

—Wait. You, Armstrong. Do you know anything about Pyrrhus?

A bag of figrolls lay snugly in Armstrong’s satchel. He curled them between his palms at whiles and swallowed them softly. Crumbs adhered to the tissue of his lips. A sweetened boy’s breath. Welloff people, proud that their eldest son was in the navy. Vico Road, Dalkey.

—Pyrrhus, sir? Pyrrhus, a pier (*U* 2.18-26).

Although borne out by scientific etymology, Athy’s remark in *A Portrait* rests on precisely the same method as that of the hapless Armstrong in “Nestor”. Not only does it illustrate a cognitive process which is a staple of language use, but it further shows that proper nouns are affected by it too.

The rest of the dialogue between the two schoolchildren provides a further illustration of it:

Then he asked:

—Are you good at riddles?

Stephen answered:

—Not very good.

Then he said:

—Can you answer me this one? Why is the county Kildare like the leg of a fellow’s breeches?

Stephen thought what could be the answer and then said:

—I give it up.

—Because there is a thigh in it, he said. Do you see the joke? Athy is the town in the county Kildare and a thigh is the other thigh.

—Oh, I see, Stephen said.

—That’s an old riddle, he said (*P* 20).

While Armstrong found a pier in Pyrrhus, Athy finds a thigh in his own name. His gesture, which suggests that any proper name, with a tiny bit of ingenuity, can be inserted into the system of differences that is language (a point elaborated upon by Jacques Derrida in his seminal work *Of Grammatology*), has far-reaching theoretical and methodological consequences. Not only does it put the final nail in the coffin of the conception of language as a nomenclature, it hints at the myriad segmentations and mental associations on which our daily use of language rests,

a field of research which pioneers of the fledgling discipline of semantics had precisely been turning their attention to in the decades before the publication of *A Portrait*. Joyce's works, therefore, do more than simply record the recent impact of comparative philology on language study, they herald a concern for phenomena which had been dismissed for centuries as quaint or marginal, but which had suddenly found themselves rehabilitated by contemporary scholars such Michel Bréal and Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom they were proper terrain for the linguist to investigate. It is precisely a similar rehabilitation that one finds throughout Joyce's works, from the so-called "malapropisms" of "The Sisters" to Molly's confusion of the words "carrot" (the vegetable) and "carat" (the unit for measuring the weight of jewels) in "Penelope". Joyce's promotion of those phenomena from the status of aberrations to that of staple elements of language use is very much of its time, and even looks forward, in some ways, to the works of post-structuralist thinkers, who made much of the role played by folk etymology in our everyday use of language. Joyce's concern for both the diachronic and synchronic approaches to language thus mark out his works as truly transitional. They are on the cusp between the historicist model characteristic of the nineteenth-century, which aimed at replacing an approach to language based on myth by a scientific method and which perceived the past meanings of a word as integral to its identity, and a structuralist model whose main focus is on the numerous links posited by speakers between different items in the lexicon and which by necessity takes on board all sorts of unexpected, abnormal and funny phenomena.