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***Ulysses*, Order, and Reality, or Joyce’s Quest for Syntactic Iconicity**

Every Joycean has heard the phrase “expressive form”, which was coined by Walton Litz back in 1961 in his seminal study *The Art of James Joyce*. The phrase is commonly used to refer to the way in which the form of each episode of *Ulysses* mimics its content. A case in point is that of “Oxen of the Sun,” which traces the growth of the embryo in the womb through a series of parodies which chart the evolution of English prose from preliterate pagan incantations into Middle English, followed by the Latinate style of Milton, imitations of satirists such as Swift, and eventually 19th-century novelists such as Dickens.

Although such a writing strategy might strike one as uniquely and quintessentially Joycean, it is only an application, albeit on an exceptionally wide scale and in fully conscious fashion, of what linguists call “iconicity”.¹ The concept of iconicity was devised by the American philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) in the second half of the 19th century as part of his larger semiotic theory, whose “epochal significance” was rediscovered in the 1960s by Roman Jakobson, after 50 years throughout which it had gone almost unnoticed. Peirce defined icons as signs that have qualities that “resemble” those of the objects they represent and “excite analogous sensations in the mind”. Iconicity, therefore, is the conceived similarity or analogy between the form of a sign (linguistic or otherwise) and its referent or meaning, as opposed to arbitrariness.

Today’s linguists differentiate between different forms of iconicity. Imagic iconicity, also described as absolute iconicity, applies to a directly perceived similarity between the form (acoustic or visual) of a sign and its meaning or referent. The classic example is that, of course, of onomatopoeia, as when the phonetic form [mɪ'əʊ] is felt to be a close imitation of the crying sound of a cat. Diagrammatic iconicity applies to the perceived similarity between two kinds of relationship: a relationship between signs and a relationship between meanings or referents in reality. The classic example, in this case, is Caesar’s dictum *veni, vidi, vici*, in which the arrangement of the clauses mirrors the chronological order in which the events occurred. The

¹ For the explanation of iconicity that follows, I have drawn extensively on Günter Radden’s chapter devoted to that concept in *The Routledge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics* (ed. Wen Xu and John R. Taylor, 2021). <https://www.slm.uni-hamburg.de/iaa/personen/ehemalige-emeriti/radden-guenter/downloads/radden-2020-iconicity.pdf>

last form of iconicity identified by linguists is associative iconicity. It is also a kind of relational iconicity, except that this time, the relationship in question is not that between language and reality, but between words themselves. It is therefore intra-linguistic, and often involves phonesthemes. For example, the words “bash,” “smash” and “crash” are related by their final phonestheme /-æʃ/ and their similar meanings, while the words “glitter,” “glisten,” “gleam,” “glare,” “glimmer” and “glow” share the onset /gl-/ and meanings related to “light” and “vision”. The paradigm of /gl-/ words also includes “glamor,” “glitz” and “glory” and their figurative sense of “shining”. The more words there are that share a particular phonestheme, the stronger their semantic affinity and their iconic meaning are felt to be. That last form of iconicity signals a crucial shift from exophoric iconicity, where the signifier is iconic with the world, to endophoric iconicity, where the signifier is iconic to another signifier within language, for once that jump to an entirely intra-linguistic system of relationships is made, the possibilities for iconicity suddenly seem limitless. Iconicity then becomes a central mechanism of language use. That, of course, wasn’t lost on Roman Jakobson, who convincingly demonstrated that not just a few isolated words feel motivated but a large part of language, and who pointed out that words with similar sounds are felt to convey related meanings, irrespective of their origin.

The reason why I have chosen to look at Joyce’s works through that specific linguistic lens today is that its relevance goes far beyond the use of what Walton Litz called “expressive form” in *Ulysses*. Far from being a mere strategy which enabled Joyce to give a particular pattern, or rather a series of patterns, to his Dublin odyssey, and thus from constituting a way, in T.S. Eliot’s oft-quoted words, “of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history,”² iconicity exerted a genuine and long-lasting fascination on Joyce, whose writings keep on probing the vexed relationship between word and world. That question, of course, is comically thematized by Martha’s Clifford slip of the pen in her letter to Bloom, and keeps being explored, in a variety of ways, throughout Joyce’s works, from Eliza’s malapropisms in “The Sisters” all the way to *Finnegans Wake*, which features many references to the theory of Marcel Jousse, whose conferences Joyce attended in Paris, on the allegedly gestural origins of language. I believe that the reason why iconicity looms so large in Joyce’s works is that he had understood, well before the linguistic world did, that it plays a key role in the everyday use of language. My paper today will aim at identifying some of the ways, from the most obvious to the least ones, in which

² T.S. Eliot, “*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth,” in *The Dial*, November 1923.

Joyce's writings probe the question of iconicity, and at determining the specificity of his contribution to that debate.

A good place to start might be the first pages of *A Portrait*, where Stephen instinctively resorts to iconicity in his first fumbling attempts at understanding the bits of language with which he is surrounded. The first few lines of the novel, in which Stephen's father tells him the story of the "moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo...." (P 5), obviously provides rich matter for a discussion of the role of imagic iconicity in the young Stephen's apprehension of the world. They testify to Joyce's awareness of the now well-documented role of iconicity in language acquisition. A number of studies have shown not only that children's earliest-learned words are onomatopoeic, but that children invest phonesthemes with all sorts of different meanings. Sound symbolism can therefore be said to scaffold word learning from infancy to early childhood. Furthermore, Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, two twentieth-century psychologists who carried out pioneering work on child development, have shown that children understand the name of an object as an integral part of that object. Vygotsky, interestingly, mentions the example of the word "cow", explaining that when pre-school children are asked why a cow is called cow, they say things like, "A cow is called cow because it has horns" (quoted in Radden).

It is precisely such a reconnection of the word "cow" with its referent in the real world which the incipit of *A Portrait* would seem to foster in Stephen's mind, since the word "cow" and the onomatopoeia expressing the sound made by the animal are welded together. Except that the two sit awkwardly together, and that far from enabling the word "cow" to retrieve the iconicity it has lost through time, the onomatopoeia achieves the exact opposite, that is, it sets into relief that arbitrary nature of the word "cow". In so doing, it illustrates Saussure's claim in the lectures he delivered in Geneva at the very precise time when Joyce was writing *A Portrait*, that arbitrariness and motivation are two antithetical ways of accounting for the form of words. Saussure further explains that the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign is a fundamental condition for its historicity, inasmuch as it is because no intrinsic link connects it with reality that it is shaped by human and social factors. The very fact that the opening scene from *A Portrait* features a man teaching his son the first rudiments of language is, in that regard, highly symbolic, since Saussure insists on the fact that language's transmission between generations is what makes the sign a historical artefact, that is to say, it is what enables both the sound and the meaning of the sign to be shaped by contingency: "however far into the past we may go back, language always presents itself as a legacy from the preceding age. No society knows or

has ever known language otherwise than as a product inherited from previous generations and to be taken as it is.”³ The transmission of language between generations thus turns out to be, in the light of Saussure’s discourse, to be fundamentally antithetical to the mimetic theory of the origins of language.

The opening scene of *A Portrait* could thus be said to unveil, in wonderfully condensed fashion, the paradoxical nature of the role played by iconicity in our understanding and use of language, since it illustrates both the way in which the search for a missing link between word and world is an instinctive drive in all of us, a manner for us to make sense of language’s rich tapestry, and the way in which the connections of all kinds that drive results in already lie in store for us within language itself and are the paradoxical legacy passed down by previous generations of speakers. In other words, the opening scene of *A Portrait*, and the first chapter more at large, reveal the artificial element inherent in the quest, which is natural to all humans, for a motivation for words. It is this paradox which Joyce probes further in *Ulysses*.

His exploration is taken to particular lengths in the “Proteus” episode, where we find Stephen pondering again the question of the vexed relationship between word and world. He focuses on the sound made by the waves and reflects on how to transcribe it phonetically: “Listen: a fourworded wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos. Vehement breath of waters amid seasnakes, rearing horses, rocks. In cups of rocks it slops: flop, slop, slap: bounded in barrels. And, spent, its speech ceases. It flows purling, widely flowing, floating foampool, flower unfurling” (*U* 3.456-460). In a fascinating article devoted to Joyce and contemporary linguistic theories, Benoît Tadié has suggested that the whole passage is torn by a tension between arbitrariness and motivation. He highlights the two, mutually exclusive, readings it allows, one which could be called onomatopoeic, since it would be seen as translating into alliterative prose the hissing sound of the waves, and another, anagrammatic, or rather, *hypogrammatic* one, which would enforce an awareness, on the part of the implied reader, of the permutative possibilities of phonetic sequences. Saussure called *hypogrammes* theme words whose phonetic material is allegedly spread through the poetic compositions of Greek and Latin poets. It is in the light of that concept that Tadié reads the famous “wavespeech” of “Proteus,” whose constituent parts would then be perceived as the dispersed fragment of *hypogrammes* whose subject matter is central to the passage itself:

‘**hrss**’, for example, forms the consonantal structure of [**horses**]; the *hypogramme* ‘**sea**’ (not present in undetached form in this paragraph but of overwhelming symbolic importance) is the

³ Ferdinand de Saussure. *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), ed. Charles Bally and Albert Séchehaye, in collaboration with Albert Riedlinger (Paris: Payot, 2005), 105. My translation.

matrix of ‘it[s (s)p(ee)ch cea(s)e(s)]’; in ‘Sirens’ it comes out again when deaf Pat the waiter ‘[s(ee)hears lip(ss)p(ee)]ch’ (*U* 11.1002). The equally significant ‘Cock lake’ (*U* 3.453), in what may be a concealed auto-erotic passage, can be found in ‘In [cups of r(o)cks it sl(o)]ps’, and similarly the phonetic material of the verbs ‘flowing’ and ‘purling’ is entirely reconfigured in ‘[foampool, (fl)ower un(f)urling]’.⁴

By reading the wavespeech as made up of signs referring to other words while acknowledging its all too obvious resemblance to onomatopoeia, Benoît Tadié makes the crucial jump from exophoric to endophoric iconicity even as he reveals the porosity of the border that separates them in the speakers’ minds. It is an observation which the rest of the episode bears out. For while it testifies to a fascination, on Stephen’s part, for the relationship between reality and signs, from the reference to Jacob Boehme’s theory in the first paragraph to the symbolic potential of the sails of the threemaster “brailed up on the crosstrees” in the closing one, it simultaneously prods the reader to draw a series of connections between words themselves.

The classic illustration of this process is the play on the word “color” in the first paragraph of “Proteus”:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno* (*U* 3.1-7).

Joyce’s critics in the past haven’t failed to point out that the word “color” in the phrase “*maestro di color che sanno*” is likely to be instinctively connected, in the reader’s mind, with the adjective “coloured” used a few lines above, all the more so as it is borrowed from Dante’s *Inferno* where it refers to Aristotle, whose philosophy Stephen is precisely pondering. Except that the two words, of course, share no common root, the word “color” being an abbreviated form of the Italian “coloro,” which means “those”.

The opening paragraph of the “Proteus” episode therefore shows that the instinctive human drive for iconicity applies itself not just to the relation between language and reality, but to the relations between words themselves. By so doing, it also shows the degree of subjectivity inherent in the process. For as linguists who specialize in the field of iconicity are always pointing out, iconicity is in the eye of the beholder. This is a fact that Joyce, in “Proteus”, doesn’t simply reveal, but that he revels in. Hence the numerous subtle, not to say subliminal, connections the episode encourages the reader to draw between words which are not cognate

⁴ Benoît Tadié, “‘Cypherjugglers Going the Highroads’: Joyce and Contemporary Linguistic Theories,” in Laurent Milési (ed.), *James Joyce and the Difference of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003), 53.

with each other, but which are used by Joyce in such a way that they look as if they are. Interestingly, a lot of them have to do with underground animals. The time available to me being limited, I will mention only one of them, but there are plenty of others. As he casts his mind back to his Paris days, Stephen thinks about Parisians sipping glasses of absinth in the early hours of the morning: “Paris rawly waking, crude sunlight on her lemon streets. Moist pith of farls of bread, the froggreen wormwood, her matin incense, court the air” (*U* 3.209-210). Walter Skeat, whose dictionary Stephen is said to read “by the hour” in *Stephen Hero*, informs us that the current form of the word “wormwood” is the product of folk etymology:

WORMWOOD, a very bitter plant. (E). The suffix *-wood* is corrupt, due to confusion with *wood*, in order to make it sound more intelligible [...] **β**. It is thus evident that the word is doubly corrupt, and has no more to do with *worm* than it has with *wood*; [...] the comp. *wermód* unquestionably means *ware-mood* or ‘mind-preserver,’ and points back to some primitive belief as to the curative properties of the plant in mental affections. Anyone who will examine the A.S. Leechdoms will see that our ancestors had great trust in very nauseous remedies, and the bitterness of the plant was doubtless a great recommendation, and invested it with special virtue.⁵

This process of (double) “corruption” is one, however, which the text invites the reader to make the word go through again, as in a sort of lexical metempsychosis, since a few moments before reminiscing about his Paris days, Stephen spots a few pieces of wood littering the ground and imaginatively turns them into fragments from the wreckage of the Spanish fleet which was routed by the English in 1588: “His boots trod again a damp crackling mast, razorshells, squeaking pebbles, that on the unnumbered pebbles beats, *wood* sieved by the shipworm, lost Armada” (*U* 3.147-149; my emphasis).

“Proteus” thus comes across as a chameleon text whose glimmering exterior keeps dazzling and deceiving the reader. It is tempting to see a reference to this facet of the episode in the passage of “Eumaeus” where the narrator tries to convey Stephen’s thoughts as he is sharing a drink with Bloom in the cabman’s shelter:

Over his untastable apology for a cup of coffee, listening to this synopsis of things in general, Stephen stared at nothing in particular. He could hear, of course, all kinds of words changing colour like those crabs about Ringsend in the morning burrowing quickly into all colours of different sorts of the same sand where they had a home somewhere beneath or seemed to (*U* 16.1141-1146).

The episodes which feature Bloom further illustrate the ubiquity and universality of the iconic drive I have described, as well as the porosity, once again, of the border between exophoric and endophoric iconicity. While in the mortuary chapel where Paddy Dignam’s funeral mass takes place in “Hades,” Bloom thinks about the name of the celebrant: “Father Coffey. I knew his

⁵ Walter Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882), 718-9.

name was like a coffin" (*U* 6.595). Interestingly, Bloom does not think that his name *sounds* like the word coffin, but that it *is* like a coffin. The link he posits, therefore, has to do with the relation between language and reality. It thus constitutes a particularly developed case of imagic iconicity which is reminiscent of Philadelphia humourist Fred Lavner's quip: "Today, I realized that the word 'bed' actually looks like a bed" (quoted in Radden). What is striking about Bloom's remark, however, is that the connection he makes is entirely dependent on the context, for should Father Coffey not been a priest but a barista in one of our well-known chains of coffee shops, Bloom would probably have drawn a link not between his name and a coffin, but between it and the famous beverage. Behind my remark lies a serious point, which is that the passage shows how the links we constantly posit between words and their referents in real life are coloured, not to say downright conditioned, by the personal, historical context in which we find ourselves. "Proteus" and "Hades" would then further illustrate the lesson taught by the opening paragraph of *A Portrait*, a lesson which constitutes, I believe, Joyce's contribution to the whole reflection about iconicity, namely that there is no "pure," "direct," or "objectively transparent" motivation between word and world, an observation which many thinkers had made before him, but that we can no more do away with the urge to posit connections than we can do away with the urge to breathe or to eat, and that the products of that urge are necessarily coloured, often comically so, by elements of the context in which we find ourselves.

The last frontier in the study of iconicity in *Ulysses*, and the question which features so prominently in the title of my paper, but which I will unfortunately have little time to treat today, is syntax, whose status in Joyce studies resembles that of a terra incognita, since very few studies have been devoted to it. There are a number of passages in the book which, because of their dislocated syntax, which is so at odds with the one we are used to, seem to lend themselves to an iconic reading. To take just one, famous, example, that of the gulls in "Lestrygonians" which Bloom gazes at: "Looking down he saw flapping strongly, wheeling between the gaunt quay walls, gulls". The highly unusual positioning of "gulls" at the end of the sentence seems to mimic Bloom's apprehension process, giving as it does the priority to the action or movement over the animal itself. An interesting parallel could be drawn with Stephen's puzzlement over Aristotle's writings on perception at the beginning of "Proteus," where he notes that the Greek philosopher "was aware of them bodies before of them coloured" (a sentence whose syntax itself would warrant commentary). In truly Joycean fashion, and in a manner which is perfectly consonant with the cases of lexical iconicity discussed earlier, syntax thus becomes the means through which a reflection not just on the relation between word and

world, but on the multiple filters, personal, physical, and cultural, through which that relation is necessarily mediated, is carried out.

As I hope to have shown, once the core notion of iconicity has been identified as a fruitful lens through which to look at Joyce's oeuvre, it throws up a number of fascinating questions which branch out into several directions. One of those avenues of research is the study of syntax, and it is this particular trail which I plan to explore in my future research.