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SCIENCE, ETYMOLOGY AND POETRY
IN THE “PROTEUS” EPISODE OF *ULYSSES*

Although the schemata Joyce gave to Stuart Gilbert and Carlo Linati were published with the aim of shedding light on some of the symbols and techniques used in *Ulysses*, they sometimes seem to raise more questions than they answer. This is the case with the “art” attributed to the “Proteus” episode: philology. The main problem such a general claim poses is that it leaves totally unclear the precise way in which Joyce’s philological knowledge impacted on the language of the chapter. Does Joyce simply use words in their archaic sense? Does he try to give a feeling for the evolution of language by charting the different stages gone through by chosen lexemes? What degree of lexical accuracy can be ascribed to his handling of etymology? And finally, can a more general interpretation of his approach to etymology be derived from it?

We learn from *Stephen Hero* that Stephen Daedalus read Walter Skeat’s etymological dictionary “by the hour” (*SH* 26). If we take this remark to apply to the young Joyce, as indeed everything seems to prompt us to do, then Skeat’s dictionary seems to be the ideal place to look for information on the history of the words used in “Proteus”¹. By carrying out a detailed and

¹ The question of which particular edition of Skeat’s dictionary Joyce used for *Ulysses* is a moot and complicated one.⁷ Four different editions were issued: 1882, 1884, 1898 and 1910. As Stephen Whittaker points out, the first three are virtually identical, since Skeat confined himself to tinkering with the list of “Errata and Addenda” located at the end of the book. The transformation of Stephen’s mother into a crab that sticks its claws into Stephen’s heart in “Circe” leads Whittaker to argue that Joyce resorted to one of the first three editions, whose information under the word “cancer” all mention the idea of a crab “eating into the flesh” which the fourth edition does not. He draws the conclusion that any Joyce student interested in etymology should work with one of the first three editions rather than with the fourth one. However, as Fritz Senn, in a letter to the editor in the following issue of the *JJQ*, remarks, there is no possible way of ascertaining for sure which edition of Skeat Joyce used for the whole of *Ulysses*; it depended on the place in which he found himself, and on the edition he had at

painstaking historical analysis of the language of the episode, I shall try to draw a typology of the different uses to which Joyce submits etymology, and by so doing, answer some of the questions asked above. The simplest form which Joyce's forays into the linguistic past take is the use of words in their archaic sense. This is the case with the verb "to ken", for example, in the sentence which Stephen seems to remember from his schoolboy days: "Dominie Deasy kens them a" (U3.19-20). Contrary to what most glosses tend to suggest², the verb "to ken" here is not to be taken in its contemporary meaning, which is "to know", but in its older one. Walter Skeat explains: "The sense 'to know' is Scand.; but it is not the *original* sense. The verb is etymologically, a *causal* one, signifying to make to know, to teach, shew" (WS 313). He then illustrates this point by adducing a quotation from *Piers Plowman* which is particularly interesting here because of the pun Stephen probably makes with the Latin phrase "Dominus Deus": "'Kenne me on Crist to beleue' = teach me to believe in Christ; P. Plowman, B. i. 81" (WS 313). Later, at the end of the episode, the adjective "silly" applied to the shells carried by the water ("Driving before it a loose drift of rubble, fanshoals of fishes, silly shells" [U 3.471- 72]) also needs to be interpreted in its archaic sense, which etymologists usually associate with notions of simplicity and frailty.

Such a usage of etymology, quantitatively speaking, remains, however, quite limited in the chapter. What Joyce does more often is put into practice

his disposal. Senn concludes that each case has to be judged on its own merits, a statement with which Stephen Whittaker agrees (personal communication). For more information, see Stephen Whittaker, "Joyce and Skeat", *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 24, n° 2 (Winter 1987): 177-92, and Fritz Senn, [Letter to the Editor] (on Skeat), *James Joyce Quarterly*, vol. 24, n° 4 (Summer 1987): 495. I have decided, for the sake of this article, to resort to the first edition. Contrary to the fourth edition, the first three did not include any of the etymological information freshly gathered by the compilers of the OED, which, by 1909, as Whittaker points out, was available through "*Pb*". This accounts for the fact that the information provided in the first three editions is often less accurate than that given in the fourth. Moreover, because Skeat's enterprise was a solitary one, he could afford to devote only a limited amount of time to each entry, which means that the data he adduced could not be as stringently checked as he would have wished. Because of all this, however, and somewhat ironically perhaps, the first three editions would have provided much more imaginative grist to the creative mill of a young aspiring writer like Joyce. Indeed, several of the interpretations offered in this essay, based, as it turns out, on inaccurate etymological speculation, would simply not be possible by referring exclusively to the fourth edition. Although this encourages me to think that Joyce did use one of the first three editions, I do not claim to have come to any solid and definitive conclusion about the matter, and consider that it still needs to be investigated further.

² See, for instance, Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman, '*Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's Ulysses*', rev. and exp. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 46.

the young Stephen Daedalus's aspiration, as it is expressed in *Stephen Hero*, to "explain" the etymology of words: "It was not only in Skeat that he found words for his treasure-house, he found them also at haphazard in the shops, on advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public [...]. Phrases came to him asking to have themselves explained" (*SH* 30). By paradigmatically unfurling the metaphoric potentialities inherent in words, Joyce creates metaphors which seem at first sight to be the arbitrary products of Stephen's unbridled imagination, but are in fact nothing more than the resurfacing of past semantic lives³. The image of the "rag of wolf's tongue," which Stephen sees "redpanting" (*U* 3.346) from the dog's jaws, thus seems to be inspired by the very etymology of the word "wolf," which Skeat explains in these terms: "The sense is 'tearer', or 'render', from his ravenous nature. - WARK, to tear; whence Skt. *vraçch*, to tear" (*WS* 716). The dog's name, "Tatters" (*U* 3.353), which the reader learns a few lines later, comes as a further variation on the image of tearing contained in the preceding metaphor, and suggests, by a subtle game of *mise-en-abyme*, that reality is already conditioned by and programmed within language.

Another interesting trope is the extended metaphor relating to the tide, which Joyce, very aptly, chose in both schemata as the symbol of this etymological episode, since Skeat derives "time" and "tide" from the same root (*WS* 644). The water from the tide is said to be "sheeting the lows of sand quickly" (*U* 3.326-27), and is compared to both lace ("At the lacefringe of the tide he halted" [*U* 3.337-38]) and a lasso ("In long lassoes from the Cock lake the water flowed full" [*U* 3.453]). If the last metaphor might seem to be out of tune with the previous two, etymology quickly corrects that impression, since, for Skeat, "lasso" derives from the same root as "lace": "LASSO, a rope with a noose. [...] – Lat. *laqueus*, a snare. See Lace" (*WS* 322).

This short succession of tropes is in fact only part of a much wider metaphorical network which equates the undulation of water with weaving, and which seems to have been suggested to Joyce by the link Skeat doubt-

³ The metaphor of semantic ghosts haunting the text is not used at random. The very first lines of the episode seem indeed to suggest it. Stephen, strolling along the strand, looks down at the water and the objects littering the beach, and turns them all into items making up Nature's book: "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" (*U* 3. 2- 4). Here is what Walter Skeat has to say on this last word: "**DIAPHANOUS**, transparent [...] – Gk. *διαφαίνειν*, to shew through. – Gk. *δια*, through; and *φαίνειν*, to show, appear. See **Phantom** (*WS* 165). Stephen's next thought, "But he adds: in bodies", seems to reinforce this reading.

fully and tentatively draws between the etymologies of “to weave” and “to wave”:

WAVE (1), to fluctuate, to move or be moved about with an undulating motion or up and down. (E.) [...] β . .Fick suggests a connection with *weave*; if so, the sense of ‘weave’ is only secondary, and due to the motion of the hand; the primary sense of the Teut. base WAB being that of movement to and fro, as in G. *weben*, to fluctuate. The form of the root is, however, the same as that of *weave*, q.v. (WS 698).

This connection between “weave” and “wave” is particularly developed in the paragraph which describes the flooding of the weeds by the tide:

Under the upswelling tide he saw the writhing weeds lift languidly and sway reluctant arms, hising up their petticoats, in whispering water swaying and upturning coy silver fronds. Day by day: night by night: lifted, flooded and let fall. Lord, they are weary; and, whispered to, they sigh. Saint Ambrose heard it, sigh of leaves and waves, waiting, awaiting the fullness of their times, *diebus ac noctibus iniurias patiens ingemiscit*⁴ To no end gathered; vainly then released, forthflowing, wending back: loom of the moon. Weary too in sight of lovers, lascivious men, a naked woman shining in her courts, she draws a toil of waters (U 3.461-69).

Apart from “petticoats” and “loom”, whose connections with the lexical field of clothing and weaving are obvious, the word “toil” is here used in its meaning of “net” and therefore goes back to the French substantive “toile” (“-F. *toile*, ‘cloth, linen cloth, also, a staulking-horse of cloth; [...] -Lat. *tēla*, a web, thing woven; put for *tex-la*. -Lat. *texere*, to weave” [WS 648]). The word “weeds,” for its part, is more ambiguous than it seems. The entry devoted to it in Skeat’s dictionary mentions the use of its derivative, “weedy,” in Act IV, scene vii of *Hamlet*, where Gertrude relates the story of Ophelia’s death: “There on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds / Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke; / When down the weedy trophies and herself / Fell in

⁴ For a stimulating commentary on this Latin clause and for a good illustration of the similarity of the mechanisms involved in both translation and etymology along with the problems they pose to the critic, see Fritz Senn, “Protean Inglossabilities: ‘To No End Gathered’” in Fritz Senn, *Inductive Scrutinies: Focus on Joyce*, ed. Christine O’Neill (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1995), 142-49.

the weeping brook.”⁵ The very topic of that passage, to which Stephen alludes a few lines later when he thinks “My cockle hat and staff and hismy sandal shoon” (*U* 3.487-88),⁶ as well as the play from which it derives, point towards the other meaning of “weeds,” namely that of “mourning clothes,” which is recurrent throughout *Ulysses*, as both Bloom and Stephen, like Hamlet, wear weeds. The root of “weeds” in that sense (“the Aryan WADH, to wind round, clothe, is an extension from WA, to bind, weave; just as WABH, to weave, is from the same root [...]. See **Weave, Withy, Wind** (?), **Wad, Wattle**” [*WS* 701]) is the same as that of the verb “to wend,” which is applied precisely to the weeds swayed by the tide in the paragraph from *Ulysses* quoted above.

The same process applies, but in a reverse sense, to the word “loom”. Although it clearly refers to the idea of weaving, the context in which it occurs (“loom of the moon”) invites us to take into consideration its other meaning, and to see in it an object of semantic fluctuation: “**LOOM** (?), to appear faintly or at a distance. [...] The orig. sense is to glimmer or shine faintly. [...] M. E. *lumen*, to shine. ‘Hire lure *lumes* liht, Ase la lanterne a nyht’ = her face looms brightly, like a lantern in the night” (*WS* 340). What is at stake here is the ultimate identity of this most protean of texts, suddenly sent back, within the space of a paragraph, to another temporality and to its former status as a woven object: “-Lat. *textum*, that which is woven, a fabric, also the style of an author; hence, a text” (*WS* 633).⁷

One might find numerous examples of similar etymology-based metaphorical networks in “Proteus”. What they demonstrate is that Skeat’s dictionary came to play for Joyce the role of a pre-text for metaphors, a store of images contained within language from which he relentlessly drew in order to build the metaphorical structure of the episode. “Proteus” thus proves to be a watershed in Joyce’s overall handling of etymology: while his early writings expressed a yearning for a more correct use of words thanks to a proper knowledge of etymology, the multiple puns and metaphors yielded by his

⁵ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1603), ed. G. R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987), 31.

⁶ See Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 65-6.

⁷ For a well-known discussion of the etymology of “text”, see Roland Barthes’s “From Work to Text”, in *Image-Music-Text*, sel. and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 159. Another writer who was fascinated, although for very different reasons, by the relationship between poetry and weaving, especially that involved in the making of tapestry, was W.B. Yeats. See Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, *Yeats and the Visual Arts*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 58-66

mining into the linguistic past in “Proteus” show him distancing himself from any idea(l) of solid scientific truth. This is also why “Proteus” can be said to go beyond the young Stephen Daedalus’s desire to “explain” words. “Proteus” marks a new stage in Joyce’s approach to etymology, one defined by his awareness that to engage in etymology is necessarily, to some extent, to engage in poetry, and that the craft of the etymologist is not far removed from that of the poet⁸.

But Joyce in “Proteus” even goes a step further. He does not simply content himself with resorting to poetry in order to make up for science’s limited capacity to establish an analogy between signifier and signified.⁹ After all, there was nothing new in that. The tradition known as folk etymology, which, if understood in a broad sense, might be said to encompass the games on etymology analysed above, had been established throughout Western literature for at least four centuries, with Rabelais, probably, as its most famous (and funniest) exponent. What Joyce does in “Proteus” is give a truer and more faithful picture of the effect of time on language by revealing the mechanisms that lie behind the latter’s evolution. By so doing, he takes on board the advances made in the field of philology in the nineteenth century, highlighting the roles of fiction, error and superstition in relation to language change. Those mechanisms are at work in the very language of the episode: they are ceaselessly shaping and changing it, and give it a constant movement and impetus similar to that with which the god Proteus constantly switches appearance in the *Odyssey*. “Proteus” thus turns out to be a very sophisticated reflection on the practice of etymology. This meta-linguistic vein running throughout the chapter, quite fittingly, is particularly apparent in words expressing ideas and concepts often resorted to as tropes in etymological discourse. Just as etymology is often discussed in terms of roots, underground networks, semantic layers¹⁰ and buried meaning, the chapter is peopled with an army of subterranean creatures, both literal and metaphoric. The text incites the reader to bore into its surface and find the teeming linguistic life going on underneath it.

⁸ For the discussion of the link between etymology and poetry, as well as for the commentary on folk etymology which follows, I am indebted to Derek Attridge. See his chapter entitled “Language as History/History as Language: Saussure and the Romance of Etymology” in *Peculiar Language*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 90-126.

⁹ On this topic, see François Rigolot, “D’Isidore à Platon: Rabelais et la *figura etymologica*,” *Lexique*, n. 14, 1998, 187-99.

¹⁰ Stephen himself evokes that image when he equates the sand he is treading with language: “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here” (*U* 3.288-89).

Because nineteenth-century philosophy had established the role of chance, randomness and error in the evolution of language, however, what the reader often ends up being faced with is a world of false exteriors and misleading appearances. The word “mammoth”, featured in the chapter when the rocks along the south wall are compared to “mammoth skulls” (U 3.207), is a good example. The etymology given by Skeat for the word “mammoth” is particularly interesting, as it sketches a comic metaphorical link between the animal and the mole:

MAMMOTH, an extinct species of elephant. [...] -Russ. *mamant'*, a mammoth. -Siberian *mammont*. 'From Tartar *mamma*, the earth, because the Tungoses and Yakoots believed that this animal worked its way in the earth like a mole;' Webster. 'The inhabitants of [Siberia] have a traditional fable to account for the constant occurrence [of remains of elephants]. They hold that the bones and the tusks which they incessantly find in their agricultural operations, are produced by a large subterraneous animal, living in the manner of the mole, and unable to bear the light. They have named this animal *mammont* or *mammoth* – according to some authorities, from the word *mamma* which signifies “earth” in Tartar idioms, or, according to others, from the Arabic *behemoth* or *mehemoth*, an epithet which the Arabs apply to an elephant when he is very large [...]' (WS 350).

This surprising explanation, which Skeat concludes with a touch of humour (“We cannot credit Siberian peasants with a knowledge of Arabic!”), cannot but remind the reader of Molly’s naïve belief in the existence of an underground tunnel connecting Gibraltar to Africa, which can be the only possible explanation in her eyes of the presence of macaques on the Old Continent:

I suppose it must be the highest rock in existence the galleries and casemates and those frightful rocks and Saint Michaels cave with the icicles or whatever they call them hanging down and ladders all the mud plotching my boots Im sure thats the way down the monkeys go under the sea to Africa when they die (U 18.790-94)

Here is the gloss provided by Don Gifford:

Barbary apes (macaques) exist both in North Africa and in Gibraltar – two colonies of non-swimmers, separated by nine miles of waters. The mystery of the separation, together with the labyrinth of caves and natural well-shafts

on Gibraltar, has led to the sort of legend of a natural tunnel to Africa about which Molly is “sure.” A more informed speculation is that the Roman soldiers who garrisoned the Rock brought the monkeys to Gibraltar from North Africa as pets.¹¹

If mammoths can turn into metaphoric moles through the effect of credulity, hearsay and superstition, moles themselves can rear their heads above the surface of the text through a game of polysemy.¹² Although the word “mole” in the sentence in which Stephen “lifted his feet up from the suck and turned back by the mole of boulders” (*U* 3.278-79) clearly refers to the alignment of rocks acting as a breakwater, its use in a chapter devoted to Protean change, especially as applied to animals (see the multiple transformations gone through by the cockle pickers’ dog), nonetheless enables Joyce to insert the name of another animal into it, albeit behind a false exterior.¹³ What may even be at stake here is another deployment which consists of holding the reader in suspense for a short fraction of time as to the precise meaning conjured up by the use of a polysemous word, until the rest of the sentence clarifies it. Although one might find numerous examples of such a device throughout Joyce’s works, the most famous case is probably the first sentence of the “Wandering Rocks” episode: “The superior, the very reverend John Conmee S. J. reset his smooth watch in his interior pocket as he came down the presbytery steps” (*U* 10.1-2).¹⁴

Although these linguistic games might strike one as fanciful and give the impression that they are but further illustration of Joyce’s fascination with words, one only needs to look at some of the other animals buried in

¹¹ Gifford and Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated*, 622.

¹² For an original discussion of the word “mole” in Joyce’s works, one that plays on yet another meaning of the term beside the two mentioned here, see Marie-Dominique Garnier, “Old Mole: la littérature dans la peau, ou le grain de beauté, de Shakespeare à Joyce,” in *La surface*, ed. Mathilde La Cassagnère and Marie-Odile Salati (Chambéry: Université de Savoie, Laboratoire Langues, littératures, sociétés, 2005), 61-72.

¹³ As Fritz Senn very shrewdly points out in connection with the deliberate confusion wrought in the reader’s mind by the play on the words “colour” and “color” at the start of the episode, the linguistic treatment given to the question of false appearances in “Proteus” feeds into Stephen’s reflection on Aristotle (the pronoun “color” being precisely part of a quotation from the *Inferno* describing Aristotle). The issue is much too large for me to address here, but I plan to do so in a separate article at a later date. See Senn, “Protean Inglossabilities”, 137.

¹⁴ The first critic to have pointed out the play on polysemy in this sentence is Clive Hart. See Clive Hart, “Wandering Rocks”, in *James Joyce’s Ulysses. Critical Essays*, ed. Clive Hart and David Hayman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 190.

the etymological and metaphorical sands of Sandymount Strand to realise that they are in fact nothing but deliberately chosen specimens aimed at providing a living and literally graphic proof of the importance of chance, conjecture¹⁵ and error in the evolution of language.

Take the word “tomahawk”, for instance, which occurs during Stephen’s sudden inner vision of Scandinavian Vikings invading Ireland:

Galleys of the Lochlanns ran here to beach, in quest of prey, their bloodbeaked prows riding low on a molten pewter surf. Dane vikings, torcs of tomahawks aglitter on their breasts when Malachi wore the collar of gold. A school of turlehide whales stranded in hot noon, spouting, hobbling in the shallows. Then from the starving cagework city a horde of jerkined dwarfs, my people, with flayers’ knives, running, scaling, hacking in green blubbery whalemeat (*U* 3.300-06).

This wonderfully evocative vignette may be defined as an unfolding, in its literal and etymological sense, of both a historical and a linguistic event. Historical time is going by in front of our very eyes, and so is linguistic time: “cagework city” is a literal translation, although an approximate one, of the name of Dublin in Gaelic, *Baile Átha Cliath*, while the detail of the starving and scrambling Dubliners seems to “explicate,” or “unfurl,” the etymology of “dwarf” (“**DWARE**, a small deformed man [...] The evidence tends to shew that the original sense of *dwarf* is not ‘bent,’ but ‘one who rushes forth,’ or ‘furious’; cf. Zend. *dvar*, to rush forward, said of evil spirits; cf. Gk. *θουροϛ*, raging, *θρῶσκειν*, to spring, rage, Lat. *furere*, to rage” [*WS* 183]).

This is why the word “tomahawk” matters here. It is, in more ways than one, a paradigmatic example of misleading appearances. Besides being the miniaturized replica of an original, the “torcs of tomahawks” are completely out of place on the torsos of Vikings. More importantly, though, the word “tomahawk,” despite the few references to falconry spread across the chapter, has absolutely nothing to do with the predator whose name is nevertheless graphically inscribed in it, since it derives from a language belonging to the Algonquian family (*WS* 648). Graphic inscription, however, does not necessarily go hand in hand with genetic inscription. The reader suddenly realises that the developing ramification of the network linking all the underground animals

¹⁵ “Conjecture” here needs to be taken in its etymological sense of “throwing together” (Latin *conjectere*, to throw together, from which derives *conjectura*), as should become clear very soon.

of the chapter together, a network of which the tomahawk, being a hatchet alternatively buried or unearthed by Indians, is potentially part of, depends, in fact, on an etymological sleight of hand. What the word does illustrate to perfection, however, is the typical way in which lexemes from far-removed language families are integrated into English, or into any other language, for that matter: the sounds making up the word in question in the original language are slightly and unconsciously modified by the ear of the English speaker in order for these sounds to resemble a familiar signifier (or several ones) in his or her own language. This is exactly how the Mohegan “tumnahegan” and the Delaware “tamoihecan” became the English “tomahawk”¹⁶

This process is even more visible regarding the word “wormwood”: in spite of appearances, it has nothing to do with either wood or with that other subterranean animal smuggled into the chapter. Walter Skeat is categorical about it:

WORMWOOD, a very bitter plant. (E). The suffix *-wood* is corrupt, due to confusion with *wood*, in order to make it sound more intelligible. We find the spelling *wormwod* as early as the 15th century. ‘Hoc absinthium, *wormwod*,’ Wright’s Voc. i. 226, col. I. But only a little earlier (early 15th century), we find *wermode*, id. i. 191, col. 2. –A.S. *wermód*; ‘Absinthium, *wermód*,’ in a glossary of the 8th century; Wright’s Voc. ii. 98, col. I. + Du. *wermoet*, ‘wormwood;’ Hexham. G. *wermuth*, M.H.G. *wermuote*, O.H.G. *weramote*, *werimuota*, *wermuota*. 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 G. forms shew clearly that the division of the A.S. word is *wer-mód*. [...] γ. Of course, the only way to recover the etymology is to consider the A.S., Du., and G. forms all at once. Now A.S. *mód*, O. Du. *moedt*, G. *muth*, M.H.G. *muot*, *muotte*, O.H.G. *muat*, all mean the same thing, and answer to mod. E. *mood*, meaning formerly ‘mind, courage, wrath.’ The A.S. *werian*, O. Du. *weren*, *weeren*, M.H.G. *weren*, all alike mean to protect or defend [...]. Thus the comp. *wermód* unquestionably means *ware-mood* or ‘mind-preserver,’ and points back to some primitive belief

¹⁶ Another well-known example is Sugarloaf Mountain, the rocky hill situated at the mouth of the Guanabara River in Rio de Janeiro. Legend has it that the natives used to call it “Pau-nh-acuqua”, which means “highpointed hill” in the Tupi-Guarani language. The sound of the word, along with the very shape of the mountain itself would have evoked the image of a sugarloaf in the Portuguese colonizers’ minds, and the peak has ever since been called O Pão de Açúcar – “Sugarloaf Mountain” in Portuguese. Interestingly, there is also a mountain called the Sugarloaf in the Dublin area, where Bloom one day sprained his ankle, and whose name consequently crops up several times throughout the book (see, for instance, U 8.166).

as to the curative properties of the plant in mental affections. Any one 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 (WS 718-19).

This is a bit of etymological knowledge which Joyce most definitely seems to have been in possession of, as he makes much of it in “Proteus”. For one thing, there is the possible pun on the colour green, which is insisted on at several points (“the froggreen wormwood» [U 3.210], “sipping his green fairy” [U 3.217], “Green eyes, I see you. Fang, I feel” [U 3.238]), and which in French is a homonym of “worm” (*vert*, “green”, *ver*, “worm”)¹⁷. This interpretation is made all the more likely by the fact that the scene is set in Paris, and that the request the drinkers would have uttered to get a glass of absinthe (*un verre d’absinthe*) would have involved yet another homonym of “worm” in the shape of the French word for “glass” (*verre*). Furthermore, a well-known expression at the start of the twentieth century in France to describe what the characters are doing, namely, drinking some alcohol first thing in the morning, was *tuer le ver* (literally, “to kill the worm”).

But more telling, perhaps, is the unobtrusive metaphor one encounters a couple of pages earlier, when Stephen, at the sight of a few pieces of wood littering the beach, thinks “wood sieved by the shipworm, lost Armada” (U 3.149). This small detail seems wilfully designed to incite the reader, a few paragraphs later, subliminally to divide the word “wormwood” into its two apparent components, “worm” and “wood,” and so to worm something out of “wormwood,” as it were, by discovering a worm wriggling at its root.

Charles Baudelaire wrote: “Pouvons-nous étouffer le vieux, le long Remords, / Qui vit, s’agite et se tortille, / Et se nourrit de nous comme le ver des morts, / Comme du chêne la chenille?”¹⁸ In “Proteus,” decomposing bodies and the decomposing of words are never too far apart. If one still harbours any doubts about it, they only need to turn to the body of the dog lying dead on the beach in the passage in which the name of another famous nineteenth-century French poet is explicitly mentioned, the very one to whom *Les Fleurs du Mal* were dedicated, Théophile Gautier: “A bloated car-

¹⁷ “Green fairy” is itself a literal translation of the French phrase “la fée verte,” which was the nickname given to absinthe by nineteenth-century French poets such as Paul Verlaine.

¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire, “L’irréparable”, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1980); “Can we stifle the old, the lingering Remorse, / That lives, quivers and writhes, / And feeds on us like the worm on the dead, / Like the grub on the oak?” in *The Flowers of Evil* (trans. William Aggeler, Fresno, CA: Academy of Library Guild, 1954).

cass of a dog lay lolled on bladderwrack. Before him the gunwale of a boat, sunk in sand. *Un coche ensablé* Louis Veillot called Gautier's prose" (*U* 3.286-88). Beside the word "coche," which might metaphorically represent yet another instance of an animal buried in the etymological sands of the beach, since it derives from the same root as "cockle," recurrent throughout the episode, the word "gunwale" warrants special attention. It is at the centre of a number of metaphorical ramifications which lead one to think that Joyce in "Proteus" does not limit himself to pointing to the results of the process known as folk etymology, but shows it in action.

The first occurrence of the word "whale" could be seen as a giveaway, since it is related to the motif of metempsychosis, which functions as a sort of general metaphor for the process of linguistic change throughout *Ulysses*¹⁹. Stephen mentally quotes ("Ay, very like a whale" [*U* 3.144]²⁰) from the passage in *Hamlet* in which Polonius, believing Hamlet to be sliding into folly, does not contradict him when he claims to be successively seeing the shapes of a camel, a weasel and a whale in a cloud. The motif of metempsychosis comes back towards the end of the chapter, in a paragraph in which the putative etymological link between "whale" and "gunwale" is made much more obvious:

Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of a spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain. Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a urinous offal from all dead. Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun (*U* 3.476-81).

¹⁹ It could be argued that the variation that the word "metempsychosis" later undergoes in *Ulysses* – "met him pike hoses" – illustrates the process of linguistic change not just metaphorically, but performatively. And that it is, moreover, not just a mere illustration of a linguistic process, but a wonderful example of a linguistic *mise-en-abyme*. Molly, in "Calypso", apparently pronounces the first syllables of the word, before stopping to look for it in her book, although this has to be inferred by the reader. Bloom, who obviously hasn't the faintest idea of the word she has in mind, asks: "Met him what?" (*U* 4.336). Later, in "Lestrygonians", Bloom, after wondering for an instant about the etymology of "parallax" ("Par it's Greek: parallel, parallax" [*U* 8.111-12]), thinks: "Met him pike hoses she called it till I told her about the transmigration" (*U* 8.112-13). This means that Molly mispronounced the word the first time, although we will never know the exact way in which she did so, and that Bloom, haunted as he is by the thought of her pending adultery with Boylan, later reinterprets her mangled pronunciation as "met him pike hoses", with its burden of sexual innuendo.

²⁰ See *Hamlet*, 269.

Beside the fact that the body of the drowned man is hauled up over the gunwale like a cetacean, the last sentence cannot fail to remind the reader of Stephen's earlier vision of whales stranded on the beach, spouting, hobbling, and soon cut up by hungry Dubliners for their meat. A few lines earlier, the body of the drowned man had been indirectly compared to that of Alonso in *The Tempest* through the quotation of a snatch from Ariel's song: "Five fathoms out there. Full fathom five thy father lies" (*U* 3.470). Like Alonso's body, which, under the magical influence of the sea, suffers a mysterious "sea-change / Into something rich and strange",²¹ his eyes turning into pearls and his bones into coral, the word "gunwale", through the effect of time and of lexical association, might become the object of an unexpected transformation.

However, the last sentence of the paragraph quoted above also echoes, less obtrusively perhaps, another of Stephen's hallucinations, one that was mentioned at the beginning of this essay, namely, that of May Dedalus's sudden appearance in front of her son in "Circe". The lexical parallels between the two passages are obvious: Stephen's mother "rises *stark through the floor in leper grey*" and her face is "*worn and noseless, green with grave mould*" (*U* 15.4157-59). Stephen Whittaker has demonstrated how the whole scene, which climaxes in May Dedalus's turning into a crab and planting its claws into her remorseful son's heart, owes a lot to the information provided by Skeat under the word "cancer" in the first three editions of his dictionary.²²

Sandymount Strand swarms with a host of metaphorical underground animals concealed in its etymological sands, "coloured signs" which are there to be deciphered by the reader.²³ It is perhaps to this particular facet of the episode which, much later in the book, the narrator of "Eumaeus" refers when he says:

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* 16.1141-46).

²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1611), ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

²² Stephen Whittaker, "Joyce and Skeat", 183-185.

²³ "Colour" and "conceal", as Skeat informs us, derive from the same root (WS 122).

As this passage suggests, the treatment of etymology in “Proteus,” however subtle or learned it might seem, is first and foremost highly playful and poetical. However, its great originality lies precisely, and paradoxically perhaps, in its scientific nature: Joyce does not simply resort to puns and metaphors as a way of making up for science’s deficiency in tracing language to its origin, but to reveal on the contrary the extent to which the evolution of language depends, even thrives, on the same mechanisms as poetry does, namely, phonetic resemblance and unexpected metaphoric connections. In doing so, Joyce proves himself to be the heir of then numerous nineteenth-century philologists who, like Walter Skeat, had striven to give philology a stronger scientific basis.²⁴ He also proves himself to be the proper and deserving heir of his favourite nineteenth-century writer, Gustave Flaubert, who, in a letter to Louise Colet in 1852, had written: “Plus il ira, plus l’art sera scientifique, de même que la science deviendra artistique. Tous deux se rejoindront au sommet après s’être séparés à la base.”²⁵

²⁴ The irony, of course, is that Skeat’s efforts were directed towards precisely the kind of use of etymology conceived by Stephen in *Stephen Hero*, i.e., a more proper, because etymology-grounded, handling of words. In the first lines of his preface to the first edition, Skeat writes: “It [the dictionary] is rather intended as a guide to future writers, shewing them in some cases what ought certainly to be accepted, and in other cases, it may be, what to avoid” (WS, v). As with many other writers, Joyce took Skeat’s guidelines to lengths the latter would simply never have envisaged.

²⁵ “Art will become increasingly scientific with time, just as science will become increasingly artistic. Both will meet at the top after having separated at the base” (my translation); letter from Gustave Flaubert to Louise Colet, 24 April 1852; in Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance II* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1980), 76.

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