

Építész a kőfejtőben Architect in the Quarry



Tanulmányok
Dávidházi Péter
hatvanadik születésnapjára

Studies Presented to
Péter Dávidházi
On His Sixtieth Birthday

Szerkesztette / Edited by:

HÍTES Sándor
TÖRÖK Zsuzsa



rec.iti
Budapest • 2010

A kötet megjelenését az
MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézete és a
Nemzeti Kulturális Alap támogatta.



A borító Adam Friedrich Oeser *Sokrates meißelt die drei Grazien*
(Szókratész kőbe faragja a három gráciát) című metszete alapján készült.
A metszet Johann Joachim Winckelmann *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der
griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* című értekezésének első,
1755-ös kiadásában jelent meg először.

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ISBN 978-963-7341-87-8

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Tördelte: Hegedüs Béla

FERENC TAKÁCS

“impulsory irelitz”

*James Joyce, the Berlitz School and the Unlearning of the
English Language*

Viewed from the commonsensical point of view of the socio-linguist, *Finnegans Wake* looks, reads and, in addition, sounds like a monstrously substandard variety of English. It is a form of language that bears the mark of a kind of linguistic will that is intent on creating, by radical de-standardisation, a dialect, theoretically possible, though impractical in ordinary language *praxis*, that barely falls short of being a total idiolect, that is, a strictly one-man language. Similarly, the text poses another awkward question for the linguistically-minded inquirer: it throws into serious doubt what the socio-linguist calls the “language identity” of a given piece of language whether written or oral. At every point, *Finnegans Wake* invites multiple-language contextualisation as the precondition of its meaning and the text always makes a richer and fuller sense if it is simultaneously assigned to several languages including some other than English. Consequently, its status as an English-language text is destabilised at every turn and the logic of its assignment to the class of things called “the English language” is questioned and subverted all throughout.

Consider, in some detail, the following:

Killykillkilly: a toll, a toll.

(FW 4.7-8)

Here you need, even for the more obvious meaning, to contextualise the passage at least in two languages. Echoing the Irish place-name Kilkelly, *killikillkilly* gives us “church” through Irish *cille*, meaning “church”, and it focuses *a toll, a toll* in its obvious church meaning, the tolling of church bells. Conversely, *killykillkilly* obviates itself as an onomatopoeic complement to *a toll, a toll* on the phonetic level, the small bells ringing first with “light” vowels (three *i*-s), followed by the “dark” vowels, the *a* and the *o*, of the big ones striking twice. Now, further contextualisation in further languages can confirm these results in surprising ways. Invoking Russian, for instance, Petr Škrabánek has extracted, from *killikillkilly*, the word *kolokol*, which is Russian for “bell” or “church bell” (and, phonetically speaking, a rather neatly symmetrical “dark”-vowel fit for *killykillkilly*).¹ Thus, Russian recontextualisation reveals the grammatical subject and the logical agent of *Killikillkilly: a toll a toll*: it is indeed churchbells ringing here.

By assigning further language identities to the passage, its meaning can be extended in interesting new directions. For instance, Helmut Bonheim, in his study of German linguistic items in *Finnegans Wake*, identifies the word *toll* as a German adjective meaning “mad,” “deranged” or “wild.”² This gives us a gloss on the combination of English and Irish meanings in *killykillkilly*: when “*cille* kills *cille*” (or, even worse, “*cille* kill *cille*” in the imperative), that is, when “church kills church” it is certainly a “mad”, “deranged” and “wild” state of affairs (and this particular kind of madness is, of course, not without relevance to Joyce’s native country as well as to his personal predicament).

Now if we go even further, and attempt to contextualise the passage in Hungarian, a language Joyce was familiar with,³ *a toll* gives us as

¹ ŠKRABÁNEK, Petr, *Night Joyce of a Thousand Tiers: Studies in Finnegans Wake*, Prague: Litteraria Pragensis, 2002, 13.

² BONHEIM, Helmut, *A Lexicon of the German in Finnegans Wake*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967, 7.

³ As John McCourt’s *The Years of Bloom* makes it abundantly clear all throughout, Joyce’s familiarity with Hungarians and the Hungarian language started

yet another meaning. In Hungarian *toll* means “pen”, literally as well as symbolically, as in “the pen is mightier than the sword,” *a* is the Hungarian definite article the word *toll* invariably takes in this kind of construction. So, on top of churches and church bells tolling, we get an allusion to the priestly role of the artist and some of its concomitants: literature as a religion of sorts, authorship as a kind of sacred madness, and, also, being an author as something that takes its heavy toll (if we finally recontextualise *toll* in English and make it mean “duty,” “charge” or “fine”). Shem the Penman is certainly recognisable in this multi-language miniature portrait of the artist in his role as high priest, martyr and saint of High Modernist writing.

In order to attain this portrait, that is, to produce this particular conjunction of meanings, we made, tacitly and automatically, a few preliminary assumptions about the text of the passage in question we were about to read. We first assumed that the language identity of the

during his years in Trieste. (McCOURT, John, *The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste 1904–1920*, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2000.) The creator of Leopold Bloom, son of Rudolf Virág from Szombathely, worked a dose of Hungarian-language material into the text of his *Ulysses*, including the ingeniously scatological pun *Százharminczbrojújgulyás-Dugulás* in “Cyclops” (*Ulysses: The Corrected Text*, (1984) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986. 280) and, apart from “peppering” *Finnegans Wake* with at least three-hundred Hungarian words and phrases (arguably a rather cautious estimate), he also wove quite elaborate Hungarian linguistic patterns into the semantic mesh of the text as, for instance, in the often-glossed “orina di un’arciduchessa” passage of *FW* 171.23–28. (*Finnegans Wake*, (1939) London: Faber and Faber, 1971.) (Cf. TAKÁCS, Ferenc. ‘Joyce and Hungary’ = Wolfgang ZACH and Heinz Kosok (eds). *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World*. 3 vols. Vol 3: *National Images and Stereotypes*, Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1987. 161 and 167 (161-67); KENDI, Arye, *Hungarian in Finnegans Wake – A Word List*, Manuscript. n. d. all throughout). While working on *Finnegans Wake* in the nineteen-thirties, Joyce had a friendly informant on the Russian language, who was, however, Hungarian: Elizabeth Marcus, or – more properly – Erzsébet Márkus, wife to Joyce’s friend, the avant-garde composer George Antheil (CORNWELL, Neil, *James Joyce and the Russians*, Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1992. 18). Mrs Antheil may well have been the source of some of the Hungarian as well as of the Russian in *Finnegans Wake*.

passage was English. Then we were forced, more or less immediately, to assume that the text represented some highly unusual nonstandard variety of the language so assumed. Afterwards, at certain strategic points of our process of reading we were compelled to discard our original assumption as to the English-language identity of the text, and, instead, assumed, concurrently, several other language identities for the passage.

It is worth, whether morally or epistemologically, considering what we were actually doing while we attempted to make sense of the passage. In discarding routine assumptions about reading, our behaviour was of extreme permissiveness as we displayed an unusual degree of readiness to deploy highly unorthodox procedures of meaning production. In fact, we did all sorts of things we would have never done for a “normal,” more ordinary text.

Of course, we could have done otherwise. We could have behaved in the usual “normal” way: we could have appealed to the “rules” which are automatically involved in routine acts of reading or interpretation. We could have pointed out that the passage divagates from Standard English to the point where we cannot very well confer even nonstandard dialect status on it either, and we could have added that the transparent presence of non-English words in the text, assumed initially to be in English, eventually made it impossible for us to establish the language identity of the text with reasonable certainty. As in interpreting any written or oral utterance, language identity and the status of the text *vis-à-vis* the standard form of the language so identified are some of the most basic assumptions necessary to make for producing meaning for the text, our normal appeal to ordinary rules would have logically resulted in denying that the text has any meaning whatsoever. At best, we would, perhaps, have conceded that it was, after all, in English, though of a hopelessly garbled, obscure, and pretty meaningless sort.

At this point we should note that making our choice implied, on our part, opting for a set of morally and politically “deviant,” “subversive,” “alternative” or “anti-establishment” values and attitudes: for anarchy as opposed to authority, process as opposed to form, spontaneity as opposed to orderliness, openness as opposed to closure, fluidity as opposed to solidity, or fixity, of meaning. Also, while we were making this choice we tacitly suspended the validity and, indeed, the usefulness of

certain basic principles of rationalism and nationalism that underlie and infuse our accepted notions of standard language form and language identity. We were prepared to entertain, firstly, the possibility that a given piece of language can make sense without previously submitting itself to the normative authority of its standard form, and, second, that language is not necessarily *a* language, that is, something normatively always subordinated to, and logically identified by, a standard national language. In short: we made the *prima facie* absurd assumption that language can be any odd language or, even more absurdly, any number of languages, and simultaneously so at that. Or *anythongue athall* as the *Wake's* own self-reflexive hint at the issue puts it (*FW* 117. 10–16).

Now, for these highly unorthodox, or “abnormal,” procedures of text production and text interpretation *Finnegans Wake* both represents and calls for while endorsing both, Joyce had a number of supportive models in actual language *praxis* whether in and outside the pale of literary use. Writing and reading that go conspicuously in for flouting the authority of standard language form and normal language practice by systematic distortion of, and deviation from, standard procedure included, for Joyce, a wide range of forms: nonsense poetry, language games such as acrostics and anagrams, “secret languages” like Shelta, and, most importantly, his own Hiberno-English language habits, fraught with paradoxes and contradictions of national authority and cultural power. In the passage

Shaun replied under the sheltar of his broguish

(*FW* 421. 21–22)

he himself makes an explicit reference to the latter supportive model (referring to it by the term *brogue*) and associates it with Shelta, one of the old “secret languages” of Ireland.⁴

There was, however, another important supportive model of this kind for Joyce. He spent more than a decade of his life, his most

⁴ MACALISTER, R. A. S., *The Secret Languages of Ireland: With Special Reference to the Origins and Nature of the Shelta Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937, 255–257; VESEY-FITZGERALD, Brian Seymour, *Gypsies of Britain: An Introduction to Their History*, London: Chapman & Hall, 1946, 34–42; DOLAN, Terence Patrick, *A Dictionary of Hiberno-English*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd, 1999. 237.

formative “years of bloom,” as John McCourt memorialised it in the title of his recent book,⁵ in Trieste where the problematic nature of the relationship of dialect and standard language form as well as the linguistic and political question of language identity were part and parcel of the everyday experience of the people around him. At that time, the city was a predominantly Italian city under Austro-Hungarian rule. It had its own distinct means of communication, *triestino*, the local, nonstandard, version of the Italian language. The composition of the city’s population, apart from the Italian component, reflected the full linguistic and cultural map of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and its inhabitants of Greek, German, Croat, Czech, and Hungarian background all used their own distinct nonstandard form of *triestino*, already a nonstandard language form.⁶ For Joyce, this was an obvious reflection on, and “doubling” of, his own original predicament as an Irish author working in a linguistic medium that was only very problematically his own. His experience of living, working and writing in Trieste thematised, for him, both the politics and the poetics of standard versus nonstandard form, of language identity and national authority on a daily basis and in a particularly perspicacious form.

There was also an aspect of his life in the city where his original predicament and his Triestine experience entered into a direct relationship of overlap and mutual reinforcement. The venue where this took place was the Berlitz School in Trieste, where Joyce made his living, or was trying to make his living, as a teacher of the English language.

Assuming the role of teacher was already laden with many paradoxes for him. The first of these was that he was hired as a teacher

⁵ *The Years of Bloom: James Joyce in Trieste 1904-1920* offers a wealth of information on Joyce’s linguistic, cultural and political experience of his formative years in Trieste, including an acute and perceptive treatment of the Berlitz School component of this experience. As practically every page of the book has something relevant to say on the topic of the present paper, I see no practicable way of detailed acknowledgement this time. Instead, I wish here to acknowledge, with much pleasure and gratitude, the general indebtedness of my paper, both for inspiration and information, to John McCourt’s excellent study.

⁶ ELLMANN, Richard, *James Joyce*, (1982) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, 196.

of English, a language that “will always be ... an acquired speech” for Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, in the shadow of which his soul always frets,⁷ a language that some time later Joyce, already working on *Ulysses*, thought of abandoning altogether for Italian or French.⁸ He was, then, teaching English as one of the Irish, whose plight he described, actually in one of his “pedagogical gambits” he used in his Berlitz classroom, as being “condemned to express themselves in a language not their own.”⁹ This was no doubt further complicated by the conflicting claims of Standard English, the teaching of which the School must have insisted on and his students logically expected of him, and those of the distinct Hiberno-English qualities of his idiolect. (Listeners, for example, sensitive to the phonetic modulations of Hiberno-English speech find conspicuous traces of the Cork accent of Joyce’s father in the recordings made of Joyce’s reading of parts of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* in the 1930s.)

The paradoxical consequence of this was that Joyce, put into the position of authority a teacher is supposed to have and base his teaching work on, had, at least in principle, to represent, enforce and impose a language variant on his pupils he was himself markedly unhappy with. Neither was he happier with his position or imposition of authority: a self-professed anarchist who did his after-school drinking in cafés and wine-bars frequented by the syndicalist working-class element of Trieste, he was no doubt acutely aware of the absurdity of his role he found himself cast into. His often quoted *cri de cœur* – “Berlitz, Berlitz, what have I done to deserve this from you?” – and his sarcastic debunking of the school and its founder he regularly employed in the classroom as routine conversation opener show how he felt and thought about the whole thing.¹⁰

⁷ JOYCE, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, (1916) Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968. 189.

⁸ ELLMANN, 397.

⁹ ELLMANN, 217.

¹⁰ ELLMANN 216–218. The experience must have left a few permanent, if minor, scars: in a letter to Italo Svevo, written in Paris in 1921, Joyce still would not pass up the opportunity of taking a scabrous jab at the School by referring to it, in a scatological pun, as “Berlitz Cul” (CRIVELLI, Renzo S., *James Joyce: Itinerari Triestini / Triestine Itineraries*, trs. John McCourt, Trieste: MGS Press Editrice, 1996, 26–28).

What we know of the contents and style of his teaching seems to bear out all this.

As opposed to the “systematic and punctilious” method of his brother Stanislaus, Joyce’s own style was, in Richard Ellmann’s word, “flamboyant.”¹¹ Normally, he would restrict classroom engagement with the compulsory Berlitz textbook, used universally and rigidly adhered to all throughout the network of schools run on the Berlitz system, to a minimum, branching quickly out freely into discussing all sorts of subjects.¹² Also, in flagrant disregard for the Berlitz “first principle”, the exclusive classroom use of the language that is being taught, he tended to switch into Italian, *triestino* or any odd language he cared for and his students could provide him practical linguistic information on. In a highly instructive and, also, touchingly amusing verbal testimony in a television documentary made in 1982 Letizia Svevo, Italo Svevo’s daughter recalled Joyce’s language classes. Apparently, they were great fun. Joyce spoke a little of literature, spent only a small time on the English language and regularly discussed Parnell and the politics of liberation with his students.¹³

What emerges from all this is a Joyce who, in his Berlitz teacher capacity, is involved in a histrionic act of great delicacy, which is, at best,

¹¹ ELLMANN, 216.

¹² JOYCE, Stanislaus. *My Brother’s Keeper*, (1958) New York: Viking, 1969. xvi; GOTTFRIED, Roy, ‘Berlitz Schools Joyce.’ *James Joyce Quarterly* 16 (Fall 1978/Winter 1979): 224, [223–237]

¹³ This is the text of the relevant section of the interview in Sean Ó Mórdha’s television documentary *‘Is There One Who Understands Me?’: The World of James Joyce* (1982):

LETICIA SVEVO FONDA SAVIO: These lessons were very funny... Because we spoke a little of literature, very little of English language and discussed very much politics.

[...]

He spoke very much of a man of whom I don’t remember... Parsnell, I think...

INTERVIEWER: Parnell...

LETICIA SVEVO FONDA SAVIO: Yes. And he said, also in his books, that were quarrelled in his family about this Parnell, because one part of his family was for him, and the other part was against him. But I think he would have the great hope that Ireland would be one day a free country.

(My transcript of the original soundtrack)

a careful balancing act between claims of pedagogical authority and the anarchic curiosity of the student, or, at worst, a wholesale sabotaging of the authoritarian implications of the entire pedagogical enterprise, a carnivalesque subverting of the institutional seriousness of school and classroom. There is also a constant reversal of roles involved: Joyce seems to have been ever so keen on relinquishing his teaching authority and turning himself into the occasional student of his pupils. What he was learning from them was, in the retrospective light of *Finnegans Wake*, the multiplicity of ways native linguistic competence can interfere with English in the course of the learning process, which results in ever-different hybridised varieties of nonstandard English or, for that matter, in no English at all. This was part general encouragement, part specific inspiration for the language project of *Finnegans Wake*; instead of authoritatively “correcting” the “mistakes” and “errors” his students made by evoking the normative power of Standard English, Joyce was content to view the language performance of his non-native language learners, by nature random, anarchic and deviant, as a welcome process of destandardisation by which restrictive authority of the rational and national sort is disenfranchised and a new freedom and singularity of linguistic expression is achieved.

There is a passage in *Finnegans Wake* which seems to sum up most of the logical, linguistic and political paradoxes involved in all this, and this is where the quote in my title comes from:

should I be accentually called upon for a dieoguinnsis to pass my opinions, properly spewing, into impulsory irelitz

(FW 421. 25–27; Book III, Ch. i.)

My focus is on *impulsory irelitz* in the passage. The phrase de-standardises, or overwrites in the word-processing sense, the grammatically and semantically “correct” *compulsory Berlitz*. The two phrases constitute a logically polar relationship: *impulsory* yields “impulse” and “pulse,” and by isolating semantically kindred “ire” from *irelitz* it evokes notions of opening, exploding, freedom, passion, anarchy and the like, while *compulsory Berlitz* reverberates with connotations of institution, power, authority and form. The language-teaching context also prompts us to recontextualise *Berlitz* in Irish; and by doing so, we can make *Berlitz* yield *Béarla*, pronounced as [ˈbe:rlə], which means

“the English language” in Irish; *compulsory Berlitz* is, then, also “Béarlaish,” that is, the English language, in its “compulsory”, that is, standard and authoritative variety. Conversely, *irelitz*, its polar opposite, is Irish. However, *impulsory irelitz* is also a kind of inverse form of “compulsory Irish,” a political and educational requirement in post-1922 Ireland, suggesting that “subversive” Irish can also be turned into a force of oppressive nationalist authority. Joyce’s ideal *impulsory irelitz* is somewhere between “compulsory English” and “compulsory Irish.” This is a dialect epitomising the condition of being “somewhere between,” of being free of the authority of equally constricting rival forms, languages and identities; it is, of course, a utopian condition, nonexistent except as in and through the language of *Finnegans Wake*.

In a schoolboy essay entitled “Study of Languages,” young Joyce favoured the kind of precision of language where there was “a correct expression ruled by clear regulations.”¹⁴ The phrase *impulsory irelitz* encapsulates the process by which this juvenile homage to the authority and power of a certain ideal of language was replaced by the mature writer’s notion of language as a radically fluid idiom that subverts the normative power and transgresses the frontiers of standard use and language identity. And this process, the move from the authority and collectivity of *compulsory Berlitz* to the anarchy and singularity of meaning of *impulsory irelitz*, the overwriting of Standard English by the language of *Finnegans Wake*, was both inspired and, I claim, made possible by Joyce’s Berlitz School experience in Trieste. Here, while teaching the English language to his students he also learnt from them all sorts of ways he could unlearn the same language.

¹⁴ *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, Eds. Ellsworth MASON and Richard ELLMANN, New York: The Viking Press, and London: Faber & Faber, 1959, 26–27; GOTTFRIED 225.