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# JOYCEAN BABELING: SCATTERED LANGUAGE IN 'OXEN OF THE SUN'

MAE CAPOZZI

**T**his paper considers James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It focuses specifically on Joyce's use of language in "Oxen of the Sun." I interpret the episode, which figures the conception, gestation, and birth of language alongside a literal birth, as a construction and deconstruction of the English language that suggests its ultimate inefficacy. I framed my close reading of the chapter with theoretical work by Thomas Aquinas, Ferdinand de Saussure, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida. I argue that Joyce, by acknowledging the limits of language even as he continues to write, reaffirms and reinscribes the role of the Artist.

I contend that Joyce premeditates the theoretical trajectory of the twentieth-century deconstruction in his Babelian scattering of language. To develop this argument, I delve into the theoretical work of Thomas Aquinas' *Compendium Theologiae* and *Summa Theologiae*, Ferdinand de Saussure's *Courses in General Linguistics*, Walter Benjamin's "On Languages as Such and the Nature of Man," and Jacques Derrida's "Differance." The bulk of my paper consists of a formal analysis of central passages in the text, which revolves around one key passage concerning "the utterance of the Word." I deal specifically with Benjamin's considerations on naming, Saussurian semiotics, and Derridean differance.

*"I'm not sure of loving Joyce, of loving him all the time."* — Jacques Derrida

*"I think this episode might also have been called Hades for the reading of it is like being taken the rounds of hell."* — Harriet Shaw Weaver

## INTRODUCTION

Critics of *Ulysses* (1922) often declare the impenetrability of "Oxen of the Sun." More than any other episode, "Oxen" predicts the Babelian scattering of language ubiquitous in

*Finnegans Wake*. Language runs away with the plot, covering its scent and forcing the reader to dig her nose into the text like a hungry bloodhound that has lost the trail. The reader must read and reread and re-reread, and even then she will never fully understand the text. Kathleen Wales, describing the chapter as a "linguistic tour de force," summarizes the traditional reading of this episode.

Two of the most significant are the theme of the development of the child from embryo to birth, and the parallel development of English prose style from its supposed origins in the ancients to the late nineteenth century. This bland summary, of course, hides the true complexities of the episode... (Wales 319)

John Gordon, like other critics, acknowledges the average reader's dislike of this particular chapter.

Probably most readers' least favorite chapter of *Ulysses*, "Oxen of the Sun" has long been cited as flagrant evidence for the commonest charge against James Joyce, that his work was written for professors to interpret rather than for people to read. (Gordon 349)

"Oxen of the Sun" is certainly a challenging chapter, and one critics tend to overlook in favor of episodes like "Nausicaa" and "Penelope." I suggest "Oxen of the Sun," serves as the linguistic climax of *Ulysses*, as will become clear in the course of this essay.

My own criticism owes much to the work of critics before me. Those readings of the episode has allowed me to engage specifically with how language functions in the context of the episode. I certainly offer nothing new to the discourse surrounding *Ulysses* by arguing "Oxen" concerns itself with the conflation of birth and language. This essay focuses, rather, with exactly how and why Joyce uses language within the context of the episode, and how "Oxen of the Sun" contributes to the entirety of *Ulysses*.

I will invoke parallax to argue that the two discussions coexist: they move ever-nearer to each other until they collide. They cross and distance themselves again. Joyce, in creating this discursive intersection, explores all of the possibilities inherent in language while acknowledging its ultimate inefficacy. Throughout the episode, he painstakingly follows a literary-historical trajectory from pre-English to “broken doggerel.” At each step of the way, he explores language’s inability to fully express anything at all. Confusion reigns even in the central passage of the chapter.

“Oxen of the Sun” also presents important arguments regarding the role of the artist and censorship. Borrowing from Aquinas, Joyce figures the mother as intellect. God, too, becomes the ultimate artist, who gives birth to life. Joyce fills the episode with many different artists: Bloom (the artist in exile), Stephen (the wordsmith), and Mulligan (the ‘irresponsible’ producer of low mimetic art). Joyce examines his own artistic insecurities particularly through the voice of Stephen, who talks in circles and creates paradoxical arguments that he rejects as soon as he makes them. At one point, thunder interrupts Stephen’s heretical argument about the Virgin Mary. The thunder, a meaningless noise, frightens Stephen. When faced with a meaningless sound, he suddenly recognizes the impossibility of language to truly express anything at all. I interpret the chapter as a construction and deconstruction of the English language; Joyce, by using language to acknowledge its inefficacy, reaffirms and reinscribes the role of the Artist.

#### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

#### AQUINAS, SAUSSURE, BENJAMIN, AND DERRIDA

The work of Thomas Aquinas, Ferdinand de Saussure, Walter Benjamin, and Jacques Derrida advises this argument. Aquinas argues: “when the intellect understands itself, the word conceived is related to the understanding person as offspring to father” (Aquinas I:39). He adds.

Consequently, since we are using the term “Word” in the latter sense, that is, according as God understands Himself, the Word itself must be related to God, from whom the Word proceeds, as Son to Father. (I:39)

God’s relationship to the Word<sup>1</sup> mirrors the conception and growth of language

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1 Please note that the capitalization of “Word” refers to language imbued with religious meaning, whereas “word” refers to common language. For this reason, the Word of God is capitalized.

throughout “Oxen.” Joyce invokes Aquinas’s theory of language with the episode’s violent and instantaneous turning-point in the midst of the Ruskin moment. This moment sets the stage for an argument Joyce both accepts and rejects; the author of language, as “God,” treats the Word like his offspring. The author, like God, can both construct and deconstruct language—not only does he imbue a text with meaning, he can also scatter language and create the necessity for translation.

In *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas argues that language has the power to accurately signify, a claim that Jacques Derrida, along with Joyce, will later reject. For Aquinas, language serves as a perfect system in which words point directly to the essence of a concept. Joyce uses Aquinas as a starting point for his own writing. Though Aquinas’s linguistic ideas serve as a baseline for this episode, the chapter moves beyond these ideas.

Ferdinand de Saussure departs from Aquinas in his construction of signification. He describes the sign as diadic, meaning it consists of two distinct parts, the signifier and the signified, and discloses that “*the linguistic sign is arbitrary*” (Saussure 68). To briefly explain, a signifier is a word meant to represent and describe the signified, or the concept being described. This term will reappear throughout the essay, and will always fit this definition, though both the signifier and the signified function differently according to different theorists. Unlike in Aquinas, in Saussure’s formulation, the signifier does not perfectly describe the signified. Rather, Saussure argues that humans have applied a random phoneme to a concept and agreed upon it. We understand signs based on both their relation to and their difference from other signs, not because a signifier describes a concept’s essence. For a major portion of “Oxen,” Joyce dedicates himself to language within the scope of agreed-upon conventions before he rejects them entirely. He parodies the styles of other authors. Having read Joyce’s sources, the reader has already been ushered into that agreed-upon sign system, which renders those moments legible in comparison to later moments in the chapter.

I have used Walter Benjamin’s “On Languages as Such and on the Languages of Man” to discuss the role of “naming” in “Oxen of the Sun.” Benjamin focuses on the role of mystical linguistic theory in opposition to bourgeois linguistic theory. In reference to the first chapter of Genesis, Benjamin posits the ubiquity of language: “Every expression of human mental life can be understood as a kind of language, and this understanding, in the manner of a true method, everywhere raises new questions” (Benjamin 62). By relating language to God, he (re)enchants language.

For to think that we cannot imagine anything that does not communicate its mental nature in its expression is entirely meaningful; consciousness is apparently (or really) bound to such communication to varying de-

grees, but this cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God. (62)

For Benjamin, everything expresses its *true* mental being *in* language, within rules governed by God. He cannot imagine a lack of language (a linguistic abyss). Even a lamp communicates the “language-lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression” (63). Everything “speaks” through its own language, though not in a language humans can translate. Benjamin bases his argument on the idea that God has constructed a world entirely out of a Word.

Benjamin most influences my own work in his consideration of “naming”: “The name, in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself” (65). Like Aquinas, Benjamin enchants the act of naming. “Name, however, is not only the last utterance of language but also the true call of it” and “Language, and in it a mental entity in it, only expresses itself purely where it speaks in a name—that is, in its universal naming...“All human language is only the reflection of the word in name” (65).

He clarifies by arguing that the proper name of an individual defines that person’s fate.

The deepest images of this divine word and the point where human language participates most intimately in the divine infinity of the pure word, the point at which it cannot become finite word and knowledge, are the human name. (69)

For Benjamin, the name itself has tremendous power—power that Saussure and Derrida would never attribute to language. Benjamin writes that, “it is no longer conceivable...that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things...agreed by some convention. Language never gives *mere* signs” (69). He clearly rejects Saussurian semiotics by arguing that the sign is *not* arbitrary.

Benjamin offers insight into the transformation and translation of language after the Fall.

“There is a reason for the multiplicity of human languages. The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—so many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language. (70-71)

After the Fall of Man, language cannot function the way God originally intended. Rather, it only functions through translation. For Benjamin, “the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language...The word must communicate *something* (other than itself)” (71). Language then becomes a system of signs mutually agreed upon, as Saussure has argued. “After the Fall...linguistic confusion could only be a step away” (72).

*Signs* must become confused where things are entangled. The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence. In this turning away from things, which was enslavement, the plan for the Tower of Babel came into being, and linguistic confusion with it. (72)

Benjamin’s argument mirrors Joyce’s in the turning-point of “Oxen of the Sun” and warns of language’s deconstruction after “the utterance of the Word” (Joyce 422). This argument sets the stage for Derrida’s concept of *differance* and the deconstruction of language as the chapter nears its close.

Jacques Derrida, for many readers of Joyce, becomes the obvious theorist to turn to when reading *Ulysses*. His (non)concept of *differance* fully rejects the theories suggested by Aquinas and Benjamin. His theory of language builds off of and differs from Saussure’s understanding of semiological difference as well as Nietzsche, Freud, Levinas, and Heidegger. In his essay “Difference,” (1968) Derrida gives “the name *differance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/ temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation” (255). With *differance*, Derrida seeks to reject the popular idea that speech allows for unmediated access to truth. By calling attention to the different spellings but same pronunciations of *difference* and *differance*, Derrida acknowledges the ambiguity of the spoken word and the necessity of referring to writing to clarify. Unlike in Aquinas and Benjamin, Derrida does away with the signified. Instead, signifiers relate to each other. *Differance* mediates this relationship by creating meaning from which signifiers emerge.

Derrida also introduces the important concept of “lack.” Derrida explains that his concepts derive from “those of negative theology” (259). Because “*Differance* can no longer be understood according to the concept of ‘sign,’” we must “question the authority of presence or its simple symmetrical contrary, absence or lack” (262). He adds to this idea later on.

We then come to posit presence--and in particular, consciousness, the

being-next-to-itself of consciousness--no longer as the absolutely mat-  
 rical form of being but as a 'determination' and an "effect." Presence  
 is a determination and effect within a system which is no longer that of  
 presence but that of differance; it no more allows the opposition between  
 activity and passivity than that between cause and effect or in-determi-  
 nation and determination, etc. (268)

He expands on this absence and questions how we can make sense of the func-  
 tioning of difference.

How can we conceive of differance as a systematic detour which, within  
 the element of the same, always aims at either finding again the pleasure  
 or the presence that had been deferred by (conscious or unconscious) cal-  
 culation, and, *at the same time*, how can we, on the other hand, conceive  
 of differance as the relation to an impossible presence, as an expenditure  
 without reserve, as an irreparable loss of presence, an irreversible wear-  
 ing-down of energy, or indeed as a death instinct and a relation to the ab-  
 solutely other that apparently breaks up any economy? It is evident--it is  
 evidence itself--that system and nonsystem, the same and the absolutely  
 other, etc., cannot be conceived *together*. (370)

Derrida figures differance as an absent-present or present-absent that is both there  
 and not there. We cannot understand the multiple ways in which differance func-  
 tions at the same time: "The trace cannot be conceived--nor, therefore, can dif-  
 ferance--on the basis of either the present or the presence of the present" (272).  
 Instead, "It commands nothing, rules over nothing, and nowhere does it exercise  
 any authority. It is not marked by a capital letter. Not only is there no realm of dif-  
 ferance, but differance is even the subversion of every realm" (272). Differance,  
 in that case, is a void, an abyss of complexity that undermines every attempt at  
 meaning, that Joyce wholeheartedly embraces.

For Derrida, the *a* of differance "is a tomb that (provided one knows  
 how to decipher its legend) is not far from signaling the death of the king" (257).  
 We can replace "king" here with author, or perhaps God. If God "says" rather  
 than "writes," ambiguity must seep into his utterance, thereby undermining his  
 omnipotence.

What we do know, what we could know if it were simply a question of  
 knowing, is that there never has been and never will be a unique word, a  
 master name...there is nothing kerygmatic about this "word" so long as  
 we can perceive its reduction a lower-case letter. (277)

The word ceases to be "kerygmatic": it cannot function as a vehicle for Truth. If



this is the case, neither Aquinas' nor Benjamin's God, (who is consubstantial with the Word), can exist. Saussurian semiotics cannot not function either. Derrida's ideas become important to our analysis of what occurs if the Word does not exist after all.

In my analysis of the episode, I have chosen to use Joyce as the actor in the text, rather than referring to the narrator. I thoroughly believe Joyce is making a very specific argument about the nature of language. I support this claim by turning to the numerous letters he wrote explaining the chapter itself, as well as the Gilbert and Linati schemas.

#### BIRTH OF LANGUAGE

The episode begins with the conception of the English language, which Joyce marks with a threefold repetition: "Deshil Holles Eamus. Deshil Holles Eamus. Deshil Holles Eamus" (Joyce

383). Joyce stupefies the average reader at the outset by using both Latin and Irish to provide a setting for the chapter. According to *Ulysses Annotated*, "Desil" is Irish for a clockwise movement, "Holles" is the name of the street in Dublin where the lying-in hospital is located, and "Eamus" means "let us go" in Latin. Joyce willfully obfuscates meaning by using multiple languages.

Repeating the phrase three times invokes ritual, and so encourages a consideration of mythology and Catholicism. Joyce uses a religious schema before he interrupts it near the end of the passage. His use of Irish, English, and Latin also carries a second significance: Irish nationalism, English colonialism, and Catholicism (Latin) each represent Stephen's three masters. In "Telemachus" Stephen tells Haines "—I am the servant of two masters, Stephen said, an English and an Italian...And a third, Stephen said, there is who wants me for odd jobs" (20). The reference to these three languages calls attention to the power of the masters over Dublin, and represents a call to arms for the Irish Artist.

The text continues with two more repetitions of three: "Send us, bright one, light one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit. Send us, bright one, light one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit. Send us bright one, light one, Horhorn, quickening and wombfruit" (383). This litany calls for a child ("wombfruit"), and further suggests a fertility rite. The reference to Horhorn" complicates the request. The word "Hor" means dirt in Old English, and horn may refer to the devil. Perhaps Joyce means for us to acknowledge the pagan nature of the rite.

Finally, the moment concludes, "Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa! Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa! Hoopsa, boyaboy, hoopsa" (383). This phrase refers to a midwife bouncing a baby boy to induce breathing. Joyce places an extra space be-

tween each of the words, in which the reader can imagine the reverberation of the phrase as well as the bouncing of the baby boy. When conflated, these three phrases represent antiquated fertility rites paired with a contemporary birth. In doing so, Joyce suggests the primordial nature of birth and invokes ever-changing nature of language. Joyce follows these utterances with a block of translated but not-Anglicized Latin.

Universally that person's acumen is esteemed very little perceptive concerning whatsoever matters are being held as most profitable by mortals with sapience endowed to be studied who is ignorant of that which the most in doctrine erudite and certainly by reason of that in them high mind's ornament deserving of veneration constantly maintain when by general consent... (383)

The fetus-language begins to develop and become more legible. We can recognize the language as English, although Joyce purposely misplaces syntactic elements. The passage also lacks punctuation, or distinction between its parts. The necessary organs are there (words), but they are not in their correct place.

Moving into Anglo-Saxon, the language becomes increasingly comprehensible. The plot begins to take shape, and Leopold Bloom enters the scene. "Some man that wayfaring was stood by housedoor at night's oncoming. Of Israel's folk was that man that on earth wandering had fared" (385). Though the syntax is disordered, Joyce makes the meaning clear: Bloom has arrived. Joyce describes the hospital. "Of that house A. Horne is lord. Seventy beds keeps he there teeming mothers are wont that they lie for to thole and bright forth bairs hale so God's angel to Mary quoth" (385). Once again, the language does not resemble modern English, but the meaning is clear. The hospital contains seventy beds where mothers can give birth.

#### LIFE AND DEATH

Joyce creates a parallel between life and death. Bloom arrives at the Maternity Hospital in all black: "As her eyes then ongot his weeds swart therefor sorrow she feared" (385). Bloom's outfit provides a stark contrast to the purpose of the Maternity Hospital: birth. A bitter tone overlays the episode. "Before born babe bliss had. Within womb won he worship. Whatever in that one case done commodiously done was" (384). Joyce calls attention to the challenge of life as compared to the comfort of the womb. He suggests a child would be better off remaining in his mother's womb.

He continues to apply the contrast between life and death:

Therefore, everyman, look to that last end that is thy death and

the dust that gripeth on every man that is born of woman for as he came naked forth from his mother's womb so naked shall he wend him at the last for to go as he came. (386)

Joyce notes the significant similarities between life and death, which present an important parallel linguistic argument. Human life from conception to death reflects the construction and deconstruction of language as it occurs in this episode. Life begins in meaninglessness and ends in meaninglessness. We can say the same for the English language, at least within the context of "Oxen of the Sun."

#### THE MOTHER AND THE ARTIST

Joyce equates the role of the mother with the mind of the artist. He once wrote to Nora, as one critic observes, that "his work [was] a child which he carried in 'the womb of [his] imagination' and fed 'day after day out of [his] brain and [his] memory'" (Bazargan 279). Aquinas makes a similar argument regarding thought.

Therefore, when the intellect understands something other than itself, the thing understood is, so to speak, the father of the word conceived in the intellect, and the intellect itself resembles rather a mother, whose function is such that conception takes place in her. But when the intellect understands itself, the word conceived is related to the understanding person as offspring to father. (Aquinas 1:39)

In "Oxen of the Sun," woman gives birth to the word, while the men at the table undermine her fertility as they discuss contraception and abortion. Bloom admires womankind for her role. "The man hearkened to her words for he felt with wonder women's woe in the travail that they have of motherhood..." (Joyce 386). The birth in this chapter—the birth of Mrs. Purefoy's son—is the hardest the nurse has ever seen. "She said thereto that she had seen many births of women but never was none so hard as was that woman's birth" (386). The birth of the child associated with language is the hardest birth.

Stephen joins the arguments regarding birth and language together again. He requests that his auditors listen: "Mark me now" (391).

In woman's womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh that passes becomes the word that shall not pass away. This is the postcreation. *Omnis caro ad te veniet*. No question but her name is puissant who aventried the dear corse of our Agenbuyer, Healer and Herd, our mighty mother and mother most venerable and Bernardus saith aptly that she hath an *omnipotentiam deiparae supplicem*, that is to wit, an almightiness of petition because she is the second Eve and she won

us, saith Augustine too, whereas that other, our grandam, which we are linked up with by successive anastomosis of navelcords sold us all, seed, breed now. Or she knew him, that second I say, and was but creature of her creature, *vergine madre figlia di tuo figlio* or she knew him not and then stands she in the one denial or ignorancy with Peter Piscator who lives in the house that Jack built and with Joseph the Joiner patron of the happy demise of all unhappy marriages *parce que M. Léo Taxil nous a dit que qui l'avait mise dans cette fichue position c'était le sacré pigeon, ventre de Dieu! Entweder transsubstantiality oder consubstantiality but in no case subsubstantiality.* (391)

Stephen deconstructs his past, Catholic theology and language. Joyce still follows the chronological trajectory of language, but the actual argument presents language's inefficacy. Stephen begins with the paradoxical argument that in woman's body the word becomes flesh, but even though all people die the word does not disappear. He complicates the parallel Joyce has created in this episode between birth and language. Stephen's argument resembles his theory on Shakespeare in the episode "Scylla and Charybdis." When asked "Do you believe your own theory?" Stephen replies "—No" (213-214). He seems to do the same here, not by suggesting that the theological concept does not work, but by continuing to argue within the context of that schematic. He calls the continued existence of the word "the postcreation."

Stephen focuses on two important mothers, Eve and Mary. He calls Mary "the second Eve" and argues that "she won us...whereas that other, our grandam, which are linked up with by successive anastomosis of navelcords sold us all, seed, breed, and generation, for a penny pippin" (391). At first, he contrasts Eve's failure with Mary's success. He then rejects his own argument by suggesting that Mary's birth was also unsuccessful. "Or she knew him...and was but creature of her creature" (391). To "know" in a biblical sense, means to have sexual relations with someone. Stephen adds, "*vergine madre figlia di tuo figlio.*"<sup>2</sup> Stephen calls attention to the heretical implications inherent in this perspective; if the Father and the Son are consubstantial beings, the "Virgin" Mary has had sexual intercourse with the son she gives birth to. If, on the other hand, Mary is actually virginal, then she is "in the one denial or ignorancy."

Stephen does not believe Mary was unaware and uninvolved in Jesus' birth: "*Entweder transsubstantiality oder consubstantiality but in no case subsubstantiality*" (391). Transubstantiation describes the process in which the wine and host become the blood and body of Christ. Consubstantial refers to the relationship between the Trinity; all three members are both separate and the same. Joyce

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2 "virgin mother daughter of your son"

can accept both of these possibilities, either that God and Mary engaged in sexual intercourse (transsubstantiality) or the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary (consubstantiality). He refuses to believe in “subsubstantiality” which he describes as “A pregnancy without joy... a birth without pangs, a body without blemish, a belly without bigness” (*Joyce* 391). In this instance, the Mary is nothing more than a vessel. Stephen wants to give Mary credit for Jesus’ birth, and in doing so, seems to admire birth like Bloom does.

If Joyce equates the mother with the artist, he must consider Mary an artist. By giving Mary credit for her role in the conception of the Word, Stephen gives the artist the power to create and shape language. Joyce has not only made reference to many different writers, but by writing in each of their styles he has also engaged himself as an artist. The cyclical, metamorphic argument resembles the nature of language itself over the course of the episode; it moves from impenetrability, to clarity, to impenetrability again.

Stephen rephrases his argument again.

And as the ends and ultimates of all things accord in some mean and measure with their inceptions and originals, that same multiplicit concordance which leads forth growth from birth accomplishing by a retrogressive metamorphosis that minishing and ablation towards the final which is agreeable unto nature so is it with our subsolar being. (394)

Stephen’s argument about beginnings and endings mirrors the process language undergoes in this chapter. The above passage describes a fairly pessimistic conception of life’s trajectory. He explains that the human body undergoes a “retrogressive metamorphosis” from birth to death. In other words, we begin to die the moment that we are born. Joyce makes a linguistic pun with the word “minishing,” which derives from “diminishing.” The word itself has undergone a “retrogressive metamorphosis,” as it slowly loses itself. By calling humanity “subsolar being[s]” Stephen also makes a connection to the title of the episode, “Oxen of the Sun.”

#### STEPHEN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING IN MEANINGLESSNESS

Stephen speculates on the purpose of humankind and the ultimate existential question.

And as no man knows the ubicity of his tumulus nor to what processes we shall thereby be ushered nor whether to Tophet or to Edenville in the like way is all hidden when we would backward see from what region of remoteness the whatness of our whoness hath fetched his whenceness. (394)

Stephen suggests that no man knows where he will be buried or how he will die. He does not know if he will end up in Hell or Heaven. Everything is hidden from him, yet he hopes that he will somehow discover his point of origin. Stephen uses language to undermine the Church and to come nearer to God in a way reminiscent of the Tower of Babel.

Stephen speaks bravely and confidently, but his use of language is interrupted and undermined with “A black crack of noise in the street here, alack, bawled, back” (394).

And he that had erst challenged to be so doughty waxed pale as they might all mark and shrank together and his pitch that was before so haught uplift was now of a sudden quite plucked down and his heart shook within the cage of his breast as he tasted the rumour of that storm. (394)

At the very moment that Stephen thinks he understands life, nature subverts him. His manipulation of language encourages him to think he has control, but the crack of thunder frightens him. Bloom must speak “to him calming words to slumber his great fear, advertising how it was no other thing but a hubbub noise that he heard...” (395). Of course, it is the “hubbubed-ness” of the noise that carries significance. As Benjamin reminds us, “Things are denied the pure formal principle of language—namely, sound” (Benjamin 67). A sound has disrupted and destroyed the sense of security language gives to Stephen. That same sound will soon be equated with the Word of God.

Stephen feels this fear. “Heard he then in that clap the voice of the god Bringforth or, what Calmer said, a hubbub of Phenomenon? Heard? Why, he could not but hear unless he had plugged up the tube Understanding (which he had not done)” (395). Stephen understands that the crack of thunder is more than a mere sound. It reminds him of the finitude of his existence and the inefficacy of language when faced with meaningless sound. “For through that tube he saw that he was in the land of Phenomenon where he must for a certain one day die as he was like the rest too a passing show” (395). As an artist, he hopes to create language that will remain after he is gone, but he realizes that language does not last. Only sound endures. Joyce continues to play with this idea in *Finnegans Wake* when he describes the sound of the Fall. “bababadalgharaghtakamminarronnkonnbronnontonnerronnntuonnthunntrovarrhounawnskawntoohooordenenthurnuk!” (Joyce 1). Language ceases to function, but sound remains omnipresent, and marks the failure of language.

Stephen begins to approach life’s truth and an understanding of the existential abyss, until he is interrupted by the warning of an incomprehensible sound.

Joyce translates this sound for the readers.

Wherein, O wretched company, were ye all deceived for that was the voice of the god that was in a very grievous rage that he would presently lift his arm and spill their souls for their abuses and their spillings done by them contrariwise to his word which forth to bring brenningly bid-deth. (Joyce 396).

Joyce begins to set the stage for the climax of the chapter, which comes many pages later, and in language time, many centuries.

But by and by, as said, this evening after sundown, the wind sitting in the west, biggish swollen clouds to be seen as the night increased and the weatherwise poring up at them and some sheet lightnings at first and after, past ten of the clock, one great stroke with a long thunder and in a brace of shakes all scamper pellmell within door for the smoking shower... (397)

This moment prepares the scene for the deconstruction of language that occurs when God utters the Word. The men misread the warning and continue to talk about contraception.

#### FAILED BIRTHS

Mulligan and Alec Bannon enter the scene. Bannon is in Dublin to purchase “a colour or a cornetcy in the fencibles and list for the wars” (401). In other words, he is in the market for a condom so he can have sex with Milly, Bloom’s daughter. Mulligan jokes about setting up a “fertilising farm” at which he will “offer his dutiful yeoman services for the fecundation of any female” (402). Of course, Mulligan’s story entirely departs from the conversation of contraception and abortion the others were having before his arrival. His joke is sinful but on the absolute opposite side of the binary. Though his goal is fertilization rather than contraception, he undermines the sacred nature of the act and does not plan to care for the children. In the metaphor Joyce has created, if the other men represent censorship, Mulligan signifies the irresponsible artist who creates without regard for his work. He represents low culture.

As these absurd, heretical discussions ensue, like Mary, Mrs. Purefoy gives birth in the midst of a sinful world. Bloom considers the birth for a while, thinking that “the issues so auspicated after an ordeal of such duress now testified once more to the mercy as well as to the bounty of the Supreme Being” (408). God wins out momentarily, before Bloom turns to his neighbor, Alec Bannon, who will soon have sex with his daughter. Even as a child is born, the men consider non-traditional conception and physical deformity. “artificial insemina-

tion...females impregnated by delinquent rape...and the abnormalities of harelip, breastmole, supernumerary digits, negro's inkle, strawberry mark... " (410-411).

Mulligan mentions Haines, and his "tale began to freeze them with horror" (412). Haines, as the novel's Englishman, represents the metaphorical rape of Ireland by England as a result of the colonial mission. England impregnates Ireland with the English language. Haines "had a portfolio full of Celtic literature in one hand, on the other a phial marked *Poison*" (412). This story represents the murder of Ireland by England's destruction of its language. England has poisoned Celtic literature. This is another language of birth gone wrong, of "females impregnated by delinquent rape" (411).

Joyce describes a more individual failed birth: Rudolph's. "No son of thy loins is by thee. There is none now to be for Leopold, what Leopold was for Rudolph" (414). The men proceed in their debate of "infant mortality" (418). They wonder "why a child of normally healthy parents and seemingly a healthy child and properly looked after succumbs unaccountably in early childhood" (419). Moments later, the narration returns to Mina Purefoy and her son. "She had fought the good fight and now she was very happy" (420). Joyce once again reminds us of the contrast between conversation and setting. Soon, the narration turns to a discussion of sin. Although the son (Son) has been born, sin continues to exist as it did before the birth of the child. Bloom looks on at Mrs. Purefoy's "false calm" (422). She is not Mary, and her son is not Jesus. They are all sinners who have built a tower of lies in an attempt to understand the miraculous nature of birth, and God must punish them, as he punished the builders of the Tower of Babel. He destroys their language.

#### THE UTTERANCE OF THE WORD

Joyce tells the reader to "Mark this farther and remember. The end comes suddenly" (422). He calls our attention to this climactic paragraph, enjoining us to "mark this." In doing so, he also transfers the narration from past tense to present tense. These sentences, like nearly all of Joyce's, produce many levels of meaning both inside and outside of "Oxen of the Sun." Within the chapter, Joyce uses this language to describe God's power to end life as quickly as he began it. It marks the end of any semblance of clarity Joyce gives to language leading up to this moment; he deconstructs language after the "utterance of the Word" (422). Externally, this suddenness recalls Rudolph's death, the telegram reporting the news that Stephen's mother is dying, and the deaths of Paddy Dignam and the drowned man. It refers to the end of Bloom and Molly's sexual life. Joyce reuses this idea in the very different context of "Circe," when the fan, (a synecdoche for Bella, the head of the whorehouse) tells Bloom, "(*Tapping.*) All things end. Be mine. Now"



(528). By exclaiming that the “The end comes suddenly,” Joyce creates an ironic dichotomy between setting and conversation, death and birth.

Joyce reminds us of the setting. “Enter that antechamber of birth where the studious are assembled and note their faces” (422). “Antechamber” has multiple meanings, all of which Joyce applies in this chapter. Most literally, it applies to the waiting room of a maternity hospital. Its origin derives from the waiting room outside the royal bedchambers. This meaning implies the importance of Mina Purefoy’s son—the men waiting outside treat his birth like the birth of a prince. It can also signify any space that transfers into another, implying that as the baby is

born, he moves from the antechamber of his mother’s womb into the world. If Joyce uses this definition of “antechamber,” perhaps he means to suggest that the “studious are assembled” with their thoughts in “the antechamber of birth,” or Mina Purefoy’s womb. Furthermore, authors have figuratively referred to the “antechamber of death,” which allows Joyce to construct a clear contrast between the “antechamber of birth” and the “antechamber of death.” In terms of language, P.G. Hamerton in *The Intellectual Life*, writes about metaphorical antechambers.

In this great privilege of instant admission the man of one study has always the advantage of men more variously cultivated. Their misfortune is to be perpetually waiting in antechambers, and losing time in them. Grammars and dictionaries are antechambers... (Hamerton 81)

Hamerton uses the antechamber in respect to language and argues that a knowledge of words and their meanings are the antechamber outside of the chamber of language.

Hamerton’s thoughts on antechambers present the possibility for some linguistic play. If we understand the “chamber” as the world, as we do when we consider the antechamber as a womb, we can consider the antechamber as the pre-lapsarian world, the world before the Fall. This analysis of the word becomes necessary when we inspect the language of the entire paragraph. Infused with biblical language, it resembles the enchanted language espoused by Aquinas and Benjamin. I use the term biblical language to describe any language in which signifier perfectly describes the essence of the signified. In other words, biblical language assumes that there is no distance between the word and the world. The term antechamber sets the stage of this language, only so that Joyce can subvert and pervert it.

We must also acknowledge the metempsychotic possibility inherent within the word “antechamber.” The word “antechamber” contains the prefix “ante” and the phoneme “chamber.” “Ante” means before, but is closely related

to “anti,” not by etymology, but by sound. Differance renders this type of play possible. Derrida, when describing the distinction between the words difference and differance writes.

In the one case ‘to differ’ signifies nonidentity; in the other case it signifies the order of the *same*. Yet there must be a common, although entirely differant root within the sphere that relates the two movements of differing to one another. We provisionally give the name *differance* to this *sameness* which is not *identical*: by the silent writing of its *a*, it has the desired advantage of referring to differing, *both* as spacing/temporalizing and as the movement that structures every dissociation. (Derrida 255)

Joyce was certainly aware of the aural connection between the two prefixes, and wants us to perform the kind of play that Derrida encourages. The prefix “anti” signifies opposition. An “anti-chamber” becomes a non-space, and so calls to mind emptiness and space. In that sense, the word “antechamber” signifies a *lack*, in the Derridean sense. Joyce constructs an anti-world simultaneously to a prelapsarian world, and we can recognize both here.

Joyce commands the reader, to “Enter that antechamber” alongside the characters, and requests us to literally observe them. If we read the word “antechamber” as I have suggested in the previous passage, we enter a negative space, a *lack*. The next section reads, “Nothing, as it seems, there of rash or violent” (Joyce 422). The use of the word “Nothing” resembles that negative, anti-world that Joyce has constructed. By inviting us to enter this negative space, Joyce creates an inverted, opposite, *anti*-world, in which we discover the opposite of the truth. The sentence supports this statement by dictating a falsehood; Joyce describes the men as neither “rash or violent” (422), but at this moment, the characters are drinking and carousing in a lying-inhospital. Joyce fills this false anti-world with biblical language and allusion. Biblical language, as considered by Aquinas, removes the necessity of the signifier. Instead, because word is world, signifieds can describe other signifieds without the help of language. By creating a world in which language functions perfectly, Joyce undermines God and language. God and God’s omnipotent language only exists in the anti-world—it is not a truth.

Joyce continues: “Quietude of custody rather, befitting their station in that house, the vigilant watch of shepherds and of angels about a crib in Bethlehem of Juda long ago” (422). Joyce continues to depict falsehood as truth in the negative, oppositional world of *lack* he has designed. The characters do not resemble the shepherds and angels who awaited Jesus’ birth, but their opposite. He distinctly contrasts the men with the shepherds and angels depicted in this

religious scene to further distance reality and truth from the myth of God, which can only exist in an anti-world.

At this point, Joyce shifts to the climax of the chapter: the moment in which signifier becomes signified, which can only occur in the negative world Joyce has created.

But as before the lightning the serried stormclouds, heavy with preponderant excess of moisture, in swollen masses turgidly distended, compass earth and sky in one vast slumber, impending above parched field and drowsy oxen and blighted growth of shrub and verdure till in an instant a flash rives their centres and with the reverberation of the thunder the cloudburst pours its torrent, so and not otherwise was the transformation, violent and instantaneous, upon the utterance of the Word. (422)

Aquinas argues, “What is contained in the intellect, as an interior word, is by common usage said to be a conception of the intellect” (Aquinas 1:38). He concludes, “Hence what is comprehended by the intellect is not unfittingly called the conception of the intellect” (Aquinas 1:38). In Chapter 39 of *Compendium Theologiae* he adds:

But when the intellect understands itself, the word conceived is related to the understanding person as offspring to father. Consequently, since we are using the term ‘Word’ in the latter sense, that is, according as God understands Himself, the Word itself must be related to God, from whom the Word proceeds, as Son to Father. (Aquinas 1:39)

Aquinas expresses that God conceives of the Word as he conceives of a Son. Joyce situates “Oxen of the Sun” in a maternity hospital to emphasize God’s Word as an act of conception, resembling that of a father. The earth is anthropomorphized as Mother Earth. The Word, then, is born from the sexual intercourse between God and the Earth.

Joyce depicts “serried stormclouds, heavy with preponderant excess” (Joyce 422). The clouds are full of rain, as they were as Noah was building his great ark. With Aquinas’ concept of language in mind the “swollen masses turgidly distended” (422) suggest testes filled with sperm that allow God to conceive life. The passage continues: “impending above parched field and drowsy oxen and blighted growth of shrub and verdure” (422). Joyce depicts the unsuspecting animals and vegetation below, entirely unprepared for the deluge that may drown them. We must note the articulation of “drowsy oxen” because of the title of the chapter, “Oxen of the Sun.” Ironically, these oxen happen to be located directly beneath enormous rainclouds, rather than in the sun. The oxen stand in a “parched

field,” which suggests that until this moment, they truly were “of the sun.” Joyce implies that the oxen resemble the characters within the maternity hospital, preparing for the rain. God plans to punish them, but to also create space for rebirth.

Joyce moves forward: “till in an instant a flash rives their centres and with the reverberation of the thunder the cloudburst pours its torrent” (422). Instantly, the end is nigh for the oxen below. “The end comes suddenly” (422). Joyce explains that the “flash rives their centres” to suggest sexual intercourse between God and the Earth. The flash penetrates the Earth, and conceives of new life. The rain (ejaculation) is accompanied by the lightning (penetration) and thunder (the Word of God). The “violence” and “instantaneity” further suggest Joyce’s conflation of rain and ejaculation. If we examine other orgasm imagery in *Ulysses*, for example in “Nausicaa,” we recognize the “instant” and “violent” nature of the orgasm for Joyce.

And then a rocket sprang and bang shot blind and O! then the Roman candle burst and it was like a sigh of O! and everyone cried O! O! in raptures and it gushed out of it a stream of rain gold hair threads and they shed and ah! they were all green dewy stars falling with golden, O so lively! O so soft, sweet, soft! (366-367)

In describing an orgasm through the medium of flammable, explosive fireworks in “Nausicaa,” Joyce emphasizes the violent, ejaculatory nature of the orgasm, and so we can read the violent rainstorm as God’s orgasm—the role of rain is to, reductively, fertilize the barren earth. He also parodies the language of the romance novel. By discussing God in this manner, Joyce subverts God’s linguistic power by relegating the language he uses to describe God to that of a subpar erotic genre rather than to the level of Art.

The storm, (God’s orgasm, His ejaculation of language), is “so and not otherwise.” In this moment, the Word perfectly represents the world. The “transformation,” (the metamorphosis, the metempsychosis of nature, the transubstantiation), is immediate and violent when God speaks the Word.

In the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas explains the role of the Word.

it must be said that manifold senses do not lead to equivocation or to any other type of ambiguity, for...these senses are not multiplied in such a way that a single word signifies several things, but rather because the things signified by these words can be signs of still other things. (Aquinas I-II).

In this moment in “Oxen of the Sun,” Joyce uses language as God does—there is no “equivocation” or “ambiguity.” According to Aquinas, language functions in

direct opposition to difference; in his formulation, signifieds signify other signifieds, thereby removing the necessity of signifiers. Linguistically, Joyce clearly supports Derrida's notion of language. He knows that even when he imitates Aquinas' view of language that his meaning is multivalent and does cause confusion. Even in the last few words of the paragraph—"the utterance of the Word"—Joyce makes it unclear whether God or Stephen speaks the Word (Joyce 422). This creates contradiction as well as points to other signifiers for further explanation, as Derrida would argue language functions.

The paragraph ends with language functioning perfectly; the signifier perfectly describes that which it signifies. Joyce concludes, "so and not otherwise was the transformation, violent and instantaneous, upon the utterance of the Word" (422). As God speaks, the "transformation" occurs. But what is this transformation? Perhaps Joyce refers to the movement from the perfect language that only exists in the "anti-chamber," to the deconstructed language that immediately follows the paragraph. The next word is "Burke's!," a name (422). Benjamin's argument regarding naming becomes useful in our analysis of this passage.

#### BABELIAN SCATTERING

The way that Joyce sets this moment up encourages the reader to expect an enchanted perspective of naming, in which the name functions perfectly, as Benjamin would argue. Joyce rejects this, resulting in a Babelian scattering of language. Derrida articulates a Tower of Babel moment in "Yes, laughter" (1984). He writes, "Babel, the struggle for power of languages: who has the rights of translation, knowledge, and authority" (Mitchell, Slote, and Derrida 19). Of course, Joyce asks and answers this exact question throughout *Ulysses*. To expand, in "Two Words for Joyce," Derrida specifically refers to *Finnegans Wake*, taking two words: "HE WAR" (Mitchell and Slote 22). He attempts to explain/assemble/translate these two words, resulting in a particularly useful analysis for our purposes.

Declaring is an act of war, he declared war in tongues [languages] and on language and by language, which gave languages, that's the truth of Babel when Yahweh pronounced its vocable, Babel, difficult to say if it was a name, a proper name or a common noun sowing confusion. (Mitchell, Slote, and Derrida 23)

Derrida attempts to unpack the Babelian moment within the context of *Finnegans Wake*, an explanation that is useful for our own understanding of this Babelian moment in "Oxen of the Sun." Babel, a name, does not function the way Benjamin believes naming does. The word "Burke's" is no different. Is it "a name, a proper name or a common noun sowing confusion?" Joyce is aware of all of these

possibilities and plays with them. Burke is a name, but it does not refer to anyone or thing in particular, until Joyce clarifies. In *Ulysses*, at least five different Burkes are mentioned. Mr. O'Madden Burke, pissur Burke, Edmund Burke, beauty Burke and Colonel Richard Burke. We do not know exactly what Joyce refers to until he clarifies, "Burke's of Denzille and Holles their ulterior goal" (*Joyce* 423). For this reason, I argue that the Word fails to function perfectly, just as it does in Babel.

Immediately after this paragraph, language scatters as it did in the story of the Tower of Babel. Once language functions perfectly, Joyce breaks it.

Outflings my lord Stephen, giving the cry, and a tag and bobtail of all them after, cockerel, jackanapes, welsher, pilldoctor, punctual Bloom at heels with a universal grabbing at headgear, ashplants, bilbos, Panama hats and scabbards, Zermatt alpenstock and what note. A dedale of lusty youth, noble every student there. (423)

With the word "Outflings," a Joycean creation rather than an English word, Joyce begins to reconstruct a new language from the rubble of the demolished Tower of Babel. He does so by inventing new words that are not a part of the English language. For example, the Joycean invention "dedale" becomes particularly important both in reference to Stephen Dedalus. Perhaps it is related to "daedal," an obsolete French word meaning a maze or a labyrinth. Simultaneously, a surgeon tells the men: "news of placentation ended" (423). The moments following the ejaculation of "Burke's!" represent a rebirth, or a successful afterbirth. They describe the movement from the "ante-chamber" to the world, from a space in which language functions perfectly to reality. Joyce repeats this argument in later sentences. "The air without is impregnated with raindeu moisture, life essence celestial, glistening on Dublin stone there under shiny coelum. God's air, the All-father's air, scintillant circumambient cessile air" (423). The sexual intercourse between God and the Earth in the preceding passage has been successful.

Joyce, in the final moment of "Oxen," writes in the English appropriated by those oppressed by the English language: "Pidgin English, nigger English, Cockney, Irish, Bowery slang and broken doggerel." He tells us to "Trample the trampellers" (425), to revolt against the British. Language explodes into English, German, Latin, French, French sounds, misspoken French, and Spanish. Characters take on Jewish accents: "Vyfor you no me tell? Vel, I ses, if that aint a sheeny nachez, vel, I vil get misha mishinaa. Through yerd our lord, Amen" (426). Joyce uses Latin to describe drinking: "*Nos omnes biberimus viridum toxicum diabolus capiat poster ora nostra*" (427).

Though the language is challenging to read, we can make sense of these final paragraphs because of reference points from earlier chapters. For example,

one paragraph discusses Paddy Dignam's funeral.

That, sir, was once a prosperous cit. Man all tattered and torn that married a maiden all forlorn. Slung her hook, she did. Here see lost love. Walking Mackintosh of lonely canyon. Tuck and turn in. Schedule time. Nix for the hornies. Pardon? See him today at a runefal? Chum o yourn passed in his checks? Ludamassy! Pore picaninities! Thou'll no be telling me thot, Pold veg! Did ums blubble bigsplash crytears cos frien Padney was took off in black bag. (427)

Joyce has trained us to understand his manipulations of language within a schematic he has created. Upon reading the text, we agree to the rules of the language Joyce has constructed, and we learn to read throughout the episode. He both enacts and breaks the rules of traditional language

as well as the rules of the language he has created. In the above passage, Joyce refers to the man in the mackintosh. He also refers to Paddy Dignam. "See him today at a runefal...Padney was took off in black bag?" (427). We understand the significance of this sentence even though Joyce manipulates language to the point where it is nearly incomprehensible. He disguises his meaning by even changing the spelling of important plot points. We may not have understood that "runefal" referred to a funeral, and "Padney" referred to Paddy Dignam if we did not have knowledge universal to all readers of *Ulysses*—that Bloom attends the funeral of Paddy Dignam in the "Hades" episode. It is in this episode that Bloom first sees the man in the macintosh who follows him throughout *Ulysses*. Joyce even spells "mackintosh" differently in "Oxen" than he does in "Hades." "The chap in the macintosh is thirteen" (110) and "M'Intosh, Hynes said scribbling" (112), and yet we understand the reference.

At the same time, Joyce's manipulation of words also presents multi-valent meaning. The word 'rune' can signify many things; in this context, the most fitting may be the obsolete meaning. "Course, onward movement, esp. of a celestial object; (also) rapid movement, running, esp. of a person" (*OED*). "Fal" signifies falling. In that case, Joyce describes the death of Dignam as a falling star. He ascribes meaning to Dignam's death. The mention of a mackintosh in this episode is also fascinating since the most important moment revolves around rainfall. Though the passage seems incomprehensible, it actually may have more meaning than a traditionally organized passage. Joyce is reconstructing language, and the reader is slowly learning the rules.

Joyce even uses untranslatable sounds, like the sound of vomiting: "Ware hawks for the chap puking. Unwell in his abominable regions. Yooka, Night. Mona, my throe love. Yook. Mona, my own love. Ook" (427). Somehow,

we can even make sense of these meaningless sounds within the context of an impenetrable passage. Joyce makes the point that it does not matter whether he speaks within the agreed-upon rules of the English language—we can make sense of it anyway.

Joyce mentions Elijah, “Elijah is coming washed in the Blood of the Lamb” (Joyce 428). Joyce refers to Elijah mockingly.

The Deity ain't no nickel dime bumshow. I put it to you that he's on the square and a corking fine business proposition. He's the grandest thing yet and don't you forget it. Shout salvation in king Jesus. You'll need to rise precious early, you sinner there, if you want to diddle the Almighty God. (428)

Joyce injects the passage with sexual innuendo from the “bumshow” to the use of the word “diddle” in reference to “the Almighty God.” He refers to God’s “business proposition.” Joyce, again, rejects God, though less subtly than his previous rejection in the central passage of the episode.

Joyce concludes the episode with the sentence “Just you try it on” (428). This may be the most important sentence in the episode, though it seems fairly standard. The sentence refers directly to the preceding one — “He’s got a cough-mixture with a punch in it for you, my friend, in his backpocket”— yet it summarizes the episode as a whole (428). If, in fact, Joyce plays with language and continues to write in spite of its inefficacy in order to reaffirm the role of the Artist, and specifically the Irish artist, then he does so in this final sentence. He encourages the artist to “try it on,” just as he has tried on each of the styles of writing in this episode before breaking and then reconstructing it.

“Oxen of the Sun” is tremendously complicated. I have focused on what I think is one of its most fascinating preoccupations: the role of the Artist. Joyce’s writing remains subject to Derridean lack, and he recognizes this failure of language. Even so, he continues to write, thereby reaffirming the struggle of the Artist. No matter how much he manipulates language, it will never function perfectly, but he continues to try. This heroic attempt reinscribes the role of the Artist as one who struggles against all odds to create something meaningful in the space of total meaninglessness.

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