Bloom's Feline Discourse: A Semiotic Tension

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More than two generations have passed since the publication of *Ulysses* (1922), and the critics and scholars have well learned to live in its aftermath with arduous scholarships and interpretations. The initial din and dust appear to have settled. Yet it seems that we are now more accustomed to the singularities of the Joycean text than we have cleared its haunting enigma. Let us take an example:

> But the greatest affront of all is the arrangement of the book, *Ulysses* is a chaos. All the conventions of organized prose which have grown with our race and out of our racial consciousness which have been reverently handed on by the masters with such improvements as they have been able to make, have been cast aside as so much dross. Quotation marks for conventional passages are omitted; punctuation follows new and unknown rules; sentences begin and forget to end; chapters have no apparent relation to one another, and neither numbers nor titles; and one chapter, the last, runs to 42 pages (25,000 words) with not a single punctuation of any kind...[1]

The review from which this passage is quoted is one of the earliest complaints against the book's formlessness. Critics have long ceased to point an accusing finger at these singularities of Joyce language, and much has been done toward clarifying their novelistic import. Yet the language field of the Joycean text still remains to be a very valid critical challenge. In what follows, the present writer will deliberate, perhaps rather fastidiously, on the opening scene of "Calypso", the third chapter of *Ulysses*, to look into the semiotic tension Joyce creates through his onomatopoeic manipulation. Onomatopoeia, taken in the largest possible sense, may be said to be one of the few pivotal forces commanding the writer's experimental style.

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(1) Holbrook Jackson's review of *Ulysses* in *To-Day*, June 1922, in Robert H. Deming, ed., *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, Vol. I, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 199.

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In the last chapter of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, where Alice awakens from her dream to confront her cat, she has this complaint about feline communication:

> It is a very inconvenient habit of kittens (Alice had once made the remark) that, whatever you say to them, they *always* purr. 'If they would only purr for "yes", and mew for "no", or any rule of that sort,' she had said, 'so that one could keep up a conversation![2]

What is extraordinary about this passage is that Alice, by way of making an excuse for her dream journey through the looking-glass, evokes with inspired casualness the linguistic impasse vis-a-vis the world of things here symbolized by the feline presence. This awareness of the impenetrable other seems to be the fitting conclusion of Alice's adventure as the elusive past perfect tense suggests obliquely. There is the despair of the medium, the language, between the mind and the world, between the rational and the supernatural, or between the sensible surface of consciousness and the hidden mute world of the subconscious or unconscious. The barrier of language that tests and delimits the rational is absolute and being absolute, renders itself to easy solution. It is walking "through the looking-glass." After all, the jabberwocky of Alice's fantasy world is linguistically transparent, the complication involved being simple dioptric reversions and distortions of a looking-glass. Where the medium dispairs of negotiating the world, Alice has blinked her eyes.

There is a somewhat analogous situation in the first part of the "Calypso" chapter of *Ulysses* in which Bloom starts his morning activity conversing with his cat.

> —Mkgnao!
> —O, there you are, Mr Bloom said, turning from the fire.
> The cat mewed in answer and stalked again stiffly round a leg of the table, mewing. Just how she stalks over my writingtable. Prr. Scratch my head. Prr.
> Mr Bloom watched curiously, kindly, the lithe black form. Clean to see: the gloss of her sleek hide, the white button under the butt of her tail, the green flashing eyes. He bent down to her, his hands on his knees.
> —Milk for the pussens, he said.
> —Mrkgnao! the cat cried.

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(2) Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 313.

They call them stupid. They understand what we say better than we understand them. She understands all she wants to. Vindictive too. Wonder what I look like to her. Height of a tower? No, she can jump me.

—Afraid of the chickens she is, he said mockingly. Afraid of the chookchooks. I never saw such a stupid pussens as the pussens.

Cruel. Her nature. Curious mice never squeal. Seem to like it.

—Mrkrgnao! the cat said loudly. [3]

But here Bloom does not blink his eyes to render what is impenetrable penetrable. Instead he hears his "mews" and "purrs" by imposing a linguistic difference upon each separate occurrence of the cat's sound: hence, the inflectional series of "Mkgnao—Mrkgnao—Mrkrgnao". Immediately following the passage quoted above, Alice had summerized her dilemma by the question, "But how *can* you talk with a person if they always say the same thing?" Now Bloom appears to have found the answer. To put it more correctly, Joyce appears to have modified significantly the question raised by Lewis. Alice is concerned with language's absolute barrier; Bloom with the medium's descriptive borderland gaining the foreground.

This particular point needs some elaboration, for Joyce's characteristic concept of language may be read into Bloom's initial gambit rather exemplarily in much the same way Alice's lament of the language barrier happens to hint at the compositional principles of Lewis Carroll. Bloom's feline discourse engages multiple levels of narrative implications: it situates Bloom in a domestic occasion; it insinuates at his dubious sex role; it suggests the fiber of his character; and it contrasts with the moody philosophic Stephen in its quotidian trivialities. Apparently it is a comic moment in which a man and a cat stage a performance in collaboration. That the performance hinges on the imagined cat word is comic no doubt, but the preoccupation with language relates to the typical Joycean concern. [4] The series of cat words is Bloom-Joyce's *tour de force* in verbal description. However, it has a metaphysical import reaching beyond the mere pretension of linguistic verisimilitude in representation.

Let us consider the semiotic status of language. The descriptive capacity of a language is limited, or more precisely system-bound because language as an autonomous sign system

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(3) James Joyce, *Ulysses,* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 57.

(4) Cf. Stephen-Joyce's extreme self-consciousness of the English language in Chapter V of *A Portrait:* "The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master,* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit." *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), p. 189.

cannot transcend itself to interfere with non-systemic elements. It is so by definition. A cat's cry either remains a cat's cry as an indescribable hence nonlinguistic phenomenon or is incorporated into the linguistic system with whatever representative value it happens to obtain. English 'meow'—and its accepted variants—has become a normative expression for a cat's cry through convention and by conforming to the rules of English phonology. Bloom's (or Joyce's) 'mkgnao' transgresses the phonological norm with its unacceptable combination of phonetic units (no English speaker can pronounce it) but remains systemic all the same owing to the concurrence of these factors:

(1) the fact that the constitutive units are after all phonemic (typographically realized),

(2) the vestige that refers back to the conventionalized norm of expression ('m-k-nao', the pseudo-stem, resembles 'meow'),

(3) the paradigm of repetition and variation that evokes linguistic motivation of such an instance of gradation as inflection (progressive additions of 'r'), and

(4) the descriptive context that enables the reader to recognize the identity of imitative form ('mkgnao' would not be recognizable either in isolation or even in juxtaposition with its idiosyncratic variants if not positioned in a narrative context).

These factors are very important in Joyce not only because they disclose his characteristic descriptive motivation in its most concrete level but also because they shed light to the more general pattern of his strategy of language. Most of Joyce's onomatopoeic moments seem to yield to similar patterns. Thus, the language field is fantastically exploited only to be absorbed into the order of the sign system as well as of narrative signification. As Roy Gottfried says of the art of syntactic irregularities in *Ulysses*, this is part of Joycean dialectic between order and disorder. [5]

Once we accept Bloom's variation on the theme of the cat's cry as fundamentally systemic, we may turn our attention to the significance of the subversive gesture implied in the deviation from the accepted norm. Why on the earth couldn't Joyce, we might ask, be just satisfied with 'meow'? Why did he take the word apart only to reconstruct it again? We can approach this question only negatively, that is to say, through the scrutiny of its effects. At this juncture, one is tempted to rush to the larger question of Joyce's philosophy of language, the distrust of language bred by his sense of alienation, his parallel interest in human gestures, [6] or more generally the crisis of language in

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(5) Roy K. Gottfried, *The Art of Joyce's Syntax in "Ulysses"*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980), Chapter II.

(6) For this interesting topic, see David Hayman, "Language of/as Gesture in Joyce," in Louis Bonnerot, ed., *Ulysses: cinquante ans après*, (Paris: Didier, 1974), pp. 209-220.

modern disintegrated society. All these questions are valid, but for the moment we will stick to the narrower question of the semiotic status of onomatopoeia.

It is a well-known Saussure's dictum that a linguistic sign unites the concept or the signified and the sound-image or the signifier and that the bond between them is not necessary but arbitrary. [7] The link between the signifier and the signified of the word 'meow' is certainly not necessary; nevertheless, it is not sufficiently arbitrary for that matter. If, for instance, 'cry' is a word semiotically settled in its relation to the actual sound it represents, 'meow' is ever subject to the possibility of unsettling for it is intended to imitate what is, so to speak, forbidden to imitate. Unless one restrains oneself from questioning its genetic status, the signifying identity of this word perpetually evades fixity. Such uncertainty in the ontological status of the onomatopoeic word opens the ground for a free play of demolition and reconstruction in so far as that does not violate the intrinsic properties of language as a system. However, such a process of deconstruction as Bloom's version of the cat's cry is subversive because language, which is autonomous and self-contained by virtue of its status as a system, always resists any gesture of non-systemic adventures. After Saussure, no revolution can, in principle, disrupt the cementing arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified excpt marginally. It seems that a system can turn on itself or reveal its self-awareness only at a peripheral locus.

What matters, then, is not the degree of mimetic truthfulness. Bloom's elaboration on the cat's sound neither improves nor aggravates the mimetic status of 'meow'. The point is that by simulating verisimilitude in sound representation Joyce does not mean to actualize a new dimension in the function of the sign but create a new field of activity in which the sign is made transparent by estrangement from itself. The peripheral locus is the vantage point. Figuratively speaking, it is as if the recipient of language were situated inside the sign to have a look at its secrecy. To borrow a useful term from Russian formalist Shklovsky, the central concern of Joyce's phonetic experimentalism involves the "laying bare" of the sign's potential structure. [8] The laying bare of the conventional 'meow', again to use Shklovsky's famous term, "defamiliarlizes" the represen-

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(7) Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, tr. Wade Baskin, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 67f. He mentions onomatopoeia as "motivated" or "relatively arbitrary". (p. 131f)

(8) Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy:* Stylistic Commentary," in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, tr., *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), pp. 27, 30. He spoke of "laying bare" with regards to the plotting technique of a novel.

tational status of the sign. [9] By this strategy, the reader is made language-conscious at the rawest possible level for what is defamiliarized is nothing other than the sign itself which is the conceptual base of prejudiced Joyce text.

This particular linguistic motif is played out in a narrative situation, which begins:

> The coals were reddening.
> Another slice of bread and butter: three, four: right. She didn't like her plate full.

Bloom soon notices the cat. He fondles and feeds her for some time before he goes upstairs to Molly's bedroom where his sleepy wife is waiting, he thinks, for a similar service:

> —You don't want anything for breakfast?
> A sleepy soft grunt answered:
> —Mn.

Thus, the scene begins with the pronoun "she" which is apparently ambiguous because there is no precedent and ends with Molly's "Mn" which is also ambiguous because the response is simply undecipherable though Bloom is to interpret it in the negative meaning. Yet, because of this ambiguity, "she" for Molly anticipates the cat just as Molly's "Mn" is reminiscent of the cat's response to Bloom. [10] In another word, the grammatical function of "she" and the communicative function of "Mn" are laid bare so that the narrative can fully exploit their potential ambiguities. Here we notice a remarkable parallel in principle between the sign status and the narrative texture. The defamiliarization of the sign is extended to and woven into the narrative context. The sign is, so to speak, taken apart and dramatized.

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The foregoing lengthy analysis of a single semiotic incident may have been a fastidious over-elaboration. Our excuse is that the whole can be peeped into through the sounding of a suspicious detail. Besides, the "Calypso" episode is relatively normal in style, more or less untinged by such technical excesses as increasingly shown in the second half of

(9) Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," *ibid.* Here he uses this concept as a critical formula defining the difference between literature and non-literature. I have used this to initiate the semiotic approach to Joyce language.

(10) Pronominal ambiguity may be best illustrated by the ubiquitous "he" in Molly's interior monologue in "Penelope".

the book. Biographical evidences indicate that Joyce himself originally considered "Wandering Rocks," the tenth chapter, to be the end of the first part of *Ulysses*. To "lay bare" the style with all those convolutions is properly the task carried on from "Sirens." Hugh Kenner even comments on the "moderately orthodox" nature of the first ten episodes. [11] So we have deliberately lingered on a subversive onomatopoeic moment imbedded in a seemingly benign context to maximize its underlying import. Roland Barthes did the same thing with Balzac's novella, *Sarrasine*. [12]

The language of *Ulysses* foreshadowing the language of *Finnegans Wake* bears witness to ample examples of what Harry Levin calls the "cult of imitative form," the typical linguistic manifestation of which being onomatopoeia. [13] The frequency of such occurrence is indeed extraordinary considering the fact that the English language, or any language for that matter, allows for only a minimum room for it in its corpus of vocabulary. [14] But the central significance of this motif lies not in its frequency of occurrence so much as in its resonating metaphor in which the distinctive features of linguistic temper in *Ulysses* can be comprehended in perspective. We have already discussed the dubious status of onomatopoeia as a sign and observed how the conceptual basis of the sign could be disturbed without subverting the premiss of arbitrariness in actuality. At the moment of its creation, the mimetic sign must be or have been a pure nonlinguistic fact of representation, but paradoxically its absorption into the sign system ought to be necessarily concommitant with its creation. The simultaneous presence and absence of the prelinguistic trace constitute a fertile field of metaphor for the linguistic purpose of Joyce the writer.

The clarification of the overall significance of onomatopoeic motifs in Joyce may begin by upgrading the concept to a higher generality. In short, onomatopoeia is one special function of language in which description is supposed to imitate directly what is described. If sound imitation stands out conspicuously, it is so because of language's privileged affiliation with sound. Indeed, onomatopoeia seems to be the only imitative margin in the abstract system of language. However, the language of literature, which is, according to Jurij Lotman, the "secondary modeling system" and whose meaninng is embraced by a structucture of recoding both "internal" and "external", both "paired" and "plural," is

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(11) Hugh Kenner, *Ulysses*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), p. 61.
(12) Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, tr. Richard Miller, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).
(13) Harry Levin, *James Joyce: A Critical Introduction*. (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 106.
(14) It appears that the Korean language is relatively rich in sound imitation.

more susceptible to a freer play of imitative motif, as Joyce could illustrate par excellence. [15]
The externality seems to afford to bend toward the internal, for the modification is only
simulated and does not disturb the conceptual basis of language just because the modeling
system of literature is "secondary" and its meaning structure "plural". We might say, then,
that Joyce's penchant for descriptive exhaustion, for example, is a sort of a "secondary
modeling" of his devastating confrontation with the sign on the mimetic ground. Perhaps
this "secondariness" of the narrative-level mimesis is an infelicitous qualification because
different levels in the textual hierarchy of *Ulysses* are more of a homology than of an
analogy. With Joyce, the proposition that language is the theme can be verified only by
the recognition of its operative consistency of this kind. [16]

The hierarchy of the imitative language in *Ulysses* is like this. At the elementary lexical
level, imitation includes sound (e.g., Bloom's cat words), shape (e.g., 'awaywayway',
'endlessnessness'), sematic features (e.g., "three Christian boys *sixeyed* Bloom"), the fact
of utterance (e.g., "Bloom's high grade *ha*"), and so forth endlessly. These features
remodel themselvs into the level of sentence, and their common typographical manifestations
include a variety of different forms of combination, addition and deletion. Then comes the
discourse in its totality with a formidable accumulation of details which is itself a mimetic
content. What is more significant, however, is the gesture of absolute mimesis by which
reality is not merely represented but incarnated. Hence, so many parodies, some of which
becoming symbolic like "Oxen of the Sun". At another extreme, the expression enacts the
content with vengeance.

When my country takes her place among.
  Prrprr.
  Must be the bur.
  Fff. Oo. Rrpr.
  Nations of the earth. No-one behind. She's passed. *Then and not till then.* Tram. Kran, kran,
kran. Good oppor. Coming. Krandlkrankran. I'm sure it's the burgund. Yes. One, two. *Let my
epitaph be.* Karaaaaaaa. *Written. I have.*
  Pprrpffrrppfff.
  Done[17]

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(15) Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, tr. Ronald Vroon, (Ann Arbor: University
     of Michigan Press, 1977), pp. 34-37.
(16) Cf. "...the language of Dublin *is* the subject..." in Kenner, *Dublin's Joyce*, (Boston: Beacon
     Press, 1962), p. 12. Language has a status of its own in Kenner's more recent book, *Joyce's
     Voices*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
(17) *Ulysses*, pp. 289-290.

This enactment certainly stands for an expressive excess and entails two stylistic aspects of the text. First, it hinges upon the perpetual present tense by which language becomes "of the foreground" as Erich Auerbach said of the Homeric style. [18] Next, it functions as the linguistic rationale for both the bias and the plurality of the text as manifested by the interior monologue (e.g., "Penelope"), spatialization of the temporal (e.g., "Wandering Rocks"), diegetic double entendre (e.g., parodies, Kenner's "Uncle Charles Principle"), and so forth. [19]

However, no description can exhaust the material of reality and no techique of language can appropriate nature without contradiction. Language enacting its concept—this mimetic perfection is an impossibility. What is attempted is a simulation of merging language into reality, not actualization. Onomatopoeia is indeed a remarkable phenomenon which contains a trace of language's original status in nature, but paradoxically it does not exist outside the system of language. The paradox of language is that while its capacity for mimesis is taken for granted absolute mimesis is self-contradictory and impossible. The state of correspondence can never pass over into the state of identity.

This is the hard rock of the ontological status of language. Upon it stands the onomatopoeic adventure of the Joyce text, which is the subversive remodeling of the sign. Such linguistic venture may be either a form of dialectic or contradiction. Yet, self-contradiction is the necessary condition for language to be aware of itself. Only by contradicting itself, the system could be laid bare and the concept defamiliarized, and this is what happens in the general level of Joycean style and techuique as well as in the phonetic level of the text. In the process, the sign is disrupted, breaking the balance or correspondence between the signifier and the signified. The modern "writerly text", says Barthes, is "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds." [20] In the subversive Joycean text, we notice the perpetual ascendency of the signifier over the signified, which betokens of modern alienated language, the language of literary modernism.

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(18) Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, tr. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 12.

(19) For this concept, see Kenner, *Joyce's Voices*, Chapter 2.

(20) Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 5. The similar tenet runs through his *The Pleasure of the Text*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975) and some essays in *Image, Music, Text*, tr. & ed. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

조이스 의성어의 기호학적 역설

「칼립소」의 첫 장면을 중심으로

金 　 吉 　 中

〈요　약〉

*Dubliners*의 사실주의와 *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*의 내면의식을 거친 후에 나타난 *Ulysses*는 *Finnegans Wake*의 언어해체를 예고하는 James Joyce의 중심 텍스트로서 그 현란한 문체실험 이면에 언어에 대한 깊은 자의식을 담고 있다. 따라서 Hugh Kenner 등의 학자들의 기본 입장인 "언어 자체가 그의 테마"라는 인식은 지극히 정당한 것이다. 본 논문은 러시아 형식주의와 프랑스 구조주의 비평의 공헌을 바탕으로 Joyce 문학에 나타난 언어실험의 기호학적 의미는 무엇인가를 의성어 현상(onomatopoeia)이라는 다소 색다른 관점에서 논의한 것이다. 의성어 현상은 Saussure의 유명한 명제인 恣意的 기호(sign)에 일견 동기성(motivation)이 부여된 것인데, 언어학적으로는 이 동기성이 기호의 자의성이나 언어의 체계성을 수정할 수 없다. 곧, 언어가 세계를 模寫하여 자기체계 안에 세계를 再現할 수는 없다. 그러나 문학은 Lotman의 말을 빌면 자연어의 토대위에 재구성된 "이차 조형 체계"(secondary modeling system)이고, 문학적 기교(technique)의 핵심은 Shklovsky가 언명한 바, 그 기교를 스스로 "드러냄"(laying bare)에 있다. 조이스 text에 나타나는 기호의 해체와 재구성은 이와같이 언어의 자신으로부터의 소외를 보여주는 것이고 그의 의성어 탐닉은 이를 극명하게 보여주는 국면이라 할 수 있다. Harry Levin이 말한 조이스의 "모사형식에의 충동"(cult of imitative form)의 핵심이 의성어 실험이라면 내면 독백, 패러디와같은 문체상의 기법은 그 외연이라 할 수 있다. 이리하여 Roland Barthes의 말처럼 能記(signifier)의 所記(signified)에 대한 우위가 담보되고, 이는 바로 조이스로 대표되는 모더니즘문학의 특징적 언어인 것이다. 이러한 논의를 위하여 본 논문은 편의상 *Ulysses*의 "Calypso"의 첫 장면을 집중적으로 언급하였다.