**Embedded Meanings**

The etymology of a word can deepen the meaning of a poem by carrying an image, as in the poem below by Madeleine Mysko. See if you can guess which word carries an important image.

*Out of Blue*

It wasn’t wind or thunder; color foretold

The yellow black-eyed Susan, the pink phlox

Were too much themselves in the charged light.

The trees to the west sharpened against the sky.

The sky was exaggerated, a purple hue.

I set out to gather toys from the yard

And towels from the line, but at the hedge was struck

By hydrangea blue. I felt it travel

Through me, toward the ground of a day

I couldn’t quite remember, and I was left

Bewildered, bereft of I didn’t know what.

I had to lean into the broad leaves, to reach

Deep, to snap stems until my arms

Were filled with blooms as big as baby bonnets.

The broken-green color blessed the air

As I carried that crucial blue across the lawn,

And the maples blanched at the first guest of wind.

The poem tells the story of a woman who goes into her yard to gather toys before a summer storm. “Bewildered, bereft,” she snaps some hydrangea blossoms to carry back into the house, and is consoled. The color of the flowers is “crucial blue.” The word *crucial* comes from the Latin *crux* (“cross”). Of course a reader can understand the poem without the etymology of *crucial*, but the reader who sees the image of the woman carrying the blossoms as a suggestion of Christ carrying the cross, reads “Out of the Blue” more clearly as a poem of faith and redemption.

Paisley Rekdal’s “Stupid” also contains embedded etymological meaning. The poem refers to the Darwin Awards, which commemorate those who improve our gene pool by removing themselves from it in really stupid ways. The poem relates several Darwin Award stories, including those of one man who drowned in two feet of water and a second man who was stabbed to death by a man trying to prove a knife couldn’t penetrate a flak vest. Rekdal has braided these instances of human stupidity along with the story of Job, “that book of the pious man / who suffered because the devil wanted to teach God / faith kills through illusion.” Toward the end of the poem Job is directly addressed: “Job, you are stupid for your faith as we are stupid for our lack of it / snickering at the stockbroker jogging off the cliff though / shouldn’t we wonder at all a man can endure / to believe.”

The etymology of *stupid* deepens its meaning. The word *stupid* comes from the Latin *tupere* (“to be astonished”), which comes from the Greek *typein* (“to beat”)—the root of our words *stupefy* and *stupendous*. Rekdal’s “Stupid” considers the borders between faith and insanity, joy and despair, life and death. The image of a person being astonished (the origin of “stupid”) affects how the reader evaluates the behavior discussed. Consequently, in the poem, winners of the Darwin Award—like Job—seem to be acting on faith rather than merely exercising poor judgment.

Examples of embedded etymological meanings are abundant in the works of Chau er, Shakespeare, and Milton. Thanks to his knowledge of roots, prefixes, and suffixes, Milton coined many words, including “pandemonium,” “disfigurement,” and “displode.” The prefix “dis,” Neil Forsyth tells us, is related to the Greek *dis*, “but picks up the flavor of the Greek prefix ‘dys,’ meaning unlucky or ill.” “Dis” is also the name of the inner city and principal inhabitant of Dante’s Hell. This understanding gives the first line of *Paradise Lost* (“Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit”) deeper significance. The writer who uses etymology draws upon deep resources. The reader who understands this web of etymological connections has a richer experience than one who does not.

Ralph Waldo Emerson’s much-quoted lines—“Language is fossil poetry,” from his essay “The Poet”—speaks to his understanding of the primacy of etymology. Emerson argues that the

poet’s power comes from his ability to use the archetypal symbols that are words. The poet, Emerson says, is “the Namer, or Language-maker” and the etymologist “finds the deadest words to have been once a brilliant picture.” Walt Whitman also championed the use of etymology, arguing that “the scope of [English] etymology is the scope not only of man and civilization, but the history of Nature in all departments, and of the organic Universe, brought up to date; for all are comprehended in words, and their backgrounds.” In discussing Whitman’s project, Joseph Kronick goes as far as to argue that it “will be to refashion the language through an etymological uncovering of origins. This presumptive historical task will, however, be conducted on common speech, American slang to be precise, rather than within the Indo-European family of languages.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is a poet whose interest in etymology is well documented in his diaries. For instance, the entry for September 24, 1863, is an etymological riff on “horn”:

The various lights under which a horn may be looked at have given rise to a vast

number of words in language. It may be regarded as a projection, a climax, a badge of

strength, power or vigour, a tapering body, a spiral, a wavy object, a bow, a vessel to

hold withal or to drink from, a smooth hard material not brittle, stony, metallic or

wooden, something sprouting up, something to thrust or push with, a sign of honour

or pride, an instrument of music, etc . . .

The above passage is only a fourth the entry, but we can see Hopkins’ mind ranging over the word and its histories, even inventing etymology as a way of combining images with history.

In the hands of a skilled etymologist, such riffs became ways to think about cultural and historical change, as when. Marin Heidegger follows the etymologies of the German *bauen* (“build”), which originally meant “to dwell,” or “to stay in a place”:

The real meaning of the verb *bauen* has been lost to us. But a cover trace of it has

been preserved in the German word, *Nachbar*, neighbor . . . he who dwells nearby.

The way in which you and I am, the manner in which we humans are on the earth, is

*Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on earth as a mortal. It means to

dwell. The old word *bauen*, which says that man *is* so far as he dwells, this word

*bauen* however also means at the same time to cherish and protect, specifically to

till the soil, to cultivate the vine.

At a time when building usually means ruining the earth, Heidegger reminds us how we have drifted from the notion of “cherish and porrect.”

A contemporary American novelist passionate about etymology is Paul West, whose book *The Secret Life of Words* is a personal and entertaining etymological dictionary. West admits that he began a novel about astronomy with the word *consider*, which means “set alongside the stars” from the prefix *cum* (“with”) and *sidus* (“star”). West notes that ancient astrologers coined this word fixed on the stars, and yet more recent astrologers are actually fixed on planets. “Tracking the courses of stars,” West continues, “soon weakened into observing them, and that into observing in general, and in no time observing has become ‘remarking,’ not in the sense of ‘notice’ but in that of ‘saying,’ in which case it joins the abominable modern “I was” and “I went,” both referring to speech. West’s book, like Hopkins’ diary entries, testifies to the addictive nature of learning etymologies. Every unknown word is a mystery waiting to be solved.

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