

TRANSMUTATIONS

by
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Disclaimer

These are tentative annotations, liable to be adjusted, modified or discarded. Many of them are highly questionable, definitely far-fetched and a few on the verge of insanity. So use them at your own risk. My aim is trying to put together controversial data in order to build a possible system. The results may not be satisfactory, but I am convinced that the strategy is the right one. McHugh's Annotations and Fweet should be always at hand.

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- 316.11: -- Good marrams and good merrymills, sayd good mothers
316.12: gossip, bobbing his bowing both ways with the bents and skerries,

Invited by the clients to continue the narrative, Porter resumes his tale playing the role of the Ship's Husband and addresses his audience calling them “**Good marrams and good merrymills**”. It's the same “**Good marrams**” used by the Captain in 315.21; but, whereas, according to my interpretation, that was a sarcastic homosexual hint, in this instance Porter tries to reverse the meaning. If we read “**mar**” as Latin “*mare*” (sea), then we get “*sea rams*”. As for “**merrymills**” there might be a possible reference to “*merry males*” and *Murray's Mills*, a complex of steam-powered cotton spinning factories (Manchester, England), balancing the Captain's “**freshwatties**” of 315.21. In both cases we find the same James Watt, whose engine powered the mills. Thus we have “*pirates*” and “*workers*”,

whom the narrator addresses with a servile bow (**bobbing his bowing both ways**): the adventurous life of the “**skerries**” (small rocky reefs or islands) and the ordinary one of those “**bent**” to their hard work.

316.13: when they were all in the old walled of Kinkincaraborg (and that

316.14: they did overlive the hot air of Montybunkum upon the coal

316.15: blasts of Mitropolitos let there needs be the hourihorn), hibernia-

316.16: ting after seven oak ages, fearsome where they were

Now the big question is: who are “**they**”? I am inclined to think that they are the Captain's men left on the island, would-be colonizers, in a castle (**borg**) surrounded by walls, in a decrepit (**old**) Irish (*Kincora*: Brian Boru's palace) world (**walled**) where folly (*can-can*) is oddly (*kinky*) mixed up with lamentations (*keen keen* & Mangan's “*Lamentation of McLiag for Kincora*”), in quite an unpleasant situation (Norwegian “*kinkig*” : predicament, quandary). They had to guard themselves from the hot talks of political charlatans (**the hot air of Montybunkum**) and from the freezing sermons of religious preachers (**the coal blasts of Mitropolitos**: “**Mitropolitos**” is the Rumanian word for “*metropolitan bishop*”). Their only means of survival (**overlive**) being their meetings (real or imaginary) with “*horny whores*”, their wished paradise (*houris*: nymph of the Muslim paradise). A life resembling death (*hibernation*) in a wintry (for them) land (*Hibernia*), where they lived in distress (**fearsome where they were**). And they had to stay there for an unaccountable lapse of time (**seven oak ages** : oaks are renowned for their longevity); and a turbulent time, as well, with its references to “*The battle of seven oaks*”, two battles, in fact : the one of Jack Cade's rebellion (England 1450), and the other fought in Canada (1816) between two rival fur trade companies.

316.16: he had gone

316.17: dump in the doomerling this tide where the peixies would pickle

316.18: him down to the button of his seat and his sess old soss Erinly

316.19: into the boelgein with the help of Divy and Jorum's locquor and

316.20: shut the door after him to make a rarely fine Ran's cattle of fish.

They have to wait because the Captain has vanished away in somewhat unclear circumstances. This passage in fact gives rise to multiple interpretations. First a judicial one, where “**doomerling**” is “*the ring of judges*” (Norwegian “*dommer*” : judge), who must decree his fate (*doom*). There are references to the scene in the park, where he went to defecate (**he**

had gone dump) – in fact he has gone to piss, but I suppose that “dump” includes that as well - and met his fatal destiny (**doomering**) since the two mischievous maids (**peixies**) had the chance to contemplate (pickled peek : **would pickle him down**) his nudity (**to the button of his seat**); with **Erinly**, **Divy** and **Jorum** who might be the three soldiers. But there is also an anticipation of the defecating Russian General. In this case the “pixies” would be Butt and Taff. And there is also a possible further reference to his alleged homosexual inclinations, where “**his sess old soss Erinly**” might be Oscar Wilde crying from the depth of his prison (**into the boelgein**). “**boelgein**” hints in fact at Italian “*bolgia*” (pit, the seventh circle of Dante's Inferno), thus Wilde's “*De Profundis*”. One might ask: why **Erinly**? A possible “*Irish Emily*”. (In some graphic renderings Erinly and Emily might be confused.) “*ly*” may be “*lee*”: in nautical terms “*the side away from the direction from which the wind blows*”; thus someone who does not follow the wind, namely the orthodox sex directives (**sess old soss**). Low German “**sess**” or “**soss**” is “*six*”, Latin “*sex*”, Italian “*sessu*”. And of course “**doomering**” hints at German “*Dämmerung*: twilight” and at the mythological “*twilight of the gods*”. Although in this case it would be a grotesque finale, with the Captain in high shit (**dump**), ripped off completely (**down to the button of his seat**) by sluts (**pixies** : vivacious girls) who intoxicated him (**pickle him down**). After which he is maneuvered by and old “*souse*” (**soss**) of his, of dubious sexuality (**Erinly**), who, with the help of the devil (**Divy**), of further drinks (**jorum**) and alluring words (**loquor**) plays a foul trick, closing him in a coffin. This needs an explanation. There might be a reference to the Egyptian Osiris. During a feast, his brother Seth (who, among other traits, has also homosexual connotations) convinced him to lie down in a beautiful, *rarely fine*, chest. Once his brother was inside it, Seth nailed the chest and threw it in the ocean. In our text the coffin is subtly hidden in “**a rarely fine Ran's cattle of fish**”. We find an Italian “*scatola*” (box) in “**Ran' scattle**”. Where “**Ran**” is not only the “*Norse goddess of the sea (notorious for her pastime of drowning sailors with her net)*”, thus a sort of Circe; but also the ballad (*rann*) that depicts ludicrously the Captain's fate. And, of course, there are allusions to the Shaun / Shem confrontation, Shaun playing the trickster. If the parallel Erinly / Emily holds we pick a further hint, since “*Emil*” derives from Latin “*aemulus*” : envious, jealous, rivalling.

316.21: Morya Mortimor! Allapalla overus! Howoft had the ballshee

316.22: tried !

The coffin, of course, points directly to the “wake” scene with all its corollaries, which, in this short passage are many and quite intricate. Let's start with “**Morya Mortimor!**”, which is first an exclamation and again a possible hint at the Osirian myth. I detect a reference to *Mary* and *Martha*, the two sisters of Luke's gospel (10:38-42), the spiritual and the earthly one, who elliptically become the two sisters of Osiris (*Isis* and *Nephtys*) wailing over their dead brother.



McHugh informs us that **Morya** is “*one of the supposed authors of Blavatsky's Mahatma Letters*”; and Madame Blavatsky was the authoress of “*Isis Unveiled*”, thus another allusion to Isis. “**Morya**” hints also at Russian “*morya*” (genitive of “*more*” → sea : thus “*of the sea*”). In “**Mortimor**” we find “*mort*” (death) and Italian “*timore*” (fear, dread); thus “*fear of death by sea*”: an allusion to Phlebas, the Phoenician, of Eliot's “*The Waste Land : Death by Water*”. And a further reference to the Indonesian “*Timor Sea*”, its Portuguese name being “*Mar de Timor*”.

“**Allapalla overus!**” is another puzzling sentence. McHugh correctly points out that “*alla palla*” is Italian “*to the ball*”. But “*palla – ball*” as the spherical object, at face value, would be totally meaningless. English “*ball*”, though, is also “*a formal dance*”; thus we detect an invitation to the dance, Weber's *Aufforderung zum Tanz*:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEmjhYmrjQ>

But “**Allapalla**” is also the “*pale, appalled ALP*” crying to the moon (*palla – sphere – moon – pale moon*) that shines over the wake, ALP as the wailing Banshee (a fairy woman who begins to wail if someone is about to

die). In conclusion we see a necromantic ritual aimed at resurrecting the drowned merchant/sailor.

316.22: And they laying low for his home gang in that eeriebleak

316.23: mead, with fireball feast and turkeys tumult and paupers patch

316.24: to provide his bum end. The foe things your niggerhead needs

316.25: to be fitten for the Big Water.

Here the camera angles on the same “**they**” we met above, who are now the participants of the wake. They are depressed (**laying low**), waiting for their leader's return (**his home gang**) to that strange and frightening (**eerie**), gloomy and somber (**bleak**) Irish (Erie) plain (**mead**). Since “**home gang**” recalls the Norwegian “*holmgang*”, a trial by combat fought usually on a small island (hòlm) or skerry, his return would be seen as a reinstatement of the Viking Law. But in fact his return would coincide with his resurrection, his emerging from the coffin in the course of the wake. To make this possible (**to provide his bum end**) the necromantic ritual - with its festive fires (**fireball feast**), its heathen (**turkey**) tumults, its naïve spells (**paupers patch** → poor speeches) - assumes the aspect of the alchemical *Magnum Opus* (Great Work) aimed to obtaining the “*Elixir vitae*: Elixir of life”; in our case “**the Big Water**”. The alchemical reference explains the term “**niggerhead**”, that is “*nigredo* or *prima materia*”, the basic matter of any alchemical transmutation. I am inclined to think that the Huckleberry Finn reference is just an amusing invitation by Joyce to “*mark*” the other (*twain*) meaning. In our case four are the components of the basic matter:

[1] drinks (**fireball** → *Feuerzangenbowle* : fire-tongs punch: a traditional German alcoholic drink, especially of some German fraternities);

[2] food (**turkeys**);

[3] clothes, rags (**paupers patch** → Arlequinesque patches);

[4] good luck (**to provide his bum end** → to end his being on “*beam-ends*”)

Of course all this in a tumultuous witch's cauldron, a very wake, a feast in which fireball drinks are mixed up confusedly with food and “*purple patches*” : any sort of chatters and embellished legends of his deeds, in fact patches to fix up and hide his naked “**bum**”, thus saving his ass.

316.25: He made the sign of the ham-
316.26: mer. God's drought, he sayd, after a few daze, thinking of all
316.27: those bliakings, how leif pauses! Here you are back on your haw-
316.28: kins, from Blasil the Brast to our povotogesus portocall, the furt
316.29: on the turn of the hurdies, slave to trade, vassal of spices and a
316.30: dragon-the-market, and be turbot, lurch a stripe, as were you
316.31: soused methought out of the mackerel.

So it seems that the resurrection ritual had its effect, since the Captain has finally returned, although the Ship's Husband looks a little bit surprised. His “**sign of the hammer**” is here an apotropaic gesture, equivalent to some special use of the Christian “sign of the cross” to ward off evil. He looks dazedly (**after a few daze**) at the Captain and has a vision of all the “**bliakings** → bleak Viking kings” who ruled Dublin (*Baile Atha Cliath*) and of how life passes (**how leif pauses**) and how the brave adventurers of the times of old (*Leif Erikson* who discovered America) are no more (**life pauses**). The former brave warrior has turned into a merchant, like the slave trader *Sir John Hawkins*; he has come back from his *Treasure Island*, like *Jim Hawkins*. He who once sailed so high above (like *Basil the Blessed*), who was so bursting (**Brast**) and cynically callous (French *blasé*: jaded) has debased himself (note **BB** of **Blasil the Brast** turned into “**pp**” of **povotogesus portocall** – Latin “*bibi*”, I drank, turned into *piss*) to the state of one of the many ordinary people (**dragon-the-market** → a drug on the market), a common trader touching the various “*ports of call*”. (By the way: Basil the Blessed was born on the “*portico*” of a local church!) “**povotogesus**” hinting at “Portuguese people” hides in fact further meanings. Here we find “people” (**povo**) devoted to Jesus (**gesus**), thus a Christianized Dublin (**the furt on the turn of the hurdies** : Town of the Ford of the Hurdles). Note that “**furt**”, leaving aside the German “Furt: ford” may hint at Italian “*furto*” (theft), thus the religious conversion compared to a robbery. The Captain is no “*slave trader*”, but a “**slave to trade**”, totally dedicated to it, dealing in spicy goods, one who can drug and corrupt the market; who acts on it like an evil dragon: a base alienated businessman. *Dermot/Diarmuid* of the Irish myth turned into a **turbot**, a flatfish (**be turbot**). An abrupt swing indeed (**lurch**), a new variety (**stripe**) of man, an amphibious (German “*Lurch*”) form, both aquatic and terrestrial: it seems that the Frog Prince we met earlier has remained a frog. And in fact “**as were you soused methought out of the mackerel**” underscores an ironic double meaning. Apparently it could refer to the “*distinctiveness*” of the Captain, who has been sorted out of the mass of

common mackerels, ordinary people. But mackerel is Italian “*sgombro*”, which is homophone to “*sgombrare*” (to clear away, remove): thus he is a waste, a reject.

316.31: Eldsfells! sayd he. A

316.32: kumpavin on iceslant! Here's open handlegs for one old faulker

316.33: from the hame folk here in you's booth !

And the Ship's Husband puts an end to his speech in a friendly manner, calming down the Captain's hot temper. “*Eldfell*” (**Eldsfells**) is Icelandic for “*mountain of fire*”. But of course it is also a sign of peace, meaning that they are old fellows! And he offers him a cup of champagne (**kumpavin**) and invites the other fellows to open their arms and embrace that old comrade (Italian “*compagno*” → **kumpavin**) of their own.

