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THE WARDEN'S WORDPLAY: TOWARD A REDEFINITION OF THE SPOONERISM

THE SLIP OF THE TONGUE is one of the earliest forms of humour. The misplaced letter, the wrong word at the wrong time, the pun, have evoked smiles since classical Greek literature. The accidental metathesis which has come to be known (erroneously) as a Spoonerism has been part of the laughter experience of practically everyone.

Who has not smiled at the master of ceremonies introducing a battle-scarred general as "bottle-scarred" and then confounding confusion with "battle-scarred"? Or at the literary man going on a cruise telling his friends he was "looking for some crooks to take with him on a booze." Or at the landlady assuring the over-fastidious tenant that "the insanitary spectre had seen all the bathrooms." Or at the professor's stern admonition to the prank-loving, study-neglecting undergraduate: "You have hissed all my mystery lectures. I saw you fight a liar on the campus. In fact, you have tasted the whole worm!"

Most dictionaries credit The Reverend William A. Spooner (1844-1930), Warden of New College, Oxford, as the originator of this figure of speech. Yet the truth is that Spooner perpetrated no more than three true "spoonerisms" during his entire lifetime of 86 years, and only a few other verbal slips which are merely metatheses. Other men did just as much. In fact, this type of thing was known and laughed at long before Spooner.

Rabelais gives perhaps the earliest literary example: "Il n'y a point d'enchantement. Chascun de vous l'a veu. Je y suis maistre passé. A brum, a brum, je suis prestre Macé." Rabelais, instead of repeating "maître passé" (past master), wrote "prêtre Macé" (priest Macé), the name of the historian René Macé, a monk whose name was synonymous with simple or foolish.

A genuine spoonerism was recorded in his *Compleat Gentleman* (1622) by Henry Peacham, who tells of "a melancholy Gentleman . . . meaning to say, I must goe buy a dagger, by transposition of the letters, said: Sir, I must goe dye a begger." A near-spoonerism is found in the *Lives* of celebrities by John Aubrey (1626-1697), a dilettante historian and antiquary, who relates Sir Walter

Raleigh's flirtation with a wench whose protest "Sweet Sir Walter" became "Swisser Swatter" as she playfully warded off his advances.

Yet this wordplay has inherited Dr. Spooner's name. It is odd that the myth developed round this man, for during his lifetime Spooner was guilty of no more than an overdeveloped professorial propensity for absentmindedness. This characteristic is described in the only account of his life, that by Julian Huxley, who for six years was a tutor at New College, Oxford, during the wardenship (presidency) of Spooner. For sixty-three years a continuous resident of the college, from student, through fellow, tutor, dean, to warden, Spooner had (Huxley observes) "peculiarities":

To begin with, he was an albino—not a full albino with pink eyes, but one with very pale blue eyes and white hair just tinged with straw colour. As is common with albinos, he was very shortsighted and used to read with his eyes within a couple of inches of the paper.

One legend has it that after Spooner's hat was blown off, a white-haired gentleman was seen chasing a black hen. Huxley continues:

Then he was rather a small man with a strange, rather butterfly sort of quality in his voice. And finally, he did say, and write, and do some very odd things . . . but this did not make him any the less efficient in the varied intricacies of college business.

An example of these "odd things," to which Huxley gave the name "paraphrasia" (literally, incoherent or disconnected speech), was Spooner's saying to his wife, while Huxley was relating his experiences on the Oxford University expedition to Spitzbergen: "My dear, Mr. Huxley assures me that it's no farther from the north coast of Spitzbergen to the North Pole than it is from Land's End to John of Gaunt [John o' Groats, the tip of Scotland]!" There is the accredited story of Spooner preaching in a village church a long sermon on Aristotle:

He had finished his sermon and was halfway down the pulpit stairs when suddenly something struck him, and he trotted up again and said: "Excuse me, dear brethren: I just want to say that in my sermon, whenever I said Aristotle I should have said St. Paul."

A similar boner was repeated at a college lecture; if the source were not an eyewitness, one might suspect contamination: "Gentlemen, in the lecture I have

just delivered, I wish you to note that whenever I said Herodotus, I meant Thucydides."

The following further illustrations of forgetting names are all apparently authentic. "Indubitably true" is the description of Spooner's comment on his having said "We had a very interesting paper from Professor Kuropatkin", when it was Professor Vinogradoff who had been speaking. The then secretary of the Political Economy Club is the authority for Spooner's reference to a guest of one of the members, Dr. Child, as "Dr. Friend's child". Once when Spooner was serving tea to a group of students, his wife being absent, a Miss Williams was pouring. A Mr. Wickham entering, Spooner effected introductions; to Wickham, "May I introduce Miss Wickham?" and then, turning to Wickham, he said in perplexity: "And I am afraid I forget your name." Another story may be apocryphal: the doctor was looking for a tavern, the Dull Man at Greenwich, when he really sought the Green Man at Dulwich.

The famous "A dozen double-damask dinner napkins" routine of Beatrice Lillie recalls a prototype, a similar masterpiece of confusion. Spooner had whiskey but no soda, and went to the grocery:

"I want", he began, "A soda of siphon water to be delivered at my home."

"I beg your pardon, sir, I didn't quite catch. . . ."

"I said I want a cider of sophon water."

"A cider, sir?"

"No, no. Not a cider. I want a sofa of sidon water, and will you send it round at once, please."

"A sofa? . . . Oh, you mean a sodon of cipher water."

"No. Not a sodon. . . . A cipher of sodon water . . . that is, a water of sidon sofa, and I want it delivered white array."

Spooner's slips in writing are more psychologically revealing than those in speaking, and are examples of Freud's "perseverations." He signed his ascription on one occasion as "Yours very poorly" but changed the "poorly" to the conventional "truly". Another letter congratulated a friend on his wife's recovery from a serious illness: "I am so glad to hear that you are at last relieved from your terrible burden of debt." "Debt" was expunged, and "anxiety" substituted.

While they attest his absentminded proclivities, Spooner's colleagues and friends stress the absence from his own conversations of spoonerisms. "I was at New College from 1906 to 1909, and of course knew the Warden well. I was always hoping to hear him utter a spoonerism, but never did." "I was almost daily meeting Dr. Spooner for some forty years from 1882 onwards and

can remember hearing hardly any of the transpositions attributed to him." Another close friend said "he had not heard Spooner ever make a spoonerism." Indeed, many regretted that his name should have become attached to what may seem foolishness, to the neglect of the wit and insight he displayed in conversation.

The word "spoonerism" is listed in most dictionaries, but the definitions do not distinguish the spoonerism from simple transposition or metathesis. The definitions of all the major dictionaries (save Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*) could be applied indiscriminately to any interchange of words or syllables. As one friend of Spooner notes, "Obviously anyone with a tendency to slips of the tongue would often make spoonerisms of a kind, but in nine cases out of ten they would not be funny or worth recording, e.g., 'the dight is nark' for 'the night is dark.'" Or, one might add, "the sinner of the Rulagogue", "the merits of Dickery and Thackens", or "the collection today is in aid of the duff and dem—I mean the dem and duff".

The best-known examples of Spooner's own transpositions do not in fact result in legitimate words. The following pseudo-spoonerisms have been vouched for as his: (1) His announcement in church of the hymn, "Conquering kings their titles take" as "Kinkering' congs." A contemporary gives the date as 1879, and adds: "There was a hush and the doctor calmly repeated his slip. I am afraid that we all burst into laughter. I think the Doctor then saw his mistake." (2) His announcement in church, quoted by a student who heard it some time between 1919 and 1921: "But now we see through a dark glassly." (3) His request to a stranger who had assumed his special seat in the college chapel: "Excuse me, but I think you are occupewing my pie." (4) His enquiry to a seemingly taciturn Japanese, whom he was entertaining at dinner, to stimulate conversation: "Do you practise ju-jusit?" (5) His informing his students, during a lecture (probably in 1887) that the authorities for a certain statement were Irenaeus and Collypark [Polycarp].

In these five recorded examples of spoonerisms, there occur transposition of syllables within a word, transposition of single syllables in adjoining words, and transposition of whole words with parts of other words. Spoonerism is employed too loosely. Is it possible, from an examination of all the examples of this form of wordplay *attributed* to Spooner by his friends and students, to give a new definition of spoonerism which is more precise?

The true spoonerism, it seems, should require all three of the following features: (1) Transposition of individual letters (generally initial) between words, or transposition of complete syllables or words. (2) The consequent

formation by such metathesis of legitimate words, including slang, but not including jabberwocky. (3) The achievement of a humorous effect by the unexpected incongruity. It is not material whether the spoonerism is unintentional; some of the funniest examples have been laboriously fabricated.

The following three are the only true spoonerisms committed by Spooner that can be authenticated: (1) John P. Graham, a student at New College in 1894-1898, took notes during a lecture in which Spooner said: "So you will be abily easle [not a true spoonerism] to chase the train [true spoonerism] of thought." (2) While a guest at Mr. Graham's house, Spooner remarked that he had "lately tasted a most delicious madeira when he was in Banana." (There is another banana story. "Mrs. Gray, daughter of one of the masters of Rugby School, is reported to have taken a banana—in those days rather a rare fruit—and have said to Dr. Spooner, 'Do you like bananas?' He suddenly roused from a reverie: 'Eh, what? Well, I must confess I prefer the old-fashioned nightgown.'") (3) This story is attested by Mr. H. Forsyth. On the occasion of one of Spooner's visits to the Kensington Poetry Lovers' Circle in 1888-1889, Spooner began a reading from Tennyson: "Come into the garden, Maud, / For the black gnat-bite has flown."

No doubt the best explanation for the association of Spooner with the spoonerism is his friends' delight in ascribing to him a whole litter of much more clever mistakes. Having publicly made one such boner as "Kinkering congs", he became a natural butt for the good humour of Oxford university life. In later years, the inventors of spoonerisms long considered Spooner's own have come forward to straighten the record. Charles W. Baty, for example, states that "When I was an undergraduate at Christ Church . . . I invented and put into circulation the spoof spoonerism [A camel passing through the knee of an idol]." Another writer, a contemporary of Spooner in the eighties, says, "We used to spend hours in inventing 'spoonerisms'."

It would be impossible to make any complete collection of spoonerisms, because of the fad for word transpositions ("Morrow-skying") popular among London medical students in the nineteenth century, and the later vogue of *The Pink 'Un* in the Edwardian period. Furthermore, new spoonerisms are continually being formed: Joyce, for example, toward the end of *Finnegans Wake*: "and a myrmidens of pszozlers pszinging Satyr's Caudelayed Nice and Homly Dombly Sod we Awhile but Ho. Time Timeagen Wake." Yet from diverse sources it is possible to make a reasonably complete anthology of the better specimens attributed to Spooner.

Spoonerisms: Type I (Transposition of Words)

<i>Blow</i>	Courage to blow the bears of life.
<i>Drink</i>	Work is the curse of the drinking classes.
<i>Glass</i>	Spooner demanded at the station restaurant a bath of milk and a glass bun.
<i>Go</i>	A form of farewell: Must you stay, can't you go?
<i>Magnify</i>	Spooner asked at the optician's for a signifying glass. When the proprietor replied he had none in stock, Spooner commented, "Thank you, it doesn't magnify."
<i>Night</i>	The text for a sermon: Sorrow may endure for a joy, but night cometh in the morning.
<i>Prostrate</i>	Let prostrate angels fall.
<i>Tooth</i>	How sharper than a serpent's thanks it is to have a toothless child.
<i>Trumpet</i>	Commenting on the church organist: He is a fine musician; he can play Purcell's Voluntary by ear trumpet.
<i>Unemployable</i>	Employment of the unimprovable.

Spoonerisms: Type II (Transposition of Letters)

<i>Bag</i>	Two essentials for a train journey, a rag and a bug.
<i>Balliol</i>	On a don of Keble College, who had been made a fellow of Balliol College: Most remarkable, Cable to Belial!
<i>Bay tree</i>	The wicked spreading himself like a gray bean tree.
<i>Battle-scarred</i>	A famous general is described as bottle-scarred, then as battle-scarred.
<i>Battleships</i>	Cattleships and bruisers.
<i>Birds</i>	Listen to the bumming herds all day. They go west in the nude at night.
<i>Benches</i>	Spooner got tired of addressing (a sea of) beery wenches. "It's beery work addressing empty wenches."
<i>Bicycle</i>	Spooner delighted to ride a well-boiled icicle. He icicled up to Bislip [Islip].
<i>Blaze</i>	Let me get within the bloody rays of the fire.
<i>Blow</i>	A blushing crow.
<i>Brain</i>	Addressing not only manual workers but boilers of the train.
<i>Brink</i>	The Prodigal Son on the busy drink of destruction.
<i>Button</i>	Searching in the aisle of a church, Spooner explained to the verger he was looking for a glutton dropped from above.

- Coffin* Stand by and let the parson cough.
- Church* Children come to the birch to be chastised by our vocal lickster, Marry Hoares.
- Cruise* Spooner was looking for some crooks to take with him on a booze.
- Dean* Spooner, visiting the Dean of Christ Church, enquired, "Is the bean dizzy?"
- Debtors* Spooner was examining in Divinity Moderations, commonly known as "Divvers". A nervous undergraduate on being asked to translate a portion of the Greek Testament which included the Lord's Prayer, stumbled at the phrase translated as "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." "Go on," said the examiner encouragingly, "Forgive us our debts as we forget our divvers."
- Figs* Figs or plums? Pigs, please!
- Fleet* The troops crossed from England to France with the aid of the Flannel Sheet.
- Folks* Spooner caused some surprise at a village fête by saying he had been enjoying the fun with some of the old soaks.
- Greenland* The hymn "From Iceland's greasy mountains."
- Hat* When his hat was blown off, he asked: Oh, please, will nobody pat my hiccup.
- Headlam* The staircase is very quiet, only Hell and Bedlam on it [Bell and Headlam].
- History* Admonition to an undergraduate: You have hissed all my mystery lectures. I saw you fight a liar in the back quad; in fact, you have tasted a whole worm.
- Howlers* Spooner criticized a student's theme by saying there were too many prowlers in his hose.
- Inspector* I assure you the insanitary spectre has seen all the bathrooms.
- Jaded* Jagged and faded.
- Kate* Spooner baptized twins as Steak and Kidney [Kate and Sidney].
- Key* The servant was instructed: Take the flea of my cat and heave it at the louse of my mother-in-law.
- Level* The choirs sing at a lead devil.
- Marston* Spooner contemplated buying a house in Fast an' Merry Road [Marston Ferry Road].

<i>Minister</i>	May I introduce our sinister Mr. Bancroft?
<i>Muddy</i>	Describing Cambridge, after a wet, winter visit: A bloody meek place.
<i>Needle</i>	Easier for a camel to go through the knee of an idol.
<i>New College</i>	All his life Spooner was devoted to Cue Knowlege.
<i>Nook</i>	Said to a professor, sitting out with a lady during a dance: You seem to have found a nosy little cook.
<i>Paws</i>	Spooner was visiting a friend in an upstairs room at a college. His friend opened the window and accidentally pushed off a cat sitting on the ledge outside. Spooner looked down, expecting to see the cat mangled, but no, "the dear creature had simply popped on her drawers and was trotting up the High Street!"
<i>Poker</i>	He accused the cleaning woman of peeling the new stoker.
<i>Queen</i>	Give three cheers for the queer old dean.
<i>Pink stuff</i>	At a luncheon, offering a lady some rose-colored soufflé: Will you have some of this stink-puff?
<i>Rain</i>	The man entered muddy from a wintry day, saying: Hush that brat; it's roaring with pain outside.
<i>Rust</i>	Where must and wrath do corrupt.
<i>Seat</i>	May I sew you into a sheet?
<i>Sinner</i>	No peace dwells in the home where a dinner swells.
<i>Shepherd</i>	The Lord is a shoving leopard to his flock.
<i>Shilling</i>	Shut him off with a killing.
<i>Shoal</i>	Describing the miraculous draft of fishes in the New Testament, Spooner declared that the disciples shot a most wonderful goal which almost broke the net.
<i>Sky</i>	A fine night with a scarlet tie.
<i>Sons</i>	Addressing a rural audience as noble tons of soil.
<i>Sock</i>	At a public dinner, Spooner was disconcerted to find a sole in his hock.
<i>Sphinx</i>	He has gone out to see the minx by spoonlight.
<i>Stores</i>	He did not buy at the local shops in Oxford, but went to London to steal at the doors.
<i>Talker</i>	Spooner allegedly spoke of Coleridge as a "tearless porker," too much given to piggery-jokery in theosophical matters.
<i>Tidings</i>	The teafull chidings of the evangelist.
<i>Toast</i>	The diner asked for soft toes on roast.

- Train* He arrived by the town drain.
- Trumpets* Addressing a band of missionaries on the eve of their departure for India, he urged them to have faith, whatever difficulties they might encounter. "Remember the siege of Jericho," he concluded. "The Israelites had faith in the Lord, and lo! the city was teased with strumpets. Go thou and do likewise!"
- Wish* Spooner warned the candidates of the Missionary Society against having a half-warmed fish in their hearts.
- Zeal* The vicar prayed that the congregation would be filled with fresh veal and new zigor.

From the evidence presented, it is clear that the ascription of the humorous verbal transposition to Spooner is fortuitous, and that the dictionaries err in perpetrating and helping to perpetuate the association. The legend does not have the factual basis which is the reason for naming idiosyncrasies after their chief user, such as Mrs. Malaprop or Dogberry. "Spoonerism", however, has been in use for over half a century; it is perhaps just as well to retain it—and to redefine it. And if spoonerisms have not very greatly enriched the literary tradition, they have at least added to the stock of English humour.

NOTES

References to spoonerisms are scattered in out-of-the-way places. The following sources have been used for this article. (1) The results of a competition printed in *The Manchester Guardian* in the late twenties, reprinted in *Maclean's Magazine*, reprinted in *Word Study*, Vol. V, No. 2 (Dec., 1929), pp. 3-4; (2) The series of correspondence, extending over one year, in the house organ of The Oxford University Press, *The Periodical*, Vol. XXI, No. 187 (Dec., 1936), pp. 134-6; Vol. XXII, No. 188 (Feb., 1937), pp. 17-21; No. 189 (April, 1937), p. 461; No. 190 (June, 1937), p. 73; No. 191 (Oct., 1937), p. 91; No. 192 (Dec., 1937), p. 120; (3) The results of a competition reported in *The New Statesman and Nation* (London), Vol. XXXVII, No. 932 (Jan. 15, 1949), p. 66; (4) The essay, "Doctor Spooner: The growth of a legend", in Julian Huxley, *On Living in a Revolution* (New York, 1942), pp. 112-8. All these sources were able to draw on a wide and educated audience comprising many people who knew Spooner personally.

In his comments on Spooner in *Age and Youth* (1953), pp. 45-47, Sir Ernest Barker agrees with the conclusion of this article. According to Barker, "Oxford's great metaphasiarch", as *Punch* once called him, was seldom guilty of 'metaphasis', or the transposition of *sounds*. What he transposed was *ideas*."