

# ADVENTURES IN MEANING

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**S**UPPLIED with sheets of black paper and a pair of scissors, my daughter one evening sat down to a table ready for work. She casually informed me, upon enquiry, that she was going to make some silhouettes.

"Silhouettes," I repeated. "And may I ask the meaning of that word?"

At the outset I should say that for a considerable number of years I have taken a great interest in the history and meaning of names. It is an interest, I might add, that awaited quickening until several years after I had graduated from college, for I did not have a single teacher, either in high school or beyond, who succeeded in making me habitually conscious of the significance that might lie hidden behind words. I am not now condemning my teachers. I should have been bright enough to develop an interest for myself. Just to give you an example of my dullness from the field of geography, I confess I was content for a long time to make no enquiry about the Mississippi River: for some reason it never seriously occurred to me that someone had to name it, and probably had a good reason for the selection of a name. But it is different with me now: sometimes I think my enthusiasm for meaning borders on fanaticism.

At any rate, to get back to the young silhouette maker, I pointed out to her that here was a rather peculiar word which, among other things, did not lend itself to that analysis which even a little knowledge of foreign languages oftentimes makes possible. With short speculation as to a possible meaning, we turned to an encyclopedia and read:

"Silhouette" is the representation in solid black of the outline of an object, occasionally with a few assisting lines in white. The name comes from Etienne de Silhouette, French minister of Finance in 1759. He strove by severe economy to remedy the evils of a war which had just terminated, leaving the country in great exhaustion. At the end of nine months he was obliged to leave his place. During this period all the fashions of Paris took the character of parsimony. Coats without folds were worn; snuff-boxes were made of plain wood; and, instead of painted portraits, outlines only were drawn in profile. All these fashions were called *à la Silhouette*; but the name remained only in case of the profiles.

So here in the word "silhouette" was a real adventure in meaning. French government, ministers, wars, depressions, finances, economic philosophy, styles of dress, and art, with special reference to the latter half of the eighteenth century, were in issue, all because of my enquiry at the moment a young girl was about to occupy herself with some black paper and a pair of scissors!

Nor is the illustration I have just given a spectacular, isolated example of the way in which meanings may be far-reaching in their significance. I remember now, as I write, that several years ago, while engaged in the study of English politics, I was fascinated by the origin of the names Tory and Whig, which led me into some fascinating excursions. I can still hear the Irish *Tar a Ri*, "Come, O King," ringing in my ears; and the whiggamors will, for me at least, be still driving their Scottish horses so long as I have any kind of memory.

Indeed, so much good can come out of a genuine search for meaning, and the material is so plentiful, that I would suggest a course on Meaning for schools and colleges, were there not so much opportunity and necessity for an investigation in every course that the duplication would be fatal. But wherever the search is begun, there are enormous dividends in the increased stimulation of intellectual curiosity, which curiosity is, without possibility of dispute, one of the major objectives of school life. The habit of looking things up, of tracing ideas to their sources, of making names and places more than mere labels, and of bringing forward related information and its implications, will, if properly formed, remain for life, long after mere facts have been forgotten. A special emphasis on meanings in every school course would act as a fixative for such intellectual curiosity.

At the risk of being encyclopedic, and of repeating facts which are already familiar to many readers, I shall give some illustrations of the delights I have had as an adventurer in meaning. For, after all, I am an adventurer, a kind of soldier of academic fortune, pursuing no particular plan, but always looking for something new.

## I

The meaning of place-names reproduces geography in technicolor.

Those who know only a little French must realize at once that Boise, the capital of Idaho, was at one time a wooded

place; that the Michigan city of Detroit is located on a strait; that Le Havre is really "The Harbor"; that the Montana City of Butte is in some way associated with "a small knoll"; that Grand-Pre is identified with "a great meadow"; and that the the Platte River has reference to "calm". I see much more beauty in Fontainebleau when I learn that the name is a corruption of *fontaine de bel eau*; and my imagination is enlivened when I am informed that the Quebec City of Lachine received its name from explorers who believed they had reached China.

A knowledge of Latin helps, too. Natal is not merely another province of South Africa when it is brought to my attention that the name is derived from *natalis*, meaning "birth-day", the discovery of that part of Africa having been made on the Feast of the Nativity, 1497. I am glad that Capri, now romanticized in popular song, was not given such a forbidding name as "Goat Island", but that *caper*, meaning "goat", was used instead. I privately laud the poetic being who christened it, and then proceed to pore over my books to see what the island produces, wondering if it grows both goats and fair women. I see the bearded fig trees of Barbados, so named from *barba*, which means "beard". My imagination recreates the beacon and the beacon tower on the River Reuss in Switzerland. The beacon has long since passed away, but its light gave a name to the city of Lucerne. Even the Mediterranean islands of Minorca and Majorca have more than usual interest when it is discovered that one means "minor" and the other "major". The Sea of Marmora is not just another small body of water when I learn that *marmor* means "marble", and that an island of that sea with the same name contains extensive marble quarries. My interest rises to great heights, indeed, when I discover that the marble, of a particularly fine grade, was used in building the monument to Mausolus at Halicarnassus, a structure ranked as one of the wonders of the ancient world.

Other languages besides French and Latin make their contributions. I know that I shall never forget the location of the Isle of Man. Man is a contraction for the Manx word *mannin*, meaning "middle". Look at an atlas. The Isle of Man is exactly in the middle of the Irish Sea. Brazil becomes immensely more colorful when one knows something about her name. The Portuguese word, *braza*, meaning "a live coal", has reference to the color of the dye woods found in that country. One is impressed by the original wildness of Ceylon when informed that the name is derived from the Hindu word for

lion. Bethlehem, with all its historic riches, takes on even a new meaning when it is explained that the name is in reality "house of bread", from the Syrian *beit el lehm*, winning appropriateness because of the productive land surrounding the little city. Tierra del Fuego has an imaginative picturesqueness when the discovery is made that the name is Spanish for "Land of Fire", so designated because the Indians who inhabited the place used fires at night to signal to each other. I have always found a special fascination in the naming of the Brazos River in Texas. The Spanish called it *Brazos de Dios*, "Arm of God". It appears that a Spanish mission on the banks of the river had been, during the absence of guards, destroyed by Indians. Upon their return, the guards found the bodies of their companions floating in the river, with no discoverable evidence of violence to account for their death. "A miracle," said the Spanish, "has been performed by the arm of God."

I find much satisfaction in knowing something about the men, great or small, who are identified with places. A few outstanding examples come to mind. There is the Adriatic Sea, named after Adrian or Hadrian, one of the "five good emperors" of Rome; the city of Boston, really Botolph's Town, named after Saint Botolph, who founded a monastery in the English city in the seventh century; the city of Alexandria, after its founder, Alexander the Great, brilliant pupil of Aristotle at thirteen and conqueror of the world at thirty; the city of Barcelona, after its founder, Hamilcar Barca, the Carthaginian; the city of Baltimore, after the Lords Baltimore, father and son, founders of the province of Maryland; Bolivia, in honor of her liberator, Simon Bolivar, who spent nine-tenths of a magnificent patrimony in the service of his country; the city of Orleans, after the Roman emperor, Aurelain, whose importance is indicated in his title of "restorer of the Empire"; the Bermudas, after their discoverer, Juan Bermudez, who, shipwrecked, was on his way from Spain to Cuba with a cargo of hogs; the Bering Strait, after the Danish navigator employed by Peter the Great, who proved by his discovery that Asia was not united to America; and Gibraltar, from the Moorish *Jebel al Tarik*, the "Mountain of Tarik", after General Tarik, who led the Moors into Spain seven hundred years after the birth of Christ.

Indeed, what a flood of colored light the meaning of names throws on geography!

## II

I like flowers. I have often thought that modern governments, turning paternalistic in order to patch the thin places in competitive enterprise, might be well advised to deliver a fresh bouquet two or three times a week to every home. That is how much I like flowers, whose delights consist not only in their color and fragrance but also in their meaning.

No gardener is worth his salt who does not know how his shrubs and flowers got their names. On second thought, this is making the condemnation a bit strong: at least he should have an interest in knowing. Let him find out that the Wistaria was named after Casper Wistar, the American physician; that the Dahlia obtained its name from Andrew Dahl, the Swedish botanist; that the Poinsettia was introduced into America from Mexico by Dr. Poinsett, an American minister to that country; that the Zinnia was named in honor of J. G. Zinn, a German eighteenth century botanist, and I will wager, if the gardener is any kind of man at all, he will not rest until he finds out how such flowers as violets, sweet Williams, gladiolas, and heliotropes chanced to bear their particular nomenclature.

There is much history in flowers. Hollyhocks have an interesting story, connected not only with heels but also with the Holy Land. When I was in school I could tell with some degree of accuracy, I believe, who the Plantagenets were, but I would have "flunked" had someone called upon me to explain how they obtained their name. Long afterwards I learned that the name had its origin in the custom of Geoffrey, Count of Anjou, who wore a sprig of broom (*plante de genet*) in his cap. In the same meaningless way during my school career I read in my books about *fleur-de-lis*. I knew enough French to understand *fleur-de*, but *lis* was an enigma, and an enigma it remained for too long a time. Really, someone should have told me that this was the flower of Louis, written at first as *fleur-de-Löys*, and contracted later into *fleur-de-lis*. What Louis? Why, Louis VII of the Second Crusade, who, looking about him for a device for his banners, found that an angel came to him in his sleep and bade him adopt the golden iris. And when he set out in 1147 with his huge army, the colorful banners were decorated with that flower in yellow conventional design.

Naturally enough, flowers have served the imagination. When someone in ancient Rome saw the five-spurred colum-

bine, his imagination pictured five little doves perched on the rim of a dish, feeding together in friendly fashion. As a result, he named the flower columbine, from the Latin, *columba*, meaning "dove". A favorite musical instrument in Anglo-Saxon days was the gliew, an arched support hung with bells of varying tones. Then someone with imagination saw a flower—a tall flower with hanging bell-shaped blossoms—and called it the foxes-gliew, which was made later into foxes-glow, and finally, for a reason unknown to me, into fox-glove. It was not the color of the flower which gave a name to the pink. It was imagination. Imagination says that at first all the petals had smooth edges, but that a fairy queen, needing a new gown, chose this one because of its fragrance. The fairy dressmaker, gathering enough material for a gown, snipped the petals to give them a becoming fringe, a fringe they have kept to this day. Imagination named the Delphinium, too. When the buds began to unfold, and, half-opened, were wind-tossed along the stalk, it was easy to think of them as baby porpoises out of their element. At any rate this was the Greek imagination, from which we have Delphinium, meaning "dolphin".

### III

No excursion into the realms of meaning would be complete without a glance at mythology, which has provided a very substantial part of our intellectual background for more than twenty-five centuries, and allusions to which permeate all our literature. Whether it is the meaning of such different things as "dog days", the names of butterflies, or "Il Penseroso" in which Milton says

Or bid the soul of Orpheus sing  
Such notes as warbled to the string  
Drew iron tears down Pluto's cheek,  
And made Hell grant what love did seek,

a sound knowledge of mythology in indispensable.

I am, by the way, much interested in butterflies. Nor should I forget to mention moths, too. I can trace my heightened interest back to an enquiry by my wife one day as to the differences between the two, an enquiry, incidentally, I could not adequately answer.

But continuing with moths and butterflies, it is quite natural, when one stops to think, that the beautiful things

of mythology should furnish many of the names of the familiar creatures. Let me illustrate. A large spot on the back of each wing of a moth gave it the name of Polyphemus, which, of course, has reference to the one-eyed monster of the Cyclopean race whom Ulysses met in his travels. A genus of butterflies has been called Junonia because of their exceptional beauty, after Juno, the queen of the heavens. In allusion to the beautiful maidens called the Pierides, who haunted the Pierian springs in Thessaly, the small white and yellow butterflies which flit about the garden have been named Pieris. Another group, recognized because of their grace and beauty as well as their habit of frequenting the borders of woods, have received the name of Dryades. There is a butterfly of rare beauty called Adonis, this being the handsome young shepherd who was in love with Venus. A group of attractive, gossamer-winged butterflies have been called Vestals, suggested by the white-robed priestesses of Rome. I might continue the list at greater length, but my point, I think, has been proved.

Certain mythological associations have made an especially deep impression on me because I discovered the meaning after the material had become commonplace. *Panic*, for example, ranks high in word interest for me, because I associate my fears with the god *Pan*. I studied French, learning the names of the week—*lundi, mardi, mercredi*. . . Only memory was involved at the time. What a revelation when later, paging an old book, I found a meaning for these words: *lundi* was Moon's day, *mardi* was Mars's day, *mercredi*, Mercury's day. . .! Some ancient history several years ago gave me a nodding acquaintance with Mithridates the Great. Upon refreshing my memory a short time ago, I found that he was born in 134 B.C., was King of Pontus, and was considered by Rome to be her most formidable enemy. Those facts I shall probably forget again as time goes on. But I feel quite sure that I shall remember that Mithridates means "a gift of Mithras", Mithras being a Perso-Iranic divinity who was the first god of heavenly light. It is not easy to forget that the glory of Mithridates is revealed even in his name.

#### IV

I have no desire in these few pages to give the impression that I put a high premium on encyclopedic information, and have slight regard for the development of the critical intellectual processes. No one could argue with more zeal than I that what

the world needs most of all is thinkers, and not mere readers. I am well aware that in certain academic climates—climates generally restricted to colleges—encyclopediosis—if I may coin a word—is a disease which in its more advanced stages has the power of undermining intellectual health. To be specific, too many teachers are dryly “factual”, and as a result produce factual students. Wherever the disease is found, I would fumigate with logic. But in many places the disease germs have no chance to survive, for reasons which are obvious: it is to the people who live in such uncontaminated areas that this article is primarily addressed. Consequently I can say to them in the words of Pope:

A little learning is a dangerous thing;  
Drink deep or taste not the Pierian spring.