

Getting Fit: An Apology for Mrs Nolan

In Ulster argot “Tague” (there are variant spellings: teague, teigue, taig) is a pejorative term for a Catholic. Those given to such abusive language are probably unaware of its derivation, from Tadhg or Tadhg, a personal (boy’s) name formerly popular with Irish-speakers. That Tadhg also means “a poet” perhaps gives further insight into the mind-set of those responsible for the still depressingly common graffiti, “Tagues out.”

I

CONTEMPT, DISGUST AND LOATHING are a triumvirate of feelings whose unwelcome authority only rarely rules my outlook. Alas, my expression was set precisely according to their contours of distaste the morning Mrs Nolan caught me staring at her house. My hope is that I was too far away, and the moment too brief, to have allowed an accurate decoding of my facial semiotics; my fear remains that she took my disapproving scowl for an impromptu performance from Ulster’s well-practised repertoire of bigotry. She must have witnessed scores of them. The Nolans were Catholics, newly moved to the leafy Protestant suburb where I grew up. “Tagues out” had already been spray-painted on the road outside their gate. If I’d noticed her in time, I’d have masked my feelings with some blandly inscrutable expression, or simply directed my gaze elsewhere. But Mrs Nolan was kneeling out of sight at the front wheel of her car checking tyre pressures as I walked by. When she stood up I was caught off guard, my openly hostile stare suddenly intercepted by someone on whom I’d not have chosen to bestow it. I regret the likely misreading my look of contempt/disgust/loathing may have engendered, but if I’d attempted to disguise

it I would have taken a step towards exactly the sort of mismatch between actuality and expression that led me into this dismal triumvirate's thrall in the first place.

As a rule, face and feeling fit together well. The constant dialogue between them is telepathic, wordless, automatic. It is carried more by the blood than the brain, so that resultant expressions do not normally happen by design. Certainly the way we feel and the way we look mesh together so closely that we are seldom conscious of any disjunction between them. This is a very different relationship to that which exists between what we feel or think and what we *say*. Of course, we can act or lie with our faces, furl and unfurl the sails of expression deliberately so that they show what's written in some script, or what we want others to believe about us, rather than registering the actual weather of our mood. But, even for the most accomplished actor or liar, it's hard to bring wholly under conscious control the dilation of the pupil, the warmth of a smile, the set and flex of jaw, eyebrow, forehead, all the subtleties of face by which we semaphore so many messages to others. So, although it can be disrupted by deception, the snug fit between face and feeling remains much closer than anything words can claim. As such, caught out by Mrs Nolan's sudden appearance, I felt naked before her, ambushed into revealing an intimate ugliness it was inappropriate for a stranger to see.

The look of contempt/disgust/loathing that I knew must have marked my features as I stared at her house that morning, was a very accurate indicator of how I viewed it. It fitted my feelings precisely. By contrast, it was the *lack* of fit between name and thing named that prompted my expression. Mrs Nolan's house was called "The Beeches." The name was emblazoned on a rustic wooden sign affixed to one of the brick pillars at the gate. It was the name, rather than anything intrinsic to the house itself — an unremarkable redbrick villa — that sparked my repugnance. Its lack of fit grated on my sensibilities in the same way as if I'd seen someone smiling but read only measured hostility in their eyes. Comparing house and name, there was a disconcerting mismatch between actuality and what had been chosen to express it.

Obviously some degree of mismatch is inevitable. After all, a name is no more the thing named than a map is the territory it represents.

One of Swift's deft imaginings in *Gulliver's Travels* shows how unmanageable communication would become if it attempted too close a correspondence with the things we want to talk about. The sages of Balnibarbi were crushed under the sheer weight of the objects they had to carry in order to conduct communication without relying on the shorthand of signs. And Jorge Luis Borges (in the *Universal History of Infamy*) ridicules the notion of a map drawn on the same scale as, and coinciding point by point with, the ground it covers. Clearly a map would become impracticable, indeed pointless, if replication replaced representation. Borges' map was of such unwieldy magnitude that it was soon abandoned by the inhabitants of the fictional world in which he placed it, though it has remained a useful point of reference for others who have turned their thoughts to the relationship between representation and reality. Jean Baudrillard refers to it in his essay "Simulacra and Simulation" and Umberto Eco uses it to good effect in his "On the Impossibility of Drawing a Map of the Empire on a Scale of 1 to 1" (in *How to Travel with a Salmon and Other Essays*).

The chasm between reality and representation is one we can variously bridge, sometimes with breathtaking elegance and fluency. But to suppose we could ever fill it would be to drastically underestimate the depth and dimensions of the real, or to overestimate the reach of our words, images and other media. A name can only identify the thing named, not replace or replicate it. When the mismatch between actuality and expression goes beyond such inevitable limitation, though, there is cause for concern. The mismatch between "The Beeches" and the dwelling it referred to seemed to me to edge towards deception rather than naming. Its lack of fit certainly went beyond anything that innocent inevitability could excuse.

Why did I take such virulent exception to "The Beeches?" To start with, there wasn't a single beech tree in the vicinity. A few mature birches, pre-dating the house by decades, did stand around the boundaries of the property, so "The Birches" might have suggested a more apt choice of name. But to have chosen any arboreal sobriquet, even one that did match some of the trees still growing there, would have glossed over the fact that to build "The Beeches" had necessitated the felling of a magnificent lime tree, two magnolias, and a line of

yews on whose berries mistle thrushes used to gorge each year. The Nolans' house was one of two built in what had been the beautiful, rambling garden of an elderly neighbour, whose death heralded the start of a process that would wreak havoc on a place I loved — the sale of large properties to developers who saw only the opportunity for profit in turning gardens into building plots. To lay waste a rockery planted out with rare alpines, to concrete over flowerbeds threaded through with snowdrop, crocus and daffodil bulbs, to bulldoze thickets of holly and rhododendron and then to call your house “The Beeches” seemed not unlike calling a facility for burning books “The Library.”

This is unreasonable, I know, an emotional over-reaction. The Nolans may have had all sorts of good reasons for naming their house as they did. Perhaps it was to remember with affection a previous dwelling so named, perhaps they intended to plant a beech hedge, perhaps they just liked the sound of “The Beeches,” or maybe it was the only name-plaque available in the rustic style they favoured. Or it could have been a simple error — thinking that their birch trees were beeches. We all make mistakes, and it wasn't their fault that people no longer wanted, nor could afford, the large gardens that were commonplace in the neighbourhood when I was growing up. Even taking their house as a prompt to remind me of all the “Rose Cottages,” “Ashvales,” “Fairviews,” and such like that have obliterated roses, ash trees and fair prospects all over Ireland, my grounds for complaint about “The Beeches” are still surely too slender to justify the depth of venom that poisoned my face that morning. To be credible, my apology to Mrs Nolan needs to explain how her misnamed house touched a deeper nerve and sparked a far stronger sense of revulsion than anything for which she could be held directly responsible.

II

One of the characters in Brian Friel's play, *Translations*, makes the following observation:

It can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of fact.

Whatever the historical accuracy of his remark may be — the play examines the struggle for linguistic dominance between English and Irish in nineteenth century Ireland — the image of language as a contour map, a network of intricate lines capable of expressing every nuance of undulation in the underlying landscape of reality is, I think, an appealing one. Despite the inevitable shortcomings of so massive a simplification, it still allows us to pinpoint for examination some of the most fundamental functions and dysfunctions of language. “The Beeches” offended me so deeply because it is conceptually (albeit unconsciously) allied to namings that seriously mislead us. It belongs — granted as a distant relation — to that family of dysfunctional word-maps that give a dangerously erroneous picture of the landscape they purport to represent.

It will be objected immediately that no verbal contour could ever be expected to map “the landscape of fact” *exactly*. This would take us back to the absurdity of Borges’ map with its unworkably close correspondence between representation and reality. In any case, such contours themselves surely help to *determine* the landscapes we perceive rather than just describing what’s already there. To propose otherwise would imply that language is little more than a straightforward system of reportage — rather than something we *think* with. This objection notwithstanding, I think we can identify certain examples of fit, of match and mismatch, along a continuum of correlation between our feelings, thoughts, intentions, the world they inhabit, and the words that bridge the space between them. This continuum ranges from a pole of intimate consonance, where words seem to fit like a glove, almost as snugly as facial expression fits feeling, to a pole of such radical and discordant dissonance that they seem to be engaged in misrepresenting rather than anything that could reasonably be described as mapping.

Is an ordinarily accurate choice of words as close as we can come to a verbal contouring of the landscapes in which we live? In his classic study of religious experience, *Das Heilige* (*The Idea of the Holy*, first published in 1917, English translation 1923), Rudolf Otto suggests that a much closer mapping can sometimes occur. The examples he

gives could stand emblematically at the pole of closest fit possible. Certain names of deity, according to Otto, started off simply as automatic cries (what he termed “original numinous sounds”). These utterances were forced from the throat in the supposed presence of God. One of his points of reference here is the Indian deity Ascarya, whose name, literally translated, means “that before which we go ‘Aaaagh!’” Otto made the fascinating suggestion that much religious language may have evolved from such primal screams of sacral immediacy.

“Ascarya” seems as close as we could come to a 1:1 correspondence between expression and object. Such a cry does not qualify as language as such, it is more a proto-word than a fully developed word, but it does show how, under certain conditions, a contour of utterance and the landscape of fact it seeks to represent might be aligned as closely as feeling and facial expression. In such an instance, few if any interstices of inaccuracy would be left open; perception would issue automatically in sounds that fitted it perfectly. The trajectory of experience would be tracked in a precisely shadowing arc of exclamation. But the closeness of such tracking would be bought at a terrible price. However much emotional catharsis such slavish mirroring might afford, it would confine us to a very primitive level of engagement with the world. It allows only automatic reaction, not the interpretation that enables us to edge towards understanding. It’s just as well my look of contempt/disgust/loathing wasn’t accompanied by some automatic *noise* of revulsion, paralleling Otto’s idea of an “original numinous sound.” Whilst distance may have masked my expression, it would not have muted any wailing dirge set at a volume consonant with my disapproval. How doubly humbling it would have been if Mrs Nolan had heard such a cry!

At the other extreme of correlation between utterance and actuality is the sort of misfit between word and landscape found in the diction of the Nazis. By constructing misleading word-maps they attempted to lull people into thinking that entirely different landscapes were taking shape beneath what they said. They sought to camouflage even the sheerest summits of evil by marking them only as gentle and

unremarkable verbal inclines. All official correspondence referring to the slaughter of the Jews was subject to special language rules so that, for example, words like “extermination,” “liquidation,” or “killing” were almost never used. Instead we read of “special treatment,” “evacuation” and the now infamous “final solution.” Treblinka, Auschwitz and other camps were referred to — grotesquely — as “charitable foundations for institutional care.” Far from the kind of 1:1 correspondence that marks the pole of tight (too tight) fit represented by Otto’s original numinous sounds, the opposite pole on this continuum of expression offers no correspondence at all.

Calling your house “The Beeches” scarcely merits comparison with anything on the scale of misrepresentation perpetrated by the Nazis. But in pointing in the direction of the pole of mismatch rather than fit, and in its casual acceptance of such mismatch, as if it simply didn’t matter, the Nolans’ choice of house name does invite some degree of condemnation, even if it may not excuse the full force of venom evident in my stare.

III

Thinking about my (immoderate?) reaction to “The Beeches” and trying to justify the poisonous look my unfortunate neighbour fielded that morning, I have come to realise how important the matter of *fit* is and how much of our energy is devoted to getting it right. Sometimes we can take it for granted, of course. There are contexts in which both place names and personal names act to describe not just to designate; as well as being labels, they have meanings that are contoured to what they point to. They are *fitting*. John Everett-Heath puts the matter well with regard to places (in *Place Names of the World: Historical Context, Meanings and Changes*):

Place names are a window onto the history and characteristics of a country. They reflect the migrations of peoples, their religious and cultural traditions, local languages, conquests, fortifications long since disappeared, topography and even industrial development.

So, for example, Edenduffcarrick (*Edan Dubh Carrige*), in County Antrim, means “hill-brow of black rock,” Mayo (*Maigh Eo*) means “plain of the yew trees,” Larne (*Latharna*) means “territory of the people of Lathair,” Rathmullan (*Ráth Maolán*) means “Maolán’s ring-fort” and so on. However, over time the original meanings fade and are forgotten; description is eroded back to mere designation, sound replaces sense. In terms of Everett-Heath’s analogy, though these windows onto a place’s history and characteristics were once transparent, they are gradually made opaque by that combination of familiarity and change through which history progresses. Personal names, too, may once have had a meaning, though unless one lives in a culture where names are given only when a person’s characteristics are known — as in some Native American tribes — they are more likely to reflect parental hope or aspiration than anything attributable to the person so named. There is also the practice, found in parts of Asia, of giving someone a name with a repellent meaning — “Pig’s Breath,” “Dog Carcase” — not because such names describe their bearer, but in order to ward off the attentions of evil spirits.

Although I can feel something akin to nostalgia at the thought of living in a culture where place names and personal names meant what they said, fitted what they applied to, I have grown used to names offering almost no clue as to a person’s or place’s nature. However, there is surely a difference between somewhere called “Primrose Lane” (there are two in Belfast) that once was indeed resplendent with these delicate blossoms but has, over time, become entirely urban and ungreen, and *starting out* with a name like “The Beeches” that *never* corresponded with the thing it represents.

To the (very limited) extent that names have meanings, they can be judged a good or bad fit. But most of our concern with fit now happens beyond the kind of immediate labelling they perform. For instance, Mrs Nolan and I both belonged to a generation that was shrugging off the ill-fitting garb of Ulster sectarianism that had, for decades, kept people imprisoned in a rupturing categorisation that split the country in two. The political and religious outlooks of our parents and grandparents, the traditional allegiances we inherited from

them, increasingly seemed not to fit the contours of Ireland in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The idea that Catholics should accept papal authority unquestioningly and look to Dublin for leadership, or that Protestants' loyalties should be unswervingly given to God, Ulster and the Queen, seemed about as accurate a map of our actual outlooks as John Goghe's 1567 map of Hibernia was of the troubled island we inhabited. The landscape of fact as we've learnt to see it at this stage in history, cannot wear these outmoded costumes without feeling strained and ridiculous. Increasingly in Ireland, the old myths of nationalism and loyalism, Catholic and Protestant, seem like archaic apparel of ludicrous design. But we are still at a time of transition; what many of us view as quaint or embarrassing relics, others still wear as a source of identity and pride.

It's interesting to look at how senses of fit change over time. Humans have clad themselves in a stupendous variety of conceptual costumes — everything from the notion of a flat earth, a world made in seven days, to contemporary ideas about evolution and cosmography. When an idea no longer dovetails with the evidence around us, it can be as uncomfortable as a too tight shoe. Some individuals, though, have shown themselves to be startlingly resistant to getting fit in any other way than relying on the ideas they have grown up with and are accustomed to. Civilizations, and individuals within them, can become imprisoned not only in linguistic contours that no longer match the landscape of fact, but in religious, political, literary and scientific contours whose fit is equally poor. Thomas Kuhn (in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*) has shed much light on the dynamics of match and mis-match that are involved when an accepted scientific paradigm loses its sense of good fit and is replaced by one that seems to cover things more closely. But our understanding of fit at an individual level is still rudimentary. Individuals have very different levels of tolerance for cognitive dissonance, very different preferences, are prepared to give their allegiance to diametrically opposed positions. How is it that, for one person, using violence for political ends seems legitimate, whilst for another it is so morally repugnant that no justification could ever be found to fit it? Why are some of us enchanted by outlooks that

others view as close to crazy? Where do our different senses of fit come from, and how do they change and develop over a lifetime? What makes one person, idea, or institution open to changes of fit, whilst others seem predisposed to stick with whatever tradition is already in place? And why does one thing seem fitting to one culture, one to another, such that in some places a cyclical view of time will take root, whereas in others it will be viewed as linear?

Getting fit today certainly seems more complicated, if also more exhilarating, than it used to be. We live at a time in history when we have access to a hugely expanded range of possibilities in terms of political, social, religious, scientific and artistic thinking. The values we take on to clothe ourselves and shield us from the weathers of existence may be drawn from a far wider and more diverse range of sources than ever before. A person may now view their life through a frame that has been moulded by Buddhist, Christian, secular-scientific, Native American, communist and democratic values. We have moved from the “one-size-fits-all” milieu of our ancestors to our current pluralistic exuberance. It’s easy to introduce a false contrast here, of course, to say that previous generations were born into whatever worldview they had, that fit was a matter of inheritance rather than individual decision, that they were locked into their ideas and customs, whereas our world is one of freedom and choice. The fact is that we are born into our milieu as surely as any previous generation was born into theirs and, as a result, we have no choice but to be faced with choices.

People find totems and talismans that fit their hopes and fears and aspirations from all sorts of sources now. Sometimes the fit seems jarringly incongruous. In a small County Down village that I know well, for example, there is a modern bungalow called “Nirvana.” The mismatch between its obvious material opulence and the metaphysical austerity of Buddhism’s ultimate goal is so ill fitting as to be funny. The inanities of such bricolage notwithstanding, it’s good to live in an era rich in the creative possibilities of variety and where there is an appreciation of individual needs and differences, recognition of the fact that not everyone looks at things the same way. As Hugh Brody has so eloquently shown (in *Maps and Dreams*, his lyrical exploration

of tribal peoples' senses of place in British Columbia), different people make different maps, feel the fit of the land lie upon them in sometimes radically different ways. An awareness of the existence of different fits can, of course, act to undermine the credibility of each one, but it can also act massively to enrich the descriptive and explanatory resources at our disposal.

IV

In his *Introduction to a Theological Theory of Language*, Gerhard Ebeling suggests that,

Since language is so intimately connected with life, something of the necessary reverence for life should be carried over to the way we use language.

Ebeling's plea is reminiscent of the Confucian idea that we can only hope to live in harmony if we name things correctly. Something similar lies behind Jacques Ellul's dictum (put forward in *The Humiliation of the Word*) that "anyone wishing to save humanity today," rather than trying to save the *world*, "must first of all save the *word*." Such reverent use, such correct naming, such saving of the word, needs carefully to assess the extent to which our word-maps "match the landscape of fact," not in any unworkable 1:1 way, but in that more complex correspondence that allows us to judge which are truthful, which diabolical. Do we look to religion, poetry, or science for a reverent use of language today? In each realm of discourse there are exemplars of good and bad fit.

Poets ("Tagues in!") can help us name things correctly in the Confucian sense, help us save the word and make our language fit for the tasks entrusted to it. "Poetry," as George Steiner reminds us (in *Real Presences*) is "thought at its most intense." Such intensity ought to be able to pare to the bone of insight and flense away our subterfuge, whether at the level of "The Beeches" or of "charitable foundations for institutional care." It may not, of course, lead to a *comfortable* fit, but we ought surely to have learnt that comfort alone is not a good indicator of accuracy. Consider, for example, how the great Welsh poet R.S.

Thomas views things (in the poem “Rough,” from his 1975 Collection *Laboratories of the Spirit*):

*God looked at the eagle that looked at
the wolf that watched the jack-rabbit
cropping the grass, green and curling
as God's beard. He stepped back;
it was perfect, a self-regulating machine
of blood and faeces.*

Is that an image that fits our world? Does “a self-regulating machine of blood and faeces” accurately match the “landscape of fact?”

The physicist Richard Feynman has this to say about fit:

When you have put a lot of ideas together to make an elaborate theory, you want to make sure, when explaining what it fits, that those things it fits are not just the things that gave you the idea for the theory; but that the finished theory makes something else come out right in addition.

I don't want to offer any elaborate theory, but to voice a concern about the way in which things frequently don't “come out right” in our ordinary diction. There are, to be sure, cases of obvious and odious mismatch — in the language of certain advertisers and politicians. Indeed, some of what they say is weighted with such distortion that the buoyancy of reasonable accuracy is threatened and we risk plummeting towards repugnant destinations. Allowing such contemptuous misuse of language to pass uncensored is perilous indeed. However, my concern here is with a far less noticeable mismatch — the insidious, near invisible process by which the ordinary, the mundane, the familiar, what we're used to, can clad things so closely, fit so comfortably, that the world's strangeness and mystery, its vertiginous, baffling and beautiful complexity, becomes so swaddled with the blandness of simplification that our wonderment at being atrophies and dies.

In *The Critic as Artist*, Oscar Wilde talks about the way in which beauty can be “dimmed by the mist of familiarity.” Familiarity's mist can seep so deeply into our lives that it seems to fit things perfectly,

unproblematically, and in that assumption of ease and exactitude much that is important, not only beauty, risks being lost. Sometimes, considering the nature of things, some stunned Ascarya-like cry seems far more apt than the kind of “cat sat on the mat” reductions by which language renders the incredible into something manageable.

Consider: every moment of our lives is situated in that miniscule chink of light and sentience between the towering pressure of time past and time future, territories where our consciousness has no purchase. We live on a planet that is no more than one speck in an immensity whose scale dwarfs us and threatens to make our little schemes of sense appear absurd. Each person, every creature, all of the objects we weave our ways around, trail tendrils back in time that are of awesome duration, and interconnect in webs of such intricacy as to defy any process of mapping that we can summon.

What are we fit for? How can we learn to see, yet not be overwhelmed by, our brief flash of presence in the enormities of encompassing absence that are so vast their scale is hard to comprehend? What could possibly fit what happens between the towering monoliths of birth and death that we must navigate our way between here, in all our tiny fragile vulnerability, beneath the stars? Look up at the night sky, allow the light from distant worlds and times long past to fall palely on your skin, like a ghost’s touch, spelled with hauntings. Gaze at the sweep of history and imagine the immeasurable tonnage carried in each of its constituent moments. Mud compacts around a skeleton, and, second by second, transactions happen that render bone into fossil; comets traverse the dark of space, flowers bloom and wither, battles are fought, a child sees the sea for the first time, a stone falls unnoticed from a cliff-side, dislodged from its place as the soft plumage of a seabird gently corkscrews on its nest, warming a clutch of eggs towards hatching. A girl visits a museum, sees photographs of mass graves and slaughter and is forever changed; two thousand miles away a boy the same age as her brother machetes a family to death; fingers pull triggers, surgeons’ hands repair the ravages of age and disease; lovers embrace, an old man remembers passion, a leopard’s jaws close round an antelope’s neck and it suffocates, hearing as its last sound on earth the

leopard's heartbeat, its rasping, panting breath, and the lifeblood from its jugular spattering the dry-as-dust earth like rain. Clouds form, the seasons turn. Trillions of cells move invisibly through their intricate balletic processes, unseen within the forms they constitute for a while — snails and plankton, dogs and fungi, blue whales, horses, eagles. Photosynthesis marshals sunlight into forests, electrons endlessly conduct their atomic orbits, drizzle dapples the leaves of birch trees swaying in a gentle morning breeze as a man walks past the house outside which they're growing and stares at it with a look of loathing. How can anything fit so cacophonous a collection of shrapnel? Of course our ordinary vocabulary provides all of the labels I've just used, facilitates accounts of things that promise some depth of insight. But beyond a quite superficial level, do we really have much idea who we are, where we are, what we ought to do? Existence, glimpsed beneath familiarity's mist, can shrug off all our fits and leave us feeling naked. How can we respond adequately to our situation; what is the most fitting way in which to face it?

Some argue that the landscape of fact is too horrific to look at directly and that to do so (rather like the reported impact of looking on God's face) is likely to be lethal. Ernest Becker, for example, urges that, "It cannot be over-stressed that to see the world as it really is is devastating and terrifying." For Becker, a "full apprehension" of our condition would drive us insane. He believes that a terrible anxiety is bound to result from "the perception of the truth of one's condition." In *The Denial of Death* he poses the question of what it means to be a self-conscious animal. His answer is simple: "It means that one is food for worms," and, according to Becker,

This is the terror: to have emerged from nothingness, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating yearning for life and self-expression — and with all this yet to die.

Or, as that most acute of self-chroniclers, Henri-Frédéric Amiel, put it, "the universe seriously studied rouses one's terror." He and Becker both seem to have glimpsed R.S. Thomas's "self-regulating machine of blood and faeces" beyond the mist of familiarity and its deceptively

simple terms: wolves, eagles, rabbits, grass. But, alongside the terror, is a more positive reaction not also possible? If, blowing away the mist of familiarity, we see a situation that might make us exclaim, “Aaaagh!” will such an outburst not have elements of astonished wonder as well as fear laced into the very bones of its utterance?

The Russian formalists, particularly Victor Shklovsky, are associated with the idea of *ostranenie*, or strategies for making strange. Shklovsky saw the fundamental task of all art as providing such strategies, acting to estrange the familiar so that we can see things in all the incandescence of their raw, incredible nature, throw off the anaesthetic of custom and let the world stand before us afresh, uncovered by any of the customary fits (or fit ups) with which we clad it. I suspect it was the fact of “The Beeches” belonging to a realm of discourse that seeks to make familiar that, at least in part, made me despise it so much. Not only did it conceal the history of Mrs Nolan’s house, not only was it inaccurate, but in opting for something mass-produced, convenient, one of a range of standardized, non-specific rustic plaques, it seemed wholly out of touch with the fundamental nature of what it named.

Zen is a mode of *ostranenie* that can boast a far more ancient provenance than anything Shklovsky’s aesthetic could claim. It is imbued with the urge to see the world as it really is, to wake up to the incredible nature of existence beneath the mist of the familiar, allowing things to come into focus in the light of their is-ness, thus-ness, givenness, being. “The Beeches” seemed like a kind of anti-Zen, not geared to promoting any flash of *satori* — in the gleam of whose insight the true nature of things might be glimpsed. Instead, it acted only to clog perception with the soporific mist of the familiar.

V

Made conscious of my contemptuous look of disgust and loathing by Mrs Nolan’s sudden appearance, that momentary stare lingered in my mind. Eventually, the questions it prompted acquired sufficient density to fall out of the orbit of casual musing and land upon the page, that deceptively unbloodied dissection tray on which we can pry

into the innards of what happens, excise and follow nerves and veins, try to get to the heart of things and decode the pulse that beats there, its reverberations sounding through us like the tom-toms of a distant tribe, at once alien and familiar in their mix of menace and meaning. Perhaps as a strategy to avert the embarrassment caused by having someone witness so unguarded an expression nakedly displayed on the canvas of my face, I started to wonder where our expressions come from and if sometimes they are less personally revealing than mine had been that morning. Might this provide a means of sidestepping responsibility and any need to apologise?

Do expressions ride like ghosts in the bloodlines that carry us through time, each generation's visage identically succumbing to their haunting? Or do they constitute a personal vocabulary, for whose spellings-out we are ourselves accountable? Is what's written on our faces — that script so minutely entangled with the image others have of us — really evolution's iron text? Is each smile, each frown, each look of loathing just part of survival's catechism of response, a brutal rote branded on the flesh so that every alignment of our features has little to do with us as individuals but merely signals, in a language readable to all our tribe, unambiguous warnings of love, hate, fear, anger, puzzlement? Do our different cultures train us to look and respond in different ways, so that expressions can carry different meanings in different times and places? If we had been in Africa, not County Antrim, and if it had been the second, not the twenty-first century, would my look of disgust have meant something entirely different to Mrs Nolan? Beyond nature's authority and society's stamp, does the coding of our faces also fly personality's particular pennant, expressing something of our own unique reaction to the impress of things upon us, sometimes, as on this occasion, to our extreme embarrassment, such that we might wish ourselves safely lost in some other time and continent?

I suspect that each of these questions admits to some degree of affirmative answer. Certainly the idea of differential readings of expression would be supported by Angus Trumble's fascinating book, *A Brief History of the Smile*, which traces out some aspects of this, our

most appealing facial gesture, showing how it has carried a bewildering range of meanings. So the Victorians saw open-mouthed smiling as obscene, and nineteenth-century English and American slang equated “smiling” with drinking whiskey. But no matter how we calibrate the origin or purpose of expression, it’s clear that the correlation between the landscape of face and feeling is closer, more intimate, more immediately revealing than that between the landscape of fact and what we say about it.

Looking at the two extremes of fit suggested by “Ascarya” on the one hand and Nazi use of language on the other, it would be easy to argue that, by and large, we walk a safe middle way between them. Our language, though not mirroring our experience in the slavishly obedient manner suggested by Otto’s original numinous sounds, does not approximate to the kind of deception reminiscent of the Nazi’s hellish verbal cartography. Far from being trapped in some inflexible series of verbal ejaculations, wrenched from us involuntarily, or involved in any stupendous structure of misrepresentation, for the most part we operate a system of language that allows us enormous flexibility and variation whilst remaining within the bounds of adequate, if not perfect, truthfulness. In the end, I suspect my contempt/disgust/loathing at Mrs Nolan’s naming of her house was ignited from the tinder of three separate causes: straightforward anger at the despoliation of a place I love; a concern that “The Beeches” veered away from that safe middle ground of ordinary accuracy towards the dangerous drop of deception that runs alongside it; and a sense that the mist of familiarity which such safe middle ground so often engenders, had descended in this instance in a particularly dense smog. Or, since it is perilous to imagine we can wholly unravel the complexities of our behaviour into rationality’s neat categories, perhaps the poison in my face that morning had other sources too, more clouded and confused (and maybe shameful) than any that self-conscious mapping can lay out for public examination.

In any event, Mrs Nolan, that is the dissection done as best I can, giving, I hope, some account at least of why I gave that look. And this apology, I’m afraid, is no apology at all in the sense of saying sorry, but

only an apologia attempting to explain and justify what happened. What I *can* say I'm sorry for — and it is heartfelt — is any sense of superiority that my stare, or the musings it has prompted, might suggest. In criticizing “The Beeches” I know I am far from innocent. As I write this, I realise that, were I truthful, my own house should be named “Indifference,” “Indulgence,” or maybe simply “Greed.” Such cognomens would better catch something of the web of uncaring and thoughtless consumption that typifies so many lives, my own among them. Moreover, as I draw these reflections to a close, I am uneasily mindful that I may be hoist on my own petard with the lack of fit my words have managed. All I can say in my defence is that the task of the writer is to keep on looking for words that will fit, particularly in situations where the nature of things seems to throw off everything we try on, exploding all our attempted fits with a sense of something essentially wild and naked which none of our approximations can hope to clad for long. Were something to seem a perfect fit, I fear it could be due only to a failure of vision, not to any triumph of eloquence. Perhaps being aware of the inevitable mismatch between our linguistic contours and the landscapes of fact they are intended to map is, in the end, our best guarantee that whatever correspondences we *can* establish will not obscure the essential nature of that amazing topography to which our sentience gives access.