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Procurus: Of Truth in Language

“ . . . there is *art* in every good sentence—art that must be grasped if the sentence is to be understood! A misunderstanding of its tempo, for example: and the sentence itself is misunderstood!”¹

THERE WAS A FASHION about thirty years ago for critics to feel obliged to state their position in literary theory before they started criticising. As a practising literary critic suspicious of the notion of literary theory I never joined in, but I now see a need to avoid explicitly some common and I believe mistaken assumptions about language and meaning that deny both literature and comment on literature as forms of thought or possible ways of telling the truth. This recognised need makes me take the unusual step of using the same chapter as precursor to two quite separate books. I hope the imaginable person who purchases both will not feel defrauded and that what follows in both books will justify this extraordinary procedure.

It is not easy to make any uncontroversial proposition about language, but I hope not to be challenged for supposing that the defining characteristic of language is that it enables us to make common meanings in ways not otherwise available to us. If so it is reasonable to expect

1 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* §246; transl. R.J.Hollingdale, 1973, p.159

the study of language to focus, in whatever ways, on how uses of language have meaning. To answer this question it is again reasonable to go to the study of language as it has been academically developed in recent centuries, that is, Linguistics. Linguistics offers itself as the science of language. The science of language may be expected to explain, may it not? how language makes it possible for us to share a particular kind of meaning. But if we hope to get from Linguistics any explanation of how uses of language come to mean anything we shall be disappointed. It is not coincidental that of all the departments of Linguistics, the most hopeless is semantics.¹

Linguistics gives its accounts of grammar and syntax, understood as the regularities of the well-formed sentence, but is unable to tell us anything about how actual locutions are meaningful. Linguistics cannot satisfy our questions about meaning because its practitioners do not, as scientists should, try to understand meaning in language by beginning with observation. Instead they take over from common Western tradition and traditional teaching of grammar some ready-made assumptions which are, unluckily, untrue. The basic function of the sentence, assumed to be the basic form of language, is assumed to be the expression of meaningful propositions; but this could not be a conclusion from the observation of actual uses of language.

These, I hope, sound like drastic generalisations, so I will begin with three examples before going on to a few of the fallacies which make Linguistics unable to consider meaning.

First: *Irony* is an insoluble semantic problem for the linguistics of the well-formed sentence. Irony (unlike sarcasm) only works when it has exactly the same grammar, including phonology, as a “straight” statement; irony has

¹ Cf. the chapter “The Wild Goose Chase of Meaning out of Language” in my book *The New Grammarians’ Funeral*. The forty+ years since publication have brought no improvement.

therefore no separate department in modern grammar. There can be no ironative voice. Did Swift really argue in favour of solving the problem of overpopulation by cooking babies? There is no *grammatical* way of knowing, for exactly the same sentences can be taken “straight” or ironically. But to take irony “straight” is certainly to miss the meaning. (Do you assume that the “straight” somehow precedes and underlies the ironic? If so why?)

Second, *figurative language* and especially metaphor. Plain (itself an adjective rhetorical not scientific) propositional sense is taken to be always the centre and foundation. Is the unmetaphorical sense of a metaphor somehow underlying or more central than what the metaphor actually means? Linguistics has no way of accounting for metaphor. Or allegory: would anybody get the meaning of *Pilgrim’s Progress* if they took it to be about a physical journey?

Third, *context*. No speech or writing is meaningful without context, but context is unavailable for consideration by Linguistics.

Silence has no grammar, but in the right context in language even silence can be meaningful. The two minutes’ silence on 11 November. *What* does it mean? What that context gives it to mean. If the answer to “Wilt thou have this man to be thy lawful wedded husband...?” is a silence, the silence will certainly be meaningful, though the meaning will vary with church, priest, congregation, and unmarried couple. Think of the sense George Eliot gives to Grandcourt’s silences in *Daniel Deronda*!

I walk into the room, look through the window, raise my right arm and declaim rhetorically “The sun!” What account of the meaning of this locution can be offered by Linguistics if the inclination is resisted to say these two words are meaningless, not a well-formed sentence &c.? Would it help to consult a dictionary for the definition

of *sun* and a grammar for the role of the definite article? (“[Here is] *the* sun,” not just “*a* sun”) or to treat the phrase as a précis or telegraphic form of “The sun is shining”? (If so what would that mean? Would it be a banal but verifiable proposition?) But any speaker knows the words already, and they don’t explain why the exclamation may be meaningful. In context the meaning is perfectly clear, and so understood by the hearer; any expansion would mean something else. It has been a cloudy morning; I and the friend staying with me had wondered whether to go out for the day but thought the weather was against it. The exclamation could raise the possibility of changing our minds. It is certainly necessary to the sense of this exclamation that in its way it is making a verifiable proposition about the external world. What could be more the external world than sun and rain? And to verify it my friend has only to look out of the window and in the most empirical way accept the evidence of his senses. This would not elucidate the meaning.

Moreover, somewhere in the sense of these two words is a glance at the last words of an English translation of Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, “The sun, the sun” which in *its* context is the sign of the speaker’s irrevocable loss of mind. What this does to the whole meaning of my monosyllables I will invite the reader to contemplate, but it is certainly there, part of the meaning of what is said.

Linguistics has no way of handling context. Literary criticism must. So in this case literary criticism is closer to considering meaning than linguistics.

“Lise!” was all Prince Andrew said. But that one word expressed an entreaty, a threat, and above all conviction that she would herself regret her words.¹

The one word “Lise!” can express all these things, in its

¹ *War and Peace* transl. Louise and Aylmer Maude, Oxford (1922) 1941, vol. I, p. 32

context in the whole novel as well as in the immediate explanatory remarks by the novelist.¹

My question to linguists is why they are unable to consider locutions such as my “The sun!”, one of the most ordinary and frequent kinds of unambiguous meaning in language.²

Linguistics, Grammar and Rhetoric as practised for thousands of years lead away from rather than towards any understanding of meaning in language, because of some interlinked false assumptions, the most important being that meaning is really outside language altogether, and that truth can only be told in a certain linguistic form. What follows is an attempt to recognise some notions that prevent understanding of meaning and of truth in language.

1 The Underlying Idea Fallacy

We take it for granted that we can say things and write things. If so where are the things we say or write? If we ask what anybody means, where should we look for the *what*?

J.L. Austin’s explorations of what ordinary language can tell us about kinds of meaning will not help, because common speech asks no questions here. “To say something” assumes that there is a thing waiting to be said, before and

1 The unity of a work of art is that within itself it creates as much of its own context as it needs to be meaningful. (Christians would say the same of the Bible. What we call the Old Testament is not quite the same as the Jewish Bible because it is taken in a context that includes the New Testament.) This applies most obviously to dramas and novels, but can also be true, for instance, of the sequence of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and even quite short works like Donne’s Elegie IV, “The Perfume”, which gives the equivalent of a stage setting as the action proceeds, but also depends for its meaning on the reader’s picking up assumptions about love as understood by the speaker.

2 Context, of course, covers a very wide range. For my example I described an immediate context in the lives of two people. Not that the experience is the same for both, but that as a matter of grammar this is the context in which the speech has meaning. A wider context would be this moment in a visit of a few days, and the place of the conversation. It is within the context of some presuppositions both known and sub-conscious. We presuppose *inter alia* that if we go out the buses will run and not be held up at roadblocks while passengers are searched. The widest context is the language and history. The speech is meaningful, but only in English. The conversation, that is, occurs in a particular language as well as in our lives at this time and place.

separate from the saying. *Put it into words*: there is, then, an *it* waiting to be *put* (as with the homophone: Putt the ball into the hole). *What have you to say about that?* is commonly understood to presuppose, as well as a *you*, both a *what* and a *that* before anything is said. All these expressions assume that the *what*, the *it*, can be the same in different expressions: *To put it in other words*.

Well, before we get to the putting, WHERE are all these *its* and *whats* and *thats*? Where is the *it* before, during and after *it* is said? If they are pronouns where is the antecedent?

What quite does the wordless idea, as it waits for language, look like? before—as we say, again assuming a sequence in time, and in the same verb that is used for getting juice out of a fruit,—before it is “expressed”?

The great minds of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment were notoriously hostile to the Aristotelian tradition of the schools, but there is no rebellion against Aristotle in Locke’s notion that the sounds of speech are “signs of internal conceptions” and “marks for the ideas within [the] mind”.¹ First we are supposed to have an idea, wherever it comes from, whether observation or something innate. This idea is the *what* of anything we mean. It is then put into words, which travel from the mind of the speaker or the written page to the mind of the hearer or reader, where they are reconverted to idea.

The use men have of these marks being either to record their own thoughts, for the assistance of their own memory; or, as it were, to bring out their ideas, and lay them before the view of others: words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them . . .²

Temporal sequence is necessary to Locke’s conception of meaning. This is, to cross the Channel and advance a

1 John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) ed. Raymond Wilburn (1947) 1948, III.2; p. 201 2 *Ibid.*, III.ii §2, p. 204

couple of centuries, much the same as Saussure's scheme of meaning as ideas we have before they are put into language. *Code* is a word frequently used by linguists. The idea, in its prelinguistic form, is supposed to be *coded* into language, and then language coded into speech or writing. The hearer/reader then reverses the process, decodes the sounds/marks into language then decodes *that* into idea, so ending up with the pre-coded idea the speaker/writer started with.¹ The *doyen* of modern linguists, Noam Chomsky, accepts without any qualms this notion of language as a kind of translation of pre-existent meanings, which he agrees in tracing back to Aristotle.²

By the most orthodox scientific principles, as well as common sense, we must, then, ask where to find and how to recognise these pre-linguistic ideas. How can we inspect the idea that is to be "coded" into language in its pristine state before the language is spoken or written? or after the linguistic embodiment is read/heard and decoded? Where and what is it? Unfortunately for the assumptions of common speech, of linguistics and of one tradition of philosophy from Aristotle to the present day, there is no answer to this *where* question. The prelinguistic content of language is nowhere to be found.

We "say something", so there *must be* something waiting to be said? (Should we not look hard at "must"? Particularly from the empiricist standpoint it appears unpromisingly *a priori* and independent of our perceptions?) If so, it must still be asked how this something can be perceived. If it counts as a hypothesis that there is an idea waiting to be expressed, what experimental test of the hypothesis is proposed by the science of language? The answer that cannot be avoided does not solve the problem. Nobody has ever observed original ideas waiting to be coded and decoded, nor, as is sometimes suggested, a proto-language

1 Cf. my *Holding the Centre*, pp. 52 ff. 2 See *ibid.*, pp. 129–31.

waiting to be turned into an actual language spoken or written, nor has anybody ever proposed an experimental test to demonstrate the existence of the underlying idea. The underlying idea is always and only accessible in the linguistic form into which it is “coded”. The prelinguistic ideas fail, by ordinary scientific standards, the first test of existence, namely perception.

Can the underlying-idea notion be applied to music and if not why not? Must we believe that a composer has in mind a theme, harmonies, counterpoint, in a pre-musical form, before coding it all into notes?

Occam’s razor is called for. The understanding of meaning in language is unaffected if we just drop completely the notion of the pre-linguistic original idea. This underlying uncoded idea is an unnecessary entity that adds nothing to what we may understand of language in the written and spoken embodiments we can observe, it introduces confusions, and is better dispensed with. “Pfui!” you may say, or perhaps “Phooey!” What underlies your exclamation?

A sub-fallacy is that language can be objectively observed at least in its manifestations of the sound of speech (or perhaps even the print of a book). Phonetics and phonology are well developed. As physical observation phonetics can say nothing at all about meaning. Within language a heavy stress may for instance have a profound (or trivial) meaning, but in phonetics it is just sound. The same is true of the brain activity which some neurological linguists consider intently in the hope that it will give information about language. It may do so only if we bring the observations within grammar, till when it remains brain activity.

2 The Experience as Sense Fallacy

A subdivision of the prelinguistic-idea fallacy is that language, especially in a good novelist, conveys experience. In the bus queue I politely invite the old lady to get on

before me. Perhaps this does not need anything to be said. Perhaps a gesture with the arm and a smile. Or I may say, "After you." Neither these words nor my account conveys either an experience or any underlying idea. Any idea it conveys is in the words themselves in that context.

The experience itself is not expressible in words; nor is any other. Language does not (as some critics incautiously suppose) convey experience, it makes sense. Works of art can allow us to imagine some feelings and perceptions of others, but that is not conveying experience. So much going on at the same time! for instance a bit of the *Trout* quintet "going through my mind", that is, part of my conscious experience, and I know it has been put there from a snippet circulated by the Southwell Music Festival and not just as a bit of music but to mark one of the twelve days of Christmas; at the same time I feel a light twinge of hunger and know that soon I will eat a sandwich. If I am writing anything but this glance at experience, it is quite unlikely that any of these parts of experience will have anything to do with what I write. Even if they have, they are not the meaning of what I write.

"Telling a dream": Dame Julian of Norwich agonised for many years trying to tell her visions, but at last what she told was the sense they made not the visions themselves. When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream he did not himself have the experience of dreaming: he saw (what Pharaoh could not see for himself) the sense of Pharaoh's report of the dreams.

My objection is to the belief that nonlinguistic operations of the mind can themselves be the content of what we say or that they shed any light on (a later topic) the form/content distinction. Languageless thought itself takes numbers of different forms, but in none of them is there a separable formless content unless we launch off on an infinite regression and say that some even less articulate content underlies our pre-linguistic thoughts.

What, if anything, goes on before or after language is firstly not relevant to meaning in language and secondly only discoverable, if at all, by more language.

3 The Sense and Reference Fallacy

Another contributor to the notion of pre-linguistic content is the very ancient idea that words have meaning by way of reference to things. The word is supposed to invoke the idea of the thing, and the idea refers to the thing itself. Sometimes this idea of the thing is taken to be same as its meaning¹—so the referent of a word is what it means. This notion seems to be what is appealed to in phrases we have already met, such as *saying something*. If the thing said *is* a thing as commonly understood, represented in the mind by an idea which then has to be put into language in the “saying”, the thing that we say is just the name of an object or of an idea.

In the most radical philosophy the thing itself is the meaning. With variations this is the account of centuries of empiricists culminating in Frege and first-stage Wittgenstein. The latter asserted that “A name means an object. The object is its meaning.”² If so, reference itself is meaning, guaranteed by the object referred to.

Swift, two centuries before the logical positivists, demolished referentialism in Book III of *Gulliver's Travels* with the philosopher who saved himself the trouble of speech by carrying a set of *things* about with him, in the hope of expressing his meanings by pointing at (= referring to) them when he wanted to say something. This would also have the advantage of working anywhere, whatever

1 An understanding some would trace back to the Book of Genesis, though we are told there only that Adam named the creatures as God looked on, not what Adam meant by the naming. (Genesis ii.19)

2 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) transl. D.F.Pears & B.F.McGuinness (1961) 1966, 3.203. Cf. “In a proposition a name is the representative of an object” (3.22) Wittgenstein is well known to have later made other and very different approaches to the subject.

language was being spoken, because the reference/meaning would be directly to/in objects in the external world. The fallacy (leaving aside the practical difficulties with collective or abstract nouns or of carrying about e.g. an elephant or the planet Mars) is that nobody would know what if anything was meant. The *meaning* is just what the referent cannot give. The philosopher's pointing could make sense only in a context that made it the answer to a question. But the referent would then have a different sense according to what question was being answered. "What would you like for breakfast?" or: "Is an egg as heavy as lead?" or "Is an egg fragile?" Swift's philosopher answers the last by dropping the egg and then has to replenish his bag.

Egg has no meaning alone and out of context. (One context is dictionary definition.) Traditional linguists avoid this objection by the terminology of *sense and reference*. The sense is supplied by other parts of language like verbs, but the reference remains as the representation in language of objects and as such is necessary to meaning. The belief in reference to an object as at least part of an idea in the mind aids the conception of language as a kind of translation (into "literal" meaning) of ideas that are in the mind before any language at all. First we think about an egg then later clothe the object with a word, which will differ with what language we happen to be speaking. The underlying idea is the same, because in the external world there are eggs. So we get back to the belief in language as coding, in this case substituting the word *egg* for the idea of an egg which gets its sense from reference to an actual external-world egg. But what if the egg is imaginary or mythical? The meaning would then depend on our knowing that *egg* had no referent. Discussion of mythical or imaginary eggs can be as meaningful as talk about the eggs at the breakfast table, but not by way of sense-and-reference.

If it cannot be established that ready-formed ideas precede and are coded into language, or that meaning in language is limited to verifiable propositions about things, we have to reconsider the notions of form and content, which grow from these doctrines. But first, I think I must glance at languageless thought, for that, if anywhere, is where the pre-linguistic idea may be caught, as well as reference-as-meaning.

4 Thought without Language

The reliable evidence for non-linguistic thinking can only be introspection, and if we ask ourselves it is easy to see that we practise non-linguistic thought all day long. In fact my observation of myself tells me that nonlinguistic thought, thought in the sense of problem-solving and answering rational questions, is in some very ordinary contexts more usual than talking to oneself.

The day to change the bedding: which drawer are the pillow-cases in? oh yes, it's the bottom drawer of the chest in the other room—but I don't *say* that to myself, I just know what I'm trying to do, and remember (or not) where the object is kept. And the meaning of my languageless thought depends on reference to those objects in the external world, the pillow-cases and the drawer. (Though, again appealing to common experience: when we are asking these everyday languageless questions there is no hard and fast exclusion of language. The odd word or phrase may well pop up as part of solving the problem. What difference this makes to the whole discussion I am not sure.)

Isn't my trying to remember where we keep pillow-cases a pre-linguistic idea that I can clothe in language (as I have just done) if I wish? Surely the idea in these cases *is* in the mind "before" it goes into language? And it can not only be "put into words", but if I have to bring someone else in on the question it *must be* put into words (unless the person

knows my memory lapses so well that she just points to the drawer)? So there are plenty of such ideas underlying language, waiting, though not needing, to be coded into language? and depending for their meaning on reference to objects in the external world?

I must beware of the common fault of thesis-fixation, the search for excuses if there are exceptions or cases where the thesis is untrue. I accept that in such everyday instances something that can be called thinking is done without language, and if necessary can be sort-of translated into language. That is not what I am denying. The trouble with the idea-waiting-to-be-(optionally)-put-into-words comes with *before*: if it is *without* I make no general objection, though I have doubts about Chomsky's "conceptual".¹ But the empiricists and the linguists do insist on a *before*. What I deny are ideas not yet embodied in such entities as sentences or Spenserian stanzas but which already have the meaning of the "coded" linguistic expression. "What are you doing?" "Looking for the pillow cases." This is related to but separate from the actual looking and whatever alinguistic thinking that entails. As such, it is not an example of a pre-linguistic formed idea being "put into words". The relation of what is said to the non-linguistic thought preceding it is

1 He appeals to the same kind of evidence as I do, namely introspection, but I can't recognise the experience. "You think and then you try to find a way to articulate what you think... we can and do think without language and, if you are thinking, then presumably there's some kind of conceptual structure there." Chomsky accepts the consequence that telepathy is possible, i.e. the transmission of the ideas that language is supposed to code, but without language. "If we had the ability to communicate by telepathy, let's say (so that we didn't have to make sounds), there might be no word ordering in language at all." (*Ibid.*, p. 131) Of telepathy thus saith Wikipedia (accessed 25 February 2016) "Definition: The transference of thoughts or feelings between two or more subjects through parapsychology. Telepathy... is the purported transmission of information from one person to another without using any of our known sensory channels or physical interaction." This misses the most curious claim for telepathy: that it can transfer thoughts without language. Imagine the much-travelled Martian who features in so many works of science fiction and philosophy: it [for they have no sex on Mars] has no language but communicates telepathically. If it taught us how to communicate telepathically would we be able to transmit the concept of language without using it?

closer than in some other cases, but we still have relation not identity. What I say is a report of, not an expression of, prelinguistic thinking. When the thought “goes into language” I may very likely be expressing exasperation with myself or I may make a joke, and these two also may have relations to the non-linguistic experience. I may be exasperated without saying anything to myself or anybody else. But if I then say something about it I think that is an adequate formulation of what I am doing. The “it” is not an idea underlying what I say, but an experience referred to by what I say. The sense of the experience still has to be made in language not just referred to.

In any case, if the idea of coding pre-existent ideas into language looks plausible at all it is only in the most commonplace everyday matters like changing my pillow case. For anything more like argument I think language has to come in. (Chomsky does not ask whether his fully-fledged pre-linguistic conceptual thoughts include *all* thinking.) What if the question “in my mind” is why I am (as indeed I am) an antidisestablishmentarian? Numbers of not-language things may be going through my mind, images, feelings about the established church, quite irrelevant pictures and bits (I may be cold or thirsty), but a meaning fully-formed that only needs coding into words? I don’t think so, and go back to my first question: if there is such an underlying meaning, where is it? My efforts at explanation have to be by way of argument. The content of argument does not underly it: the content *is* the argument.

Could I conceive the present discussion as a series of ideas not coded into language and then code the whole lot at once? This would not just be impractical because of the feat of memory required. The contention is that this is not how language works.

When I am thinking in language, as now, whatever goes on before I write something down isn’t language or proto-

language or formulated thought. It is the composition in language that formulates the thought.

5 The Form-and-Content Fallacy

The two-and-a-half-thousand-years-old distinction of form and content as separable parts of language is interdependent with both the meaning-as-underlying-idea fallacy and the meaning-as-reference fallacy. The “content” is ultimately taken to be the pre-linguistic idea, or the referent, and the “form” the language that conveys it. All this needs simultaneous correction.

“Form” is not always easy to distinguish from “content”, even before we get to language. Think of coining. Molten gold is cast in a form and out comes a guinea. In olden times, content of coins was practically distinguishable from form, because the coin would be worth its weight in gold, whatever was stamped on it, and a clipped guinea would be worth less than a whole guinea. By modern convention one fifty-cent coin is worth the same as another of the same currency, whatever metal it is made of. The form is that of a fifty-cent coin, the content is that of a fifty-cent coin and without both, neither. If you say, “the content is just metal,” the statement is incomplete: it is only the content *of the coin* if it has the form of the coin. Even if form and content can in this case be distinguished they cannot be separated.

There is no difficulty in distinguishing the form of a religious service from its content. The form is, however it originated, there before anything fills it. The same hymn may be sung in or out of a form of service. The form may prescribe different daily lessons or psalms which can be read elsewhere.

This seems to be like an income-tax return form, or a cricket scorebook. Even here the forms at least severely control the content. Is it the form or the content that

inhibits comments on the world situation or declarations of undying passion? or is it just a convention? (And are conventions part of meaning and if so how?)

Or take telegrams (the reader is requested either to remember telegrams or look them up in Wikipedia): the distinction between form and content may seem obvious and unchallengeable. In the olden days of the post office there used to be what were always known as telegram forms, and a young lady in the cage waiting to receive them and count the words before charging for the content, that is, the number of words (not characters, for this was before computerisation and counting would have been tedious), the forms being free. The telegram form and content surely exist separately before being put together? The recipient can, if he wants to, take them apart and offer the content more presentably in the different form of typewriting. But what is put on the telegram form, the written words, the “message”, that too has both form and content, not as easily separable as the telegram form and the writing. The telegram is a stylistic convention by which writer and reader are both looking for information relevant to an agreed subject. It does not follow that the “information” of a telegram can only be expressed in factual statement. Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden telegraphed the secret news that the pound was to leave the gold standard in a message something like “Old Lady goes off Tuesday.” “Literally”, this would have to be information about a journey by an old human lady, not the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street. And attitude and emotion, as well as context, can be part of the meaning even of a telegram: they were frequently used to acquaint wives and parents of a death in war, or that a man was missing. What *information* was conveyed by the congratulatory telegrams the monarch used to send to subjects on their hundredth birthday? See below, on weather forecasts.

I agree, though, that there is sometimes obvious sense in distinguishing the form and content of, in these cases, Matins or cricket scorebooks or telegrams. These instances are not the same as, or even much like, form-and-content in plays or novels or conversations, if form and content are thought of as container and contained, with *form* as *style* separate from *content* or *matter*.

Form-and-content as separate *parts* of language confuses writing and talking with the areas of experience where we can truthfully discuss *doing things*. *Saying something* really is grammatically different from *doing something*. One idea of *style* is: “way of doing something”, the something having some sort of existence before it is done. Characteristically this way of thinking can be true and useful when applied to skills. How to putt the ball into the hole: both the ball and the hole are there to be seen before any putting, and the golf pro will improve the amateur’s style of doing it. This is then taken to be like the homophone, how to put a thought into language, with different styles being just different ways of getting it done.¹ Does it make any difference to meaning whether on sports day the master in charge starts the sprint by saying “On your marks, get set” then firing a pistol, or by shouting “Go!”? The meaning is proved to be the same if the race gets off to a good start? (“Don’t ask for the meaning, ask for the use.”) But in that case, like putting the ball into the hole, we know in advance the work that is to be done, which need not be in language at all. There could be a variety of the starting gate of a horse race.

¹ We hear much about “language skills” from official educationists. It is hardly controversial to observe that language as a whole is not a set of skills that can be taught. It is not by being taught that toddlers in ordinary families “acquire”, as the linguists say, language. Grown-ups do encourage (or discourage), and correct, and, once the child is in command of a language, teach other languages, but language is not itself taught. Children used to be taught about the form of essays, the use of paragraphs and so on, but how to write or say something meaningful is not a teachable skill.

The trouble starts when language, in its task of making sense, is taken to be a way [= form] of saying something [content], the thing (usually the underlying pre-linguistic idea) being separable from the way (“coding” into [a style of] language). How can language be “how to do” anything if the thing cannot be found or distinguished from a doing that cannot be found without the thing?

The analogy between putting a golf-ball or boiling an egg and knowing how to get a pre-existent meaning into language is false. In talking or writing there is nothing like the ball, the hole, the golf club, the egg, the boiling water or the discrete cook.

There are many forms of language and styles of language, no one of which has a monopoly of either truth or falsehood; but without *any* form there is no possibility of either truth or falsehood, or any other kind of meaning, that is, of any “content” whatever. Any change of “form” changes “content”.

6 The “Literal” Meaning Fallacy and Rhetoric

“Literal” meaning is thought to be as near as we can get to the underlying idea, and will not survive it. In linguistics and in classical rhetoric *literal meaning*, actually a quite obscure phrase, is taken to be a sort of simple propositional form of which all other possible expressions of “the same” meaning are complications; this *literal meaning* is first cousin to the verifiable proposition of empiricist philosophy. and to the *content* of the form-and-content fallacy. “Literal meaning” is not, however, if is understood as a sort of basic central meaning on which anything is built, anything that springs from the observation of language. Given a locution or some written unit, the question for linguistics ought to be, *What does it mean and how does it come to mean it?* To begin with the assumption that the first meaning must be “literal” begs these questions, that is, assumes

the answer in the form of the question. So: *The cat sat on the mat*. Literal meaning: a particular (definite article) cat seated itself (or if the verb is continuative, was seated) on a particular mat. This *literal* meaning is supposed to underlie anything else such as figurative meaning or allegory or grammatical or prosodic example; it is supposed to be the first, ordinary, natural sense before any complications are brought in. Like the unspoken idea fallacy this has nearly become an absolute presupposition, beyond challenge and needing an effort to be thought about. It nevertheless has to be challenged. For there is nothing in the observation of language or in the experience of talking or reading to suggest that any primary literal layer of meaning exists. Why is it supposed that a proposition about a cat, which is not what that sentence normally means, underlies anything it does mean?

If we are in the biology lab “The cat sat on the mat” might be an irregularly formed experimental observation. The “literal” meaning just means the meaning that would be demanded in scientific experiment. In actual speech or writing it would be very unusual for the sentence to be making any proposition about any real or imaginary cat at any level. It does not follow that the sentence is senseless, only that beginning with the “literal” meaning is a hopeless way of trying to get at the sense. What understanding is gained by asserting that literal meaning somehow underlies the many common uses of the sentence?—such as: an example of bad rhyming or of the sound of the short *a* vowel?

The generalisation of the aim of the sciences to make nothing but “literal” sense is not a holding to the bedrock of language and truth but the attempt to impose a quite specialised and unusual use of language as elemental and foundational, with anything else probably suspect. The belief in literal meaning comes into its own if the world relies on science as *the* true use of language.

To the true believer in underlying literal sense, all fiction is lies, because the literal, first, underlying sense of a story is to make propositions that are not even meant to be verifiable (in Ayer's sense of verifiable). From the hard-line empiricist doctrine of words and things it follows that fiction cannot be meaningful, since by definition it is not making verifiable propositions recognisable to the philosopher. Linguistics, correspondingly, has no way of distinguishing fact and fiction. Nor has rhetoric, unless by noticing things like "Once upon a time" as peculiar to fiction—but then, that may be heavy irony or a joke.

A story may have exactly the same grammatical and syntactic form as the report of an experiment in physics; neither has grammatical primacy; neither underlies the other, and in both cases to mistake the one for the other is to miss whatever meaning there may be. If fiction is taken for fact it is misunderstood as surely as if fact is mistaken for fiction. They are just different modes of language, giving different varieties of meaning. In the case of a story there is no "literal" meaning underlying the fictitious meaning any more than in physics there is a fictitious foundation beneath the empirical propositions.

7 Rhetoric True and False:

the fallacy of the central simple form

Our notions of rhetoric and grammar are so deeply ingrained in the culture descending from Greece and Rome that it is difficult to view them clearly! Rhetoric as taught throughout the Middle Ages assumes, much like traditional grammar, a basic undecorated form before the rhetor comes along. If there is no such thing, notions of rhetoric have to change. In the modern world the idea of *style* suffers from the same mistaken assumptions.

A common image, used for centuries so unsuspectingly as almost to be another presupposition, is of the meaning,

the (probably pre-linguistic) content, as the *body*, leaving the expression in language—style, form—as the *clothes*. This of course comes naturally from the assumptions about separate idea and expression. Poor shivering unclothed body of meaning, come forth! Alas! she can only show herself already clothed. Naked came I into the world, but not my ideas: they had to be dressed first.

Style as the *dress* of thought is nevertheless still almost a dead metaphor, so much is it taken for granted. It has been damaging literary criticism for hundreds of years. “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d” as Pope put it—not noticing that his own poetry contradicts the idea. For what unchanging idea/thought/content underlies *The Dunciad*?

Would an expanded version of “I despise dunces” be *saying the same thing* as Pope’s poem? The core idea of classical rhetoric as well as empiricist philosophy is that Pope would have been clearer if he had put everything into third-person propositions in prose—for prose is assumed to be somehow a simpler and more direct form of expression than verse.

Rhetoric is taken to be the set of tools and methods for dressing the simplest form. But there is no such thing as a basic, simple form without any style/rhetoric, any more than there is an unclothed idea.

Take the shipping [weather] forecast as broadcast for many years on BBC radio. The purpose is in purest accord with the belief that the function of language is to convey information as clearly and simply as possible, for which a rigidly defined style is necessary though not, as it happens, the well-formed sentences which are supposed to convey information, for here verifiable propositions about the external world are made without any finite verbs at all. The definite article is also dropped. We are given, after the name of the area, the direction and strength of

the wind, intensity and kind of precipitation, visibility, without the use of any of these nouns: after the proper name come adjectives. Things like “Rockall, Malin, south veering south-west, strong to gale force, showers, moderate to good.” (I don’t recall that anybody ever explained all this to me. In the end I picked it up.) Then follows what the BBC calls the “general” weather forecast—I invite semanticists to explain the meaning of *general*—which, to me irritatingly, is determinedly chatty. The speakers are trained to exaggerate conversational intonation patterns, in contrast to the deliberately repetitive intonation and decreed pauses of the shipping forecast. The voice is often dropped at the decisive moment so that we have to listen intently to get any actual information. The word *during* is not heard: never “during the afternoon”, it has to be “as we head through the course of the afternoon....” Even *wind* is discouraged: *breeze* is a kind of poetic diction referring to any air-movement under 40 m.p.h. Now, the ordinary next step is to suppose that both forecasts are doing much the same thing about differing localities, that is, they have different styles but the same content. The *content* is the prediction of what is going to happen to the weather, the *form* just how this happens to be conveyed.

But *are* the two forms saying “the same thing”? If they are giving the same information would it be true to say that both forecasts mean the same? Only, it seems to me, with regard to one aspect of what is said. “The meaning is the information about the weather,” says the semanticist/empiricist. That depends on what the listener is interested in. It is reasonable to suppose that the listener wants information about the weather and can with an effort get it out of the general forecast. But the general forecaster often takes responsibility for the weather and apologises if it is going to be bad, especially if that will interfere with a sporting event or outdoor pop festival. Is this not part of

the meaning? Why not? for instance if you are listening in order to enjoy British Values? One or two are certainly being expressed. Try to apply “meaning is content not style” to, for instance, a proposal of marriage. The “content” is the same, the work to be done to get her to answer “Yes.” But will not the style (dry, passionate, morose, comic...) vary the meaning? and possibly affect the answer?

Rhetoric was extensively taught during the Middle Ages, the basic idea being this fallacious one, that you begin with pre-existent *matere* [= content, body, simplest statement] and then treat it in such-and-such a way, low, high middle, to expand or *précis* [= form, clothes] so as to add or remove dignity or colloquiality. A modern instance of the belief in content as unstyled ideas (“matere”) has inflicted great damage on Bible translation.¹ Translation, it is often supposed, is a variety of ways of putting “the same thing” in a different language. Translators often call this *same thing* the “message”. Where is the message? “Dynamic” translators think it is a content underlying any form, and separable from any expression. As usual, however, the message is only to be found in some expression or other. In practice, in the versions that took the theory seriously, the isolation of the “message” was by way of paraphrase of the source into “kernel sentences”, indicative statements, that were supposed to be as near as language can come to the content. These were then translated into their equivalents in the “target” language before style was added as a sort of finishing lick of paint. The kernel sentences are not, however, formless content underlying all expression; they have a very noticeable form, though arbitrarily changed from the source text. The process of dynamic translation leads, as I demonstrated, to disgraceful and wild inaccuracy.

Rhetoric is just organisation of style. There is more in the world, and more in language, than propositions about the

1 See my *Who Killed the Bible?*

external world, and different styles of language, different kinds of rhetoric, are developed to cope with them. The simple sentence recommended but not practised by Bishop Sprat, or the kernel sentence, are themselves self-conscious styles of rhetoric.

The mistake of Socrates was to suppose that *all* rhetoric is bad, though in the sense I offer the word the Socratic dialogues themselves are formed by a kind of rhetoric. Rhetoric/style can be used for truth or falsehood. (Do not assume that empiricist philosophy has an exclusive right to tell us what counts as true or false. Let it be demonstrated first. See below.) The poet uses rhetoric as much as the mountebank, but honestly.

If the only true function of language were to convey information as understood in, for instance, natural science, Sprat demanding “a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expressions; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness, as they can”¹ would be right. (He does understand this as a way of speaking, not anything natural.) The situations where we do need a style of uncomplicated information can be taken over by bad rhetoric, as in the just-mentioned weather forecasts. The first sign is length. Rhetorically decorated statements involve amplification in the various manners offered by the medieval rhetoric handbooks. The radio weather forecast chats around the prospective weather and apologises if it is going to rain. Bad rhetoric is a chronic disease in the modern world (by *bad*, I mean tending to falsity, not unskilfully used), asserting all kinds of untruths in contexts where the Lockean conveyance of information is really required. Locke’s remarks on our advertising “industry”² would have been useful. But bad rhetoric is not confined to advertising or political

¹ *History of the Royal Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, 1667, unidentifiable downloaded reprint, p. 113

² Modern uses of this word are often bad rhetoric.

party leaflets. My local authority trying to persuade us that their “new-build” headquarters is just the “hub” the town needs.... Bad Rhetoric is the lubricant of western capitalism. Company reports do not restrict themselves to factual reporting: to get at the facts you have to penetrate layers of “positive” “spin”. Bills from utility companies are now written in bad rhetoric. Pseudo-colloquial forms (noticeable at a glance from the frequency of apostrophes—which will surely become extinct with the next phase of pseudo-colloquialisation; “pseudo” because a common result is incomprehensibility in common language) are *de rigueur*: “As a heads up, remember that this email is not your ticket.” (from a ticket-booking agency) Well, I know “heads up, tails down”, but what does it mean here? The *message* is just “this email is not your ticket”. From the website of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Income:

You can invest in a number of companies during a year and those investments might qualify for the schemes, but you can’t claim relief for the same investment. You’ll get relief by investing in newly issued shares.

Second person replaces the information-giving third, to try to make the meaning personal not general. The passive is not used though for a general statement it would be expected here in standard English. Something more like:

During any one tax year investments may be made in any number of qualifying companies. Tax relief cannot be claimed twice for the same investment. Relief is only granted on the purchase of shares newly issued.

Plain proposition-making, however, is not somehow natural, nor is it the somehow ordinary central form from which others derive. It is one style of language, one form of rhetoric which by a wave of the philosopher’s wand becomes the only proper way of expressing meaning. In real life it is found in some uses that call for unadorned

conveyance of information. The empiricist dogma is that this is the only proper use of language, but in fact it is restricted to things like timetables and street signs not in sentences and, of course, the reporting of scientific experiment. The empiricists have performed the persuasive feat of making us take for granted that this use is (a) basic, the foundation of all other uses and (b) not itself a style or rhetoric. This is first cousin to the fallacy of the “plain meaning” somehow separate from any linguistic expression whatever, Saussure’s idea waiting for linguistic formulation. The propositional style is supposed to be as close as we can get to the simple sense. But the plain style is itself a style the rhetoric of which is particularly emphatic. Gradgrind denouncing rhetoric is an unwitting sophist, himself rhetorical in the service of a philosophy he does not know to be false. Prince Hal, giving his plain tale of the robbery, is as rhetorical as Falstaff, but he thinks the rhetoric of plain factuality will do his work.

The meaning of the spoken or written word is its content and its style in union, in a particular context. Sometimes what we may identify as *style* may have more meaning than content, if content is “literal” meaning. When Malvolio writes from his madhouse to Olivia, the Clown tries to make the letter express madness by reading it madly. When Fabian reads it sanely Malvolio establishes his sanity beyond doubt not by the *what* of what he is writing but by being able to compose an eminently sane letter. It could be said this establishment of sanity is in this context the meaning, the *what* of this letter; the meaning *is* the style.¹

8 Part vs Aspect

The work of art is not in two parts, form and content. Meaning is of the whole. Form and content are not separable parts of language; they are aspects.

¹ *Twelfth Night* V.i

What the critic needs to begin with is, as Arnold said, to see something steadily and to see it whole. There are many ways of doing this, many points of view. With due care, we may see the poem in one aspect or another, but this will only work if we keep in mind that the aspects are of the same thing, not different parts that can exist separately.

The distinction between form and content may be useful in the right circumstances if treated with care. If form and content are misunderstood as separate things it is worse than useless.

In one aspect, I can look at *The Canterbury Tales* as the development of a new English long verse line; in another as a collection of the different kinds of narrative poem practised in the days of Chaucer (I have done both in separate books): the number of points of view and ways of looking are limited only by the ingenuity of the critic within or beyond several well-established modes of thought. But they are all inhibited if we try to take content as somehow existing without form, like the earth without form and void before creation, or form without content, which would have to be the idea of the seven days of creation before the actuality.

Works of art mean what they are not what they (paraphrasably) say: the *what* (content) is not separable from the *how*. In Henry James's tragi-comic tale, *The Figure in the Carpet*, the challenge Hugh Vereker, the distinguished author, puts to his critics, is to discover the eponymous "figure" running through all his works which, he says, they have all missed.

I scratched my head. "Is it something in the style or something in the thought? An element of form or an element of feeling?"

He indulgently shook my hand again, and I felt my questions to be crude and my distinctions pitiful.¹

1 "The Figure in the Carpet", Selected Tales of Henry James (1947) 1956, p. 187

James's joke (the *genre* of the tale, if any, is *shaggy dog story*) is to make fun of the critics' search for the figure in the carpet—which they conduct along the lines of the form-and-content distinction. What they miss is just the whole works of art, that is, the whole meaning. (James's hilarity is quite an achievement considering how much he had suffered from the inadequacy of critics. So he allows the critics in the tale to offer another fallacy: the author-as-authority:

I had above all to remind myself that with Vereker's death the major incentive dropped. He was still there to be honoured by what might be done—he was no longer there to give it his sanction. Who alas but he had the authority?¹

Who? Any critic with perspicacity to discern and articulacy sufficient to show others. For the critic does aim at common truth.)

Perhaps these things are too hard for me. What I am sure of is that to suppose language to be just a coding of pre-existent ideas into present indicative active sentences which are then clothed by various optional styles is a false doctrine which makes all the concepts—form, content, style—traps.

There is no harm in the expression “verse forms” as long as it does not mislead us into thinking that, like the form of service that varies the Psalms twice a day but within the same form, a heroic couplet is a form waiting to be filled up with two rhyming iambic pentameters, or that the content could be run into (Dryden's phrase) some other verse form, or the other harmony of prose, while retaining the same content.

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 214

Many books on English metres and many introductions to school editions of the poets give what they take to be the *forms* of verse forms. Iambic pentameter is five iambs, often stated on the page without any exemplification as

x / | x / | x / | x / | x / (x)

That is supposed to be the form of the iambic pentameter. Any ten or eleven syllables conformable to this pattern will be a pentameter; the form is not itself a pentameter. But the form is only demonstrable as a form when it has content. The more common method of teaching pentameter (both methods useless) is to say it goes

de *dum* de *dum* de *dum* de *dum* de *dum*

This is example not pure form; “de *dum*” is content as well as form. But no “de *dum*” can be thought of as either form or content before it is repeated five times to form a pentameter: they could only be seen as the form of a *pentameter* when they are so organised as to be the content of a pentameter.

Verse forms cannot vary without varying the whole poem, of which the (use of the) verse form is one aspect.

The iambic pentameter is as much a mode of meaning as the well-formed sentence, though in a different way. *Cursus* forms are modes of meaning. Like grammaticality of the well-formed sentence, regularity of pentameter will not guarantee meaning, but the reader/critic may truthfully point to ways in which it creates meaning. The same can be said of different styles of prose. Perhaps we want to say e.g. “He has nothing to say” or “a style in which it is impossible to tell the truth”. This can be useful but gets misleading as soon as there is any implication that style and content are separable entities.

In criticism of poetry “form” and “content” can be lenses for examining different aspects of a whole, the

meaning of which is the whole itself, not any paraphrasable proposition it may make. If, however, the mixed metaphor may be allowed, the lenses are edge tools, to be used with care (as well as discretion, for microscopic or telescopic observation is not always called for). The aim of rhetoric is to make possible what I have just called “common truth”.

Literary critics can make a much better shot than either empiricist philosophers or university linguists at discussing how language comes to mean, for literary critics practise the art of pointing to various kinds of meaning really made as we make and remake the written language. In this way criticism is more genuinely empirical than Linguistics.

Works of literature are much better than dictionaries or semantics at showing, by means of (as Lawrence called it) “art speech”, what words mean. What does *love* mean? Look *love* up in a dictionary? *Emma* or *Anna Karenina* or *King Lear* or *Macbeth* give us a far better idea of the range of the word. We are told that God is love. What does that mean? NED (1933 edn) definition of substantive *love* “2 In religious use, applied in an eminent sense to the paternal benevolence and affection of God towards His children” Would our mythical Martian have any faint notion of love from that? Better to read the New Testament. And look at your life (which you can hardly read these books without doing, though let’s hope we do not resemble Shakespeare’s tragic heroes and heroines). The word LOVE would be unintelligible to the visiting Martian unacquainted with human life, even if it read the New Testament. What is forgiveness? We ask to be forgiven as we ourselves forgive: but what do we mean? Shakespeare (and some other poets including Dickens) will show us.¹ The Gospels, like the novelists and dramatists, do not give definitions, they tell stories and make images. This does not prove them untrue.

1 Cf. John Haddon, *The Comedy of Forgiveness*, B, 2012

9 Truth

Why has the West allowed itself to be taken over by the notion that truth is restricted to the quite specialised language of what is verifiable by scientific hypothesis-formation and testing? As a sufficient idea of truth this is untrue. One consequence is that objections are made to some meaningful and potentially truthful uses of language. In common speech *true* can be a qualifier of human character as well as of propositions. If truth in language is found only in verifiable propositions as understood by Locke or Bertrand Russell, no couple has ever got married, no jury has ever pronounced a true verdict and all fiction is lies. "...I plight thee my truth," people say in the marriage service, using the older form *troth*. Incoherent, say the empiricists. "Trouthe thee shall deliver, it is no drede" must be judged quite meaningless. "She is a true scholar" does not mean only that she makes verifiable propositions, so, Ayer would say, it doesn't mean anything. (Was he a true philosopher?)

Augustine's absolute prohibition of lying takes lying to be asserting to be the case what is known not to be the case. This depends on an insufficient idea of truth. Rowan Williams discusses the example of a household in occupied territory during the Second World War, sheltering a Jew and raided by the Gestapo.¹ Should the Jews be protected by means of "lying", by saying something that is not the case in order to frustrate the search? Well, of course they should! The present point is that in the imagined circumstances the misleading of the would-be murderers counts as lies only by Augustinian/empiricist standards. What is truth? said jesting Pilate and would not stay for an answer. Truth is more than factually correct statements. In this case what is by empiricist standards a lie is actually and really the truth. In paraphrase it means something like, "If I give you a factually correct answer I shall be untrue to the good and

1 *The Edge of Words*, 2014, p.48

to loving my neighbour [yourself included]. *Truth* demands that I say something factually untrue.” The real meaning of the Gestapo inquiry is: We intend to murder these people. The intention (*vouloir dire* in French) of the reply is “Not if I can help it.” That is true.

Juries have to judge guilt. Is the accused guilty or not guilty? But juries have been known to acquit because *guilty*, though in accordance with the facts and the law, would be untrue. (This is, of course, dangerous territory: cheering up terminally ill patients by reassuring them of their recovery is untrue in all senses.)

This is another of the places that a tradition coming down from Aristotle and the Enlightenment has entered ordinary language. In the school playground a polite alternative to calling someone a fibber or liar used to be “You story!” short for “You story teller!” Stories were taken to be untrue. This is profoundly untrue. Fiction may be true or false though not in the same way as asserted “fact”. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” “Thy word is truth.” It does not follow that all the words proceeding from the mouth of God are verifiable propositions about the external world. Sometimes He speaks in parables and images.¹ The Bible cannot be fully the Word of God unless we realise that fiction can be true or false, though not in the same ways that history can be true or false² or scientific experiment. So can men and women be true or false. Members of juries

¹ This is obvious in the New Testament, where one of the differences between Jesus and his disciples is that he often teaches in parables. I offer the view that the books of Jonah and Job are moral fables not histories; the signs being the literary shaping e.g. of the first chapter of the latter, with the repeated messengers of disaster all using the same phraseology, and the presence of a strong comic element, as in Jonah’s flying from God then his exasperation when Nineveh is spared but the sunshade gourd is not. Many of the New Testament parables are music-hall funny: the man who buys a plot of ground then goes to test it, the man who has married a wife and therefore cannot come, the sower who wastes valuable seed by scattering it amongst rocks or thorns... I deny with any strength I can muster that anything in this note denies the truth of the Bible.

² Factual accuracy is not a sufficient condition of truth in history.

used to have to be reported as good men and true. In the traditional English wedding ceremony both parties have, as we noted, to pledge their truth.

To understand any writing properly we have to recognise, *inter alia*, whether it is offered as fact or fiction, but to equate this with knowing whether it can be true or false is deeply mistaken. An artist is untrue if insincere. A poet is untrue if his rhythms are wrong. A bell or a sentence may or may not ring true.

Jane Austen understands truth, and she knew what Mr Knightley means by his boast, "You hear nothing but truth from me."¹ This is in the middle of one kind of non-verifiable proposition, a proposal of marriage. The author's comment is on the next page:

Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it may not be very material.

This is a much truer idea of truth than verifiable objective proposition.

King Lear is true. What does it say? It says itself. It expresses the truth of some forms of evil, of pride, and also of forgiveness. And what does it say about them? It says what Shakespeare wrote. True? = depend on it, bet your life on it, put your faith in it.

Is the Christian way true? If we put our trust in God is he true? "He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."²

To make verifiable propositions is a quite special use of language which itself could hardly have come into being without a world in which we speak and write many other

1 *Emma* ed. R.W.Chapman, Oxford, (1923, 1944) 1965, p.430

2 1 John i.ix as in the Preparatory Sentences to Morning and Evening Prayer

kinds of senses, and without the quite specialised contexts where verifiable propositions are required. Moreover the meaning of a verifiable proposition is not explicable by its status as such, except in certain well-defined contexts. I mentioned the famous cat on the mat. And there is no reason to suppose that the use of well-formed sentences to make verifiable propositions has precedence in any grammar of meaningful utterance over, for instance, their use to make unverifiable propositions or fiction or lies. On the other hand, verifiable propositions can be made in a number of different grammatical forms. Biblical Hebrew has a convention of making a historical proposition by way of a rhetorical negative question.

Literary criticism has a better chance than school grammar or academic Linguistics of commenting on irony, context, style as mode of truth, but only if we are bold enough to defy the academic authorities.

10 Language as Inspiration

And how do we know what we really and truthfully want to say? We don't, before we say it.

All language is inspiration. We can put ourselves in a good situation to think or to say but then all the thoughts we have come to us. That our thoughts are inspired is recognised again and again in the Collects of the Book of Common Prayer. Daily throughout the year: "O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels and all just works do proceed..."¹ On the Christian day of days, "...as by thy special grace preventing [= going before] us thou dost put into our minds good desires..."² The word *inspiration* is not omitted: "...Grant to us thy humble servants, that by thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by thy merciful guiding may perform the same..."³

1 Second Collect at Evening Prayer 2 Easter Day

3 Fifth Sunday after Easter

Cf. the instruction of Jesus to his followers not to prepare in advance if brought before the courts, "For the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say."¹

There must be the other possibility, that our ideas come from a wrong source. So we pray "that we may be defended...from all evil thoughts which may assault the soul".² Bunyan was well aware of this. Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress* is relieved to know that the evil whisperings in his ears come from the Devil not himself.

Just when he was come over against the mouth of the burning Pit, one of the wicked ones got behind him, and stept up softly to him, and whisperingly suggested many grievous blasphemies to him, which he verily thought had proceeded from his own mind. [*margin*] Christian *made believe that he spake blasphemies, when 'twas Satan that suggested them into his mind.*³

But then it is his duty, God being his helper, to resist them.

These thoughts, godly or devilish, frequently come by way of intermediaries. When Peter exclaimed against the recognition by Jesus that he must be crucified, Jesus said, to his principal disciple, "Get thee behind me, Satan."⁴

Inspiration is not denied by the fact that we can be taught skills.

When [the plowman] hath made plain the face [of his ground], doth he not cast abroad the fitches, and scatter the cummin, and cast in the principal wheat and the appointed barley and the rie in their place?

For his God doth instruct him to discretion, and doth teach him.⁵

God does teach the plowman, not immediately but by way of a sort of apprenticeship from other plowmen, who have

1 Luke xii.12 2 Second Sunday in Lent

3 *The Pilgrim's Progress*, 1678, facs. repr. 1928, p. 80

4 Matthew xvi.23 5 Isaiah xxviii. 25-6

been taught by “tradition”. The individual’s responsibility, including the trainee plowman’s, is to judge.

Inspiration is often attributed to poets and composers. It comes to us all through reading and listening. Then we are always responsible, whether as trainee plowmen or readers or listeners, for judgement. The traditional plowing may be following bad methods. A composer may be overrated or underrated.

11 Of Judgement

The critic needs knowledge, but the defining function/capacity of the critic is judgement. Knowledge is the store mainly of what has come to me, and which I can call on. There is no guarantee of the truth of knowledge. Most knowledge I take on trust, swallowed down with the language, “common knowledge”. Ideas are only *my* ideas if I accept them or “identify with” them. (Even absolute presuppositions are only absolutely presupposed if you and I absolutely presuppose them individually.) I can decide to concentrate on something, and may even be able to do so, though unpredictably; but concentration is more like a mood than a method and brings no guarantee of results, any more than inspiration. (It is not impossible to feel inspired then go back and reject the inspiration.) What I have to do, with whatever help, guidance, or submission, is to accept responsibility for receiving, modifying or rejecting “what I think”.

How do I know when I get the right answer? There is no teacher’s tick, though there is the infrequent feeling of at last having got there. But there is no guarantee of the feeling. Even then I may be brought to see that I am wrong. But my judgement is what I am to be judged by.

Spring cleaning, time to wash the curtains. Sudden thought: I don’t like the colour: could I dye them at the same time? Where does *that* come from? From my knowledge of

the curtains and the room, but even here could I have the idea by following a course in how to have ideas? I doubt it. What I can do is ask whether it's a good idea, worth the effort and so on. Then if all goes well I, as they say, "make my mind up"—another expression worth consideration, like "making" for poetry, but not just here.

Is even this *judgement* mine? In the Collect for Whit Sunday we ask "by the same Spirit to have a right judgement in all things" (so including even about whether to dye the curtains). So the judgement too is inspiration? But we are then responsible for recognising and accepting the right judgement. Infinite regression is avoided by commitment to this acceptance. When *I* am judged it will be no excuse to say my judgement was faulty.

"Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.... For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom...another discerning of spirits...."¹ "Discerning of spirits" is an old name for literary criticism. The critic's responsibility is to discern amongst the spirits and not reject the Holy Spirit.

Imagination can be the scene of a kind of deep thought. Then the critic can help us recognise and judge the truthfulness and significance of the thought, for which judgement we remain individually responsible.

The amazing fact that the first person can be plural! I am I and you are you but we share language—otherwise you wouldn't be reading this. The language is *shared* inspiration which like every particular idea is subject to judgement. As Leavis recognised so clearly, literary criticism is discussion aiming at common judgement. Literary criticism is often muzzy or mistaken but it can be a form of truth.

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1 1 Corinthians xii.4, 8, 10

I felt the need for this discussion as a ground-clearing. It will have succeeded in its aim if (a) it provokes anyone else to thought and (b) it releases me to finish my two books. A criticism of Shakespeare's metres or of the tragic English novel is of intelligible ways of making sense in language, quite beyond the reach of orthodox linguistics and empiricist philosophy, and (if we are to retain the hazardous distinction of form and content) both of them in different ways viewing a whole by way of a style-aspect.

Literary criticism, in a very different style but as surely as physics, aims at common truth. Literary criticism can be, though it often fails to be, scientific: not in the degraded sense of *science* used at school but in the original sense: disciplined thought. How can I, without any pretensions to being a philosopher, expose centuries-old fallacies? I can do so by making explicit what any literary critic knows.

Whether what follows is true, or thought, or criticism, the reader, by the grammar of criticism, cannot read without judging.

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