

The Silence of Cratylus:
Post-Structuralism and Mysticism

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Thought Currents in English Literature
Volume LXV, December 1992

The English Literary Society of
AOYAMAGAKUIN UNIVERSITY

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Skepticism about the ability of language to communicate “truth” did not originate with post-structuralism, but is a recurring theme in the history of Western thought. Extreme medieval nominalism reduced speech and writing to nothing more than noises and wiggles on the page. Everything is just what it is; nothing is capable of representing anything else; hence language conveys no meaning. The Greek philosopher Cratylus, who was roughly contemporaneous with Socrates, had maintained that nothing can be said since reality is always in a state of flux. For words to have determinate meanings they must represent determinate objects. But Cratylus, influenced by Heraclitus’s maxim that it is impossible to step into the same river twice, concluded that if objects are constantly changing, no determinate meanings are possible. According to Aristotle’s account, Cratylus eventually opted for total silence and responded to anyone who spoke to him by wagging his finger.

Critics of deconstructionism are concerned that the present skepticism about language will reduce all rational discourse to little more than finger-wagging. The debate is thus not only about the viability of language, but also over whether any form of public discourse is possible. On the one side are the iconoclastic post-structuralists who gleefully point out that words have no deter-

minate meanings and who invite us to join in the play of signifiers; on the other the more sober-minded critics who grumble that words still “mean” something and that, despite some problems, language still plays a useful role in organizing experience. For both sides, if language is *not* an adequate vehicle for rational discourse, then all discourse must be arbitrary and irrational. Some deconstructionists delight in this conclusion, many critics are abhorred by it, but neither side questions whether any other choices are possible.

The problem raised by post-structuralism is little more than a modern variation on the ancient problem of whether truth (i.e., meaning) is objective and absolute or subjective and relative. We’ve been here many times before in the history of Western thought and, as the examples of medieval nominalism and Cratylus show, things may have been a lot worse. What a reading of history also shows, however, is that the only way to avoid being gored by either horn of a dilemma is to come up with a third alternative. Our current problem need not be reduced to a simple two-sided debate between those who attack the credibility of language and those who defend it. The contemplative *silence* and illuminative *gestures* of the medieval mystics and ancient Zen masters, so reminiscent of Cratylus, suggest a third possibility. Skepticism about language need not lead to cynicism, whether playful or serious, but can instead be a catalyst for spiritual and social liberation.

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It is unlikely that a new Plato will appear to combat the sophistry of deconstructionism by insisting that words such as Justice, capital J, have fixed meanings grounded on eternal ideas. Linguistic “absolutism” is no longer an option for us. We can ac-

cept the deconstructionists' essential theses that the meaning of words are not fixed and that any text can produce a variety of interpretations, some of which may even be contradictory. We can accept the critique that language does not live up to the expectations we previously had for it. It does not convey Absolute Truth and is not, as we are discovering, even very good at conveying many ordinary relative truths. Language contributes as much to misunderstandings as it helps to resolve them; it is as much a wall between people as it is a bridge. Language must be demystified, dethroned—not necessarily guillotined, but simply returned to its role as an ordinary citizen in human consciousness. Deconstructionism shatters our faith in the ability of language to give us, in Descartes' phrase, "clear and distinct ideas" about the world. Instead we must grope our way through a fog of ambiguities.

What is more debatable, however, is the post-structuralists' contention that there is no escape from the fog. Once language has been dethroned, we do not become more deeply entangled in words, but liberated from them. Might there not be a realm beyond language where we can leave the chains of Plato's cave behind us and walk in pure sunlight? Why insist that we are forever condemned to watching the play of shadows on the wall since all experience is mediated through language? Deconstructionism stands or falls with the assumption that there is no reality beyond images themselves. So if it can be shown that all experience is *not* mediated through language and that nonlinguistic forms of communication are possible, we will have found a way through the horns of the dilemma. We will no longer be beholden either to naive views about the ability of language to communicate Absolute Truth nor to the post-structuralists' glib attack on rational discourse. We can reopen the possibilities of silence and

gesture, replacing the Word with experience.

Structuralism, the precursor of contemporary deconstructionism, started from the premise that language is a self-contained system. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure distinguished between the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the set of noises and wiggles which designate concepts; the signified are the concepts so designated. The key idea is that words do not designate objects, but concepts. These concepts are organized into the linguistic systems we call languages, and as systems they are essentially complete. Saussure determined that referents—the concrete objects which words are commonly believed to refer to—are irrelevant from the linguist's perspective. All meaning is dependent upon language. There is no possibility of meaning existing outside of language.

Post-structuralism did not challenge Saussure's primary assumption that language is an enclosed self-referential system. Rather it questioned Saussure's belief that the meaning of words can be determined within the system itself. Jacques Derrida challenged structuralism by pointing out that differences exist not only between signifiers, but also *within* signifiers. A single word can have a variety of meanings, some of which may even be contradictory, depending on the contexts it occurs in. But the meaning of a word cannot be decided simply by considering its relationship to other signifiers since the precise meanings of these other signifiers are also not clear. We arrive at the essential *uninterpretability* of any utterance or text we might encounter. It is impossible for us to know exactly what speakers and authors mean by what they say and write.

In Derrida's view, when we try to interpret a text we search for a center, that is, a firm starting point which renders the meaning of the individual words and their relationship to each other clear.

Meanings can then crystallize around this center in much the same way that rock candy crystallizes around a string placed in sugar water. Western philosophy has attempted to locate this center in a variety of places—in consciousness, transcendentalism, God, humanity, and the like. But any such center is not contained within the text itself. It must be imposed on the text from the outside. There is no reason to prefer one particular “center” over any other, however, since any explanation as to why one center is preferable to others must itself be made within language. Because we can only talk about philosophical language by using more philosophical language, philosophy cannot be used to criticize philosophy. If one set of signifiers cannot be used to explain another set of signifiers, the result is that deconstructive interpretations can themselves be deconstructed. We are caught up in an endless chain of signifiers from which there is no escape.

According to Derrida, any center we choose is purely functional. It does not represent an absolute starting point, but merely a relative one. Decentering is the process by which we come to question the ultimate validity of any particular center. But Western thought has typically refused to recognize that all such centers are provisional; if one particular center is found wanting, philosophers simply go off in search of another. The result is our tendency to think that such centers are necessary in order to preserve linguistic stability and interpretative closure. Without a secure center we are left only with the freeplay of signifiers. In other words, all language is poetry, a wordplay, which discloses nothing about the world we live in and is useless as a tool for guiding future action.

Deconstructionism proceeds on the assumption, as we have noted, that there is no exit from the labyrinth of language. Language is everything—this indeed is the central theme of the so-

called “linguistic turn” of twentieth century thought. It is easy to see how inextricably thought is bound up with language, but can it be further assumed that all human experience can be reduced to language? Certainly experience can only be *talked about* within language, but this does not necessarily entail the reductionism that all experience is *mediated* through language. Heidegger held that there is no such thing as direct, unmediated experience, discrediting the Cartesian idea that preconceptions can be bracketed out through a methodological doubt which leaves the mind totally blank and receptive. Experience is indeed ordered in a variety of complex ways, and without this ordering we would only experience a flow of meaningless sensations. But to say that all experience is mediated *through language* is oversimplistic. Even though “pure consciousness” as such may be illusionary, we can still inquire about the possibility of a realm of experience outside of language. The paradox, of course, is that we can only perform this inquiry within language.

3

Post-structuralism is concerned solely with the relationship between signifiers and not at all with the relationship between referents—human beings and objects—in immediate experience. The classic problem of how signifiers are related to referents, that is, of how words are related to objects, is not resolved by the deconstructionists in any satisfactory way, but simply ignored. It is inadequate to account for referents simply by saying that they have no place in the system. While Saussure may have made a convincing case that referents are irrelevant from the point of view of *linguistics*, this does not entail that referents are irrelevant from other, perhaps non-linguistic, perspectives.

By focusing exclusively on language we have avoided, rather

than faced up to, the problem of how the world of language and the world of experience are related to each other. The result is a linguistic solipsism which collapses all experience into language and denies any reality outside of language. We are no longer full and complete biological beings which stand in bodily relationships with other bodies, but cerebral spirits with no function beyond the processing of linguistic symbols. A wholistic outlook is thus precluded from the very start. Body is cut off from mind and we are reduced to the half-human. Since our bodies are merely referents, they are totally irrelevant as far as language is concerned. And language is everything, at least as long as we remain in the post-structuralist camp.

I, for one, want my body back. The tendency to emphasize the conceptual over the real, the image over the concrete, is simply one more instance of the West's gnostic tendency to privilege spirit over matter. Western thought frequently attempts to dissolve its dualisms into monisms by cutting off one horn or the other of a dilemma, and positing the remaining horn as the whole. Thus, spirit is cut off from matter and becomes All, as with medieval other-worldliness, or the reverse, as with modern materialism. In post-structuralism, language is cut off from other forms of experience and becomes, as it were, the Parmenidian One.

A more wholistic approach would be to see all language as contained within experience rather than all experience as contained within language. Language is *part of* experience, not the *whole of* experience. There are areas of experience which stand outside of language. And if it is true that not all experience and communication is mediated through symbols, then more *im*-mediate forms of experience and communication must be possible. I am not talking here about a mystical, intuitive insight into metaphysical "reality." The Kantian *Ding-an-sich* may remain inaccessible to us;

we may not be able to posit an *objective* “scientific” account of the world based on an isomorphic correspondence between language and a world outside language; but such a recognition does not thereby compel us to reduce all uses of language to the merely *subjective*. In the kind of immediate experience I am considering there is no dualistic split between subject and object; experience itself is nondualistic—one seamless whole. Any dualistic distinctions which arise are themselves linguistic conceptualizations occurring within the parameters of experience.

Experience is nonetheless extraordinarily complex. It is a tautology to say that all thinking is dependent upon language and then to claim that thought cannot escape language. Thinking itself does not occupy a clear and distinct compartment in human consciousness. “Thought” cannot be separated from, or made dominant to, other types of experiences, such as perception, emotions, memories, and the like—all the other unclear and indistinct flotsam of consciousness. (Moreover, any typology of consciousness is itself a product of consciousness.) Language may play a role in ordering experience, but not all experience is so ordered, and experience which is not ordered is not *ipso facto* “meaningless.” Language is but one component in the complexity that makes up human experience, and not necessarily the most important part.

Consider perception. Regardless of whether we see language as describing an objective reality “out there” or merely our “inner” perception of it (a false dualism to begin with, however), how adequate is language for communicating perceptual experience? In any given field of vision—a room for example—we do not name all of the objects we see. It simply takes too much time to conceptualize everything we experience, and only a fraction can be reduced to language. If we attempted to reduce ev-

everything we perceive to language, it would be a horrendous task, since each of the distinct objects we perceive would have to be labeled. Moreover, what qualifies as a “distinct object”? How will we use language to divide up what we see? Should a table count as a single object, a complex of top and legs, or a composite of lines and surfaces? How detailed a description would be necessary in order to fully convey our perception to another person? Would an account of the length, breadth, and height of the table be any more significant than a description of the distances between various scratch marks on the table? A *complete* description would not be able to employ any principle of selection, since selection by its very nature emphasizes one set of features over another, and thus fails to account for the whole.

The end result is that any description of what we saw would have to be less than fully communicative about what we have perceived. Moreover, even if we were able to give an adequate account of our perception of the room, this would not necessarily be an adequate account of the room itself. We would only be able to give our account from the perspective of having been in the room at a particular point in space and time. Moving to different positions in the room would yield different perceptions, but it would still be virtually impossible to see the room from all possible positions (including unusual perspectives, such as from positions *inside* the table). A complete account would ultimately have to include a description of the arrangement of each and every atom which makes up the room. Any given arrangement, moreover, is not static, but has a history and a future. A “complete description” would also have to account for all past and all possible future arrangements.

The world is not a snapshot that can be studied at one’s leisure. Like Cratylus, we are overwhelmed by the Heraclitean conclusion

that everything is in a state of flux. There is no “total” point of view, only a patchwork of limited perspectives. The room-in-itself, remains inaccessible to us, and hence essentially incommunicable. Any attempt to reduce our experience of the room to language would necessarily involve distortions based on our time-space perspective, our principle of selectivity, and the inherent limitations of language itself. We can either recognize these inadequacies and content ourselves with using language the best we can, or we can be reduced, like Cratylus, to finger-wagging silence.

These considerations point out the impracticability of a project like logic positivism which felt the world could be adequately described by reducing it to “atomic facts.” Absolute scientific knowledge about the world would require knowing at any given point in time all of the factual relations between objects. Even if the world “stood still” long enough for us to give such an account, we would have to divide the world conceptually into “objects” and invent symbols to designate each of these “objects.” Each symbol would have to designate (i.e., name) a single “object” since perceived similarities between “objects” are purely conceptual. The symbols we created would then constitute a full mirror image of the “objects” of the world, in a one-to-one isomorphic relationship—anything less would be forced to employ a principle of selectivity which, as we have noted, would result in a partial, not a complete, account.

While the symbols in such a construction would parallel “objects” in the world and their relationships with each other, they would hardly *explain* them, since the relationships between the various symbols would be *identical* with the relationships between “objects” in the world. Explanation always involves reducing experience to a limited number of *similar* cases (involving principles of selectivity), which of necessity limits the uniqueness of any

particular case. Language is predicated on the assumption that words can stand for more than one particular “object;” the word “chair,” for example, can be used to designate millions of particular “objects” in the world. But the word itself can never communicate to us exactly what a *particular* chair is like. And the only way to find out what a particular chair is like is to *experience* it for oneself.

In reality, though, before we could even begin describing the world in such a way, the world will have moved on to a new set of factual relations between objects. By necessity, then, all knowledge of the world, no matter how “scientific,” is fragmentary and incomplete, unable to escape from the flow of change. To further complicate the issue, we have not even begun to consider that which lies *beyond* human experience, both the unknown which we have not yet encountered, and the unknowable which it may, in the nature of things, be impossible for human beings to experience. Whereas cynics see the fragmentary nature of knowledge as an occasion for despair, the mystics see it as an occasion for awe—and also a bit of humility, since they realize that the world itself can never be contained by human conceptions of it. We could only be sure of our knowledge of the world if we were aware of the whole, but since we are never aware of the whole, we must always check our pride in thinking that we do in fact have a knowledge of it.

The cosmos is not reducible to language. The cynicism of the West at the limitations of human knowledge is the result of a previous overconfidence in our abilities, stemming from the same anthropocentrism that prompted Protagoras’s “Man is the measure of all things.” We *believed* that language could do all of these wonderful things for us, and now we find out that it can’t. What has been shattered, then, are simply our previous illusions.

Our real situation hasn't changed in the least. We are still obliged to live out our lives, make choices, and use language the best we can, unless as Camus suggested, we choose to resolve the problem of meaning by committing suicide.

4

Nonetheless, the deconstructionist might counter that while the cosmos itself is not reducible to language, all *thoughts* about the cosmos are, and this is precisely where we delude ourselves into thinking that we have grasped hold of the truth of the universe when in fact all we have grasped hold of is the "truth" inherent in language. Language is, as we are constantly reminded, an inherited system. We are obliged to express ourselves with words we ourselves did not invent and which may or may not be adequate to convey our experience of the world.

This point is well-taken. But the difficulty is no longer simply the meanings of signifiers, but the difficulty of trying to use these signifiers to communicate experience beyond signifiers. By re-focusing on experience, we reopen the question of the relationship between signifier and referent, between language and experience. We also raise the possibility that what we wish to communicate is apart from language and therefore can be communicated without resorting to language. In other words, referents stand in relationships to other referents in much the same way that signifiers stand in relationships to one another, and the relationships between referents are themselves "communicative."

In a sense we can say that all experiences of the world are dissimilar in that we each have different sets of experiences. When we have had an experience and we want to communicate it to someone else, we know the meanings which we are trying to convey. But we are also aware that the meanings we send out on the

vehicles of language may not be the ones which are being recreated in the listener's mind. There is, then, a divergence between the intended and received messages, and the received message can be distorted in any number of ways.

A precondition of communication, then, is shared experience. When I tell someone who has had the experience of eating watermelon that I ate watermelon for supper last night, I can be reasonably sure that the person will understand what I mean. Nonetheless, it is still possible to distinguish between the particular watermelon I ate and the particular watermelons which the other person has eaten. This emphasis on particularity parallels Aristotle's distinction between "whatness" and "thisness." The listener "knows" my experience of eating watermelon by comparing it with his or her own experience of eating watermelons. The listener recognizes, of course, that the two experiences are the "same" only in a general sense (whatness), but not in a particular sense (thisness). That is, the other person still does not fully know what it was like for me to have eaten that particular watermelon on that particular night. All experience is thus ultimately individual from the point of view of particularity. There is no authentic vicarious experience. Each person's experience is the person's own, and no one person's experience can substitute for another's. Hence, at best there can only be a kind of analogy between two individuals' particular experiences, despite the fact that there is not a complete disjunction between them.

The situation is complicated when communication is attempted between individuals who have not shared the same experiences. No amount of explaining will enable me to convey what Japanese *umeboshi* tastes like to people who have never tried it. I can name it a "pickled plum" and describe it as extremely salty and sour, but this will do absolutely nothing to prepare people who have

never tasted *umeboshi* for the actual taste of it. In this example, communication is best effected not through language, but through direct experience. I can best “communicate” the taste of *umeboshi*, not by describing it in language, but by letting the persons with whom I wish to communicate try it for themselves. This form of “direct communication” dispenses with language altogether (just as structuralism dispenses with referents altogether), and shows its superiority to communication through language precisely because it is unmediated by language. Direct experience is an *im*-mediate, rather than a mediated form of communication.

This emphasis on shared experiences recovers a sense of body, that is, a sense not just of *thinking about* the world and attempting to describe it in language, but a sense of actually *being in* the world and participating in its activities. In addition to the self-contained system of language with its play of signifiers, we can also posit a self-contained system of experience with a “play of referents,” as it were. We have reintroduced, then, the tension between the two Cartesian worlds of mind and body, and we have raised again the problem of how these worlds are related to each another. My intention, however, is not to set up a new dualism between language and experience, but simply to point out that the truncated linguistic monism of post-structuralism is inadequate to account for the full range of human experience. What I’m after is simply a more wholistic perspective.

We acknowledge, then, from the very start the inability of language to adequately communicate either about the world or about our experience of the world. We can see that within its points of reference there is no opportunity *within language* to escape from language and to really understand what a person is attempting to communicate through language. In other words, we can accept many of the pessimistic conclusions of the post-structuralists with-

out, however, despairing that there is no escape from the “play of signifiers.” If we see signifiers themselves as referents, then language cannot escape from the “play of referents” either.

5

The skepticism about the possibility of language to communicate adequately about our experiences is encountered in mysticism. Two traditions, the Zen Buddhist and the medieval Christian, offer excellent examples. In the West Pseudo-Dionysius, who was influenced by Plotinus’s Neoplatonism, distinguished between apophatic and cataphatic theology. In apophatic theology no positive statements about God are possible. God can only be described in negative terms, as “not this and not that” (*cf.* the Hindu *neti, neti*). This is because God, is not *a* being, but *beyond* being, that is, not reducible to a *particular* thing. As with Derrida, any positive use of a word contains within it its own opposite. The tendency of conventional theology is to privilege God’s “goodness” over God’s “evilness.” But Dionysius explodes the tension between these opposites by saying that neither fully describes the whole. Therefore, we are unable to say what God is, only what God is not. Apophatic theology is totally skeptical about the ability of language to adequately communicate “divine truth.”

Clearly, then, if God is to be experienced he cannot simply be thought. No accurate thoughts about God are possible precisely because no adequate language about God is possible. God, in short, cannot be exhausted by creeds and dogmas which, in the final analysis, are not “divine truths” but human constructions. The idea of God, then, is fully deconstructed, and what we are left with is the direct mystical experience of God or nothing at all. The “nothingness” of God can either lead to the nihilism of Nietzsche (and contemporary deconstructionist theologians such

as Thomas Altizer for whom “God is dead”), or it can lead to the paradoxical conclusion of mysticism that once all *concepts* of the divine have been destroyed the *experience* of the divine becomes a real possibility. Zen Buddhism speaks of this encounter as the Great Doubt, the nothingness or *mu*, we must come to terms with before direct experience is possible. Reformulated in more modern terminology, any attempt to encounter “ultimate reality” involves moving beyond language. Only by iconoclastically destroying every idol is it possible to come to immediate experience itself.

From the apophatic point of view all ideas about God are de-centered. God does not, in the Derridian sense, serve as the “center” which holds everything else together. This explains the conflicts the mystics often had with orthodoxy: they refused to limit their experience to dogmatic formulations. The decentering of God was aptly expressed by the medieval maxim, “God is a circle whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” On the one hand the mystics had a keen sense of the immanence of the divine in human experience, yet they also had a keen sense of the transcendence of the divine since the experience of a single individual could never exhaust it. Thus it is impossible for one individual, group, or historical period to fully define the experience of the divine. As with the contemporary post-structuralist, Jean-Francois Lyotard, any attempt to describe the whole would result in an inadequate “totalization” in which one’s own experience (or the experience of one’s group or historical period) is mistaken for the All. The Other is thus forcibly eliminated. That Christianity in fact became an oppressive “metanarrative” (Lyotard’s term) of doctrine and dogmas which excluded each and every Other who stood outside the Church is a matter of historical record. That the mystics tried to avoid this result is also a matter

of historical record. Christianity for them was not a metanarrative, not a system of theological definitions which by their very nature draw boundaries, but a living experience. It was the Pharisees, not Christ, who wanted to reduce religion to an oppressive set of legalistic rules.

Consequently Dionysius did not feel obliged, as contemporary critics of deconstructionism do, to defend rationality. Neither, however, did he see the demise of rationality as plunging us into irrationality. Rather, for Dionysius, rationality is something to be transcended. Moving beyond the Word, we come to experience. The purpose of the Word is to lead us to experience, and we must not confuse the one with the other. In the well-known Buddhist proverb, we must not mistake the finger for the moon. Rationalists and post-structuralists are debating, then, about the finger, not the moon. In Zen there is the same skepticism towards language one finds in Dionysius and strategies, such as meditation and the koan, which forcibly attempt to *break down* our ordinary conceptions about the world in order to arrive at a more direct experience of it. Silence and gesture (striking disciples, breaking things) replace verbal communication as primary teaching devices.

Of the mystical state itself nothing can be said, neither for the apophatic Christian mystics nor the “nihilistic” Zen Buddhists. We cannot even say, much as orthodox Christianity would like us to say, that “God exists.” We are obliged to remain silent. In the experience of the divine (whether designated as the Christian God or the Buddhist *mu*) we find ourselves at one with it. If we ask what difference there is between ourselves and the divine, we must descend back again into the discursive thought of doctrines and ideas, which divides things on the basis of artificial concepts rather than unites them on the basis of actual experience. There-

fore the experience itself cannot be communicated to someone else; it is totally nonvicarious. The best that we can do is to invite others to experience it for themselves. For the mystics this apophatic experience is arrived at primarily through contemplation, which is the gradual stripping away of attachment to, among other things, language and concepts. Not that the mind is emptied and a state of “pure consciousness” is reached. Rather we come to see conceptual thinking for what it is: a single movement in a much vaster repertoire of consciousness.

Nonetheless precisely because language is also a part of consciousness, Pseudo-Dionysius held that it is not simply useless. Cataphatic theology, holding that any positive statements which are made about God must be regarded as purely metaphorical, complements apophatic theology. The metaphorical nature of these statements places them beyond Aristotelian logic because they are both true (in a poetic sense) and false (in a literal sense) at the same time. The paradoxical nature of cataphatic statements complements the paradoxical nature of apophatic statements, the latter being neither true nor false (in any sense whatsoever). Thus, in addition to the conventional categories of truth (T) and falsehood (F), we also have the categories of apophatic negation ($\sim T \cdot \sim F$) and cataphatic metaphor (T•F). Apophatic negation resembles the post-structuralists’ nihilistic view of language, cataphatic metaphor the play of signifiers.

Metaphorical meanings are conveyed primarily through symbols. Iconography played an important role in Eastern Orthodox mysticism precisely because it was seen not as an end in itself, but as a means of individual transformation. If the icon is worshipped as an end in itself it of course becomes an idol. If the icon is used to awaken one’s own inner experience, however, it becomes a vehicle of personal transformation. Carl Jung saw a

deep connection between the symbol of Christ, as one in whom the human and the divine are fully united, and fully realized human potential. If Christ is set up as an object of devotion, he becomes an idol and it is then impossible for individuals to realize the union of the divine and the human within themselves (that is, in immediate experience). Eastern Orthodoxy rejected this approach with its doctrine of *theosis*, or deification. Christ is not only a historical personage (i.e., human), but also a living spiritual reality (i.e., divine). By “identifying” with Christ, humans themselves become instances of the fusion of the divine and the human—incarnate gods. They do not stand in a hierarchical relationship with Christ, but are one with him, and therefore one with God. The result is a radical “equality,” or horizontal relationship between the divine and the human.

The meeting point of the divine and the human is experience, in which no dualistic oppositions are possible. And the result is not simply a subjective “inner” feeling, but a transformed life which brings the subjective to bear on the objective. Transformed individuals in turn transform the world. The goal, to parody Marx, is not simply to be caught up in a play of signifiers about the world, but to change it. Language and symbols do not become ends in themselves, but tools for transformation. Medieval hermeneutics allowed for a variety of levels of meaning by positing four modes of interpretation—the literal, the moral, the allegorical, and the anagogical. The Bible is “inspired” precisely because it has transformative power—the individual experiences the death of ego and the resurrection of a more authentic self. By confining themselves to the literal, historical meanings of the Biblical text both fundamentalism and modern Biblical criticism lose the moral and transformative power of the Word. Religion, however, is not about what happened “back then,” but about

what's going on right now. The self is changed and the self goes on to change the world. Both the "subjective" self and the "objective" world are involved in the process. Christianity expresses the first of these transformations as being "born again," the second—the flow from inner to outer, from self to others—as "love." Buddhism expresses the former as "enlightenment" and the latter as "compassion."

The apophatic use of language, then, is negative and destructive. It delegitimizes all legitimations and collapses all oppressive metanarratives, thus allowing space for immediate experience. The cataphatic use of language on the other hand is positive and reconstructive. All meanings are recognized as being nothing more than human constructs, which are neither handed down from above (conventional revelation) nor adhering in the essential nature of things (natural law). Metaphors themselves are part of the play of experience, and experience replaces language as the locus of meaning. Apophatic language is death; cataphatic language is resurrection. The nihilistic tendency in deconstructionism understands only the first of these possibilities.

6

When we look at the world "as it is," are we satisfied with what we see? If we define well-being purely in terms of personal happiness and happen to have had good fortune, we may well conclude that God is in his heaven and all is right with the world. To reach such a conclusion, however, we must restrict consciousness to the surface level of the personal, ignoring everything that doesn't fit within its particular frame of reference. As soon as we begin to expand our consciousness, however, both inwardly into our own "subjective" state and outwardly into the "objective" world, we become unsettled, because then we see that, whether

God is in his heaven or not, all is certainly not right with the world. All is not right with our inner selves either. We have been living in a shell which we now want to liberate ourselves from. Our expanding awareness makes naivety impossible. We are east of Eden. We have the knowledge of good and evil. It is impossible for us to return to the garden of innocence. We are forced to toil outside its gate and to work out our own salvation.

Our awareness of the discrepancy between the world as it is and the world as it might be involves a wider sense of self. As long as self is simply “individual self,” ego, it remains limited and unrealized. The best that it can become is a Nietzschean Overman. But as self begins to transcend ego and to become aware of both the depths within and the horizons without, it begins to widen. Soul becomes Oversoul (Emerson’s adaptation of Plotinus). Rather than define ourselves as parts within the whole, we identify ourselves with the whole. The expansion of consciousness leads us to a more empathetic appreciation of the Other. We do not attempt merely to *communicate* with the Other verbally through language, but to *understand* the Other’s situation more concretely through shared experience. The best way to improve communication is not to talk to, but to live with, others. Cross-cultural misunderstandings, for example, are minimized when people from two cultures have an “experiential” as well as a “verbal” understanding of the other culture.

On the one hand, we realize that the whole can only be grasped by an expansion of consciousness, on the other, that the whole cannot be grasped all at once. Something like eternity would be required for us to do an adequate job of it, but by the time we have grasped the whole it will already have changed into something else. In the meantime we must settle for a limited, but constantly expanding horizon of consciousness, which permits no false

“totalizing,” but at the same time is able to explore in our divine-human imagination *the world as it might be*. Our imaginative explorations of this world involve clarifying values and making choices. What kind of world would we like to live in and how are we going to make our imaginative vision a reality?

The easy way out is to avoid posing such questions. Thus we see in modern culture the depreciation of “imagination” and “value judgements” in favor of the “cold hard facts” of science. Values are regarded as “purely subjective,” whereas facts are not. But science can only show us the world as it is, not as it might be. It is ultrareactionary in that it has no plans for the future, no new ideas about where the world might go. It is unable to transform the world or to create a new one. It can only doggedly describe our present situation and offer us no guidance for the future. Its literary equivalent is the ultrarealism which wallows in our modern “excremental culture” and presents us with no possible escape from the cesspool of “reality.” We know what it is like to die the death of a salesman, but haven’t a clue as to what would constitute a life really worth living. Television programs “entertain” us with the blood and gore of war and inner city streets, but we are fairly short on ideas of how to create lasting peace and decent neighborhoods. Our creative imaginations have been thoroughly blunted by our obsession with the “real.”

The very fact of our existence necessitates, however, that we act. We are, as Sartre claimed, condemned to freedom—at the very least we cannot, in Fromm’s words, escape from it. How we act, moreover, is not purely a “subjective” matter, since our actions help to determine the “objective” course of events. Ethics is concerned not with “subjective value judgements” but with how things actually stand in the world and how they might be changed. This view of ethics moves far beyond the usual

“subject-object” split of traditional Western thought. Since we cannot perform two or more different acts at the same time, we are obliged to choose between various possibilities. Freedom cannot be negated. By following a particular course we pursue one alternative to the exclusion of others. The more we refuse to make conscious decisions about our future the more we lose control over it. The more we are able to imagine possible futures, however, the wider our range of choice becomes.

One function of art (among many others), then, is transformation. Art—by which I mean all types of cataphatic expression, including political discourse about how society might be organized—is the imaginative ground in which we explore human potential and possible futures for ourselves. The only way the future can be encountered is through the imagination, and this is precisely where cataphatic modes of expression become most useful. Art which explores desirable futures is *utopian*. Utopian expression is concerned less with the world as it is than with the world as it might be. Only when utopias come to be taken as inevitabilities rather than as working hypotheses for future experiments do they become Lyotard’s oppressive “metanarratives.” Utopian thinking enables us to imaginatively explore new forms of life before attempting to make them realities. Utopias thus employ metaphorical, rather than literal language, emphasizing the “possible” over the “real.” Rather than draw attention to their own language—*art pour l’art*—utopias point beyond language to creatively imagined, yet authentically possible, states of being.

The goal of such art, then, is not aesthetics but transformation. It is an attempted reordering not only of thought but of the material conditions of existence. It is concerned not simply with relationships between signifiers, but with relationships between referents. Experience reveals not only worlds of symbolic order-

ings, but also worlds of human and material orderings, which humans themselves are responsible for. In one sense it is true that all orderings are inherited, that we cannot choose the world we are brought into. But this recognition captures only one side of the dialectic. The other side is that humans also constantly modify existing orderings and create entirely new ones. We must choose either to accept our world as it is or to change it. Art is revolutionary in way that science is not because it is a means of imagining what we would like to change the world into. But this function is only possible when art is utopian rather than merely aesthetic, revolutionary rather than merely self-indulgent.

In some cases language and art might be used as catalysts for effecting change. In other cases they might be dispensed with altogether, as in silent communion with nature or passionate love-making, i.e., silence and gesture. Having shown how inadequate language is to communicate such experiences, however, hardly invalidates the experiences themselves. Doing encompasses all of saying, but the reverse is simply not true. What we do defines us more than what we say—"existence precedes essence" in Sartre's terminology. In many cases, words are simply not necessary: silence and gesture communicate all.

Interpretation, then, is not only a matter of understanding what someone means by looking at the language they use, but also of having shared experiences which render the language intelligible. In other words, it is not language which renders experience intelligible, but experience which renders language intelligible. Without shared experience, language indeed becomes mere wordplay. Shared experience, however, cannot be based either in objects (Saussure's referents), which merely perpetuates the old materialism, nor in subjective consciousness (Saussure's signifiers), which merely perpetuates the old idealism, but in a nondualistic "union"

which sees selves, not as separate from, but as “one” with each other and the world.

Communication under this model becomes a set of shared experiences. It is not that I, acting alone, impose my future vision of the world on others, but that out of our shared experiences new visions of the future will emerge. The emergence of these visions depends upon a social discourse which engages our imaginations. Can we imagine, for example, a world in which no one is hungry, in which everyone has the basic necessities of life, in which there is no hierarchy or oppression, in which human potential can be realized to its fullest? How does this imagined vision of the future compare with one which, for example, sees everyone greedily pursuing their own self-interests? Which alternative is preferable? Who should decide? And after we decide, how do we make our imagined vision a reality?

These considerations do not show us how such questions should be answered, only that they can be asked. If we do not participate in the decision-making processes which determine our own futures, we are then obliged to follow the decisions others make on our behalf. One imagined future is *not* just as good as any other, since choice is not purely arbitrary but defined by the parameters of what we ourselves conceive to be desirable and of what is actually achievable. Within nature itself there are parameters which determine certain optimal, if not absolute, conditions of existence. Claiming that no public discourse is possible on such questions simply limits human choice and plays into the hands of those who wish to preserve the status quo. The post-structuralists are frequently criticized for deconstructing existing legitimations and ideologies but not having anything to put in their place. Utopian thinking replaces legitimation with apophatic iconoclasm, ideology with cataphatic vision.

One valid reason for reading is precisely to expand consciousness. We want to be changed by what we read. We read not only to be entertained or to stimulate ourselves intellectually, but to expand our awareness of the world. The emphasis on consciousness and the acts which follow from it reopens the possibility of a new kind of "moral" criticism. But rather than approach such criticism from the point of view of existing ideologies or "metanarratives" (Marxism, Christianity, feminism, etc.), we can look closely at how texts extend our awareness and then at how this extended awareness affects our acts and ways of being in the world. Texts which expand consciousness and lead to more authentic activity "move" us more than texts which are shallow, clichéd, obscure, or self-absorbed.

For discourse to be truly democratic, the active participation of everyone is required. We can no longer live solely in a spectator culture which leaves decision-making power in the hands of elites while the masses are bought off with bread and circuses. A participatory culture involves active participation in social discourse rather than the merely passive consumption of mediated reality.

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