

Sillogie dei saggi da tradurre - L 10 - Lettere Moderne

Words and Behavior  
(1936)  
Aldous Huxley

Words form the thread on which we string our experiences. Without them we should live spasmodically and intermittently. Hatred itself is not so strong that animals will not forget it, if distracted, even in the presence of the enemy. Watch a pair of cats, crouching on the brink of a fight. Balefully the eyes glare; from far down in the throat of each come bursts of a strange, strangled noise of defiance; as though animated by a life of their own, the tails twitch and tremble. With aimed intensity of loathing! Another moment and surely there must be an explosion. But no; all of a sudden one of the two creatures turns away, hoists a hind leg in a more than fascist salute and, with the same fixed and focused attention as it had given a moment before to its enemy, begins to make a lingual toilet. Animal love is as much at the mercy of distractions as animal hatred. The dumb creation lives a life made up of discreet and mutually irrelevant episodes. Such as it is, the consistency of human characters is due to the words upon which all human experiences are strung. We are purposeful because we can describe our feelings in rememberable words, can justify and rationalize our desires in terms of some kind of argument. Faced by an enemy we do not allow an itch to distract us from our emotions; the mere word "enemy" is enough to keep us reminded of our hatred, to convince us that we do well to be angry. Similarly the word "love" bridges for us those chasms of momentary indifference and boredom which gape from time to time between even the most ardent lovers. Feeling and desire provide us with our motive power; words give continuity to what we do and to a considerable extent determine our direction. Inappropriate and badly chosen words vitiate thought and lead to wrong or foolish conduct. Most ignorances are vincible, and in the greater number of cases stupidity is what the Buddha pronounced it to be, a sin. For, consciously, or subconsciously, it is with deliberation that we do not know or fail to understand—because incomprehension allows us, with a good conscience, to evade unpleasant obligations and responsibilities, because ignorance is the best excuse for going on doing what one likes, but ought not, to do. Our egotisms are incessantly fighting to preserve themselves, not only from external enemies, but also from the assaults of the other and better self with which they are so uncomfortably associated. Ignorance is egotism's most effective defense against that Dr. Jekyll in us who desires perfection; stupidity, its subtlest stratagem. If, as so often happens, we choose to give continuity to our experience by means of words which falsify the facts, this is because the falsification is somehow to our advantage as egotists.

Consider, for example, the case of war. War is enormously discreditable to those who order it to be waged and even to those who merely tolerate its existence. Furthermore, to developed sensibilities the facts of war are revolting and horrifying. To falsify these facts, and by so doing to make war seem less evil than it really is, and our own responsibility in tolerating war less heavy, is doubly to our advantage. By suppressing and distorting the truth, we protect our sensibilities and preserve our self-esteem. Now, language is, among other things, a device which men use for suppressing and distorting the truth. Finding the reality of war too unpleasant to contemplate, we create a verbal alternative to that reality, parallel with it, but in quality quite different

from it. That which we contemplate thenceforward is not that to which we react emotionally and upon which we pass our moral judgments, is not war as it is in fact, but the fiction of war as it exists in our pleasantly falsifying verbiage. Our stupidity in using inappropriate language turns out, on analysis, to be the most refined cunning.

The most shocking fact about war is that its victims and its instruments are individual human beings, and that these individual human beings are condemned by the monstrous conventions of politics to murder or be murdered in quarrels not their own, to inflict upon the innocent and, innocent themselves of any crime against their enemies, to suffer cruelties of every kind.

The language of strategy and politics is designed, so far as it is possible, to conceal this fact, to make it appear as though wars were not fought by individuals drilled to murder one another in cold blood and without provocation, but either by impersonal and therefore wholly non-moral and impassible forces, or else by personified abstractions.

Here are a few examples of the first kind of falsification. In place of "cavalrymen" or "foot-soldiers" military writers like to speak of "sabres" and "rules." Here is a sentence from a description of the Battle of Marengo: "According to Victor's report, the French retreat was orderly; it is certain, at any rate, that the regiments held together, for the six thousand Austrian sabres found no opportunity to charge home." The battle is between sabres in line and muskets in Echelon—a mere clash of ironmongery.

On other occasions there is no question of anything so vulgarly material as ironmongery. The battles are between Platonic ideas, between the abstractions of physics and mathematics. Forces interact; weights are flung into scales; masses are set in motion. Or else it is all a matter of geometry. Lines swing and sweep; are protracted or curved; pivot on a fixed point.

Alternatively the combatants are personal, in the sense that they are personifications. There is "the enemy," in the singular, making "his" plans, striking "his" blows. The attribution of personal characteristics to collectivities, to geographical expressions, to institutions, is a source, as we shall see, of endless confusions in political thought, of innumerable political mistakes and crimes. Personification in politics is an error which we make because it is to our advantage as egotists to be able to feel violently proud of our country and of ourselves as belonging to it, and to believe that all the misfortunes due to our own mistakes are really the work of the Foreigner. It is easier to feel violently toward a person than toward an abstraction; hence our habit of making political personifications. In some cases military personifications are merely special instances of political personifications. A particular collectivity, the army or the warring nation, is given the name and, along with the name, the attributes of a single person, in order that we may be able to love or hate it more intensely than we could do if we thought of it as what it really is: a number of diverse individuals. In other cases personification is used for the purpose of concealing the fundamental absurdity and monstrosity of war. What is absurd and monstrous about war is that men who have no personal quarrel should be trained to murder one another in cold blood. By personifying opposing armies or countries, we are able to think of war as a conflict between individuals. The same result is obtained by writing of war as though it were carried on exclusively by the generals in command and not by the private soldiers in their armies. ("Rennenkampf had pressed back von Schubert.") The implication in both cases is that war is indistinguishable from a bout of fisticuffs in a bar room. Whereas in reality it is profoundly different. A scrap between two individuals is forgivable; mass murder, deliberately organized, is a monstrous iniquity. We still choose to use war as an

instrument of policy; and to comprehend the full wickedness and absurdity of war would therefore be inconvenient. For, once we understood, we should have to make some effort to get rid of the abominable thing. Accordingly, when we talk about war, we use a language which conceals or embellishes its reality. Ignoring the facts, so far as we possibly can, we imply that battles are not fought by soldiers, but by things, principles, allegories, personified collectivities, or (at the most human) by opposing commanders, pitched against one another in single combat. For the same reason, when we have to describe the processes and the results of war, we employ a rich variety of euphemisms. Even the most violently patriotic and militaristic are reluctant to call a spade by its own name. To conceal their intentions even from themselves, they make use of picturesque metaphors. We find them, for example, clamoring for war planes numerous and powerful enough to go and “destroy the hornets in their nests” – in other words, to go and throw thermite, high explosives and vesicants upon the inhabitants of neighboring countries before they have time to come and do the same to us. And how reassuring is the language of historians and strategists! They write admiringly of those military geniuses who know “when to strike at the enemy’s line” (a single combatant deranges the geometrical constructions of a personification); when to “turn his flank”; when to “execute an enveloping movement.” As though they were engineers discussing the strength of materials and the distribution of stresses, they talk of abstract entities called “man power” and “fire power.” They sum up the long-drawn sufferings and atrocities of trench warfare in the phrase, “a war of attrition”; the massacre and mangling of human beings is assimilated to the grinding of a lens.

A dangerously abstract word, which figures in all discussions about war, is “force.” Those who believe in organizing collective security by means of military pacts against a possible aggressor are particularly fond of this word. “You cannot,” they say, “have international justice unless you are prepared to impose it by force.” “Peace-loving countries must unite to use force against aggressive dictatorships.” “Democratic institutions must be protected, if need be, by force.” And so on.

Now, the word “force,” when used in reference to human relations, has no single, definite meaning. There is the “force” used by parents when, without resort to any kind of physical violence, they compel their children to act or refrain from acting in some particular way. There is the “force” used by attendants in an asylum when they try to prevent a maniac from hurting himself or others. There is the “force” used by the police when they control a crowd, and that other “force” which they used in a baton charge. And finally there is the “force” used in war. This, of course, varies with the technological devices at the disposal of the belligerents, with the policies they are pursuing, and with the particular circumstances of the war in question. But in general it may be said that, in war, “force” connotes violence and fraud used to the limit of the combatants’ capacity.

Variations in quantity, if sufficiently great, produce variations in quality. The “force” that is war, particularly modern war, is very different from the “force” that is police action, and the use of the same abstract word to describe the two dissimilar processes is profoundly misleading. (Still more misleading, of course, is the explicit assimilation of a war, waged by allied League-of-Nations powers against an aggressor, to police action against a criminal. The first is the use of violence and fraud without limit against innocent and guilty alike; the second is the use of strictly limited violence and a minimum of fraud exclusively against the guilty.)

Reality is a succession of concrete and particular situations. When we think about such situations we should use the particular and concrete words which apply to them. If

we use abstract words which apply equally well (and equally badly) to other, quite dissimilar situations, it is certain that we shall think incorrectly.

Let us take the sentences quoted above and translate the abstract word “force” into language that will render (however inadequately) the concrete and particular realities of contemporary warfare.

“You cannot have international justice, unless you are prepared to impose it by force.” Translated, this becomes: “You cannot have international justice unless you are prepared, with a view to imposing a just settlement, to drop thermite, high explosives and vesicants upon the inhabitants of foreign cities and to have thermite, high explosives and vesicants dropped in return upon the inhabitants of your cities.” At the end of this proceeding, justice is to be imposed by the victorious party—that is, if there is a victorious party. It should be remarked that justice was to have been imposed by the victorious party at the end of the last war. But, unfortunately, after four years of fighting, the temper of the victors was such that they were quite incapable of making a just settlement. The Allies are reaping in Nazi Germany what they sowed at Versailles. The victors of the next war will have undergone intensive bombardments with thermite, high explosives and vesicants. Will their temper be better than that of the Allies in 1918? Will they be in a fitter state to make a just settlement? The answer, quite obviously, is: No. It is psychologically all but impossible that justice should be secured by the methods of contemporary warfare.

The next two sentences may be taken together. “Peace-loving countries must unite to use force against aggressive dictatorships. Democratic institutions must be protected, if need be, by force.” Let us translate. “Peace-loving countries must unite to throw thermite, high explosives and vesicants on the inhabitants of countries ruled by aggressive dictators. They must do this, and of course abide the consequences, in order to preserve peace and democratic institutions.” Two questions immediately propound themselves. First, is it likely that peace can be secured by a process calculated to reduce the orderly life of our complicated societies to chaos? And, second, is it likely that democratic institutions will flourish in a state of chaos? Again, the answers are pretty clearly in the negative.

By using the abstract word “force,” instead of terms which at least attempt to describe the realities of war as it is today, the preachers of collective security through military collaboration disguise from themselves and from others, not only the contemporary facts, but also the probable consequences of their favorite policy. The attempt to secure justice, peace and democracy by “force” seems reasonable enough until we realize, first, that this noncommittal word stands, in the circumstances of our age, for activities which can hardly fail to result in social chaos; and second, that the consequences of social chaos are injustice, chronic warfare and tyranny. The moment we think in concrete and particular terms of the concrete and particular process called “modern war,” we see that a policy which worked (or at least didn’t result in complete disaster) in the past has no prospect whatever of working in the immediate future. The attempt to secure justice, peace and democracy by means of a “force,” which means, at this particular moment of history, thermite, high explosives and vesicants, is about as reasonable as the attempt to put out a fire with a colorless liquid that happens to be, not water, but petrol.

What applies to the “force” that is war applies in large measure to the “force” that is revolution. It seems inherently very unlikely that social justice and social peace can be secured by thermite, high explosives and vesicants. At first, it may be, the parties in a

civil war would hesitate to use such instruments on their fellow-countrymen. But there can be little doubt that, if the conflict were prolonged (as it probably would be between the evenly balanced Right and Left of a highly industrialized society), the combatants would end by losing their scruples.

The alternatives confronting us seem to be plain enough. Either we invent and conscientiously employ a new technique for making revolutions and settling international disputes; or else we cling to the old technique and, using "force" (that is to say, thermite, high explosives and vesicants), destroy ourselves. Those who, for whatever motive, disguise the nature of the second alternative under inappropriate language, render the world a grave disservice. They lead us into one of the temptations we find it hardest to resist—the temptation to run away from reality, to pretend that facts are not what they are. Like Shelley (but without Shelley's acute awareness of what he was doing) we are perpetually weaving

A shroud of talk to hide us from the sun  
Of this familiar life.

We protect our minds by an elaborate system of abstractions, ambiguities, metaphors and similes from the reality we do not wish to know too clearly; we lie to ourselves, in order that we may still have the excuse of ignorance, the alibi of stupidity and incomprehension, possessing which we can continue with a good conscience to commit and tolerate the most monstrous crimes:

The poor wretch who has learned his only prayers  
From curses, who knows scarcely words enough  
To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,  
Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute  
And technical in victories and defeats,  
And all our dainty terms for fratricide;  
Terms which we trundle smoothly o'er our tongues  
Like mere abstractions, empty sounds to which  
We join no meaning and attach no form!  
As if the soldier died without a wound:  
As if the fibers of this godlike frame  
Were gored without a pang: as if the wretch  
Who fell in battle, doing bloody deeds,  
Passed off to Heaven translated and not killed;  
As though he had no wife to pine for him,  
No God to judge him.

The language we use about war is inappropriate, and its inappropriateness is designed to conceal a reality so odious that we do not wish to know it. The language we

use about politics is also inappropriate; but here our mistake has a different purpose. Our principal aim in this case is to arouse and, having aroused, to rationalize and justify such intrinsically agreeable sentiments as pride and hatred, self-esteem and contempt for others. To achieve this end we speak about the facts of politics in words which more or less completely misrepresent them.

The concrete realities of politics are individual human beings, living together in national groups. Politicians—and to some extent we are all politicians—substitute abstractions for these concrete realities, and having done this, proceed to invest each abstraction with an appearance of concreteness by personifying it. For example, the concrete reality of which “Britain” is the abstraction consists of some forty-odd millions of diverse individuals living on an island off the west coast of Europe. The personification of this abstraction appears, in classical fancy-dress and holding a very large toasting fork, on the backside of our copper coinage; appears in verbal form, every time we talk about international politics. “Britain,” the abstraction from forty millions of Britons, is endowed with thoughts, sensibilities and emotions, even with a sex—for, in spite of John Bull, the country is always a female.

Now, it is of course possible that “Britain” is more than a mere name—is an entity that possesses some kind of reality distinct from that of the individuals constituting the group to which the name is applied. But this entity, if it exists, is certainly not a young lady with a toasting fork; nor is it possible to believe (though some eminent philosophers have preached the doctrine) that it should possess anything in the nature of a personal will. One must agree with T. H. Green that “there can be nothing in a nation, however exalted its mission, or in a society however perfectly organized, which is not in the persons composing the nation or the society... We cannot suppose a national spirit and will to exist except as the spirit and will of individuals.” But the moment we start resolutely thinking about our world in terms of individual persons we find ourselves at the same time thinking in terms of universality. “The great rational religions,” writes Professor Whitehead, “are the outcome of the emergence of a religious consciousness that is universal, as distinguished from tribal, or even social. Because it is universal, it introduces the note of solitariness.” (And he might have added that, because it is solitary, it introduces the note of universality.) “The reason of this connection between universality and solitude is that universality is a disconnection from immediate surroundings.” And conversely the disconnection from immediate surroundings, particularly such social surrounding as the tribe or nation, the insistence on the person as the fundamental reality, leads to the conception of an all-embracing unity.

A nation, then, may be more than a mere abstraction, may possess some kind of real existence apart from its constituent members. But there is no reason to suppose that it is a person; indeed, there is every reason to suppose that it isn't. Those who speak as though it were a person (and some go further than this and speak as though it were a personal god) do so, because it is to their interest as egotists to make precisely this mistake.

In the case of the ruling class these interests are in part material. The personification of the nation as a sacred being, different from and superior to its constituent members, is merely (I quote the words of a great French jurist, Leon Duguit) “a way of imposing authority by making people believe it is an authority *de jure* and not merely *de facto*.” By habitually talking of the nation as though it were a person with thoughts, feelings and a will of its own, the rulers of a country legitimate their own powers. Personification leads easily to deification; and where the nation is deified, its government ceases to be a mere convenience, like drains or a telephone system, and, partaking in the sacredness of the

entity it represents, claims to give orders by divine right and demands the unquestioning obedience due to a god. Rulers seldom find it hard to recognize their friends. Hegel, the man who elaborated an inappropriate figure of speech into a complete philosophy of politics, was a favorite of the Prussian government. "Es ist," he had written, "es ist der Gang Gottes in der Welt, das der Staat ist." The decoration bestowed on him by Frederick William III was richly deserved.

Unlike their rulers, the ruled have no material interest in using inappropriate language about states and nations. For them, the reward of being mistaken is psychological. The personified and deified nation becomes, in the minds of the individuals composing it, a kind of enlargement of themselves. The superhuman qualities which belong to the young lady with the toasting fork, the young lady with plaits and a brass soutien-gorge, the young lady in a Phrygian bonnet, are claimed by individual Englishmen, Germans and Frenchmen as being, at least in part, their own. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*. But there would be no need to die, no need of war, if it had not been even sweeter to boast and swagger for one's country, to hate, despise, swindle and bully for it. Loyalty to the personified nation, or to the personified class or party, justifies the loyal in indulging all those passions which good manners and the moral code do not allow them to display in their relations with their neighbors. The personified entity is a being, not only great and noble, but also insanely proud, vain and touchy; fiercely rapacious; a braggart; bound by no considerations of right and wrong. (Hegel condemned as hopelessly shallow all those who dared to apply ethical standards to the activities of nations. To condone and applaud every iniquity committed in the name of the State was to him a sign of philosophical profundity.) Identifying themselves with this god, individuals find relief from the constraints of ordinary social decency, feel themselves justified in giving rein, within duly prescribed limits, to their criminal proclivities. As a loyal nationalist or party-man, one can enjoy the luxury of behaving badly with a good conscience.

The evil passions are further justified by another linguistic error—the error of speaking about certain categories of persons as though they were mere embodied abstractions. Foreigners and those who disagree with us are not thought of as men and women like ourselves and our fellow-countrymen; they are thought of as representatives and, so to say, symbols of a class. In so far as they have any personality at all, it is the personality we mistakenly attribute to their class—a personality that is, by definition, intrinsically evil. We know that the harming or killing of men and women is wrong, and we are reluctant consciously to do what we know to be wrong. But when particular men and women are thought of merely as representatives of a class, which has previously been defined as evil and personified in the shape of a devil, then the reluctance to hurt or murder disappears. Brown, Jones and Robinson are no longer thought of as Brown, Jones and Robinson, but as heretics, gentiles, Yids, niggers, barbarians, Huns, communists, capitalists, fascists, liberals—whichever the case may be. When they have been called such names and assimilated to the accursed class to which the names apply, Brown, Jones and Robinson cease to be conceived as what they really are—human persons—and become for the users of this fatally inappropriate language mere vermin or, worse, demons whom it is right and proper to destroy as thoroughly and as painfully as possible. Wherever persons are present, questions of morality arise. Rulers of nations and leaders of parties find morality embarrassing. That is why they take such pains to depersonalize their opponents. All propaganda directed against an opposing group has but one aim: to substitute diabolical abstractions for concrete persons. The propagandist's



purpose is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human. By robbing them of their personality, he puts them outside the pale of moral obligation. Mere symbols can have no rights—particularly when that of which they are symbolical is, by definition, evil.

Politics can become moral only on one condition: that its problems shall be spoken of and thought about exclusively in terms of concrete reality; that is to say, of persons. To depersonify human beings and to personify abstractions are complementary errors which lead, by an inexorable logic, to war between nations and to idolatrous worship of the State, with consequent governmental oppression. All current political thought is a mixture, in varying proportions, between thought in terms of concrete realities and thought in terms of depersonified symbols and personified abstractions. In the democratic countries the problems of internal politics are thought about mainly in terms of concrete reality; those of external politics, mainly in terms of abstractions and symbols. In dictatorial countries the proportion of concrete to abstract and symbolic thought is lower than in democratic countries. Dictators talk little of persons, much of personified abstractions, such as the Nation, the State, the Party, and much of depersonified symbols, such as Yids, Bolshies, Capitalists. The stupidity of politicians who talk about a world of persons as though it were not a world of persons is due in the main to self-interest. In a fictitious world of symbols and personified abstractions, rulers find that they can rule more effectively, and the ruled, that they can gratify instincts which the conventions of good manners and the imperatives of morality demand that they should repress. To think correctly is the condition of behaving well. It is also in itself a moral act; those who would think correctly must resist considerable temptations.

(From *The Olive Tree*)

dous Huxley was a man of exceptional vision and foresight. Twenty years ago, shortly before his death, he turned to the great theme of man's relationship with his planet, and raised many questions which have become crucial to the survival of civilization. Deeply concerned with the social, economic and ecological problems facing mankind, he raised the alarm about the deterioration of our environment and emphasized the primacy of the connection between man and nature, and between mind and body.

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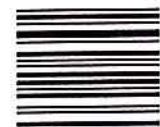
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# ALDOUS HUXTLEY THE HUMAN SITUATION





I want to begin this discussion of language with a certain number of extracts from different authors which cast a lot of light on the subject. The first is from the autobiography of Helen Keller, where she describes how she discovered language as a child. She writes:

[My teacher] brought me my hat, and I knew I was going out into the warm sunshine. This thought, if a wordless sensation may be called a thought, made me hop and skip with pleasure.

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over my hand she spelled into the other the word 'water', first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten — a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house, every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me.<sup>1</sup>

Let us now set a number of other quotations against this, beginning with some from Goethe. Goethe was one of the supreme masters of the word, and it is very interesting to find this great manipulator of words speaking constantly against language. He says in one place, '*Gefühl ist alles; Name ist Schall und Rauch*'<sup>2</sup> (Feeling is everything, name is merely sound and smoke). Then there is the famous quotation,

*Grün, leurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,  
Und grün des Lebens goldner Baum.*<sup>3</sup>

(Green is all theory, green life's golden tree.) And, again:

We talk too much. We should talk less and draw more. I personally should like to renounce speech altogether and, like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches. That fig tree, this little snake, the cocoon on my window sill, quietly awaiting its future, all these are momentous signatures. Indeed, a person able to decipher their meaning properly would soon be able to dispense with spoken and written words altogether. The more I think of it, there is something futile, mediocre, even foppish about speech.<sup>4</sup>

Talleyrand, the great French diplomatist of the early nineteenth century and one of the great masters of practical life, said that 'Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts'<sup>5</sup> — which was undoubtedly true in his case. Another interesting observation about language was made by the great Christian existentialist philosopher Kierkegaard, who said that the purpose of language is to assist and confirm people in refraining from action. This is, in a sense, a development of the phrase in the Gospel which says that 'not all of those who say "Lord, Lord!" will enter into the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 7:21).

<sup>2</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, I*. Marthens Garten. 3456-3457.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., Studierzimmer, 2038-2039.

<sup>4</sup>Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Conversations with J. D. Falk* (1809).

<sup>5</sup>This phrase was attributed to Talleyrand by Harrel in his play *Le Main Jaune*.



What is required, then, is not devotion or theological speculation, but right action. On the other hand, we find that language can be most horribly effective in promoting action, especially bad action. As Hitler wrote, 'All effective propaganda has to limit itself only to a very few points and to use them like slogans.'<sup>6</sup>

We find a number of remarks about language in relation to religion in the epistles of St Paul – remarks the more curious when one reflects that it is precisely the language of St Paul's epistles which has dominated the whole Christian scene for nineteen hundred years. Paul says, in one well-known phrase, 'The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life' (2 Corinthians 3: 6). And, 'We should serve in the newness of the spirit and not in the oldness of the letter' (Romans 7: 6).

Finally, here is a passage from the works of John Locke on language in relation to philosophy. Although written nearly three hundred years ago it is still very much to the point:

Vague and insignificant forms of speech and abusive language have so long passed for mysteries of science and hard, or misapplied words have by prescription such a right to be mistaken for deep learning and height of speculation, that it will not be easy to persuade either those who speak or those who hear them that they are but the covers of ignorance and a hindrance to true knowledge.<sup>7</sup>

These quotations indicate very clearly the curiously ambivalent attitude towards language which we always have had and certainly still have, and which has prevailed throughout the ages. The phrase which opens the Gospel according to St John, 'In the beginning was the Word' (John 1: 1), is perfectly true in regard to the beginning of the strictly human world. There is no doubt at all that the strictly human form of life arose when it was possible for man to speak. Language is what makes us human. Unfortunately, it is also what makes us all too human. It is on the one hand the mother of

<sup>6</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1939).

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 'Epistle to the Reader'.

science and philosophy, and on the other hand it begets every kind of superstition and prejudice and madness. It helps us and it destroys us; it makes civilization possible, and it also produces those frightful conflicts which wreck civilization.

Now human behaviour differs from animal behaviour precisely because of the fact that human beings can speak and animals cannot. And we find that even the most intelligent animals, because they cannot speak, cannot do things which to us seem absolutely rudimentary and which very small children, as soon as they learn to talk, would be able to accomplish.

There was a very interesting experiment carried out by the great German Gestalt psychologist, Wolfgang Köhler, who worked for many years with chimpanzees. Köhler found that his chimpanzees could use sticks as tools to pull down bananas which were hanging out of their reach. They were intelligent enough to see that this tool – the stick – could be used for extending their arm and getting the banana. But Köhler found that the animals only used the stick to get a banana when both stick and banana were in view at the same time. If the banana was in front of them and the stick was behind them, they could not use the stick; they could not bear the banana in mind long enough to look around and pick up the stick and then use it. ( )

The reason for this is quite clear. We have words for banana and stick which permit us to think about these objects when they are not actually in sight. Even a small child, knowing the words 'banana' and 'stick', has a conceptual notion of their relationship and is consequently able to think of 'stick' in conjunction with 'banana' even when the stick is behind him and to remember this long enough to pick the stick up and use it on the bananas.

The fact that animals cannot retain their knowledge of things over a long period, and consequently lose interest in them, accounts for their (to us) preposterous behaviour in many situations. They constantly interrupt one line of action to do something else, and they may come back to the first activity or forget it altogether. Human beings, on the other



hand, thanks to language, are able to pursue one purpose or to act in relation to a principle or to an ideal over long periods of time. In a certain sense we can say that language is a device for permitting human beings to go on doing in cold blood the good and the evil which it is possible for animals to do only in hot blood, under the influence of passion.

This continuity is illustrated not merely in the life of individual human beings; it is also illustrated very forcibly in the life of entire societies, where language may be described as a device for connecting the present with the past and the future. While it is clear that the Lamarckian conception of the inheritance of acquired characteristics is completely unacceptable, and untrue biologically, it is perfectly true on the social, psychological, and linguistic level: language does provide us means for taking advantage of the fruits of past experience. There is such a thing as social heredity. The acquisitions of our ancestors are handed down to us through written and spoken language, and we do therefore enjoy the possibility of inheriting acquired characteristics, not through the germ plasm but through tradition.

Unfortunately, tradition can hand on bad as well as good items. It can hand on prejudices and superstitions just as effectively as it can hand on science and decent ethical codes. Here again we see the strange ambivalence of this extraordinary gift. It is like the fairy stories in which there is a good fairy and a bad fairy, but in this case the good fairy's gift, which is this amazing gift of language, also turns out to be the bad fairy's gift. It is one of the ironies of our destiny that the wonderful thing which Helen Keller so eloquently describes as a giver of life and creator of thought is also one of the most dangerous and destructive things that we can have.

In the beginning of human life, as a strictly human adventure, was the Word. But what happens when there is no language? What happens in very small children and animals? What is the life of what may be called immediate experience? Here it is worth making a small digression to consider some of the ideas of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophers have always affirmed that the thing which creates

our specifically human world is what they call *nama-rupa* (name-and-form). Name may be defined as subjectivized form and form is the projection of name into the outer world, and the two create for human beings this world of separate objects existing in time. However, the enlightened individual goes beyond grammar. He has what may be called a 'grammar-transcending experience' which permits him to live in the consciousness of the divine continuum of the world and to see the one continually manifest in the many. The enlightened person is, so to speak, *after* the rise of language; he lives in language and then goes beyond it. But what sort of world is there *before* language is introduced? What sort of world is the world of immediate non-verbalized experience?

William James spoke of the world of immediate experience, in a very characteristic phrase, as a 'blooming, buzzing confusion';<sup>8</sup> the idea being that the animal and the small child live in a chaos of sensations. But recent investigations in the ethology of animals and the perceptions of small children have revealed that immediate experience really isn't quite as blooming and as buzzing as James supposed. What emerges most strikingly from recent scientific developments is that perception is not a passive reception of material from the outside world; it is an active process of selection and imposing of patterns. The nervous system of animals and of human beings is contrived in such a way that it automatically sifts out from the blooming, buzzing confusion those elements which are biologically useful. So far as animals are concerned, it selects out of the confusion precisely those elements which help them to survive; the animal sees only two classes of objects — the edible and the dangerous.

One of the things which has been revealed in the study of animal universes is how exceptionally limited and extremely odd many of them are. The great German biologist Baron J. J. Von Uexküll wrote a great deal about what he called the *umwelt* of the animals, the different universes in which

<sup>8</sup> William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, 1948), p. 48.



creatures of different classes and species live. The subject is one of immense fascination. It makes one realize how extremely arbitrary our idea of reality is, though our idea of reality is incomparably greater than that of even the highest of the lower animals. Goodness knows what sort of a world a creature with more effective senses and a better mind than ours would live in!

As an example of the strangeness of some of these animal universes, let me cite the case of the frog, which was communicated to me recently by Patrick D. Wall of M.I.T. Apparently the recent researches on frogs indicate that, although the frog has mechanically very good eyes, it sees in a very limited way. Evidently the buzzing, blooming confusion comes in at its eyes, but what its nervous system selects out of the innumerable sensa which come in is limited to that which moves. One can imagine a frog sitting on a water-lily pad and looking down into the water. There is a minnow swimming, and as long as the minnow swims, the frog sees it; the minnow stands still for a little and immediately it disappears from the frog's universe; when it starts swimming again, it enters into the frog's world once more and goes on. The frog's universe must therefore be utterly strange, a continuous emergence and disappearance of objects. What on earth would a frog's philosophy be — the metaphysics of appearance and disappearance? There may be frog Platons, for all we know, who would devise the most extraordinary systems to account for this fantastic reality.

Much more limited universes belong to animals of lower levels of organization than the frog. Even animals as high as dogs and monkeys quite clearly have entirely different kinds of universes from ours. They just don't notice certain things which to us are very important. The dog obviously doesn't notice the sunset or the flowers on the tree, which to us seem very beautiful. He just smells the trunk of the tree and finds something very satisfactory there.

When we come to human beings, we find that the nervous system selects from the buzzing, blooming confusion in the same way that the animal's nervous system selects, but it

doesn't select anything like as rigorously. Much more comes through to the human consciousness than ever comes through to the animal, even to the higher animal. Such an enormous range of reality enters the human mind, there is such a great profusion of material, that here James is quite right: in spite of the neurological selection and abstraction which has gone on, the profusion is a confusion. And here is where language comes in. We proceed to a higher level of abstraction by means of language and select in this conscious and semi-conscious or pre-conscious way those materials which are useful to us biologically; and, since we are not entirely at the mercy of our biological necessities, we also select those materials which are valuable socially or valuable from the point of view of aesthetics or what not.

The materials which we derive through these acts of abstraction are immediately translated into symbols which we can understand. We evidently have this innate tendency to turn all our experiences into more or less equivalent symbols, as well as an innate urge to order and meaning. The symbols may be of many non-verbal varieties, but by far the most important and the most highly organized symbol system is language. And it is through language that we impose symbolic order and symbolic meaning upon a profusion which, as it is apprehended directly, seems to us terribly confusing.

This process of abstraction and selection is extremely useful to us from a biological point of view. In fact, it is quite clear that we couldn't get on without it. It is useful to us as scientists and technologists in our efforts to control environment. It is also useful to us as social beings. But here we come once more to the ambivalence of the linguistic and symbol-making process. As we impose order and meaning upon immediate experience, it is just as easy for us to impose bad order and bad meaning as it is to impose good order and good meaning. We enjoy the process of symbolization; it is as though there was a kind of art-for-art's-sake pleasure in the procedure. But we very often find that in our enthusiasm for imposing order and meaning through symbols upon immediate experience we have made an awful mess of the



experience and created a symbol pattern which leads us into endless trouble.

It is worth quoting a few examples of how this urge to order and meaning has somehow gone astray. One of the areas in which human beings have tried to impose their own kind of order and meaning is the area of astronomy. Man, from earliest times, has looked up at the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars, and has been puzzled, as anybody in heaven knows, by the extraordinary mystery of their existence. He has tried to impose upon this mystery an order and a meaning which makes sense to him as an all-too-human being; and in many cases, as we see from the study of history, he has made profound mistakes in regard to the order and meaning of the heavenly bodies – mistakes which have cost him very dearly in his social and individual life.

Consider man's attitude towards eclipses. From time immemorial, eclipses have been regarded as portents which foretold disasters. They have been felt to be closely connected with human life – and always in an extremely dangerous way. On the 27 August 413 B.C. there was an eclipse of the moon. This particular eclipse of the moon was of great historical importance because it was observed by Nicias and the Athenians, who were at the time besieging Syracuse in Sicily. They had been in considerable trouble and it was quite clear that they ought to go home, that they would probably get into much worse trouble if they stayed on. An eclipse was profoundly unlucky in the symbol system of the Athenians; in their search for order and meaning in the universe, they had made the decision that a journey should never be started in the neighbourhood of an eclipse. So Nicias decided to postpone the return to Athens for at least a month, with the consequence that his entire fleet was destroyed and his entire army was taken prisoner by the Syracusans. If you have this hunger and thirst for order and meaning and are not patient enough to look into the real nature of the order and meaning, but insist that the universe is meaningful in terms of your all-too-human wishes and desires, you will certainly get into trouble.

A similar example of the extreme danger of having turned the universe into the wrong kind of symbols was illustrated by the Aztecs. They, too, wanted to make some kind of sense and order of the celestial phenomena, and they concentrated primarily upon the sun. Unfortunately they anthropomorphized it and felt that in order to keep alive, the sun must be constantly fed – and one of the things that they thought the sun needed was the blood of sacrificial victims. As anybody who has read Aztec history knows, they had the peculiarly unpleasant method of sacrifice of ripping the heart out of the victim and holding it up to the sun. The necessity of providing the sun with a continual supply of human blood imposed upon the Aztecs the foreign policy of continually raiding their neighbours for victims. They did their best not to kill people in battles, but to take them alive; and they would bring them back to Mexico City and sacrifice them at the rate of twenty thousand a year. Needless to say, this procedure did not make them very popular with their neighbours; when the Spaniards arrived, a great many of the neighbours of the Aztec kingdom went over to their side, and this accounts for the almost miraculous success of Cortez and his tiny band in overthrowing the Aztec empire.

These two examples show how dangerous it is to try to impose symbolic order and meaning upon the world before you really understand what the world is like. Nevertheless, we shall always do this because it is very difficult for human beings to tolerate the mysterious as such – what theologian Rudolph Otto calls the *Mysterium tremendum* of the world. It is so terrible and inexplicable that he has always had to put up a smoke screen of symbols between it and himself. In one of its functions, it may be said that language is a device for taking mysteriousness out of mystery. We have always done this, and unquestionably in future times historians will see that we are still doing it, perhaps not as flagrantly as the Aztecs or the Greeks did it, but probably very badly.

This tendency to impose premature order and meaning upon the universe is illustrated in the culture of the Middle Ages. As the great French historian of medieval art, Emile



Mâle, points out, in the Middle Ages the *idea* of a thing was always more real than the thing itself.<sup>9</sup> The study of things for their own sake held no meaning for thoughtful men. The task for the student of nature was to discover the eternal truth which God would have each thing express. We may now ask ourselves what were the eternal truths expressed by individual things in the Middle Ages: They were not generalizations based upon the humble observation of facts; medieval scholars were simply not interested in the humble observation of facts. They were only interested in illustrating in the external world something that they had read either in the scriptures or in the Greek philosophers whom they regarded as authorities.

We may say that the proper relationship between words and things had been reversed during the whole of the Middle Ages. The proper relationship, I presume, is that words should be regarded as arbitrary symbols standing for things. But the men of the Middle Ages looked at it the other way around. They regarded things as being illustrations of some general abstract principle to be found in Aristotle or in some part of the scriptures. As one reads medieval literature, one begins by being highly entertained by the extraordinary phenomenon of allegorical botany, of parables in natural history, of astronomy which tells fortunes. But in a very short while – certainly I speak for myself – one becomes terribly oppressed by the awful humanization of nature. One has a sense of being boxed into a world where everything has a suffocating feeling of humanity instead of being other than humanity. To use a phrase of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the medieval world is one where everything ‘wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell’.<sup>10</sup> It was only when this reversal of the relationship between words and things was changed, as a result of the new interest in science, that we entered a world where nature is refreshingly other than in the all too human world.

<sup>9</sup>Emile Mâle, *The Gothic Image* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), pp. 27–8.

<sup>10</sup>Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘God’s Grandeur’, I, 7 in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.

In our own time, we find that all the most horrifying aspects of contemporary life have arisen precisely from this wrong relationship between symbols and words. All the totalitarian tyrannies of our time have been based upon the wrong relationship of things and words; words have not been regarded by them as symbols arbitrarily standing for things, but things have been regarded as illustrations of words.

Take, for example, the whole Nazi racial doctrine. This would have been impossible if individual Jews and gipsies had been regarded as what they were – each of them a separate human personality. But they were not so regarded. Instead each of these persons was reduced to being merely the illustration of a pejorative label; the word ‘Jew’ or the word ‘gipsy’ was regarded as a category. And the individual humans, who were of course the only realities, were assimilated to this category; they were made to be merely illustrations of a bad category, which as such could be exterminated with a perfectly good conscience. What was being exterminated was not really a human being; it was merely the illustration of an idea.

We see the same thing under the Communist regimes, where individual human beings are lumped together merely as illustrations of capitalism, imperialism, cannibalistic bourgeoisie, and so on, and as such are regarded as something sub-human which it is permissible to destroy. There is no doubt at all that this tendency is one of the most dangerous which we have to face. It is one of the highest prices we have to pay for the inestimable benefit of language. We are forced to accept – because we accept the grammar and syntax of our language – the idea that whole classes of real individual things are in fact merely the expressions of some diabolic principle.

After all, one can say that wars can really only be fought if the purely human individuals engaged in them are dis-regarded and the opposite side is simply equated with the concretization of a bad abstraction. This is in fact what all war propaganda is: it is making people on our side believe that people on the other side are merely the concretization of



very bad abstractions. I think the democratic countries don't go quite as far in this as the other ones have done, but it remains an appalling danger.

Now let us consider the dangers on an intellectual level of having a wrong form of order and meaning in the world. A few years ago I became very interested in the history of what used to be called 'animal magnetism' and was later called 'hypnosis'. When one examines the history of this very strange subject during the nineteenth century, one is flabbergasted by the attitude of official medicine, and, to some extent, of official science in general, towards the subject. Because the Victorian *Weltanschauung* had taken a certain form and the urge to order and meaning had stressed the fact that material objects were somehow much more real than psychological events, it was quite impossible for most medical men to behave in any kind of scientific or even rational way towards the phenomena of animal magnetism and hypnosis.

The whole theory of hypnotic anaesthesia was fully developed by James Esdaile in 1846, before the invention of chloroform and ether, and before the invention of aseptic surgery and antiseptics. Not only was Esdaile able to perform a great number of major operations which had never been performed before, he was able to reduce the death rate following surgery, which was then 29 per cent, to 5 per cent. One would have thought that the medical profession would have sat up and taken notice, but all that Esdaile got for his pains was to be hounded out of the profession, called a quack and a charlatan, and forbidden to practise at all. It is extraordinary that the recently published textbook of Dr Milton Marmor, the anaesthesiologist at Cedars of Lebanon in Los Angeles, really just takes up where Esdaile left off 113 years ago, that simply from pure professional and academic dislike of unfamiliar ideas, this immensely valuable procedure was allowed to remain completely or virtually unexplored for more than a century.<sup>11</sup> This wasn't merely a malignancy; the members of the medical profession who persecuted Es-

<sup>11</sup> Milton J. Marmor, *Hypnosis in Anesthesiology* (Springfield, Ill.: C. C. Thomas, 1959).

daile and his followers were completely the prisoners of their system of order and meaning, which had been developed in the past century or two, and they could not escape from it.

Undoubtedly the future will show that there are plenty of semantic prisons in which we are confined today which do not permit us to think straight about all kinds of very important subjects. It will undoubtedly be clear to the historians a hundred years from now, but it is not clear to us what these prisons are. We can only be quite sure that there are plenty of them.

#### ESSAYS

sense of loyalty could be transferred to humanity itself, which is not an abstraction.

Mr Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* was a good caricature of the hedonistic Utopia, the kind of thing that seemed possible and even imminent before Hitler appeared, but it had no relation to the actual future. What we are moving towards at this moment is something more like the Spanish Inquisition, and probably far worse, thanks to the radio and the secret police. There is very little chance of escaping it unless we can reinstate the belief in human brotherhood, without the need for a "next world" to give it meaning. It is this that leads innocent people like the Dean of Canterbury to imagine that they have discovered true Christianity in Soviet Russia. No doubt they are only the dupes of propaganda, but what makes them so willing to be deceived is their knowledge that the Kingdom of Heaven has somehow got to be brought on to the surface of the earth. We have got to be the children of God, even though the God of the Prayer Book no longer exists.

The very people who have dynamited our civilization have sometimes been aware of this. Marx's famous saying that "religion is the opium of the people" is habitually wrenched out of its context and given a meaning subtly but appreciably different from the one he gave it. Marx did not say, at any rate in that place, that religion is merely a dope handed out from above; he said that it is something the people create for themselves, to supply a need that he recognized to be a real one. "Religion is the sigh of the soul in a soulless world. Religion is the opium of the people." What is he saying except that man does *not* live by bread alone, that hatred is *not* enough, that a world worth living in cannot be founded on "realism" and machine guns? If he had foreseen how great his intellectual influence would be, perhaps he would have said it more often and more loudly.

#### New Words

February-April 1940?

At present the formation of new words is a slow process (I have read somewhere that English gains about six and loses about

four words a year) and no new words are deliberately coined except as names for material objects. Abstract words are never coined at all, though old words (eg. "condition", "reflex" etc.) are sometimes twisted into new meanings for scientific purposes. What I am going to suggest here is that it would be quite feasible to invent a vocabulary, perhaps amounting to several thousands of words, which would deal with parts of our experience now practically unamenable to language. There are several obvious objections to the idea, and I will deal with these as they arise. The first step is to indicate the kind of purpose for which new words are needed.

Everyone who thinks at all has noticed that our language is practically useless for describing anything that goes on inside the brain. This is so generally recognized that writers of high skill (eg. Trollope and Mark Twain) will start their autobiographies by saying that they do not intend to describe their inner life, because it is of its nature indescribable. So soon as we are dealing with anything that is not concrete or visible (and even there to a great extent — look at the difficulty of describing anyone's appearance) we find that words are no liker to the reality than chessmen to living beings. To take an obvious case which will not raise side-issues, consider a dream. How do you describe a dream? Clearly you *never* describe it, because no words that convey the atmosphere of dreams exist in our language. Of course, you can give a crude approximation of some of the major facts in a dream. You can say, "I dreamed that I was walking down Regent Street with a porcupine wearing a bowler hat" etc. But this is no real description of the dream. And even if a psychologist interprets your dream in terms of "symbols", he is still going largely by guesswork; for the *real* quality of the dream, the quality that gave the porcupine its sole significance, is outside the world of words. In fact, describing a dream is like translating a poem into the language of one of Bohn's critics; it is a paraphrase which is meaningless unless one knows the original.

I chose dreams as an instance that would not be disputed, but if it were only dreams that were indescribable, the matter might not be worth bothering about. But, as has been pointed out over and over again, the waking mind is not so different from the dreaming mind as it appears — or as we like to pretend that it appears. It is true that most of our waking thoughts are

"reasonable" — that is, there exists in our minds a kind of chessboard upon which thoughts move logically and verbally; we use this part of our minds for any straightforward intellectual problem, and we get into the habit of thinking (ie. thinking in our chessboard moments) that it is the whole of the mind. But obviously it is not the whole. The disordered, un-verbal world belonging to dreams is never quite absent from our minds, and if any calculation were possible I dare say it would be found that quite half the volume of our waking thoughts were of this order. Certainly the dream-thoughts take a hand even when we are trying to think verbally, they influence the verbal thoughts, and it is largely they that make our inner life valuable. Examine your thoughts at any casual moment. The main movement in it will be a stream of nameless things — so nameless that one hardly knows whether to call them thoughts, images or feelings. In the first place there are the objects you see and the sounds you hear, which are in themselves describable in words, but which as soon as they enter your mind become something quite different and totally indescribable.<sup>4</sup> And besides this there is the dream-life which your mind unceasingly creates for itself — and though most of this is trivial and soon forgotten, it contains things which are beautiful, funny etc. beyond anything that ever gets into words. In a way this un-verbal part of your mind is even the most important part, for it is the source of nearly all *motives*. All likes and dislikes, all aesthetic feelings, all notions of right and wrong (aesthetic and moral considerations are in any case inextricable) spring from feelings which are generally admitted to be subtler than words. When you are asked "Why do you do, or not do, so and so" you are invariably aware that your *real* reason will not go into words, even when you have no wish to conceal it; consequently you rationalise your conduct, more or less dishonestly. I don't know whether everyone would admit this, and it is a fact that some people seem unaware of being influenced by their inner life, or even of having any inner life. I notice that many people never laugh when they are alone, and I suppose that if a man does not laugh when he is alone his inner life must be relatively barren. Still, every individual man has an inner life, and is aware of the practical impossibility of understanding others or being understood — in general, of the

star-like isolation in which human beings live. Nearly all literature is an attempt to escape from this isolation by roundabout means, the direct means (words in their primary meanings) being almost useless.

"Imaginative" writing is as it were a flank-attack upon positions that are impregnable from the front. A writer attempting anything that is not coldly "intellectual" can do very little with words in their primary meanings. He gets his effect if at all by using words in a tricky roundabout way, relying on their cadences and so forth, as in speech he would rely upon tone and gesture. In the case of poetry this is too well-known to be worth arguing about. No one with the smallest understanding of poetry supposes that

"The mortal moon hath her eclipse endured,  
And the sad augurs mock their own presage"

really means what the words "mean" in their dictionary-sense. (The couplet is said to refer to Queen Elizabeth having got over her grand climacteric safely.) The dictionary-meaning has, as nearly always, something to do with the real meaning, but not more than the "anecdote" of a picture has to do with its design. And it is the same with prose, *mutatis mutandis*. Consider a novel, even a novel which has ostensibly nothing to do with the inner life — what is called a "straight story". Consider "Mannon Lescaut". Why does the author invent this long rignarole about an unfaithful girl and a runaway abbé? Because he has a certain feeling, vision, whatever you like to call it, and knows, possibly after experiment, that it is no use trying to convey this vision by describing it as one would describe a crayfish for a book of zoology. But by *not* describing it, by inventing something else (in this case a picaresque novel: in another age he would choose another form) he can convey it, or part of it. The art of writing is in fact largely the perversion of words, and I would even say that the less obvious this perversion is, the more thoroughly it has been done. For a writer who seems to twist words out of their meanings (eg. Gerard Manley Hopkins) is really, if one looks closely, making a desperate attempt to use them straightforwardly. Whereas a writer who seems to have no tricks whatever, for instance the old ballad-writers, is making an especially subtle flank-attack, though, in

the case of the ballad-writers, this is no doubt unconscious. Of course one hears a lot of cant to the effect that all good art is "objective" and every true artist keeps his inner life to himself. But the people who say this do not mean it. All they mean is that they want the inner life to be expressed by an exceptionally roundabout method, as in the ballad or the "straight story".

The weakness of the roundabout method, apart from its difficulty, is that it usually fails. For anyone who is not a considerable artist (possibly for them too) the lumpiness of words results in constant falsification. Is there anyone who has ever written so much as a love letter in which he felt that he had said exactly what he intended? A writer falsifies himself both intentionally and unintentionally. Intentionally, because the accidental qualities of words constantly tempt and frighten him away from his true meaning. He gets an idea, begins trying to express it, and then, in the frightful mess of words that generally results, a pattern begins to form itself more or less accidentally. It is not by any means the pattern he wants, but it is at any rate not vulgar or disagreeable; it is "good art". He takes it, because "good art" is a more or less mysterious gift from heaven, and it seems a pity to waste it when it presents itself. Is not anyone with any degree of mental honesty conscious of telling lies all day long, both in talking and writing, simply because lies will fall into artistic shape when truth will not? Yet if words represented meanings as fully and accurately as height multiplied by base represents the area of a parallelogram, at least the *necessity* for lying would never exist. And in the mind of reader or hearer there are further falsifications, because, words not being a direct channel of thought, he constantly sees meanings which are not there. A good illustration of this is our supposed appreciation of foreign poetry. We know, from the *Vie Amoureuse* du Docteur Watson stuff of foreign critics, that true understanding of foreign literature is almost impossible; yet quite ignorant people profess to get, do get, vast pleasure out of poetry in foreign and even dead languages. Clearly the pleasure they derive may come from something the writer never intended, possibly from something that would make him squirm in his grave if he knew it was attributed to him. I say to myself "Vixi puellis nuper idoneus", and I repeat this over and over for five minutes for the beauty of



the word "idoneus". Yet, considering the gulf of time and culture, and my ignorance of Latin, and the fact that no one even knows how Latin was pronounced, is it possible that the effect I am enjoying is the effect Horace was trying for? It is as though I were in ecstasies over the beauty of a picture, and all because of some splashes of paint which had accidentally got on to the canvas 200 years after it was painted. Notice, I am not saying that *art* would necessarily improve if words conveyed meaning more reliably. For all I know art thrives on the crudeness and vagueness of language. I am only criticizing *words* in their supposed function as vehicles of thought. And it seems to me that from the point of view of exactitude and expressiveness our language has remained in the Stone Age.

The solution I suggest is to invent new words as deliberately as we would invent new parts for a motor-car engine. Suppose that a vocabulary existed which would accurately express the life of the mind, or a great part of it. Suppose that there need be no stultifying feeling that life is inexpressible, no jiggery-pokery with artistic tricks; expressing one's meaning simply a matter of taking the right words and putting them in place, like working out an equation in algebra. I think the advantages of this would be obvious. It is less obvious, though, that to sit down and deliberately coin words is a commonsense proceeding. Before indicating a way in which satisfactory words might be coined, I had better deal with the objections which are bound to arise.

If you say to any thinking person "Let us form a society for the invention of new and subtler words", he will first of all object that it is the idea of a crank, and then probably say that our present words, properly handled, will meet all difficulties. (This last, of course, is only a theoretical objection. In practice everyone recognizes the inadequacy of language — consider such expressions as "Words fail", "It wasn't what he said, it was the way he said it" etc.) But finally he will give you an answer something like this: "Things cannot be done in that pedantic way. Languages can only grow slowly, like flowers; you can't patch them up like pieces of machinery. Any *made-up* language must be characterless and lifeless — look at Esperanto etc. The whole meaning of a word is in its slowly-acquired associations" etc.

In the first place, this argument, like most of the arguments produced when one suggests changing anything, is a long-winded way of saying that what is must be. Hitherto we have never set ourselves to the deliberate creation of words, and all living languages have grown slowly and haphazardly; *therefore* language cannot grow otherwise. At present, when we want to say anything above the level of a geometrical definition, we are obliged to do conjuring tricks with sounds, associations etc; *therefore* this necessity is inherent in the nature of words. The non sequitur is obvious. And notice that when I suggest coining abstract words I am only suggesting an extension of our present practice. For we do now coin concrete words. Aeroplanes and bicycles are invented, and we invent names for them, which is the natural thing to do. It is only a step to coining names for the now unnamed things that exist in the mind. You say to me, "Why do you dislike Mr Smith?" and I say "Because he is a liar, coward etc." and I am almost certainly giving the wrong reason. In my own mind the answer runs "Because he is a — kind of man", — standing for something which I understand, and you would understand if I could tell it you. Why not find a name for —? The only difficulty is to agree about *what* we are naming. But long before this difficulty arises, the reading, thinking type of man will have recoiled from such an idea as the invention of words. He will produce arguments like the one I indicated above, or others of a more or less sneering, question-begging kind. In reality all these arguments are humbug. The recoil comes from a deep unreasoned instinct, superstitious in origin. It is the feeling that any direct rational approach to one's difficulties, any attempt to solve the problems of life as one would solve an equation, can lead nowhere — more, is definitely *unsafe*. One can see this idea expressed everywhere in a roundabout way. All the bosh that is talked about our national genius for "muddling through", and all the squasmy god-less mysticism that is urged against any hardness and soundness of intellect, mean au fond that it is *safer not to think*. This feeling starts, I am certain, in the common belief of children that the air is full of avenging demons waiting to punish presumption.<sup>5</sup> In adults the belief survives as a fear of too-rational thinking. I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, pride comes before a fall etc. — and the most dangerous pride is

the false pride of the intellect. David was punished because he numbered the people — i.e. because he used his intellect scientifically. Thus such an idea as, for instance, ecrogenesis, apart from its possible effects upon the health of the race, family life etc. is felt to be *in itself* blasphemous. Similarly any attack on such a fundamental thing as language, an attack as it were on the very structure of our own minds, is blasphemy and therefore dangerous. To reform language is practically an interference with the work of God — though I don't say that anyone would put it quite in these words. This objection is important, because it would prevent most people from even considering such an idea as the reform of language. And of course the idea is useless unless undertaken by large numbers. For one man, or a clique, to try and make up a language, as I believe James Joyce is now doing, is as absurd as one man trying to play football alone. What is wanted is several thousands of gifted but normal people who would give themselves to word-invention as seriously as people now give themselves to Shakespearean research. Given these, I believe we could work wonders with language.

Now as to the means. One sees an instance of the successful invention of words, though crude and on a small scale, among the members of large families. All large families have two or three words peculiar to themselves — words which they have made up and which convey subtilized, non-dictionary meanings. They say "Mr Smith is a — kind of man", using some home-made word, and the others understand perfectly; here then, within the limits of the family, exists an adjective filling one of the many gaps left by the dictionary. What makes it possible for the family to invent these words is the basis of their common experience. Without common experience, of course, no word can mean anything. If you say to me "What does bergamot smell like?" I say "Something like verbena", and so long as you know the smell of verbena you are somewhere near understanding me. The method in inventing words, therefore, is the method of analogy based on unmitigable common knowledge; one must have standards, that can be referred to without any chance of misunderstanding, as one can refer to a physical thing like the smell of verbena. In effect it must come down to giving words a physical (probably visible) existence. Merely *talking* about definitions is futile; one

can see this whenever it is attempted to define one of the words used by literary critics (eg. "sentimental", "vulgar", "morbid" etc. All meaningless — or rather, having a different meaning for every one who uses them). What is needed is to *show* a meaning in some unmistakable form, and then, when various people have identified it in their own minds and recognized it as worth naming, to give it a name. The question is simply of finding a way in which one can give thought an objective existence.

The thing that suggests itself immediately is the cinematograph. Everyone must have noticed the extraordinary powers that are latent in the film — the powers of distortion, of fantasy, in general of escaping the restrictions of the physical world. I suppose it is only from commercial necessity that the film has been used chiefly for silly imitations of stage-plays, instead of concentrating as it ought on things that are beyond the stage. Properly used, the film is the one possible medium for conveying mental processes. A dream, for instance, as I said above, is totally indescribable in words, but it can quite well be represented on the screen. Years ago I saw a film of Douglas Fairbanks', part of which was a representation of a dream. Most of it, of course, was silly joking about the dream where you have no clothes on in public, but for a few minutes it really was like a dream, in a manner that would have been impossible in words, or even in a picture, or, I imagine, in music. I have seen the same kind of thing by flashes in other films. For instance in "Dr Caligari" — a film, however, which was for the most part merely silly, the fantastic element being exploited for its own sake and not to convey any definite meaning. If one thinks of it, there is very little in the mind that could not *somehow* be represented by the strange distorting powers of the film. A millionaire with a private cinematograph, all the necessary props and a troupe of intelligent actors could, if he wished, make practically all of his inner life known. He could explain the real reasons of his actions instead of telling rationalized lies, point out the things that seemed to him beautiful, pathetic, funny etc. — things that an ordinary man has to keep locked up because there are no words to express them. In general, he could make other people understand him. Of course, it is not desirable that any one man, short of a genius, should

make a show of his inner life. What is wanted is to discover the now nameless feelings that men have *in common*. All the powerful motives which will not go into words and which are a cause of constant lying and misunderstanding, could be tracked down, given visible form, agreed upon, and named. I am sure that the film, with its almost limitless powers of representation, could accomplish this in the hands of the right investigators; though putting thoughts into visible shape would not always be easy — in fact, at first it might be as difficult as any other art.

A note on the actual form new words ought to take. Suppose that several thousands of people with the necessary time, talents and money undertook to make additions to language; suppose that they managed to agree upon a number of new and necessary words; they would still have to guard against producing a mere Volapuk which would drop out of use as soon as it was invented. It seems to me probable that a word, even a not yet existing word, has as it were a natural form — or rather, various natural forms in various languages. If language were truly expressive there would be no need to play upon the sounds of words as we do now, but I suppose there must always be *some* correlation between the sound of a word and its meaning. An accepted (I believe) and plausible theory of the origin of language is this. Primitive man, before he had words, would naturally rely upon gesture, and like any other animal he would cry out at the moment of gesticulating, in order to attract attention. Now one instinctively makes the gesture that is appropriate to one's meaning, and all parts of the body follow suit, including the tongue. Hence certain tongue-movements — i.e. certain sounds — would come to be associated with certain meanings. In poetry one can point to words which, apart from their direct meanings, regularly convey certain ideas by their sound. Thus: "Deeper than did ever plummet sound" (Shakespeare — more than once I think). "Past the *plunge* of *plummet*" (A. E. Housman). "The un-*plumbed*, salt, estranging sea" (Matthew Arnold) etc. Clearly, apart from direct meanings, the sound *plun-* or *plun-* has something to do with bottomless oceans. Therefore in forming new words one would have to pay attention to appropriateness of sound as well as exactitude of meaning. It would not do, as at

present, to clip a new word of any real novelty by making it out of old ones; but it also would not do to make it out of a mere arbitrary collection of letters. One would have to determine the natural form of the word. Like agreeing upon the actual meanings of the words, this would need the cooperation of a large number of people.

I have written all this down hastily, and when I read through it I see that there are weak patches in my argument and much of it is commonplace. To most people in any case the whole idea of reforming language would seem either dilettantish or crankish. Yet it is worth considering what utter incomprehension exists between human beings — at least, between those who are not deeply intimate. At present, as Samuel Butler said, the best art (i.e. the most perfect thought-transference) must be "lived" from one person to another. It need not be so if our language were more adequate. It is curious that when our knowledge, the complication of our lives and therefore (I think it must follow) our minds, develop so fast, language, the chief means of communication, should scarcely stir. For this reason I think that the idea of the deliberate invention of words is at least worth thinking over.

### Review of *The Thirties* by Malcolm Muggeridge *New English Weekly*, 25 April 1940

Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge's "message" — for it is a message, though a negative one — has not altered since he wrote "Winter in Moscow." It boils down to a simple disbelief in the power of human beings to construct a perfect or even a tolerable society here on earth. In essence, it is the Book of Ecclesiastes with the pious interpolations left out.

No doubt everyone is familiar with this line of thought. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. The Kingdom of Earth is forever unattainable. Every attempt to establish liberty leads directly to tyranny. One tyrant takes over from another, the captain of industry from the robber baron, the Nazi gauleiter from the

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## Politics and the English Language

Payments Book, 11 December 1945; *Horizon*, April 1946

Most people who bother with the matter at all would admit that the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent, and our language — so the argument runs — must inevitably share in the general collapse. It follows that any struggle against the abuse of language is a sentimental archaism, like preferring candles to electric light or hansom cabs to aeroplanes. Underneath this lies the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes.

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes: it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fall all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits

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which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers. I will come back to this presently, and I hope that by that time the meaning of what I have said here will have become clearer. Meanwhile, here are five specimens of the English language as it is now habitually written.

These five passages have not been picked out because they are especially bad — I could have quoted far worse if I had chosen — but because they illustrate various of the mental vices from which we now suffer. They are a little below the average, but are fairly representative samples. I number them so that I can refer back to them when necessary:

(1) 'I am not, indeed, sure whether it is not true to say that the Milton who once seemed not unlike a seventeenth-century Shelley had not become, out of an experience ever more bitter in each year, more alien [*sic*] to the founder of that Jesuit sect which nothing could induce him to tolerate.'

Professor Harold Laski (*Essay in Freedom of Expression*).

(2) 'Above all, we cannot play ducks and drakes with a native battery of idioms which prescribes such egregious collocations of vocables as the Basic *put up with for tolerate* or *put at a loss for bewilder*.'

Professor Lancelot Hogben (*Interglossa*).

(3) 'On the one side we have the free personality: by definition it is not neurotic, for it has neither conflict nor dream. Its desires, such as they are, are transparent, for they are just what institutional approval keeps in the forefront of consciousness; another institutional pattern would alter their number and intensity; there is little in them that is natural, irreducible, or culturally dangerous. But *on the other side*, the social bond itself is nothing but the mutual reflection of these self-secure integrities. Recall the definition of love. Is not this the very picture of a small academic? Where is there a place in this hall of mirrors for either personality or fraternity?'

Essay on psychology in *Politics* (New York).

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(4) 'All the "best people" from the gentlemen's clubs, and all the frantic fascist captains, united in common hatred of Socialism and bestial horror of the rising tide of the mass revolutionary movement, have turned to acts of provocation, to foul incendiarism, to medieval legends of poisoned wells, to legalize their own destruction of proletarian organizations, and rouse the agitated petty-bourgeoisie to chauvinistic fervour on behalf of the fight against the revolutionary way out of the crisis.'

Communist pamphlet.

(5) 'If a new spirit is to be infused into this old country, there is one thorny and contentious reform which must be tackled, and that is the humanization and galvanization of the B.B.C. Timidity here will bespeak canker and atrophy of the soul. The heart of Britain may be sound and of strong beat, for instance, but the British lion's roar at present is like that of Bottom in Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* — as gentle as any sucking dove. A virile new Britain cannot continue indefinitely to be traduced in the eyes, or rather ears, of the world by the effete languors of Langham Place, brazenly masquerading as "standard English". When the Voice of Britain is heard at nine o'clock, better far and infinitely less ludicrous to hear aitches honestly dropped than the present priggish, inflated, inhibited, school-ma'annish arch braying of blameless bashful mewling maidens!'

Letter in *Tribune*.

Each of these passages has faults of its own, but, quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery: the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose, and especially of any kind of political writing. As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked

together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house. I list below, with notes and examples, various of the tricks by means of which the work of prose-construction is habitually dodged:

*Dying metaphors.* A newly invented metaphor assists thought by evoking a visual image, while on the other hand a metaphor which is technically 'dead' (e.g. *iron resolution*) has in effect reverted to being an ordinary word and can generally be used without loss of vividness. But in between these two classes there is a huge dump of worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves. Examples are: *Ring the changes on, take up the cudgels for, toe the line, ride roughshod over, stand shoulder to shoulder with, play into the hands of, no axe to grind, grist to the mill, fishing in troubled waters, rift within the lute, on the order of the day, Achilles' heel, swan song, hotbed.* Many of these are used without knowledge of their meaning (what is a 'riff', for instance?), and incompatible metaphors are frequently mixed, a sure sign that the writer is not interested in what he is saying. Some metaphors now current have been twisted out of their original meaning without those who use them even being aware of the fact. For example, *toe the line* is sometimes written *toe the line*. Another example is *the hammer and the anvil*, now always used with the implication that the anvil gets the worst of it. In real life it is always the anvil that breaks the hammer, never the other way about: a writer who stopped to think what he was saying would be aware of this, and would avoid perverting the original phrase.

*Operators, or verbal false limbs.* These save the trouble of picking out appropriate verbs and nouns, and at the same time pad each sentence with extra syllables which give it an appearance of symmetry. Characteristic phrases are: *render inoperative, militate against, prove unacceptable, make contact with, be subjected to, give rise to, give grounds for, have the effect of, play a leading part (role) in, make itself felt, take effect, exhibit a tendency to, serve the purpose of, etc., etc.* The keynote is the elimination of simple verbs. Instead of being a single word, such as *break, stop, spoil, mend, kill* a verb becomes a *phrase*, made up of a noun or adjective tacked on to some general-purpose verb such as

*prove, serve, join, play, render.* In addition, the passive voice is wherever possible used in preference to the active, and noun constructions are used instead of gerunds (*by examination of* instead of *by examining*). The range of verbs is further cut down by means of the *-ize* and *de-* formations, and banal statements are given an appearance of profundity by means of the *not in-* formation. Simple conjunctions and prepositions are replaced by such phrases as *with respect to, having regard to, the fact that, by dint of, in the interests of, on the hypothesis that*, and the ends of sentences are saved from anticlimax by such resounding commonplaces as *greatly to be desired, cannot be left out of account, a development to be expected in the near future, deserving of serious consideration, brought to a satisfactory conclusion*, and so on and so forth.

*Pretentious diction.* Words like *phenomenon, element, individual (as noun), objective, categorical, effective, virtual, basic, primary, promote, constitute, exhibit, exploit, utilize, eliminate, liquidate*, are used to dress up simple statements and give an air of scientific impartiality to biased judgements. Adjectives like *epoch-making, epic, historic, unforgettable, triumphant, age-old, inevitable, inexorable, veritable*, are used to dignify the sordid processes of international politics, while writing that aims at glorifying war usually takes on an archaic colour, its characteristic words being: *realm, throne, chariot, mailed fist, trident, sword, shield, buckler, banner, jackboot, clanion*. Foreign words and expressions such as *cal de sac, ancien régime, deus ex machina, militis militibus, status quo, gleichschaltung, weltanschauung*, are used to give an air of culture and elegance. Except for the useful abbreviations *i.e.*, *e.g.*, and *etc.*, there is no real need for any of the hundreds of foreign phrases now current in English. Bad writers, and especially scientific, political and sociological writers, are nearly always haunted by the notion that Latin or Greek words are grander than Saxon ones, and unnecessary words like *expedite, ameliorate, predict, extraneous, deacinated, clandestine, subaqueous* and hundreds of others constantly gain ground from their Anglo-Saxon opposite numbers.<sup>26</sup> The jargon peculiar to Marxist writing (*lyena, hangman, cannibal, pety bourgeois, these gentry, laquetry, flunkies, mad dog, White Guard*, etc.) consists largely of words and phrases translated from Russian, German

or French; but the normal way of coining a new word is to use a Latin or Greek root with the appropriate affix and, where necessary, the *-ize* formation. It is often easier to make up words of this kind (*derogialize, impermissible, extramarital, non-fragmentary* and so forth) than to think up the English words that will cover one's meaning. The result, in general, is an increase in slovenliness and vagueness.

*Meaningless words.* In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning.<sup>27</sup> Words like *romantic, plastic, values, human, dead, sentimental, natural, vitality*, as used in art criticism, are strictly meaningless, in the sense that they not only do not point to any discoverable object, but are hardly even expected to do so by the reader. When one critic writes, 'The outstanding feature of Mr. X's work is its living quality', while another writes, 'The immediately striking thing about Mr. X's work is its peculiar deadness', the reader accepts this as a simple difference of opinion. If words like *black* and *white* were involved, instead of the jargon words *dead* and *living*, he would see at once that language was being used in an improper way. Many political words are similarly abused. The word *Fascism* has now no meaning except in so far as it signifies 'something not desirable'. The words *democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice*, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of régime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different. Statements like *Marshal Petain was a true patriot, The Soviet Press is the freest in the world, The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution*, are almost always made with intent to deceive. Other words used in variable meanings, in

most cases more or less dishonestly, are: *class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality*.

Now that I have made this catalogue of swindles and perversions, let me give another example of the kind of writing that they lead to. This time it must of its nature be an imaginary one. I am going to translate a passage of good English into modern English of the worst sort. Here is a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes*:

'I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding; nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.'

Here it is in modern English:

'Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.'

This is a parody, but not a very gross one. Exhibit (3), above, for instance, contains several patches of the same kind of English. It will be seen that I have not made a full translation. The beginning and ending of the sentence follow the original meaning fairly closely, but in the middle the concrete illustrations — race, battle, bread — dissolve into the vague phrase 'success or failure in competitive activities'. This had to be so, because no modern writer of the kind I am discussing — no one capable of using phrases like 'objective consideration of contemporary phenomena' — would ever tabulate his thoughts in that precise and detailed way. The whole tendency of modern prose is away from concreteness. Now analyse these two sentences a little more closely. The first contains 49 words but only 60 syllables, and all its words are those of everyday life. The second contains 38 words of 90 syllables: 18 of its words are from Latin roots, and one from Greek. The first sentence contains six vivid images, and only one phrase ('time and chance') that could be called vague. The second contains not a single fresh, arresting phrase, and in spite of its 90 syllables it gives only a shortened version of the meaning contained in the first. Yet without a doubt it is the second kind of sentence that

is gaining ground in modern English. I do not want to exaggerate. This kind of writing is not yet universal, and outcrops of simplicity will occur here and there in the worst-written page. Still, if you or I were told to write a few lines on the uncertainty of human fortunes, we should probably come much nearer to my imaginary sentence than to the one from *Ecclesiastes*.

As I have tried to show, modern writing at its worst does not consist in picking out words for the sake of their meaning and inventing images in order to make the meaning clearer. It consists in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and making the results presentable by sheer humbug. The attraction of this way of writing is that it is easy. It is easier — even quicker, once you have the habit — to say *In my opinion it is a not unjustifiable assumption that* than to say *I think*. If you use ready-made phrases, you not only don't have to hunt about for words; you also don't have to bother with the rhythms of your sentences, since these phrases are generally so arranged as to be more or less euphonic. When you are composing in a hurry — when you are dictating to a stenographer, for instance, or making a public speech — it is natural to fall into a pretentious, laminized style. Tags like *a consideration which we should do well to bear in mind* or *a conclusion to which all of us would readily assent* will save many a sentence from coming down with a bump. By using stale metaphors, similes and idioms, you save much mental effort, at the cost of leaving your meaning vague, not only for your reader but for yourself. This is the significance of thick metaphors. The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image. When these images clash — as in *The Fascist octopus has sung its swan song, the jackboot is thrown into the melting pot* — it can be taken as certain that the writer is not seeing a mental image of the objects he is naming; in other words he is not really thinking. Look again at the examples I gave at the beginning of this essay. Professor Laski (1) uses five negatives in 53 words. One of these is superfluous, making nonsense of the whole passage, and in addition there is the ship *alien* for akin, making further nonsense, and several avoidable pieces of clumsiness which increase the general vagueness. Professor Hogben (2) plays ducks and drakes with a battery which is able to write prescriptions, and, while disapproving of the everyday phrase

*put up with*, is unwilling to look *egregious* up in the dictionary and see what it means. (3), if one takes an uncharitable attitude towards it, is simply meaningless: probably one could work out its intended meaning by reading the whole of the article in which it occurs. In (4), the writer knows more or less what he wants to say, but an accumulation of stale phrases chokes him like tea leaves blocking a sink. In (5), words and meaning have almost parted company. People who write in this manner usually have a general emotional meaning — they dislike one thing and want to express solidarity with another — but they are not interested in the detail of what they are saying. A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions; thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. You can shrug it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready-made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent — and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear.

In our time it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a 'party line'. Orthodoxy, of whatever colour, seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style. The political dialects to be found in pamphlets, leading articles, manifestos, White Papers and the speeches of under-secretaries do, of course, vary from party to party, but they are all alike in that one almost never finds in them a fresh, vivid, home-made turn of speech. When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases — *bestial atrocities*, *iron heel*, *blood-stained tyranny*, *free peoples of the world*, *stand shoulder to shoulder* — one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem

to have no eyes behind them. And this is not altogether fanciful. A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself. If the speech he is making is one that he is accustomed to make over and over again, he may be almost unconscious of what he is saying, as one is when one utters the responses in church. And this reduced state of consciousness, if not indispensable, is at any rate favourable to political conformity.

In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible. Things like the continuance of British rule in India, the Russian purges and deportations, the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan, can indeed be defended, but only by arguments which are too brutal for most people to face, and which do not square with the professed aims of political parties. Thus political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness. Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called *pacification*. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called *transfer of population* or *rectification of frontiers*. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called *elimination of unreliable elements*. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Consider for instance some comfortable English professor defending Russian totalitarianism. He cannot say outright, 'I believe in killing off your opponents when you can get good results by doing so'. Probably, therefore, he will say something like this:

'While freely conceding that the Soviet regime exhibits certain features which the humanitarian may be inclined to deplore, we must, I think, agree that a certain curtailment of the right to political opposition is an unavoidable concomitant of transitional periods, and that the rigours which the Russian people have been called upon to undergo have been amply justified in the sphere of concrete achievement.'

The inflated style is itself a kind of euphemism. A mass of Latin words falls upon the facts like soft snow, blurring the outlines and covering up all the details. The great enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cutfish squirting out ink. In our age there is no such thing as 'keeping out of politics'. All issues are political issues, and politics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia. When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer. I should expect to find — this is a guess which I have not sufficient knowledge to verify — that the German, Russian and Italian languages have all deteriorated in the last ten or fifteen years, as a result of dictatorship.

But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should and do know better. The debased language that I have been discussing is in some ways very convenient. Phrases like *a not unjustifiable assumption*, *leaves much to be desired*, *would serve no good purpose*, *a consideration which we should do well to bear in mind*, are a continuous temptation, a packet of aspirins always at one's elbow. Look back through this essay, and for certain you will find that I have again and again committed the very faults I am protesting against. By this morning's post I have received a pamphlet dealing with conditions in Germany. The author tells me that he 'felt impelled' to write it. I open it at random, and here is almost the first sentence that I see: '(The Allies) have an opportunity not only of achieving a radical transformation of Germany's social and political structure in such a way as to avoid a nationalistic reaction in Germany itself, but at the same time of laying the foundations of a co-operative and unified Europe.' You see, he 'feels impelled' to write — feels, presumably, that he has something new to say — and yet his words, like cavalry horses answering the bugle, group themselves automatically into the familiar dreary pattern. This invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases (*lay the foundations*, *achieve a radical transformation*) can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain.

I said earlier that the decadence of our language is probably curable. Those who deny this would argue, if they produced an argument at all, that language merely reflects existing social conditions, and that we cannot influence its development by any direct tinkering with words and constructions. So far as the general tone or spirit of language goes, this may be true, but it is not true in detail. Silly words and expressions have often disappeared, not through any evolutionary process but owing to the conscious action of a minority. Two recent examples were *explore every avenue* and *leave no stone unturned*, which were killed by the jeers of a few journalists. There is a long list of flyblown metaphors which could similarly be got rid of if enough people would interest themselves in the job; and it should also be possible to laugh the *not un-* formation out of existence,<sup>28</sup> to reduce the amount of Latin and Greek in the average sentence, to drive out foreign phrases and strayed scientific words, and, in general, to make pretentiousness unfashionable. But all these are minor points. The defence of the English language implies more than this, and perhaps it is best to start by saying what it does *not* imply.

To begin with, it has nothing to do with archaism, with the salvaging of obsolete words and turns of speech, or with the setting-up of a 'standard English' which must never be departed from. On the contrary, it is especially concerned with the scrapping of every word or idiom which has outworn its usefulness. It has nothing to do with correct grammar and syntax, which are of no importance so long as one makes one's meaning clear, or with the avoidance of Americanisms, or with having what is called a 'good prose style'. On the other hand it is not concerned with fake simplicity and the attempt to make written English colloquial. Nor does it even imply in every case preferring the Saxon word to the Latin one, though it does imply using the fewest and shortest words that will cover one's meaning. What is above all needed is to let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about. In them, the worst thing one can do with words is to surrender to them. When you think of a concrete object, you think wordlessly, and then, if you want to describe the thing you have been visualizing, you probably hunt about till you find the exact words that seem to fit it. When you think of something

abstract you are more inclined to use words from the start, and unless you make a conscious effort to prevent it, the existing dialect will come rushing in and do the job for you, at the expense of blurring or even changing your meaning. Probably it is better to put off using words as long as possible and get one's meaning as clear as one can through pictures or sensations. Afterwards one can choose — not simply *accept* — the phrases that will best cover the meaning, and then switch round and decide what impression one's words are likely to make on another person. This last effort of the mind cuts out all stale or mixed images, all prefabricated phrases, needless repetitions, and humbug and vagueness generally. But one can often be in doubt about the effect of a word or a phrase, and one needs rules that one can rely on when instinct fails. I think the following rules will cover most cases:

- (i) Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- (ii) Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- (iii) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- (iv) Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- (v) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
- (vi) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous. These rules sound elementary, and so they are, but they demand a deep change of attitude in anyone who has grown used to writing in the style now fashionable. One could keep all of them and still write bad English, but one could not write the kind of stuff that I quoted in those five specimens at the beginning of this article.

I have not here been considering the literary use of language, but merely language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought. Stuart Chase and others have come near to claiming that all abstract words are meaningless, and have used this as a pretext for advocating a kind of political quietism. Since you don't know what Fascism is, how can you struggle against Fascism? One need not swallow such absurdities as this, but one ought to recognize that the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are

feed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even to yourself. Political language — and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists — is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. One cannot change this all in a moment, but one can at least change one's own habits, and from time to time one can even, if one jeers loudly enough, send some worn-out and useless phrase — some *jacketboot*, *Achilles' heel*, *hotbed*, *melting pot*, *acid test*, *veritable inferno* or other lump of verbal refuse — into the dustbin where it belongs.

## The Sporting Spirit

*Tribune, 14 December 1945*

Now that the brief visit of the Dynamo football team has come to an end, it is possible to say publicly what many thinking people were saying privately before the Dynamos ever arrived. That is, that sport is an unfailing cause of ill-will, and that if such a visit as this had any effect at all on Anglo-Soviet relations, it could only be to make them slightly worse than before.

Even the newspapers have been unable to conceal the fact that at least two of the four matches played led to much bad feeling. At the Arsenal match, I am told by someone who was there, a British and a Russian player came to blows and the crowd booed the referee. The Glasgow match, someone else informs me, was simply a free-for-all from the start. And then there was the controversy, typical of our nationalistic age, about the composition of the Arsenal team. Was it really an all-England team, as claimed by the Russians, or merely a league team, as claimed by the British? And did the Dynamos end their tour abruptly in order to avoid playing an all-England team? As usual, everyone answers these questions according to his political predilections. Not quite everyone, however. I noted with interest, as an instance of the vicious passions that football provokes, that the sporting correspondent of