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Symmetry, Asymmetry, and Literary Humanism

This book is primarily for teachers and prospective teachers of English, although I believe it will interest scholars in the fields of language, rhetoric, and discourse generally. It is the result of many years of teaching courses in language and linguistics to students of literature and rhetoric, and one of its primary goals is to bring these fields into friendlier conversation with each other. I do not intend to survey every critical and philosophical issue in the extensive interface of these disciplines. This book is for the advanced student of literature, rhetoric, or composition studies, who may be taking that first course in linguistics or philosophy of language; the professor who may be rethinking the structure and content of that course in English language for prospective teachers; or the experienced teacher looking for a chance to reexamine those murky relations within the language, literature, and rhetoric triangle of English Studies.

Although some of my terminology is new, the basic questions are very old: Do words (does language) reflect reality? Can the study and practice of language itself—considered apart from the subjects and disciplines that language encodes and communicates—make you a smarter, wiser, and better person? Teachers of language and literature have always tended to

think so, and this affirmative answer is what I will term *symmetry*. Many of these teachers now realize, however, that there are serious objections to symmetry, as well as a history of erroneous thinking and practice on the subject; and so they'd rather not be questioned too closely on particulars. In fact, many have lost confidence that the question can be answered affirmatively at all. A host of scientific and philosophical developments in the last half century, as well as a host of educational failures—in a civilization that wants earnestly to promise the extended benefits of literacy to all its citizens—have seriously eroded that confidence. My goal is to offer a prospect of restoration. Even though specific attributions of symmetry have often been wrong, sometimes resulting in ineffective practice, our basic intuitions of symmetry are valid, demonstrable, and usable. Language does teach us something, if we listen in the right places, and learn from it in the right ways.

For individuals in the field of English Studies, there are practical and personal as well as philosophical urgencies to the symmetry question, and the following conditions can be regarded as symptomatic:

- Most of us would describe ourselves as "lovers of words" or "lovers of language," but few of us have any distinct or communicable sense of what these phrases entail.
- Philology, conceived originally as the historical study of language, and oriented toward the establishment and understanding of early English texts, once held a secure place in the study of letters. But linguistics, understood broadly as the scientific study of language in general, has no such security. A national survey in 1969 discovered unanimity among American leaders in English Studies that the preparation of English teachers should include at least one course in "the English language"; however, that same study discovered no agreement about the content of such courses, and no agreement at all about the "points of application" of linguistic principles to the needs of English teachers (Pearson and Reese). No greater state of agreement has developed since that time.
- Although courses in "English Linguistics," "Linguistics for Teachers," and "History of the English Language" do exist in nearly every program of English education, the primary points of application upon which most would be found to agree are actually negative. That is to say: differences among spoken varieties of English, either geographical or social, are not indicative of accomplishment or intelligence,

and efforts to modify them are not productive; the formal teaching of grammar does not result in better writing and speaking; the differences between prestigious and nonprestigious usage do not have anything to do with clarity of thought or true elegance of expression; and an educational emphasis on such matters has, in any case, little positive effect, even on usage itself (for an interesting critical perspective on "History of the English Language," see Crowley 11–42).

- Quite fortunately, a half-century's labors in sociolinguistics and language history, combined with other sources of critical consciousness, have led to forms of language instruction that celebrate (rather than worry about) the diversity of dialects, traditions of discourse, and modes of literacy that exist nationwide and worldwide in English (see Smitherman and Villaneuva; Graddol; Leith; and Swann). However, specific recommendations for teaching—things that may be thought to lead to better reading, writing, speaking, and citizenship—are still limited to by-now familiar liberations from (warnings against) the old enthronements of majority speech.

To any observer of this field from the outside, the immediate question might be an astonished, "Is there really a problem here? What two things could go more naturally and comfortably together than English Studies and the formal study of language?" To anyone on the inside, however, the disjunction is more apparent. For any college or university faculty in the English-speaking world, "English" primarily means the study of literature in English. The formal study of language has very little to do with it, and the place of linguists in most departments of English is marginal and precarious (see especially Robinson). Among faculties in secondary schools, the response might be more complicated, because here the responsibility for teaching competence in the use of language is felt more urgently, and issues of language, literacy, and language policy receive more daily attention. But here there are also sharp discontinuities. The formal study of language plays no role in the study of literature, and its relevance to effective writing and speaking is at best ambiguous—and, in fact, a subject of long-standing dispute. At every level, many of the most successful teachers do their best to minimize the formal study of language, while many of their best students are repelled by it.

In the past half century in America, roughly since the appearance of Edward P. J. Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student,* university English faculties have taken on a much greater and more learned re-

sponsibility for all that "rhetoric," in the classical sense, can mean: the development of the effective use of language in the world, and the parallel development of a broader human character and sensibility. But even the most successful university programs of rhetoric and composition have remained separate from other parts of the English curriculum; and here too, in spite of strenuous efforts, the formal study of language has remained stubbornly marginal.

None of this signals a particular crisis in English Studies. It is simply a fact of life, albeit a curious one. Wherever language and rhetoric have been taught, the problem has cropped up in one way or another. The divisions we are talking about are related to a question that has fascinated philosophers, grammarians, poets, and theologians from Plato onward. I call it the *symmetry question*. In its simplest and earliest form, as I indicated at the beginning, this is the question of whether words reflect reality. The question is paraphrasable, however, in a variety of complicated ways and contexts: What is the relationship of language to the world, especially to our thoughts about the world and to our experience of it? Is language understandable as simply the medium through which we express our thoughts and experience? Or is there a relationship of symmetry between the two? Do forms and structures of language parallel (mimic, tie into, anticipate) or participate in the forms and structures of these other things—that is to say, the world, our consciousness of it, our experience of it? If they do not, should we worry about it? If they do, are there ways that we can use that knowledge?

I am now going to shift away from the term "English Studies" and take up the more historically inclusive notion of "literary humanism." As implied by its separate verbal components, the field of literary humanism was named originally for its devotion to "letters" on the one hand, and for its separateness from "divinity" or theological studies on the other hand. (In the Renaissance period of European history, whence the notion of humanism derives, this separateness did not imply hostility to religion, as some have thought, although the fact of separation did mean a good deal.) The term has been defined in a number of different ways, but in general literary humanism has come to name any conscious program of scholarship and teaching that combines the study of language, rhetoric, and literature, working toward greater competence, character, and wisdom in the individual and, hence, toward a better society. That is a rather cumbersome definition, but it does underscore both the complexity and the ambitiousness of the enterprise: scholarship, teaching, language, rhetoric,

literature, competence, character, wisdom, and a better society. As literary humanists of the Renaissance understood quite well, such conscious programs were broader and more oriented toward civil society than the theologically oriented education of medieval Europe; and they had a much earlier origin, in pre-Christian Greece and Rome.

Looking at the various components of this definition of literary humanism, it becomes readily apparent that how the symmetry question is answered can have a powerful impact upon how any literary humanism is conceived, constructed, and put into practice. The medieval supporting structures of an eternal truth are no longer in the foreground. The credibility of the literary humanistic enterprise, and the viability of its hopes, are greater if there are correspondences or analogues between structures of language and those of human knowledge, character, and social aspiration. With this fact in mind, we can now pose the symmetry question in some different ways: Does language itself, and its study, have special things to teach you about the world? If you listen to language and practice its arts, are there important things about the world that you might expect to hear or learn? And if so, can literary humanism be organized to facilitate this listening and learning?

Historically, since its inception in the Greek city-state, most serious literary humanism has been animated by an intuition and a claim of symmetry. In modern times as well (that is, since the eighteenth century), literary humanists have been motivated by a strong conviction of symmetry, and that conviction has fueled a great deal of devoted research, both in language and in literature. However, when it has come actually to illuminating the study of literature with the study of language, or harnessing linguistic insights to the teaching of effective use, they have not really known what to do with this conviction. Moreover, some of the things they have done with it have been neither wise nor effective. Most strikingly, humanists have not been powerfully assisted by linguistic science, either in articulating the conviction itself or in giving it practical application.

A strong reason for this is that modern linguistic science has been animated by a different leaning altogether from the one that has fueled literary humanism. This is the view that I will call *asymmetry*. It is the view that, by and large, language is its own kind of system, operating with its own unique principles, hence the idea that linguistic structures are related to other kinds of structures is considered a mistake. For many literary humanists, the privileging of asymmetry, especially its characteristic expression as "arbitrariness," has caused linguistics to seem worse than not

very helpful, much like an alien presence. And when students of literature have themselves embraced asymmetry, it has seemed like a defection to the dark side.

Advocates of literature might argue that, with or without symmetry, it's in the great works of literary art, not in everyday writing and speaking, that we witness the most compelling, beautiful, and revelatory articulations of language and the world. These displays are not on the surface of things, not to be purchased inexpensively with a sentence diagram or a right-branching nominalization transformation; they are bought dearly, with great struggle and sacrifice, through processes that are only dimly understood, by minds of extraordinary power and insight.

This is true enough, and every lover of literature will to some degree assent to it. It is one of the great positions—though not by any means the only possible one—of modern literary humanism. But it does not answer the question of why the study of language has contributed so little to the understanding and appreciation of these things. And it opens up a larger and fascinating theoretical question as well: Is the function of literature to mine the possibilities of language, discovering its deep participations in experience? Or is it rather to construct these things as artful and entertaining illusions, in ephemeral and perhaps suspect ways? Without a doubt, the answers to these questions for literary humanists—most especially English teachers—can be located by looking at the history of conflicts between symmetry and asymmetry (a history which reaches back much further than the advent of modern linguistics or literary criticism) and also by listening to and learning from language in some different ways.

The Marriage to Latin

For roughly the first eighteen hundred years of the Common Era, these questions about language were not make-or-break questions for teachers of language and literature. They were certainly not unknown to literary humanists, and different leanings did affect practice in one way or another; but they were not the basis for anxieties about how the whole enterprise fits together. Language, including the issue of competence in its use, was dominated by the study of one particular language, Latin. Literature was dominated by a particular literature: a list of great works in which the world's wisdom, beauty, and eloquence were deposited, primarily in Latin. Consequently, questions aside about how language and literature participate in the world and in each other, the case for literary humanism was

bunkered on both sides by a common and necessary subject matter: the Latin language, considered a more elevated medium than the vernacular languages, and the great religious, philosophical, and literary texts composed in Latin.

For hundreds of years, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the terms "grammar" and "Latin" were virtuously synonymous. It was understood that what a student was doing in the grammar stage of the curriculum—in later centuries the "grammar school"—was learning how to read, speak, and write in Latin. (The first books of English grammar did not appear until the sixteenth century, and these were neither scholarly books nor manuals of proper English, but rather primers for the study of Latin.) Latin was the nearly universal and exclusive medium of learning, of government, of religion and ecclesiastical affairs, right down to the church service, and all the important literature, including Holy Scripture, was written in it. Moreover, it was not anybody's native language, and virtually all study of "language" was aimed at learning how to read, write, and speak Latin.

Everyone who taught Latin and wrote manuals for its instruction did so in the confidence that Latin was a necessary acquisition. However, most had another kind of confidence as well: Latin was a superior language. And here is an important meeting place for the symmetry question and the practice of literary humanism. The idea of Latin's superiority over the various languages of the people (vulgar tongues, they were called, from the Latin "vulgus," meaning common people) is strongly connected to the idea that Latin is more symmetrical: it is closer to reality. It has a greater purchase on the truths and realities that language must represent. It is more appropriate, therefore, to the important communal functions (the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, the affairs of government and diplomacy, the conduct of teaching, learning, and scholarship) that language must perform.

For the most part during this period, the superiority of Latin was not so much advocated as it was assumed. The judgment of modern linguistics, of course, is that this assumption was wrong. It was based partly on superstition (Latin as divinely ordained) and partly on ignorance of historical facts. But more exactly, it was based on an imperfect understanding of fundamental linguistic processes and linguistic relationships: how languages are internally structured; how and why they change; what happens when they come into contact with one another; and what condi-

tions make it possible for one variety of a language to become standardized and adapted for official use. The science of language acknowledges a blunt truth: there is no evidence that any language is better than any other language. However, the proposition that seems so dubious and outlandish to the modern linguist would have seemed obvious and uncontestable to the medieval schoolman.

It is important to keep in mind from the outset that the primary argument for the greatness of Latin was always its obvious association with greatness. It was the language of learned and holy people; and most of the wise, beautiful, and holy literature was written in it. However, if you asked an educated person to explain formally why Latin was superior, you would generally get some combination of the following:

> Latin is more logical and intellectually complex than the vulgar languages, and therefore (in addition to being more dignified), it is more in touch with ultimate reality.
>
> Latin is more highly structured and regular than the vulgar languages, and therefore (in addition to being more dependable), it is more in touch with the higher regularities of the cosmos.
>
> Latin is more permanent and stable, less subject to change and variation, than the vulgar languages, and therefore (in addition to being more widely accessible), it is more in touch with the permanent and stable realities of the universe.
>
> Latin is more elegant, dignified, and beautiful, and therefore (in addition to being a fitter medium for important occasions), it is more expressive of elegance, dignity, and beauty in general.
>
> Latin has a greater store of scientific, philosophical, and religious vocabulary, and therefore (in addition to being a necessary lingua franca), it is a more powerful medium for exploring these things.

In this history, no single individual would have endorsed with equal emphasis all of these formal justifications. Interestingly, by the end of the Renaissance period, some of the assumptions of Latin's superiority had eroded considerably, even as others were being asserted more vigorously. As early as the thirteenth century, poets were engaging in open and flamboyant relationships with their vernaculars (see *The Divine Comedy* and *The Romance of the Rose*), even as the Catholic church remained faithful. Dante wrote a treatise, *De Vulgari Eloquentia,* defending the vernacular in literature, but even here the superiority of Latin (which he calls "gram-

matica") is not seriously questioned. Dante in fact promoted the superiority of his own Tuscan dialect on the grounds that it was closer to Latin.

In the sixteenth century, leaders of the Protestant Reformation would tear asunder and denounce as superstition the hold of Latin on religious life, even while literary humanists in Protestant countries (notably England) were constructing a school curriculum that was more rigorously based on Latin than ever before: acquiring Latin, doing Latin exercises designed to improve thinking, absorbing the wisdom that was (still) stored in Latin, and preparing to conduct the world's business in Latin. Some of the masters of grammar schools in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England initiated trial separations, so to speak—that is, attempts to teach logic and rhetoric in English—but these attempts were not immediately successful, and the study of grammar continued to mean, for the most part, the study of Latin and great books written in Latin. In this setting also, the presiding assumption was that Latin was a superior language, even if it was not inherently so, because the great classical authors had made it so. And so strong was Latin's hold that even by the time of the eighteenth century, when literary humanists were celebrating a rich and proud national literature, and the teaching of English was becoming an important part of the educational agenda, the old assumption remained. A project of English literary humanism would become to improve the language—in fact, to make it as logical, as regular, as stable, as dignified, and as beautiful as Latin.

It has been such a long time since anyone was signed on to this particular project that a good deal of the philosophy behind it has passed out of memory as well. For that reason, I want to take a closer look at some specifics, for what they may reveal about the symmetry question. Among the various justifications of Latin's superiority, the arguments about reason and stability were generally more compelling than those about beauty (hence the gorgeous infidelities of the poets). The first argument, regarding logic, would have been the most compelling of all. Here, for thinkers of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, was the primary meeting ground of language and reality.

Although it is very little emphasized today, logic was an integral component of traditional language arts, the second in the "trivium" of basic preparatory studies: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Its purpose, then as now, was to secure sound thinking, and it did this by teaching students how to perform specific dialectical operations: how to define terms properly; how to distinguish different concepts from one another; how to dis-

tinguish the different kinds of propositions or claims that are made in an argument; and how to join together propositions correctly in support of these claims.

Why would Latin be considered more logical than other languages? Primarily because its grammar seemed more complex and therefore more attuned to those logical differences named above. Latin did possess a more complex and comprehensive set of noun and verb endings (inflections), expressing different relationships of case and tense, than any European language. A student learning the name for boy ("puer"), for instance, would have to learn along with it ten different inflectional endings, depending upon the particular reality it represented in a given sentence and its logical relationship to other parts of a sentence: Was the boy singular or plural? The subject or object of a verb (nominative or accusative)? The owner or originator of something (genitive)? And so on through the case system: puer, pueri, puero, puerum, puero, pueri, puerorum, pueris, pueris. There is a much longer list for the various tenses and moods of a verb. And it is all far more complicated than this, of course, because there are different classes of nouns and verbs, each requiring a different set of inflectional endings. By contrast, the European vernaculars, including French, Italian, and Spanish (the living continuations of Latin), had evolved into languages with far simpler inflectional systems.

What linguists have long understood is that no language is really more complex or logical than another. What Latin accomplishes with its inflectional system is as readily accomplished in English by a battery of prepositional expressions and by a much more tightly regulated system of word order. However, the differences we are talking about were right there on the surface to see. Latin was indeed more complex on that surface, and the vernacular language did look grammatically and logically impoverished by comparison. Moreover, Latin is devilishly difficult to learn as a second language, requiring years of painstaking effort. For a variety of reasons, the grammar of the curriculum became the necessary boot camp, the portal to logic, rhetoric, literature, theology, the sciences, and the "higher" life.

More important than whatever combination of factors may have made Latin seem more logical than other languages was the prestige of logic itself. In contrast to modern times, medieval thinkers placed a much higher premium upon logic than upon observation, experiment, or feeling. In this predilection they combined Christianity's conviction of the fallenness of this world with a philosophy of knowledge inherited from Plato and Aristotle. The things of this world—nature as well as human life and human

history—were in this view radically imperfect, unreliable, and transitory. More perfect, more permanent, and therefore more "real" and knowable, were the ideas or abstract categories of things, apprehensible through logic. From this premise it only took one more step of reasoning to think of these permanent things as more readily accessible through the more permanent medium—Latin. The down-to-earth vernaculars participated more in the impermanence and fallenness of the earth itself.

An entire school of medieval grammarians, the so-called modistae of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, devoted their labors to proving that grammatical concepts or modes (parts of speech, the categories of case, tense, and so on) provided direct links to permanent ideas built into the structure of reality and the human mind. In other words, a tripartite condition of symmetry was posited among modes of being (realities out there), modes of conceptualizing (ideas about them), and modes of signifying (words about them). In later medieval philosophy, the symmetry question appears prominently in attacks upon this position, resulting in the famous debate between realists and nominalists. Realists held that abstract ideas or universals—justice, love, freedom—have objective and permanent reality. In fact, they are more real than any historical fact or condition that they might name, and these realities are knowable, or at least partially so, through human language. Nominalists (from the Latin "nomen" or name) held that the general ideas of things are simply names for material (the real) things, or rather generalizations about them. These categories have no reality apart from their connections to material things, and these things are not really knowable in the abstract. The categories of language, therefore, have no special purchase upon them.

The realism versus nominalism debate, especially as the early modern world headed speedily in the direction of nominalism, held some potential for dissolving the marriage to Latin. However, this dissolution was not to occur for a very long time, and not without a host of real-world developments. As long as Latin remained the central repository of learning and literature, the lingua franca of scholars and diplomats, (still, for a great part of Europe) the language of the Church, and as long as formal education remained the possession of a very small part of the population, the hold of Latin would remain firm. Interestingly, from the sixteenth century onward, Protestant leaders would have powerful reasons for opposing the practical hegemony of Latin in religious life. Theoretically, they opposed the very idea that a particular language could possess special powers. (Here, at least in the popular imagination, was the basis for the power and

necessity of the Church's sacraments.) However, even as Protestant leaders were promoting vernacular literacy for a wider segment of the population, the marriage of literary humanism to Latin remained strong, and in some ways it became stronger.

Literary humanists of the Renaissance (the first scholars and teachers actually to call themselves "humanists") mounted a new defense of what has come to be known as a "classical education." This education consisted essentially of a rigorous program of grammar, logic, and rhetoric in Latin, and after that, the great moral and philosophical literature in Latin. Humanists believed confidently in the superior logic, beauty, and expressiveness of Latin, especially in what they considered its purer classical form. They scoffed at what they considered the corrupted Latin of the medieval church (they also invented the very term "medieval"), and they promoted instead the Latin of the Roman republic, represented most exquisitely in the works of Cicero. They were the founders of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century grammar schools mentioned earlier; and they constructed a curriculum that was more rigorous than had existed in medieval schools. Partly as a consequence, in both Protestant and Catholic Europe, nearly all preparatory education and all university education would remain in Latin. And for a long time to come, the best way to improve your native language would be considered to make it more like Latin (Knowles 107–14; Amsler 287–89).

This historical sketch is not meant to debunk traditional literary humanism, nor certainly to discredit the general idea of symmetry. The purpose has been to underscore that literary humanists, while admirable in their purposes, can be mistaken about particulars. Their work is fueled by an intuition and a leaning toward symmetry—an "enchantment," as the brilliant French linguist Gerard Genette has termed it. However, they have inherited a literary humanism that, because of its long marriage to Latin, is partial to ideas about symmetry that no longer stand up to rational scrutiny. The marriage to Latin produced some beautiful children, but it was nevertheless a bad marriage.

It is important to keep in mind that the symmetry question, and also its relevance to literary humanism, is much older than the Renaissance grammar school or the medieval trivium. What a broader historical view will uncover is that the struggle between symmetry and asymmetry is not merely a struggle between literary humanism and the science of language (or even, going back a little further, between literature and philosophy). It

is a struggle within literary humanism itself. There can be (and have been) literary humanisms intelligently founded on a leaning toward asymmetry as well. And more importantly, there can be (and have been) humanisms that intelligently join the two.

Symmetry versus Asymmetry

If you dispense with the question of whether there is anything very special about the Latin language, there still remains the question of whether there is anything very special about any language at all. And obviously this turns out to be a more fascinating question. We can begin with two quotations that illustrate the two basic leanings, both of them from great literary figures and neither more or less sophisticated about language than the other. The first is from W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats":

> Time that is intolerant
> Of the brave and innocent,
> And indifferent in a week
> To a beautiful physique,
> Worships language and forgives
> Everyone by whom it lives;
> Pardons cowardice, conceit,
> Lays its honours at their feet.
> Time that with this strange excuse
> Pardons Kipling and his views,
> And will pardon Paul Claudel,
> Pardons him for writing well. (46–57)

The next is from Samuel Johnson's Preface to the *Dictionary of the English Language*: "I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven" (7).

The first quotation expresses the view that language, properly and creatively used, is an organ not merely of clarity and beauty but of special revelation as well; that these things belong together and lead into each other. This is something that poets have always tended to believe. When William Wordsworth exclaimed (in "Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey") that nature "never did betray the heart that loved her," he meant also the natural language—the "language of the sense," which appears in the same poem as our primary way of connecting to nature (122–23). He is

> well pleased to recognize
> In nature and the language of the sense,
> The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse
> The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
> Of all my moral being. (107–11)

Wordsworth's statement is certainly more extravagant and unguarded than Auden's, but Auden's is strong enough. Yeats, Rudyard Kipling, and Paul Claudel are all figures whose political views he detests, but he believes that their special relationship to language (not just their command of it) gives them access to a truth that transcends politics. Would it not follow from this that the best education is the one that joins the love of wisdom to the love of words? This is symmetry.

Samuel Johnson's quotation—and please keep in mind that it comes from a great literary critic and student of language—stands for the equally cogent position that all of the above is basically not true. Individuals like Johnson are more likely to recognize that the common tongue (and the noble one too, in all its plumage and decoration) is a carrier of error, prejudice, and false gods. Francis Bacon, the seventeenth-century prophet of the scientific mind-set, termed them "the idols of the marketplace" (40–42). Such individuals may love the poets but be less inclined to forgive them simply for writing well. Language, they recognize, has no particular hold on the truth; in fact, by its very nature it tends to soak up prejudice and error like a sponge. Words "plainly force and overrule the understanding," says Bacon, "and throw all into confusion, and lead men away into numberless empty controversies and idle fancies" (40). No sentence that we speak can be coherent and comprehensible unless it lays its new information on a comfortable bed of old information—presupposition, that is—the already known. It is the old information, chiefly embedded in the existing vocabulary, that usually carries the error and prejudice. As an example, consider Johnson's own use of the words "sons" and "daughters" in the quotation above. No contemporary writer would use such a sexist metaphor; no editor would allow it.

Our ordinary speech is full of prejudice, inexactitude, and outright error. This is why anyone's first step in learning any new scientific or scholarly field will be to master its vocabulary—one that replaces the looseness and misconception of the old, the common language with the exactitude and fixity of the new. It is also why groups of individuals who have been oppressed or discriminated against have become vigilant about the ways

that prejudices against them are carried unconsciously in ordinary speaking and writing.

These are among the great truths and lessons of asymmetry, and it would follow from them that every education, like every serious discourse, should begin with a set of procedures for washing and wringing dry the dirty sponge of language. In this view, individuals should be trained to learn from and listen to language for its characteristic ways of leading one astray, and to practice a discourse that surpasses ordinary usage. The traditional language art that takes on this project directly is dialectic (or practical logic), and there are forms of literary humanism that concentrate on dialectic for this very reason. Released from the marriage to Latin, dialectic might give very little attention to details of language at all; in fact, it might scorn such attention.

Individuals of a scientific and dialectical bent are drawn to asymmetry. However, it is important to remember that the devotion to logic is not the only form that a leaning toward asymmetry can take. One such was the program of "General Semantics," which gained some educational currency in the mid-twentieth century, chiefly through its two most prominent popularizers, Stuart Chase (*Science and Sanity*) and S. I. Hayakawa (*Language in Thought and Action*). This program sought to alert students not only to the dangers of ordinary speech and discourse (the ubiquitous tendency toward abstraction, generalization, prejudicial assumption, and the false lures of advertising and propaganda), but to what it considered the uncertain paths of traditional logic as well. The program lost currency because of its failure to understand the ways in which language does lead us to what is true and valuable and good.

Another, more traditional (and actually more embraceable) asymmetrist position is that the study of logic is too arid a procedure, even as the study of linguistic detail is too picayune and futile. The surer path, in this view, is to fill your head with substance. Being well-read—studying the best works of literature in the old, broad sense (philosophy, ethics, and history, as well as literary art works)—is the best way to learn sound thinking and, in the long run, the effective and responsible use of language. In which case, sing praise again that we are free from Latin! In fact, we are free from language itself, and we can go directly to the substance of communication and learning. Are translations of the great books OK? Certainly. Language does not encode wisdom, it simply transmits it. This is an ancient position, and it is explained cogently by Vivien Law in her magisterial *History of Linguistics in Europe*:

> If language turns out to mirror reality faithfully and inevitably, then we have no freedom to use it as we choose . . . we must unavoidably speak in accordance with the truth inherent in the world. If, on other hand, language is arbitrary, we are cut off from reality—but at the same time we are free: free to speak and act in accordance with the truth of reality, or not. (20)

A value of the leaning toward asymmetry is its urgent understanding of our responsibility to use language with care: our natural language is prone to prejudice and error, and so we must scrub it clean. Just as importantly, however, asymmetry in the right hands can also celebrate and teach the art of language. Wordsworth, to be sure, believed that poetry works its wonders by finding the natural language, the one that connects to nature, and scraping away the excess. However, many lovers of poetry (Samuel Johnson included) have believed that the best poetry achieves what it achieves precisely by imparting to language a beauty, integrity, and clarity of thought that it does not naturally possess.

Symmetry and asymmetry, it should now be apparent, are not two forms of literary humanism but two contrary ways of thinking that have motivated and informed it. They connect to philosophical issues of a broader sort, and they connect to specific practices in the language arts. Historically, symmetry has been the more enchanting proposition and the more powerful motivator, though the more difficult to explain and defend. And there have been (and can be) specific views and practices that are plainly mistaken. Again, while specific intuitions of symmetry have often been inaccurate, they are never entirely wrong. The humanist love of language and confidence in language is neither unrequited nor misplaced. Language is a great teacher, but we must learn to listen carefully.

Suggested Reading

Conley, Thomas M. *Rhetoric in the European Tradition.* New York: Longman, 1990. A very good overview of the discipline of rhetoric from ancient to modern times, with an emphasis on competing traditions and the philosophical viewpoints behind them.

Genette, Gerard. *Mimologiques: Voyage en Cratylie.* Trans. Thais E. Morgan. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. The original, groundbreaking study of attempts to connect structures of language to realities outside of language, with an emphasis on French sources.

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