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Two Famous Asymmetrists

When Plato took up the question of symmetry directly, in his dialogue *Cratylus,* he knew that he was stepping into an ongoing, high-stakes discussion. He knew that it was Heraclitus, the celebrated pre-Socratic philosopher of change, who first proposed an educative relationship between words and the things they named. Heraclitus, the philosopher who famously proclaimed that a person cannot step into the same river twice, was impressed with what he regarded as the relative stability of language. In his view, external features of the world existed in such a rapid state of flux that words about them, because they changed more slowly than other things, were capable of retaining important truths now lost to direct observation (Poster 15–17). The Stoic philosophers, however, wrote more extensively on the subject (though much of this writing is now lost), and to Plato they presented a more powerful and disturbing argument. The Stoics maintained that the forms and categories of language, in spite of all kinds of surface evidence to the contrary, existed continuously in basic symmetry with the forms of the world. They must in fact do so, the Stoics argued, or we would not be able to know anything about the world or do anything useful in it.

In ancient philosophy, the symmetry question was also linked to another question specifically about language, the so-called analogy-anomaly question. Here, we deal with the fact that the surface of every language, like the surface of the world itself, is full of irregularities. Why do we have "bring," "brought," "has brought," rather than "bring," "bringed," "has bringed," or "bring," "brang," and "has brung"? To some thinkers, such facts were, in themselves, evidence enough that language was an irregular (and therefore probably unreliable) instrument. This is the anomaly position. To the analogists, however, this view seemed as superficial as the evidence on which it was based. Apparent anomalies were either the surface manifestations of a deeper system of order (roughly akin to the deep structures of modern linguistics), or they were corrupted versions of a previously existing order.

The analogy-anomaly question runs parallel to the symmetry question, and ancient treatments of it tended to provide further support for symmetry. Nobody expects the existing, outward form of the word *duck* to be like a duck or expects an active sentence to always signify action. Language's reference is not to *things*, in the sense of objects or events, but to the (truer, more stable) *ideas* of things. If you look deep enough, or go back far enough, you will likely find the connection. "Likely," however, turns out to be a big word in that sentence. The explanation seems very reasonable, but it can be exceedingly difficult to demonstrate consistently. And this is why in all ages the case for symmetry has come forward more as an article of conviction and belief than as a statement of fact.

In the ancient discussion, the need to keep the faith might have seemed especially strong, because the issue of language connected to two important philosophical issues. The first, as already noted, was the epistemology question: Are there stable, knowable realities out there? How can we know them? And how can we communicate reliably what we know? If something is being claimed in language, is there anything in language itself that authenticates or discredits the claim?

The second, related issue is more specifically about human institutions—government, religion, the law—and that is the ancient debate of nature versus convention: Allowing for all sorts of surface differences (everybody knows the constitution of Sparta is different from that of Athens), do such institutions derive from a natural order of things, and are they therefore subject to universal laws? Or do they exist by convention—by agreements among humans at different times and places, under different circumstances. If the latter is true, then they are not accountable to uni-

versal principles, since none are better or truer than another, except as a matter of practical working.

How do questions about the regularity and symmetry of language relate to all of this? First of all, human institutions are language-saturated. They are conducted in language, and in an important sense (a literal one, in fact, in the case of constitutions and laws) constructed by language. If language has no special hold on the truth or rightness of things, it can then be asked, how can the institutions constructed by it? More ominously: If language itself is saturated with prejudice and error, then what are the prospects for these language-saturated institutions? Furthermore, language itself is an institution. Does language in some sense derive from nature, reflecting the laws and principles of a permanent reality? Or is it something that human beings invented as their way of communicating? Are there natural principles that govern (or should govern) its use? And do these have anything to do with the way language represents (or should represent) reality?

Plato and the Sophists

This brings us to rhetoric—the ancient practice and teaching of public discourse. And here we come to a quarrel that Plato himself instigated with the teachers of rhetoric in his days, known as sophists. The study of this quarrel is wonderfully instructive and complex, and its fundamental issues enter into discussions and controversies about the teaching of rhetoric and composition today (see Crowley; Scenters-Zapico; and Schiappa). Many of the actual writings of the ancient sophists are fragmentary or lost entirely; and there is a great deal of controversy about the value and even the content, in some cases, of sophistic teaching. (Much of what we know is from Plato himself, who may have distorted it in the process of opposing it.) Rather than attempting to contribute any new interpretation of the debate, I will give only a thumbnail sketch, concentrating on how it relates to the symmetry question.

In modern times, we have come to expect that a controversy about language arts will take the form of a debate about what works. We want everyone to read, write, and speak better. We want to achieve these things, but why are we not doing so? When we criticize a form of literacy education, our basic argument will be that it does not work or that it won't work. The ancient debate had quite a different shape, however. Plato's quarrel with the sophists began with the assumption, and indeed the observation, that the sophistic program was working—was working too well, in fact,

and was about to destroy the Athenian state. All of the language-saturated institutions were, in Plato's view, being poisoned by a corrupted form of public discourse openly advocated by its most successful teachers.

The sophists advertised that they could ensure the success of young men about to enter public life by teaching them the skill most needed in their world—making speeches in public, primarily in courts of law, in legislative assemblies, and in public ceremonies. They did this by studying successful speeches and then, in the succinct phrase of James Murphy, "adducing useful precepts for the conduct of future discourse" (*A Synoptic History* 1). In time, the sophists accumulated a substantial body of precepts for each of the basic venues mentioned above, in five key areas: the conceptual or argumentative strategy of a speech (the art of invention, or in Greek "heuresis," the "finding" of a subject matter); the organizational plan of a speech (arrangement or disposition); the verbal strategy or style of a speech—effective selections of words, phrases, levels of diction, and figures of speech; the forceful and effective delivery of a speech; and a set of techniques for remembering the speech to be delivered. There were no doubt many varieties of approach, but two things in particular, fairly or unfairly, came to be regarded as hallmarks of sophistic teaching: a bold, unapologetic concentration on winning arguments rather than using language to discover and communicate truth; and a heavy emphasis on verbal strategy, or style—language in the primary sense. And both of these for the primary purpose of achieving personal success.

There exists everywhere a popular, visceral distrust of style over substance, contempt for slick manipulation over elemental sincerity. It was natural, therefore, that sophism would acquire something of an unsavory reputation, some of it no doubt unfair and ill-informed. However, Plato's objection to sophism went well beyond such commonplace distrust. Plato believed that sophism was based on and promoted a bad epistemology, was on the wrong side of the nature versus convention debate, and held a view of the symmetry question that placed excessive faith in the rightness and goodness of language itself. Most alarming to Plato was the claim of some sophists that a focus on acquiring sophistication in language would lead not only to success in speechmaking but also to a kind of wisdom.

An individual familiar with the practicalities of teaching speech or composition to young people might wonder out loud whether this is the sort of thing that really has power to pull down a republic. Many Athenians listening in on this debate undoubtedly did just that, and people in actual power are the sort to sneer at such a proposition. At all times

it is worth keeping a measure of the distance between the practical and theoretical ends of an educational practice. Nevertheless, both Plato and the sophists knew that the stakes were higher than who would get the teaching contracts, and the claim about wisdom was more than just a bit of bravado or overblown advertising.

The question is always worth asking—especially in a time when so many teachers so often experience a sense of failure in what they are doing—the way Plato asked it: What if everything we are doing were completely successful? Would we be achieving for individuals and for society what we really want to achieve? The name "sophist" does mean "wise man," and although many sophists were undoubtedly content to attend to the practicalities of speechmaking, quite a few were serious philosophers in their own right. They had good reasons for including an overview of politics, law, and ethics (the basic subjects, after all, of speechmaking) in their teaching. And these views, like those of Plato's mentor Socrates, often constituted a serious challenge to the conventional thinking of their day. This is why Plato took them head on, in dialogues named after them: Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias, and Prodicus.

All of the above is a frightfully compact summary of some well-known issues in the history of ancient rhetoric. Here is where we come to some of the surprises. A completely innocent observer, I should think, would expect the symmetrist—that is, the individual who posits a certain rightness about language—to be on the nature side of the nature versus convention debate, and also to be an optimist and a realist on the epistemological question. After all, if there is a stable order of nature, a coherent and well-constructed world out there, and if our minds and our language are part of that creation and participate in its essential features of design, then we should be in pretty good shape.

Does this sound like Plato? It is not. Although he is a realist on the epistemological question, he is *not* a symmetrist. He is firm on the question of whether there is a coherent reality outside of language, but he is very skeptical about the "power of language" to grasp it. In fact, it was only the Stoics who held tenaciously, even somewhat desperately, to both realism and symmetry. The interesting thing about the sophists, by contrast, is that they combined a belief in language with lack of belief in firm realities outside it. They combined linguistic symmetry with epistemological relativism and skepticism. This is what Plato considered a danger to society: For though language is not very good at grasping reality, it does have the power to charm, beguile, and persuade large audiences.

The sharpest edged, if not really the most formidable, of Plato's opponents was the sophist Gorgias, who combined a belief in the social power of language with a disbelief in its power to know anything, proclaiming famously and outrageously: "Nothing exists; if it did exist, we could not know it; and even if we could know it, we could not communicate it." We can, however, charm, beguile, persuade, and electrify audiences, and that is the juice that runs the world. It is altogether possible that Gorgias's famous saying is one of those flamboyant overstatements designed more to stir up reflection than to proclaim a serious position. A tamer and more careful restatement, if one may dare stand in for such a powerful orator, might go like this: "I'm not saying that there aren't real things out there, only that our institutions aren't universal, unchanging substances. We're always reshaping them in the here and now. I'm not saying that we can't know anything, only that we can't absolutely know anything, especially in human affairs. The most important thing is that knowledge is not always the issue. We're always having to decide what to do, what course is likely to be most successful, what to love and cling to and what to discard. These are matters about which we often have the least firm knowledge, and so knowledge plays only a minor role in the process. And besides, we shouldn't be so afraid of enchantment. It's lovely and it's fun. See my beautiful and playful little treatise, 'Encomium to Helen.'" Plato is not enchanted by this smooth talk, however, and he retorts as follows (my words again): "Gorgias talks about fun while the republic can hardly govern itself and is caught up in a tragically destructive war. The state is not about fun. As I recall, you're not really a citizen of Athens, are you, Gorgias? And trials for treason, such as the one that unjustly condemned to death my mentor Socrates, they're not about fun either. Truth is the issue, and eloquence is the problem. Look around you."

More of a challenge than Gorgias, in any case, and in its way more troubling, was a main line of sophism represented by Protagoras and Prodicus. These sophists did embrace symmetry, and they did so in a rather compelling way. There was a connection between language and the world, these teachers proclaimed, and those who were most adept at finding it would become both successful and wise in the process. These sophists offered an education based in language (a literary humanism), one that focused on procedures for finding the right words for things, claiming that language, cultivated in the proper ways, did have a hold on the truth—or such truth as we can have.

This formulation was more of a challenge for Plato because, in contrast

to the provocations of Gorgias, it seemed attractive, sensible, and practical. It is in fact a kind of literary humanism that did survive and which many of us would like to endorse and to practice—it is possible that Plato himself would have liked to. In fact, many scholars believe that his writings on rhetoric and poetry, especially the beautiful dialogue *Phaedrus,* constituted a challenge to his own students to produce a philosophically defensible humanism, one that would have the power to reform as well as promote success in public discourse. Plato's student Aristotle was probably taking on just that challenge in his magnificent works on *Rhetoric* and *Poetics.*

Whatever constituted Plato's true feelings or hopes about rhetoric and poetry, however, the philosophical problems were substantial. While symmetry at some level would seem to be necessary for us to be able to know and communicate anything, there are two huge problems with it: first, it is virtually impossible to demonstrate, either practically or philosophically; and second, its natural and inevitable bedfellows are skepticism and relativism. Why? Because, strictly from the standpoint of what words and sentences refer to, the discrepancies, misalignments, and discontinuities between language and anything else are too numerous to ignore. The common language is manifestly soaked with error and prejudice, and although there would be no science of linguistics as such for about twenty-four centuries, intelligent individuals could observe that language was its own system, not just a subcategory or offshoot of some other, such as logic. And so, unless you wanted to claim that there is some sort of lost language that we need to recover, or some new philosophical language that we need to construct (and these are both positions that have been taken in the history of our subject) then language's real connection would have to be not to things but to the consciousness of things—to states of reality that are subjective and interior. And such things are notoriously unreliable and disreputable.

Plato takes up the symmetry question directly in his dialogue *Cratylus,* where the eponymous character returns from instruction by sophists. Cratylus has been persuaded that there must be an essential connection between words and things. If language is our basic instrument for discovering and communicating reality and if that instrument has no essential connection to reality, then what can we do? Socrates concludes, after a long and painstaking inquiry, that we cannot demonstrate any essential connection between words and things, or words and ideas either. The

good news, however, is that this isn't necessary, because the mind has the capacity to apprehend reality directly. The mind does require training to do this, but it isn't a linguistic training that it requires. Listening to language doesn't really do you much good at all.

Now this is an interesting conclusion, and perhaps a liberation from terminal subjectivity. But even more interesting are the considerable energies that Socrates expends in exploring that other possibility, that is about possible forms of symmetry. In contrast with the way the conversation goes in some of the other dialogues—most especially the *Gorgias*—Socrates does not just set the opposition up to be denigrated. He engages in a real dialogue with his interlocutors. He really is intent, one feels, on carrying Cratylus's investigation as far as it will go.

Although some scholars have concluded that Plato's purpose here is to defend a symmetrist position, or at least to argue the urgent need for one (Genette 25–26; Krapp 130), modern historians of linguistics have demonstrated fairly conclusively that Plato is a confirmed asymmetrist. Nevertheless, the impression is inescapable that there is a stirring intellectual drama going on here. And while Plato directs us safely toward asymmetry, Socrates and the other characters do dramatize a deep fascination—again I defer to Gerard Genette's term "enchantment"—with that other thing, symmetry.

Many philosophers have considered the *Cratylus* as a kind of prolegomenon to Aristotle's massive works on logic and the principles of thought. The operating assumption of these works is that language is conventional and arbitrary but that categories of thought—what Socrates in the *Cratylus* terms "direct impressions of the soul"—are not. These impressions, not language, are our access to reality. However, if *Cratylus* is such a stalking horse, it is certainly a fanciful and deeply ambivalent one. The general case in favor of asymmetry, as I pointed out above, is not that difficult to make. What Socrates's basic excitement is about—the major thing that requires explaining—is that some words do reflect reality, some logoi, instances and acts of language, do penetrate. In these extraordinary cases, language, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's wonderful formulation would state over two thousand years later, "partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible" (*Statesman's Manual* 30).

To explain this mystery, Socrates engages in a bit of on the spot mythologizing: each language must have originally had a name giver. The character Cratylus gets very excited at this point and suggests that the

name giver surely would have been a god, but Socrates lets it go. The important thing is that the name giver must have gotten some things right and some things wrong, and we can do likewise. Vivien Law, in her *History of Linguistics in Europe from Plato to 1600*, sums it up very succinctly:

> the fact that some words do appear to reflect reality overtly has an important implication: it suggests that it is possible to gain accurate knowledge of reality without using words. So we should not despair. Since the name-giver was able to perceive reality directly, so can we. Therefore, we should concentrate on getting to know reality directly, without bothering with inferior imitations—words. (23)

Plato, Vivien Law concludes, is now free to investigate other sources of knowledge, having dismissed as only partially true the idea that "language has truth encoded in its very words." And so, "Language no longer interests him" (23). That is certainly a just conclusion, and we will see another version of it in St. Augustine. However, the qualification, "only partially true," has to be one of the largest qualifications in the history of qualifications, since the entire argument hinges on it. We should keep in mind that there is another, poetic side of Plato, which comes out in such dialogues as *Phaedrus;* and that image of the name giver, who might have been a god, like the deep-running desire for that other thing, stays in the mind.

Saint Augustine and the Word of God

Aurelius Augustine, the powerful and influential theologian, controversialist, spiritualist, and church leader of Christianity in the late Roman Empire, began his professional life as a teacher of rhetoric. Latin had become the language of public life in lands under the control of Rome—Augustine was from a province of northern Africa, and he wrote in Latin. However, the "marriage to Latin," with its implications of the superiority and even holiness of the Latin language, had not yet taken place. From the evidence of an early textbook, *De Dialectica*, now attributed to him, he does seem to have started off a symmetrist. If so, the position is not in that work stated very passionately, and it would not have attracted much notice. In that little book, Augustine would have been taken as following that mild form of symmetry that persisted as a legacy of the sophistic tradition, and which had been tamed, qualified, and civilized in the great rhetorical works of Cicero and Quintilian. The symmetry question really began to excite him after his conversion to Christianity. It was then that he gave up teaching rhetoric, and in a startling passage from his autobiog-

raphy that echoes Saint Paul, considered himself no longer a "salesman of words" (*Confessions* 9.2.2).

It's an unfortunate accident of history that Saint Augustine did not know the text of Plato's *Cratylus* when he composed his own very extensive reflections on the nature of linguistic signs. If he had, he surely would have had to do something with that character of Socrates's invention, the name giver. Such a figure would require more than passing reference from the man who was convinced that God created the universe through the Word, who was in the beginning with Him, and who sent the Word—the logos, Jesus Christ—as the historically decisive revelation to humankind (John, I). Surely enough, though, Augustine would have dismissed as a relic of paganism Cratylus's suggestion that the name giver was a god. If there was a name giver, it would have to be Adam, who in the book of Genesis was given the role of naming the animals.

However, that would not necessarily spoil the case for symmetry. After all, Augustine might have recognized him as the prelapsarian Adam, in command of a not yet fallen language. This might have been the Adam who would recall, as John Milton wrote twelve hundred years later, that he named the animals "as they passed, and understood / Their nature, with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension" (*Paradise Lost* VIII, 352–54). Under such circumstances we might envision Augustine as the symmetrist par excellence, for whom the glory of God is revealed in all his creation, especially in the human mind and language. But in fact it is not so. Augustine remained a temperamental symmetrist all his life, but he did explicitly renounce symmetry in his theological works. Augustine taught that words are not natural signs but human inventions, and they have their meanings purely by agreement among their users, not on account of any connection to what they signify.

Of course, it could conceivably have been otherwise. Augustine was a fierce believer in original sin. The Fall led to the corruption of all earthly things, certainly including human speech. There is also the story of the Tower of Babel, recorded in the book of Genesis, in which the original language of mankind was dispersed into a confusion of tongues. Reflection on these possibilities might have sent Augustine on a search for the original, pure language, as it has sent others in the history of our subject (see Eco). However, it did not do so. Augustine did not believe in an Edenic perfect language (Lombardi 29). Communication before the Fall would have been direct, without the aid of language at all. In Augustine's view, language was something constructed by humans after the Fall. And

so it is not simply a fallen language that we, the sons and daughters of Adam, speak, nor is it simply the fragment of some purer thing that existed before Babel.

On the ancient debate between nature and convention, Augustine's position was clearly what might be called Christian conventionalism. In this view, there exists a clear distinction between natural institutions (that is, things created by God) and human institutions (things created by humans and existing only by agreements among themselves). In Augustine's scheme of things, language (unlike the heavens, mathematics, or astonishingly, even rhetoric) is a human institution, and there is no connection between any of its parts and the rest of creation. For Augustine, even more so and more literally than for Samuel Johnson, words are completely the "daughters of earth," and not at all the "sons of heaven" (7).

By the way, individuals are not required to have a particular religious position in order to have a position on this question. It can be argued (and has been done convincingly by modern linguists) that language is a "natural institution" because a detailed capacity for it—what has been called "universal grammar"—exists as part of the structure of every human being's brain. The point is worth emphasizing here, because Augustine the fifth-century religionist comes across as much more modern than one might expect. One reason is that for Augustine the consequences of asymmetry are potentially more disturbing than they are for Plato and Aristotle.

Plato may have a lingering enchantment with symmetry, but he is willing to give it up for philosophical reasons. In fact, he needs language off center stage, because he has two more powerful players waiting in the wings: reason (the unaided apprehension of truth) and logic (a system for testing, refining, and proving what reason apprehends). Language's proper role is to be the transmitter of what reason discovers and logic approves. But for Augustine, reason and logic are not very reliable. They can be useful at times but they are fallen, along with every other human capability, and it is a mistake to place too much confidence in them. Augustine's ultimate solution, of course, is that the only thing in which we can have real confidence is the Word of God.

What is modern sounding about this very old-fashioned discourse is that Augustine's very distrust of reason and logic is shared by a strong segment of modern philosophy since the eighteenth century. Quite a few poets, philosophers, and literary humanists of the romantic period (think back to Coleridge) have not been troubled by losing confidence in reason. They too

have had something else waiting in the wings: a powerful faith in language and imagination. But what happens if we have neither? The rather desolate landscape of a human society without much confidence in either reason or language is one that Augustine shares with some of the most notorious asymmetrists of the modern age, Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan.

Another way in which Augustine commands special attention is that he is virtually the only premodern thinker to use that very modern terminology of signs and referents (Todorov, "The Birth of Western Semiotics"). Augustine first develops such a terminology in the dialogue entitled *De Magistro*—the master, or teacher. This is a treatise that he later said (in the *Confessions*) was based on an actual dialogue with his son Adeodatus. In the dialogue, the youthful Adeodatus plays a role similar to that of Cratylus—that is, the character who wants very badly for there to be a natural connection between words and things. But Augustine, his father and teacher, talks him out of this. After a long and playfully tedious discussion—for which he apologizes more than once—Augustine arrives at a paradox: You cannot know anything except through words, but the most that words can do for you is to remind you of something you already know. And so, how—beyond simple objects that somebody can point to as they are named—can you come to know anything that you didn't already know?

We may be reminded at this point of a wonderful speculation by Plato, in the dialogue entitled *Meno.* He concludes there that all significant knowing, beyond things that can be simply pointed to, is in fact a remembering, of things preexisting in the mind but obscured by such distractions as being born. The example he puts forward is the Pythagorean theorem, which he "teaches" on the spot to an attendant servant boy who has had no introduction whatever to mathematics. But Augustine would dismiss all of this as a pagan superstition. The point that he wants to drive home to Adeodatus is that the only way you can know anything important is through the assistance of an inner teacher—the magister—who is Christ.

In his *Retractions,* Augustine said that his purpose in *De Magistro* was not really to erect a comprehensive theory of language but to demonstrate that our most important knowledge comes from revelation, not from reason. It is important to keep in mind that he never departed from this distrust in reason, for it is possible to see in some of his later writings a movement toward symmetry. In the treatise *On the Trinity,* Augustine engages in a powerful set of speculations on that most fascinating of con-

cepts, logos—in Augustine's Latin, verbum. There are three important meanings packed into it. In its most literal sense, of course, logos means a word, a separate and delimited set of sounds pointing to something; but more commonly in traditional usage, it means a saying or an act of speaking. For Augustine and for Christians, it means more: a specific fund of speech, the Word of God as recorded in the Bible. And finally, it also names the second person of the Christian Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

What is the logic behind the connection of Jesus to the Word? This is a difficult question that most commentators, both secular and religious, tend to avoid. Here is a partial answer: Keep in mind that speaking is acting, and acting is speaking. Language performs actions even as it "says" things about the world. Actions send messages, even as they do their work in the world. When you say to your partner that the garbage can is full, you are probably reminding (instructing?) him or her to take the garbage out. When you bring your friend a present, you may be saying that you love this person, or perhaps that you are sorry for acting so bitter about the garbage. To Jewish and Christian believers, when God said, "Let there be light," he was most definitely doing something: He was creating the world with words. In *The Rhetoric of Religion,* Kenneth Burke points out that Babylonian, Egyptian, and Indian cosmologies also employ the "divine word" as an agent of creation (11).

But the divine word also takes the form of action. To Christian believers, when God sent his son, he was speaking—sending a definitive message to the world—in the Biblical phrase, "the word made flesh" (see Lombardi 41–43). Questions of belief aside, this ancient complexity of the term logos captures a powerful insight—the interconnection of speaking and acting. This interconnection has become one of the ripest topics in all of modern linguistics and language philosophy.

Augustine was interested in the connections among all these meanings of logos, but neither he nor Christianity invented the complexity. The term logos packed in a number of significant meanings before Christianity added even more. In Greek philosophy it became synonymous with reason, connected with the Stoic conviction that the symmetry of language resides in its connection to the ideas of things, not the things themselves. In Greek rhetoric, logos refers specifically to the appeal to reason, as opposed to the appeal to emotion (pathos), or to the character of the speaker (ethos) in persuading an audience. It was in the Jewish and Christian reli-

gions, however, that the term acquired a mystical significance. Since logos was God's way of creating the world, then the Word must contain powerful insights about the world; and there you have it: symmetry.

For Christians there was even more, of course. Since the Son of God was the logos, who was with God at the beginning, it was also through the Son that the world was created: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John I, 1–3). It would be possible to conclude that language is definitely worth listening to, something that contains the deepest religious truth. Indeed, serious thinkers in modern times have felt, without necessarily endorsing any specific religious belief, that the concept of logos in the traditions of Judaism and Christianity possesses a significant wisdom about language (Burke, *Rhetoric of Religion*; Frye). However, we should not get excited just yet. The difficulty with attributing this specific version of symmetry to Augustine is that, in the orthodox view that he helped to establish, it was not language itself but God's specific revelatory acts, both speaking and acting, that were generally taken to have this kind of shimmering significance. And this was the case not only in mainline Christian theology but also in the Jewish cabala, an interpretive tradition that took as its project the unraveling of spiritual secrets, not in language per se but in God's language, in the ways specific Hebrew words and even letters were combined in the Torah.

What makes Augustine's speculations in *On the Trinity* seem intriguingly contemporary is the terminology he develops in his analysis of the connections among the three forms of logos: logos as an act of speech, logos as the Word of God (scripture), and logos as Jesus Christ. In explaining how we are able to receive wisdom from scripture, Augustine makes a distinction between "outer word," ("vox") and "inner word" ("verbum"); and these are terms that remind us distinctly of the modern linguistic distinction between surface structure (the outer syntactic form of sentences) and deep structure (the conceptual underlay to which they are systematically connected).

In Augustine's view, the outer word does not give you knowledge of things, but instead directs you to the inner word, Jesus Christ. This presence, or teacher, will reveal to you to the scripture's true significance. This is one of the theoretical bases of the allegorical interpretation of scripture, which prevailed in medieval times. The allegorical or spiritual (inner)

meaning of a text—a bright and shining revelation from God—is more important than its literal, historical (outer) meaning, which may appear strange and incomprehensible.

What's fascinating about Augustine's interpretation of logos is that it appears to acknowledge the possibility of symmetry, and it is certainly an optimistic revision of the rather bleak view of human language in *De Magistro.* Taken as a explanation, or even as an allegory, of what happens when we talk or listen, this view looks compatible with the Stoic belief that language's natural connection is not to things but to concepts. It might also be seen as a precursor to the linguistic notion of universal grammar, that magisterial inner wiring that is distinctively human.

Nevertheless, there is no hard evidence that Augustine's rather pessimistic view of the human condition underwent any revision at all. The concept of verbum or word in *On the Trinity* is quite compatible with that of the inner teacher in *De Magistro.* And Augustine did in his later treatise *On Christian Doctrine* hold explicitly to the view of language as a human institution, whose signs are arbitrary and conventional. In this case, as with Plato, both language and rhetoric are the carriers of truths derived elsewhere, and they should be disciplined to that task.

Some of the truths that language carries, however, are of the most extraordinary kind. They are to be found in God's word—inspired writings. And here is the basis for what might be termed, paradoxically, an Augustinian literary humanism. We find it in the way that multiple meanings unfold from the Word of God. A central question in this inquiry has been whether the process described in *On the Trinity* is meant to account for logos—all speech—or logos the Word of God, specifically holy scripture; and there are, we must admit, very substantial indications that the latter is the case. For Augustine, as for Plato, ordinary language lacks referential power. Its grasp of the world around it is very tenuous; however, this is a proposition that cuts both ways. If language lacks a firm grasp on the world, then the world also lacks a firm grasp on language, and language is not tied simply to its referential function. By insisting on the arbitrary and conventional nature of literal reference, Augustine is doing more than emphasizing the poverty and fallen state of human speech. He is clearing a path for its freedom. Without the kind of referential confinement that symmetry would imply (either to earthly things or to mere human thoughts) language is free to be the instrument of higher things—nothing less, in fact, than the carrier and expositor of logos. This will certainly be an arduous thing to understand, may in fact require considerable linguis-

tic ability and training. It may occasionally require ways of talking and speaking that are considerably out of the ordinary.

Lovers of language and rhetoric are by no means out of work. Augustine did not, like other early Christian fathers, reject rhetoric as an unnecessary relic of the pagan past. Nor did he spurn other forms of secular learning and literature. In the treatise *On Christian Doctrine,* he preserves a respectable place, if not a starring role, for language and rhetoric. And there may be more: revelation has taken place not only in singular events but also through the medium of language, in the Word of God. In its journey through the prism of ordinary, asymmetrical language, logos takes on unusual forms and bright, scary colors that symmetry can neither grasp nor express.

The rhetoric inherited from Rome shored up and augmented such symmetries as existed. It intended to promote a discourse that was as close to the truth as possible: correct, clear, and appropriate to the scene and the subject. In this tradition the main purpose of *figurative* language—later referred to as "colors"—was to add a sense of dignity. This was the classical theory of style in a nutshell, as Augustine knew it. But scripture seemed far otherwise—in fact, an embarrassment to some, though not to the converted Augustine. In apparent violation of the canons of rhetoric, scripture seemed full of obscurities, inexplicable happenings and sayings, indecorous language, and inscrutable symbols. Here is something of immense interest to literary humanists: What is true of the Bible in this respect is also true of much of the world's great imaginative literature. Both can be frighteningly indecorous and implausible at times, and both are shot through with meanings beneath and beyond the surface.

We are back to a central question, which has its analogue in theology. It is no accident that one of the great controversies of the Christian church has been the question of how open or closed, public or personal is the fund and process of revelation. This is essentially the question of whether logos is confined to scripture and its central revelatory events or whether it is present in individual lives, history, and inspired literature. Religious scholars have found the seeds of powerful arguments for both sides in Augustine's works.

Clearly, Augustine regards the Bible as the primary inspired literature—not just ordinary speech but a special privileged speech, the Word of God. Moreover, there is not much doubt that he would be quick to endorse a teaching based on authoritative interpretations of scripture over any other source of inspiration. In one of his sermons he endorses emphati-

cally "the true, the right Catholic faith, gathered not by the opinion of private judgment, but by the witness of the Scriptures, not subject to the fluctuations of heretical rashness, but grounded upon Apostolic truth . . ." (*Sermons* 34). Nevertheless, it is also clear that Augustine saw in his own life a continuous and progressive pattern of revelation, and that is why he wrote what is the Western world's first autobiography, *Confessions*. You don't have to believe in its religion to know that it is a wonderful book. What is immediately obvious about Augustine's autobiographical writing, in Latin or in translation, is that it is charged with a copious, exuberant, playful, and mind-stretching rhetoric. Its rhetoric is to some degree the rhetoric that Augustine learned from the so-called late sophistic side of classical rhetoric, which promoted dazzling verbal display over the more dignified and content-oriented Ciceronian program of clarity and decorum. But one can also see a language that has gone to logos and has come back with bright, shining colors. Language is asymmetrical, but it can be symmetrized, or re-symmetrized, in its contact with truth.

This review of ancient asymmetry yields some fascinating insights that serve as a foundation for further exploration of the symmetry question and its relations to literary humanism. By looking at figures such as Plato, the sophists, and Augustine, we realize that asymmetry is not the exclusive preserve of modern linguistics or of postmodern literary theory. Furthermore, interesting and powerful ways of teaching the use of language can flow from either side of the symmetry question. Symmetry may venerate great literature as something that recovers and exploits the deep connections of language to experience. Asymmetry, by contrast, may adore the discourse that powerful inspiration shapes to beautiful and extraordinary forms. What nearly all writers—and not just literary artists—will agree is that beautiful and revelatory things sometimes happen in the *process* of making discourse. The truly interesting questions for literary humanism are functional: What assists that process? And what gets in the way? Outlooks that are philosophically opposed may be functionally reciprocal.

Literary humanists are motivated by the love of language and its works, valuing those uses of language that do not merely encode but enact—and discover by enacting—the meanings they convey. We know, moreover, that language arts are connected to the intellectual growth of individuals and to the health and sanity of society. Literary humanists are not warm to the message that language is its own system, closed off from the things that matter. But this feeling does not have to imply automatic rejection or

acceptance of any particular theory of language. The important thing is to listen carefully.

Asymmetry is not such a bad thing. It does not mean the alienation of language from experience (as "arbitrariness," the term most often used by linguists, has sometimes implied) but rather the freedom of specific forms from specific references and the possibility of new meanings. Functionally, the phenomenon of asymmetry exists in fruitful correlation with symmetry, both in the linguistic system and in the best individual expression and literary performance. Ultimately, it is valuable to explore ways in which language is *free from*, as well as *engaged in*, significance.

Symmetry, clearly the more enchanting of the two propositions, has always been more difficult to prove, and also the most vulnerable to error. It has nearly always been mistaken, for instance, to think that mastery of particular linguistic forms (such as the different sentence types or complex syntactic structures) will lead to other, "higher" kinds of mastery. We must, however, keep asking significant questions: What are the true, vital ways in which language participates in the world, and what does it discover by enacting its meanings? How can we energize the language arts with the knowledge of these things? It is true that the formal study of language, like all science, is primarily about mechanism. However, the science of language was born out of the desire to understand more deeply the meaning as well as the mechanism of language, and linguistics has found some interesting new ways of doing that by forging new links with cultural criticism.

Suggested Reading

Barney, Rachel. *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus.* New York: Routledge, 2001. This study makes better sense than any other of Socrates's apparent ambivalence about the symmetry of linguistic forms. Barney suggests that Socrates's conventionalism is about verbal forms or designations, whereas his continuing excitement is about the process of naming in language.

Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology.* Trans. Gaytria Spivak. 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. Among all of Derrida's writing, this work contains his most explicit statements about the impossibilities of reference; the things which language attempts to name "have always already escaped, have never existed." Language is caught up in an infinite chain of substitute references, and thus meaning is always endlessly postponed or deferred.

Lacan, Jacques. "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud." *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English.* Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 412–44. After Derrida, Lacan is probably the second most famous asymmetrist of the modern period. This essay contains his

influential reflections on the principle, extrapolated from Saussure, that "no signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification" (415).

Lombardi, Elena. *The Syntax of Desire: Language and Love in Augustine, The Modistae, Dante.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Lombardi's chapter on "Augustine: The Syntax of the Word" (22–76) makes interesting observations on the various senses of "verbum," as Augustine would have known and used it.

Markus, R. A. "St. Augustine on Signs." *Phronesis* 2 (1957): 60–83. Rpt. in *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays.* Ed. R. A. Markus. Garden City: Anchor, 1972. 61–91. This remains the best single analysis of Augustine's theory of language.

Ringer, Jeffrey. "Faith and Language: Walter Hilton, St. Augustine, and Poststructural Semiotics." *Christianity and Literature* 53 (2003): 3–18. This provocative essay draws parallels between Augustine's asymmetrism and that of the modern post-structuralists Derrida and Lacan.

Schiappa, Edward. *Protagoras and Logos: A Study in Greek Philosophy and Rhetoric.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991. This is one of the best expositions of the sophistic position on language and rhetoric in the ancient world.