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Naming and Renaming the World

In John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* the character Adam describes an astonishing psychic event. Having completed the task of giving names to all the newly created animals, Adam recalls: "I named them as they passed, and understood / Their nature; with such knowledge God endued / My sudden apprehension" (VIII, 349–54). Earlier, in our investigation of Saint Augustine, this passage was introduced to illustrate a persistent view of symmetry: that names of things have a deep and permanent connection to their essential natures. As we have seen repeatedly, this view does not stand up to empirical observation or rational reflection. Nevertheless, while specific attributions of symmetry are usually mistaken, the broad intuition of symmetry is never simply wrong. I want to begin this chapter by examining a special way in which Milton was right.

Designating versus Naming

Milton speculates that Adam came to know the essential natures of the animals as he named them. Insofar as it encourages the belief that the names of things (perhaps in their original, pure form) can instruct us as to what the things are really about, this speculation is mainly erroneous. We

will not learn a great deal about dogs, cats, or any other animals by contemplating their names or through researching their etymologies. About the porpoise, we may be temporarily fascinated to discover that its name is a blending of the Latin words "porcus" (pig) and "piscis" (fish), but this only tells us something about an impression the animal once made, nothing about its nature.

At this point it may be useful to clear the air once again about the function and usefulness of names and etymologies. The alert and opportunistic symmetrist might well object: What you are saying might be very true about simple names like "dog" and "cat" and even "duckbill platypus," but how about complex terms like "justice" and "courage"? In trying to understand what justice is, does it not help us to know that the term "justice" derives from the Latin root "jus," meaning law; and that in earlier usage the word also has the meanings of precision, correctness, and straightness, as in the "justification" of lines on a printed page?

The answer is, yes, it helps a great deal, as a record of how people have used this term in the past. Any serious study of an idea such as justice ought to begin with an examination of this record, and such an examination will often uncover bits of forgotten wisdom and knowledge—encapsulations of what other people have known and thought. However, the meaning of justice is not contained in its name, or in its accumulated usages. It is in fact the asymmetry of names to things that makes possible the long and varied histories of usage and semantic change that we find so interesting—not to mention the fact that the twenty-first century American idea and practice of justice may be different from (and superior or inferior to) ancient belief and practice. For individual cases of justice and for the attempt to define justice in such a way as to guide us in these individual cases, the linguistic investigation may be initially useful, but it has to be supplanted fairly quickly by investigations that are historical, empirical, and philosophical.

And so, back to Adam's animals. Having pushed back once again the hard claims of symmetry between words and things, even very complex things, I will contend that Milton knew what he was talking about—that his narrative about the first human being giving created things their first names carries an important insight. It is important to realize that Milton is not actually claiming that the names of the animals contain their essential natures. His claim is that Adam came to know their natures in the act of naming them. Here is where Milton's speculation is highly insightful: the process of naming, especially naming for the first time, is

an imaginative process, a process of coming to know something. In some cases, Milton would add—most especially in God's creation of the cosmos with words—it is commensurate with the process of creation itself. This is an insight entirely compatible with our conclusion about social construction—that important realities are made by language.

Adam, of course, was highly privileged. Most of us do not get to name (or rename) the species of animals; we simply use the names that are already given. We do, however, often find ourselves searching for just the right way of saying something. Alternately, if we are thoughtful individuals with interesting experiences to share, we find ourselves searching for new ways of describing (or indeed, dramatizing) those experiences. This is especially true if we want to emphasize their special importance in a given moment. Here is an opportunity, therefore, to introduce an important difference (a binary opposition, if you will), between what I will call designation and what has already been termed naming or renaming.

When we designate a thing—an experience, a problem, a feeling, a complex entity, and so on—we scroll through an existing inventory of names, phrases, and experiences, looking for the one that best fits what we are talking about (this inventory can be on the spot memory, of course, or aids to memory, such as dictionaries, thesauruses, and the like). An educated person is often identified by her or his ability to access and use this existing storehouse—precisely, fluently, and copiously—in a variety of situations. When we name or rename a thing, we reach out for a new way of expressing it. Interestingly, when we do this, we only rarely make words entirely anew; instead, we scroll through that same inventory of existing words and phrases, attaching them this time to comparable or related things. This may be because we lack an existing designation for the thing we are discussing, or perhaps because we are less interested in designating the thing and more interested in conveying something new or special about the thing. A creative person is often identified by his or her ability to access and apply these *as ifs* ingeniously and arrestingly.

Often, we congratulate ourselves for having found the exact word for a thing, when what we have really done is to create a new word. The word as formed is not new, but we have turned it in a new direction ("turn" is the actual meaning of the word "trope," or figure of speech). I can remember, for example, a conversation in which several professors were admiringly discussing the work of another professor, who was in charge of a program designed to train and nurture aspiring poets and fiction writers. None of the terms suggested to describe his service—"custodianship," "leadership,"

"caretaking," and so on—seemed to capture the quality we had in mind. Then someone said, "It's really a ministry," and everyone agreed immediately that this was "the exact word," especially when it was recalled that the individual had previously been an actual minister. Of course, this term was not an exact designator at all but rather an exploratory device for better understanding or communicating what the group was thinking about. What is "exact" in such a case is not the designation but the fitness of the analogy to the specific circumstance.

At this point it may strike the reader that the word "naming" is being used as a composite term for a variety of figurative or poetic uses of language—metaphor, symbol, analogy, and the like. Why invent new terms, you might ask, for what is more commonly referred to as the difference between literal and figurative speech? We can for most purposes safely define the figurative in the same way that "naming" has been defined—as a new way or a departure from the ordinary way of representing things. In most cases, such a departure will be based upon some kind of likeness or mental connection to the thing being represented. This is textbook introduction to poetry. In the previous chapter, I asked you to examine Shakespeare's Sonnet 146 in which the soul is represented figuratively as a medieval "lord," confined to a gaily painted "mansion," and surrounded and besieged by "rebel powers." Without very much difficulty we understand the mansion to be a "figure" for the human body (on which the soul has lavished far too much attention); we understand those "rebel powers" to be both the pleasures and the perils of fleshly existence (pleasures will turn against you; focusing on material gain is a dangerous way to live).

A good deal of the pleasure as well as the intense reflection we derive from this poem is the higher degree of symmetry that is present in its language—that is, the direct and exciting fitness of language to the things being represented. The term "mansion," for instance, presents through comparison an interesting image of the human body; and this element of "secondary symmetry" (Genette 26) stirs reflection in us, even while for most of us the precise etymological connection between the word "mansion" and its literal referent, "large, grand residence" is now long lost. The figurative representation gives us fresh and stimulating symmetries, while the literal meaning has for the most part receded into asymmetry. The poet has revivified, even resymmetrized speech, we might say, so that it participates in the reality it represents; and that, many poets and literary humanists have believed (and I also believe), is a major function of poetry.

The literal/figurative opposition does serve us rather well, so one may ask what the problem is exactly. Nothing, except that we run the danger of separating the forms of speech from their purposes. In the way we have come to use these opposing terms, the "literal" is too closely tied to the referential and objective purposes of speech, while the "figurative" is linked to subjective, expressive, and decorative purposes. The literal, we suppose, is the language of science, scholarship, and the workaday world, while the figurative is the language of self-expression, beautiful crafting, and perhaps even the powerful affecting of audiences. However, as plausible as it may seem on the face of it, this is an erroneous and even dangerous set of connections. It distorts our understanding of where true expressiveness comes from, and perhaps more importantly, it misdirects our thinking about where good ideas come from. In using the literal/figurative distinction, we need to come to understand that the "literal" does not mean reference to hard fact as opposed to imagination, or even objective as opposed to subjective understanding; it does not even mean language that is not metaphorical, and the reason is that many metaphors have "died"—or at least become tamed—and receded themselves into the literal (see Davidson). The literal is perhaps best understood as designative as opposed to new-naming language.

One way of clarifying our thinking about the literal/figurative distinction is to come to an awareness of how thoroughly saturated with metaphor much of our everyday, designative discourse actually is. In their intelligent and remarkably readable book *Metaphors We Live By,* George Lakoff and Mark Johnson put to rest in short order any illusion that our speech can refer directly to such concepts as time, love, mind, ideas, or communication. These are complex, nonphysical matters, and in our regular talk and writing we always name them by analogy to something else—almost always to something more material and physical. One of Lakoff and Johnson's best and earliest examples is the concept of time, which very often is talked about as if it were money—apparent in such expressions as "spending time," "saving time," "investing time," "wasting time," and so on (7–8). Everyday thinking about concepts and ideas is loose and inexact, precisely because it is loaded with such unconscious metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson point out that we are not merely using metaphors when we think we are referring directly to things, but also that our thinking about important concepts tends to be dominated by "systematic" metaphors: time as money, the mind as a machine, and theories as buildings. Their work is directed toward questions of whether and how we can escape

the entrapments of such systematic metaphors, or alternately, verify their usefulness and validity. These are interesting questions; however, I want to stay focused on that all-important process of new naming. Whereas Lakoff and Johnson are interested in unconscious uses of figurative language that direct thought into familiar patterns, I want to focus on a conscious process that can produce new and original thinking.

From Saint Augustine to Lakoff and Johnson and beyond, philosophers and linguists have wrestled with the question of reference. It is a necessary question to ask about acts of speech; however, the status of this question diminishes if we think not of individual speech acts but of larger discourses. As we have seen in previous chapters, referring is never a larger purpose of discourse, and it is better not to think of it as a purpose of discourse at all. Every discourse of any complexity, from a conversation across the dinner table to a large book, is a combination of saying, acting, forming, performing, exploring, and discovering; and the purpose in every case is not to refer to things but to perform acts, to achieve a variety of social and cultural ends. They are mostly familiar ones, to be sure, but they are functions rather than pointings to. In fulfilling any and all of these functions, we have recourse to both the already named and to the process of new naming.

Many of the most heartfelt "expressions" (of sorrow, pity, joy, and commiseration) you have uttered or heard may have contained no figurative language at all. The memory bank of the already named may have served quite well for such purposes, and the stress of circumstances may have prevented very much in the way of additional linguistic exertion. A similar condition holds for works of literary art. While poetry is, to be sure, the primary haunt of figurative language, many poems and certainly most works of fiction achieve their purposes with ordinary speech. In such cases it is the situations and incidents designated by language, not the language itself, that are significant. Moreover, we often find the literal and the figurative coming together in unexpected ways. Consider the poem entitled "Pastoral," by the American poet William Carlos Williams:

> When I was younger
> it was plain to me
> I must make something of myself.
> Older now
> I walk the back streets
> admiring the houses

of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.
No one
will believe this
of vast importance to the nation. (*Collected Poems* 1:64)

In this poem, Williams has deliberately chosen from a fund of ordinary, unadorned, and conspicuously literal words and phrases. The resulting expression, however, is far from ordinary. What is surprising and arresting about the poem is not its overturning of regular speech but its overturning of regular viewpoints. What happens in the process is a re-enlivening of regular speech. The ramshackle habitations of the poor are presented as objects of serious reflection and even of beauty to a mature man, as opposed to the not any longer impressive ambitions of his youth. And there is, of course, a singular element of figuration in the poem: the title "Pastoral" is used ironically, and irony is a figure of speech, the one in which there is a strong difference between what is expected by the reader and what is actually delivered. Pastoral is that genre of poetry in which we expect to witness idealized portraits of country life (not realistic descriptions of urban decay), expressed in a highly figured language, "poetic" in the conventional sense. Under the circumstances, we might venture to say that Williams's plain speech becomes in its totality an image, both of the scene he is describing and the thought he is expressing. Here is another example of participation—of symmetry in the midst of asymmetry.

As Williams's poem demonstrates, the revivifying of language that we associate with good poetry can take place through a strong representation of the world in ordinary speech. At the same time, as a good deal of not very interesting poetry demonstrates, overtly figurative language often

fails to meet this goal, and in fact it tires out fairly quickly. Such figurative expressions as "light at the end of the tunnel" or "take with a grain of salt" have a way of passing rather quickly over into the land of the already named, in effect, the realm of the literal. They are just regular, clichéd expressions. They belong in the dictionary, that great repository of dead metaphors, buried in such words as "acumen," "agony," "ambition," "anecdote," "arrive," "assassin," and so on through the letter *A* and then down the alphabet (I'll spare you the etymologies of all but the last of these words: "assassin" derives its name from the Arabic word "hashshashin"—hashish; during the eleventh-century period of the Crusades, a secret sect of hashish users became notorious for their undercover killings of European crusaders). What is really figurative, if we insist on calling it that, about "real" figurative language is the element of new naming, the search for the "as if," and along with it an exploration and discovery of new experience.

As a teacher of literature, I like this recasting of the literal/figurative distinction into the alternative of designating/naming, because it helps me to explain a part of the great importance of poetry. Poetry's ability to name and rename the world makes it not just a clever or beautiful way of expressing things but also an important form of knowledge. It takes ordinary language into areas where it has not been before. Obviously, in adopting this alternative terminology I have been engaging in an act of renaming of my own—for a scholarly and not a poetic purpose. A good part of the reason for doing so, in fact, has been to reclaim this creative and exploratory function of language for ordinary speech and for specialized uses of language other than the poetic.

In all of our speaking and writing, beyond the most formalized and formulaic, we are engaged in some combination of designating and naming—of scrolling through an existing store of forms and phrases for the one that fits, and alternately, of pushing that existing store into what is new territory. Both of these processes are exploratory, and it is not just the one that produces figurative language that is creative. Indeed, the designating process itself—that scrolling through the existing lexicon for just the right word or expression to describe a thing—can be an exploratory and revelatory process, especially for an educated and thoughtful person. Such a person's education has equipped them with a large storehouse of words and phrases, a memory of how wise and thoughtful people have used this storehouse, and also with the skill of scrolling itself. For such a person, the process of finding the right word for a thing is also, to paraphrase Milton,

a process of discovering its nature. That said, we have to acknowledge that there is something especially exciting and revelatory about the process of new naming. Poetry is the special preserve of this process; however, another part of poetry's importance is that this preserve is also the training ground for a much broader range of discourse and discovery.

Langue and Parole

Here is a possible snippet of ordinary conversation, out of which we can easily pull the designative and the naming components: "At this point I was in such a state of confusion about my life that—I don't know, it was like a siege and a betrayal—it was like I was trapped in my own house, and all the things I'd loved and counted on were out there aiming guns at me." You may recognize this as a colloquial paraphrase of Shakespeare's Sonnet 146. The speaker, in a momentary "loss for words" about a particular state of feeling, gives to it a provisional name by comparing it to a feeling of being under siege. Despite their importance to specific moments of expression, most individual acts of naming such as this are of little consequence to the permanent lexicon. They emerge spontaneously under the stress of circumstance, and although they may persist in private memory, they have no effect on the language as a whole. Other acts of naming, however, hope to achieve, and do in fact achieve, an honored place in the common vocabulary. From Shakespeare we have such phrases as "a pound of flesh," "rotten in the state of Denmark," and "the sound and the fury." But also from the worlds of scholarship, investigation, and even politics we have such naming and renaming as "Oedipus complex," "dialectical materialism," "fear and trembling," "Murphy's Law," "The Laffer Curve," and "sunset law."

In addition, there is a process of social aggregation in which certain expressions or extensions of existing meanings catch on in a small community, spread to larger and larger ones, and then into the common storehouse. This is one of the ways in which a language grows and changes over time. What is commissioned at first as a metaphor, "the spur of the moment" for instance, is eventually decommissioned, so to speak, and sent over to the storehouse of the designative. While it sits there, people forget its "as if" derivation from the actual spurring of a horse. There it loses its metaphoric, dramatizing power and becomes a designator. From the standpoint of vocabulary and phraseology, the history of a language is largely a history of such commissionings, decomissionings, and occasional recommissionings. Henry David Thoreau performed just such an act of re-

commissioning, revitalizing the "spur of the moment" cliché as he wrote: "Let the spurs of countless moments goad us incessantly into life. I feel the spur of the moment thrust deep into my side. The present is an inexorable rider" (*Winter* 255).

The process characterized as designating, naming, and renaming from a common existing storehouse is consistent with the distinction that the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure added permanently to our scholarly discourse about language: the distinction between langue and parole, first introduced in his landmark study, *Course in General Linguistics.* Langue in Saussure's usage is the existing system of the language—an intricately coordinated and unified network of phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules plus a vocabulary—that exists basically in peoples' heads. Langue is a composite psychological entity that is prior to parole, the individual act of speech that a person makes in an actual historical circumstance. The single most remarkable thing about language, in Saussure's view, is the wholeness, stability, and complete consistency of langue, the underlying system—the software, we might say—shared by all speakers of the language, at any given moment. And this system, in Saussure's view, is the primary thing that the linguist should study.

One does not have to agree with Saussure's rigid cordoning off of the software from its actual uses to grasp from his distinction an important point regarding symmetry. In all our talking, we do draw upon an existing fund of phonological and syntactic as well as lexical and semantic forms. We use these forms with varying amounts of freedom—very little on the phonological side, and a lot, comparatively, with words and phrases. We exercise this freedom to create discourses in which language does participate in the acts it performs and the realities it names. If you recall the performative principle, you will observe that this freedom makes possible new actions and new social realities as well as new namings (and therefore new understandings) of the world. And this very freedom is dependent upon a high degree of looseness, arbitrariness—asymmetry—at every level, between the existing forms and meanings of language.

A more pointed and more satisfying discussion than Saussure gives us of the new-naming phenomenon can be found in the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen's *Mankind, Nation, and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View.* Not completely satisfied with Saussure's dismissal of parole as unsystematic and ephemeral, Jespersen suggests that any comprehensive understanding of the larger phenomenon of language has to include both langue and parole. Jespersen portrays the interaction between the two as

"a constant struggle going on between the speech of individuals and the organized language which never satisfies the whole body" (12). Keep in mind that in trying to understand this relationship between individual usage and the underlying system (which Jespersen is metaphorizing as a kind of struggle) we are talking about a phenomenon that cannot be quite designated—that is, divided into operational components and described literally. We can only try out alternate as ifs. Jespersen strikes another comparison that is more violent in its connotations: "In the regular siege-war, which 'speech' makes upon language, the former always succeeds in getting a few soldiers admitted into the fortress" (12).

In his more capacious adaptation of Saussure's terminology, Jespersen goes even so far as to suggest a division of labor between the opposing forces of langue and parole: langue "satisfies the craving for the communication and understanding of thoughts," while parole or "speech . . . stands at the service of actual life; what it would express is feeling, desire, action" (12). This statement is both elegant and satisfying because it comprehends the role of language in performing actions and dramatizing experience, as well as its role in making statements. In a follow-up formulation, Jespersen improves further upon Saussure's thought by distinguishing between "the word," a "potential linguistic action . . . as it lies unused in the brain or as it stands in a dictionary," and the "word pronounced," an "actual linguistic action" in the world (20). A great deal of language theory in recent decades (see Harris, for instance) has been aimed at tearing down Saussure's wall between langue and parole. Few have done so quite as effectively as did Jespersen in the 1920's, but this is not to say that Jespersen has the last word.

Jespersen's division of labor between understanding and feeling is worrisome. It conforms to a conventional division between poetic and scientific discourse, and it runs a danger that we have identified—of tying figurative language or new naming to the expressive as opposed to the cognitive, epistemic, knowledge-making functions of language. As is evident from the discussion going on at this very moment, a good deal of the back-and-forth that takes place in scholarly exploration takes the form of debates about what to call—how to name—the phenomena that we are studying. And these debates are obviously about more than the question of which terms from the common vocabulary work best. If this were the case, the whole business could be decided by a lexicographer!

In serious attempts to understand the world, the debates are not really about what words (designations) to use but about what renamings—

what as-ifs, stretchings, and reappropriations of existing vocabulary—best capture, apply to, indeed reenact in language, the experience we are attempting to understand. This is why an individual attempting to explore a new subject, or to explore a subject in a new way, will so often find herself or himself inventing new terms or using old terms in new ways. For the bleary-eyed and impatient reader, this procedure can be exasperating, especially with such fertile and penetrating thinkers as belong to the professions of literary theory and language philosophy. However, we have to acknowledge that this is what real understanding is always about—not about reference but about what is beyond reference—the process of renaming.

Major Functions of Naming

We name things all the time. As explained earlier, every substantive term in the dictionary is a designation that has an act of naming behind it. Accordingly, the process of naming goes on and on in any living language, fulfilling a variety of needs and functions. We name our children, our pets, organizations, books, stories, and poems, for a variety of reasons, whether serious, celebratory, or frivolous. Corporations name their products and services to make them sound practical, glamorous, or romantic, as the marketing occasion warrants. We name and rename certain bodily functions, so as to skirt around forms of unpleasantness and taboo. Military commanders give different names to their operations so as to minimize ("protective reaction strike") or maximize ("Operation Shock and Awe") their ferocity. We sometimes even rename ourselves, hoping to signal or even to actuate a change of life and character. When the legendary prizefighter Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he was certainly signaling such a change.

It would be absurd to try to name all the animals—that is, to sort out all the possible types and uses of naming. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to identify and put names on four of the largest types and uses of naming, exploring their significance for issues of symmetry and for their value to literary humanism. Ultimately, the hope is, of course, to come to better understand their natures (to use Milton's language) in the process, perhaps in a more modest way than Milton envisioned. Thus far, the goal has been to shake loose, temporarily, the notions of the figurative and the nonliteral from the poetic, so as to emphasize the presence and importance of the naming process in all kinds of human discourse. This shaking loose carries with it, of course, the implication that the process may function

differently in various settings. And so I think it will be useful to attempt an inventory of these different functions, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that individual ones of them are not tied to specific kinds or genres of discourse.

Most traditional inventories of figurative language are organized as lists of forms, the products of naming, such as metaphor, symbol, analogy, synecdoche, metonymy, and so on. While such a list is useful, my effort for the present is to focus on the *process* of naming and the different kinds of things that figurative language can do—what people are attempting to accomplish when they give new names to things.

Struggling to express

There can be no doubt that a large majority of those sieges, which Jespersen highlighted above, are due to a lack of—or forgetfulness of—established vocabulary. In regular conversation, when we do not know enough words for what we are trying to express, we have two choices: to fall silent or to move forward with adaptations and recyclings of the words we have. In most circumstances, most of us will keep going. This process is most noticeable in the speech of children, who often charm and delight us with such expressions as "wayback" for the luggage compartment of a station wagon. What the hearers of such talk may consider a hilarious renaming is actually for the speakers a new naming. This is precisely the spontaneous process by which new words come into a language, and the reason why a word's etymology will sometimes reveal a startling figure of speech.

The word "curfew," for instance, derives from the Norman French expression "couvre-feu," meaning "cover fire," which originally named the ringing of an evening bell reminding or requiring medieval villagers to dampen or extinguish their fires. Even in its original meaning, the term was a figure of speech, synecdoche, wherein a part of a thing or process is elected to name the whole. The term was later stretched or turned further, to name a signal (perhaps in some cases the same church bell) requiring individuals to be off the streets. We have no way of knowing, of course, but there may have been an element of playfulness, perhaps of irony at this expression's forming and catching on and eventually settling in as a designation. And so the characterization of this process as a "struggle to express" should not obscure the fact that new expressions do come readily enough to clever minds. There is an element of pleasure and discovery in them. They constitute a kind of natural poetry; and "natural" poetry can

eventually cross over into ordinary speech. Sometimes it makes sense and is fun and enlightening to put aside established ways of saying things and to look at them in a new or different way, the way a child or an anthropologist from Mars or Eve or Adam in the Garden of Eden would do, as if for the first time.

Expressing well

With this process we move from a "natural" to a "composed" instance of new naming. In this case the speaker may have at hand a store of existing expressions for a thing, but now the struggle is for something beyond the ordinary: something charming, surprising, inspiring, dignified—not usually all of these things at once, of course, but always something memorable. In many cases, we note, what makes the expression memorable is that the figure of speech will produce an image, like the covering of fire in the example above. This is where the term "imagination" comes from, of course, and poets of the classical and neoclassical schools have tended to understand imagination in precisely this way. Alexander Pope, perhaps the greatest of neoclassical English poets, wrote famously that:

> True wit is Nature to advantage dressed,
> What oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed;
> Something whose truth convinced at sight we find,
> That gives us back the image of the mind.
>
> (*An Essay on Criticism,* II, 297–300)

With these lines from Pope's poem, it appears as if we might be headed once again toward an exclusive discourse of the poetic; however, that word "convinced" is a reminder that rhetoricians too have always understood the devices of new naming to be powerful instruments of persuasion as well as delight. From classical times through the Renaissance period, they kept long lists of them for the sake of investing speeches with charm and dignity, the two most commonly recognized effects. They understood that these things could help to sway audiences just as readily as sound arguments. They also knew that the well-turned phrase could on occasion produce that powerful and lasting image that would actually dominate thought on an issue for years to come. When Winston Churchill, with his famous "Sinews of Peace" speech, said that an "iron curtain" was descending upon Europe, he brought to world consciousness a metaphor for the purposeful isolation of countries that had come under Communist con-

trol, a lasting and memorable name for the instrument of that isolation, and a persuasive suggestion that the lives of people behind that curtain were lives of imprisonment.

Discovering and rediscovering the world

In the beautiful passage of poetry above, Alexander Pope's celebration of the "ne'er so well expressed" does, for all its sweetness of expression, overlook an important fact: that the bright new image will sometimes bring with it a new conception and a new experience of reality. Here is a legitimate and all-important form of symmetry, the participation of language in the reality it names and the epistemic force of its imaginative deployment. As we have already seen, there can be no conceptual reordering or new understanding of anything in the absence of this process.

The failure to acknowledge and account for this epistemic force is precisely the shortcoming of most traditional (classical and neoclassical) theories of discourse, which are otherwise learned, thorough, and elegant in their expression and practical in their application. It was not until the romantic period, beginning in the late eighteenth century, with such poets and theorists as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Giambattista Vico, that some kind of formal accounting for this force and function was attempted. It is also from this period, interestingly enough, that we can trace the beginnings of the attempt by Western nations to extend the benefits of literacy and formal training in language to a larger portion of their citizenries. This project surely had more to do with new social and economic realities created by the industrial revolution than with new theories of language. But other revolutions—revolutions in understanding—were taking place as well in Europe and America. Expansive and prophetic thinkers like Walt Whitman were bold enough to project and look forward to a new democratization of the human spirit, and in such thoughts a new role and a new challenge were posed for literary humanism.

Shaping reality

Sometimes when we name things we urge them in a certain direction. When parents name their children after great men and women, or after the lovely persons and great achievers of their own families, they do this hoping that the child will "grow into" the name. They also hope, sometimes, that the spirit of that person—the positive elements of character and action that were alive in that person—will live on in the family by virtue of the fact that there is a person in their midst so named. In recognizing this

shaping function of language, we are reaching back to the performative principle and the social construction of reality. Once again we meet the astonishing fact that certain kinds of realities are not merely discovered but actually brought into being by language. This is most easily discernible in such overt forms of social construction as pledges, pronouncements, and agreements; but there do exist subtler instances as well—realities of collective feeling and allegiance that are maintained through a process of strong representation.

Much of the figurative language that we encounter in daily life is sentimental and merely ceremonial, but sometimes it has an effect. And "ceremony" itself, as we previously saw, is an important builder of social realities, a promoter and maintainer of values and ways of life (consider how many ceremonies are actually naming ceremonies). There are, of course, realities that are not shapeable by speech. Naming a certain structure "The George Washington Bridge" is certainly not going to affect the load tolerances of the structure itself, but there are a number of social realities that might be affected: a sense of collective pride in the grandeur of the thing (as opposed to misgiving about its massive expense); a sense of confidence in the ability of government (science, technology, or labor) to achieve great things, and a consequent willingness to embark upon new ventures; the hopeful reconnection of social geographies (neighborhoods) that are literally connected by the bridge.

This shaping function is also notable in the dynamics of organizations. The organization that calls itself "The Salvation Army" will in fact organize itself and go about its work, at least initially, in a different way from the one that is named "The Brothers and Sisters of Peace and Mercy." Sometimes organizations, like individuals, will change their names, not just to signal to others a change in character or direction but, in addition, to help bring about change, by nudging the attitudes of their own members in a new direction.

Designating versus Naming as Pilot Analogy

Structural properties of language—most often expressed as oppositions of an *x* versus *y* character—"anticipate" or have their analogues in issues of human aspiration, behavior, and culture. These analogues, and not supposed correspondences of form and meaning at any level, constitute the true sources of symmetry in language. An adequate and effective literary humanism will justify and orient itself toward the pilot analogies of language and culture. As we have seen earlier, the cultural analogue

of symmetry versus asymmetry is participation versus freedom; the cultural analogue of saying versus doing is contemplation versus action; and the cultural analogue of designating versus naming is tradition versus innovation.

The act of designation belongs to the existing language—the fund of memory and reference that we scroll through to find the appropriate, understandable way of saying things. The act of naming, by contrast, belongs to our individual (sometimes highly personal) extension of that fund into new territory. Designation is what tradition hands us; naming is the new thing we make of it. Designation makes use of a collective fund; naming makes a new use of that fund, sometimes permanently altering the fund itself. Sometimes, as we have seen, naming can involve deliberately rejecting what is in that fund. This happens when humans insist on new ways of saying, conceptualizing, or even constituting things.

It is not difficult to see the parallel movements in the world outside of language: In all of our comings and goings, we are guided by existing structures and existing traditions of how to define ourselves and conduct our business. These structures and traditions constitute a social and institutional langue, the fund of reference for the parole of actions, decisions, and movements in concrete circumstances. In a settled culture, most of our daily actions and interactions take place comfortably and unconsciously within that structure. Other times, however, the actions of individuals will place that structure under considerable pressure, demanding change. Here is an obvious example: Most thoughtful persons at this hour in the twenty-first century have rejected the traditions of racism and racial discrimination in our culture. This did not come about, however, before individuals challenged those traditions. The change was personal and individual before it was collective. It was "in here" before it was "out there."

The notion of structure is a reminder that both designating and naming are processes framed by a larger system of governance—the grammar of a language. This principle of structure also holds in the dynamics of tradition versus innovation. And in that fascinating intermixture of acting out and speaking about our lives, we continuously scroll through the "lexicons" of cultural practice (including literature and discourse), and this will result in our following, altering, or sometimes overturning existing "usage" in particular cases. People ought to be trained to study the "grammars" of cultural practice—that is, the organizing traditions (including philosophy and religion) that aim at an overall understanding of things.

For this reason it is not at all outlandish to think of established ways

of doing things—in government, society, religion, and all the arts and sciences—as "languages." Nor is it unreasonable, therefore, to think of accomplishment in the primary medium—language in the literal sense—as fundamental to accomplishment in these substantive areas. Nothing will substitute, of course, for devoted and systematic study of the specific lexicons and specific grammars (methodologies, theories, and so forth) of the various disciplines, or for as much cultural knowledge as one can attain. Training in language, however, has the opportunity of providing more than literacy and communication skills. A practiced sophistication in language and its inner movements can open windows to those outer movements of tradition and innovation, established usage and personal response, that belong to a good life and a good society.

Suggested Reading

Barney, Rachel. *Names and Nature in Plato's Cratylus.* New York: Routledge, 2001. This penetrating study makes better sense than any other, in my opinion, of Socrates's apparent ambivalence about the symmetry of linguistic forms. Barney suggests that Socrates's "conventionalism" (asymmetrism) is about verbal forms or designations, whereas his continuing excitement is about the process of naming in language. This is, of course, exactly the distinction that I have pursued in this chapter.

Harris, Roy. *The Language Machine.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987. This short book is a devastating critique, taking a historical perspective, of the distinction between langue and parole (or competence and performance) that has both empowered and bedeviled modern linguistics.

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980. A very intelligent and remarkably readable study of the ways in which metaphors influence our thinking.