

• *Words and the Wise*

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SOME of the feats of modern advertising may have made sceptics of a good many of us, but they have also served to convince others that there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philology. A questionnaire addressed to the average housewife on the meaning of the word "homogenized" might serve to illustrate the point. (Maybe we could work this in with the census.) Such a questionnaire would certainly show that of those who have heard the word, relatively few can attach an accurate signification to it. But the word "homogenized" is redolent of homeopathic doctors, hygienics, eugenics, all the scientific "ize's" (sterilize, pasteurize, cauterize, etc.), and a good many other words which we cannot just put our finger on at present, and, consequently, the word "homogenize" is an entire success from an advertising standpoint. It reeks of laboratory fumes. We almost expect it to come wrapped in cellophane. And it is a certainty that there cannot be a germ on it. On the force of the word itself, the average individual, endowed with average persuasive ability, could undoubtedly induce not a few prospective customers not only to buy homogenized milk, but to get their carpets, awnings, or trousers homogenized—if he could develop an inexpensive method of general homogenization.

Perhaps we have been taking our words not seriously enough. Here is one that apparently can operate rather effectively independently of any specific meaning. (The questionnaire referred to has not been sent out, but the result which we have supposed is only too obvious.) If words are definite signs for definite concepts, how can this word do its work so successfully

and at the same time in a so evidently free-lance, haphazard fashion?

It is convenient to distinguish two general ways of using words. We may call these the scientific (or philosophical) and the practical (or poetical) uses respectively. The first is concerned with the accurate statement of fact, and with that only. It is scientific in the strict sense, and operates by means of declarative sentences. Thus the imperative mood, for instance, has no place in the scientific use of language, except in so far as it may furnish material to be explained in declarative sentences. Emotionally charged language as such has likewise no place there. Logic books do not trick out their syllogisms in forms like this:

Look here! All men are mortal.

But aha! Sweeney is a man.

Therefore, tch! tch! Sweeney is mortal.

No, this first use of language is merely enunciative, concerned as such with conveying judgments, which are representative of truth, from one mind to another, and that simply in so far as they are representative of truth. It is a strictly informational use of language. It is concerned with words simply as signs, strictly in function of what they signify.

The second way of using words is not so simple as the first. It may be called the practical or poetical way because it regards words not in function of what they represent, but in function of what they do to their auditors. Of course, in using words in function of what they do to their auditors, we must also consider what they mean, but this is not all we must consider. And in using words for what they do to their auditors, even when we take into consideration their strict meaning—the concepts which they represent—we regard this meaning not primarily as representative of

truth in the way that we do in the scientific or philosophical use, but as directed to a further end. Thus, when I say to a friend, "You are a good-for-nothing!" I direct the meaning of the statement to some such end as the establishing of a feeling of bantering good-will between us, whereas I may direct the meaning of the identical statement to a panhandler who is in obvious bad faith in order to make him stop trying to worry a dime out of me.

There is an interesting text in St. Thomas on this matter:

Now there are five species of perfect speech: namely, declarative, interrogative, vocative, imperative, and deprecativ. It must be borne in mind that the reason not only represents things themselves, but also by its own concept directs and orders other things. Now in representing things in themselves, it [the reason] forms an utterance which is indicative or declarative, but in ordering other things it forms different utterances. For something is directed and ordered by another for three reasons: first, that the mind may attend to it, and the vocative is concerned with this; secondly, that the voice may respond, and the interrogative is concerned with this; thirdly, that a work may be carried out, and the imperative is concerned with this when it is desired of inferiors, the deprecativ (to which the optative is reducible) when it is desired of superiors. . . . The suppositiv, that is, the conditional, and the dubitativ are reducible to the interrogative. (*Opusculum I, Summa Totius Logicae Aristotelis, tract. vii, c. 3.*)

With these prefatory remarks, St. Thomas goes on to distinguish substantially the same two uses of words that we have marked off:

And because these four species of speech [i.e., interrogative, vocative, imperative, and deprecativ] do not denote the true or the false, but a kind of order consequent upon the true and the false, therefore they do not pertain to the present discussion, which is directed immediately to demonstrative science, in which the hearing of man is led by reason to observe the true according to what is proper to a thing (itself), but they pertain rather to rhetoric or poetry, which induce assent by producing an effect in the listener. But only the declarative, which denotes the true and the false, and whatever other discourse can be reduced to the declarative, pertains to this discussion. (*Ibid.*)

This is a clear recognition of a state of affairs to which some literary critics have remained blind. It is their purblindness that has contributed to such unfortunate occurrences as the lifting of Shakespeare's characters out of his plays, so that they could be handled and criticized as real persons.

The dramatist, like any other poet, or like an orator or advertising-copy writer, is inter-

ested in making a something to which his audience will react in a certain way. He employs words in their second, their practical use. He is not concerned primarily with showing his audience what a thing is, or how it works—that is the province of the scientific lecturer. The dramatist, or orator, or advertising-copy writer is interested first and foremost in making his audience act or react, internally or externally, in certain ways. He directs his words to that end, and what happens to them in the transit is really incidental.

In the passage cited above it will be noted that St. Thomas makes room for the reduction of other forms of discourse to the declarative. Conversely, declarative discourse may be reducible to other forms, and thus, though of itself it pertains to the scientific or philosophical use of language, it may be employed also in the practical or poetical use. Thus if I confront a practicing physician with the simple statement, "I have broken my arm," I have equivalently asked him to do something about it. Examples of this kind need not be multiplied. The point should be made, however, that this sort of usage is disturbingly frequent in ordinary conversation. A very cursory examination of conscience shortly convinces us of the fact that more often than not we are more or less directly concerned with the effect that a statement will have as well as with the truth that it may contain. And there is nothing wrong in this, provided that we do not make the truth enter and exit entirely at the bidding of expediency. It is simply a fact that we use speech in this way. In ordinary use the scientific or truth-bearing variety of speech and the practical or result-producing variety are hopelessly intermixed, and cannot be distinguished adequately merely by sorting out the declarative from the non-declarative sentences. Even in the present article, it would only be blinking the facts to pretend that everything is entirely on a cold, scientific basis. It is a part of my business to kick up some dust, too.

There is, of course, writing which is merely scientific: text-books of mathematics, physics, and the like; a good bit of Aristotle and perhaps most of St. Thomas. And it may be interesting to inquire whether there can be writing which is *entirely* non-scientific and *altogether* practical or result-producing. By way of answer, it would seem that the scientific use of words must, at least implicitly or indirectly, always enter into the other use. Thus, even in a thing like Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," the effectiveness in the production of the desired result depends on the ability of the strange new words to conjure up all sorts of meanings of other words which sound something like them, but which ultimately represent something true.

The more important thing to keep in mind, however, is that often language is used for purposes which are entirely result-producing. In such cases, whether or not it can completely divorce itself from being representative of things, of reality, it must order everything to its purpose—as St. Thomas says (see above), to "producing an effect in the listener." No sane literary criticism can neglect this fact for an instant, or pretend at any juncture to judge a piece of literature like a piece of scientific writing. What if the dramatist does not present a man as he is? Who ever demonstrated that it was his business to do so? Is not that rather the business of the anatomist, the physician? If the dramatist does represent a man simply and entirely as he is—we have never seen or read one who does—it is only in order to help along his general creation, which is the play, not the character. We simply cannot pick pieces out of the whole and compare them with real things to see if they are done rightly or not. The whole cannot be compared in that way, and the parts have no meaning out of the whole. An amputated hand is no longer a part of a man: it is a piece of meat.

To illustrate how words used in function of the result they produce cannot be criticized in the same way as can words used scientifically

or philosophically as representative of reality a passage in *Othello* may serve. (It can be paralleled by hundreds of similar instances in Shakespeare.) It is from Othello's final speech:

Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that lov'd, not wisely, but too well;

Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away,
Richer than all his tribe.

The "his" in the last line is the Elizabethan possessive for either the masculine or neuter singular of the third personal pronoun, and hence means either "his" in our sense, or "its." Now if we approach the matter in the last three lines as something factual, representative of reality, we will find all sorts of difficulties. Does it mean that the Indian himself, when he had the pearl, was richer than all his (the Indian's) tribe, or that the pearl was richer than all the Indian's tribe, or that the pearl was richer than any other pearl (i.e., than all of its tribe), or that the Indian, even without the pearl, was richer than all his tribe, or that the Indian, having the pearl, was richer than all the rest of its (the pearl's) tribe put together—or does it have rather one of the many other possible meanings which we might reasonably assign to it? Frankly, I do not know and probably nobody else does. Certainly no one who has written about it knows, as you can see by consulting the editions. Now, if language were being used here scientifically or philosophically, I would have to suspend my judgment of the passage until I knew precisely what it meant. But since language is not operating here in that way, but in function of an effect to be produced, I can say, without troubling in the least to assign one definite meaning to the passage to the exclusion of all others, that it is excellent poetry. Its excellence can be known because no matter what I do with it, no matter which I take of the many suggestions it gives me, it succeeds in doing what Shakespeare wanted it to do: in giving me knowledge of a particular bit of beauty. Do I have to be able to say that one of the possible meanings is the denotation and that the others

are connotations? If I were to say that, I would be afraid that I might be doing violence to the facts of the case.

And so we come back to homogenization. "Homogenize" is really a very useful word. We may not know what it means, though it doubtless means something very definite, correct, and (we must add) sanitary, or something like that—scientific, maybe. Nevertheless, "homogenized" is good advertising, for

advertising uses words not for what they represent, but for what they do. And, after all, there is no dishonesty here, because the milk really *is* homogenized, you know. But whether the people really know what it means is immaterial, almost entirely beside the point. If it makes them buy the milk, that is all it is supposed to do—and who are we to reason why?

• *Trees, Not So Lovely*

(A Poem)

W. K. KNOEDELSEDER

Someone once said that he didn't think he
knew of a poem as lovely as a tree.

I don't concur. Not me.

Of course, maybe a tree is lovely if you stand
far enough away from it when you envision
it,

But when you get up real close to it, it's sort
of ugly, ision it?

At least that's always been my experience,
And it sort of ties up, not unremotely I admit,
with that old adage about proximity to the
forest and the trees being a source of visual
interference.

Now you take the ordinary tree, or even the
best one, why, you can't even scan it.

Besides, what have poem and trees got in com-
mon, anyway, that he should look at the
former and say that the latter is more beau-
tiful than it?

But then, back to scanning, I have never held
that meter is an essential part of any poem.

All you need is a rhyming dictionary to give
you all the proper rhyming words, unless,
of course, you already knoem.

But this is all very inconsequential, or

Else I might be justified in hoping that the
world, in recognition of this off-hand obser-
vation, might beat a pathway to my dor.

Which it won't.