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Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Philosophy of Science and Literary Theory (Autumn, 1985), pp. 165-171

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468986>

Accessed: 08/09/2008 15:29

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Critical Innocence and Straight Reading

Peter Caws

USE “innocence” here not (in the first instance) in the sense of not harming or not intending to harm, but in the sense of not being accountable for the consequences (possibly harmful, although this is no longer essential to the meaning of the term) of not having knowledge one does not happen to have—knowledge that one *might* have or even be expected or assumed to have. Innocence in this sense is not the same thing as ignorance, but it presupposes ignorance. Of course the two senses are connected, since it was tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge that constituted the traditional first loss of innocence, but that is not a line I wish to follow here, even though it is not without relevance to the issues I shall be discussing. There are some things one can’t come to know without losing one’s innocence in some respect or other—coming to know which reveals hitherto unrealized possibilities of error, either already committed (as in the evangelical conviction of sin) or encountered for the first time, whether as risk or temptation. Such knowledge may be disquieting, but it may also be liberating, since error does not necessarily ensue, nor is it the only new possibility. In this short article I want to deal with a kind of knowledge of language, which has consequences for the understanding of literature, that I think falls under this description.

A useful paradigm case of loss of innocence in the sense I mean, and that I have described elsewhere, is something that happens frequently in the history of individual religious belief. Somebody growing up in a closed community, and learning only one set of beliefs, may die in the faith without ever having felt a challenge to it. But just knowing that an alternative set of beliefs exists and is held, let us say, by infidels *may* start a chain of thought like this: here are two sets of beliefs that contradict one another; they cannot both be true, so one of them must be false; but if one is false the other may be false also, so there may be *no* true belief. Language has this in common with religious belief, that the one we start with is characteristically that of the culture we grow up in, and it may be a long time before we grasp the significance of the fact that there are others. It need not ever be grasped: people (English tourists on the Continent used to be one of the stock examples) can observe that foreigners

make strange noises without realizing that there is an alternative way of saying what *they* want to say, or that what they say—even if said loudly—will not be understood.

Once the existence of other languages is fully realized, parochialism of this kind becomes impossible, even though people may continue to think their own languages superior to the others—and there are differences that make such judgments defensible. Although it is true, *grammatically* speaking, that there are no primitive languages, this is not the case from a literary point of view. I remember being rebuked by René Char for showing interest in Mistral and the *Felibrige* on the grounds that their Provençal was an artificial resuscitation of a poetically dead language; for literary purposes, he implied, a language has to be historically continuous and have the resources of metaphor and allusion that come only with regional hegemony, diversity of usage, cross-connections with other languages, and so on. According to this argument there are only a handful of world-class literary languages, and the only one current in France is French, of which literary Provençal was, once, one of the tributaries.

Losing our innocence about the existence of foreign languages doesn't, of course, make us think that there aren't any languages. It seems to me terribly important for everyone to know more than one language so as to reveal if not correct the parochialism of the mother tongue, but knowing a second language doesn't mean that one stops speaking the first, so the situation is not quite parallel with that of belief. But in the linguistic case I want to deal with here the parallel seems to reemerge and to pose something of a problem. What I shall call "critical innocence" is the situation of people who think plain language is enough, who call spades spades, who think that given linguistic expressions mean the one thing they say and only that—people, in other words, for whom there objectively and finally is such a thing as *the* meaning of an utterance. This innocence is lost, whether to sophistication or corruption (and which one prefers to say may be an ideological and not merely a semantic matter), when ambiguity, irony, metaphor, and the like are encountered and recognized for the first time—that is (at the latest), with the experience of literature as such. I say "as such" because it is possible to hear and enjoy stories and even read whole novels without a loss of critical innocence if one thinks that *they* (as stories or novels) mean just one thing—for example, what their author intended them to mean.

The parallel with the case of belief shows itself in the conclusion philosophers are sometimes tempted to draw that if it doesn't mean that one thing, then there isn't anything a linguistic expression means.

If it can mean two things, then it can mean as many things as you like, or nothing. The right strategy, then, is to keep talking and figure out from context and other cues what transaction of meaning is at issue in a particular utterance. Meaning, as the ethnomethodologists say, is renegotiated in every act of discourse. And in literary discourse I suspect that something like this is true; part of the interest of literary works lies in our expectation that their authors will play neat tricks with meaning, and part of the pleasure of reading them consists in figuring those tricks out. Not that that deprives literary texts of meanings or paralyzes our judgment about better and worse interpretations; but nobody seriously engaged in any literary enterprise can pretend to critical innocence. By now this seems banal: polysemy, multiple readings, and so on are current coin, and appropriately worn.

This loss of innocence admits us to paradise rather than casting us out of it; the possibility of literature is the most spectacular gift of language. However, the existence of literature in this sense doesn't corrupt (or insistently sophisticate) every use of language. I remember a paper of O. K. Bouwsma's on the proposition that "ordinary language is notoriously vague and ambiguous," in which he described the chaos in the Sears Roebuck warehouse as Mr. Sears called out the order for pants and Mrs. Roebuck filled it with garden furniture, so vague and ambiguous were the terms of their ordinary language. The possibility of filling mail orders correctly depends on a critically innocent use of language. (We can use language in a critically innocent way without actually being ignorant of the fact that it can be used in other ways or indeed being able to use it in those ways at other times.) There may be no literary "fact of the matter" except at the level of the editorial establishment of a definitive text, where the criteria of the factual resemble those employed in some of the social sciences (in which one approaches factual descriptions rather than clinching them), but there is a fact of the matter in the mail-order warehouse, where (unless some exercise in conceptual art is in progress) nothing is supposed to be ambiguous or metaphorical or ironic.

Now this fact of the matter is of course expressed in the mother tongue; if I order pants from a Japanese mail-order house, a translation schema will come into play somewhere along the line, and the risk of getting garden furniture be correspondingly increased. However, it is possible to be literary in just one language, and for the moment I will restrict myself to the single-language case, overlooking the argument that we need a translation schema from the mother

tongue or “background language” into itself on the grounds that this belongs to another problem and can’t, on pain of infinite regress, be meant in the sense in which I need one to read the Japanese catalogue. The question I now want to ask is whether there are other critically innocent uses of language, and the answer I want to give is that the (idealized) practice of science constitutes such a use. (This may have as much to do as anything does with the forms of mutual incomprehension that arise between scientists and humanists, but that’s a side issue.)

Whatever practical difficulties lie in the way of this aim, science *tries* to say the one true thing about its object, and to mean by this just what is the case with respect to that object. Aren’t ambiguities possible here too? What about “gavagai” and the rest? I can’t, it is true, know with much confidence how good the natives’ zoology is, what they really think about rabbits, but as long as it’s zoology we’re talking about and not semantics that won’t bother me much. In my mother tongue rabbits are furry, long-eared, born blind, prolific, and so on, and these are facts of the matter. There can’t be any fact of the matter any more basic than that: to ask how rabbits are, independently of any such description, is to ask not just an unanswerable question but a silly one, not because they don’t exist independently of being described but because to ask how they are is to ask for a description. But this can’t mean there *isn’t* any fact of the matter, because ascertaining the facts of the matter has always meant getting just such a basic description and getting it right up to whatever approximation the available language will bear.

The point here is that the basic description is to be critically innocent; *furry* is to mean furry and not scaly, just as *spade* means spade and not pitchfork—it isn’t even to mean endearing, although it no doubt soon unscientifically will. And for scientific purposes it is essential that description *stay* critically innocent: the point of calling some rabbits *Oryctolagus* and some *Sylvilagus* is to *disambiguate* as far as possible, and so into the furthest reaches of theoretical terminology. *Of course* if the mother tongue changes, whether through paradigm shifts or professional specialization or improbable Feyera-bendian lexical reforms, then the basic description will change with it, and this *may* mean that we decide we were mistaken about the fact of the matter, or that it needs to be stated more carefully, but it still won’t mean that there isn’t one. Similarly for other languages: so far science has managed, for the most part, to establish translations between alternative formulations; if one day in some case it can’t, its

response won't be to give up on facts (at the level specified here—there may obviously be special cases in evolutionary cosmology or quantum chromodynamics) but to conclude that the formulations attend, in some Whorfian way perhaps, to different factual aspects of the world.

Within present limitations there can obviously be no question of defending myself against all the controversial objections that have been and will again be raised against this view. The whole opposition of realism and pragmatism is at stake. Let me return to my main point. Critical innocence, in the sense in which I mean it here, is something that the sciences rightly prize. It is something that literature rightly rejects. But there is no quarrel between them. If the zoology student happens to know that *Oryctolagus* comes from a word that means "to dig," and that some gazelles were called *oryx* because their pointed horns looked like pickaxes (and for all I know were used as such—*oryx* means pickaxe too), his reflections on this accidental etymological convergence of two kinds of leaping animals under the sign of burrowing won't do him much good on the zoology exam, although knowing that some species of *oryx* dig themselves shady overhangs in the sand dunes to avoid the midday sun conceivably might. He can get sophisticated in conversation and parade his knowledge of Greek and Latin roots, but if his teachers look on this as a form of frivolity, not to say corruption, we may think them stern or Puritanical or humorless, but we won't on those grounds question their competence as zoologists.

The interesting question, of course, is whether critical innocence is a virtue in philosophers, or whether, to use my alternative formulation, there is a critically innocent use of language in philosophy. Engels thought not; for him people whose *yea* was *yea* and their *nay* were laughably naive; he encouraged sophistication (or corruption?) through the dialectic. This was a move in the direction of literature, although Engels himself thought it a move in the direction of a (dialectical) science. The debate is current again as to whether philosophy should be more like literature or more like science, and I think that the notion of critical innocence can make a contribution to it.

It will perhaps be useful if I introduce a complementary notion, that of *straight reading*, where "straight" is to be understood rather as it is in the expression "straight man" in a comedy routine. The straight man is a model of critical innocence; he doesn't get the *double entendres* but we do, and that's why we are in a position to laugh at

him. This permits a rephrasing of the opposition between science and literature. No text that has only a straight reading will count as literature; a literary text doesn't even have to have a straight reading, although as we saw above it may (but what would a straight reading of *Finnegans Wake* be like? or for that matter of any serious poem?). A scientific text, on the other hand, has to have a straight reading whatever else it has, and the rest will be merely ornamental and possibly distracting. Whimsy about the naming of quarks is all very well, but physics is still trying to say something definite.

Something needs to be said here about the textuality of scientific texts, but that must wait for another occasion. What now of philosophy? Could we accept as philosophical a text that had only a straight reading, which would make philosophy like science, or will we insist on the textual thickness that would make it like literature? It seems to me that the answer here is quite clear: a philosophical text with no literary pretensions at all, written plainly, straightforwardly, and unambiguously in the mother tongue, would be the very model of a philosophical text. Not that philosophical texts can't be written with an eye to literature—Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and whole generations since are too firmly entrenched in the discipline to rule that out. But it isn't always philosophically helpful to be literary; as in science, sometimes it's ornamental, but sometimes it's distracting.

Of course the questions, Could there be philosophical texts that admit only of straight reading? and Is straight reading enough for philosophical texts? are very different and have very different answers. (Notice however that it isn't an objection to the position I have taken here that texts meant for straight reading can *also* be read for "significance" in Hirsch's somewhat idiosyncratic sense. That of course is true of science also—it's just that scientists don't have to do it, nor do philosophers if they aren't inclined to.) Critical innocence in its pure form is not a virtue in philosophers, who have to be wise enough in the ways of the world to know how often and how deviously discourse doesn't mean what it seems to say. But critical sophistication isn't much of a virtue either if it is directed at texts that don't require it.

The fact that meaning may be obscure and reference uncertain and nothing as the critically innocent might wish it to be doesn't mean that we can't mean, refer, and so on, in texts that are trying to get something clear rather than just making conversational moves. (Clarity sometimes emerges even from casual conversations in spite

of themselves.) In the case of belief with which I started, the existence of an alternative doesn't mean that either belief is actually discredited without further inquiry. But if the inquiry is to proceed at all, in that case or in the case of meanings, something, sooner or later, will have to be read straight. And the possibility of doing that, of being occasionally and temporarily at least *wilfully* innocent of literary device, is something that in my view at least philosophy does well to cling to.

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