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Science, Axel, and Punning

Hugh Kenner

Professor Kenner's article is taken from a talk presented at Syracuse University, October 26, 1979, as part of the symposium "The Study of Culture."

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1. Quotations from Sprat throughout this article are taken passim from the *History of the Royal Society*, 1667.

Thomas Sprat, bishop of Rochester in 1684, is a much-quoted author by virtue of just two sentences. I am writing this page within arm's length of three different books in which these sentences are transcribed: Basil Willey's *Seventeenth Century Background*, Brooks and Wimsatt's *History of Literary Criticism*, and Barbara Shapiro's biography of John Wilkins, who sought to order the thinking of the learned world by devising a philosophical language for it to think in. Sprat was writing his *History of the Royal Society*, published under the auspices of the society itself in 1667, and he was addressing

*one thing more, about which the Society has been most solicitous; and that is, the manner of their Discourse; which, unless they had been very watchful to keep in due Temper, the whole Spirit and Vigour of their Design had been soon eaten out, by the Luxury and Redundance of Speech.*¹

It is instructive to listen to him warming himself up for what literary historians have long regarded as the classic statement of the principles of scientific writing, though I cannot discover that scientists have ever paid it much heed. It is essential, he has already said, "to separate the knowledge of Nature from the colours of Rhetorick, the devices of Fancy, or the delightful deceit of Fables"; a cool statement of which he loses the cool when he confronts head-on the topic of human discourse. For his patience is overwhelmed by "the ill Effects of this Superfluity of Talking," so much so that

when I consider the means of happy Living, and the Causes of their Corruption, I can hardly forbear . . . concluding, that Eloquence ought to be banished out of all civil Societies, as a thing fatal to Peace and good Manners.

Man is distinguished from the brutes by speech, said Cicero, whom this sentence would have dismayed.

What dismays Thomas Sprat, though, is what an educational tradi-

tion stemming from Cicero has taught us to regard as the unfailling resource of language.

Who can behold, without Indignation, how many Mists and Uncertainties, these specious Tropes and Figures have brought on our Knowledge? . . . For now I am warm'd with this just Anger, I cannot with-hold my self, from betraying the Shallowness of all these seeming Mysteries; upon which we Writers, and Speakers, look so big. And in few Words, I dare say, that of all the Studies of Men, nothing may be sooner obtain'd, than this vicious Abundance of Phrase, this Trick of Metaphor, this Volubility of Tongue, which makes so great a Noise in the World.

We cannot fail to observe how Sprat expends words against words, duplicating and triplicating his nouns: Mists and Uncertainties; Tropes and Figures; Writers and Speakers; Abundance of Phrase, Trick of Metaphor, Volubility of Tongue. Only Eloquence, it seems, can condemn Eloquence, placing it among "those *general Mischiefs*, such as the *Dissention* of Christian Princes, the *Want of Practice* in Religion, and the like"; great universal evils. Only Eloquence, or else the practice of the Royal Society itself—a new priesthood, we are to believe, or a band of saints. And Sprat's voice drops as he utters his famous two sentences:

They have therefore been more rigorous in putting in Execution the only Remedy, that can be found for this Extravagance; and that has been a constant Resolution, to reject all the Amplifications, Digressions, and Swellings of Style; to return back to the primitive Purity and Shortness, when Men deliver'd so many Things, almost in an equal Number of Words. They have exacted from all their Members, a close, naked, natural way of Speaking; positive Expressions, clear Senses; a native Easiness; bringing all Things as near the mathematicall Plainness as they can; and preferring the Language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars.

There it is; and if you had before your eyes the fourth edition, from which I have been copying, you would see that the printer has emphasized the point to which I am coming by embellishing with capital initials none of the verbs but all of the nouns. That was a printing-house convention, as it still is in Germany, and it helps bear out Sprat's famous aphorism about Things and Words. The word worthy of signalization is the word that denominates a thing. That, it seems, is the "primitive Purity and Shortness."

But the primitive Purity and Shortness is the purity and shortness of Eden, as we may guess when Sprat conjoins the adjectives *close, naked, natural*. Naked was Natural before the Fall; after that came fig leaves and more extravagant clothing. And language, now, is clothing, distinguished by Amplifications and Swellings, not to mention Digressions such as the necktie. Adam spoke to Eve with a naked Easiness, using positive Expressions and clear Senses, in "the primitive Purity and Shortness." He did not tell her she was like a red, red rose; Hugh Hefner, maybe, remembers what he told her. Certainly he did not tell her that her eyes were nothing like the sun, nor mention the

fire that stirs about her, when she stirs. “Me Adam, you Eve,” mentions so many *Things*, almost in an equal Number of *Words*, and is certainly not the language of Wits, or Scholars.

“The Language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants,” says Sprat, naming three classes whose occupations are supposed to be handling *things*. “So many *Things*, almost in an equal Number of *Words*”: you pick up the mercantile metaphor of equivalence, a penny a line, a dollar a year, a word a thing. Things are real and discrete, words are their labels, and our ideal is a one-to-one correspondence. Each thing has a name; every cat that wanders through the English-speaking world has the label *cat* spray-painted on its side; we can thus *say* every thing, though it is difficult to imagine what we can manage to *say about* anything. Swift, his mind doubtless on this very passage, arranged that certain philosophers in Lagado should save words, hence breath, hence attrition of the lungs, by carrying about with them in large sacks the things whereon they proposed to discourse, since words are properly but the names of things; they would open the sacks and simply hold the things up. One cannot say what they were saying. What do *things* say?

In Sprat’s discourse we may discern the unmistakable accents of the religious reformer. It is not irrelevant that he would one day be bishop of Rochester or that John Wilkins, his mentor during the writing of the *History*, would be bishop of Chester within a year of the *History*’s publication. The connection of nakedness with naturalness, the ad-duction of “native Easiness,” the rhetoric of return—return “to the primitive Purity and Shortness”—these are the mannerisms of a mind for which the substance of history is the degeneration of pure religion with time, and the essence of urgent reform is the restoration of its first condition. It is nothing less than the lost tongue of Adam that the new priesthood of the Royal Society will restore. And the lost tongue of Adam was busy, we are to believe, not in affirming at all but simply in naming; since to the unfallen mind of Adam, things were present in their transparent essences and named accordingly; and on their names being spoken, declared themselves wholly, leaving no void to be filled by webs of mere talk.

A stronger claim for the mere reform of prose style has not often been made: a primitive Purity and Shortness will restore, once we have its trick, the light of Eden that played upon all things before the Serpent, prototype of Wits and Scholars, blinded our parents with his flattery and the Angel intervened with his flaming sword.

What ensued, alas, was nothing more edifying than Robert Hooke’s report on the Dissection of a Dog and (brave new world!) proposals for “several new kinds of *Pendulum Watches* for the Pocket, wherein the motion is regulated, by Springs, or Weights, or Loadstones, or Flies moving very exactly regular.” Those are unfallen flies.

What also ensued, though, was a linguistic norm. The language of science is a language abashed, purged of “this vicious Abundance of *Phrase*, this *Trick of Metaphor*, this Volubility of *Tongue*”; for “the tongue is an unruly evil, full of poison,” wrote the apostle (James 3: 8). It is also a language to be read with diminishing pleasure.

“Bringing all Things as near the mathematicall Plainness as they can,” they commenced, did the priesthood, eventually to discourse in mathematics exclusively: in a language no one speaks, not even its possessors; and when Wordsworth, in “The Prelude,” evoked the antechapel

*Where the statue stood
Of Newton with his prism and silent face,
The marble index of a mind forever
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone*

he told us that the presence of Newton the sage would be indistinguishable from the presence of Newton’s unspeaking statue: for the sage is thinking in equations, and is wordless, and alone. There has been no such former sage, not Pythagoras, nor Socrates, nor Confucius, nor Jesus: these were sage in the company of disciples, who remembered them for what they said and preserved their sayings. Who remembers anything that Newton said? When he spoke, he was apt to be quarreling about priority of discovery. In his role of sage, he did not *say*. Very good middlemen such as Henry Pemberton, who published *A View of Sir Isaac Newton’s Philosophy* in 1728, the year after Newton died, conveyed Newton’s thought to those who merely read English.

*Fix upon any plane two pins [says Pemberton’s brisk voice] as at
A and B in fig. 91. To these tye a string ACB of any length.
Then apply a pin D so to the string, as to hold it strained; and in
that manner carrying this pin about, the point of it will describe
an ellipsis.*

He is telling you something to do. You are not to take his or Newton’s word for anything; you are to repeat the experiment. For that is, increasingly, the new thing that the scientist has to say: I have performed an experiment, and you can repeat it. I have done some new thing you have never imagined being done. I have (for instance) dissected a dog *in articulo mortis*, and by inserting a bellows into its trachea have kept its heart beating even after the dissection away of the pericardium; and such is the regularity of nature that you, moreover, may do the same. Pemberton’s instructions for drawing an ellipse are not otherwise oriented: here is a curiosity, moreover one of planetary significance, which you may reproduce with a string and pins.

And Pemberton is speaking, interestingly, in the voice of the novelist, a voice that was commencing to lift itself up in those years. Pemberton’s book is 1728; *Robinson Crusoe* was 1719, and *Gulliver’s Travels* 1726. A novel enables you to repeat the experiment. You can relive, plank by plank and crop by crop, Crusoe’s recreation of a habitable world (demi-Eden), or Gulliver’s disastrous encounter with the talking horses who seem to be inhabiting the Republic of Plato and persuade him that he would be better delivered from a world that offers both lawyers and dancing masters.

As befits opportunities to repeat some experiment, novels were written in Royal Society prose, low-keyed, unmetaphoric, crammed with nouns. They bespeak, in their dense factuality, a new thing to do with prose, a prose disencumbered of “all the Amplifications, Digressions, and Swellings of Style.” Within a cen-

ture writers were discovering a corresponding new thing to do with verse. No longer (for instance) a witty piece of persuasion like "To His Coy Mistress," a poem was becoming an account of an experience—an experiment; by definition not repeatable because I am I, not you, and even I do not step twice in the same stream; an experience by analogy moving, even usefully moving to you, through the medium of my stark and rhythmic account. I wandered lonely as a cloud (if I choose I may insert a footnote specifying date and place), and how the sight of the daffodils moved me I trust my verse conveys, and how it is that oft when on my couch I lie they have power to move me again. So I have shared my epiphany; treasure you up therefore epiphanies of your own, against the vacant and pensive moods that will come upon you. (And that, by the way, is an experiment you cannot help repeating if you live: you will find that vacancy will come.)

There are consequently unsurprising resemblances between Wordsworth's 1802 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* and Sprat's 1667 *History of the Royal Society*. These extend into details of wording that seem not to have been noticed. Wordsworth's second sentence contains the noun *experiment*, a word he had already employed when the book was first published in 1798. These poems, he said then, were published as "experiments," to ascertain "how far the language of conversation in the lower and middle classes of society is adapted to the purpose of poetic pleasure." He had preferred, that is to say, "the Language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants, before that of Wits, or Scholars," though 130 years after Sprat he found linguistic degeneration so far advanced that merchants afforded no model, only countryman artisans.

In the fourth paragraph of the 1802 *Preface*, Wordsworth reports how the "experiment" was regarded by "certain of my friends." Its object, as he now more exactly rephrases it, was

to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a poet may rationally endeavour to impart.

(In passing we may note the word *quantity* and wonder, how measured? *Quantity* is a word to use when you are proposing "an experiment.") And these friends of his believed that "if the views with which [the poems] were composed were indeed realized"—this can only mean if sufficient readers reported pleasure of the appropriate kind and quantity—"a class of poetry would be produced, well adapted to interest mankind permanently, and not unimportant in the mutiplicity [quantity again!] and in the quality of its moral relations." They foresaw, these friends, the possible generation of a new poetic species; "and on this account they have advised me to prefix a systematic defence of the theory, upon which the poems were written." This is as gravely worded as a grant proposal in recombinant DNA.

And it is exactly that grave; for what Wordsworth proposes is a poetic mutation which, if it proves capable of survival, will affect the lives of mankind "permanently." (It has affected ours. And when he wrote the *Preface*, Mary Shelley was lisping words; in 1818 she would publish *Frankenstein*.) It is a mutation to be accomplished by writing of "incidents or situations from common life" in "a selection of the

language really used by men''; and Wordsworth expects that as much may issue from this simple stragem as ever Sprat hoped from the new priesthood of the Royal Society.

This is truly to command the World [Thomas Sprat had written], to rank all the Varieties, and Degrees of Things, so orderly one upon another, that standing on the Top of them, we may perfectly behold all that are below, and make them all serviceable to the Quiet, and Peace, and Plenty of Man's Life.

And the poet, says Wordsworth,

considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting qualities of nature [so that] the remotest discoveries of the chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist, will be as proper objects of the poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us.

The chemist, the botanist, or mineralogist are no longer foreign to readers of poetry, whom T.S. Eliot has instructed in catalysis and Marianne Moore in the culture of *Camellia Sabina*—

Dry

*the windows with a cloth fastened to a staff.
In the camellia-house there must be
no smoke from the stove, or dew on
the windows, lest the plants ail.*

They have heard Ezra Pound identify certain "rock-layers arc'd as with compass" on the west shore of Lago di Garda: "This rock is magnesia." The science least foreign to Wordsworth had been invented between Sprat's time and his: psychology. He was one day to arrange his *Poetical Works* on a plan guided by the taxonomies of the Leibniz of associationism, David Hartley; they fitted a prestigious system and might be read as case studies in the operations of minds.

Wordsworth devotes two long paragraphs of the *Preface* to explicating the poet's close kinship with the scientist, so close in fact that only two things need explaining: his emphasis on pleasure (but the scientist, he reminds us, would quit were it not for the pleasures of discovery) and his decision to pursue an essentially scientific course not in straightforward Royal Society prose but in meter. His surprising answer is that meter is a kind of anesthetic; when the substance of what is to be communicated is excessively passionate or contains an admixture of pain,

the co-presence of something regular, something to which the mind has been accustomed in various moods and in a less excited state, cannot but have great efficacy in tempering and restraining the passion by an intertexture of ordinary feeling.

We need not believe this, but it was the language to which Wordsworth had recourse when he felt constrained to give explanations; and it is the language of a sober and intelligent Royal Society virtuoso, restrained by 130 years' accumulated experience from the headlong enthusiasm we often detect in Sprat, who expected the gates of Eden to reopen for traffic momentarily.

For it was, we must remember, as a disciplined hermetic priesthood that Thomas Sprat saw the Society. That prose of theirs, which furnished an idiom for Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*, was part of a discipline meant to unlock the closed Garden by returning "back to the primitive Purity and Shortness," before men imitated the serpent in talking to deceive. In Wordsworth's *Preface*—not, though, in his verse—the hieratic note is gone; the poet is "a man speaking to men," and not with the tongues of angels but with those of countrymen. But Wordsworth in this as in so much else is exceptional, and we shall soon find the poets too rejoining a priesthood: under, for instance, the auspices of Shelley, who defected from the great vision of the Royal Society in stigmatizing "the calculating faculty." "Reasoners and mechanists," he tells us, are being proposed as claimants to "the civic crown" long reserved to poets; but all that they have procured is that "the rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism." So much for "the cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world"; the *Defence of Poetry* ends with Shelley's claim that the true measurers of circumference and sounders of depths are poets, who "measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature," who are "the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration," and who are in fact "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

So the religious claims that were made on behalf of nascent science in the seventeenth century were being made on behalf of a newly prophetic poetry in the nineteenth; and as scientific language—despite Sprat's professing that it was the language of Artizans, Countrymen, and Merchants—had withdrawn itself from public comprehension, so the language of poetry was about to do likewise. In 1890 Villiers de l'Isle-Adam published *Axel*, "the disdainful rejection of life itself," according to Arthur Symons (*The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 1899). This was the play in which Edmund Wilson found the key to literary modernism, in "a particular kind of eloquence," says Symons, "which makes no attempt to imitate the speech of every day, but which is a sort of ideal language in which beauty is aimed at as exclusively as if it were written in verse." For, Symons explains, the modern drama has limited itself to "as much as possible the words which the average man would use for the statement of his emotions and ideas." But "it is evident that the average man can articulate only a small enough part of what he obscurely feels or thinks," and it is evident therefore that the real language of men, despite Sprat's protestations or Wordsworth's, has no priestly functions whatever. Science, says *Axel*, "states but does not explain: she is the oldest offspring of the chimeras; all the chimeras, then, on the same terms as the world (the oldest of them!) are *something more* than nothing!" Which is pretension, because Nothing is what is. Symons translates the following interchange:

—*Happily we have Science, which is a torch, dear mystic; we will analyse your sun, if the planet does not burst into pieces sooner than it has any right to!*

- Science will not suffice. Sooner or later you will end by coming to your knees.*
 —*Before what?*
 —*Before the darkness!*

To read Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* is to see a priesthood assembling. The book is a curiously strict counterpart to Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society*—by then 232 years in the past—in elucidating an exactly analogous movement, an effort to conscript the highest thought on behalf of men's liberation from common opinion, thereby coming closer (Symons said) "to everything in humanity that may have begun before the world and may outlast it."

"Here, then, in this revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition . . . literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech." A revolt, we note, against, among other things, rhetoric: that "Luxury and Redundance of *Speech*" Sprat had excoriated. And—here is the sacerdotal note—literature in attaining this liberty accepts a heavier burden; "for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual."

The responsibilities of the sacred ritual would have lain lightly upon a seventeenth-century English latitudinarian, for whom things were things; words, words. The symbolist movement was staffed almost exclusively by lapsed Catholics, convinced from childhood that there existed verbal formulae of power, of efficacy. Mallarmé rhymed the sestet of a sonnet on rare words ending in the cruciform *x*, having begun it with words which evoke purity, dedication, and the crucifier's nails, contriving however that only the most pertinacious or perverse reader should be reminded of Christian iconography; these words will work what magic lies in their power unaided by associations of the parish. That sonnet ends "Des scintillations sitôt le septuor," evoking at once the seven-starred Big Dipper of astronomy and a countdown, *cing, six, sept*, toward the mystic seven, the tally of the days of creation. Such concerns have seeped into all modern thought about poetry, and the fiercely irreligious William Empson did not ever doubt that ambiguity—a symbolist invention—came in seven types.

It has been a cardinal discovery of our own age—Stanley Fish, for one, has put it forthrightly—that there exists no simple, no "natural" language. All language capable of any expressiveness at all reeks of artifice. Prose is not "natural" as compared with verse; Chaucer, who could render superbly in verse the naturalness of the *Wife of Bath*, was reduced to monkey chatter when he attempted to write a few plain prose pages of instruction to his "lyte Lowys" on the use of an instrument no more arcane than a slide rule. In the *Treatise on the Astrolabe* we miss a voice, we miss a rhythm, we miss all those tacit devices of precedence and subordination which bring to the *Canterbury Tales* the tang and intelligibility of the real language of men. This is only to say that prose as much as verse requires inventing and reducing to rule and procedure, and English prose in the late fourteenth century had barely begun to be invented. Prose resembles

spontaneous speech only in being unmetred, but on the strength of that resemblance alone it has been identified with spontaneity: with the real language of men, who are thought to speak prose.

Men do not, nor do women. As the tape recorder assures us, they um and ah and not only leave sentences unfinished but also, midway in what a prose writer would call a sentence, may change their minds more than once about where it is going. Prose, intelligible prose, is as artificial as any verse.

This matters, because the assumption that Adam spoke prose is religious, not experiential. The Royal Society, when it proposed as an ideal "so many *Things*, almost in an equal Number of *Words*," was remembering that Adam was a namer—by whatsoever name Adam called each creature, that was the name thereof—and supposed that this was equivalent to prose: to a formed language. Wordsworth made the equally arbitrary assumption that "hourly communication with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived" (note the anxiety behind that doubled *best*) would issue, among countrymen, in a powerful prose to which the poet had only to superadd meter. And it was supposed by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and by Mallarmé that prose is equivalent to the degenerate inability of Everyman to speak a tithe of what he obscurely thinks.

Prose is none of these: prose is high artifice. And when James Joyce proposed that Stephen Dedalus should be priest of the eternal imagination—once more that priestly image!—he proposed also that it should be the daily bread of common experience that the priest should transmute into the radiant body of life everlasting, by a means not always distinguishable from writing down the commonplace just as it was, but in well-formed prose.

Stephen was to complete the analogy with a priestly magician by taking vows of silence, exile, and cunning, the better, as it were, to enable James Joyce to write his first prose book, which is written (he said) in a style of "scrupulous meanness"—rejecting, that is, "all the Amplifications, Digressions, and Swellings of Style"—and much concerned with words and the way people use them. In the first paragraph a boy is murmuring to himself the word *paralysis*, which sounds to him "like the name of some maleficent and sinful being." In the fourth paragraph a man talking of faints and worms turns out, if we consult a large dictionary, to be discoursing not of pathology but of a distillery. The sole occurrence of the word *grace* in a story called "Grace" places it, as we should expect, near the word *believed*; but what it concerns is a gentleman's need for a silk hat of some decency, by grace of which he can pass muster. The real language of men is chameleonlike; words refuse to mean what they ought to, and a culture which does not observe this is a culture in decay. And James Joyce's last book, *Finnegans Wake*, declines to let its words anywhere specify what they mean at all. Their "meaning" is solely the phantasms they can generate by virtue of the company they keep. "O, rocks!" said Molly Bloom. "Tell us in plain words." But there are no plain words.

This is a grave matter. The belief that there were plain words sponsored the faith, three centuries ago, that science might unite mankind. After all this time of increasing disunion, in

the course of which word-men and scientists have pulled so far apart as only to communicate with one another, or with the laity, through interpreters, we are coming to believe that people only understand one another's words when they pretty nearly understand one another anyway. There are no plain speakers either, no plain readers; only groups of us more or less skilled in a greater or lesser number of overlapping languages. And this is not something that has gone wrong with our culture. What went wrong with our culture was the insidious belief that it could ever be any other way. That was a comforting but atavistic belief. It is only savages who have a simple, a purposive, a unified culture: who thoroughly understand one another, and whose poets are "technicians of the sacred." The decision to leave those simplicities behind, a decision we presumably do not propose to renegotiate, was entailed in our decision not to be savages.