The Philosophy of Rhetoric

I. A. Richards

Edited by John Constable

I. A. Richards Selected Works 1919 - 1938
Volume VII

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

Perhaps since his death the most widely known of all Richards' books, certainly the most read, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* is a simplified treatment of the major theoretical concerns of *Interpretation in Teaching.* Richards himself compared the relationship between these two books to that between two other of his works:

> There is a sort of proportion sum_ *Philosophy of Rhetoric* is to *Interpretation in Teaching* as *Science and Poetry* is to *Principles of Literary Criticism.* Each was a replaying on a more popular level, as I thought.[1]

The remark is suggestive, since *Science and Poetry* was a work that Richards 'took a dislike to' soon after publication, and whose 'most clearly stated points were, I found, understood in ways which turned them into indefensible nonsense'.[2] *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* has never attracted much hostile criticism, or invited obvious and apparently wilful misunderstanding as *Science and Poetry* notoriously has, and we may infer that Richards' dissatisfaction is more with the fact that the positions in both these popular versions were taken to be suitable targets, or as his final position, when more complicated and less readily criticized versions were in print. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* is an introduction to *Interpretation in Teaching*, not a substitute for it.

The origins of this text are simple. In January of 1935 Richards was invited to deliver the Mary Flexner lectures for 1936 at Bryn Mawr College. He had just a undertaken a very substantial 'Statement' for the General Education Board of

the Rockefeller Foundation on the application of his interpretational theories to education, and though this was a vast commitment, to be delivered by the end of 1935, he was attracted by the opportunity of travel to the United States, and the lectures were a further opportunity for making his views known. He accepted almost immediately, having obtained permission for yet another leave of absence from Magdalene and the Faculty of English.[1] The title at this time, and for the rest of the year, appears to have been The Interpretation of Prose',[2] and by September, and perhaps earlier, Richards had decided to present 'six discourses expounding those parts' of the Rockefeller Foundation's commissioned work 'which seem most suitable for a general audience'.[3] The Rockefeller work was a summation of courses he had been engaged upon since completing his 'Practical Criticism' lectures in 1927. As he described the business to John Marshall, Assistant Director of Education at the Foundation:

> I have gone a long way on from *Practical Criticism.* In fact since then, most years, I've given a course of lectures – under the perhaps odd title of 'Philosophy of Rhetoric' – which has been on the theory of interpretation and illustrations of its practical uses. I have got almost too large an accumulation of suggestions, plans, experiments and materials towards reconstructing 'general education' – chiefly by making people more able to take a fruitful interest in their own learning and thinking processes.[4]

Much of 1935 was taken up with collecting further protocols relevant to the work, and a frantic period of writing between September and December.[5] When the Rockefeller statement was complete Richards was able to turn his attention to the composition of the lectures, and on the 29th of December he

wrote to tell his wife Dorothy that he had begun work:

> After the expansiveness of The Statement it would have been a pleasant change to tackle this opposite job of lively summary and condensation – but with only a few days for it – Well! Hell![1]

But the following day, with the writing actually progressing, it seemed better:

> cheered by having now 2 full lectures, I and II, finished and a good deal of material for the rest sorted and more or less planned out.[2]

On the 2nd of January he had finished three of the lectures, assembled two more, with only the last lecture left undecided. A bout of sinus trouble, and exhaustion after the effort of completing the Rockefeller 'Statement' had led him to decide that he would not polish the texts for the last three:

> I suddenly felt that I'd go stale on the stuff and it would be *dead* by the time I had to give it if I finished off the second half too thoroughly.[3]

But he believed that all his 'necessary preparations *intellectually*' were complete, and on the 18th of January they sailed for the United States. Before going on to Bryn Mawr they stopped off in Harvard where Richards attended a Lowell Fellows dinner, sitting between Skinner and Lowes, and afterwards 'enjoyed much talk with Quine'.[4] They lunched with M. H. Abrams, recently a visiting scholar at Magdalene,[5] and Richards called again on B. F. Skinner, with whom he talked about the application of reflex theory to language.[6] In Philadelphia they settled quickly, but were soon engaged in a vigorous round of social and professional engagements. Two days before the lectures were due to start a letter from

England told them that Mansfield Forbes, who had recruited Richards to teach for the English tripos in 1919, and was one of Richards' closest Cambridge friends, had died suddenly of a blood clot. Richards was 'horribly shocked',[1] and the death seems to have cast a gloom over the first lecture and the rest of their stay:

> Found after a few minutes the Hall was too much and *immense* Gothic roof– no light – crimson curtains, too much heat, and a complete inability to listen – all quality goes out in the roof. Very depressing, but they said they liked it.[2]

In the following days Richards gave seminars related to the lectures, and met Paul Weiss, later to review *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, whom A. N. Whitehead had warned Richards was a 'dragon'. Richards found him to have a 'very quick and supple and acute mind', with 'a good way of rephrasing and exploring other people's remarks'.[3]

Richards now set to work finishing off his next lectures, with the assistance of Dorothy who 'in despair typed away at Lecture II which she says doesn't hang together and isn't comprehensible.'[4] Their mood was lifted by the certainty that they would be going on from Philadelphia to China, to carry out Basic English related work for the Rockefeller Foundation, and Dorothy resumed Chinese lessons in preparation.[5] Richards only 'survived' the remaining lectures, but appears to have enjoyed the question and answer sessions with colleagues.[6] News that Hitler had reoccupied the Rhineland was disturbing, but a meeting with the Flexner family, the patrons of the lecture series, was a great success, and the Richardses left Philadelphia feeling that they had been 'spoiled'.[7] The lectures were not yet ready for submission to the Oxford University Press, and immediately after leaving

Bryn Mawr Richards was engaged to travel to Washington for a three day conference on his Rockefeller 'Statement' with a group of leading North American educators. With these responsibilities discharged, they decided to travel slowly to San Francisco, visiting Santa Fe, and then Taos, where they had a 'sunset meditation on the prehistoric past'.[1] A brief visit to the Grand Canyon led them on to San Francisco at the beginning of April, and they departed on the 2nd, sailing under the Bay Bridge and the unfinished Golden Gate Bridge, the 'most lovely structures in steel we've ever seen',[2] with 'tiny figures of men cheering high up in a faint creaky tone'.[3] Richards revised his lectures at sea on the 4th, 5th, and 6th, and he dated his preface to *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* during a nine hour stop-over on the 7th at Honolulu, where the Richardses had married ten before.

A short delay seems to have held up publication when Richards lost a set of proofs – they didn't resurface again until the middle of January the following year[4] – but the book was printed and copies available in early December. However, and in spite of the fact that the title page is dated 1936, it was not officially published until the 14th of January 1937.[5] Looking at it Richards was unenthusiastic, and wrote to Eliot:

> Few I fear will like *Philosophy of Rhetoric.* This way of having a thing published a whole year after you did it, when all the warmth of the act has gone, would stop me writing I expect. Perhaps that is the remedy.[6]

Richards' fears were misplaced, and the book was well-received on publication, and has since been regarded as a founding document in the study of metaphor, achieving a celebrity which is rather surprising given its brevity. That it has dated is of course true, and the sophistication of the field

developed with great speed, but rapid obsolescence in this case is a tribute to the intensity of the interest it aroused. Paul Ricoeur's remarks on it may be taken as representative. He writes that 'the pioneering job' carried out by *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* 'cannot be overestimated'.[1] Richards' 'frankly anti-taxonomical bent' 'distinguishes it from its decadent relations' because Richards, more than any other preceding thinker, had 'broken with the theory of the word conceived as the name of the idea',[2] and mobilized his 'whole rhetorical enterprise with the aim of re-establishing the rights of discourse at the expense of the rights of the word'.[3] The substance of this point can be better grasped from Ricoeur's observation that:

> With Richards we enter into a semantics of the metaphor that ignores the duality of a theory of signs and a theory of the instance of discourse, and that builds directly on the thesis of the interanimation of words in the living utterance.[4]

This contextualism, and Ricoeur is in effect praising an oblique anticipation of linguistic pragmatics (a point which will occur often to a careful reader of the works from *The Meaning of Meaning* onwards), enables Richards to propose a rhetoric 'which teaches the mastery of contextual interplay by means of a knowledge of criteria of understanding other than those of simple univocity upon which logic is built.'[5] Ricoeur's admiration, as can easily be seen, is not so much for the theory of metaphor which is proposed within this new rhetoric, though he thinks that admirable too, but for the general conception of communication, and the practical purpose of a rhetoric which theorizes it:

> If rhetoric is a 'study of misunderstanding and its remedies', the remedy is the 'command' of the shifts of meaning that assure

> the effectiveness of language in communcation. Ordinary conversation consists in following these shifts, and rhetoric should teach their mastery.[1]

Richards' treatment of metaphor is thus seen, quite correctly, as part of a larger program, and this is all the more acute since Ricoeur nowhere shows knowledge of Richards' major statement of this scheme, *Interpretation in Teaching.* Anyone who has read both works will readily understand why it is that linguists have elected the shorter as a classic, but this is hardly a worthy reason for the choice, and though its moment is now past, for technical students of the theory of metaphor, it is perhaps time that historians of the field revisited the relationship between these two oddly twinned books, if only to wonder at the influence that might have been had Richards made *Interpretation* as approachable as *The Philosophy of Rhetoric.*

Finally, Ricoeur praises Richards' introduction of the terms 'tenor' and 'vehicle' for discussing the elements present in a metaphor. Addressing a question which must have occurred to any student looking over the book, Ricoeur observes that these terms are vastly superior to their commonsense alternatives – 'the original' idea and 'the borrowed idea'; 'what is really being thought or said', and 'what it is compared to'; 'the principal subject' and 'what it resembles'; and 'the idea' and 'its image' – because their neutrality prevents or at least inhibits any presupposition of a one and only, or a 'proper meaning'.[2] Still more importantly, Ricoeur notes that it combats the assumption that metaphor must involve a mental image. However, his highest praise is for a feature that would ordinarily be regarded as a flaw in a terminological pairing, namely that it is hard to think of them

separately (or, as a candid undergraduate might say, remember which is which):

> they prevent one from talking about tenor apart from the figure, and from treating the vehicle as an added ornament. The simultaneous presence of the tenor and the vehicle and their interaction engender the metaphor; consequently the tenor does not remain unaltered, as if the vehicle were nothing but wrapping and decoration.[1]

A reader turning to Richards' pages at this point may wonder what the fuss is about, and be surprised that a work, which Ricoeur himself admits is marked by 'tentativeness and a certain lack of technical development',[2] should attract such commentary. The answer is largely that Richards' observations, which he had been formulating, in the later 1920s, between seven and eight years before he wrote them down and delivered them in Bryn Mawr, were of extraordinary novelty. As Ricoeur puts it, 'Richards made the breakthrough; after him, Max Black and others occupy and organize the terrain.'[3]

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1 'Beginnings and Transitions: I. A. Richards Interviewed by Reuben Brower', in Reuben Brower, et al., eds, *I. A. Richards: Essays in his Honor* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1973), 117–41), 29.

2 I. A. Richards, 'Preface', *Science and Poetries* (W. W. Norton: New York, 1970), 7.

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, 16 Jan. 1935, Richards Collection, Magdalene College, Cambridge (hereafter, RCM).

2 IAR to David H. Stevens, Director of the Rockefeller Foundation, 16 Sep. 1935, Rockefeller Archives Center.

3 IAR to David H. Stevens, 16 Sep. 1935, Rockefeller Archives Center.

4 IAR to John Marshall, (undated, but stamped as received 3 Oct. 1934), Rockefeller Archives Center.

5 See the Introduction to Volume 8 for a further account of the composition of *Interpretation in Teaching.*

1 IAR to D. E. Richards, dated by DER 30 Dec. 1935 (probably composed by Richards 29 Dec. 1935), RCM.

2 IAR to D. E. Richards, 30 Dec. 1935, RCM.

3 IAR to D. E. Richards, 2 Jan. 1936, RCM.

4 D. E. Richards' diary, 27 Jan. 1936, RCM.

5 D. E. Richards' diary, 28 Jan. 1936, RCM.

6 D. E. Richards' diary, 29 Jan. 1936, RCM.

1 D. E. Richards' diary, 8 Feb. 1936, RCM.

2 D. E. Richards' diary, 10 Feb. 1936, RCM.

3 D. E. Richards' diary, 12 Feb. 1936, RCM.

4 D. E. Richards' diary, 16 Feb. 1936, RCM.

5 D. E. Richards' diary, 21 Feb. 1936, RCM.

6 D. E. Richards' diary, 6 Mar. 1936, RCM.

7 D. E. Richards' diary, 4 Apr. 1936, RCM.

1 IAR to David H. Stevens, 6 Apr. 1936, quoted in D. E. Richards Diary, 6 Apr. 1936, RCM.

2 IAR to David H. Stevens, 6 Apr. 1936, quoted in D. E. Richards Diary, 6 Apr. 1936, RCM.

3 D. E. Richards' diary, 2 Apr. 1936, RCM.

4 IAR to D. E. Richards, 16 Jan. 1937, RCM.

5 IAR to John Marshall, 17 Dec. 1937, Rockefeller Archives Center.

6 IAR to T. S. Eliot, 7 Mar. 1937, in the possession of Mrs Valerie Eliot, quoted in John Constable, ed., *Selected Letters of I. A. Richards* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1990), 100.

1 Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, translated by Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1978), 76.

2 *Rule of Metaphor*, 77.

3 *Rule of Metaphor*, 79.

4 *Rule of Metaphor*, 99.

5 *Rule of Metaphor*, 79.

1 *Rule of Metaphor*, 79.
2 *Rule of Metaphor*, 81.
1 *Rule of Metaphor*, 81.
2 *Rule of Metaphor*, 83.
3 *Rule of Metaphor*, 84.

REVIEWS AND SIGNIFICANT ARTICLES DISCUSSING *PHILOSOPHY OF RHETORIC*

Reviews

Emperor, John B., 'New Books', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 23/4 (Dec. 1937), 663.

Empson, William, 'Books of the Quarter', *Criterion*, 17/66 (Oct. 1937), 125–9. Reprinted in Volume 10.

H., C. D., 'Language and Meaning', *Cambridge Review*, 59/1437 (29 Oct. 1937), 54–5.

Hampshire, S. N., 'The Method of Mr Richards', *London Mercury*, 36/211 (1937), 89–90.

Leavis, F. R., 'Advanced Verbal Education', *Scrutiny*, 6/2 (Sep. 1937), 211–17. Reprinted in Volume 10.

Lyons, C. P., 'Reviews', *Modern Language Notes*, 54/3 (1939), 213–15.

Middleton Murry, John [Unsigned], 'Literature as Discipline: More about the Meaning of Meaning', *Times Literary Supplement*, 36/1834 (27 Mar. 1937), 237.

Sisson, E. O., 'Reviews', *Modern Language Review*, 33 (Apr. 1938), 293–4.

Troy, William, 'New Rhetoric for Old', *Nation* 143/26 (26 Dec. 1936), 765–6.

Weiss, Paul, 'A Context Theory of Words', *New Republic*, 90/1166 (7 Apr. 1936), 275–6.

Other Discussions

Bilsky, Manuel, 'I. A. Richards' Theory of Metaphor', *Modern Philology*,

50 (1952), 130–7.

Ricoeur, Paul, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, translated by Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1978).

Warren, Austin, 'The Criticism of Meaning and the Meaning of Criticism', *Sewanee Review*, 46/2 (Apr.–June 1938), 213–22. Reprinted in Volume 10.

NOTE ON THE TEXT

The text reprinted here is that of the First Edition, dated 1936 but not in fact published until January 1937.[1] The volume was published by the Oxford University Press in New York, and simultaneously from imported sheets in London. No subsequent editions were revised.

This edition makes a number of changes to the text:

1. In the first edition the epigraph to each lecture appeared on a separate page with its own heading. In this edition it has been placed immediately before the main text of the lecture.

2. In order to improve the clarity of the text on p. 25, where a complicated quotation is laid out in a way which makes it difficult to see what is being quoted from Smart, and what is added by Richards, four words by Richards have been deleted.

3. On page 104, the redundant 'of' at the end of paragraph one has been deleted.

4. The endnote to Lecture Three has been inserted as a footnote in the relevant position.

To facilitate the tracing of references the page numbers of the 1936 edition have been supplied in the margin. All internal cross-references, excluding those in the contents chapter listings, are to these original page numbers.

When originally published *Philosophy of Rhetoric* did not have an index; that given here has been generated for this

edition and the references are to the pagination of the current volume.

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1 IAR to John Marshall, 17 Dec. 1937, Rockefeller Archive Center.

LECTURE ONE

INTRODUCTORY

> Yet beware of being too material, when there is any impediment or obstruction in men's wills; for preoccupation of mind ever requireth preface of speech; like a fomentation to make the enter.
>
> Francis Bacon, 'Of Dispatch'

These lectures are an attempt to revive an old subject. I need to spend no time, I think, in describing the present state of Rhetoric. Today it is the dreariest and least profitable part of the waste that the unfortunate travel through in Freshman English! So low has Rhetoric sunk that we would do better just to dismiss it to Limbo than to trouble ourselves with it – unless we can find reason for believing that it can become a study that will minister successfully to important needs.

As to the needs, there is little room for doubt about them. Rhetoric, I shall urge, should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies. We struggle all our days with misunderstandings, and no apology is required for any study which can prevent or remove them. Of course, inevitably *at present*, we have no measure with which to calculate the extent and degree of our hourly losses in communication. One of the aims of these lectures will be to speculate about some of the measures we should require in attempting such estimates. 'How much and in how many ways may good communication differ from bad?' That is too big and too complex a question to be answered as it stands, but we can at least try to work towards answering some parts of it; and these explanations would be the revived subject of Rhetoric.

Though we cannot measure our losses in communication we can guess at them. We even have professional guessers: teachers and examiners, whose business is to guess at and diagnose the mistakes other people have made in understanding what they have heard and read and to avoid illustrating these mistakes, if they can, themselves. Another man who is in a good position from which to estimate the current losses in communication is an author looking through a batch of reviews, especially an author who has been writing about some such subject as economics, social or political theory, or criticism. It is not very often that such an author must honestly admit that his reviewers – even when they profess to agree with him – have seen his point. That holds, you may say, only of bad writers who have written clumsily or obscurely. But bad writers are commoner than good and play a larger part in bandying notions about in the world.

The moral from this comes home rather heavily on a lecturer addressing an audience on such a tangled subject as Rhetoric. It is little use appealing to the hearer as Berkeley did:

> I do... once for all desire whoever shall think it worth his while to understand... that he would not stick in this or that phrase, or manner of expression, but candidly collect my meaning from the whole sum and tenor of my discourse, and laying aside the words as much as possible, consider the bare notions themselves...

The trouble is that we *can* only 'collect the whole sum and tenor of the discourse' from the words, we cannot 'lay aside the words'; and as to considering 'the bare notions themselves,' well, I shall be considering in a later lecture

various notions of a notion and comparing their merits for a study of communication. Berkeley was fond of talking about these 'bare notions', these 'naked undisguised ideas', and about 'separating from them all that dress and encumbrance of words'. But an idea or a notion, when unencumbered and undisguised, is no easier to get hold of than one of those oiled and naked thieves who infest the railway carriages of India. Indeed an idea, or a notion, like the physicist's ultimate particles and rays, is only known by what it does. Apart from its dress or other signs it is not identifiable. Berkeley himself, of course, has his doubts: 'laying aside the words as much as possible, consider...'. That 'as much as possible' is not very much; and is not nearly enough for the purposes for which Berkeley hoped to trust it.

We have instead to consider much more closely how words work in discourse. But before plunging into some of the less whelming divisions of this world-swallowing enquiry, let me glance back for a few minutes at the traditional treatment of the subject; much might be learnt from it that would help us. It begins, of course, with Aristotle, and may perhaps be said to end with Archbishop Whately, who wrote a treatise on Rhetoric for the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana* that Coleridge planned. I may remark, in passing, that Coleridge's own *Essay on Method*, the preface to that Encyclopaedia, has itself more bearing on a possible future for Rhetoric than anything I know of in the official literature.

Whately was a prolific writer, but he is most often remembered now perhaps for an epigram. 'Woman', he said, 'is an irrational animal which pokes the fire from the top'. I am not quoting this, here at Bryn Mawr, to prejudice you against the Archbishop: any man, when provoked, might venture such an unwarrantable and imperceptive

generalization. But I do hope to prejudice you further against his modes of treating a subject in which he is, according to no less an authority than Jebb, the best modern writer. Whately has another epigram which touches the very heart of our problem, and may be found either comforting or full of wicked possibilities as you please: here it is. 'Preachers nobly aim at nothing at all and hit it!' We may well wonder just what the Archbishop meant by that.

What we have to surmise is how Whately, following and summing up the whole history of the subject, can proceed as he did! I He says quite truly that 'Rhetoric is not one of those branches of study in which we can trace with interest a progressive improvement from age to age'; he goes on to discuss 'whether Rhetoric be worth any diligent cultivation' and to decide, rather half-heartedly, that it is – provided it be taken not as *an* Art of discourse but as *the* Art – that is to say, as a philosophic discipline aiming at a mastery of the fundamental laws of the use of language, not just a set of dodges that will be found to work sometimes. That claim – that Rhetoric must go deep, must take a broad philosophical view of the principles of the Art – is the climax of his Introduction; and yet in the treatise that follows nothing of the sort is attempted, nor is it in any other treatise that I know of. What we are given by Whately instead is a very ably arranged and discussed collection of prudential Rules about the best sorts of things to say in various argumentative situations, the order in which to bring out your propositions and proofs and examples, at what point it will be most effective to disparage your opponent, how to recommend oneself to the audience, and like matters. As to all of which, it is fair to remark, no one ever learned about them from a treatise who did not know about them already; at the best,

the treatise may be an occasion for realizing that there is skill to be developed in discourse, but it does not and cannot teach the skill. We can turn on the whole endeavour the words in which the Archbishop derides his arch-enemy Jeremy Bentham_ 'the proposed plan for the ready exposure of each argument resembles that by which children are deluded, of catching a bird by laying salt on its tail; the existing doubts and difficulties of debate being no greater than, on the proposed system, would be found in determining what Arguments were or were not to be classified' in which places in the system.

Why has this happened? It has happened all through the history of the subject, and I choose Whately because he represents an inherent tendency in its study. When he proceeds from these large-scale questions of the Ordonnance of arguments to the minute particulars of discourse – under the rubric of Style – the same thing happens. Instead of a philosophic enquiry into how words work in discourse, we get the usual postcard's-worth of crude common sense: be clear, yet don't be dry; be vivacious, use metaphors when they will be understood not otherwise; respect usage; don't be long-winded, on the other hand don't be gaspy; avoid ambiguity; prefer the energetic to the elegant; preserve unity and coherence... I need not go over to the other side of the postcard. We all know well enough the maxims that can be extracted by patient readers out of these agglomerations and how helpful we have all found them!

What is wrong with these too familiar attempts to discuss the working of words? How words work is a matter about which every user of language is, of necessity, avidly curious until these trivialities choke the flow of interest. Remembering Whately's recommendation of metaphor, I can

put the mistake best perhaps by saying that all they do is to poke the fire from the top. Instead of tackling, in earnest, the problem of how language works at all, they assume that nothing relevant is to be learnt about it; and that the problem is merely one of disposing the given and unquestioned powers of words to the best advantage. Instead of ventilating by enquiry the sources of the whole action of words, they merely play with generalizations about their effects, generalizations that are uninstructive and unimproving unless we go, more deeply and by another route into these grounds. Their conception of the study of language, in brief, is frustratingly distant or macroscopic and yields no return in understanding – either practical or theoretical – unless it is supplemented by an intimate or microscopic enquiry which endeavours to look into the structure of the meanings with which discourse is composed, not merely into the effects ofvarious large-scale disposals of these meanings. In this Rhetoricians may remind us of the Alchemists' efforts to transmute common substances into precious metals, vain efforts because they were not able to take account of the internal structures of the so-called elements.

The comparison that I am using here is one which a modern writer on language can hardly avoid. To account for understanding and misunderstanding, to study the efficiency of language and its conditions, we have to renounce, for a while, the view that words just have their meanings and that what a discourse does is to be explained as a composition of these meanings – as a wall can be represented as a composition of its bricks. We have to shift the focus of our analysis and attempt a deeper and more minute grasp and try to take account of the structures of the smallest discussable units of meaning and the ways in which these vary as they are

put with other units. Bricks, for all practical purposes, hardly mind what other things they are put with. Meanings mind intensely – more indeed than any other sorts of things. It is the peculiarity of meanings that they do so mind their company; that is in part what we mean by calling them meanings! In themselves they are nothing – figments, abstractions, unreal things that we invent, if you like – but we invent them for a purpose. They help us to avoid taking account of the peculiar way in which any part of a discourse, in the last resort, does what it does only because the other parts of the surrounding, uttered or unuttered, discourse and its conditions are what they are. 'In the last resort' – the last resort here is mercifully a long way off and very deep down. Short of it we are aware of certain stabilities which hide from us this universal relativity or, better, interdependence of meanings. Some words and sentences still more, do seem to mean what they mean absolutely and unconditionally. This is because the conditions governing their meanings are so constant that we can disregard them. So the weight of a cubic centimeter of water seems a fixed and absolute thing because of the constancy of its governing conditions. In weighing out a pound of tea we can forget about the mass of the earth. And with words which have constant conditions the common-sense view that they have fixed proper meanings, which should be learned and observed is justified. But these words are fewer than we suppose. Most words, as they pass from context to context, change their meanings; and in many different ways. It is their duty and their service to us to do so. Ordinary discourse would suffer ankylosis if they did not, and so far we have no ground for complaint. We are extraordinarily skilful in some fields with these shifts of sense – especially when they are of the kind we recognize officially

as metaphor. But our skill fails; it is patchy and fluctuant; and, when it fails, misunderstanding of others and of ourselves comes in.

A chief cause of misunderstanding, I shall argue later, is the Proper Meaning Superstition. That is, the common belief – encouraged officially by what lingers on in the school manuals as Rhetoric – that a word has a meaning of its own (ideally, only one) independent of and controlling its use and the purpose for which it should be uttered. This superstition is a recognition of a certain kind of stability in the meanings of certain words. It is only a superstition when it forgets (as it commonly does) that the stability of the meaning of a word comes from the constancy of the contexts that give it its meaning. Stability in a word's meaning is not something to be assumed, but always something to be explained. And as we try out explanations, we discover, of course, that – as there are many sorts of constant contexts – there are many sorts of stabilities. The stability of the meaning of a word like *knife*, say, is different from the stability of a word like *mass in* its technical use, and then again both differ from the stabilities of such words, say, as *event, ingression, endurance, recurrence*, or *object*, in the paragraphs of a very distinguished predecessor in this Lectureship. It will have been noticed perhaps that the way I propose to treat meanings has its analogues with Mr Whitehead's treatment of things. But indeed no one to whom Berkeley has mattered will be very confident as to which is which.

I have been suggesting – with my talk of macroscopic and microscopic enquiries – that the theory of language may have something to learn, not much but a little, from the ways in which the physicist envisages stabilities. But much closer analogies are possible with some of the patterns of Biology.

The theory of interpretation is obviously a branch of biology – a branch that has not grown very far or very healthily yet. To remember this may help us to avoid some traditional mistakes – among them the use of bad analogies which tie us up if we take them too seriously. Some of these are notorious; for example, the opposition between form and content, and the almost equivalent opposition between matter and form. These are wretchedly inconvenient metaphors. So is that other which makes language a dress which thought puts on. We shall do better to think of a meaning as though it were a plant that has grown – not a can that has been filled or a lump of clay that has been moulded. These are obvious inadequacies; but, as the history of criticism shows, they have not been avoided, and the perennial efforts of the reflective to amend or surpass them – Croce is the extreme modern example – hardly help.

More insidious and more devastating are the over-simple mechanical analogies which have been brought in under the heading of Associationism in the hope of explaining how language works. And thought as well. The two problems are close together and similar and neither can be discussed profitably apart from the other. But, unless we drastically remake their definitions, and thereby dodge the main problems, Language and Thought are not – need I say? – one and the same. I suppose I must, since the Behaviourists have so loudly averred that Thought is sub-vocal talking. That however is a doctrine I prefer, in these lectures, to attack by implication. 'To discuss it explicitly would take time that can, I think, be spent more fruitfully. I will only say that I hold that any doctrine identifying Thought with *muscular* movement is a self-refutation of the obscrvationalism that prompts it – heroic and fatal. And that an identification of

Thought with an activity of the nervous system is to me an acceptable hypothesis, but too large to have interesting applications. It may be left until more is known about both; when possibly it may be developed to a point at which it might become useful. At present it is still Thought which is most accessible to study and accessible largely through Language. We can all detect a difference in our own minds between thinking of a dog and thinking of a cat. But no neurologist can. Even when no cats or dogs are about and we are doing nothing about them except thinking of them, the difference is plainly perceptible. We can also say 'dog' and think 'cat'.

I must, though, discuss the doctrine of associations briefly, because when we ask ourselves about how words mean, some theory about trains of associated ideas or accompanying images is certain to occur to us as an answer. And until we see how little distance these theories take us they are frustrating. We all know the outline of these theories: we learn what the word 'cat' means by seeing a cat; at the same time that we hear the word 'cat' and thus a link is formed between the sight and the sound. Next time we hear the word 'cat' an image of a cat (a visual image, let us say) arises in the mind, and that is how the word 'cat' means a cat. The obvious objections that come from the differences between cats; from the fact that images of a grey persian asleep and of a tabby stalking are very different, and from some people saying they never have any imagery, must then be taken account of, and the theory grows very complex. Usually, images get relegated to a background and become mere supports to something hard to be precise about – an idea of a cat – which is supposed then to be associated with the word 'cat' much as the image originally was supposed to be associated with it.

This classical theory of meaning has been under heavy fire from many sides for more than a century – from positions as different as those of Coleridge, of Bradley, of Pavlov and of the *gestalt* psychologists. In response it has elaborated itself, calling in the aid of the conditioned-reflex and submitting to the influence of Freud. I do not say that it is incapable, when amended, of supplying us with a workable theory of meaning – in fact, in the next lecture I shall sketch an outline theory of how words mean which has associationism among its obvious ancestors. And here, in saying that simple associationism does not go far enough and is an impediment unless we see this, I am merely reminding you that a clustering of associated images and ideas about a word in the mind does not answer our question: 'How does a word mean?' It only hands it on to them, and the question becomes: 'How does an idea (or an image) mean what it does?' To answer that we have to go outside the mind and enquire into its connections with what are not mental occurrences. Or (if you prefer, instead, to extend the sense of the word 'mind') we have to enquire into connections between events which were left out by the traditional associationism. And in leaving them out they left out the problem.

For our purposes here the important points are two. First, that ordinary, current, undeveloped associationism is ruined by the crude inapposite physical metaphor of impressions stamped on the mind (the image of the cat stamped by the cat), impressions then linked and combined in clusters like atoms in molecules. That metaphor gives us no useful account either of perception or of reflection, and we shall not be able to think into or think out any of the interesting problems of Rhetoric unless we improve it.

Secondly the appeal to *imagery* as constituting the meaning

of an utterance has, in fact, frustrated a large part of the great efforts that have been made by very able people ever since the seventeenth century to put Rhetoric back into the important place it deserves among our studies. Let me give you an example. Here is Lord Karnes – who, as a Judge of the Court of Session in Scotland, was not without a reputation for shrewdness – being, I believe, really remarkably silly.

In *Henry V* (Act IV, scene I) Williams in a fume says this of what 'a poor and private displeasure can do against a monarch': 'You may as well go about to turn the sun to ice with fanning in his face with a peacock's feather.' Lord Karnes comments, The peacock's feather, not to mention the beauty of the object, completes the image: an accurate image cannot be formed of that fanciful operation without conceiving a particular feather; and one is at a loss when this is neglected in the description'. *(Elements of Criticism*, p. 372.)

That shows, I think, what the imagery obsession can do to a reader. Who in the world, apart from a theory, would be 'at a loss' unless the sort of feather we are to fan the sun's face with is specified? If we cared to be sillier than our author, we could pursue him on his theory, by asking whether it is to be a long or a short feather or whether the sun is at its height or setting? The whole theory that the point of Shakespeare's specification is to 'complete the image', in Kames' sense, is utterly mistaken and misleading. What *peacock* does, in the context there, is obviously to bring in considerations that heighten the idleness, the vanity, in Williams' eyes, of 'poor and private displeasures against a monarch'. A peacock's feather is something one might flatter oneself with. Henry has said that if the King lets himself be ransomed he will never trust his word after. And Williams is saying, 'You'll never trust his word after! What's that! Plume yourself upon

it as much as you like, but what will that do to the king!'

Lord Kames in 1761, blandly enjoying the beauty and completeness of the lively and distinct and accurate image of the feather he has produced for himself, and thereby missing, it seems, the whole tenor of the passage, is a spectacle worth some attention.

I shall be returning to Lord Kames, in a later lecture, when I discuss metaphor. His theories about trains of ideas and images are typical eighteenth-century Associationism – the Associationism of which David Hartley is the great prophet – and the applications of these theories in the detail of Rhetoric are their own refutation. We have to go beyond these theories, but however mistaken they may be, or however absurd their outcome may sometimes seem, we must not forget that they are beginnings, first steps in a great and novel venture, the attempt to explain in detail how language works and with it to improve communication. As such, these attempts merit the most discerning and the most sympathetic eye that we can turn upon them. Indeed, it is impossible to read Hartley, for example, without deep sympathy if we realize what a task it was that he was attempting. Not only when he writes, in his conclusion, in words which speak the thoughts of every candid enquirer:

> This is by no means a full or satisfactory Account of the Ideas which adhere to words by Association. For the Author perceives himself to be still a mere novice in these speculations; and it is difficult to explain Words to the Bottom by Words; perhaps impossible.
>
> *On Man, p. 277.*

But still more when he says: