

## The Thing in Itself

93 A traditional metaphor which goes back in our tradition to Aristotle holds that style is a kind of afterthought or nonessential wrapping around a core of honest content. Many of us have a puritanical suspicion of the *insincerity* of "pure style" (cf. Sontag 1966b: 16), a skepticism which is reflected in the folk etymologizing that we engage in when contrasting pairs of words like the following:

form	formalism
style	stylization
affect	affectation
religion	religiosity
art	artifice, artiness
method	methodology
legal	legalistic

The words in the second column consist of a root (the word in the first column) plus some derivational suffix. In one case (methodology), the seven-dollar word is absolutely synonymous with the root, and the suffix adds absolutely nothing but pomp. In each of the others, the seven-dollar word has an additional pejorative meaning, one that is contributed by the suffix alone. Each of these words would require an essay considerably longer than a dictionary definition to elucidate, but the common pejorative meaning seems to me to be "fraudulent *fake*." For example, affectation is the display of fake emotions; to be legalistic is to engage in pointless and mean-spirited adherence to the outward conventions of the law; religiosity is the expression of the outward con-

ventions of religion without any true religious feeling; the other examples are comparable.

The language in these cases is an icon of a widespread attitude toward style as ostentatious and useless dandyism—away with the wrapping and the fakery! (I share this attitude, incidentally, being violently allergic to the word "methodology.")

In this chapter, I want to explore three expressions of this bluff and puritanical attitude: the "cult of plain speaking" in America today; efforts to provide an unframed object language in various branches of linguistics; and the drive to get behind the formal façade and interpret works of art.

### 7.1. (The Cult of) Plain Speaking

God must have loved poor people, or He wouldn't have made so many of them.  
(Abraham Lincoln)

Let your yea be yea, and your nay be nay. (Jimmy Cliff)

A recurrent specter—that of wimpdom—is haunting the yuppie men of the United States today. (Since this is my group, I will use the first person in alluding to them from now on.) Not only do we fear that we are the spiritual clones of Caspar Milquetoast, Dagwood Bumstead, Walter Mitty, or Woody Allen and yearn to be real men, but we also believe in the moral superiority of the oppressed (cf. Russell 1950) and of poor people in general. We think of "real" (folksy, unsophisticated) *people* as more spontaneous and more natural (as Flaubert put it, "dans le vrai") and above all we think of "real" *men* as more virile than members of the etiolated and decadent "croissant crowd" that we belong to.

Camp Sharparoon was a camp for youths from inner-city New York, who were popularly known at the time as "disadvantaged," which meant they knew a LOT more about sex than I did. I was in charge of a group of 12- and 13-year-old boys, and when they'd get to talking about sex, I, the counsellor, the Voice of Maturity, the Father Figure for these Troubled Children, would listen intently, occasionally contributing helpful words of guidance, such as: "Really?" And: "Gosh!" There were times when I would have given my left arm to be a disadvantaged youth. (Barry 1988:281-2)

Two strands can be distinguished in this cult of the commoner: a somewhat affected egalitarian reverence for the unaffected wisdom of "real people" in general and a much more heartfelt, frankly sexual envy of strong, silent "real men" in particular (cf. Feirstein 1982). Sometimes one of these strands or another clearly predominates, and the two notions can, of course, be mutually contradictory. (Nietzsche's "blond beast," although a real man, is a natural aristocrat.) However, they are also so deeply intertwined that trying to keep them separate is sometimes impossible.

The cult extends to a kind of adulation of the unaffected vigor of the one-syllable words in which "real people" express themselves, and this cult of plain

speaking (CPS) will be my subject here. I hope, first, to demonstrate that the ideology, although not ubiquitous, is nevertheless not restricted to the white-collar elite of the United States today. And then I would like to present some of the reasons why I believe that it is a cultural construct and, like all such constructs, fundamentally artificial.

### 7.1.1. The Spread of the Cult

That the worship of "real men" is at least a reality is easily demonstrated by reference to the stereotyped figure of the action hero and its exploitation in recent American films from *The Godfather* to *The Last Action Hero*. Or we could point to the phenomenal (and deserved) success of Bruce Feirstein's witty ethnography of the white-collar male psyche, *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*, or countless articles in magazines like *Esquire* with titles like "How to Be a Man" which obsess over this preoccupation or recruitment propaganda for the armed forces ("We're looking for a few good men") which exploit it. A particularly subtle manifestation of this cult is the widespread sense among white males that the term "man" is an altogether too grandiloquent and pretentious term for ourselves and the resulting general use of the more humble label "guy" (cf. Barry 1995:1).

The familiar populist worship of "ordinary people," on the other hand, is currently exemplified in the glamorization of doggedly unglamorous "real people" as represented not only by Jeff McNelly's cartoon idealizations of "Pluggers" but also by a spate of contemporary advertising campaigns for beef and beer, virtually incomprehensible in themselves, which can be understood as an extremely sophisticated reaction against the glitz of the star system, with its extreme glorification of impossibly affectless, sophisticated, hip, and glamorous models or the proverbial rich and famous icons of the reel world. *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie*, Garrison Keillor's "Lake Wobegon," Jeff McNelly's *Pluggers*, and country and western music in general may be celebrating the same folksiness, sincerity, and authenticity whose artist laureate a generation ago was Norman Rockwell.

In the United States today, the populist component of the CPS attitude may derive in part from a very strong local tradition of anti-intellectualism in American life in general. This is ably described and analyzed in Richard Hofstadter's book of the same title (1963), as well as in Dwight MacDonald's critique of *Kultur bolshevismus* or "anti-intellectualism for intellectuals" ([1941] 1958). In recent years, the attitude has been exploited in the United States, with differing degrees of success, by midwestern and southern political figures from Harry Truman to George Wallace to Ross Perot, and even effete eastern millionaires like George Bush have attempted to cash in on it (with miserable results, as numerous lampoons by Garry Trudeau in *Doonesbury* made clear [see figure 7.1]).

The essence of the old idea that there is a necessary antithesis between honesty and civility is encapsulated in a memorable interchange in Goethe's *Faust II* (6770-1):

### Doonesbury

BY GARRY TRUDEAU

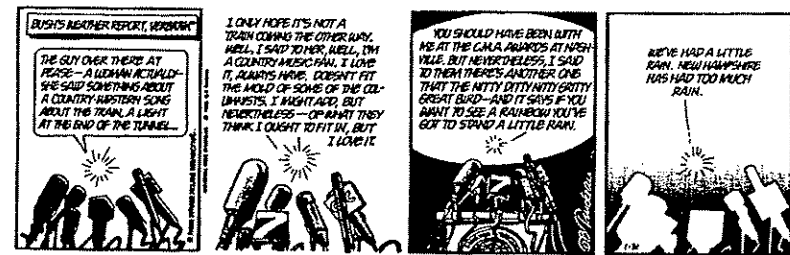


Figure 7.1. *Doonesbury*, by Garry Trudeau. (© G. B. Trudeau; reprinted with permission of Universal Press Syndicate; all rights reserved.)

- Mephistopheles: Du weisst ja nicht, mein Freund, wie grob du bist. (You don't know, my friend, how rude you are.)  
 Bacchalaureus: Im deutschen luegt man, wenn man hoefflich ist. (In German, politeness is lying.)

Although, as this interchange suggests, populism is generally associated with egalitarian and progressive sentiments, it is just as easily appropriated by the right and is quite compatible with the most thuggish *Blut und Boden* know-nothingism. Indeed, in a recent article in *The Nation* (February 17, 1992), Christopher Hitchens was right to draw attention to the "near-perfect symmetry" between Jesse Helms's attacks on the National Endowment for the Arts and Josef Goebbels's attacks on the "incomprehensible and elitist"—and hence, "degenerate"—expressionist art of the 1930s.

More generally, both strands of our current populism may derive from a Western European tradition that is associated with Romantics like William Wordsworth, William Blake, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried von Herder, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the latter's familiar staple of "the noble savage." We encounter this figure (at once a "real person" and a "real man") again and again in canonical Western literature. Often he is explicitly contrasted with narrators like Gustave Flaubert, Franz Kafka, and Thomas Mann, the nerds who regularly present and describe him to us. Isaac Babel, the great twentieth-century Soviet writer, speaks as an inheritor of this tradition in his description of the virile brigand Benya Krik, "the king" of Odessa gangsters:

Forget for a while that you have spectacles on your nose, and autumn in your heart. Leave off raising a ruckus at your writing desk, and being timid in public. Imagine for a moment that you raise a ruckus out in public, and you're timid on paper. You're a tiger, a lion, a cat. You can spend a night with a Russian woman, and leave her satisfied. (Babel 1965: 166)

But our idealization of the language of the salt of the earth and a concomitant revulsion for linguistic artifice and sophistication (as in the passage from *Faust*) is much older than Goethe, Rousseau, or even Shakespeare, whose Marc Antony ("a plain blunt man that love my friend") has given lessons in sophisti-

cated demagoguery to English speakers for nearly 400 years. In fact, it easily goes back within our Graeco-Roman-Judeo-Christian tradition at least to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6), the idealization of the "good shepherds" of Virgil (L. Marx 1964:19), the "Germans" of Tacitus (Russell 1950:58), and a concomitant detestation of Persian effeteness in Horace and continues to the present, where it is represented not only in high but also in popular culture.

In high Anglo-American culture, notable apostles of the cult of plain speaking include Walt Whitman and George Orwell. The first inveighed against all "style" in the introduction to his *Leaves of Grass*: "I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect or originality to hang in the way between me and the rest, like curtains. I will have nothing in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell, I tell precisely for what it is" (cited in Sontag 1966b:16).

In the same tradition is George Orwell, who not only strove to achieve for himself a kind of "prose like a windowpane" (1953d:316) but also excoriated every variety of bombast, cant, and gobbledygook in his famous essay on "Politics and the English Language." The most memorable passage in this masterpiece of invective is Orwell's comparison of the eloquent power and simplicity of plain speech with its translation into officialese:

Here is a well-known verse from *Ecclesiastes*: "I returned and I saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise nor yet riches to men of understanding; but time and chance happeneth to them all."

Here it is in modern English: "Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account." (Orwell 1953c:163)

Orwell's dual attitude (adulation of plain speaking and the noble savages who engage in it coupled with boundless contempt for gobbledygook and its purveyors) also informs Anglo-American anthropological practice since Malinowski and thus provides the moral bedrock which underlies William Labov's eloquent albeit scholarly and impeccably academic partisanship of "the [superior] logic of non-standard English" (Labov 1972a). "Larry," Labov's "paradigmatic" exemplar of a speaker of Black English Vernacular is emphatically a BAD boy, "one of the loudest and roughest members of the Jets, one who gives the least recognition to the conventional rules of politeness," one who "causes trouble in and out of the classroom" (ibid.:214). On the other hand, he "can sum up a complex argument in a few words, and the full force of his opinion comes through without qualification or reservation. He is eminently quotable" (ibid.:215). "He does not wander, or insert meaningless verbiage" (ibid.:216). Here is Labov's fifteen-year-old juvenile delinquent "Larry" on heaven: "An' when they be sayin' if you good, you goin' t' heaven, tha's bullshit, 'cause you ain't goin' to no heaven, 'cause it ain't no heaven for you to go to" (ibid.:215). And on why God is a white man: "Cause the average whitey out here got everything, you dig? And the nigger ain't got shit, y'know? Y'unnerstan'? So—

um—in order for *that* to happen, you know it ain't no black God that's doin' that bullshit" (ibid.:217).

Without laboring the point too much, I would like to suggest that Labov—who sees himself with admirable candor as a "lame" or social wallflower/outcast (ibid.:291)—stands to Larry in something of the same hero-worshipping posture as do the executives in the Norman Dog cartoon shown in figure 7.2. Many a starry-eyed schoolboy has similarly admired the working-class stud he dreams up, dreams of, but despairs of imitating. As the sickly and bespectacled Friedrich Nietzsche (also a linguist) stood to the blond (later also blue-eyed and Aryan) beast he invented in the *Genealogy of Morals*; as Dave Barry stood to the disadvantaged kids of Camp Sharparoon; as the shy bespectacled genius Isaac Babel stood to virile brigands like Benya Krik in his *Odessa Stories* and to beautiful Cossacks like Savitsky in his *Red Cavalry* tales; as Merle Miller stood to Harry Truman in his aptly titled best-selling biography *Plain Speaking*; as Woody Allen stood to his fantasy of Humphrey Bogart in *Play It Again, Sam*; as Leonard Bernstein stood to the Black Panthers in Tom Wolfe's devastating send-up of limousine liberals in *Radical Chic*; and as Bruce Feirstein stood to the ultravirile 225-pound truck driver "Flex Crush" in *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche*—so too, perhaps, does Labov stand to Larry. (And so, of course, do I.)

A more complex example, one in which anti-intellectualism is more clearly identified as a specifically manly or guy virtue and tightly associated with downright sexual hostility, is provided by a recent Ferris-Bueller-at-the-opera Pepsi commercial in which Michael J. Fox as a waggish lowbrow scamp deflates his prissy date by rushing out of the concert hall in mid-aria to grab a Pepsi and winds up as the star of the show. It is probably an only half-conscious and

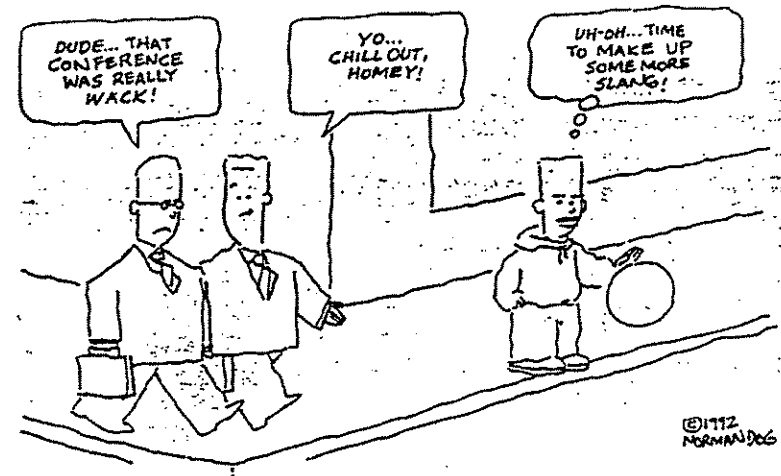


Figure 7.2. Two Executives Get Down, *Norman Dog*. (Reprinted with permission.)

fully unintentional aspect of this brilliant commercial that it resonates with one of the central themes of American literature—Huck Finn's flight from *our* version of the "eternal feminine":

The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal decent and regular the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. (Twain 1960:2)

Unconscious it may be, but there is no mistaking the spiritual kinship of the blithe Michael J. Fox (hoisting his Pepsi to the astonished chorus) with Mark Twain's plain-speaking unlettered Huckleberry Finn or the American identification of the "eternal feminine" with the dessicated and censorious Widow Douglas (covering her face in humiliation). That this is a staple treatment of sexual relationships in a great deal of American literature has been cogently argued by Leslie Fiedler (1960).

Closely allied with this populist tradition, I believe, is our emphatically nonegalitarian obeisance to strong, silent stoics like those portrayed by the likes of Humphrey Bogart, Marlon Brando, Clint Eastwood, Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and countless others, exponents of the tough and laconic "Me Tarzan," "Make my day," "Read my lips" school of understatement. In *The Godfather*, the inarticulate Don Corleone hardly says a word, and when he does, it is clear that the English language—in fact, language in general—is not his natural medium. ("Real men never settle with words what can be accomplished with a flamethrower" [Feirstein 1982:17]). In *The Last Action Hero*, a young boy trapped in Miss Gundy's Shakespeare class fantasizes Schwarzenegger as a cigar-chomping Hamlet who short-circuits most of the boring palaver of the actual play by blowing Claudius away with a Magnum and the memorable words "You killed my father: big mistake."

One-liners consisting of plain, blunt words of one syllable (and often no more than four letters) are prized in this tradition for their pungent eloquence as well as for their honesty. Labov contrasts them with what he derisively calls "OK words" (like "science," "culture," and "intoxicate"), which advertise their mealy-mouthed speakers to be people of the middle class (1972a:220).

It's only one step from the idealization of four-letter words to the worship of total silence and the concomitant disdain for fluency and language in general. Talk is cheap, actions speak louder than words, poetry is for old maid schoolmarms, and real men (action heroes, strong, silent hunks like Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone) either "never settle with words what can be accomplished with a flamethrower" or like Harry Truman are reticent about their inner feelings. Like Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather*, some of them may, if necessary, condescend to *buy* fast-talking (vaguely effeminate, too often typically Jewish) mouthpieces to do their talking for them and to deal with the likes of the IRS, but mere inconsequential chitchat—and this is underlined—is almost beneath their dignity. When talk fails, they say it with acts of memorable violence.

Real men will tolerate the jibberjabber of fluent wordsmiths—lawyers, pundits, spin doctors, poets, speech writers, admen, schoolmarms, journalists, politicians, therapists, highbrow academic nerds (in a word *wimps*)—only with contemptuous reluctance and always view them, if they view them at all, with the thinly veiled disdain which the salt of the earth reserve for "the croissant crowd": gigolos, maître d's, feminist performance artists, and Woody Allen. In the company of such men, it is a badge of virility to flout the rules of grammar of the only language you know; grammaticality (to say nothing of multilingualism) is for sissies. It is interesting to note in this connection the peculiar connotations of things European: "Over in Europe, the comic foreigners are gabbling and gesticulating" (Orwell 1953b:295). Thus Orwell captured the chauvinist mindset of British "Boys' weeklies" in 1939. How unlike the British stoicism of the explorer Stanley, who after finally tracking down the missionary-explorer Dr. Livingstone in the heart of darkest Africa, greeted him with only the immortal one-liner "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?"

"Throughout the depression, the movies [in America] implied that money was poison, that only regular folks knew how to have fun, that the rich and their lackeys seemed faintly European, or worse" (M. C. Miller 1988:205). But to see how this same mindset grips the *male* American imagination today, "imagine" Arnold Schwarzenegger speaking German (which, of course, he does). Imagine Johnny Weissmuller—politely?!—saying not "Me Tarzan, You Jane" but "My name is Tarzan." It spoils the effect. "As a general rule, Real men avoid foreign movies like, well, quiche. . . . 'And besides,' says Flex Crush, 'if the movie really had something important to say, they would have made it in English in the first place'" (Feirstein 1982:25). Let the tightlipped schoolmarms enunciate, let the eggheads simper over their Latin puns, and let the Woody Allens of this world spout their psychobabble; real men avoid the softness of lexical embellishment, to say nothing of foreign languages, like the poisonous taint of effeminacy itself.

However much Americans overtly value the articulate fluency of aristocrats like William F. Buckley, Jr., we also no less overtly (albeit unofficially) worship the eloquence of a laconic aristocracy of brutes. Trudgill (1972) provided a sober and scholarly demonstration of this disparity in his discussion of the phonetics of prestige dialects in Norwich. While women in general aspire to emulate the likes of Henry James and the proverbially asexual arbiters of grammaticality—like Mark Twain's Widow Douglas and James Thurber's schoolmarm Miss Groby (Thurber 1994a)—real men (at least the men of Norwich, England) aspire to imitate the rugged hood, who (as Dave Barry pictured him) dropped out of school and was romancing every girl on the block at about the same age they entered high school, and who now (as Bruce Feirstein pictures him) is a nuclear-waste truck driver. When Bismarck sneered at fluency in foreign languages as a "fine talent for headwaiters" and dismissed parliamentary majorities in favor of blood and iron, he anticipated not only the blond beast of Aryan mythologizing but also our own American versions of this figure; the Marlboro Man, Mike Hammer, and Rambo. (It is worth emphasizing the truism that each of these instantly recognizable stereotypes—cowboy,

hardbitten private eye, and soldier of fortune—is utterly remote from the experience of contemporary Americans, if not totally fictional.)

### 7.1.2. *The Cultural Specificity of the Cult*

To show how constructed our ideologies are, it is enough to compare them with others. To begin with, there is already a difference between the stoicism of Clint Eastwood's personae on the one hand and the British ideal as exemplified by the explorer Stanley and Walter Mitty's fantasies on the other. Both are repressed and clipped, but if Eastwood is a noble savage, Stanley is more the civilized stoic who dresses for dinner in the jungle; his code derives from the playing fields of Eton and does not include four-letter words. So, too, are Walter Mitty's heroes: "Pandemonium broke loose in the courtroom. A woman's scream rose above the bedlam, and suddenly a lovely, dark-haired girl was in Walter Mitty's arms. The District Attorney struck at her savagely. Without rising from his chair, Mitty let the man have it on the point of the chin. 'You miserable cur!'" (Thurber 1994b:50). It is almost impossible to imagine Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger or Feirstein's teamster hero Flex Crush uttering these words. They are, of course, too literary.

Again, the American obeisance to strong, silent Godfathers and urban samurai is overt but unofficial. There is a bit of Ferris Bueller and Huck Finn in Rambo and the Godfather, inasmuch as part of their appeal lies in the fact that—unlike Stanley and the gallant heroes of Walter Mitty—they are unambiguously portrayed as outlaws. Needless to say, hero-worship *could* be enforced both on the playground and in the classroom. Or it could be equally banished from both. Both variations indeed occur.

Among the Wolof of Senegal (as well as other societies in the Western Sahel), Judith Irvine has shown that a laconic and semi-articulate way of speaking (*waxu géér*) is *official*, being associated with *nobles*, while a verbose and fluent style (*waxu gewel*) is associated with *lower-caste* speakers. Like Don Corleone in *The Godfather*, the nobles mumble, stammer, and make mistakes: "Correctness would be an unnecessary frill, an emphasis on fluency of performance or performance for its own sake, which would not be *appropriate*—or perhaps even possible—for these highest nobles" (Irvine 1990:140, emphasis added). The nobility let glib lower-caste griots do their talking for them. The speech of these praise-singers and go-betweens is not only phonetically and syntactically correct to the point of prissiness but also "replete with emphatic devices, parallelisms, and ideophones" (ibid.) and gabbled at a rate of up to 300 syllables a minute (ibid.:137).

Since these mouthpieces are "expressive vehicles" (ibid.:135) and "message bearers" (ibid.:150), their lack of sincerity is axiomatic: "In the Wolof communicative system, the display of affect (or the person who expresses an idea) need not be the same person who possesses it. A griot may display emotion on behalf of a noble, to whom the emotion is attributed, but who sits by impassively" (ibid.). But if laconic mumbling is officially respected, neither is flu-

ency unofficially despised. Apparently, Wolof griots are not treated with the same suspicion and contempt that real (American) men lavish on schoolmarm. The restraint of the nobles and the volubility of the griots are instead compared by Wolof speakers to "a good set of brakes" and "a strong engine," both of which are necessary for a working car (ibid.:153).

Because our cult of plain speaking is so familiar and because parallels and variations like the Anglo and the Wolof traditions are so easy to identify, it is still tempting to see our idealization as an unofficial expression (with admittedly local peculiarities) of a *universal* attitude which the Victorians and the Wolof happen to have ritualized in slightly different ways, but this is clearly not the case. The cult of plain speaking, although widespread, is without congeners in many other places.

To judge from the impressions of students of Javanese, for example (notably Mead, Bateson, C. Geertz, H. Geertz, Siegel, and Wolfowitz), etiquette, elaboration, insincerity, and alienation are seen not at all as the painful burdens of civilization but as the kind of good breeding that everyone aspires to in order to be fully human.

We plain-speaking buffs may despise sententiousness, but "one has arrived, in Javanese, when one has come to enjoy making the obvious comment at the proper time in an appropriate tone" (Keeler 1984:358 apud Wolfowitz 1991:58).

We PSB's regard alienation as a disability, but "this state of weakened emotional investment in one's immediate environment, of self-induced distance and disciplined aloofness from all events in the transient world of men . . . is among the most valued of Javanese feeling patterns, *iklas* (= 'detachment')" (C. Geertz 1960:53 apud Wolfowitz 1991:59).

We may claim to despise playacting and hypocrisy, but "to the Javanese, 'pretence'—*etok-etok*—is without any devaluing connotations and is positively valued as a good way to deal with troublesome situations" (H. Geertz 1961:134 apud Wolfowitz 1991:64).

Psychotherapy aims to liberate *us* from repression, but "It is . . . formal style that embodies the dominant cultural value, 'refinement' (*alus*), a consistent negation of the spontaneous, dramatic, and self-expressive elements in social interaction. Refinement, conventionally framed in opposition to the negative value *kasar* ('coarse, rough, crude') constitutes a cornerstone of Javanese personal philosophy and aesthetics" (Wolfowitz 1991:69). For similar observations on the acceptability of clichés and conversational routines among other groups, see Matisoff (1979) for Yiddish; Tannen and Oztek (1981) and Tannen (1982) for Greek and Turkish; and Coulmas (1981) for Japanese.

Plain speaking exists among the Javanese as well as among every other social group and is normal between siblings and spouses and between young children and other family members. It is characterized as laconic, elliptical, and abruptly intoned "almost as if the activities of speaking, moving, and interpreting constitute a burden to be avoided as far as possible" (Wolfowitz 1991:87). If plain speaking (PS) is a discipline of the playground in the United States and of the classroom in the Sahel, it is banished to the outhouse in Java.

### 7.1.3. The Incoherence of the Cult

Like every ideology, the cult of plain speaking is of interest not nearly so much for what it says about its alleged denotatum, "real men" or the "salt of the earth," as for what it reveals about ourselves, as the people who put it together and subscribe to it. In evaluating the validity of this cult, I will therefore pass over whether or not the blue-collar male happens to be anything like what Dave Barry or Isaac Babel imagine him to be and consider only whether the idealization of plain speaking is logically consistent on purely internal grounds.

I believe that it is logically invalid for two reasons, articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin and Ferdinand de Saussure. The first reason is that the very self-consciousness involved in choosing to employ PS and associating it with its appropriate context clearly marks it as an essentially arbitrary affectation no different from any other consciously chosen mode of behavior. Plain speaking is never plain; it is at best "plain." The second reason is that all language is already artificial, all speaking is unplain by design.

But before I develop these arguments, I should try to defend myself against the reasonable charge that I am flogging a dead horse. Surely in a thoroughly urban culture, worship of muscular brutes like Arnold Schwarzenegger is an anachronism. Indeed, Philip Slater suggests that their spiritual ancestor, the demigod Herakles, was already difficult for an urban people like the ancient Athenians to take altogether seriously for this very reason more than 2,000 years ago (Slater [1968] 1992:339). And surely in American popular culture, where self-reference, irony, and satire are virtually the mother tongue of everybody with a TV set, where every naive ideal exists virtually only as its caricatured representation in parody, there is no need to belabor such an unresisting imbecility as the superior virtue of the salt of the earth. Hasn't the destruction of the cult been consummated by experts already?

I would say that the answer is, surprisingly, no. To be sure, the cult of PS does figure in a very large number of satirical treatments by writers, filmmakers, and cartoonists—from James Thurber's "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" to Woody Allen's *Play It Again, Sam*, from Norman Dog to Garry Trudeau—but when we look closely at these works, it is clear that what the satirist derides is always the nerd and never the validity of his dream of masculinity.

Bush is pathetic when he tries to talk country and western or use four-letter words. So are the two executives portrayed by Norman Dog, trying to talk Black English Vernacular. But country and western and BEV are still the language of real men. Walter Mitty is immortally pathetic in his daydreams of tightlipped manly valor, but what makes Thurber's story an enduring tragedy is the achieving *reality* of the gap between Mitty's dream and the henpecked hubby that he is. And we can say the same of Woody Allen's persona contrasted with his vision of "Humphrey Bogart" in *Play It Again, Sam*.

With all our cynicism and hipness, the cult of PS is one of the very few things we (white-collar American males) seem to believe sincerely. Dagwood Bumstead, Woody Allen, Walter Mitty, George Bush, and all of the other wannabe heroes are clearly absurd. The actual action heroes are not; to the

Greeks, Herakles may have been portrayed as "a good-natured oaf" (Slater [1968] 1992), but his spiritual descendants, the hard-bitten types portrayed by countless actors from John Wayne to Bruce Willis, are not. They have not been demolished or at least not in any readily accessible or familiar work that I am aware of. And it is in the absence of such demolition that I offer the following remarks.

#### 7.1.3.1. BAKHTIN'S REJOINDER

Some modes of speaking may be thought of as masks which disguise the speaker's true self; politeness and irony come to mind, as do affectations and playacting in general. We owe to Bakhtin a profound rhetorical question: What makes us so sure that there is any mode of speech which is truly a "face" and not just another "mask"? In particular, what makes us think that the brutal laconic style of the Godfathers of this world is not a freely chosen mask?

In fact, if we consider the strong, silent actors on our own cultural stage, it is apparent that the plain speech they utter (and which we so idealize) may be no less of an affectation than Japanese *enryo* "refinement," Japanese *enryo* "reserve," or the most florid operatic performance. I have already suggested that the fictional Godfather embodies the virtues of the Wolof nobility. What about the genuine article? Here is Norman Lewis discoursing on the original Godfather, Don Calogero Vizzini, and the Sicilian cult of *omertà* which he so perfectly embodied:

Don Calo never confused the shadow with the substance of power, and saw no reason why he should ever be compelled to speak an emasculated Italian rather than the vigorous local dialect. . . . He remained an illiterate all his life, a state of affairs from which he seemed to derive positive satisfaction. (Lewis [1964] 1984:46)

Always laconic—indeed almost incomprehensible to the barons and politicians (with whom he divided up postwar Italy), patricians who spoke standard Italian (ibid.:113)—Don Calo achieved a tremendous charisma at least in part by virtue of his silence:

The Johnsonian pithiness of his rare but massive utterances, the majestic finality of his opinions, appealed to the human search for leadership. Even men of education and intellectuals admitted their susceptibility to a strange power of attraction not uncommonly possessed by a capo-mafia. (ibid.:21)

Up to this point, Lewis might well be lavishing on the Sicilian Mafioso the same almost familiar respect that Labov showered on his paradigmatic inner-city badass teen, Larry.

Yet Lewis matter-of-factly speaks of Don Calogero's brevity and peasant earthiness as on a par with his slovenly dress—"typical Mafia *affectations*" (ibid.:21) which are resolutely cultivated: "It was not done for a Mafia chieftain to show off in the matter of his clothing or any other way, and sometimes, in Don Calo's case, this lack of concern for appearances was carried to extremes" (ibid.:21). Most interesting, Lewis regards Don Calogero's "schlump

chic" (the term is from Suzanne Fleischman) as akin to a stoical *suppression* of the self: "The mafioso . . . developed a kind of self-control closely resembling that quality known as *giri* [constraint] by the Japanese, and so much admired by them. A true man of honour never weakened his position or armed his enemy in advance by outbursts of passion or of fear" (ibid.:30).

At this point, we may turn to a famous Japanese exemplar of plain speaking, the poet-priest Ryōkan (1758–1831), whose *Kaigo* (Prohibitions) is a collection of aphorisms concerning daily conversation. Among the things prohibited are: "an excess of words; glibness; speaking pretentiously; saying things in a kindly seeming manner; speech reeking of the scholar; speech reeking of elegance; speech reeking of Zen enlightenment; speech reeking of the tea master." In all things, words should be spoken with sincerity (Doi 1986:118–20). In other words, Ryōkan's advice is: "*cultivate* simplicity and sincerity. It is very hard to do, and there are countless pitfalls to be avoided in the dedicated and conscious pursuit of it. That is why it is so rare. Incidentally, that is why I have written the *Kaigo*."

We have come all the way back from the artifice of *enryo* "self-control,"<sup>1</sup> via plain speaking, to *giri* "constraint, obligation."<sup>2</sup> But we have never left artifice behind.

And this same paradoxical juxtaposition of plain speaking with a stiff (Anglo-Japanese) upper lip occurs in Merle Miller's heroic plugger Harry Truman. On the one hand, he "spoke his mind": "Harry's words were never fancy, but they were never obscure either. You never had to try to figure out what Harry was up to; he told you what he was up to. . . . There was not a duplicitous bone in his body. He was without guile" (1973:15). But on the other hand, he was what we would call emotionally repressed to the point of practicing Japanese *alus*:

Did he weep? Did he curse the fates? Did he shake his fist at the thunder? If he ever did, he did it in private. Lincoln was an outwardly melancholy man; Harry Truman was not. His melancholy, if any, was all buttoned up inside him. He never, to use a phrase several of his contemporaries used in describing him, wore his heart on his sleeve. How are you? I'm fine. And you? (ibid.:29)

Needless to say, Merle Miller, Truman's admiring biographer, finds both his salty language and his stoicism equally and totally admirable. But whatever else we can say or think, speaking your mind ("he *told* you what he was up to") and being buttoned up ("he did it in private") are clearly mutually contradictory. That the fact does not occur to Miller suggests that the virtue he worships is laconic machismo, not unbuttoned sincerity, and most emphatically, not the unrestrained self-revelation of psychobabble, the histrionics of which Miller possibly regards with as much contempt as Woody Allen's "Humphrey Bogart" did or as Bismarck regarded the fluency of waiters.

According to Doi, this suppression of the self—classic *enryo*—is also at the very heart of the Japanese sage Ryōkan's charm. He never spoke about himself (Doi 1986:119), thus possessing one of the "essential qualities of the human being who has charm: an interior life that is indiscernible from the outside" (ibid.:120). But what is this if not an image?

Being a man (and it is always a man; we are dealing with another gender-based affectation here) of few pithy words is an artificial achievement: the noble savage achieves stoical nobility by the calculated suppression of self.

I would go further and contend against the extreme relativism of anthropologists like Michelle Rosaldo, Alessandro Duranti, and Kenneth Read (who claim to have rediscovered the noble savage living free and speaking from the heart among the Ilongot of the Philippines, the natives of Samoa, and the Gahuku-Gama of New Guinea) that the concept of artifice and etiquette is already implicit in the very notion of obligation itself. A human society in which there is never any tension between what one wants and what one does seems entirely unimaginable to me (although it may well be that "lighting out for the territory" with Huck Finn or the Marlboro Man represents a fantasy of total freedom from this constraint to the American viewer).

#### 7.1.3.2. THE CULT AS A REACTION

Even a cursory reading of Feirstein (1982) will clearly show that the cult of real men (and its linguistic aspect) is not only the product of an identity crisis but also a reaction to gobbledygook (29), glamor (15, 32), high culture (25), political correctness (13), psychobabble (28), cosmopolitan sophistication (21), every kind of fakery (30), gimmickry (10, 14), the Industrial Revolution and automation (13), the decline of the American Empire (10), and finally language itself (17). How sincere and genuine can any such an anxious and self-conscious revivalism be which defines itself by reference to a disjointed list of the things it is trying to avoid?

The Canadian psychoanalyst George Zavitzianos (1972) discovered a new perversion which he called *homeovestism*: "dressing up in the clothes of the same-sex person." Naturally, the behavior is more difficult to detect than transvestism, since it is an imitation or an exaggeration of what society normally expects. What distinguishes it from the normal behavior of just plain getting dressed (the existence of which is, of course, increasingly problematic) is that it is engaged in self-consciously by people who assert most vehemently what they feel most insecure about. Plain speaking may be an example in language of what Zavitzianos claimed to have discovered in dress: the perversion of what might be called "homeo-phemism," dressing up our speech "normally."

The American advent of the postmodern age of hip quotation was perhaps recorded by Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" of 1966, but there are plenty of signals that we have had a surfeit of cynicism and glitz and that the sensibility of the 1990s is reverting to the sincerity and authenticity of an earlier time. Our cult of plain speaking, like our fondness for "real people" and "real men," may be an expression of this sensibility.

*Advertising Age* named Ross Perot—artist of the clunky pie charts and the schoolmaster's pointer—"Adman of the Year 1992." The *Utne Reader*, in a feature story on postmodernism, calls for a return to "the good, the true, and the beautiful." Garrison Keillor made the heartland fashionable among the yuppies who read the *New Yorker* with his tales of smalltown life in Lake



Wobegon. Bob Garfield, the Pauline Kael of *Advertising Age*, excoriates a recent Doritos commercial for doing exactly what commercials have been doing for at least the last ten years—minding their own business and entertaining through self-referential jokes. “Why don’t they tell us how good Doritos taste?” he complains. Real (doggedly unglamorous) people are everywhere, endorsing beef and beer. This is to say nothing of Ronald Reagan, who campaigned “as the incarnation of the cleancut simple values of small-town America” (Anderson 1990:165).

It is a commonplace among academic students of popular culture (cf. L. Marx 1964; Ewen 1988; Anderson 1990:245) that an escapist nostalgia for a mythical pastoral innocence is if not “profoundly reactionary” at least allied with a profound acquaintance with and dislike of the present and a fear of the future. And I think that the popularity of Lake Wobegon and the trendiness of bib overalls are connected with a sentimental restoration of the world of Norman Rockwell in reaction against brittle sophistication, phony glamor, and the irony epidemic of the present.

By the same token, our adulation of “real men” may be a long overdue consequence the Industrial Revolution, which has by now removed the *raison d’être* for traditional masculinity by making physical differences between the sexes totally irrelevant for almost every kind of work. Mechanization has emancipated gender roles from biological sex and, incidentally, made men as a gender largely superfluous in peacetime.

But failing an epidemic of amnesia or another good war, no restoration of the past can be genuine because we are only too aware of the intervening decades we have lived through. Maybe Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon is a replay of *Oklahoma!* But it is for us emphatically a replay, a parody which is enriched for being framed in heavy quotation marks. Lake Wobegon is to *Oklahoma!* (I would suggest) as Ronald Reagan was to the “straw-hatted, wisecracking, but hardworking, white, Protestant, and middle-class America[n] of the Norman Rockwell paintings” (Anderson 1990:165), as Marie Antoinette was to what she conceived to be a real milkmaid, or as Pierre Menard’s *Quixote* is to Cervantes’s in Borges’s magnificent parable—“verbally identical,” perhaps, but “infinitely richer.” In the same way, the supermen of the action movies are only parodies of Hercules. There can be no restoration of the past, not because the past never existed as we imagine it to have been (an irrelevant issue) but because we know it is a restoration.

So when we speak of hick, we mean “hick,” when we speak of real people, we mean “real people,” and when we speak of real men, we mean “real men,” whose muscles come from working out on the Nautilus rather than pitching bales of hay. However much passion we throw between our quotation marks, they are still emphatically framing everything we say, and quotation, of course, is a large part of what camp and hipness and un-plain speaking are all about in the first place.

#### 7.1.3.3. SAUSSURE’S REJOINDER

Obligation and artifice are implicit in the act of quotation, as in all acts of repetition. But they are equally implicit in the very idea of a language as a system

of signs. By this definition, all languages, however simple, offer their speakers the means to lie, and all speakers, no matter how disfluent, do so. If it’s true, guaranteed power, sincerity, and spontaneity we’re after, we can no more find them in familial speech among the Javanese, the disfluencies of Wolof nobility, the mumblings of Don Corleone, Larry’s raps on God, Dirty Harry’s one-liners, the aphorisms of Ryookan, or the wit and wisdom of Harry Truman than in the sayings of Joe Isuzu, Vladimir Nabokov, or Jacques Derrida. Nor can we find them in true confessions, whether these are addressed to one’s priest or one’s therapist. We can only find them in *symptomatic communication*: prelinguistic cries, moans, and grunts. Compared to these, all talk—even the “clear and effective” and “eminently quotable” speech of Labov’s paradigm speakers of Black English Vernacular—is cheap or at least an affectation.

Speakers using language in general are *eo ipso* alienated from the emotions they describe. Once they control them sufficiently to use language, they are not merely expressing them but also describing them; no longer merely, or even primarily, participants, they have become observers and exorcists of their emotional turmoil. And this is true no matter how much sincerity they speak with. Not for nothing is displacement listed as one of the design features of human language.

In noting that “on eut dit que son sentiment s’en allait avec ses paroles,” Gide echoed an oft-repeated insight (1966:66). In fact, it is the central idea of psychotherapeutic catharsis:

The so-called fundamental rule of psychoanalysis—namely, that the patient *must* free associate—also springs from an earlier procedure. Josef Breuer discovered the etiology of hysteria and its cure by listening to the verbal productions of a young woman. He and Freud called this the “cathartic method” to designate the idea that the cure consists of a kind of “cleaning out” of traumatic memories. These noxa, conceived on the analogy of pus, are drained, not through the sinuses in the skin, but through words issuing from the patient’s mouth. (Szasz 1965:34; cf. Storr 1990:26–7)

But the idea of getting some distance from your emotions by expressing them is older than this “discovery”:

In part it is the nature of Javanese that its speakers can practice the emotional detachment (*iklas*) they so much value by speaking of things in order to avoid being possessed by them. Thus, Javanese dislike being surprised, and consequently they exclaim *lho* indicating they are surprised, in order to avoid feeling it. (Siegel 1986:27 apud Wolfowitz 1991:60)

But there is a further way in which language differs from the simple catharsis of a scream or any other prelinguistic cry. Rather than external signs which the speaker chooses, uses, and searches among for the “*mot juste*” or the best “costume” in a kind of verbal dress-up game, autistic prelinguistic cries are internal signs which emanate from the speaker involuntarily. They are “literally expressive” (Fonagy 1971b:170) or “presentative” rather than re-presentative (Bolinger 1985:98) signals. Only in the case of expressive language can we assert that “what I do is me” and nothing else.



Expressions are not a sign of anything in the world other than the speaker's state. This is similar to the much-diluted claim made by Searle (1979) in his taxonomy of speech acts: expressive illocutionary acts neither fit the external world nor attempt to make the external world fit them. Searle's expressions, however, include linguistic expressions like "Congratulations!", all of which are capable of being uttered insincerely. I use the term "expression" only for involuntary symptoms.

It may be because of its private nature that an expression—even a conventionalized linguistic pseudo-expression—can be directly quoted but resists indirect quotation to varying degrees (cf. Banfield 1982):

1. a) He cried "Yuk!"
- b) \*He cried that Yuk.

The contrast between (1a) and (1b) is, of course, very heavily grammaticalized in English. It is not only expressions but any fragment of discourse other than a conventional proposition which resists being introduced by the complementizer "that":

1. c) \*He said that yes.

Other languages like Spanish allow the equivalent of (1c) but not of (1b); yet others like Russian and Hebrew allow both (1b) and (1c). There may well be a universal hierarchy of complementizability, similar to the famous Keenan-Comrie accessibility hierarchy (Keenan & Comrie 1977), with propositional discourse at the top of the hierarchy (all languages allow complementizers) and ideophones like "Brrrr" and totally nonlinguistic expressions at the bottom (where no languages, or very few, allow complementizers to appear).

The contrast in acceptability between (1a) and (1b) indicates that, conventional grammar to the contrary, direct and indirect quotation are entirely different speech acts. Direct quotation is fundamentally an act of demonstration, mimicry, or playacting; the quoter steps out of character for a moment and pretends to be the person quoted. In this respect, direct quotes have many of the same properties as ideophones, inasmuch as they tend to offer scope for mimicry, are often isolated from the discourse within which they are embedded by a pause, and tend to resist morphophonological sandhi processes including declinability (cf. Childs 1995). Indirect quotation is an act of translation; the quoter translates the utterance of the original speaker into his or her own frame of reference, which may differ from that of the original speaker not only with respect to conventional shifters like tense and deixis but also concerning what these two people think they know about the world. An actor or mimic may put himself or herself in the speaker's place, but nobody can *translate* the speaker's private emotions into his or her own frame of reference.

In fact, expletives like "yuk," of which English has a large number, although they are in fact linguistic signs, are conceived as the expression of auditory gestures which are not linguistic. Such paralinguistic "unmonitored, purely physiological externalizations of an inner state" (Couper-Kuhlen 1986:174),

including whimpers, moans, squeals, laughter, sobbing, yells, sighs, grunts, and hums, are not only available to speakers of all languages but also shared in large part by other animals. "Yuk" is already a language-specific verbalization (compare German "pfui," Russian "fuu," Dakota "xox") of a universal gesture of revulsion, which is only partially (and perhaps accidentally) auditory in expression. There seems to be a yawning chasm between *symptoms* such as screaming with pain, bellowing with rage, or howling with laughter on the one hand and *signs* (even nonindirect quotable "E" signs such as "Ouch," "Damn," or "God!") on the other (cf. Bühler 1934; Goffman 1983; Bolinger 1985). It seems likely to me, however, that the admittedly profound contrast between expression and description, like many other categorical distinctions in languages, could be replaced by some kind of hierarchy of possibilities (cf. Stankiewicz 1964). At its irreducibly animal base are paralinguistic purely expressive and involuntary signs like laughter, sobs, bellows of rage, squeals of pain, and so forth. Higher on the hierarchy are already totally staged and conventionalized epithets like "mmmm," "yuk," "ouch," "aha," "wow," "hurray," "bah," oaths and imprecations, and invocations of the deity. These betray their "expressive" status through their inability to occur as indirect quotations or translations and undoubtedly owe some of their expressive power to their violation of linguistic etiquette and convention at various levels. For example, negative grunts contain the glottal stop, "brrrr," "it's cold" consists of a non-phoneme, and "mmm" violates constraints on canonical syllable structure in English. Oaths like "Fuck!" clearly owe their expressive power to the violation of purely social taboos against mention of the sacred or the polluted. Exclamations like "Jesus H. Christ!," "You idiot!," and "Lucky little Rupert!" are nonpropositional. Even higher in the hierarchy of expressive insincerity are very syntacticized constructions, charades of strong feeling like "—the hell" or "Ce que—," which can occur in utterances containing full propositions, and therefore *can* be indirectly quoted, such as

2. a) What *the hell* are you talking about?
- b) *Ce que* Pierre est intelligent! (Ducrot 1984:186)

It is notable, however, that these are of ambiguous origin. In the following indirect quotation, it is possible that the quoter is reproducing the original speaker's exasperation (in which case [3] is a translation of [2a]) or interpolating his own (in which case [3] is both a translation of and an editorial comment on [2a]):

3. She asked what the hell they were talking about.

Most verbal and most descriptive are thoroughly conventional declarative propositions with their grammatical shoelaces tied like:

4. a) You are a fool.
- b) I am angry.
- c) I am angry at you.
- d) I am proud of you.

- e) I am very angry and impatient.
- f) I think Irma is very lucky.
- g) I think she is an amazing woman.

Or the conventional rendition of (2b):

- 5. Pierre est tres intelligent.

I propose that a speaker negotiating the hierarchy between a gag reflex—"Yuk!," "Gross!," or "That's gross!"—then, is moving between structures meant to convey relatively spontaneous, sincere, and involuntary expression on the one hand and cool, objective, detached, *alienated* description on the other.

Expletives and epithets in English often subsist at different stages of this (ontogenetic and possibly phylogenetic) hierarchy of expressive sincerity. It is notable, for example, that "ouch" and "ow" are on different rungs, the former more conventionalized and therefore less expressive than the latter.

What is involved in the gradual taming of emotive expressions is their conversion from symptoms, which are part of the speaker, to consciously selected signals, which are external to him or her. In expressing their emotions by means of linguistic signs, objects of an alien origin, speakers are alienating themselves from the emotions which they represent in the most iconic fashion possible. (Compare Muecke's observation that "the concept of detachment seems to be implicit in the concept of pretense, since the ironist's ability to pretend attests a degree of control over more immediate responses" [1970:36]).

All humans with conventional language of one kind or another do this. This much alienation and detachment and *enryo* is simply a unique and characteristic part of being human, no matter how plain the language we speak.

## 7.2. Plain Speaking in Linguistics

Throughout this chapter, I have been dealing with an attitude toward language which regards plain speaking not as "neutral" but as heavily steeped in very specific populist and macho virtues. I have therefore postponed discussing arguments presented by commentators like Barthes (1977), Geertz (1960), or Sontag (1966e) against the possibility of such a neutral mode of unmarked "degree zero" discourse in general. I would like to turn to a consideration of this more general topic now.

Plain speaking is an attempt to get back to "the thing in itself": an object stripped of cultural baggage, which a distinguished colleague of mine, describing a distinguished journal of linguistic research, has called "metacrap." While the impossibility of such a pursuit has been a commonplace in philosophy since Kant's distinction between phenomena and noumena in his *Critique of Pure Reason* and in sociology since at least Berger and Luckmann's *Social Construction of Reality*, there are two almost universally accepted constructs in linguistic theory which still subscribe to the fallacy that such a thing not only is possible but also must serve as the indispensable foundation for any linguistic thinking in general. These are the transcription of the International Phonetic

Alphabet (IPA) and Russell's "object language." In the following brief remarks, I cannot treat these subjects with the rigor and thoroughness they deserve. I do hope to show, however, that there are reasons for regarding the IPA as a virtually Platonic abstraction and that there are reasons for regarding the object language, as described by Bertrand Russell, as no more a language than the drooling of Pavlov's dogs. Since the authors of these theories are among the most distinguished members of their disciplines, I do not think that the easily discoverable problems in their formulations can be as easily remedied. Rather, they reflect a fundamental incoherence and impossibility in the very project of getting "back" to "the basics," at least as far as language is concerned.

### 7.2.1. The IPA as the Phonological Thing in Itself

Virtually every student of phonetics and phonology accepts that the phoneme and the distinctive feature are framed language-specific bits of socially constructed and psychological reality. Underlying these, however, there is the physical signal, whose existence is a biological and acoustic reality. This signal is captured on the sound spectrograph. Its written version is the narrow phonetic transcription, which is language-independent. The phoneme /t/ is only a psychological reality of English; the phone [t] is a fact of nature. We learn the phonology of a language through slow acquaintance with its sound pattern. On the other hand, a trained phonetician—like a sound spectrograph—can produce with equal facility and accuracy a phonetic transcription of a text in his or her own language or a text in any totally unknown language (cf. Laver 1994:29). Call this the naive version of the physical reality argument.

No sophisticated linguist believes in the naive version of this argument. All it takes to become a "sophisticated linguist" in this sense is five minutes of experience with a sound spectrograph, during which time the student can learn that there are no acoustic invariants for any single phone and in fact no strong evidence for the reality of a linguistic segment of any sort. Segmentation and the IPA are now universally believed to be abstractions of some kind. Most crudely, the IPA abstracts away from personal qualities in the human voice and aims to record only "linguistic qualities" (Ladefoged 1969). Nevertheless, the prevailing view is that an IPA transcription is somehow *an abstraction of a lower order than a phonemic transcription*, and it is this commonsense view which I wish first to present and then to challenge.

The idea that phones are language-independent and conceptually prior to phonemes (cf. Laver 1994) is most famously associated with the "cardinal vowel" theory of Daniel Jones. (Interestingly, no phonetician has ever proposed producing the same benchmark set of cardinal consonants.) Jones emphasized—almost *boasted*—that the eight cardinal vowels which he proposed (discovered? invented?) are not—any of them—precisely the same as the vowels of any specific language (see, for example, the frontispiece of his *English Pronouncing Dictionary* [(1917) 1946; cf. Catford [1988:138]) and that they were *radically* different from all of the vowels of English (although some of them were by a happy coincidence not too far from some of the vowels of French). They

could only be learned directly from him and, subsequently, from students he had trained, from the students of those students, and so on (cf. Jones 1917 apud Ladefoged 1969:76; 1993:220). Other distinguished phoneticians have stepped back, somewhat uneasily, from this extreme position and maintained that by following instructions and with practice we can all learn the vowels at home (*Principles of the IPA* [1949] 1962:4–5; cf. Catford 1988:133–53), but the IPA account already equivocates between acoustic and articulatory characterizations of these vowels:

Cardinal e, ε, a are selected so that the degrees of *acoustic* separation i - e, e - ε, ε - a, a - α, are approximately equal. Cardinal ɔ, o, u are vowels of the back series continuing the same scale of equal degrees of *acoustic* separation. . . . The *tongue positions* of e and ε are intermediate between those of i and a, and the *tongue positions* of ɔ and o are intermediate between those of α and u. (*Principles of the IPA* 1949:4–5; emphasis added)

A closer reading of Catford's superficially pedantic and pedestrian account reveals that the series can in any case only be constructed by self-contradiction. Between the reference vowels [i] and [α] which are based on the idea of physical limits ([i] is the highest vowel we can make before uttering the glide [j]; [α] is the lowest back vowel we can make before uttering the pharyngeal fricative [ʕ]), the intermediate vowels [e], [ε], and [a] are inserted at "equal articulatory intervals of tongue height" and then the series is continued to [u] through ascending in equal intervals through [ɑ] and [o]. As Catford acknowledges, the points are *neither articulatorily nor acoustically equidistant, the distance between [a] and [α] being greater than that between any two contiguous front or back vowels*. "Partly because of this, it is desirable to learn the front series and the back series as two distinct, though related sets. *This helps to avoid the problem that arises if one is to produce [i - e - ε - a - α] as a single set of equidistant vowels*" (1988:134). But *this* is a practice which he initially identified as the fundamental principle of construction for the Cardinal Vowel Series and then characterized as "an error to avoid" exactly one page further on.

Ladefoged (1969:71) is even more explicit in dispensing with the idea of equal intervals: "It seems that the tongue does not move in a series of even approximately equidistant steps when a set of cardinal vowels is pronounced. . . . [In fact] the tongue has such a different shape for the front and back vowels that it is meaningless to compare." What this means, of course, is that the cardinal vowels cannot be specified in purely articulatory terms. The crucial ingredient in the construction of such a series, *equal intervals of tongue height*, is a chimera.

Nor is there any hope of characterizing these cardinal vowels acoustically by precisely specifying their formants. As Ladefoged notes, even the select group of Jones's first-generation students whom he recorded under Jones's explicit supervision produced acoustically quite different sounds.

So it seems that if we want to learn the cardinal vowels, there is no alternative but to learn them from Jones or one of his students. The central idea of the cardinal vowels, which as a student I was disposed to view as hope-

lessly pedestrian, sort of like the directions for assembling a lawn mower, is actually wildly romantic: "I was taught the Cardinal Vowels by Jones himself, and it was a lengthy and painful process. CV number 1 ([i]) turned out to be the most difficult of all, rather unexpectedly, and it took a long time before Jones was satisfied with my version. I had trouble too with CV number 3" (Abercrombie 1991:40). Kafka could have written a marvellous parable about the incorruptible "language" which Jones's disciples maintained, chanting their mantra, keeping their heroic vigil while empires and their native languages rose and crumbled, resolutely unnoticed, all around them.

The full richness of the lunacy of the IPA becomes apparent when one attempts to use it as a point of reference in learning a foreign language. Here is Catford (1977:177) on French [o]: "The French [o] of *mot* is near CV number 7, but in modern Parisian is slightly centralized. CV 7 has somewhat closer endolabio-endolabial [*sic*] rounding."

Contrast this approach with the practice of any pedagogically naive textbook in a foreign language. Turkish /i/ is like the sound of English "pit" or when long as in "machine" (cf. Lewis 1953: 13). That is, one uses "as reference points, the vowels of a particular dialect of a language known to both teacher and student" (Ladefoged 1993:223). There is no question whom the naive language learner finds more *useful*, but my contention is that the flat-footed approach is also the only one which is theoretically sound. All linguistic phones (including the cardinal vowels) are in fact *inductively arrived at generalizations*: we arrive at [i] and [t] from learning /i/ and /t/ in human languages like French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish, and even English.

And there are no other linguistic sounds. When we learn a new language, we may try very hard to transcribe it in IPA, but what we are writing when we do this honestly and diligently (as we see when we look back after having learned some of the language) is almost totally unusable junk. (To avoid offending my fellow linguists, I should say that this has been my experience as a serious investigator of one language and as someone who has dabbled in a dozen others.) When we first transcribe utterances in a totally unfamiliar language, we are clambering out of one boat (the bilgewater on the bottom being the socially constructed reality of our native language) into another (which contains its own bilge, the socially constructed reality of whatever language we are trying to learn) and spending almost no time in the awful shark-infested abyss of "pure phonetics" in between. Not only is this abyss, I would maintain, unknowable, like Kant's object in itself. I would go further and claim that without the boats tossing on its surface (each with a little bilge inside), it would instantly *cease to exist*. There is an infinite realm of sounds and noises (car revving, dolphin squeals, bird songs, cricket chirping, brooks babbling, and the hum of my PC as I write this, to mention a few), but the phone [a] does not exist except as an abstraction based on "[a]-like sounds" in human languages.

Lest I should seem to be guilty of the effrontery of trying in three pages to debunk the august discipline of phonetics, I should point out that I am merely repeating what most phoneticians more or less casually agree on. See Pike ([1943] 1971:138), Heffner (1964:69–70), MacKay (1987:54), and, finally,

Ladefoged (1993:280), whose closing words in his textbook of phonetics are worth lingering over: "Most phonetic observations are made in terms of a phonological framework. . . . As soon as the data is segmented or described in any way, then phonological considerations are bound to be present." The IPA "thing in itself," it turns out, is a Frankenstein's monster, a compromise, an abstraction based on the *dissecta membra* of the socially constructed and *mutable* realities of different actual languages. The "rigor" of etic objectivity survives as well as it does because like many other kinds of "rigor" (like the distinction between linguistic and encyclopedic knowledge) it is happily ignored in actual practice.

Exactly the same objections could (and should) be leveled against the notion of "mentalese," a "fundamental alphabet of human thoughts," which is but translated into English, Urdu, or Mandarin.

### 7.2.2. The Object Language

Natural languages have a considerable array of lexical and other signs whose referents are language itself. For example, the English word "well" in examples like the following seems to function as a metalinguistic commentary on the inadequacy of the speaker's words (which are nevertheless the best words he or she can come up with) (cf. R. Lakoff 1973):

- a) —What's up?  
—Well, Denise and I have just split.
- b) Well, this is it, I guess.
- c) Real men are, well, realistic.
- d) It strikes us that lately there are a lot of relatively fortunate people who—  
how shall we say this?—well, who seem to have a wee bit of difficulty  
keeping their problems in perspective. (Tom Tomorrow, *This Modern World*)
- e) —Did you or did you not pull the trigger?  
—Well, yes, but—  
—Just answer the question.

"Well" is what appears to be an extreme example of a purely metalinguistic word. Polite language in particular is awash in metalinguistic expressions in which the speaker characterizes not the purported referents of his or her message but rather himself or herself and the message with all appropriate deference to the addressee. In Japanese, Aoki and Okamoto (1988) provide explanations of the following:

- |               |   |
|---------------|---|
| Chotto:       | "I feel small in making this request." (51)   |
| Nee, anoo:    | "Excuse me for intruding on you with this." (58)  |
| Sore ga:      | "It's not easy for me to say this, but . . ."   |
|               | "What I am going to say is probably different from what you<br>hoped or expected to hear from me, but . . ." (83) |
| Maa X:        | "I wouldn't go so far as to say 'X', but . . ." (228)   |
| Saa:          | "I am sorry not to be able to answer your question." (230)  |
| Soo desu nee: | "Well, let me think, I agree with what you say, but . . ." (230)  |

There are more or less adequate equivalents of these in English (albeit less conventionalized ones). But in addition to the familiar hedges and mitigators, there are many more basic-seeming metalinguistic words, including common words like "not." Horn (1985) gives a brilliant description of a contrast between "ordinary" and "metalinguistic" negation, as exemplified by the contrast between

6. a) I am un-happy.
- b) I am not "happy" (I am ecstatic).

The word "not" in (6b) is a characterization of the *mot juste* and thus eminently metalinguistic. The prefix *un-* creates a word which directly describes a state of mind; it is not about language at all. Fundamentally, however, all uses of the word "not" in any kind of assertion are at least metalinguistic, in the sense that they are not about the world at all but about the fit between propositions and the world. This has been accepted for some time.

Russell (1940) pointed out that an enormous number of apparently solid words like "true," "false," "or," and "some" are also metalinguistic words since they are commentaries on sentences rather than descriptions or labels of objects in the world. It is reasonable (and, to avoid the liar paradox, necessary) to keep them out of the most primitive language, the object language, whose existence does not presuppose any other language and wherein words relate only to objects. It is interesting to note that Russell's metaphorical idea of such a language reflected Orwell's ideal of "prose like a windowpane"; in the object language, "the words are transparent" (ibid.:66).

What does this "transparency" mean, exactly? Well, it seems to mean, unfortunately, "not being a language at all," as I will now try to show. To begin with "object words are defined logically as words having meaning in isolation, and psychologically as words which have been learnt without it being necessary to have learnt any other words" (ibid.:62). So far, this is plausible. It is possible to make assertions in the object language, but every assertion that is made in the object language is formally identical to an assertion that is made in the secondary language: "The assertion which is the antithesis of denial belongs in the secondary language; the assertion which belongs in the object language has no antithesis" (ibid.:61). This is curious and suspicious. Mindful, perhaps, of Occam sharpening his razor in the background, Russell proposed minimal contrast pairs like

- a) This is cheese. (assertion)
- b) This IS cheese. (antithesis of "this is not cheese")

Only (a) belongs in the object language, since by asserting (b), we are actually saying "as unpedantically as possible 'the statement 'this is cheese' is true'" (ibid.). And this statement involves the metalinguistic notion of truth. Sentence (a) is somehow about *seeing* (with just the eye, I-am-a-camera style), but sentence (b) is about *judging* (with the mind) (ibid.:72). We are by now much more skeptical of the possibility of being nothing but a camera than Russell was. What

does it mean, exactly, simply to "see"? Can it be expressed in language without an act of judgment? Russell clearly begs the question even more forthrightly when he says: "An object word is a *class* of *similar* noises or utterances such that from habit they have become associated with a *class* of *mutually similar* occurrences" (ibid., emphasis added). Of course, notions like "class" and "similar" are entirely dependent on acts of judgment (and entirely socially conditioned). In using category labels of any sort (and all words are category labels), we are as much reflective and selective of the *mot juste* as when we qualify our utterances with metalinguistic operators like "well."

Indeed, it is clear that Russell is (must be) entirely aware of this problem (which is equally devastating for any variety of behaviorism). It is worth repeating his exposition of the elusive difference between the object language and the formally indistinguishable secondary metalanguage in detail because it harkens back so clearly to the distinction between language and symptomatic signs, which I mentioned in the introduction:

When the dog hears the word ["food"], he behaves very much as he would if you have a plate of food in your hand. . . . If you excite a dog by saying ["Food!"] when there is no [food], your speech belongs to a higher order since it is not caused by the presence of food, but *the dog's understanding belongs to the object language*. A heard word belongs to the object language, when it causes a reaction appropriate to what the word means. . . . Whenever you doubt or reject what you are told, your hearing does not belong to the object language, for in such a case you are lingering on the words, whereas in the object language the words are transparent, i.e., their effects upon your behaviour depend only on what they mean and are, up to a point, identical with the effects that would result from the sensible presence of what they designate. (ibid.:64-6)

For the dog—as for the villagers in Aesop's fable of the boy who cried "Wolf!"—words continue to be transparent until the dog learns that talk is cheap. So much for transparency for the *hearer*. This must be true for the *speaker* of the object language as well: words are transparent as long as they are responses to what they designate. They become *opaque*, part of the secondary language, when they are uttered (or can be uttered) in the absence of "the sensible presence of what they designate." But then what separates "secondary language" from "object language" for Russell is precisely what separates language (with its design feature of displacement) from symptoms. All language, then, is inescapably metalinguistic. The notion of an object language, like that of plain speaking itself, is an oxymoron or perhaps another case of homeophemism—that is to say, a masquerade disguised as normal clothing.

### 7.3. Style and Content in Art

In art, as in language, "cutting out the metacrap" means to get at the "core" meaning beneath the "superficial form" of a work; what it seems to *be* is different from what it *means*. I have tried to show that such a reductionist approach to language is misconceived. As long as signs are signs, they will be character-

ized by exactly this irreducible duality of form (*being*) and content (*meaning*). It would seem that the same irreducible duality is characteristic of the work of art as well.

The last and wisest words "against interpretation" that I have read are not from Susan Sontag's influential essay of that title but from an essay by Dave Barry, which deserves quotation *in extenso*:

I was reading this James Bond book, and right away, I realized that, like most books, it had too many words. The plot was the same one that all James Bond novels have: An evil person tries to blow up the world, but James Bond kills him and his henchmen and makes love to several attractive women. There, that's it: twenty-four words. But the guy who wrote the book took *thousands* of words to say it. . . . And it's not just spy novels. Most books are too long. I remember in college when I had to read *The Brothers Karamazov*. . . . Our literature professor told us that Dostoyevsky wrote *The Brothers Karamazov* to raise the question of whether there is a God. So what I want to know is, why didn't Dostoyevsky just come right out and *ask*? Why didn't he write:

Dear reader:

Is there a God? It sure beats the heck out of me.

Sincerely,

Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Here are some other famous works of literature that could easily be summarized in a few words:

- *Moby Dick*—Don't mess around with large whales, because they symbolize nature and will kill you.
- *A Tale of Two Cities*—French people are crazy.
- Every poem ever written—Poets are extremely sensitive. (Barry 1987:178-9)

Like Susan Sontag, whose famous essay against interpretation preaches against the reductionist folly of "looking for the meaning" of the artwork, Barry points out that when the artistry is purged from the artwork, almost nothing is left. Sontag makes the same point when she notes that to interpret is to impoverish and deplete the world in order to set up a shadow world of "meanings" (1966e:7).

Incredibly, however, Susan Sontag lobbies for another kind of reductionism: "Transparency is the highest most liberating value in art—and in criticism—today. Transparency means experiencing the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are." (ibid.:12). What—again with the transparency and the thing in itself? Haven't we got beyond this with Kant? And isn't Sontag supposed to be campaigning *against* reductionism? She should be, but I think that maybe she has become so engrossed in the campaign against "searching for the core" that she proposes trashing the core itself—in exactly the same way that Whitman, Orwell, and the aficionados of plain speaking proposed trashing the "coating." The "thing in itself" which she invites us to once again appreciate is not the plain speaking core but the coating, the artistry, the metamessage, the outer form.

And in the course of this campaign, she has lost sight of the fundamental fact that, like the linguistic sign, the artwork is also ineluctably dualistic. A

work of art is not a work of nature, like a mountain, a pig, a waterfall, or a virus. These are things in themselves. And here it seems to me that Barry the satirist is a little closer to the truth (if only by omission) than Sontag the philosopher. The message of an artwork may be minimal. Shorn of its artistry, it may seem unbelievably simpleminded. But the artwork does have both an ethical and an aesthetic component, and what distinguishes it from a natural object is the presence of this second dimension. Maybe the "message" of *Moby Dick* is trite, but *there is one*. A sunset or a waterfall has none.

#### 7.4. Conclusion

I have attempted to sketch here the description of a metaphorical attitude toward language and some of its ramifications. The attitude is that language may be plain or fancy. Like architecture, it may be Dorian or Corinthian, Bauhaus or baroque. Like music, it may be plainsong or polyphonic, rap or grand opera. Honesty and sincerity, in all cases, are associated with the first choice—that of simplicity and brevity:

Es trägt Verstand und rechter Sinn  
mit wenig Kunst sich selber vor.  
(Understanding and rightmindedness  
speak for themselves.) (Faust, I:550–1)

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I have also tried to show, however, that the attitude (which, incidentally, I cannot talk myself out of sharing) is not only a homegrown artifact but also fundamentally invalid for two reasons. The first is the postmodernist reason that any mode of behavior—particularly, perhaps, the most simple one—which is freely chosen from a menu, as it were, is chosen with some degree of self-consciousness and is therefore necessarily artificial. (Not for nothing do languages like German etymologically confuse free will [*Willkür*] and arbitrariness [*Willkürlichkeit*].) The second reason is that all language consisting of "mere words" is essentially arbitrary and artificial. At this level of abstraction, Bakhtin and Saussure are saying exactly the same thing. Human language, in fact, may be the quintessential act of homeovestism. What makes us human (and perhaps what makes us appreciate dumb animals so much and invent noble savages) is our sad recognition of the duality of our symbols and therefore of ourselves: what they *mean* is not what they are. And, in the same way, what we *do* is not what we *are*.

#### NOTES

1. Offered food or drink, a guest may take only a little. The host may protest "Don't do *enryo*!" (example from S. Suzuki, personal communication). Hence *enryo* means politeness, suppression of one's inner wants. For a lengthy survey of much of the literature, see Wierzbicka (1991), and see the much fuller explication offered there (ibid.:352).

2. In modern Japan, girls give chocolate to their valentines. Recently, the custom has arisen of giving "*giri* chocolates" to co-workers for whom one has no sentimental feelings (example furnished by S. Suzuki, personal communication). Hence, we may deduce the meanings of etiquette, formality, insincerity. Again, Wierzbicka provides a sensitive survey of the changing definitions of *giri*, culminating in a comprehensive explication (1991:376). From Wierzbicka's careful summary, it seems that Lewis's use of Mafioso *giri* includes a meaning ("obligation to revenge") which is no longer current.