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# Letter and Spirit

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## Letter and Spirit · Ernest Gallo

WHEN WE ARE confronted with a text we are also confronted with this question: In what sense should we take this text? From our experience, it seems impossible for a text both to assert itself and to explain itself beyond all possibility of misunderstanding. A text can make a statement, but experience shows us that readers will understand that statement in many different ways. What the text cannot do is to verify which of those ways is most in accord with its own meaning.

Take the following text as an example:

We have to learn to think in antinomies, constantly bearing in mind that every truth turns into an antinomy if it is thought out to the end.

C. G. Jung

Jung's statement will irritate some: for is it really true that if we carefully examine the statement "These words form a proposition" it will finally turn out to mean that "These words do not form a proposition"? But others will find Jung's statement to be transparently true: "Do not be so literal. Consider not the gross literal accuracy, but the spirit of the statement. Jung is concerned with the fact that any judgment which is *not* merely literal tends to imply its own opposite."

Now, if this last observation is the case, our problem has grown: for instead of merely observing that it is difficult to discern the sense of a text, we must now admit that any text, if it is "thought out to the end," will produce two meanings—at least two meanings—which are exactly the opposite of one another. And that can be distressing.

The spirit; the letter. Surely the answer lies in the space between the two. As everyone knows,

The letter killeth, while the spirit giveth life.

Jung would have us believe that if the letter is examined closely enough, it becomes spirit; and if spirit is examined closely enough, it becomes letter. We could then frame a new dictum,

The spirit killeth, while the letter giveth life.

—which is perhaps something that not everyone knows.

The spirit is the true meaning, the original insight, that underlies the letter, the literal statement. The spirit gives rise to the letter which, however, never quite expresses the spirit.

Now, if words were always effective expressions of numinous powers, *nomina sunt numina*, there would be no gap between spirit and letter. Plato was suspicious of the written word, for it lies on the page without the living

presence of a teacher to give that word its intended meaning: “When words have been once written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them . . . and if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves. . . .” The written word is only a dead image of the spoken word, of “an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.”

The word, written on the page by teacher or his disciple, loses some of its life: it has less spirit, and the dead weight of the letter grows heavier. The extreme case would be one wherein there was no spirit, no intended, living meaning at all—for example, in an utterance written on the page by a machine.

Such machines have been proposed, in earnest by Raymond Lully, in jest by Jonathan Swift. In his *Ars magna* (1305–8), Lully perfected an art of combination in which certain concepts, represented by letters of the alphabet arrayed in three concentric circles, could be brought into differing relations with one another by the simple means of rotating the circles and so changing the combination of concepts. Lully, who drew upon Scotus and the Cabala, was deadly serious about this art, to which he devoted a large part of his life. Swift’s philosophical machine is less serious—is, in fact, a satire on philosophers who, Swift implies, seem to throw together their discourse from a series of words taken at random. In Swift’s machine, words are written on the faces of cubes which are then rotated, and the resulting string of words is then transcribed into a book. Most of the sentences thus formed are nonsense, but a few reveal divinest sense—at least, to the eye of the philosopher.

This is not altogether foolery. It has been observed that the most profound aphorisms are difficult to distinguish from the most trivial. If Swift’s machine were to produce the sentence *God is love*, would that sentence be profound or trivial? What if these same words had been uttered by Oral Roberts? Schweitzer? Peale? Are the following words profound or bathetic:

One word can redeem us from the myriad sorrows  
of the world:

That word is love.

When we learn that these words were written by Sophocles, are we ready to murmur “How profound”? How are we to understand these words? Placing them in their context sounds promising until we remember the context of the word *love* in *Oedipus at Colonus*: that context includes Oedipus’ love for his mother, now transferred to his daughter. Does that context clarify or obscure the import of the quoted lines? If these lines had been written by a machine rather than by Sophocles, would they be easier to understand, or to dismiss?

Hypothetically, one could print a whole library of great books, as well as of nonsense books, simply by programming a printing press to print letters in every possible permutation and combination. In “The Universal Library” (1901), Kurd Lasswitz describes an automatic printing machine set to produce books with forty lines to the page and fifty characters to the line (the blank space which separates words counts as one character). No human agent is needed: the machine determines the order of the characters purely by chance. The library will contain masterpieces—some as yet unwritten—side by side with utter nonsense:

If an author has written the most incredible nonsense it will, of course, be in the Universal Library. It will be under his by-line. But it will also be under the by-line of William Shakespeare and under any other possible by-line. He will find one of his books where it is asserted after every sentence that all this is nonsense and another one where it is stated after the self-same sentences that they are the purest wisdom.

Lasswitz suggests that his own essay will be found in the Universal Library, probably in the nonsense section. But who can tell whether a particular volume should be classed with nonsense books or with books of the purest wisdom? Only a true catalogue can be relied on to make such judgments and accurately assign such values. It may seem difficult to catalogue a library of  $10^{20,000,000}$  volumes: but remembers that among the volumes would be a true catalogue of the library.

The only difficulty would be to find it.

Jorge Luis Borges took up this theme in “The Library of Babel,” where he observes that the library would contain not only its own true catalogue but also “thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue.”

In short, just as a text can supply but not verify its true meaning, so too the universal library can supply but not verify its true catalogue. It is relatively easy to understand the latter case; but the former instance is harder to see simply because we do not ordinarily realize (unless we are fresh from reading Montaigne) the extraordinary number of readings that can arise from the simplest of texts. When faced with such a text we are not usually distressed simply because we do not realize the range of possible readings lurking within it. We usually feel that *somewhere* (doubtless in our own heads) there exists a true and adequate commentary which fully explicates that text. But a full collection of all possible commentaries is one definition of the universal library, which is a *plenum* of all texts: and who will uncover *its* true commentary?

Quite logically, Borges has pointed out the difficulty of ascribing meaning to any book in the universal library, even the most sensible book. He demonstrates that if a single line can mean different things in the mouths of

different speakers (for example, *Everything flows* as uttered by Heraclitus on the one hand and St. Jerome on the other), so much the more would an entire book mean utterly different things if, by some incredible chance, two different hands were to produce two identical volumes:

If literature were nothing but verbal algebra, anyone could produce any book simply by practicing variations. The lapidary formula *Everything flows* abbreviates the philosophy of Heraclitus in two words. Raymond Lully would tell us that, after saying the first word, one needs only to substitute intransitive verbs in order to discover the second word and to obtain, by a methodical chance, that philosophy and many, many more. But we would reply that the formula obtained by elimination would lack value and even meaning. If it is to have any virtue we must conceive it as Heraclitus did, as an experience of Heraclitus.

J.L. Borges, "For Bernard Shaw"

In order to understand a line of Shakespeare, one must for the moment become Shakespeare.

At the instant of his enlightenment during the sermon of the Buddha, what was the difference between the disciple Mahayaksepa and his teacher? Since the Buddha uttered no words at all in his Flower Sermon, and since Mahayaksepa understood him perfectly well, we can only conclude that the disciple already knew in some way what he desired to learn from the teacher.

So too we often feel that what we learn from a text was something that we already knew.

It follows then that in *perfect* communication nothing is transferred from a speaker to a listener: that is, in perfect communication, communication ceases to exist.

But when a machine automatically utters something to another machine, which automatically absorbs it, we may consider that here too communication has not occurred. In this one respect, the two opposite cases are identical. Is there any analogy to this automatic utterance and automatic acceptance, in human discourse? There are of course instances of cliché-exchange in which no information is exchanged. But are there no instances in which mechanical exchange is not despised but is prized?

We approach the text with the intention of grasping its spirit. We do so by means of our spirit: *cor ad cor loquitur*. But what if we are not to be trusted?

If the truth is universal and eternal, and if the inquirer is a mere individual, then the teacher may feel that by tailoring his discourse to suit the personality of his listener, he may well be violating the truth. The teacher's strategy will then be to ignore the specifics of the question asked, and insistently repeat the text. The implication is that the questioner is still entangled with his personal demons, and ought to free himself of them by attending to the universally valid truth.

In this case what is prized is the letter, for the letter *is* the spirit. The oral recitation of the Upanishads has preserved for centuries not only the exact text but also the precise pronunciation and intonation of the ancient Sanskrit, so faithful has been the tradition. It is in this tradition of utter and automatic fidelity to the letter that we should understand the prayer-wheels of Tibet. Here, too, if we think the matter through to the end, we find the letter playing the part of the spirit, and the spirit assuming the guise of the letter.

Total devotion to the letter has at least this merit, that it concentrates our energies on *this* statement and on no other. Even if the statement be only a part of the truth, such total devotion will energize the devotee in ways that a more sophisticated hovering has no power to do.

Those of us who are only too aware not only of the text but also of the abundant commentary draped around it, have one recourse, several recourses. We will simply have to accept the fact that any text can give rise to at least two contradictory readings. Every discourse implies its own opposite, which it will end by dialectically affirming.

Call one reading of a text R, and its opposite  $\sim R$ ; then every R implies  $\sim R$ :

$$R \subset \sim R$$

This kind of language will bring joy to no logical positivist. Note that the gap between these two opposites will be filled with intermediate positions, which can be arranged accordingly as they agree more strongly with R or with  $\sim R$ :

$$R, R_1, R_2, R_3 \dots R_n, \sim R$$

Such an array can stand for a set of volumes in the universal library, of which one asserts a certain thesis, the other asserts its opposite, and intermediate books represent other more or less intermediate positions.

The text may of course give birth to more than one set of opposite readings; in which case we may lay out the second set at right angles to the first in the manner of a Cartesian graph:

$$\begin{array}{c}
 r \\
 r_1 \\
 (x) \quad r_2 \\
 R, R_1, R_2, R_3, R_4, R_5, \sim R \\
 r_3 \\
 r_4 \\
 \sim r
 \end{array}$$

The point (x) would indicate that complex position composed of a simultaneous affirmation of  $R_1$  and  $r_2$ . It is entirely possible that no one has yet come up with such an affirmation; but if the question under analysis is a

current one, the analyst may rest assured that some day history will fulfill his prediction and that some thinker, flushed and happy, will announce his discovery that  $R_1$  and  $r_2$  are both true.

A third coordinate could be drawn at right angles to the other two. On the graphs thus created we represent the possible readings of a text. But whether we adopt a one-, two- or three-dimensional graph for a particular analysis, we will end not with a miscellaneous collection of opinion (got at random from the shelves of the universal library), but an organized *field* of opinion, arranged, like a magnetic field, between two polar opposites. Such a field, even if it does not yield a single unequivocal reading, at least presents us with a comprehensible and even predictable form.

Once a text is set down, no power on earth can prevent its being interpreted according to a wide range of meanings. The way in which a text works upon us is as puzzling as the way in which we mature. In the face of our incompetence to choose among the enormous range of meanings lurking in any text, how on earth can we find the right one?

Consider the graph set out above. Should the proliferation of meanings dismay us? It is far from clear how a word sets to work; why can it not work in and through a wide semantic field? Everything utters itself in a single word, yet we use many words to describe it. Perhaps the hovering range of meanings is equivalent to the single word; perhaps each meaning in the array gets a chance to work in us as though the array composed one word, and that the right one.

Perhaps the truth of the matter is that it is scarcely possible to avoid the proper meaning of a text. At times, when we read, we somewhat misapprehend the precise point, and find instead what we very much need to know at that moment. On some of those occasions, the literal sense may have found us out. And, otherwise, if we seek the meaning of a word and find ourselves lost in its semantic field, perhaps the truth is that, happily, there is no place else to go.