

Sense and Word in Liturgical Language

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When E. Gordon Craig in 1922 wrote,

“To man words come easiest and earliest to lie with. So that now in this twentieth century nearly all speech is a lie. I would not go so far as to laughingly admit that speech of that kind was an art. I should rather call it a mess.”¹

he was making the distinction between the role of language as a vehicle for communicating essentials, and the role of language as an art-form. As a theatrical designer who was to revolutionise traditional concepts of theatre, he was keenly aware of the difficulty in using language to represent exactly those things we wish to communicate to others. One word may have a variety of meanings, or because of constant use in a multitude of ways, have lost much of its original meaning. Reliance on the word itself is therefore not always the best or most effective guide to meaning. He continues:

“Once a merely natural thing—it became an art; but when it exceeded its natural term of life, having talked itself hoarse—black in the face—the silver of speech rubbed off and we came to the lead underneath, and inside the lead . . . lies.”²

In other words, language is constantly changing and if ambiguity is to be avoided, the emphasis must shift away from the individual word to its context and setting. It is no accident that a man involved with the theatre should be conscious of the problems of language and communication. The theatre, as Craig was to make clear, is a space to fill—not simply with actors delivering words, but with scenery, lights and sound, all of which create what he called ‘whole theatre’.³ Communication to an audience depends as much on the setting as the words, and it was his realisation of this that brought E. Gordon Craig to the forefront in dramatic theory. In the words of another designer heavily indebted to Craig:

“. . . to have gained a sufficient mastery over form through which to express ideas, is a key that will open many locks.”⁴

Now, this understanding of the importance of the context or setting can be seen to the best effect in two main areas, what

¹ E. Gordon Craig, *Scene* (First published by O.U.P. 1923, re-issued by Benjamin Blom, New York 1968) p 1

² *Ibid.* p 1

³ *Ibid.* p 4

⁴ Albert Rutherston *Sixteen Designs for the Theatre* (O.U.P. London 1927) p 15

Noam Chomsky calls *competence* and *performance*.⁵ To explain: competence describes a language user's awareness of what is available to him in a language; the vocabulary and the rules of grammar, syntactical order and concord etc. Performance describes the way in which the vocabulary and rules of grammar are used by an individual, resulting in a variety of styles and varying *registers*, that is the ability to make a recognisable distinction between the language and style of a legal document, and a music hall monologue.

Thus, at a competence level, understanding results as much from the individual words; the context of the utterance is therefore its syntax. Unlike a heavily inflected language, for example, Latin or Greek, modern English syntax, cannot be switched around in order to gain a specific emphasis. Communication does not lie in the main with the endings of words, but in the order they are set in. The setting of the words, like Craig's 'whole theatre' is therefore as much a part of communication and consequent understanding, as the word itself.

At a performance level, communication is increased, and ambiguity avoided by the style and register of the language used. Being able to recognise the various styles in a formal letter and a personal letter; in a diplomatic speech and an evangelical mission and so on, gives an added perspective to understanding the content of the utterance. The context . . . the style and register, furthers understanding.

It should therefore be possible to see two distinguishing characteristics of language emerging. One, the language of words, and the other the context or setting in which the words are placed. Now, when we are reading, or listening to someone reading 'the written word', communication and understanding are helped by both the competence and performance levels. However, once we get away from the written word into an area where there is either a spontaneous use of language, or where delivery of the written word relies on visual settings to add force to communication, then we move into an area which has a vast number of problems. The meaning of the words gain as much from the visual setting and activity surrounding the delivery, as from the style or register. It is at this point where church and theatre merge. And it is here that we must question the efficacy of the language used. Just as E. Gordon Craig called out for a return to 'whole theatre', so too liturgists began to seek a better way of expressing the public worship of the church; to gain a 'whole liturgy' readily understood by all.

⁵ Noam Chomsky *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (The M.I.T. Press Camb. Mass. 1965, eighth printing 1972) p 4

A few years after Craig and Rutherford published respectively *Scene*, and *Sixteen Designs for the Theatre*, Antonin Artaud was formulating his theories of theatre; theories which were to turn the theatre upside down, ripples of which are still with us today. In his *The Theater and its Double*, Artaud concerned with the problems of language and communication, says:

“It has not been definitively proved that the language of words is the best possible language. And it seems to me that on the stage, which is above all a space to fill and a place where something happens, the language of words may have to give way before a language of senses, whose objective aspect is the one that has most immediate impact upon us.”⁶

The aim of a liturgical celebration, like that which Craig called a ‘happening’ in the theatre,⁷ is to allow an audience or congregation to get beyond itself, not into a land of make-belief, but into a close-knit member of a community. It is thus the community participating in a corporate act of worship; the community sharing with the actor, rather than just watching him in a dramatic performance. The dramatic act of both liturgy and theatre creates a bond between performer and audience, between priest and people. The language used in both, is not simply a language of words, but a language which is heavily dependent upon setting and context. Where the difference lies between this use of language and that in the written word alone, is that the context and setting is visual and audible. Movement, light, sounds and architectural surrounds, with the words, create a total language . . . a language which goes beyond mere words into a language of sense and symbol.

While Artaud and his followers were trying to get rid of an inactive audience, mere spectators, so the Church, after the Lambeth Conference of 1958 and the Second Vatican Council of 1962, began to break down the barriers that separated priest from people; individual from community. Both Church and theatre sought a higher degree of involvement from all. One was no longer to ‘hear’ Mass, but to ‘celebrate’ the Eucharist; in the theatre entertainment was to give way to audience participation, to ‘stimulation’. As contemporary English was to replace Cranmerian English and Tridentine Latin, so Brecht, Pinter, Wesker and latterly Handke and Poliakoff were to replace the stereotypes of ‘Hobson’s Choice’ and ‘Charley’s Aunt’. The ‘closet drama’ was to become in Brecht’s terminology, ‘total theatre’. Craig’s concept of ‘whole theatre’ began to be actualised. Likewise, private devotion at Mass was to become ‘the prayer of the faithful’; the once private canon of the Mass was to become ‘the prayer of the church’.

⁶ Antonin Artaud *The Theater and its Double* (New York, 1938, revised edition 1958) p 107

⁷ E. Gordon Craig, *op. cit.* p 13

As Genet, Ionesco, Albee and Durenmatt called for theatrical freedom, so the members of the N.L.C., the I.C.E.L., and the I.C.E.T., began to formulate the dictates of Vatican II, bringing a greater sense of freedom into the liturgy.

As the proscenium arch is being replaced by small studios, theatres 'in the round' and so on, so the rail and gates enclosing the sanctuary were removed. The elimination of the alienating symbols of arch and rail enabled barriers to be broken down both physically and symbolically. The priest was not now enclosed, and therefore neither was the Eucharist. Likewise, the actor ceased to be a fancy dress figure on an unapproachable stage. As Beckett was to strip the stage of all unnecessary scenery, so the church stripped itself of many unnecessary rubrics added over the years. As Albert Rutherford said in 1927,

"The temptation to linger happily over enriching the individual design with elaborate detail, attempting to make of it a work of art in itself, is almost irresistible."⁸

is echoed by the Vatican Council in *De Sacra Liturgia* where we read:

"The Ordinary of the Mass (*Ordo Missae*) is to be revised in a way that will reveal more clearly the real function of each of the parts and the connections of the various parts with one another. This revision is also to facilitate the devout, active participation of the faithful.

To this end, while the substance of the rite is to be preserved, they themselves should be simplified. Doublets and any additions of little value that have occurred in the course of the centuries are to be omitted. Certain things that have fallen out through the wearing processes of time are to be reinstated after the ancient model of the Holy Fathers, according as they may seem advisable or necessary."⁹

By the introduction of contemporary English, the church has been able to throw the dramatic act of the liturgy into relief. However, unlike liturgical Latin, English does not remain static. Words change and alter their meaning. A word or phrase which was once part of a technical jargon, through the increase of the mass media, becomes part of the general vocabulary. As such, the specialised, technical meaning, loses much of its force. Its meaning, once protected by its technicality, when thrown into general use, is subject to a variety of pressures. The most damaging influence is that caused by misuse; the word loses its specialised meaning, and takes on a more general one, thus its effectiveness as a communicative symbol in its own technical field is lessened. Consider the difficulties encountered in biblical translation: words which once had

⁸ Albert Rutherford, *op. cit.* p 13

⁹ The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (De Sacra Liturgia)* C.T.S. London 1967, Chapter 2 section 50 p 23

specialised meaning, through familiarity begin to be used away from the original context, and as such lose their 'particular' meaning. Think of the *Authorised Version*, not only has it left a whole range of phrases in general use, 'still small voice'; 'lick the dust'; 'root of all evil'; 'a thorn in the flesh' and finally 'clear as crystal', but has also introduced a whole range of individual words, which have now lost their specialised meaning, and hence effectiveness within the context of the Bible message: 'damsel'; 'long-suffering'; 'quick'; 'starve'; 'scapegoat'; 'monger'; 'loving-kindness', and so the list could continue.

Likewise certain specialised terms are lost because they are associated with particular ideologies, hence at the reformation words such as, 'azymes'; 'prepuce'; 'pasche'; 'scenopegia'; 'prefinition' and so on, associated with the 'papists' were replaced. The problem that arises is that of the pressure being placed on the meaning of the common words which replace them. For example, 'washing' for 'baptism'; 'empty' for 'exinanite'; 'congregation' for 'church'; 'accuser' for 'makebate'; 'pot' for 'palmecrist' and so on. Though the sentiment of Wesley in his New Testament, that it should be for 'plein unlettered men who understand only their mother tongue', is a noteworthy one, it is very much of a two-edged sword, for semantic lowerings will always lessen the communicative power of the word or phrase.

The church in setting its liturgy in contemporary English has now to face up to the problems of using the language of everyday life, which will inevitably lessen the communicative power of the words used in the liturgy. Artaud was fully aware of this, and consequently questioned the effectiveness of a language of words, calling out for a language of senses initiated by music, scenery, action, mime, lighting, sound and pantomime. The theatre of his day had become word-orientated, and so too can the liturgy. This presents no problem if a hieratic language is being used, for the meaning of the word is encapsulated by its limited, specialised use; it is not being used away from its liturgical setting, consequently it is not subject to pressure and consequently to changes of meaning. Thus, if we are to continue using the language we use in so many other situations, we must be prepared to accept semantic lowering. We can do nothing to halt the progress of a living language, what we can do is to maintain the communicative value of the liturgy by looking at the context and setting of the language of words.

While familiarity with form, lessens the emotional dislike of change, it can also breed apathy. The hard-fought-for battle of the dialogue Mass in English is in danger of becoming mere phatic communion; that is, a series of standardised formulae which are repeated much as one says 'Good Morning', 'How are you?' 'Fine thank you, how are you?'. As Eric Berne in *Games People Play* points out, as long as we have the requisite number of formulae in

sequence, we are satisfied, thus the sequence could be as follows:

The Lord be with you
And also with you.
Lift up your hearts
We lift them up to the Lord.
Let us give thanks to the Lord our God
It is right to give him thanks and Praise.

Here, there has been a series of three sequences, a balance of communication has been attained and both sides are reassured, priest and people. If the sequence were to be broken, say with—

The Lord be with you
And also with you
Lift up your hearts,

and there it ends, there would be no satisfaction, no reassurance for the congregation. What in fact happens, is that the priest continues with the Preface, and the sequence is balanced with the people responding with the Sanctus. It is a classic example of phatic communion in sequence, in what Berne called a 'stroke ritual'; as long as both sides receive a balance of strokes, then both sides are reassured.

However, this reassurance, as in all phatic situations results in a formalised and stereotyped act of communication, where the sequence is sufficient in itself. What it is saying, its communicative value, becomes secondary to the form. By way of digression, this is one of the major reasons for the failure of the sign of peace in most communities. We shake hands or whatever we feel is appropriate, but usually in an uneven sequence; we therefore feel unsatisfied, unreassured, as if there should have been something more. We are passing the sign of peace to our immediate neighbours, whilst being conscious of our inability to reach out to the others in the church, we therefore feel insecure.

However, to return to my original point: contemporary English is fighting a battle with its use away from the liturgical celebration. Advertisements, broadcasts, newspapers and magazines are fighting a war of attrition with the meaning of words. In order to maintain the maximum semantic force of the language of words in the liturgy, we must therefore follow the lead of the theatre, and aim towards a language of senses, where we gain a 'total liturgy', and not simply 'old wine in new skins'. Everyday language may bring an immediate understanding of the Mass or Communion service, but beyond the surface there is a gradual wearing away at the meaning of the words used. Once powerful symbols of 'love'; 'grace'; 'charity'; 'wonder'; 'offering'; 'sacrifice'; 'light' and 'fellowship' are as much a part of the advertiser's lexicon, his vocabulary, as they are of the liturgist; as such, their meanings in relation to the message of the church degenerate. There is no such thing as 'timeless English', which Knox tried to achieve in his New Testa-

ment; the advertiser's jingle is as transitory as the language it employs, use this transitory language in the liturgy, and the liturgy faces the same dangers that affect the advertiser. What saves the advertiser from going out of business is the quality of his product ... his jingles may come and go, but his product will remain, if and only if, it is of a high enough quality to be indispensable to the buyer. Look to the liturgy and the story is the same, the language it uses degenerates, for it is the same language in use in the streets, but its product will remain if the quality is there. This 'quality' is the doctrine of faith we call Christianity, but unless we are Dionysian mystics, we need to see and experience this quality. Our experience of it as individuals comes from our private devotion, but as a worshipping community, our experience of it must come from the liturgy, the corporate act of worship we call the Mass. As it won't come from the language of words, it must therefore come from a language of senses. The transitory individual word, must give way to the force and power of the setting. To return to Chomsky's idea of 'competence' and 'performance'; the setting, the rules of language, give us a competence to use language in performance. The setting, by the style and register of the language used; psychologically we attune to the varying styles, and prepare ourselves to understand the communication; our frame of mind changes according to whether we are hearing or reading a political manifesto or a student 'rag-mag'.

However, language in performance is not sufficient in itself in a situation which is calling for participation by reader and listener; actor and audience; priest and people; we must also look to sense experience, not warm pious emotion, but a sense, an experience of the power of a community joined together in a unifying act, whether it be a play in a theatre or the Mass in a church.

When the language of the liturgy is solely a language of words, then it becomes a language of the intellect and reason, and experience of faith goes beyond intellect and reason. The anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, writing in the fourteenth century expresses it well:

"Lift up thin herte unto God with a meek steryng
of love; and mene him-self and none of his goodes.
And therto loke thee lothe to think on ought bot
on hym-self, so that nought worch in thi witte
ne in thi wille bot only him-self."¹⁰

The language of words, therefore, enables us to move towards a language of the senses, realised in the liturgy by moving away from stereotyped formulae couched in a language which is constantly changing. We cannot rely totally upon this language of words, because of its state of flux, and consequent loss in meanings, thus we

¹⁰ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Phyllis Hodgson (Early English Text Society, O.U.P. London 1944, Original Series No 218, revised reprint 1973) p 16, lines 3-6

must use it as a means whereby we can place the emphasis upon the senses, where the Spirit is the communicating force, not the word. Samuel Laeuchli once said:

“All Christian language is therefore penultimate; it can never claim the ultimate, the Christ, unless the Christ gives grace, forgiveness and joy in his spirit.”¹¹

The chief task of the liturgist must therefore be to move forward rather than looking over his shoulder to what was. The structure of the Mass was formulated in a period when scholasticism and dialectic were prevalent. Philosophy and theology became linguistic exercises . . . instruments of the intellect and reason, the Spirit seemed to get left out on a limb. Revision of the liturgy is something which should not be a once-a-four-hundred-years operation, but should constantly be in the minds of liturgists, for as the language degenerates, so will the communicative power of the Mass, unless the emphasis shifts away from the transitory word, to the power of the spirit in a language of senses.

Liturgists have called out for the one man who, as poet, scholar, and theologian could re-create the liturgy. They will not find him while the emphasis remains on the language of words. Place the emphasis on the language of the senses and we need only look as far as the *Holy Spirit*.

¹¹ Samuel Laeuchli, *The Language of Faith* (Epworth Press London 1959) p 235

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