




ON TARGET

- NEWS HIGHLIGHTS
- BACKGROUND INFORMATION
- COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

The price of Freedom is eternal vigilance -

Print Post Publication Number 381667 00258

Vol.44, No.10

March 20th, 2008

A Blessed Holy Week To All

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that every one who believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. St. John 3:16

The Athanasian Creed, one of the foundation creeds of the Christian Faith says we are to "believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ." If we are to "believe rightly the Incarnation", does this not mean that we should "make flesh", or make a reality of everything Jesus said and taught?

HISTORY IN ENGLISH WORDS by Owen Barfield: It should not be surprising to those who know of the Australian League of Rights and its basic policies, that in this most holy time of the Christian calendar, the articles presented to our readership refer back to our Christian foundation. The article following is by Owen Barfield, who, as some would know, was one of the J.R.R. Tolkien 'Inklings'.

It is now some years since I obtained a copy of his "History in English Words". It is a book I have come to appreciate immensely and it is found readily available at bookstores online. Mr. Barfield explained the book was "in the form of a brief, consecutive history of the peoples who have spoken the Aryan tongues... whose history in use and whose changes of meaning, record and unlock the larger history."

As a philologist (a discipline barely 100 years old in 1953) his interest was in plumbing the depths of "the inner, living history of man's soul" through the study of language itself. It had come to be seen the "historical forms and meanings of words" acted "as interpreters both of the past and of the workings of men's minds".

"In our language alone," he wrote, "not to speak of its many companions, the past history of humanity is spread out in an imperishable map, just as the history of the mineral earth is embedded in the layers of its outer crust... Language has preserved for us the inner, living history of man's soul. It reveals the evolution of consciousness..."

So, as we move into the Christian Holy Week, it was thought appropriate to re-present Mr. Barfield's rather lengthy presentation in which he outlines his own experiences, as a philologist, in his conversion to the faith of Christ. The original was presented to an audience at Wheaton College Illinois in 1976.

In this issue: • *History In English Words* • *Philology And The Incarnation*

PHILOLOGY AND THE INCARNATION by Owen Barfield: Sir Thomas Browne, that mystical, or quasi-mystical, author of the seventeenth century, wrote a book which he called *Religio Medici*, The Religion of a Doctor, A Medical Man. Many, many years later – in my own youth, in fact – Professor Gilbert Murray, who is well known in England and is probably known over here as a Greek scholar and humanist, wrote a little book (or it may have been no more than a single lecture reprinted) called *Religio Grammatici*, The Religion of a Scholar or Man of Letters. It occurred to me after I had given the title of this lecture, that if I had been a little more pretentious or a little more brash, perhaps I might have ventured to call it *Religio Philologi*, which I suppose would mean the Religion of a Student of Language, perhaps especially a student of the historical aspect of language.

It is impossible to give much attention to words and their meanings, and more especially the history of words and the history of the changes which those meanings have undergone, without making a number of interesting discoveries. Moreover, in my experience the discoveries one then makes are of a kind which it is impossible to make without being forced by them to reflect rather intensively on the whole nature of man and of the world in which he lives.

Let me give you a very simple example: Has it ever occurred to you, I wonder, that the epithet *charming*, as people use the word today, has certain very odd features about it? In the first place, it is the present participle of a very active verb, namely the verb "to charm." Grammatically, therefore, when we speak of an object, a garden, for instance, or a landscape, or perhaps a person, as "charming," we make that object or person the subject of a verb which denotes an activity of some sort. That is what we do grammatically, but it is not at all, or it is only very rarely, what we mean semantically. When we speak, for instance, of a child as charming, we do not mean that the child himself is actually doing something. On the contrary, as soon as we notice that anyone, a child or a woman, is "charming" us in the verbal sense [in which case we rarely use the simple verb by itself, but we find some other expression such as "putting on charm" or "exerting charm" so as to ring out the notion of a willed activity], when that happens, the charmer who is charming in the verbal sense generally ceases to be charming in the adjectival sense!

Well, you could say the same thing about the word *enchanting*. I mention these two words because they're good examples of a whole class, quite a noticeable group of words in our language which possess the same peculiarity. One has only to think of such words as *depressing*, *interesting*, *amusing*, *entertaining*, *fascinating*, and so on to realize that we tend to allude to qualitative manifestations in the world outside ourselves by describing the effect they have on us, rather than by attempting to denote the qualities themselves.

The next thing that you find about this little group of words, if you go into the matter *historically*, is that these words, when used with these meanings, are all comparatively recent arrivals. Most of them first came into use in the eighteenth century – none of them is earlier than the seventeenth, I think.

The kind of question one is led to ask is: is this just an accident, or has it any wider significance? That is just the kind of question which the philologist, the student of language in its historical aspect, is led on to ask himself. Is the appearance of these words at this comparatively late state just something that happened to happen, or is it a surface manifestation of deeper currents of some sort? So you have a linguistic habit, one must say, arising in the West in the course of the last few centuries, of describing or defining or denoting the outer world in terms, as it were, of the inner world of human feeling:

Now, let us take a look at another group of words, a very much larger group this time, indeed an almost unlimited one. I am referring to all those words which go to make up what the nineteenth century utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham called the "immaterial language". In other words, I mean all those innumerable words in any modern language which do not refer to anything in the outside world at all, but only to the inner world of human feeling, of human thought - only to states of

mind or mental events – *hope, fear, enthusiasm, conscious, embarrass, humility, ambition, concept* – you can go on reeling them off, any number of them, of course. If you take the trouble to look up the etymologies of these words, you will find that in every case either they or their predecessors in older languages from which we have taken them, at one time referred not only to states of mind or mental events but also to some thing or some event in the outer world; that is of course what one might call elementary etymology. Only this time it is not usually a matter of looking back just a few hundred years into the past. We have to take a much longer survey if we wish to observe the historical process to which I am now seeking to draw your attention.

First, let me make this point – everyone is agreed, and I repeat, everyone, that there was such a historical process. Now you may ask, how do I establish that rather bold proposition? And the answer is: I establish it because I am in a position to call two witnesses to it from the very opposite ends of the earth. In saying "the opposite ends of the earth", I am not only alluding to the fact that one of them is American and the other is English, though that happens to be the case, but I am thinking much rather of the fact that they represent diametrically opposite philosophies, diametrically opposite points of view and beliefs about the whole nature of man and his relation to the divine disposition in the world. The two witnesses I'm thinking of are the transcendentalist, Emerson, and the positivist philosopher to whom I've already referred, Jeremy Bentham. You'll find in the section on language in the longer of Emerson's two essays which are entitled "Nature" the following passage:

"Every word used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from material appearance. *Right* means *straight*; *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; transgression, the crossing of a line; supercilious, the raising of the eyebrows. We say heart to express emotion, the head to denote thought, and thought and emotion are words borrowed from sensible things, and now approached to spiritual nature. Most of the process by which this transformation is made is hidden from us in the remote time when language was formed." Well, that is Emerson.

Then you find Jeremy Bentham, hard-headed positivist Jeremy Bentham, in an essay of his also entitled "Language" [it comes in section four of the essay], writing as follows:

"Throughout the whole field of language, parallel to the line of what may be termed the material language, and expressed by the same words, runs a line of what may be termed the immaterial language. Not that to every word that has a material import there belongs also an immaterial one; but that to every word that has an immaterial import there belongs, or at least did belong, a material one."

Words which refer to the inner world only: When, therefore, we approach this immaterial language, these words which refer to the inner world only, we know that we have to do with words that at one time were words of the material language. We know that there has been a transition from the material language into an immaterial one.

Can we go still further and, at least in some cases, observe the transition taking place? The answer is that in some cases we can. You see, if in the case of any word of the immaterial language, we can lay our finger on a period in its history when the older material meaning had not yet evaporated, if I may put it that way, while the later immaterial meaning had already appeared, then we shall have located the transition itself.

Now let me take one of the examples which Emerson himself gives, where he writes: "*spirit means primarily wind*." I imagine that is as good an example as any you could choose of an immaterial meaning which was originally a material one. In this instance we have the best possible evidence that there was a particular time when the material meaning and the immaterial meaning still operated side by side in the same word.

The time of the New Testament writing: Not only so, but we know that that time was the time about the beginning of our era, in which the New Testament was being written. Because in the

third chapter of John's gospel you read in the account of our Lord's encounter with Nicodemus, first the words, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the spirit is spirit.*" But in the Greek it is the same word *pneuma* that is used, whether it is wind or spirit that is being referred to. In rendering the two phrases, which occur in one and the same verse, "*the wind bloweth where it listeth,*" and "*every one that is born of the Spirit,*" the translator has to use two different words for what in the original text is one and the same word. The two meanings, the material and the immaterial, were present side by side, or mingled, in the one Greek word.

Now I want to suggest that if we set side by side the two linguistic phenomena which we have been looking at, we see on the one side the thing I spoke of first, the relatively recent tendency to refer to the qualities in the outside world, [call it the world of nature, if you like], in terms of their effect upon ourselves.

Then you see on the other side a much older habit, [I call it a habit, because this time it is universal to refer to it as a mere "tendency"], that much older universal habit of referring to ourselves and our thoughts and affections in terms of the world of nature, the outside world.

So we see, reflected in language, a curiously equivocal relation between this outside world and the inner man, the self or ego of the human being which experiences it. But we see something more than that. If you survey that equivocal relation, as I've called it, historically, you can't fail to be struck by the fact that there has occurred in the course of ages a change of emphasis. One could really say a change in the centre of gravity, a change of direction in the way in which this equivocal relation operates.

A very important process: Looking back into the past, we observe an external, an outer language, a material language referring to the outer world of nature, which becomes more and more used in such a way that it becomes an inner language or an *immaterial* language, as Bentham called it. And this is clearly a very important process, for it is only to the extent that we have a language in which to express a thing that we can really be said to be properly conscious of the thing at all.

That may sound a controversial proposition, but I think it's an experience which we all have as children, when our learning to speak on the one hand, and on the other our whole awareness of our environment as a coherent and articulated world, increase side by side as correlatives to one another.

The existence of man's self as a conscious individual being: What then was the thing of which this gradual historical development of an inner or immaterial language out of an outer or material language enabled mankind as a whole to become aware? The answer is clear, I think. It was none other than the existence, hitherto unsuspected, of an inner world in contradistinction to the outer one. In other words it was the existence of a man's self as a conscious individual being. Clearly, it was with the help of language – it was through the instrumentality of language – that individual men first began discovering themselves.

But now, what do we imply when we say that something has been "discovered"? If it was discovered at a certain point or during a certain period of time, as it must have been, we imply that there was a previous period during which it was not yet discovered. But please note carefully that, although this must always be the case, it may have been the case for either of two reasons. The thing may have been undiscovered because, although it was already in existence, although it was always there, no one had so far happened to notice it. That's the one reason. Should I be in order, I wonder, here in placing the discovery of America as an example of that category? I don't know. But anyhow, there are plenty of other examples. Take the planet Neptune, for example. That's the first kind of discovery: not discovered because it didn't happen to be noticed although it was already there.

Continued in "Bulletin"