

## SHADOW LANGUAGE

It would be interesting to trace to its origin that hidden language which is familiar to every adult male, and to a large proportion of women, but which is hardly ever written down, except on walls: and to know whether it arose because it is natural to man to use a special set of terms to indicate strange forces more powerful than himself; whether it is a consequence of the psychological disintegration of the Fall, which made human beings afraid of God and ashamed of their bodies; how it has been affected by the immense change in Western human ecology which began about 1750 and is still in progress; why it has flowed more deeply underground at one time than at another; and what significance lies in the fact that its terms, and the knowledge of its existence, have during the last fifty years come far nearer the surface of communal life.

An immense learning would be necessary fully to discuss all these points; and many of their implications have to be left aside by a writer without experience of the organic cultures of the East or of the mechanized economy of the U.S.S.R. It should be possible without this, however, very briefly to sketch the nature, function, and recent history of submerged language, at any rate in this country; and to suggest possible reasons for its slow invasion of ordinary speech.

The language deals mainly with three subjects: with God; with sexual life; and with digestion. God, mystery beyond all thought, all argument, all imagination, "to whom all angels cry aloud" and whom all non-reasoning things worship by being alive; sexual life, through which humans consciously, as other creatures unknowingly, share in the almost incredible Divine activity of creating new selves, each sentient and unique, where before there was nothing; digestion, the unconscious process of transmuting into human bodies pieces of the outside world upon which their continued life depends.

A probable reason for its secrecy is the universal tendency to identify words with the things they represent. Instances are innumerable; the lover saying over and over again the name of the beloved and feeling that he is thus somehow in touch with her real self; the peasant speaking of the Good People rather than risk getting into dangerous contact with the fairies by mentioning them directly; the Bodleian Library forbidding readers access to Eric Partridge's Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English; the genteel woman substituting "passed over" and the airman "gone for a Burton" for "dead". (For, though the hidden language does not as such deal with mortality it is only in very desperate times

that there come into the open such entities as the plague-century's Dance of Death, or the R.A.F.'s 1940 drinking chorus

Here's to the next man,  
 Here's to the next man,  
 Here's to the next man to die).

In so far as it mentions God the hidden language does not use different words from those of ordinary speech; though it may be noted that ordinary speech tends to employ such terms as Providence, the Almighty, the Lord; and that to refer to Him direct, and by bare Name, creates a sense of uneasiness bordering on acute discomfort. Among many peoples there is indeed a second, a hallowed, hidden tongue in which to speak of God with love and wonder; for Catholics Latin, for Russian Orthodoxy old Slavonic, for Israel pure Hebrew, for Anglicans the set splendour of Elizabethan English. These tongues are, however, available and emotionally valid only for men and women holding the faiths concerned; whereas the other hidden language is almost universal.

Two main currents of feeling inform this; the sense of evil and the sense of power. How closely the intuition of evil is fused with that of holiness appears diamond-clear in the ambivalent French use of *Sacré* to mean both the numinously good and the numinously horrible; and in the submerged language the Name of God, and religious terms, are used to give violence and intensity to the expression of anger, so that it shall not be the petty and impotent fury of one insignificant creature, but carry with it superhuman force. The same is true of sexual terms; which can also be used (in a strange perversion of approach perhaps best indicated in the phrase "Good be thou my Evil") as a way of causing bodily fulfilment to be regarded as wicked and to be enjoyed more because of its wickedness than because of its ecstasy. Digestive terms are also used to convey a fascinated horror and contempt of the body.

In this contempt the sense of power is closely involved; for if the alarming, urgent and impersonal impulses of the body are observed from *de haut en bas* they may be easier to regard as trivial, and to control; and in bawdry as in blasphemy there may be an unconscious use of humour to shield the secret self from the impact of reality. (It is incidentally fascinating to speculate how far the "English sense of humour", so sedulously cultivated as a social asset over the last century, has succeeded in numbing us, through ridicule, against feeling and comprehending emotion; whether—in humility—in ourselves; or—in pride—in others).

The sense of power, in so far as prestige is concerned, is also bound up with the learning of the submerged language. It seems

to be necessary to the self-respect of all growing boys and, during the last twenty years at any rate, of most growing girls, that they should learn it. To know it is regarded as a sign of maturity, and its terms are avidly collected, learned, remembered and used without any such difficulty as is found in getting hold of a foreign language; and it is of quite as much interest to children whose questions about reproduction have been answered clearly, calmly, frankly and in ordinary English from the first moment they began to ask them, as to those whose curiosity has been repressed. That it is necessary for young men to know it may be illustrated by considering the true story of the agony of a young Polish officer who, brought up very carefully at home by a widowed mother and a series of governesses, and sent into the army with an entirely surface vocabulary, was called upon for the first time to reprove a private and could do nothing but blush and reiterate with stammering explosiveness, "You *evil man*".

In the age at which the hidden language is learned, and in its importance as a sign of maturity, there is a curious though incomplete resemblance to primitive custom; for in many rudimentary cultures part of the ceremonial of initiation into manhood is the learning of a secret tongue, which must not be used in public. The parallel is only partial because it is not a European practice (say) formally to confirm a child at the same time as giving him deliberate instruction in "bad" language. Although in point of fact the two things do frequently happen at the same time, only the first is an authorized and official proceeding. The second is ignored. In the primitive culture, moreover, the language is not regarded as necessarily "bad", though it may be dangerous, being charged with *mana*, or mysterious force, which can be used either for good or for evil ends.

There are three great landmarks in the history of the submerged speech in our civilization. The first is the time when its emotional impulse lost ambivalence and for the most part became identified with evil, just as the traditional nature gods once became identified with devils; the second, when the proportion of its content concerned with God lost importance, and that with sexual and digestive activity gained it; the third, when for the first time for hundreds of years (except for a brief metropolitan ripple during the late seventeenth century) in music hall and radio and conversation and printed page it shot ever more often through the texture of ordinary language to bring "a smile to the young and a blush to the fair."

It is almost impossible to discover the date of the first landmark; though there may be significance in the fact that Chaucer

and Shakespeare used words which are now submerged, and used them in poetry, which dances across the Tom Tiddler's ground of the Numinous, picking up gold and silver. Though there seems to be nothing but circumstantial evidence to bring in support of the theory, it is possible that the Reformation had something to do with it. The suppression of the hallowed secret language in so far as religion was concerned, together with the insistence on the authority of the written Word; the denial, implicit in the dissolution of the monasteries, of the fact that instinctive energy could be transmuted by the celibate into the fire of contemplation; the consequent distrust of the body, and of all imagery taken from its activities (cf. the later horror expressed by Kingsley in the true Puritan tradition, of the symbolism of the mystical marriage); the fear and hatred of all mystery, but the verbal mysteries of theology; and the prolonged witch huntings and witch trials; all these may well have identified the hidden language with evil.

It is perhaps easier to estimate the date of the second landmark, the change of stress from the spiritual to the sexual; which would seem to have come about during the late nineteenth century. Until that time the words used in swearing seem seldom to have been indicated in the popular novels which are among the most efficient and unselfconscious mirrors of ordinary life. Then a curious convention arose which permitted the author to show with unmistakable clarity what he meant, so long as he was so delicate as to omit the central letters of the words used; so that, for instance, manly heroes were permitted to relieve their feelings by remarking d — n. This convention, however, applied only to religious terms; those dealing with the body were felt to be far too dangerous, powerful and evocative to be indicated in any way at all; and seem, indeed, to have gained in intensity what those concerned with the spirit lost. It was as though the mechanized self-assured industrial and scientific culture of the time, cut off from God by its own theories, activities and inventions, had already begun to feel that its only possible point of contact with creative force was through the raw vitality of animal instinct. It is significant that this change coincided with another, in the very different sphere of children's books; whose subject matter was less and less fairies, or morals, or the feelings and events and circumstances and religious atmosphere of children's own lives, and more and more the adventures of animals, Black Beauty and Baloo and Rat and Mole and Mr. Toad and Peter Rabbit and Benjamin Bunny. From books this tendency spread to newspapers, whose children's corners were zoologically populated by Pip, Squeak and Wilfrid, and Rupert the bear and Tiger Tim and Mrs. Hippo and the Bruin Boys; and thence to the films with Felix the cat and Clara Cluck and Micky and Minnie

Mouse. This curious trend seems to be confined, as far as Western civilization is concerned, to the highly industrialized countries, England and America (though a few examples such as the enchanting Babar the Elephant have come from France); and still causes surprise when children's books in these languages are exhibited in most Latin countries.

The third great change is most clearly to be seen developing in the time between the wars; when, just as the fashion for the pastoral took hold of those with emotional and intellectual leisure in the eighteenth century, so the fashion for the proletarian, reinforced by a sense of angry guilt, swept away their later counterparts. From 1920 or so onwards the shadow language, some of which had always been common currency among the uneducated, began to invade the surface vocabulary of the educated, and to claim with laughter many of its terms, which, in shadow, carried quite a different meaning from what they held in daylight. So long as the two had been quite separate, there had been no danger of this; but now that all adults, men and women alike, were thought to be a little ridiculous if they were not acquainted with both tongues, all sorts of formerly innocuous phrases had to disappear from ordinary currency. At the same time the shadow-speech began to lose its potency, the intensity of its emotional tone; and to partake of the florid insensitiveness of the baroque. Now, as a style baroque is interesting, satisfying in its own way, lively, exuberant, extravert; but as a means of access to the Numinous it is useless, a barrier of fleshy marble bubbles which entomb in elaborate allegory what can only be expressed in living mystery.

If the desire to break through, by the shadow speech, to a sense of intense, given significance is frustrated in these ways as regards the Creator (whose Existence is not taken into account) and as regards the means of new creation (seen only as stimulant commonplace) what is left? *Pace* the advertisements, the Major will get no satisfaction from swearing by Kolynos; and there is certainly none to be had through evoking the names of powers, however immense they may be, generated and controlled by human ingenuity. Turbine; Dynamo; Hydro-Electricity; have no effect whatever—unless it be of a certain whirring dreariness—upon the emotions.

There is perhaps one general source left of the vital mystery without which a mortal ennui suffocates living. Where the lawyer wrote

“Mr. Justice Avory  
 Condemns the unsavoury  
 If we were all less bored  
 We might emulate my Lord”

the Nazi might sing

“Earnest good-pagan critics  
 Condemn anti-Semitism;  
 If our life had more meaning  
 We might abjure racial spring cleaning.”

What part the hidden language had to play in the exploitation of the sense of racial continuity and significance in Germany from 1933 onwards no foreigner can estimate; nor how many subjects and words went down into its domain; but that they were many is indicated in Mr. Noel Newsome's preface to a new German dictionary, pointing out that “one of the deadliest things which the Nazis attempted was to deprive words of their traditional meaning and to debase the German language as effectually as they have degraded Germany's self.”

While innumerable expressions, such as Blood, Soil, Race, Purity, have been pulled down into the currents of the submerged speech which no one can use or indicate without embarrassment or deprecating laughter, those currents are rising, and not only in Germany, to pollute the living stream of speech where ideas dart like goldfish; and begin to transform it into an effluent afloat with old boots, drowned cats and industrial refuse. Live meaning goes, dead laughter spreads like petrol in green and violet patches; poetry is stultified; and with the sense of numinous evil there disappears also the knowledge of numinous good.

Is it to be hoped then that the secret language should turn again into the depths

“where Alph the sacred river ran  
 Through caverns measureless to man  
 Down to a sunless sea”

and should seem once more to be charged with a preternatural horror?

Though even this might be preferable to a state of affairs in which the only untainted phrases were mathematical and technical formulae, it is not the sole alternative. Another might be in the transmutation of the secret language; in its reintegration perhaps, with the hallowed sacred speech of religion with which it shares already the Name of God. Thus boys and girls growing up might feel awe but not shame in learning it, and in considering slowly and with the enormous wonder that can never be adequate to the facts those extraordinary commonplaces of the creation, survival and renewal of unique identities with which it is concerned.

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