

ENGENDERING THE THIRD STRETCH: Knowledge, Virtue and Divine Beauty

Sue Spaid

Paradoxically, academics still want to blame language, as if it's the only game on campus. As their designated boogymen, language remains entirely responsible for sexism and inequality, as if language transports the patriarchal culture, from source to destination, at best like bumblebees transferring pollen and at worst like carriers passing diseases to innocent victims. Indeed, Wittgenstein warned that "Language disguises thoughts (*Tractatus* 4.002)," but language-blaming actually excuses and empowers masqueraders, rather than encourages a clearer presentation of our thoughts.

Moreover, Barthes's declaration, the power of language is "quite simply fascist" is valid only if we attribute the said power to the pictures language evokes. The tradition of a vociferous dominant culture who speaks to and for, while everybody else listens patiently has artificially heightened language's role. The dominant culture's cogent refusal to stretch language further explains why alternative pictures reside beyond their reach.

Language is comprised of words that become meaningful only when repeated in regular patterns. No doubt, there are never enough words to carry our thoughts and even fewer patterns lending clarity to our beliefs. As language-blammers fear, language does transmit the beliefs which affect knowledge's direction. Language-blammers wrongly believe that changing the language will yield pictures that satisfy their version of reality. Barbara Jordan's image upends racism and sexism, while replacing woman with womyn only changes its spelling.

However, the real game is the production of knowledge. Inevitably, there is a pile of competing pictures of the world that posit different conceptions of reality, from which one picture is generally accepted as knowledge. Every time a cultural shift repaints the picture, the language is stretched to accommodate the altered underlying beliefs which construct knowledge. The clearest example is the public's conception of Russia, which has changed dramatically in my lifetime; painted first as Cold War Enemy and then further demonized by Reagan's Great Bear analogy, but now portrayed as the prodigal son, only because they're an unlimited market for our products and technology.

Since action speaks louder than words, no rephrasing could ever overcome the desire for particular pictures, implicit in our actions. Barthes has remarked that the "site of textual pleasure

is not the relation of mimic and model (imitative relation), but solely that of dupe and model (relation of desire, production) (Barthes Reader p. 409).^{*} Fascism-leery Barthes fosters the pleasure inherent to initiating unreal images (his *dupe*) that one desires, enabling one to live according to my *ethics of pleasure*.

Similar to the pleasure akin to the power of action over words and Barthes's *relation of desire*, the portrait (mimic and model), as an image of identity, is secondary to those images manifested by an individual's desire for particular images (dupe and model). Unfortunately, current gaze-crazy aesthetics continues to privilege representation (imitative relation), as an image of reality, over figuration (relation of desire), which divulges how the image's subject exists in the world: the mimic thrives on the status quo, but the dupe plays at the *site* where language must be stretched.

Epistemologists place culture prior to language. When language-blaters privilege language over the culture, which informs the structure of a language (vocabulary, idioms, syntax), they impose a grave misunderstanding. Language alone is merely a tool, whose use is driven by its function. Stubborn analytic philosophers like W. V. Quine take this one step further, as he claims that the conditions of intersubjectivity and stimulus meaning make language theory-free (not theory-laden), or culturally neutral (Pursuit of Truth, 1990).

In fact, Wittgenstein's project in the Tractatus was to identify the knowledge, or picture of reality (das bild), a truly neutral language (logical propositions) would represent. "What the picture must have in common with reality is its form of representation (Tractatus 2.17).^{*} Beyond Wittgenstein's vacuum, linking the form of representation (language) to the picture of reality (knowledge) is absurd. Rather, language can be stretched to construct any picture, once the mind, under the spell of an open heart, has either conceived of an alternative picture or is ready to grasp an existing one.

However, I would argue, as language-blaters do and Wittgenstein later concedes in Philosophical Investigations, that language is not entirely neutral. Wittgenstein's resolve "Mean what you say and say what you mean" suggests that as long as language is grounded in culture, it is not impersonal, let alone neutral. Moreover, even though one shares a language, one eventually

applies it differently (depending upon how one first learned the language and which usage one finds most meaningful), further emphasizing how personal language usage can be. I would even go so far as to term each personal language-style an idiolect, or private language, a notion that is strictly forbidden in analytic philosophy. Truly, communication multiplies language's elasticity, as speaking stretches it once, listening stretches it again, and responding to the listener stretches it even further (the third stretch). Contrarily, a neutral language is stretch-free.

Human communication depends on our capacity to stretch the language, to bridge diverse pictures of reality. Isaiah Berlin describes the beauty of communication despite *real* differences in cultures, thusly:

Intercommunication between cultures in time and space is only possible, because what makes men human is common to them, and acts as a bridge between them. ... We are free to criticize the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them simply as subjective, the products of creatures in different circumstances with different tastes from our own, which do not speak to us at all.
(The Crooked Timber of Humanity, p. 11).

Once language is accepted as flexible, language-blaters are in jeopardy. Consider new magazines like VIBE or WIRED. Supposedly published in English, they are initially incomprehensible until one absorbs enough vocabulary and syntax to read the pictures these varied cultures (African-American and cyberpunk) are constructing. If language were truly neutral, one would never find oneself translating within a language, as one often does when talking to a new friend, reading poetry or interpreting art.

Moreover, cultures that are less flexible, like French or German are more likely to produce linguistics who conflate language and culture. That language-blaters have failed to acknowledge the significance of culture can also be attributed to cultural anthropologists who tend to

define each culture in terms of its language and soil. While this definition accounts for regional dialects, it fails to account for burgeoning languages associated with sub-cultures and professional cultures.

If language-blatners want a culprit, they should arrest ideology, which surely has a strangle hold on the culture, as it censors any picture that dares to challenge its validity. Since changing the language has never altered societal beliefs, then one must uncover the desired pictures of reality that the language is failing to depict. New vocabulary and syntax are born from each culture's inability to construct satisfactory pictures. For example, the societal mores that assume slaves should be subservient to their masters has been changed in cultures where thinkers have proven that the picture of equality is a greater good than that of slavery.

Like a scientist testing a theory, the only way to challenge cultural ideology is to prove that its attendant culture is generating false knowledge, via language's transmission of beliefs. When the picture of reality is proven erroneous, the culture's ideology must flex to remain harmonious. The model of knowledge in continuous flux recalls Diotima's argument that the mortal body achieves immortality as the soul renews, because the act of recollection preserves knowledge, ensuring the immortality of each new image of reality.

(T) he soul, whose habits, tempers, opinions, desires, pleasures, always pains, fears, never remain in the same in any one of us, but are coming and going; and equally true of knowledge... not only do the sciences in general spring up and decay... we are never the same... For what is implied in the "recollection," but the departure of knowledge, which is ever being forgotten, and is renewed and preserved by recollection... And in this way, Socrates, the mortal body, or mortal anything, partakes of immortality (Plato, "The Love of Beauty," Philosophies of Art & Beauty, Albert Hofstadler and Richard Kuhns, editors, p. 73).

But, proving that the picture is false is often a matter of politics or endurance, as Thomas Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions describes.

Since the real challenge involves altering ideology via politics, perhaps it would be simpler just to continue blaming language! This *problem* is what leads Richard Rorty to conclude that "All that matters is what we can do to persuade people to act differently than in the past... anything that philosophy can do to free up our imagination a little is all to the political good, for the freer the imagination of the present the likelier it is that future social practices will be different from past practices (Rorty, "Some Theses About Pragmatism, Deconstruction and Feminism, 1992)."

So, the moral of this stretchy tale is: "Make New Pictures," which is also art's appeal and ultimate goal. In fact, new images of reality engender new knowledge. "Nothing politically useful happens until people begin saying things never said before -- thereby permitting us to visualize new practices, as opposed to analyzing old ones (Ibid.)." All that can be said of language is that it will facilitate our saying new things and visualizing new practices.

Language-blatners have seemingly never considered that the corruption of images is not their construction via language, but the incongruity of virtue and ideology. Moreover, language-blatners dismiss words like virtue, mostly because the twentieth century has irresponsibly twisted its concept. On one extreme is short-term virtue (GOP and mafia-like virtue), which privileges selfish motives as the direct way to determine how one should behave in terms of familial obligations, business protocol and the state's foreign policy. On the other extreme is long-term virtue (the after life), which associates virtue with carrying out some abstract good, as manifested by obedience and blind allegiance to the will of God, as gleaned from each religion's imposed interpretation of its law. Neither cliché of virtue, the short-term or long-term variety, bear any resemblance to Diotima's vision of virtue.

Rather, virtue, as defined by generosity of the spirit, posits beauty as duty, or an ethics of aesthetic. Beauty depends on the *individual's* capacity to extend oneself beyond reality. Duty is doing what one *must* do and so *chooses* for oneself, at all costs. Virtue, in term of beauty as duty, facilitates carrying out my *ethics of pleasure*. Though seemingly solipsistic, this differs from short-term

virtue, because the individual must pay a cost (gives more than one gets), rather than demand the rewards (takes more than one gives). The resultant lifestyle parallels Kant's notion of Beauty as " pleasure without interest. " Contrarily, short-term virtue yields usury.

Oddly enough, many language-blaters have spent their lives making a case for transgression, when *genuine* transgression is actually a virtue. Genuine transgression is not *feigned*, the way much that tries to transgress today is really just masquerading as transgression. By the *beauty as duty* account of virtue, the Marquis de Sade is one of the most virtuous men in history, for he gave us some of the most extraordinary images of reality, which we recollect every day.

Diotima wants Socrates to contemplate the vast sea of beauty, to be in boundless love of wisdom unlike " a servant in love with the beauty of one... himself a slave mean and narrow-minded (*Ibid.* p. 76). " She instructs the lover of beauty to experience four stages: 1) beauty of the outward form; 2) beauty of the mind, or virtuous soul; 3) beauty of institutions and laws; and 4) the science of beauty everywhere (*Ibid.*).

For Diotima's finale, she scolds a self-satisfied Socrates for not pursuing divine beauty. Here, she offers the world's greatest advice ever given, but evidently never taken, imploring philosophy to bring forth new images of reality grounded in virtue, rather than mere images of beauty. This recalls Flory's request for new visualized practices, as well as Barthes's distinction between figuration and representation.

This, my dear Socrates, is that life above all others which man should live, in the contemplation of beauty absolute: a beauty which if you once beheld, you would see not to be after the measures of gold, garments, and fair boys and youths...

But what if man had eyes to see... divine beauty... not clogged with the pollutions of mortality and all the colours and vanities of human life...

Remember how in that communion only, beholding beauty with the eye of the mind, he will be able to bring forth, not images of beauty, but reality, and bringing forth and nourishing true virtue to become the friend of God and be immortal, if mortal man may. Would that be an ignoble life? (*Ibid.* p. 77).

Without an acknowledged place for virtue, we will never experience divine beauty.

Los Angeles, April 1995.