

THE DIFFICULTY OF READING¹

To read, to read a book, is, like all the other really human occupations, a utopian task. I call “utopian” every action whose initial intention cannot be fulfilled in the development of its activity and which has to be satisfied with approximations essentially contradictory to the purpose which had started it. Thus “to read” begins by signifying the project of understanding a text fully. Now this is impossible. It is only possible with a great effort to extract a more or less important portion of what the text has tried to say, communicate, make known; but there will always remain an “illegible” residue. It is, on the other hand, probable that, while we are making this effort, we may *read*, at the same time, into the text; that is, we may understand things which the author has not “meant” to say, and, nevertheless, he has “said” them; he has pre-

Translated by Clarence E. Parmenter.

1. [*Diogenes* having expressed the desire to publish an unedited text of José Ortega y Gasset, his heirs have sent us the following pages which form the beginning of a rough draft destined to be entitled “Commentary on the *Symposium* of Plato.” It consists of a body of notes which have been prepared not for publication but to accompany the reading of the text of Plato during a university seminar. Although neither finished nor in shape for publication, the first part, which we present here, the only one which is assembled, adds interesting elements to the author’s doctrine on linguistics and ontology.]

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sented them to us involuntarily—even more, against his professed purpose. This twofold condition of speech, so strange and antithetical, appears in two principles of my “Axioms for a New Philology,” which are as follows:

1. Every utterance is deficient—it says less than it wishes to say.
2. Every utterance is exuberant—it conveys more than it plans.²

But this last, this unpremeditated gift with which the exuberance of speech provides us, does not compensate for its essential deficiency and does not make the operation of reading more successful, if by reading we mean merely understanding what the author *wished* to say. But precisely the fact that we very soon notice that a good part of what the author actually is saying escapes us—for example, the somewhat precise signification of this or that word—reveals to us that reading cannot consist solely of simply receiving whatever the written phrases pour over us, that reading is not merely sliding over the text, but that it is necessary to extricate ourselves from the text, to abandon our passivity and construct laboriously for ourselves all the mental reality not *expressed* in it, but which is indispensable in order to understand it more satisfactorily. Then we are thankful for the results of all those supererogatory investigations which we had discovered as if behind the phrases read and which the author did not intend to communicate to us or even intended to conceal from us. The result of this is that *every* text appears to us as a mere fragment of a whole *X* which it is necessary to reconstruct.

This may seem strange, but it cannot appear questionable; in order to understand what someone wished to say (meant), we need to know much more than he wished to say and to know about the author much more than he himself knew. Therefore Kant was only too right when he demanded that one should understand Plato better than Plato understood himself.

This work is laborious; it requires diverse techniques and very complicated theories, some general, others particular, which we shall gradually encounter in our reading of the *Symposium*. The ensemble of these efforts, some technical, others the result of spontaneous perspicacity, is called “interpretation,” and the art of it, “hermeneutics.” Reading is not, then, an indefinite thing. Every reality has to be defined ac-

2. See in my book in preparation, *Velázquez*, chap. i, “The Resuscitation of Pictures,” which will soon appear (collected in the volume *Papeles sobre Velázquez y Goya*). See also on this theme chaps. xi and xii of *El Hombre y la gente*.

ording to its complete form, of which all the others are deficient modes. In this sense, to read is to interpret and not anything else. This is not, therefore, an easy task, to understand what someone has wished to say!

To speak is one of the things that man does, and speech gushes out as reactive behavior in response to a situation. This situation may be instantaneous, lasting, permanent in a man or constant in man, in "humanity." Humanity is the name of a situation which has lasted for approximately a million years.³ If we represent these diverse coefficients of "perdurance" of situations in the form of areas, we see how each situation is inscribed in a larger one which carries and excites it, except the "constant" humanity which serves as something absolute in relation to all the rest. These areas or strata of situation form, therefore, an organic hierarchy so that the more transitory situations suppose the more stagnant and are based upon them.

The fact that we understand today the *Geometry* of Euclid—until recently it was a textbook in English colleges—does not indicate that the language of Euclid, because it is mathematical, *always* has meaning, and not only with reference to a single situation, but rather that certain components of our present situation continue to be the same which formed part of the situation in which Euclid lived and which induced him to say what he said about geometry. Homer, who with a little effort would have been able to comprehend the language of Euclid, would not, however, have understood any phrase of the work because he was ignorant of the situation from which all those statements issued. In fact, only he "who is in the secret" that one of the occupations to which Man may devote himself is that very refined one which is called "making science, theory" can find the meaning of the statements of Euclid. Homer, on seeing those figures of triangles and polygons, would have believed that the subject matter was magical conjurations or, if not that, games to amuse children, because both situations—the one which leads to the practice of magic and the one which leads to play—were certainly known to him. Before understanding any concrete statement, it is necessary to perceive clearly "what it is all about" in this statement and "what game is being played." This last expression is less capricious or "literary" than the reader has at first supposed. For, as we shall see, Plato was much more right than he suspected when he qualified human

3. The philosophical concept of "situation" as a constitutive ingredient of human life already appears in Auguste Comte (see, e.g., *Discours sur l'esprit positif*).

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life as essentially a game—*paidia*.⁴ If man had a “nature,” a fixed existence such as mineral, vegetable, and animal have, we could know once for all what his behavior signified, but, as this is not true, man in each epoch devotes his life to different ends and always more or less new ones—ends which he himself has invented and which are the “convention” or *tacit assumption* of his actuations and occupations. These only have meaning in relation to that very free convention. That, then, is the definition of the game—the “conventional” occupation par excellence.⁵ And, vice versa, the daily fact that we are unable to understand a book without previously reconstructing the *conventional situation* in which it was written is, in its turn, an unceasing proof of the playful character which through one of its faces human life exhibits.

Man needs to “say”—let us not now enter into the investigation of why—and, in order to serve this necessity, he possesses some means. The principal organ or means of saying is language. It is far from being the only one. Let us not embark, either, on suggesting what the others are. Instead let us make it clear that linguists have an *a limine* insufficient notion of language—for various reasons, all of them so simple that they fall short of evident truth. The first is that linguists contemplate languages “already developed” and observe the modifications which are produced in them in the course of time. This has permitted them to elaborate the most perfect science of all those which treat of the humanities. But present-day linguistic science is a macroscopic theory. If there is to be real progress in it, it must shift to the microscopic.⁶ For this it will be necessary to scrutinize the reality “language” in its radical profundity, and for this, in turn, it is indispensable not only to take languages as they are “already developed” but to succeed in seeing language *in statu nascendi* or, in other words, to represent the conditions of the possibility of something like language.⁷ Then it will be seen—and this is evident—that the most powerful condition for anyone to succeed in saying something is that he be capable of observing profound silence about everything else. Only a being capable of renunciation, of

4. *Laws* 803C.

5. See J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens*.

6. At various points at the same time, unconnected to each other, a prodigiously microscopic tendency is now penetrating this level. Such are linguistic geography, the study of language from dialects, *patois*, *argots*, languages of professional groups, stylistics, etc.

7. The subject, then, has nothing to do with the problem of the origin of language.

the asceticism which takes for granted the omission of speaking of many things which it would like to communicate in order to succeed thus in saying even one, can arrive at forming a language. If man had persisted in saying (therefore, naming) the shade of white of this paper as distinguished from the white of the other white papers, language would not have been created, because it would have overflowed into infinities. For this reason no language in the world has a word to designate the shade of this paper—that is, of something which we see with complete clarity and might very well wish to express. The chromatic shade is ineffable. The common idea that something is ineffable because it is complicated, sublime, or divine is erroneous. Ineffability has many dimensions—some, in fact, extreme and pathetic, but others, like the one referred to, edifyingly trivial. Language in its authentic reality is born and lives and is like a perpetual combat and compromise between the desire to speak and the necessity of silence. Silence, ineffability, is a positive and intrinsic factor of language. Each society practices a different selection from the enormous mass of what might be said in order to succeed in saying some things, and this selection creates the organism which is language. Let it be recorded, then, that language from the beginning is an amputation of saying. I do not believe that it would be difficult, by transposing graphically this conception of language, to sketch its contours in such a way that, upon superposing them, one could observe with complete clarity their coincidence and divergencies in declaring and in being silent. Each one is modeled by a different selective spirit which acts upon the vocabulary, on the morphology, on the syntax, on the structure of the phrase and period.

It is surprising that a master as exemplary as Meillet would say: “Every language expresses whatever the society of which it is the organ needs. A language of semicivilized people will not be capable of expressing philosophical theories, but this does not result from its linguistic structure. With any phonetic system, with any grammar, anything can be expressed.”⁸ This is not a good occasion for complete discussion of this thesis, which is an example of the ineradicable optimism installed in scientific thought since the latter burst into flight in Greece. The formula “everything that a society needs” is too uncompromising, but even so we wonder with what gauge Meillet measures and determines

8. *Bulletin de la Société Française de Philosophie*, discussion of November 22, 1922.

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the necessities of a society. We suspect that a tautology is hidden in his words and that he confuses the necessities which a society has with those which satisfy and the reality of a language with what would be a language which was fully satisfactory, that is, perfect.⁹ Such an excessive affirmation as the end of the paragraph quoted above could rightfully be made only by a person who has not been satisfied with observing the linguistic facts and the *result* which are the languages but who, in the face of all these realities of speech, has kept in view the possibilities of that function and has started from them in order to form for himself a radical notion of language.¹⁰

Language consists, then, of a previous retraction and, as it were, asceticism of speaking which accompanies all its beginning, its organization, and its development, since it is clear that language is never made (finished) but that it is always making itself—I mean, being born. This *fieri* of the reality “language” consists not of the superficial modifications—although important—which the linguist investigates and tries to reduce almost to laws, but of the changes in the profound tendencies which engender enormous phenomena like, for example, the one which led Meillet himself to write a study entitled “Can the English Language Be Considered as an Indo-European Language?”

We may summarize this first condition of language by saying: *Language is always limited (bounded) by a frontier of ineffability.* This limitation is constituted by that which absolutely *cannot be said* in a language or in any language.

But on top of this there is a second limitation, that is, all that which

9. Note that this optimism—whose meaning and origin we are going to detect in this commentary on the *Symposium*—is not linguistic only. Because language is a typical function of society, it means that the latter is a reality normally perfect, since it satisfies its necessities sufficiently. There is, then, an underlying sociological optimism. This ingenuous belief that what exists simply because it exists has to be perfect comes to us from Plato by way of the Scholastic aqueducts. In the words of Meillet, it is taken for granted that a civilized people is capable of expressing its philosophical theories, which is a pious illusion.

10. It is the most substantial difference between the thinking of today and that of a half-century ago, which was still “positivistic.” The latter was being set up, suddenly, in the realities (the famous “facts”); present-day sciences, however, especially the physical sciences, in the face of a problem begin by constructing the system of its possibilities and only afterward arrange the facts in that formal quadricle. He who sees the reality of a subject cannot see its shape, because he lacks a background against which its silhouette may stand out—that is, its *form*. This background is the map of the possibilities (and of course impossibilities). Real language can only be investigated fundamentally on the basis of possible-impossible language.

the language *could* say but which every language passes over in silence because it expects that the hearer can and should himself suppose it or add it. This silence is on a different level from the first: it is not absolute but relative; it proceeds not from fatal ineffability but from a conscious economy. As opposed to the ineffable (unspeakable), I call this conscious reticence of language the unspoken (*inefado*). Here we can save explanations by quoting a few words of Wilhelm von Humboldt, who perhaps has had the greatest sensitivity to the reality of “language”:

In the grammar of every language there is a part that is expressly signified and another which remains tacit which has to be added [*stillschweigend hinzugedachter Theil*]. In the Chinese language, that first part is found in an infinitely small proportion in relation to this second part. . . . In every language, the context of the elocution has to come to the assistance of the grammar. In Chinese that context is the basis for comprehension, and frequently the only way to derive the construction is from it [the syntax]. Even the verb reveals itself only in the concept of the noun. . . . The Chinese language, thanks to the strange phenomenon of this pure and simple *renunciation* of an advantage common to the other languages, brings about that the relations and oppositions among the ideas appear clearer in it than in any other language.¹¹

Here we have, then, a second stratum of limitation in the expression of a language. It is curious that linguists frequently fail to perceive this, and the fact that in speaking a language one understands or communicates what the language leaves unspoken prevents their noticing that the language does not say it. In general, I do not see that sufficient distinction is made between what the language says and what we say “with it.”

But there is a third reason which makes evident to us how far linguistics is from having a full intuition of what language is. The most primitive peoples cannot understand each other with their own language alone but need the complement of gesticulation. For this reason they cannot talk in the dark. Frobenius has called attention to the fact that the natives of Nigeria do not understand well the European who speaks their language well, for the simple reason that he gesticulates much less than they do.¹²

11. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke*, V, 319. Quoted in Stenzel, *Filosofia del lenguaje* (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1935). For example, imagine a sentence composed only of nouns in which, for example, by the word “race” we had to understand the idea “he ran,” together with all the other modes, tenses, numbers, and persons of the verb “to run.”

12. Still in New York (Harlem) the Negro preacher who preaches the Palm Sunday sermon, when he says that Jesus mounted upon a young she-ass to enter Jerusalem, places

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This leads us to note that, if linguists understand by “to speak” to make use of a language, they are committing a grave error, because language as speech is not in fact articulation only but is completed by the modulations of the voice, the expression of the face, the gesticulation of the members, and the total somatic posture of the person. Therefore, the language of the linguist is only a fragment of language insofar as it means “to speak.” And this does not mean that he should busy himself with that which he left out, but it does mean that, in view of it, he should treat language seriously as a fragmentary reality and not as an *integrum*.¹³

himself astride the pulpit. “In Loango every one moves his tongue in his own fashion or—better, the language comes out of the mouth of each one according to the circumstances and the disposition in which he is. This use of language is—I do not think of a better comparison—as free and natural as the sounds emitted by birds” (Peschnel-Loesche, *Die Loango-Expedition*, III, 91–95). In other terms, the words are not something rigid and fixed once and for all, but the buccal gesture discloses, sketches, and expresses graphically, in the same way as the gesture of the hands (Lévy-Bruhl, *Les Fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* [Paris: Alcan, 1910], pp. 182 and 186). Let it be added to this that many primitive languages consist not solely of words but also of fixed gestures of direct and formal grammatical signification. They are languages which, therefore, *cannot* be written, at least in the sense in which the classical languages and ours are written. “The fact that gestures have not been studied does not prevent us from being forced to recognize that certain apparent obscurities of the written language would not be obscure in the spoken language” (L. Homburger, *Les Langues négro-africains* [Paris: Payot, 1941], p. 64).

Many years ago I said that if English and Spanish adults are, at least among Occidentals, the men who have the greatest difficulty in learning foreign languages, it is because their feeling of personal dignity is more overdeveloped than that of others, although both for different and in part antagonistic reasons. The bond between these two phenomena, apparently so far apart, is that, in learning another language, if it is not in childhood, one has to act imitatively, abandon one's own personality, and “play” at being the German or the Frenchman, etc. Imitation, in adults, implies indefectibly a certain amount of histrionism, farce, and clowning, which, of course, is resisted by two peoples so terribly serious as these two, so incapable of transmigrating from their own *ethos* to the foreign one, finding it so difficult to be anything but themselves. Now this would not be the case if language were only pronunciation—movements technically useful for their end—and not, as happens, effective gesticulation—expressive movements which emanate lyrically from our personality which has been forming itself since infancy in the collective mold of our nation. In a word, the Englishman and the Spaniard are ashamed to speak other languages. It is for this reason that a language is in truth most radically an *idio-ma*.

13. This is what I should chiefly have to oppose to this opinion of Vendryès: “Whatever may be the variations of intonation and gesture which the same phrase undergoes, the linguist may disregard them if they do not modify the grammatical structure of the phrase.”

Macroscopic grammar, perhaps, might think thus, but present-day grammar, let it not be forgotten, already has, in addition to others less highly developed, a new dimension—stylistics—which investigates finer “modifications in the grammatical structure of the phrase” which in many cases originate in intonation and gesture.

Although, as I have indicated, this is not the proper time for us to go deeply into a theory of language, let us take advantage of the scrutiny which the previous observation offers us. It, in fact, reveals to us that, in its root and authentic being, language is a gesticulation with sonorous effects, because the laryngeal and buccal organs intervene, but that it is really inseparable from the total gesticulation in which our whole body takes part and which is what strictly should be called "talk." To cut language out of this magnificent expressive complex is justified because the verbal gesture results in sonorous signs—words—which are relatively fixed and to which are ascribed relatively precise and abstract meanings. This makes it possible to compare it with the other types of gestures,¹⁴ and, thus artificially isolated, a first elaboration of grammar would be possible. But this grammar should always keep alive the consciousness that its work, of course eminent and illustrious, began with a crime: cleaving the expressive integrity of man and leaving behind unheeded the root of language or language in its root and ultimate reality—that is, what it has of gesture or, better still, in a partial way, in the general gesticulation which human flesh is.

The most superficial examination of the evolution of grammar should have led to this warning. Grammar begins by analyzing the verbal phenomenon insofar as this is a heard¹⁵ word. For millenniums this

14. The clear notion of what are the specific characteristics of language as compared to the other signs or symbols of expression will be found, *for the first time*, in the eminent book of Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie* (Karl Bühler, *Teoría del lenguaje* [Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1950]). Bühler, however, limits himself to bringing out the "significative" character of verblality, which is, in fact, what constitutes the part of speech *sensu stricto* that language possesses. In this way he succeeds, marvelously in my judgment, in creating a discipline which rigorously deserves to be called "theory of language" and represents a level of consideration more elevated and abstract not only than a particular grammar but than general linguistics. But automatically it omits the radical reality of language or *speech* which can be contemplated only on an ultimate level, that is, "philosophical." (See on this radical reality of language the author's *El Hombre y la gente*, chaps. xi and xii.)

15. Nor even this with sufficient purity. Grammar is a theory which, like all theories, was born of a need—more precisely, of a *new* need originating in the invention of a new technique: writing. This pleasant idea—of representing the heard words with visual signs and of bringing to pass deliberately that a world of visualities should function as a *symbol* of a world of auditions—has a development with an inspiring history, as every great technique always has. In the development and progressive perfecting, a critical point was reached which required a new technical idea, opposed to the initial one, which fortunately transcends and negates the initial one: the substitution of the alphabet for the ideogram. But this was impossible if the complex sounds which words are were not first analyzed in order to discover in them primary sounds which are repeated in them. Probably this caused the discovery of the idea of "element" which was to be so infinitely fertile in the whole field

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first grammar did not take a single essentially new step forward until, in the nineteenth century, it learned to become sufficiently humble to notice this very trivial fact: that the word, before being a sound and being heard, has to be pronounced and that it is therefore first a muscular movement—laryngeal, buccal, and nasal. When the verbal sound was traced back to its genesis as a system of articulatory muscular habits, phonetics was born and, with it, the prodigious rigor of the new grammar.¹⁶ But in this idea of language as muscular activity the ancient idea of language as audition continued to be *too* active. In fact, phonetics starts with the idea that the speaker executes his movements of pronunciation guided by an eagerness to produce an ideal of sound—the word just as he has heard it. And there is no doubt that this cycle of “audition—approximate pronunciation—new sound” acts permanently in the language “already formed.” But in the radical *feri* to which I was referring before and which operates not only in the utopian origin but also in the great lines of its development—therefore, at all times—the decisive thing is not the auditive ideal of the word which exists but the pure intimate preference of the speaker for certain movements of the chest, larynx, mouth, and nasal passages. And this preference—spontaneous, unconscious, lyric—is not a movement toward the end of emitting a definite sound which issues from the human body without a useful end—the condition of the expressive gesture. The result of this is that phonetics must again be taken back to a function previous to pronunciation itself, that is, to gesticulation, and language must be studied in its root as pure gesture.

What do I mean by this? Nothing vague. It originates in an observation of the human mind. To the elemental sound was assigned an elemental symbol: the letter—*gramma*—and, lo, grammar is invented. Having originated during the invention of writing, grammar abandons its primary attention to the *heard* word and consists more and more, until the nineteenth century, of a consideration of the *written* word. Not in vain is it called “grammar”—and not *logática* or *epedática*, which is what a linguistics would have been which was chiefly concerned with audition and even one which might have resulted from ideographic writing. So much for the origin. In regard to its first organization into a body of doctrine, the principal labor was due to the necessity of studying the Homeric text in a form which facilitated its transmission to educated boys. The text was unintelligible because of its archaism and conventionality.

16. An exceedingly ingenious and interesting attempt to return to the auditive theme is the discipline which, as opposed to phonetics, has been called “phonology,” initiated a few years before the war by Prince Trubetzkoy in the school of Prague. It would not be useful to our subject for us to attempt here a brief explanation of the phonological point of view.

tion motivated—or which should have been motivated—by the necessity of facilitating the teaching of foreign languages. If you want someone to learn to speak English well, the first thing to tell him, before teaching him a single “English” word, is to amuse himself from time to time by speaking his own language with the lower jaw thrust forward as if it were slightly heavy. This automatically brings about a great reduction in the movement of the lips, and almost all activity is forced upon the tongue, larynx, and nasal cavities. English phonetics emanates entirely from a certain posture of the face. This posture is the normal gesture of the Englishman, and, like every gesture, it expresses something involuntarily, and what this gesture expresses is plainly and simply the basic and lasting way the insular Anglo-Saxon confronts life. Let us suppose that one is trying to teach French. We should instruct the student to advance both lips as if to kiss, as if two people were kissing each other to their mutual delight. Such is the expressive gesture of a man for whom to live is to sip the world like a cordial and then to smack his lips, autocritical, underscorer of himself: it is the Frenchman.

It is not enough, therefore, to recognize that in a certain place the people when they speak move their lips with maximum frequency in a certain manner, press the tongue against certain regions of the buccal cavity, and send the vibratile air against the nasal cavities so that it may resound in them. It is also necessary to make formally explicit the character of pure preferences which all this has. The people of every nation relish living in precisely those movements of their muscles and not in others, as is the case with the rest of their gesticulations. Now the strange phenomenon of the expressive gesture has not been explained except by admitting that its function is to mimic symbolically our imaginary behaviors. The furious man who pounds the table with his fist symbolically smashes someone of whom the patient table is the unforeseen representative.

My idea is, then, that the articulatory moment of language is secondary in respect to the gesticulatory and that the gestures with which a language is pronounced symbolize the ways of human life which a nation prefers.¹⁷

17. This idea is beginning to find experimental confirmation. Dr. Oscar Russell and R. A. S. Paget have demonstrated that the larynx and neighboring cavities change their “expression” when “the expressive gesture of the face changes” (see *International Congress of Phonetic Sciences* [Amsterdam, 1932] and *Psychology of Language* [Paris: Alcan, 1933], p. 99). Elsewhere Sievers has given evidence of a different intonation when the same word is used in the nominative and in the accusative.

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This is what I wish to suggest when I say that language is, first, gesture. If it were urgent to be complete here and expose all my thoughts on this theme, I would have to add that, while a definite style of gesture is characteristic of each language, so also originally was a definite melody. But it is not necessary to become involved in this new question now. Gesture, melody, and therefore lyricism—this, first of all, is what speech is, because this is what language or idiom is. It is not surprising, since lyricism is and has to be the principal thing in man, who is a tremendous lyrical animal.¹⁸

Let us recall where all this is leading. We started from language or speech as the principal means, if not the only one, upon which man depends for expression. But language as language *sensu strictu* is a *nativitate* limited by the necessity of being silent about many things because of ineffability. To this limitation language adds a second one, leaving many indispensable things unsaid, which it is hoped the listener will add himself: this is the unspoken. Finally, language *sensu strictu* is a mere fragment of human expressivity; it is the disintegration of gesticulatory life, with which we arrive at a third limitation. Let us now dispense with euphemism and declare that language essentially, and not by accidental cause, suffers from these three defects or deficiencies; that language does not attain its end with sufficiency and therefore is a badly constituted reality in and of itself. But all this, in turn, was to the purpose that if to read is to understand the meaning of a text, and that if the means of saying it—language—is already in itself imperfect, it should not be surprising that reading always turns out to be a problematical operation.

The difficulty increases in grave proportions if we pass from the abstract contemplation of the limitations of the instrument with which we express—language—to the inspection of the concrete expression and, especially, the text, the book.

The book is a fixed expression, “petrified”; it is, rigorously, something which has been said. But authentic speech, as we indicated at the beginning, is that which issues from a situation as a reaction to it. Removed from its original situation, what is said is only half of itself. In fact, the fundamental speaking is the dialogue or group conversation in which the interlocutors are in each other’s presence and entirely submerged in a definite physical, moral, mental, and, in a word, vital situation. This

18. The “why” of all this, which sounds so like a phrase, is not to be explained here.

situation is evident to all, and what they say takes it for granted and does not express it because it is known; it is passed over in silence, and the talk devotes itself to enunciating precisely that which is not evident, what the situation leads up to but is not in itself.

The unit or "cell" of speech is the sentence. The sentence is composed of words, that is, the words are pieces from which the machine of the sentence is put together. They alone, isolated, do not function; they are not machines, as the pieces of a machine are not machines. This suggests that the isolated word does not properly have a meaning.¹⁹ If from the sentence, "The lion is the king of the desert," we separate the word "lion" and leave it isolated or disengaged, it loses all signification and is only a point of departure for innumerable possible significations. We do not know whether this solitary "lion" is the wild beast of the African steppe, or the café "Golden Lion," or Leo XIII, or Leo the Hebrew, or "Leon and Castile." It becomes charged with meaning only when we refer it to the sentence as a whole, when it acts *within the verbal contour* which is the sentence. I do not know whether all words are in fact equivocal, but the investigation would not be important because it is unquestionable that all of them can be equivocal.²⁰ The sentence, in turn, is likely to be ambiguous; since it is the basis for possible diverse meanings, it therefore also does not *have* in truth *one* meaning. It demands that we refer it to the rest of the text, the page, the chapter,

19. The question of whether it is the sentence which precedes the word or vice versa brings up innumerable questions which cannot even be touched upon here. What I say above tries to express only something which no one disputes: that the sentence is the *central* form of language, to which all the rest lead or from which all the rest descend.

20. The phenomenon of ambiguity, or multiplicity of meanings of words, is a good example from which to realize the necessity for a discipline which may study languages on a level more profound (or more elevated) than the linguistic level. This reveals, as the most natural thing in the world, that this fact is true of all languages. But what would indeed be natural, then, is that linguistics should take another step and should consider the phenomenon as a constitutive character of language which would be the equivalent of recognizing in language a new consubstantial defect. But in this case it would be obliged to explain this congenital infirmity of language by causes also constitutive, and the least it could do is try to derive it from the change in meaning which happens to words. But, with the phenomenon of change of meaning, linguistics acts in the same manner. It declares the normality of its presence in all languages; but, when it arranges its facts and explains them, it treats them as though they were mere accidents which happen to words, just as an automobile accident could happen to a linguist.

Read, to refer to a masterly work, the chapter (xii) entitled "Wandel der Wortbedeutung" ("Change of Meaning") which Hermann Paul dedicates to the subject in his *Prinzipien der Sprachgeschichte*, a book truly enchanting, in addition to being magnificent as a work of science.

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and, finally, the book. The sentence likewise does not *function*, nor is it what it is without a contour around it. This contiguous contour of a word, of a sentence, of a text, is the context. The context is a dynamic whole on which each part exercises influence, modifies the others, and, vice versa, receives pressures from the others. This is trivial. The opposite consideration is more interesting; that the context is, in fact, a *contour*, the most contiguous to the word, the only contour of it evident to the reader. It is a contour entirely verbal and nothing more, which permits us, nevertheless, to give to the word a meaning with first approximation. And what concerns us in this is to formulate the warning emphasizing at once how the word, when it functions and *says* something, does it in reference to a contour, which for the present is a mere context of other words. From its poorest signification, but already effective, active—and not inert, dissected, as it is in the dictionary—it consists, then, of an actuation on and in its contour. This means that *the contour forms a part of the word and that the word is activity*, pure dynamism, pressure of a contour on it and of it on a contour.

But the entire context, the whole book, in turn is “equivocal,” and this “ambiguity” of its entirety reacts on every one of its words. The works of Plato are a great example, we might almost say a scandalous example, of it. Because, in spite of their having been studied and commented upon in works which weigh an enormous number of tons, we have no clear and firm idea of what these writings are, “what these pages are really all about,” and “what game is being played in them.” Also we do not know whether they are written seriously or in jest or in a mixture of both. And this leads us to say that, in regard to innumerable sentences of Plato—literally, in respect to the major number—we do not know whether Plato really believed them or whether they were pure sport. *In a word, we do not understand Plato.* And this happens with the author who has had the greatest influence on occidental life! Now it will be understood why it is not capricious to initiate a reading of Plato’s *Symposium* by inviting reflection upon how devilish is this task of reading, which can so easily consist of *not* understanding what one is reading about.

The absence of the speaker leaves with us the written word disconnected from the expressive complex which was the body of it. No matter how accustomed we may be to reading, the better we know how to read, the more we shall feel the spectral sadness of the written word without a voice to fill it, without carnal mimicry to incorporate it and

make it concrete. Goethe was right when he said that the written word is a substitute, a miserable *Ersatz*, of the spoken word. It is not unfortunate to allude to this at the beginning of a lesson on the *Symposium*, because in the similar and contemporary work, the *Phaedrus*, Plato will make evident his antipathy to all books because of their content of cadaverous language and paralytic expression. And he insinuates most sharply something which is not usually noted: that the relation between the reader and the book is immoral, for neither can the book answer our objections but continues insolently and without risk saying always the same thing, nor can it energetically answer the imbecile reader by giving him—and this Plato does not say, but we can read it between the lines—a good blow on the nose. Dulled by the habituality of reading which is now almost second nature to us, we enjoy the evident advantages of the written word—the printed, in fact—and we have lost consciousness of the wastes and dangers which it brings with it. It has created in the last sixty years a growing undervaluation for the only word which is a word in its plenitude, the oral word, and of the most human marvels of all, which are dialogue, oratory, and rhetoric—the only true magic.²¹

Now this paradox manifests itself: one may say with a good deal of motivation that Plato is precisely the first “writer of books” who exists in Greece. The work of Thucydides had not yet been “published” when Plato began to write.²² Some “private” copies of Herodotus would be in existence. The book as an industrial and “public” entity had been invented a short time before, toward the middle of the fifth century, and, curiously, in order to “publish” the most famous tragedies.²³ Plato is the

21. These themes will be discussed during the reading of the *Symposium*, where more than in any other writing of Plato the fiction of dialogues and the fiction of discourses are united. Among the evils which the domination of the book has brought, let us mention here only the most immediate and material: the diminution of the vocabulary, in spite of the fact that the invention of printing, coinciding with the high tide of humanism, dumped upon the Romance dictionaries its load of Latinisms.

22. Of course it is not a book of Thucydides but the work of Thucydides, the *ergon* of his life. It is not written in order to write; it is consubstantial with him.

23. Therefore, as in our seventeenth century, the “parts” of Lope de Vega were published and the collections of the “most famous comedies.” It would seem that the dramatic work would have its maximum form of existence on the stage, and it would be less urgent than for any other production to give it another form of life in a book. In both cases, however, the contrary happened and this fact invites us to reflect upon the phenomenon, because it may perhaps put us on the track of what is the true (and problematical) condition of dramatic art.

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first author who “makes” books, from whom books are expected—to such an extent that in the Academy itself there was established a “printing office”—an atelier of copyists to publish the works which he kept producing. What is more, about 374 B.C. Plato “published” the *Republic*. To my knowledge, only Wilamowitz²⁴ has noted—and even he could not have concealed his astonishment—the enormity which, at that date, the idea of writing a book of such gigantic proportions represented. This was not a collection of cantos—which is how the Homeric poems were seen and read—or a series of narrations largely independent, like the stories of Herodotus, but a tremendously bulky book made up entirely of opinions or ideas, forming an architecture of such size and so intricate that it could not be made clear or manageable for young readers, who must have felt shipwrecked in such an ocean of writing.²⁵ That is to say that this man, an enemy of books, not only wrote books but did it in the superlative, on a gigantic scale. Let us try from the start gradually to become accustomed to these contradictions in the figure of Plato, since we are going to encounter many of them. But “to become accustomed” means here the opposite of “to become insensitive to.” It is a question of developing in ourselves the ability to be astonished and to be always alert when reading.

This contradiction, on the other hand, clarifies somewhat the no-less-strange fact that the Platonic writings always consist of dialogues which are supposed to have taken place or of speeches, it is pretended, which have been pronounced. It is understandable that one who does not believe much in the written word would try, when writing, to imitate as far as possible the spoken word.

It is necessary now to fix the attention solely on that aspect of the written word which makes it a deficient form of expression, leaving for another occasion the illustration of its excellent qualities. If Plato wrote volumes, let there be no doubt that it was not by chance or from incontinence but because, in spite of its congenital deficiency, the book is the only form in which it is possible to say certain things, which it would be useless to try to communicate even to the best friend in the closest of confidences.²⁶ But we find that the usual manner of considering lan-

24. Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Plato* (1919), I, 389.

25. Let us not speak of the *Laws* which Plato left unfinished and which is two-fifths larger than the *Republic*.

26. The relative impersonality and dehumanization of the written word, at the same time that it makes the elocution ghostlike, lends it a distance and anonymity, an “objectivity,” which are indispensable for the transmission of, for example, theories.

guage does not take it in its integral reality but quarters the reality and retains only one of its members. These pages would like superficially to reintegrate, step by step in logical order, our conception of language, to show what its reality is; and this implies its integrity.

Now, for us, the book is the absence of the author, and the written word the previous flight of the one who pronounces it. We have a speech without a speaker present. Why do we emphasize this so much? Is it not an exaggeration to give so much importance to the gesticulatory complex in which the word has its primitive form? We do this, however, because others attribute too little importance to it. There is no doubt that, if we could see Plato in the flesh, merely seeing him and hearing him speak would solve for us automatically some of the great problems which the reading of his books raises and which, lacking his presence, will perhaps remain perpetually enigmatic.²⁷

27. Therefore, the only thing we can do is to construct imaginatively the body of Plato, his carnal appearance, and, if we lack data which permit us to decide what shape he had, we shall be forced to imagine several different ones and to compare the different results which they give when placed behind his writings. Let no one grimace. This simply means using in history the hypothetical method which has permitted the forging of physics.