

Modes of Discourse

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The most central agony of intellectual work at the outset of the 21st century lies in the constant need to contend with modal shifts of discourse. For a while, the task lay in providing a discourse that would be adequate to something else, to a reality somehow underlying the discourse. This distinctively modern ambition now appears naive, even though still challenging and charming in itself, and productive in our technological society. Indeed, today we still need to understand that ambition, and thus to agonize over *its* mode of discourse as one among several.

Modal shifts, I say. That is, in reading or writing, speaking or listening, the chief question is whether and how we are changing modes. In order to talk about such shifts, I shall name five possible modes.

The first mode, let us call the *ordinary*. As we go about our daily business, we talk with one another, and our talk is integrated into our behavior. Words and deeds here run in parallel, and we hardly distinguish them. In any given situation of talk and behavior, something presents itself, people are responding, and the situation evolves into further presentations and further responses. Ordinary discourse is language in its innocence, transparent to the situation of shared presentations, shared responses, and shared anticipations. In our innocence we learn our mother tongue; any tongue we try to learn in itself, and not in tandem with daily behavior, we never really learn.

The second mode, let us call *alienated*. Our business grinds to a halt: we lose it, and we protest. Most commonly, we complain about the way things have turned out. At worst, we become hysterical, lose our heads as well. The innocence has vanished: we not only find foreign and objectionable the nameable presentations, responses, and anticipations in our situation, we also feel the situation as a whole weighing on us unnameably. Our speech evidences, at least to others, this unnameable weight—both in our oppressive silence and in our obsessive effort to name what we find objectionable.

The third, let us call *instructional*. In this mode, we are preparing ourselves for a business. Most commonly, we give or demand explanations: lay-outs of presentations to come, in advance of on-site responses. Discourse here is primarily anticipatory; in effect, we are at school. At worst, we refuse to budge until we get the lay-out straight (a form of self-deception articulated in the penultimate chapter of Kafka's *The Trial*). Here, too, the innocence of ordinary discourse has disappeared: we not only find given presentations, responses, and anticipations merely provisional, we also perceive our situation as a whole suspended in favor of a future business. Although instructional discourse always names the business looming in the preparation, it evidences its own vacuity in the present.

The fourth, let us call *idealizing*. Here we calculate purely and simply; we trace out formal connections which may apply to fiscal, engineering, or military questions but have validity independently of such applications. In classical Greece, and again in the Middle Ages, philosophers and educators considered idealization as training in transcendence. Copernicus, Descartes, Leibniz and others eventually contradicted the ancient supposition that such transcendence remained partial (geometry and arithmetic are “without substance,” Aristotle had remarked). Apart from this historical turning-point in the interpretation of idealization, training in it throws us back onto our own resources; idealizing, we must gird ourselves to justify each connection asserted. Such absolute responsibility in decision-making removes the last vestiges of innocence.

The fifth mode of discourse I would like to call *concrete*. Here the full weight of the human condition becomes evident. In this mode of discourse the issue, the future, is not another situation, but the very presence of those beings we have hitherto slid by in our actual situation: one responds in absolute responsibility for the difference between vacuity and plenitude. Concrete discourse I understand to be at issue in all great literature. As such, it both attracts and repels us—magnetizes us out of the other modes and also terrorizes us back into them.

I propose, then, that the central agony of contemporary intellectual work consists in the exigency to articulate not only a subject matter, but also the modal shifts required to address the subject matter. And the most trying of these shifts will be that into and out of concretion.

You will ask, I hope, what evidence might justify the generalization. I have in mind some of the current work in the domains of literary criticism, psychoanalysis, and philosophy of science. But the works of Starobinski, Lacan, and Weizsäcker are themselves responding to the works of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, and to subsequent seminal thinkers of the early 20th century.

One aphorism from Kierkegaard: “It is one thing to understand what is said; it is quite another to understand oneself in what is said.” The difference is modally linguistic. Much of Kierkegaard's work portrays the shift into concretion as beginning in alienation.

One aphorism from Nietzsche: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” But then we have a special responsibility in listening to and in addressing others. Much of Nietzsche's work derides the mode of instruction, the mode most natural to academics, and insists on a shift into concretion.

One aphorism from Wittgenstein: “Ordinary language is all right.” Most obviously, Wittgenstein's later work aspires to undo the hegemony of idealization and to relocate our speaking and listening, reading and writing back into the exigencies of the everyday. Yet this relocation into the ordinary sets the stage for the shift into concretion—a stage-setting explicitly developed in some of Stanley Cavell's essays.

And one aphorism from Heidegger: “Not we, but language speaks.” Full-bodied discourse arises as a response to what addresses the speakers and listeners, writers and readers. And it brings primarily that address to the fore—rather than making an issue out of our own response to the address. Alienated, instructional, and idealizing discourses emphatically make our own responses into the issue.

Specializing precisely in these truncated modes, we moderns experience great, even epochal difficulty in shifting out of them, except back into dreary versions of the ordinary. Even Merleau-Ponty's very suggestive distinction between *la parole parlée* and *la parole parlante* remains within the framework of expression and only strains toward the speech of address.

I detect in these and other examples a trend toward the articulation of modal shifts as an end in itself rather than as a means towards anything else — e.g. towards restituting a relationship with God, instituting foundations for the Sciences, or even raising the Question of Being. One participates in this trend by helping to create realms of discourse where we can move freely throughout all five modes, preserving the integrity of each in turn.

Here you will surely object that a trend can be illusory, or even perverse. I agree; and I then ask: How can, how might this trend be pertinent, even necessary and salutary? One very general answer: Human salvation consists of modal freedom, i.e. the freedom to complain, to prepare, to idealize, above all to address oneself to what addresses one, and also to fall back into the anonymity of the ordinary. Correlatively, human damnation consists in becoming paralyzed in any one or more of these modes. But our intellectual heritage of the last three or four centuries encourages such entrapment: modernity has placed at the heart of democracy the right to complain; at the heart of education the exigencies of preparation; and at the heart of science the right to control. The establishment of these rights now leaves us within modally fixed (even frigid) discourses. Engaged in any of these established domains, we will now enhance the fixity (or frigidity), and thus human damnation — unless we somehow work for modal mobility. Our immediate forefathers often speak as though we would be saved if only we could establish modern democracy, modern education, and modern science within our factual condition. Walt Whitman and Henry Adams knew that these developments henceforth require us to save them from their own entrapments.

A second pertinence of the trend: Without literary engagement in modal shifts we cannot understand ancient literature at all. I take Plato at his word when he remarks in the *Republic* that we cannot know the truth of our predecessors, and in the *Critias*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws* that latecomers are left with names divorced from deeds; I also take Aristotle at his word when he states in his *Metaphysics* that the opinions of our predecessors become accessible to us only when we strip away the accouterments responding to the pressures of their age and detect the address to and of the divine. Ancient literature owes its amazing power to its duality of style: while a work invites us to review something (the polity, the soul, war and courage, love and death, the arts and the sciences) it more fundamentally engages us in the modal shifts required for us to view matters differently. In the Middle Ages, when the written word had evolved into One Book, theologians retained the centrality of modal shifts by distinguishing between literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical readings of that One Book.

And a third possible truth of the trend: Whatever we intellectuals do trickles down tangibly and quickly into the classrooms of secondary education — to the arena where adolescents are first learning to shift out of the innocence of ordinary language and into the stresses and strains of criticism, exposition, and inference. Modal frigidity looms as the greatest danger in this arena: the supposition that language comes to fruition in one or the other of these truncated modes (e.g., in expression, criticism, or emotion; in explanation, comprehension, or instruction; in exact calculation or systematic inference). Frozen into mere oscillation between ordinary discourse and one or the other of the intervening three modes, adolescents find themselves barred from literature. Inability to move linguistically into the fifth mode culminates in illiteracy. Insistence upon linguistic facility at the other levels, and upon linguistic familiarity with the world, creates linguistic vacuity and drives adolescents into an indifference to literature — unless

the heat of concretion, and an appreciation of the need for mobility throughout all five modes, temper that insistence.

As all traditions that have completed their own ambitions, modernity has left us with hamstringing suppositions. Chief among these is the supposition that language is a means: a means of communication, of expression, of preparation, or of inference. Living and working within institutions saturated by this supposition, academics find themselves driven to justify their disciplines heteronomously. English professors help engineers read and write reports clearly and critically. For a while, many philosophy professors contributed to the development of the mathematical language essential to modern scientific work; many now contribute to humanizing the technological ambitions inherent in those engineering reports—under such rubrics as medical or environmental ethics, animal or minority rights. Such heteronomy is a fact of our present civilization. By itself, however, it also spells death—the death of the writing and reading, teaching and learning of literature. The trend toward self-reflective language has a healthy tap root in the concern to rediscover the autonomy of language—the possibility of our linguistic condition flourishing in its own right.

The life, the autonomy of reading and writing, teaching and learning requires a modal fluidity—above all, an ability to move in and out of the fifth mode. Our own immediate tradition, on the other hand, encourages modal fixity. Modernity claimed that we can engage in the best of all talking only by tightening up our discourse. By itself, however, tight discourse simply serves one or the other of the intervening three modes (expressive criticism, preparatory explanation, mathematical astuteness). To encourage a healthy resistance to the suppositions of modernity, I propose three axioms, or rather three amulets:

(1) Complaint, explanation, and idealization are all modes of frustration: they cannot say what they mean or want to say, and end in the exasperated conclusion that the ultimate issue is ineffable. In contrast, concretion gives us something to say, demands that we speak—or hold our

tongue. Writers and teachers have their moments of doubt, and therefore stock their libraries with classical works that succeed in saying what ultimately needs to be said, while not at all reducing it to anything already said.

(2) Expression, description, and deduction are essentially unconvincing. As Aristotle remarked, *ethos* is what most persuades: speech that testifies rather than refers to the issue, embodies it rather than proposes it. This amulet is most friendly to antiquity and most hostile to modernity.

(3) The ordinary language accompanying daily behavior at home and at work, or on the street, has nothing to say. In this mode of discourse, we specialize in nothingness: substance arises as the behavior of the moment (the shutting of the door, the affirmation of a shared goal, or whatever). In sociological terms, our engagement in ordinary language is underage: in it, we do not really speak. However, in keeping with the first axiom, writers and speakers cherish this mode, help it grow up to the issue for which it was born.

Taken together, these three axioms, or amulets, might protect us from perishing in one or the other of the three honey heads of modernity, and also from stagnation in the limbo of ordinary language. But they might also help us counteract the disease lurking within the post-modern concern for modal shifts. Anciently, this disease was called gnosticism. It consists in a fascination with concretion: I know what is at issue, I speak with those who know, I remain silent, or devious, in the presence of those who do not know. The evil of gnosticism lies in its truth: we can never make a non-knower know; we cannot force modal shifts. The untruth of gnosticism reflects that of human being generally: the refusal to engage in the movement itself as requiring that one stand outside oneself, on the threshold of one's own accomplishments.

To ease the consideration of the alternative to gnosticism, let me cite a passage from a recent Italian book by Enrico Camanni on the literature of mountain climbing, from a chapter entitled “The Birth of Alpine Literature: The

Anglosaxon School.” The author first recalls those men like Whymper and Mummery who not only started climbing the higher peaks in France, Switzerland, and Italy during the last half of the 19th century, but also wrote detailed accounts of their climbs and thereby gave birth to the sport. The author then pauses: “One can detect in every writing the presence (or absence) of that quality of immediacy and originality which renders one work more interesting than all its many mediocre imitations.” Camanni then continues:

In regard, now, to Anglosaxon literature, ... an alpine climber and man of culture like Donald Robertson ... could write: “The real subjects we mountain climbers all know are the emotions; these form the true essence of climbing. ... However, since no one can sincerely express what they have learned in the way of danger and difficulty, i.e. what they have found beautiful and gratifying, we can never have an article about a climb that, in the judgement of those who took part in it, will correspond exactly to the truth...” This criticism of Robertson brings into relief a definite aspect — the degenerative aspect — of British literary expression: a sort of conventionalism based not so much on the constant highlighting of facts and sentiments as on the superficiality typical of one who attempts irony even where events unfolded in complex and, at moments, dramatic ways.

A selective replay, in slow motion: Robertson, the climber, acknowledges that the substance of the event lies in its danger and difficulty, and emerges finally in the beautiful and gratifying. Climbing mountains, like many sports, is paradigmatic of the human condition at issue in all literature. Yet Robertson, the climber who also writes about the event, claims that no account does justice to the event. Why? Because those who took part in *that* event, the one-time climb, recognize that any account falls short of the climb they themselves knew. Camanni, the author reviewing the development of alpine literature, claims that Robertson's rather plausible remarks illustrate the reason for the

empirical fact that British books about mountain climbing tend to be rather boring: conventional in style, ironic in tone, facts and sentiments for content. In a word: superficial.

What, now, is the alternative to such gnosticism? Robertson claims that no account can do justice to that one climb. And he is perfectly correct. If I overslept, I missed it; I have lost it forever, and I may as well read the reports of the expedition physician, psychologist, surveyor, and business manager. As a reader, at least, I recognize an alternative: the author may consider that one-time climb as a model, just as a painter may take a landscape or a person as a model; the work itself makes no claim to reproduce the model, it rather shows in its own work what *might* emerge in, say, mountain climbing. And what might emerge here and elsewhere is the drama of presentation and response, the betrothals and betrayals of what gives direction to more obvious dangers and difficulties — and coherence to the facts and sentiments reported by lesser writers.

Aristotle already remarked that the best of all talking shows not what did but what can emerge. But what does it mean to show what can or might happen, whether in mountain climbing or in the human condition generally? Normally, we show, and can show, only what is already available — what has already emerged. In this way, a salesman displays his wares. Photographs in a guide book and photoclips in news coverage also show things — mountain peaks, say — but not directly: photographs and photoclips are themselves icons somehow indicating mountains. Yet these two kinds of showing, the direct and the iconic, remain incomplete and even derivative. Mountains and universities show themselves only to those prepared to engage in them. As readers of great works, we know that these works show their wares, be they whales and whaling or justice and wisdom, by engaging us in the betrothals and betrayals of whaling, or whatever. A work shows something by concentrating us on the conditions for the matter to show itself. We might well expect that all other kinds of showing, especially the direct presentation of

a mountain peak or a virtuous deed, are derivative and even deceptive.

The kind of writing that shows something by focusing us on the conditions for that something to show itself—this kind of writing emerges most evidently in a script for a play. The alternative to gnostic writing is script writing. As writers, we can relearn what we have already learned as readers. We then no longer base our art on expression, description, or inference, but rather on providing a script that will take on flesh, shape and tone largely according to how readers act it out.

If we are, at our best, dramaturges of concretion, i.e. of the movement into and out of full response to what pendingly presents itself, we must accept one very general consequence: a writing *is* the way the readers or listeners (if any) play it out, orchestrate it, choreograph it. And they will do so not only in various tonalities, but also in various modes. Thus discourse in the mode of concretion can very easily humiliate the author. Homeopathy offers one very general safeguard against the negative power of such humiliation: a profound humility from the outset.

In any event, we must, as writers and also as teachers, account for and beware of the standards set by the other modes.

For instance, expression. Each writer, each teacher even, must find a voice of his or her own. Must learn to speak out of his or her insights. In contrast, the chief task of ordinary discourse is to speak so that others can understand you (Thoreau). Ordinary language requires that we say what is currently being said, whether in the context of a gas station or a dinner party, of scholarship or a department meeting. Aware of this anonymity of voice, we might suppose that an author engages essentially in self-expression. A trap! Speaking in our own voice requires precisely that we speak to and with others: *for* others. If the best of all talking takes the form of a script, it serves the expression of others, not that of the author.

Then, too, discovery. Each writer and each teacher must bring within hearing what might otherwise go unheeded. Must detect something others have not detected. One striking feature of ordinary discourse is that it serves primarily to recall the old: to help us walk backwards through the day or the evening, eyes fixed on roads already travelled. Aware of this backwards orientation into the unknown, of the essential commitment to the old despite the avowed interest in the new—we might suppose that an author must provide something directly new. But what can be new in the mode of concretion? New information and new techniques belong to the mode of instruction. New insight, then? As readers of the best, we know that new insight hardly “belongs” to the author. As writers or teachers we must learn that the insight at stake is that of our readers or listeners. For an author, the insight at issue is as old as the hills; it behooves him or her to script a fresh response within its confines. Truth is absolutely a matter of style (Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust).

And, finally, inference. Each writer and each teacher must both start and end somewhere, clearing a path from one to the other. Must show how one can arrive at a conclusion starting from certain premisses. Characteristically, ordinary discourse consists of assertions whose warranty lies outside the talk—say, in the exigencies of mountain climbing or shoe manufacturing, far away and out of sight, or in the current exigencies of department enrollments or in the decisions of governing bodies far away and out of hearing. Aware of the fragmentary nature of ordinary talk, we might suppose that the central task of genuine writing or teaching consists in structuring a continuity, by way of step-by-step justification, from premisses to conclusion. Unawares, we then attempt a tyranny of the word: attempt to force others along our road. But concrete speech helps liberate others, frees them to travel their own roads, to discover their own continuity. One advantage of developing some competence in mathematical deductions lies in the lesson that proofs of the best sort highlight their own dependencies and make sense

only as they are played out against a background much more demanding than the arrival at a conclusion.

You will recognize that great works of the past have in fact taken the form of expression (Augustine's *Confessions*), of discovery (Plato's *Republic*), and of systematic inference (Spinoza's *Ethics*). No doubt significant philosophic work will continue to take these various forms. In the past, however, each great work has in fact broken out of these modes into the mode of concretion. Augustine's *Confessions* speaks about us, not about Augustine. Plato's *Republic* allows us to call into play our condition prior to the structures of the community we happen to live in. Spinoza's *Ethics* argues from, not toward its issue. Traditional scripts bid us to act our way out of one or another of the intervening modes and into the mode of concretion. Expression, exposition, and deduction have hitherto served only as pretexts, as springboards into concretion.

Our intellectual agony today consists, at least partly, in the ruination of those three intervening modes. Each has been institutionalized in service to ordinary discourse. Psychoanalysis has institutionalized the mode of expression, more broadly the entire mode of alienated discourse. Commercial and industrial concerns, including research and development at our universities and applied information-theory in education, have institutionalized the mode of discovery, more broadly the entire mode of expository discourse. And since Copernicus, Hobbes and Descartes deduction has named the heart of the one institution in greatest service to the everyday, modern science. Any effort to write or talk within any of these modes for the sake of movement into concretion requires one to swim against very powerful tides: tides that are natural but ones that, oddly, our whole intellectual tradition has re-enforced. Writers and teachers of all ages have had to choose between swimming with and swimming against the tides. Having set in motion a powerful riptide, our historical condition has aggravated the conditions of this choice. Most obviously, competence in the realms of expression, exposition, and deduction brings fixed and nameable rewards in the realm of the ordinary,

rewards designed to encourage us to forget the vacuity lurking therein. The odds are uneven. Scripting expression, exposition, or idealization for the sake of concretion promises only fluidity.

REFERENCES

- Søren Kierkegaard: *The Concept of Dread*, Walter Lowrie's translation, pp. 126-7. (A Danish native speaker has assured me that "what's said" reads like the German *das Gesagte* — to cover both what others say and what one says oneself.)
- Friedrich Nietzsche: *The Will to Power*, §481 ("Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei den Phänomenen stehnbleibt „es gibt nur Tatsachen“, würde ich sagen: nein, gerade Tatsachen gibt es nicht, nur Interpretationen. Wir können kein Faktum „an sich“ feststellen: vielleicht ist es ein Unsinn, so etwas zu wollen.”)
- Ludwig Wittgenstein: *The Blue and Brown Books*, Harper Torchbook, pp. 25-8 ("... we don't use language according to strict rules. ... words have those meanings we have given them... it is wrong to say that in philosophy we consider an ideal language as opposed to an ordinary one. For this makes it appear we could improve on ordinary language. But ordinary language is all right.")
- Martin Heidegger: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, p. 12; *On the Way to Language*, p. 190; and elsewhere.
- Enrico Camanni: *La letteratura dell'alpinismo* (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1985), pp. 13-15. ("...rileva un particolare aspetto degenerativo dell'espressione letteraria britannica: una sorta di convenzionalismo basato non già sull'enfatizzazione dei fatti e dei sentimenti, ma sulla superficialità tipica di chi cerca l'ironia anche là dove gli avvenimenti si sono svolti in modo complesso et talvolta drammatico;...")