

The Linguistic Barrier

Francis Bacon identified four major limitations of the human mind. He called them IDOLA. He had come to the realisation that 'our mental constitution permits us to arrive at knowledge of the world in so far as our innate capacity to create theories happens to match some aspect of the structure of the world'. He identifies these limitations as *Idola Tribus*, *Idola Specus*, *Idola Fori* and *Idola Theatri*. *Idola Fori* stands for the limitation of the linguistic medium. Bacon found that the belief that language was a reliable means of communication was based on false assumptions. Language is a mechanism of conceptualising experience. Language is not experience. Any attempt to reduce experience to linguistic formulae is therefore at best an approximation to experience. Aldous Huxley propounded a similar thesis when he described man as an amphibian who lived simultaneously in the world of experience and the world of notions. Perhaps the primitive man lived closer to experience, as also Wordsworth thought of his rustic. Thus too, Bacon thought that mythology was the philosophy of the unshophisticated mind (*Wisdom of the Ancients*). Iqbal also said that the primitive mind could conceive only in concrete terms. It lacked the capability to abstract. When, however, attempts were made to turn realities into words, like the idols of mythology, words also took on specific shapes which developed a life of their own independent of the aspects of life these were supposed to represent.

With the growing complexities of life words also became complex and multifaceted. They in fact became capsules of meanings. The user of words was forced to take the capsules as such. Ultimately life was reduced to linguistic formulae. The notions trans-

lated into words tend to acquire an independent existence of their own, a reality which dangerously interfere with the reality of experience. "This autonomous" existence of language, according to Aldous Huxley, creates all bigotry, intolerance and cruelty leading to regimentation of thought giving rise to fascist trends, not only in politics but also in religion. The Dark Ages of medieval Europe were largely sustained by the scholastic rhetoric of the most intransigent fathers of the church. The same linguistic finery and fascination with the word, rather than the truth behind it, was at the root of sectarian controversy which caused so much bloodshed and burning at the stakes, and which according to George Eliot, forced the Republicans to kill the Royalists and the Royalists to kill the Republicans in the name of the same God. The modern schoolman, T.S. Eliot, also insists on the verbal formulae which he calls the "Objective Correlative."

Unfortunately, as Aldous Huxley rightly pointed out, it is not possible to ignore the formulae altogether, since all human progress in science and philosophy, the very evolution of civilization, has been the progress of thought and thought cannot exist without words. Therefore a method has to be discovered whereby the words are made to serve thought not dominate or dictate it. It is not possible for the theoretician to do away with words or to soften their constrictive power. It is the poet who has successfully grappled with words and has got the better of them. He is perpetually engaged in the struggle to bend words to his meanings. He has succeeded to such an astounding degree that even the linguists have felt threatened and thrown on the defensive. They have launched a desperate campaign to separate language from literature.

Since word can render only inexact equivalents of direct experience, their deceptiveness can be controlled only by debunking their apparent precision by resorting to deliberate ambiguity in expression. This can be a valid starting point, since,

as chomsky observes : "It is an open question, surely, whether the 'species of instinct' that determines 'the experimental reasoning itself' does indeed 'act in us unknown to ourselves' as both Hume and Leibniz held, or perhaps even lies beyond introspection It might be in Kant's phrase, that the 'schematism of our understanding, in its application to appearances and their mere form, is an art concealed in the depths of human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze.'" (*Problems of knowledge and Freedom*). It was in this context that Mathew Arnold asserted, "The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer stay There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve...The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry. The *Study of Poetry*). The poet fathoms the depths of human soul' and opens the mystery to our gaze by using his insight with the help of his artistic skill. Artistic ambiguity is also necessitated by the fact that existing words tend to have fixed meanings which, according to Wittgenstein, are not given to them by "a power independent of us", but they have the meanings which 'someone' has given to them. Thus, to make words yield to *his* meaning, the poet has to create some sort of ambiguity around them.

Then, we have Ezra Pound's three-dimensional communication theory of words related to phanopeia, Melopeia and Logopeia. Words evoke pictorial, auditory and logical associations. The poet does not confine himself to the logopeia alone. He explores the other dimensions also.

All these limitations in the use of words, combined with the syntactical significance they acquire when used in a specific context restrict expression for the theorist. But at the same time they provide a strange freedom to the poet because in the nebulous

state of meaning created by words he can make excursions into the mysterious world evoked by the multidimensional nature of the linguistic medium.

The words and the way in which they combine to form sentences are the symbols that the poet uses to interpret and communicate experience. These symbols are arbitrary. The poet, however, is concerned with *his* experience and with *his* conceptions, and it is here that the real problem is faced. The conception of any one experience is not the same for two persons. Technically speaking, communication is a two-way process: objective concepts—the concrete things as we know them—do not remain the same when they become concepts (in the mind). They are coloured by the experience which accompanies them from the purely objective state to the mental state. So in the first part of the process the objective concepts lose at least some of their objective character. Now the concept so formed is to be retranslated in concrete symbols so as to be communicable. This is a phenomenological process. Again it will be the poet's experience which will determine the symbol for him—which in his case is the word or the sentence. But the word and the sentence are arbitrary symbols and do not provide for the variations of experience. Each word or symbol is a sort of vague generalization of a typical complex of experience. Thus, in the second half of the process of communication the problem of the poet is to find out a word or a phrase which may recreate the same experience in the reader's mind as is taking place in the poet's own mind. The musician manipulates notes, the sculptor stone, and the painter colour. The medium in each case yields to the skill of the artist. It is there before him, in its objective form. But the poet's medium is the word. It is not there before him. It exists in the mind of the audience. And there it lies with its various associations that are different for different persons, and also for the same person in different situations. The poet has to break it and remould it there right in the minds of his audience

He takes resort to metaphor, elaborating by similarities and contrasts,

We have been given to understand that as humans we are rational beings, and as such language is the most rational medium of communication for us. In order to express ourselves and to make us known to others language is inevitable; and to avoid confusion language must be standardized. But the Twentieth century had great shocks in store for us. It told us that just a mere fraction of us is at all rational. The rational is confined to the conscious mind which is to the unconscious what the ripples on the surface are to the entire ocean beneath. An experience is no more considered confined to the surface—the conscious or the rational level. It brings the entire latent energy of the unconscious into play. In order to realize its full significance the poet must go deep into the unconscious. Depth Psychology shows one way. The poet regresses. He tries to explore the psyche to its most elemental states. He goes into the farthest past. T.S. Eliot's idea of tradition is an instance to the point. Another significant example of the treatment of the unconscious is Conrad's *Lord Jim*. The poet has now realised that an experience is modified by the perspective, by the way it is interpreted. He therefore wants to get to the pre-interpretation state, to the state in which he felt without yet knowing any particular mode of feeling. This revolutionary movement practically started with Wordsworth who sought to use the 'real language of men'. He was successful at least in creating an awareness of the acute limitation of the conventional mode of poetic expression. But Wordsworth did not have at his disposal the valuable resource of modern psychology. His theory could not satisfy the 20th century poet who easily saw, as already hinted by Coleridge also, that Wordsworth's rustic was not man in the 'state of Nature', but was only a century or so behind the contemporary civilization. His attitude was as such sophisticated, though it was an outdated sophistication.

The modern poet wants to go deeper. He tries to grasp the experience in the pre-conceptual state as he knows that concepts only partly represent respective experiences. The editor of *The Faber Books of Modern Verse*. Writing as early as 1936, remarked that in the near future we may see greater emphasis placed on poetry as a means of appealing directly to the sub-conscious mind, and less on poetry as a conscious criticism of life'.

It was this quest—under the influence of Jungian psychology—that took many a modern poet, almost every one prominent among them, to the classical myth, ritual and folk-lore etc. Yeats and Eliot may be mentioned here. But this again is not the appropriate machinery to explore the unconscious. Myth, ritual and folk-lore used to poetic techniques are significant to us through the rational process. We understand them, explore them and analyse them. So here too we are unable to free ourselves of the limited rational sphere. The best that could be achieved here is merely to deepen and enlarge this sphere.

The concern of the modern poet—faced with this problem of the unconscious is now, somehow or the other, to free himself of the seemingly inevitable shackles of the logical. The emphasis now naturally shifted to the illogical—the absurd. Much earlier we see the French symbolists taking this attitude. Symbolism started in France as a literary movement in the second half of the 19th century. The credit goes to Jean Moreas who in the *Figaro* of September 1886 declared that he and his associates were seeking to create beauty through a search for the *pure concept* and the *eternal symbol*. Arthur Rimbaud, among them, declared, 'I consider sacred the disorder of my mind'. In the 20th century absurd has become rather a vogue. Naturally it created a problem of communication which fell outside the scope of the rational, hitherto considered to be the only mode of comprehensibility.

We can' however, seriously study the absurd as an experiment, a search for medium. The absurd is nothing new in literature.

Shakespeare used it as an instrument of the exploration. The speeches of Hamlet and Lear, besides those of the wise fools of his plays, have been noted for this purpose. Later, *Alice and Wonderland* has been a popular reading, not only with the children, but with the grown-ups too. Similarly nonsense verse has its appeal. But beyond this it may also serve a purpose, as did the conceits and paradoxes which were lightly indulged in by the 18th century poets but were seriously applied by the *Metaphysical poets* of the 17th century and by those of this century, like T.S. Eliot, as exploratory devices, to unravel the mysteries of existence. The secret of enjoying nonsense verse is to approach it with an infantile innocence, with a childish credulity. Any employment of the rational apparatus will spoil its whole charm ; without it, the enjoyment will be as much as provided by any good piece of art. Thus we get a clue to overcome this difficulty of obscurity and to clear the way for the artist who wants to communicate through more than the rational faculty. The watch-word for modern poetry is *experience* ; experience first, and reason may follow. Good poetry is enjoyed before it is understood.

This breaking of the *rational barrier* has been attempted by the modern poet through various devices. One is to make the successive image in a poem logically independent of each other. Any one image carries with it a very large number of associations. But in relation to another image only the associations relevant to both will find prominence while others will be rendered ineffective. If it is not an over-simplification, consider the most common place conventional images of a rose. It has been vastly used to depict the beauty of the beloved. Its softness, mellow shades, mild fragrance, delicacy and freshness are the associations utilised in this respect. But a rose in itself has much larger associations. It is, for example, short lived, grows on a thorny stem and draws its life and loveliness from the soil. These associations will, however, be invoked in a different context. Thus confined by logical relationship an image loses much of its significance. So, in order that an image be fully

realised, thus releasing to the maximum the communicative value it may carry, the image must be made logically independent. In this way the poem becomes a succession of logically irrelevant images. This method is successfully employed by T. S. Eliot. In his poems the images, in general, are not related in the usual rational sense.

Their coherence is not of logic, but of impression. Every image in creating the desired impression. Such impressions transcend the rational and enlarge the scope of communication. These images are not allusions.

It was further discovered to be very difficult to disentangle ourselves from the logical habit while every moment we are practising it in the use of language which is the most rigid logical system. A number of words make a sentence only when logically connected. The poet thus genuinely tries to break through this strictly logical practice. The method here is to disturb the logical order of words in a sentence in order to free the individual word from the logical relationships which limit its associations—the 'degree of logical or grammatical disorder is mentioned by Empson as a dimension of ambiguity. Word basically is an image, a symbol. Such experiments—which appear as acrobatics played by words in a sentence—have been made by modern poets. such as this from E.E. Cummings :

for love are in you am in i are in we

In certain other cases the usual syntax is shaken and the words have been put in a seemingly haphazard manner, as

death is more than
 Certain a hundred these
 sounds crowds odours it is
 in a hurry ..

Not only the arrangement of words, but words themselves have also been subjected to such experiments. Words have a physical existence of their own and exist in definite solid forms (not just as impressions on a piece of paper or slate, but as meanings). Th

poet attempts to break this solidity. One line in Cummings, for instance, ends with the syllable *an* and the next begins with the two syllables *imal*, thus splitting the word *animal* into two lines. Such experiments serve mainly two purposes. Firstly, as mentioned above, they provide the fullest possible play to symbol to utilise its maximum communicative power. Secondly, they help unteach the mind the habit of logical approach which has so much attenuated our faculties of communication. They help in the process of derationalization which much precede an impressionistic or surrealist response to the things around us.

Further, the experiment of breaking the words and even of rearranging the letters composing a word, from another point of view, may help in giving a clearer ideal of the relationship that exist between a symbol and the experience connected with it. What happens to the relevant concept when the symbol is broken or disturbed? Is the concept also broken or disturbed? Thus, the emphasis is upon discovering more appropriate equivalents for the abstractions than are provided by the usual concrete symbols which traditionally stand for them. The endeavour is in fact to discover some medium for experiencing the abstract. A word will be so broken as :

f
ilthi
es
t

Here *f* and *t* stand as two lines. As consonants they cannot be pronounced by themselves. But here they are placed in this abstract way, probably to test our capacity of experiencing the abstract.

There can be still another purpose of such jumbings. The poet feels that with all his endeavours to keep the images logically independent, the reader, who is accustomed to rationalise and impose some sort of logical pattern upon scattered impressions has got into the sequential groove of cause and effect directed by a single

express purpose. This does not agree with the modern poet's concept of reality as a state of *flux*.

There is, it seems to us,
 At best, only a limited value
 In the knowledge derived from experience.
 The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,
 For the pattern is new in every moment
 And every moment is a new and shocking
 Valuation of all we have been.

It may thus well be to check the possibility of forming logical patterns that the poet suddenly disturbs the arrangement of a word or a sentence, reminding the reader to keep his rational tools away in the appreciation of his poem.

This violence to language by the modern poet has been occasioned by another assumption, that the language has become too sophisticated. Due to mechanical artificiality of language the average man has been out of touch with most of his real self. The linguistic mechanism that man has developed is rather cramping. A pretty large number of experiences, particularly those emanating from the unprecedented complexity of the modern sensibility, simply cannot be comprehended through this apparatus. Thus, much that passes as experience is no more than a dexterity in the handling of language. This is a legacy from the age of reason which defined poetry, in the words of Pope, as that 'which of was thought, but ne'er so well express't'. The conventional language could express only conventional thought. No freshness of response is possible within the framework of a set phraseology. The poet seeks for a language which can unfold and reveal the simplest and the most elemental aspects of life. Beside experimenting with the Wordsworthian theory of the real language of man, poets are using local dialects and even reviving certain primitive forms of expression. All this subtlety is brought in with the hope of discovering a medium which is not so dictating as the usual modes of expression.

Though apparently genuine, this concern with the technique is symptomatic of a much more serious dislocation: that of the individual from the society—from the objective conditions of life. Disintegration of a homogeneous society, of the relationship of man to man, through a division of humanity into castes, creeds and classes, each division reducing the perspective of man and making his view of life narrower at each step, ultimately forces him into the narrowest unit of his own mind. Consequently he is convinced that reality is conceivable only in subjective terms. This makes him an introvert, recognising only his ego as the reality. He gets imprisoned in something like Leibnez' monads, which have no windows. Now, when he tries to establish communication with others he finds the outside world absolutely incomprehensible, and all his efforts at communication are frustrated. Like all transcendentalists and idealists, the poet thinks that this cleavage is superficial and can be bridged only through formal reforms, through modifying the structure here and there. It is however not language that is at fault. Language is the effect, not the cause. Language is only the symptom. The dislocation is in the human society. As soon as humanity is brought into one fold, as soon as every man succeeds in establishing human relationship with other men, all problems of alienation and isolation will be automatically solved. Sharing of experience essentially means sharing of hopes and fears, of expectations and appreciations. In a class-oriented society, where the problems and apprehensions of one class differ from those of the other, experiences cannot be shared, however efficient the linguistic apparatus. The poet will himself discover this truth if he abandons the rather sophisticated and apparently impressive grapple with the ghost of the abstract and comes down to face the realities of the objective world, where he realise that not language but life is his concern, and life in all its mundane nakedness with right thinking and right language will not be hard to conceive.