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Author(s): HANS SPEIER

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The Communication of Hidden Meaning

BY HANS SPEIER

Disclosing and Withholding

INFORMATIVE and propagandistic statements have an overt meaning (M_0) that is clearly apparent to the recipient (R). If the communicator (C) tries to enlighten R by presenting information or a logical conclusion to him, or even if he speaks of certain beliefs or of a design to shape the future, the meaning always lies, as it were, on the surface of his statements. This is true whether he says "2 + 2 = 4," "God created the world," "Paris is the capital of France," "Black is beautiful," or "To preserve peace we must arm."

But the object of communication is not necessarily to inform and obtain understanding. It may be not to spread knowledge to a given ignoramus but to maintain his ignorance; not to profess feelings but to hide or feign them; to lead astray rather than to guide the perplexed; not to give the best advice but the next best; not to enlighten but to obscure, to explain inadequately, to oversimplify, to slant, to popularize, to tell only part of the truth, to mask it, or simply to lie.

Aside from that, a person often renders the same subject in different terms when talking to different persons: discourse is role-differentiated. Observe a physician speaking about an illness to his colleague and to his suffering patient, or a father conversing about God with his child in the morning and his priest at noon. Matters kept secret from laymen can be expressed precisely in technical language to experts. If this communication is "translated" into popular terms for purposes of communicating with a larger audience, precision is

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inevitably lost. In his hearing before the Personnel Security Board, J. Robert Oppenheimer testified:

> I know of no case where I misrepresented or distorted the technical situation in reporting it to my superiors or those to whom I was bound to give advice and counsel. The nearest thing to it that I know is that in the public version of the Acheson-Lilienthal report, we somewhat overstated what would be accomplished by denaturing. I believe this was not anything else than in translating from a technical and therefore secret statement into a public and therefore codified statement, we lost some of the precision which should have gone into it, and some of the caution which should have gone into it.[1]

Role-differentiated discourse about the same subject will appear elusive to those observers who expect every communication to be a full disclosure of that which is on the speaker's mind. Similarly, such observers may easily overlook the fact that a person may not only deliberately delete from his speech some information concerning the subject he dwells on but also deliberately say something to indicate that he is withholding something else.

While often everything is disclosed and nothing withheld, there are many other communications in which something remains unsaid. From the vantage point of the recipient, the communication may then be said to resemble a view that is partially veiled or a tune reaching him only in fragments from afar. Finally, there are communications in which withholding is indeed total: evasive answers, lies, deliberate obscurities, loquacious flooding of the channels with socially acceptable nonsense, etc.

In the following discussion we shall not view communication as efforts at enlightenment or propaganda. Instead, we shall regard the whole realm of communication as a continuum bounded by the two extremes of full disclosure and total

[1] U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: Transcript of Hearing Before Personnel Security Board, Washington, D.C., April 12, 1954, through May 6, 1954* (Washington: GPO, 1954), p. 87.

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withholding of that which is on the communicator's mind. In every communication the communicator discloses and withholds. The specific mixture of the two efforts, that is, the location of any given communication on the continuum, varies among other things with the relationship between C and R and with the political context.

It might be objected that this view of communication is a misanthropic one, since it seems to assume that man is secretive if not deceitful or at least uninterested in enlightening his fellowmen. No such opinion of man's nature is meant to be implied.

Let us recall, first of all, Hugo Grotius's distinction between negative and positive stratagems. In negative stratagems we conceal all or part of what we know, as in diplomatic silence or in the withholding of some information available to us when we otherwise speak the truth. This negative stratagem is dissimulation. In positive stratagems, or simulation, we do not speak truthfully. The physician who does not tell his patient that he is going to die, although the physician expects his death, dissimulates; if the physician tells the patient that he is going to live, he uses a positive stratagem.

As this illustration suggests, the use of stratagems is not necessarily reprehensible from a moral point of view and cannot be readily equated with lying. Which stratagems are permissible or indeed mandatory from a moral point of view depends upon the intention with which the stratagem is used and upon circumstances. Grotius cites the instance of King Solomon, who proposed that the contested child be divided and thereby induced the true mother to reveal herself—evidently a morally permissible stratagem used in the pursuit of justice. Similarly, he agrees with Quintilian that children can be taught many useful truths in the dress of fiction. And there are other situations, such as self-defense against an enemy or occasions in which conventional rather than "sincere" conduct is generally expected, where concealment of

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sentiment, simulation of knowledge or intent, and even feigned respect for values constitute deviations from the truth that leave no moral blemish.

Man communicates for good and evil purposes. Unless he is ill, he knows that not everyone is his enemy to be met with tight lips or lies, and yet only a blabbing fool treats everyone like a trusted friend. Furthermore, just as concealment no less than disclosure may serve a good purpose, so disclosure like concealment may do harm in certain circumstances. Even in talking to a friend, concern or curiosity may be curbed out of respect for his privacy, just as sad tidings may be withheld from him so as to spare his feelings. Conversely, in certain circumstances we conceal nothing from our enemy and give him a full account of our strength—especially if we judge it to be overpowering—and of our good or ill will toward him. In short, while the general view of communication that is being suggested here enables the observer to take account of the fact that the political nature of the social universe impinges upon communication, it does not postulate man to be either angelically straight or fiendishly crooked. Man walks upright, but he can bend.

Before proceeding, we may try to dispose of another possible initial objection. If it be admitted that communication is an act of disclosing and withholding, the extreme case of full disclosure appears more plausible than the opposite extreme of a communicator withholding everything he knows, believes, wants, or feels. For cannot total withholding rather easily be accomplished by silence instead of communication? The argument is fallacious. Neither silence nor the explicit refusal to say anything is necessarily sufficient to avoid disclosure. Silence itself may be communicative. For example, it may express consent or dissent, as the case may be. An audience may be able not only to understand its meaning but to force it upon the silent person, so that he must speak to escape such dictates. Literally or figuratively speaking, a correspondent may receive the message, "If I do not hear from you, I shall

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assume that you agree with me." Similarly, in a manipulated mass meeting silence at a prescribed moment of cheer or applause is tantamount to a demonstrative act of defiance, as is the silence of a heretic under pressure to recant. In such cases, the communicator cannot remain passive. He has to use words, gestures, or actions if he wishes to avoid disclosing something he does not want to say by remaining silent.[2]

When the significance of silence is not tightly controlled by others, many different meanings may yet be imputed to it, which is often true of statements, gestures, and actions as well. Only an additional communication may prevent the listener from ascribing that particular meaning to silence which "the silent speaker" wants to withhold. For example, although silence may indicate that a person is shy, defiant, indifferent, or proud, the listener may take it to mean that he feels guilty, a meaning which the silent person may have good reason to deny or be anxious to conceal. In either case he must speak up, though in doing so he must swallow the pride that prompted him to be silent at first. Silence among men is always alive. Paradoxically, it is most alive when there is "a dead silence." In short, like other means of communication, silence is a way of disclosing and withholding, although it sometimes lacks the ruthlessness of the "outspoken." Silence in writing on certain subjects can also be used by an author to express an intended meaning obliquely—for example, that he considers these subjects to be unimportant or commonly held views on them to be mistaken.[3]

Silence and a high incidence of withholding in communication need not be stratagems in efforts to gain advantages over others or safeguards against disadvantages possibly to be incurred by disclosure. Instead, such "reticence" may stem from the conviction that everyday language fails to serve since it is

[2] Silence and the pressure to break it provide much of the drama in the play about Thomas More by Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*.

[3] For two illustrations, see Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1958), pp. 30–31.

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blunted by abuse. Modern literature provides ample comment on such despair in contemporary civilization. Indeed, when listening attentively to what we hear today most of the time, then over the distance of half a century the quiet voice of Hans Karl Buehl, the most modern character in Hofmannsthal's plays, touches us to the quick: "But everything one says is indecent. The simple fact that one says something is indecent."[4]

Perhaps this feeling for the "indecency" of all speech reveals a refined sentiment bordering on decadence, but perhaps there reverberates in it the older, profounder, conceit of the romantic and the mystic that ordinary speech cannot reach the truth. The opposing view was most forcefully stated by Hegel in the preface to his *Phenomenology*. Impatient with Jacobi and the romantics, with Schlegel and Schleiermacher, whose "intensity without content" he equated with "superficiality" and "dreams," he thundered: *"Die Kraft des Geistes ist nur so gross als ihre Äusserung . . . "* ("The power of the mind is only as great as the power of expression . . . ").[5]

Heterogeneous Audiences

In role-differentiated discourse the communicator changes the specific "mixture" of disclosure and withholding according to his intention toward the recipient and according to the latter's known or presumed predisposition (e.g., child vs. priest, patient vs. colleague, friend vs. foe). We may therefore distinguish between role-adequate and role-inadequate dis-

[4] Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Schwierige* (1921), in *Gesammelte Werke,* 6 vols. (Berlin: Fischer, 1924), 1: 445. See also the quotation from a conversation with the poet in Carl J. Burckhardt, *Erinnerungen an Hofmannsthal* (Munich: Callwey, 1964), pp. 88–89; and the essays by George Steiner, "Der Rückzug aus dem Wort" and "Der Dichter und das Schweigen," in his *Sprache und Schweigen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), pp. 44–97.

[5] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes,* edited by Georg Lasson, 2nd ed. (Leipzig: Meiner, 1921), p. 8.

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course. An exposition of Leibniz's monadology to a butler is role-inadequate; so is the aerodynamic explanation of flight to a babe.

While the effort at role-adequacy presents no difficulties to the communicator who addresses a recipient he knows well—say a partner, a friend, or a homogeneous group of recipients—the matter becomes considerably more difficult—and possibly hazardous—for the communicator who faces a recipient whose predisposition he does not know or the communicator who addresses a *heterogeneous* audience. To illustrate, Henry Kissinger once remarked to an audience of Congressmen's wives that since World War I there had been "very rarely fully legitimate governments in any European country." The Secretary of State learned too late that "the press office [of the State Department] had invited some newsmen to cover his remarks from an enclosed booth to the side of the auditorium."[6] To cushion the shock he had caused abroad, Mr. Kissinger subsequently issued an apology ruefully stating that he seemed to get into trouble when ladies and the press were present. Thus he managed to put the blame in part on others without admitting that he had rashly yielded to the temptation to be brilliant rather than prudent in public.

In diplomatic discourse, it happens often—indeed, it is almost normal—that the response to a public message is diversified, since the international "community," like "the public," is a heterogeneous audience.

Strictly speaking, for communication to a heterogeneous audience to be fully role-adequate, the same message would have to have multivarious meanings. This requirement is met, of course, only in exceptional cases. Sometimes it is possible by way of a second, corrective, communication to convey once more the meaning which part of the audience missed in the first instance. Thus a teacher may repeat a lesson for inattentive students or amplify for the slow-witted what his bright students had fully understood in the first, brief, rendition.

[6] *The New York Times*, March 13, 1974.

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The class of cases, however, which is of particular interest is that in which the communicator wishes to be understood only by selected members of his audience—"the intended recipient" (R_i)—while wishing not to be understood by others—"the unwanted recipient" of the same message (R_u). Put differently, he endeavors to disclose what is on his mind to R_i while withholding it from R_u.

Even a dog may play the role of R_u when its master speaking to R_i—for example, his servant—avoids pronouncing a word that the dog "understands." By spelling it—"o-u-t" for "out"—he may succeed in communicating with the servant without cueing the dog (until it has learned the new "o-u-t"). Whispering a message to R_i so that R_u cannot get its meaning follows the same pattern. So do the "asides" on the stage, which establish an understanding with the audience in the theater from which actors on the stage are presumed to be excluded. By the same token, Turgenev wrote some of his letters to Pauline Viardot (R_i) in German, because Louis Viardot, her husband (R_u), did not understand German. Turgenev availed himself of what Gibbon once referred to as "the obscurity of a learned language."[7] Resorting to a foreign language may enable parents to convey to each other a meaning which they want to withhold from their children. These may reciprocate by conversing in a contrived "secret" language, which adults are supposed not to understand.[8]

It is possible that the nonsense the unwanted listeners hear may appear to them as a secret shared by the communicator and his equals, while the latter in turn may indeed use a special language whose secret meanings are intelligible only to

[7] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chap. 40.

[8] Secret languages—as distinguished from codes—are contrived by children in many societies (including that of the Maoris of New Zealand), but there is also at least one instance of a secret language designed by a grammarian. In the fifth century A.D., Virgilius Maro invented *berba na filed* ("the poet's language"), a "slang" containing words from Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, native archaic words and distorted common words, that "was preserved by tradition in the Irish schools as a secret language" (Joseph Vendryes, *Language: A Linguistic Introduction to History*, translated by Paul Radin [New York: Knopf, 1925], p. 255).

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them. The special language is an instrument of solidarity, social exclusiveness, religious privilege, or power over those who fail to understand the secret. The communicator discloses to some recipient (R_i) what is on his mind and to others (R_u) the fact that he, the communicator, and R_i are in possession of mysterious secrets; but he withholds the *content* of the secrets from these outsiders.

The most important examples of this class of messages are communications transacted in liturgical languages, like Greek, Old Slavonic, Armenian, and Coptic, and the Latin of scholars in medieval Europe.[9]

Covert Meaning

In a heterogeneous audience, certain recipients may either fail to understand or misunderstand the communicator. In the second, more complicated, case, R_u does not hear noise or nonsense; nor does he know and accept the fact that secrets are being withheld from him. Instead, he understands a meaning, but it differs from that received by the intended recipient. The communicator manages to transmit a message which has *two* meanings, an overt one (M_0) and a covert one (M_c). He discloses M_c to the intended recipient (R_i) but withholds it at the same time from R_u by inducing R_u to think that the only meaning he intends to convey is M_0. The intended recipient, whom the communicator wants to receive M_c, understands both M_0 and M_c, is able to discriminate between them, and realizes that the overt meaning is meant to preoccupy the unwanted other recipient (R_u), thereby keeping him from noticing the covert meaning. It should be noted that this rather complicated transaction presupposes a common bond between C and R_i as a result of shared knowledge, feeling, experience, belief, or purpose. Conversely, the fact that the unwanted

[9] *Ibid.*, part 4, chap. 2, "Dialects and Specialized Languages."

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recipient of the message is a stranger or outsider accounts for his naiveté in assuming that M_0 is the sole meaning in C's message.

The communication of covert or esoteric meaning occurs in many different situations and for many different reasons. Perhaps the most harmless use is playful, although the limits of harmlessness are sometimes hard to define. Cicero comments at length on the fact that ambiguity of the meaning of words, allegorical phraseology, metaphorical language, and ironical statements may be sources of jests.[10]

Strictly speaking, the metaphorical aspects of language—in the widest sense of the term "metaphorical"—are bound to impede the pertinence of the observation that informational statements have only overt meanings, simply because relatively few communications are entirely free of metaphors. By way of illustration, it may be noted that the words "bound to" in the preceding sentence (in lieu of, say, "inevitably") are derived from "binding," an image under which life and the working of fate were interpreted in ancient Hebrew, Babylonian, Vedic, Roman, Greek, Celtic, Norse, and Slav thought:[11] one of the original functions of metaphors is making it possible to live with the dreadfully incomprehensible by inventing verisimilitudes to something that is comprehended.

Conveying both an overt and a covert meaning in the same message is by no means necessarily playful; it frequently serves very serious purposes, especially in erotic, religious, and political contexts.

Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen* contains a fine illustration of such a communication in an erotic context. Young Lucien visits for the first time the Countess de Chasteller, whom he loves, but the unexpected presence of a stranger in the room, Miss Bérard, who happens to be a malicious gossip, bewilders him. Although tongue-tied at first, Lucien at last has "a miserable

[10] Cicero, *De Oratore* 2. 64–65.

[11] See Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origin of European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), part 3, chaps. 4–5, pp. 349–377.

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little inspiration." He would be very happy, he says in the presence of both ladies, if he were to succeed in becoming a good officer in the cavalry, for it seems that heaven had not chosen him ever to be an eloquent political deputy. At this point Miss Bérard pricks up her ears because she thinks that Lucien is talking about politics. He continues that as a deputy he would not be capable of presenting in the Chamber matters of deep concern to him. Away from the rostrum he would be plagued by the vivacity of the feelings that inflamed his heart. But were he to open his mouth in front of that highest and stern judge whose displeasure would make him tremble, he could only say, "Look at my diffidence, you fill my whole heart, which lacks even the strength to reveal itself to you." By this time, Countess de Chasteller's initial pleasure has given way to uneasiness; she fears her female companion. Lucien's words appear "too transparent" to her. Hastily she asks him if he really had any prospects of being elected a deputy.[12]

Let us consider this episode somewhat more closely. Lucien (C) evidently assumed that the Countess (R_i) would not betray the covert meaning of his speech to Miss Bérard (R_u), and the Countess in her turn felt that Lucien was expecting her not to betray it. We may therefore say that C and R_i *trust* each other, whereas both of them *distrust* R_u. The awareness of this mutual trust becomes a delicate token of their love, which incidentally neither of them had ever before openly professed: the bond between them as well as the hidden meaning of Lucien's speech is a secret. Had the Countess told Miss Bérard what Lucien "really" meant, she would have disclosed not only the hidden meaning but also various other things: to Miss Bérard she would have revealed that Lucien loved her, but that she did not love him; and to Lucien her brutal response would have told him in addition that she cared so little for his love as to make it and her rejection of it public. It is questionable whether his feelings of shame would have allowed him to

[12] Stendhal, *Lucien Leuwen*, part 1, chap. 24.

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protest dissemblingly that she had evidently misunderstood what he has said: he had meant precisely what he had said (M_0). In any event, the reader is inclined to feel that only an unashamedly public profession of love on Lucien's part (in the presence of Miss Bérard) would have deserved so cold and brutal a rejection by the Countess: vulgarity would then have been answered by disdain. Everything would have been different in the absence of Miss Bérard: the Countess might have rejected Lucien's open declaration of love, but then she might have only dissembled her feelings, and Lucien would have known that she had not necessarily spoken her last word.[13]

The Misses Bérard—that is, the listeners who do not understand covert meanings—are often felt to be ludicrous, since they suffer from a defect: like some dull-witted censors, they fail to comprehend what is going on, and dupes are comical characters *par excellence.*

The Fear of Death and the Love of Truth

The erotic relationship is only one of many possible contexts in which the need arises, in the presence of listeners, to convey meaning covertly to the intended recipient. For one thing, fear of ridicule is not confined to lovers. It is a ubiquitous emotion.[14] Nor is the unwanted recipient always feared merely

[13] Another very fine illustration of double meaning in erotic discourse may be found in Molière's *The School for Husbands*, act 2, when Isabella and Valère declare their love for each other in the presence of Sganarel, Isabella's guardian. Due to the use of skillfully ambiguous language, Sganarel misunderstands the discourse and believes that Isabella faithfully loves him, addressing Valère in indignation at his advances to her. For an instance from another culture, see the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Chin P'ing Mei*, with an introduction by Arthur Waley (New York: Putnam, 1940), p. 678. Consider also the covert meaning hidden in every *roman à clef*: see Georg Schneider, *Die Schlüsselliteratur*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1951–53).

[14] Theodore Agrippa d'Aubigné (1552–1630) concluded the preface to his memoirs, published for the first time only in 1729 as *Histoire Secrète*, by an order to his children that they should not keep "more than two copies of this book," that these

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because he is a gossip who may bring on ridicule, defamation, social rejection, and the like; instead, he may inspire religious or political awe and dread. While fear of social sanctions is a strong motive for cautious behavior, religious and political fear are even more potent, since they are rooted in the fear of death.

The hunter, fisherman, or sailor in preliterate society who imagines he can be overheard or understood by animals, spirits, demons, and the like uses "guarded speech" (Sir James George Frazer) because he is afraid that open discourse would arouse the envy or wrath of uncontrollable powers and entail evil consequences for him. "In place of the forbidden word it is therefore necessary to use some kind of figurative paraphrase, to dig up an otherwise obsolete term, or to disguise the real word so as to render it more innocent."[15] Taboos are observed also with reference to ominous and mysterious physiological functions, events of nature, and in respect of powers that are held in awe, like God. They must not be named; substitute appellations are used.[16]

Like God, great human power as well can inspire awe and fear. If a heterogeneous audience includes persons of great power or their agents, the urge to abstain from the open expression of critical, skeptical, or aggressive opinions is very strong. The fact that it is dangerous to tell the truth to powerful masters is known from the folklore of many lands and is commonplace in the literature dealing with political counseling. Trusted counselors know they must speak cautiously to

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should be closely guarded, and that neither copy should leave the house. Otherwise those who were envious of the children would punish them by laughing at the divine miracles by which his life had been saved. See Otto Fischer, ed., *Thomas and Felix Platters und Theodor Agrippa d'Aubignés Lebensbeschreibungen* (Munich: Mörike, 1911), p. 294.

[15] Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 289.

[16] Heinz Werner, in his important investigation into the origins of metaphor, advanced the opinion that fear is prior to awe: "*Furcht ist früher als Ehrfurcht*" (Heinz Werner, *Die Ursprünge der Metapher* [Leipzig: Engelmann, 1919], p. 43).

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their princes.[17] Plautus has one of his characters say quite simply, "It's foolish for you to be disagreeable to a person who has more power."[18] Even the life of satirical entertainers is hazardous in illiberal times. They may be ruthlessly punished for as little as a hint in their work, although their subversive intent may be doubtful.[19]

Disclosing the truth is particularly dangerous if it finds fault with authoritative doctrines and sacred beliefs. This is so because even in the absence of a church and a priesthood with their vested interests in guarding the sacred against heresy or blasphemy, the believers do not tolerate any trifling with their gods and their faith and worship. The mere expression of doubt may be intolerable.[20]

However distant the believers may be from the exercise of political power, the rulers themselves must reckon with the religious predispositions of their subjects. Should they not share the communal faith or the ingrained superstitions of their subjects, they had yet better feign respect for them. It is therefore erroneous to equate "the vulgar" with those who have no power. This, of course, has been known to philosophers through the ages. As a rather modern observer, Pierre Bayle, remarked:

> If what is most falsely said by impious Men were true, viz. That Religion is a mere human invention, set up by the Sovereigns to keep their subjects within the Bounds of Obedience, may we not assert, that Princes are the first who have been taken in their own Snares? For Religion is so far from making them Masters of

[17] See Thomas More's "Dialogue of Counsel" in his *Utopia*, at the end of Book 1.

[18] Plautus, *Casina* 2. 4.

[19] At the time of the ruthless emperor Domitian, "the young Stoic nobleman Helvidius Priscus produced a farce about Paris—not the dancer, but the mythical Trojan prince—deserting the nymph Oenone. Domitian took this as an allusion to his own divorce, and executed Helvidius. It did not matter whether the allusion was intentional or not. It was sufficient if it was likely to be noticed and enjoyed by the public" (Gilbert Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954], p. 26).

[20] According to Cicero (*De natura deorum* 1. 23), Protagoras of Abdera opened a book with the statement, "About the gods I am unable to affirm either how they exist or how they do not eixst." The Athenian assembly banished him from the city and had his books burned in the marketplace.

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> their Subjects, that, on the contrary, it gives their Subjects a Power over them, since they are obliged to profess the Religion of their People, and not That, which seems to them the best: And if they are resolved to profess a Religion different from that of their Subjects, their Crowns will fit loose upon their Heads.[21]

Under certain conditions, then, the powerful must resort to exoteric—religiously orthodox—speech for fear of their subjects, and withhold from them esoteric views that are religiously heterodox or irreligious.

The rulers share the need for such prudence with those philosophers who put reason above faith, although philosophers are not hungry for power. They want to be able to pursue the truth without having to drink poison. While they do not need to manipulate the superstitions of the vulgar, as statesmen and generals sometimes must do in order to achieve their ends,[22] they have reason to fear being deprived of liberty and life in retaliation for questioning powerful popular beliefs. In our time, Leo Strauss reflected more than any other man on the art of philosophical writing in times when those who speak the truth run the risk of persecution. The danger to which they are exposed lies not only with the authorities but, more generally, with those who are ignorant or, to use the older term, with the vulgar; and the authorities may be among them. Strauss pointed out that "premodern philosophers were more timid . . . than modern philosophers": being convinced that "philosophy as such was suspect to, and hated by, the majority of men," they eschewed popularization and concluded "that public communication of the philosophic or scientific truth was impossible or undesirable."[23] It was undesirable not only in view of possible persecution but also because

[21] Pierre Bayle, *Selections from Bayle's Dictionary*, edited by E. A. Beller and M. du P. Lee, Jr. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 4 (article "Abdas").

[22] Machiavelli, *The Discourses* 1. 14–15.

[23] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), pp. 33–34.

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other ills may be engendered by such communication. The wise avoid speaking rashly of God in a manner that may be misunderstood and abused by the vulgar, be they powerful or not.[24]

Aesopic Language

In repressive situations common words may be used to convey covert meanings according to advance agreements so that "insiders" may protect themselves against censors and other dangerous "outsiders." Needs of closeness and solidarity alone tend to foster the use of insider language. But the incorporation of covert meanings into everyday speech may become a matter of survival. Examples of improvised codes in discourse, correspondence, or telephone conversations to mislead eavesdroppers abound.[25]

A farcical instance of an impromptu code can be found in the transcript of the meeting that John W. Dean III and John Haldemann had with President Nixon on March 21, 1973. Dean reported that he telephoned John Mitchell at his home

[24] As late as 1784, Moses Mendelssohn pointed out in his essay "Ueber die Frage: was heisst aufklären?" that the enlightening philosopher will not spread certain truths if they tear down principles of religion and morality. See Norbert Hiske, ed., *Was ist Aufklärung? Beiträge aus der Berliner Monatsschrift,* 2nd ed. (Darmstadt, 1977), pp. 449–450.

[25] Lali Horstmann reports about Nazi Germany that in her circle of anti-Nazis "Sybil" was used for England, "Pit" for Russia. "The patient's health is unchanged, worse or hopeless, was the expression we agreed on to describe the state of German defence" (Lali Horstmann, *Nothing for Tears* [London: Weidenfeld, 1953], pp. 39, 62, 67, 73). Similar references to impromptu codes occur in Margret Boveri, *Tage des Überlebens* (Munich: Piper, 1968), p. 199; Rudolf Pechel, *Zwischen den Zeilen* (Wiesentheid: Droemersche Verlagsanstalt, 1948), p. 343. An older illustration from eighteenth-century France: "Nicolas Boindin, a man of letters. . . was usually 'at home' at the Café Procope, and was a recognized freethinker there. He had a jargon all his own, and a plentiful assortment of nicknames. Liberty he called Jeanneton, Religion was Jacotte, and God M. de l'Être. 'May I venture to ask,' said a detective who was listening, 'who this M. de l'Être may be who so often misbehaves himself, and with whom you seem to have so much fault to find?' 'Yes, Monsieur; he's a police spy' " (Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954], p. 95).

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to inquire whether he had been able to raise money to pay Mr. Hunt, a Watergate defendant. Dean said, "He [Mitchell] was at home, and Martha [Mrs. Mitchell: in this case R_u] picked up the phone, so it was all in code. I said, 'Have you talked to the Greek [Mr. Pappas]?' And he said, 'Yes I have.' I said, 'Is the Greek bearing gifts?' He said, 'Well, I call you tomorrow on that.' "[26]

For veiled political criticism in repressive regimes the term "Aesopic language" has gained some currency. It was perhaps introduced by Saltykov-Shchedrin, the author of *The Golovyov Family* (1876) and *Fables* (1885), works in which the author attacked by way of circumlocution government officials, backward landowners, and greedy capitalists. Lenin as well used the terms "Aesopic language" and "slave language" to characterize the practice of the revolutionaries prior to the October Revolution of employing euphemisms in public print in order to hide their radical ideas from the censor. For example, the word "constitution" was understood by properly predisposed readers to mean "revolution." Even in Russia, however, the use of Aesopic language is older than either the Bolsheviks or Shchedrin. In the 1820s the participation of writers in political conspiracies—Pushkin's sympathy and that of other writers with the Decembrists—led the censors to suspect literature of being the cause of uprisings everywhere. When the journal *The European* was forbidden in 1832, and its editor placed under police surveillance, the censors issued a "notification" in which an objectionable contribution to the journal was characterized as follows: "Although the author says that he does not talk about politics, but about literature, he thinks something entirely different. The word 'enlightenment' he understands as 'liberty.' 'Activity of the mind' means to him 'the revolution'. . . ."[27]

[26] *The Presidential Transcripts* (New York: Dell, 1974), pp. 133–134.

[27] *Entsiklopedicheskii Slovar*, 41 vols. (Petersburg: Brockhaus-Efron, 1890–1904), 37: 955 ff. For Aesopic language in *Pravda* prior to the October Revolution, see Whitman Bassow, "The Pre-Revolutionary *Pravda* and Tsarist Censorship," *The American Slavic*

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Of course, the ruling groups as well as rebels and critics may resort to euphemisms and other devices of conveying covert meanings in public communications. The word for genocide used among Nazi leaders was "final solution." As long as the masses are illiterate and no right to education and active particpation in politics is recognized, the need for communication between the rulers and the ruled is small. Many modern regimes, however, insist on adherence by the masses to official ideologies. If in these circumstances the ruling elite considers it important to keep the masses in a state of ignorance about conflicts and struggles for power among the rulers, it may become desirable for them to use exoteric communications with the masses while conveying at the same time esoteric meanings to the subelites. In the political analysis of the Soviet regime and its policies, the understanding of such communications has engaged the attention of many scholars.[28]

Cautious concealment of one's true opinions is possible without loss of self-respect only for those whose secretiveness or mendacity protects cherished persons or values, but there are certain professions that are especially vulnerable to demoralization in consequence of continual dissimulation in public: the professional talkers and writers on political subjects. For example, the political journalists in totalitarian regimes

and East European Review 13 (1954): 47–65. More recently, Nathan Leites and Elsa Bernaut in their examination of the Moscow Trials showed in great detail the grammar and syntax of the "veiled language" in which the Bolshevik defendants expressed themselves in order to communicate with other leaders without speaking overtly to the masses (Nathan Leites and Elsa Bernaut, *Ritual of Liquidation* [Glencoe: Free Press, 1954]). For instances of the current use of Aesopic language, see Dina Spechler, "Permitted Dissent in the Decade after Stalin: Criticism and Protest in *Novy Mir*, 1955–1964," in Paul Cocks and others, eds., *The Dynamics of Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 28–50.

[28] Myron Rush, *The Rise of Khrushchev* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1958); Myron Rush, "Esoteric Communication in Soviet Politics," *World Politics* 11 (1959): 614–620; Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the U.S.S.R.* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961); Donald S. Zagoria, *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956–1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 24–35; William E. Griffith, *Communist Esoteric Communications: Explication de Texte* (Cambridge: MIT Center for International Studies, 1967); Leites and Bernaut, *Ritual of Liquidation*, pp. 277–349.

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comprise two groups, the zealots and the secret critics. The former have no moral problems, since their zeal impels them to comply and overcomply with the orders they receive. They believe in the ideology they spread. The critics have the choice of leaving their profession or becoming hypocrites, since in this profession everybody is forced to appear as a zealot whether he is one or not. The critics who do not abandon their work must behave in public like zealots. Different from dissenters in many other walks of life, they are compelled by the nature of their work to advocate rather than merely tolerate beliefs they do not share. Writing between the lines then serves not only the objective purpose of spreading criticism obliquely but also the subjective need to gain a respite from pretended zeal for false causes.

The moral stress to which critical journalists are exposed in totalitarian regimes may find release in cynicism and, in the last resort, in the illusion that their esoteric dissent will be detected in their exoteric production.[29] After prolonged compliance with official regulations of language which conflict with reality, or after entertaining for a long time prohibited secret views, the journalist may attribute to his readers an understanding of meanings hidden in his writings which they either no longer possess or have ceased to be interested in: or else the hidden meaning may be so faint as to pass unnoticed. Such illusions indicate that through habituation to fear the subjective need for moral rehabilitation may be stronger than the weak effort or the small opportunity to attain it.

Bruno E. Werner's *Die Galeere*, a novel with an evidently broad autobiographical base, conveys many insights into such moral problems of journalists in the Nazi era. Toward the end of the war, a journalist in the book says to one of his col-

[29] A staunch anti-Nazi in Germany observed in 1939 that "the same journalists who only yesterday were up to their neck in their twaddle, crack cynical jokes at their own Byzantine behavior as soon as one speaks to them in the street" (Friedrich Percyval Reck-Malleczewen, *Tagebuch eines Verzweifelten* [Lorch/Württemberg: Bürger, 1947], p. 97.

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leagues, "By the way, some people assert that my editorials contain quite a bit between the lines; I have already twice been warned officially." And the author comments that the speaker "belonged to those journalists who did not notice at all that the readers had lost the habit of finding anything in these articles but the official vocabulary . . . ."[30]

Finally, the communicator may wish to include a meaning in his message which, though hidden from *all* recipients, is to modify the overt meaning in his own mind. This is the case of statements made with a "mental reservation" which the communicator expresses in a secret (and possibly magical) way intelligible only to himself. Thus perjury may be avoided in the mind of the perjurer, if not in the eyes of the law, by a publicly imperceptible gesture to which the perjurer attributes redeeming power, because to him it annuls the validity of the oath.

The Audience Seeking Meaning

There is much evidence to support the contention that whenever freedom of expression is suppressed, the sensitivity to allusions increases. A German writer reported about the Nazi regime that at the time

> not only in reading but also in conversation the slightest allusion was understood. Everywhere one smelled a reference to current politics, even when no such reference was made. A conferencier complained to me that his audience was so superkeen of hearing as to interpret politically any joke he was telling.[31]

In 1953, Helmut Thielicke, the distinguished German theologian, published a book of sermons on the Lord's Prayer.[32] He had given the first eight of the eleven sermons in

[30] Bruno E. Werner, *Die Galeere* (Amsterdam: Bermann-Fischer, 1949), p. 494.
[31] Werner Bergengruen, "Foreword" to Pechel, *Zwischen den Zeilen*, pp. 8–9.
[32] Helmut Thielicke, *Das Gebet, das die Welt umspannt* (Stuttgart: Quell-Verlag, 1973).

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Stuttgart toward the end of World War II, while the city was subject to severe bombing raids. Professor Thielicke told me in 1953 that he recalled the feeling of political audacity he had had when giving these sermons, although they contained no overt political references. He added that, in reading proof in the early fifties, he could no longer discover which specific passages in his sermons had made him feel that way. By the same token, he said, he had experienced after the war that when speaking in a church in Communist East Berlin one had only to whisper what in West Germany required, as it were, the sound of trumpets to be understood. Several other German authors with whom I talked after the war about their experiences in writing and talking between the lines during the Nazi period spontaneously testified in the same way to the heightened sensitivity of the listeners to critical allusions in times of extreme political stress and to the loss of such sensitivity when the stress relaxed.

Indeed, it appears that people who are deprived of voicing and hearing criticism freely tend to find it wherever they can, in old literature as well as in contemporary communications. We may describe this situation, somewhat boldly, as one in which the audience seeks the meaning that it needs so that possibly R, and not necessarily C, is the originator of M_c.

In the years when Hitler ruled Germany, Ernst Jünger wrote a book, *On the Marble Cliffs,* which was widely read in Germany. The author used fantastic imagery to depict certain aspects of modern tyrannical regimes. The main figure in his book was a "Chief Forester." Later, in May 1945, Jünger noted in his diary that in times of censorship "the imagination of the reader cooperates exegetically—much more powerfully than the author wishes. The 'Chief Forester' was understood to be now Hitler, now Göring, now Stalin. This sort of thing I had foreseen, to be sure, but not intended."[33]

[33] Ernst Jünger, *Strahlungen* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1966), p. 147.

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In all epochs of history, repressive regimes have encountered the power of allusive criticism contained in older literature. While censors may be able to suppress the contemporary expression of dissent, they cannot possibly prevent associations of suppressed criticism that classical works of the past may evoke in a contemporary audience. For example, in the time of the Roman Empire, theater audiences applauded certain lines in ancient plays which seemed applicable to current abuses as well as to past practices chided by the author.[34]

To this day, many past events and a great deal of old literature have been sources of intense embarrassment to the guardians of prescribed thought. Hence the policy of illiberal regimes to confiscate or burn objectionable books of authors long dead; to restrict access to such books in libraries; to rewrite history; to eliminate certain plays from the repertoire of the theater; to rename cities; to dismantle public monuments; to prohibit old songs and drive certain musical compositions out of concert halls.[35]

The more widely acknowledged the fame and the more deeply rooted the admiration for an old author, the more difficult it is for censors to punish contemporary readers for attributing to his work a timely, subversive, meaning. Sometimes even old poetry may defy the censors despite the fierce

[34] Moses Hadas, *Ancilla to Classical Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954), p. 76.

[35] After the Decembrist Revolution in Russia in 1825, all lectures at Petersburg University were read from carefully censored books, and "the students were expected to take them down and repeat them verbatim because to answer 'in their own words' was considered 'subversive free thinking' " (David Margarshak, *Turgenev: A Life* [New York: Grove, 1954], p. 54). Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* was removed by the Nazis from the list of required reading in schools and banished from the stage because of the antityrannical verses the play contains (Theodor Heuss, *Dank und Bekenntnis: Gedenkrede zum 20. Juli 1944* [Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1954], p. 23). The opposition of the Nazis to Schiller's *Don Karlos* has a precedent in the removal of the play from the repertoire of the theater in Graz by the Austrian police in 1830. The incident inspired Johann Nestroy the following day to an extraordinarily effective satirical demonstration on the stage (Hans Speier, *Witz und Politik: Essay über die Macht und das Lachen* [Zurich: Edition Interfrom, 1975], pp. 30–31).

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criticism which contemporary readers and listeners suddenly read into stanzas whose political meaning has lain dormant for a long time.[36]

Similarly, Rudolf Pechel, for nine years until his arrest in 1942 the courageous editor of *Deutsche Rundschau*, published not only many essays which were obliquely critical of the regime but also excerpts from the writings of old authors whom the readers could suddenly recognize as famous champions of ideas opposed by the Nazis. The authors, whose writings were excerpted under the heading "The Living Past," included Erasmus, Francis Bacon, Balthasar Gracian, Boetius, Marcus Aurelius, Lao-tzu, Montesquieu, Vauvenargues, Manzoni, Kant, Jacob Burckhardt, and Jonathan Swift.

Truly covert meaning, recalled quite often in dire political circumstances, is contained in Tacitus's works. As a senator under the reign of Domitian (A.D. 81–96), whom he regarded as a worse tyrant than Nero, Tacitus witnessed the expulsions of philosophers, book burnings, and death penalties executed upon command of the emperor. Later, he wrote, ". . . as previous ages saw the utmost of liberty, so we saw the utmost of servitude, since we were robbed by spying of speech and hearing. With our voices we would have lost memory itself, if it were as much in our power to forget as it was to be silent."[37] And again, "How few are we who have survived not only others but, as it were, ourselves . . . ."[38] When the good emperor Nerva was chosen to succeed Domitian, Tacitus began to publish his history of the emperors. Long after his death, the Attic brevity and simplicity of his style was associated with unorthodoxy "and even libertinism" in many ages, whereas Cicero's ornate style became that of the church, the univer-

[36] An especially pertinent instance is a poem written by Gottfried Keller, which became very popular in the Third Reich; see Reck-Malleczewen, *Tagebuch eines Verzweifelten*, p. 97.
[37] Tacitus, *Agricola* 2.
[38] *Ibid.*, 3.

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sities, the Jesuits, the foreign offices: in general, of orthodoxy.[39]

Interestingly enough, as late as the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, Tacitus was regarded "as a dangerously subversive writer," particularly "under the dictatorships both of the Jacobins and of Napoleon."[40] Similarly, in this century, three years after Hitler had assumed power, the Phaidon Publishing House issued a German translation of Tacitus's works. In a brief note at the conclusion of the volume, signed by the publisher, the reader learned that Tacitus had awaited the end of the arbitrary rule of tyranny in "embittered silence" and that its long duration had made him cautious:

> He did not always want to be understood, not always easily, not always by everybody; many of his sentences are dark as hiding places and brief like riddles. It is remarkable that precisely in such times of anxiety, rather than in times when the press is free, the strongest statements are made and the most intricate thought becomes expressible: severe constraint produces the greatest stylists.[41]

Evidently the German publisher hoped that some readers of the book would discover and cherish in Tacitus's old work certain timely critical views of tyranny.

Sacred literature which embodies lasting values is relatively safe from political censors. Victor Klemperer, distinguished observer of the deterioration of morality and language in the

[39] Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), chap. 18. As a certain parallel, it may be mentioned that Stendhal wrote *Lucien Leuwen* in 1836 for "the happy few" who would understand his meaning and appreciate his style fifty years later. He wrote eschewing the popular romanticism of his day and reading the *Code Napoléon* in order to avoid in his own prose the stylistic frills he detested. His novel, which was devastatingly critical of politics in the Second Empire, was published posthumously.

[40] Lionel Trilling, "Tacitus Now" (1942), in his *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1953), p. 194. In the United States, his aristocratic values have kept liberals from admiring Tacitus (*ibid.*). On Tacitus, see also Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

[41] Cornelius Tacitus, *Sämtliche Werke* (Vienna: Phaidon-Verlag, 1935), "Nachwort," p. 800.

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Nazi era, noted triumphantly that sermons which took the authorities and their policies to task, if only by implication, were "quite unassailably timeless."[42] But even sacred literature is not always exempt from political persecution. When the Chinese Communists decided in 1974 to label all resistance to revolutionary values as Confucian, it became necessary to instruct Chinese youth on a mass scale what abominable "reactionaries" Confucius and Mencius had been. Now Mencius had generally been credited with advocating the right to slay those despised for having outraged humanity and righteousness. But according to a Chinese broadcast in 1974, a meeting of "poor and lower-middle-class peasants" was held in Tsouhsien County in the eastern province of Shantung, where Mencius had been born more than 2000 years ago. At this meeting it was recalled that "a certain Meng Fan-chi, said to be a 'Mencius descendant of the 74th generation,' gave a banquet for Japanese Army officers during World War II. 'This,' the broadcast said, 'shows the hypocrisy of Mencius.' "[43]

This instance surpasses in delay of censure other cases, such as that of Hobbes's *De Cive*, published in 1642, put on the Roman Index in 1654, and burned at Oxford in 1683; that of Copernicus's *De Revolutionibus*, quickly denounced by Luther, but kept off the Roman Index for almost a century; or the condemnation of John Scot Erigena's heresy by Honorius III in 1225, nearly four centuries after its publication.

Urbane Dissimulation

Covert meaning occurs in communication with "insiders." It excludes unwanted recipients, no matter whether they are in earshot of the communicator or are part of an outside world that is considered to be vulgar, profane, hostile, dangerous.

[42] Victor Klemperer, *LTI Notizbuch eines Philologen* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1949), p. 279.

[43] *The New York Times*, April 4, 1974.

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Often the transmission of hidden meaning is associated with consciousness of superiority over those excluded from the communication. It has been said that cultists and sectaries who teach hidden doctrines have a common failing, "the desire to feel superior to others by virtue of esoteric knowledge."[44] While it may be an open question whether or not they have "a desire" to feel superior, the "feeling" itself is indeed common.

It must still be noted that something similar to covert meaning may appear in the *absence* of unwanted recipients, that is to say, in entirely homogeneous groups. This is the urbane dissimulation employed in toning down a painful evocation among civilized people or in softening bad, saddening, news. "Among civilized peoples and especially in refined circles," as Eric Partridge put it in an essay on euphemism,[45] talk about death, sickness, madness, idiocy, ruin and similarly disturbing subjects is "toned down," if it cannot be altogether avoided. The relative who has died is said to have "departed," and the person who is very ill may be characterized as *"bien fatigué"*—very tired.[46] Conversely, unrestrained, direct talk among mourners is heartless, as is chillingly shown in Leo Tolstoy's short story "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." Talk about low physical functions and processes as well is avoided in "polite society," or euphemisms, allusions, and abbreviations are employed instead: she "powders her nose," "he spends the night with her," somebody has "TB," etc. Such unpragmatic patterns of speech are capable of extraordinary elaboration and refinement.

All upper classes tend to develop a vocabulary of refined speech, the mastery of which identifies its members. "Correct" pronunciation as well as the "proper" choice of words and,

[44] Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Dissent and Reform in the Early Middle Agess* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), p. 212.

[45] Eric Partridge, "Euphemism and Euphemisms," republished in his *Here, There and Everywhere* (London: Hamilton, 1950), pp. 39–49.

[46] Laurence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), p. 188. Cf. *abire ad plures* for *mori* in Latin. On euphemisms in Latin, see Otto Keller, *Zur lateinischen Sprachgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Teubner, 1893–95).

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under certain conditions, calligraphy may be indispensable for a successful claim to upper-class status.[47] The understanding of literary allusions may become a mark of distinction.[48]

Since the beautiful must not show the effort it takes to produce it, negligence and carelessness in communication may be regarded as attributes of high standing if speech or writing otherwise clearly meets the required standards.[49]

Similar to allusive discourse in socially exclusive circles is the use of learned allusions by poets in order to display their erudition (to other poets) rather than to please the multitude. In Camoëns's *The Lusiads* (1572), "the bird whose song the Phaetonian death wailed loud and long" is the swan; "the glowing amourist who won fair faithless Larissaea's love" is Apollo, etc. Renaissance poets were much concerned with showing their familiarity with the world of Vergil and Ovid; they referred to "the gods and heroes of antiquity by allusion or association rather than directly."[50] The contempt for the unlettered to be found in medieval Latin poetry survived as disdain for general popularity among serious writers and composers well into the Baroque and Classicist eras.[51] In English poetry the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were the great age of allusion. Only thereafter do

[47] *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shōnagon*, translated by Arthur Waley (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), "Introduction." For the high esteem in which calligraphy was held in Islam, see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York: Pantheon Books 1953), p. 341.

[48] *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shōnagon* (p. 65) contains an allusion to Confucius not understood by the man to whom the tenth-century author speaks in the book; nor does she explain it. It is explained by Mr. Waley, the twentieth-century editor of the book.

[49] For example, in Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* it is said about a poem written on a fan: "It was written with a deliberate negligence which seemed to him to aim at concealing the writer's status and identity. But for all that the hand showed breeding and distinction . . ." (Murasaki shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, translated by Arthur Waley, 2 vols. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935], 1:56). There are many other passages showing the importance of calligraphy.

[50] William C. Atkinson, in the introduction to his new translation of Camoëns, *The Lusiads* (London: Penguin, 1952), p. 34.

[51] See Hans Speier, "Court and Tavern in the German Baroque Novel," in his *Force and Folly* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1969), p. 224.

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allusions of great poets sometimes take on the air of labored futility.[52]

A social class that places a high value on courtesy and good manners observes many verbal taboos. That which is felt to offend, disturb, or frighten man is hidden behind a veil of politeness. Outsiders may be inclined to scorn the artificiality of such conventions, which can indeed degenerate into fastidious niceties indistinguishable from silliness. It should be noted, however, that urbane dissimulation not only is an attribute of social class but also serves to render life bearable and light in defiance of its dark terrors.

Allegorical Interpretation

In this brief essay we have seen that hidden meaning is conveyed to certain recipients in preliterate and literate societies, and particularly, though not exclusively, in illiberal regimes; among those who wield power as well as those who live under its sway; among victims, critics, and detached observers; in high and low social classes. Nor are the efforts to find a way from the overt sense to a deeper "real" meaning confined to everyday political and nonpolitical discourse; they are rather regularly required in the exegesis of sacred texts, the understanding of myths, allegories, parables, and poetic imagery, in the interpretation of philosophical writings, the critical appreciation of fine art and literature.

Inasmuch as the intention of the author or communicator is not always perfectly obvious, it is possible that some hidden meaning is read into the message by a recipient or interpreter.

[52] See for example E. M. W. Tillyard's comments in *Poetry, Direct and Oblique* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), p. 35, on Ezra Pound's "Ode pour l'élection de son sépulcre." Tillyard speaks of "bogus obliquity" and "would-be obliquity through allusion."

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This possibility was not in Dante's mind when he set forth his well-known doctrine that books "can be understood and ought to be explained in four principal senses," which he termed literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical (or mystical).[53] The notion that the recipient may possibly read these meanings into the text is rather a modern thought having to do with the discrediting of allegoresis by the Protestant Reformation, if not with the modern inclination to favor living readers over dead authors. To Dante, meaning was given in the texts to which he referred for illustration. The notion that meanings might have been invented by readers—that is, merely read into the Scriptures or Ovid, without being intended by God, the Evangelist, or the poet—would have been alien to him.

As regards allegorical interpretation, Dante was merely a link in a long history that went back to the Church Fathers and further to Philo. In the Jewish tradition, no verse in Scripture, whether narrative or law, had to be taken literally but was subject to free interpretation.[54] Philo was also conversant from Greek philosophical literature with the practice of assimilating certain elements of the Greek myths by understanding them as allegories.[55] In general, allegorizing means interpreting a text "in terms of something else, irrespective of what that something else is"—"book learning . . . practical wisdom . . . speculative meditation . . . urging necessities of changed conditions of life," etc.[56] Sometimes, allegorical interpretations were also used "to defeat the crude literalism of

[53] See *A Translation of Dante's Eleven Letters*, with explanatory notes and historical comments by Charles Sterrett Latham, edited by George Rice Carpenter (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), pp. 194–195.

[54] On allegory and the allegorical method, see Joh. Geffcken, "Allegory, Allegorical Interpretation," in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1913–22), 1: 327–331; Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: Macmillan, 1886); Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947), especially 1: 115–163.

[55] See J. Tate, "The Beginnings of Greek Allegory," *The Classical Review* 41 (1927).

[56] Wolfson, *Philo,* 1: 134.

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fanatical heresies; or to reconcile the teachings of philosophy with the truths of the Gospel."[57]

In the many centuries in which the allegorical interpretation of sacred texts, whether Jewish, Christian or Mohammedan, dominated exegesis, the legitimacy of the method was not questioned, although there were controversies about the number of meanings to be discovered, the rules and methods that were to govern the interpretation, and the correctness of specific instances of exegesis.

In dealing with hidden meaning critically it is necessary to distinguish works written by authors like Maimonides or Rabelais, who state explicitly that meaning is concealed in their writings, from writings like the Homeric poems or sacred texts, in regard to which the assertions of hidden meaning stem exclusively from the interpreters. The names of gods in Homer and Hesiod are not allegories, but to the Stoics Zeus meant *logos*, Ares war, Hermes reason, etc. Many centuries later, John of Salisbury elaborated earlier allegorical interpretations of Vergil and taught that the truths of philosophy were expressed in the *Aeneid* under the guise of a legend. Origen and St. Augustine, following a kindred Talmudic tradition, held that the Song of Songs signified Christ and the Church, although the text itself allows such interpretation only if certain rules of allegoresis are accepted. Philo had laid down the rule "that no anthropomorphic expression about God is to be taken literally"; he assumed that such expressions were "introduced for the instruction of the many."[58] St. Augustine taught that "whatever in Holy Writ cannot properly be said to be concerned either with morality or with the faith must be recognized as allegorical."[59]

[57] Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 249.

[58] Wolfson, *Philo*, 1: 116. "Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing me not; and hearing me not, neither do they understand" (Matt. 13: 13).

[59] Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, p. 237.

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The fact that Dante subscribed to the scholastic teaching of the four meanings allows us then to presume that *The Divine Comedy* can be taken as a work in which indeed four meanings can be discovered, because they were intended by the author. In other instances, however, the author's instruction to search for hidden sense is less obvious than in Dante's case and can be established only by very careful inquiry, if at all. In still others it cannot be proved and, if claimed, must be regarded as an invention of the interpreter. In the latter category belongs, for example, the cabalistic methods of gematria.

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