

LECTURE 1.

FROM PERCEPTION TO METAPHOR*

You may wonder what I had in mind in giving these lectures the title *Meaning*. The answer is in the content of the last two lectures which will deal with *Meaning Lost* and *Meaning Regained*. This is what I shall lead up to. In the lecture on *Meaning Lost*, we shall have before us a subject that is on the lips of our age in many forms. We are told every day and in a variety of ways, that meaning has got lost. The modern philosophy concerned with the existence of man arrived at the conclusion that man's existence is absurd. The most prosperous country of the world is plagued by doubts about the meaning of its national life. Young men and woman despise the prospects of their adult future, which they find meaningless, and they condemn the universities for lacking any coherent outlook which would make sense of the world.

This brings the matter urgently before us here at this University. Let me say briefly what I think about the universities. I believe that the principal function of universities is to cultivate the several domains of scholarship. Each member of the university must be entrusted with one domain and be expected to know more about this area than any other of his colleagues. Exchanges with other regions may be frequent, but a teacher's responsibility for other regions than his own is limited to the surveillance of the work going on in these regions. The universities are held together by long chains of mutual supervision between neighbours and these chains of mutual assessment assure the observance of similar standards of scholarship throughout the university. You cannot compare directly the work of a botanist with that of an Assyriologist, but the chains of overlapping neighbourhoods do mediate such comparisons. This is why one university will as a rule excell, or else be inferior to, other universities in almost every one of its departments.

Thus, however departmentalised a university may be, it does stand for and sustains a single coherent system of academic values. I shall come back to this in my last lecture. I will say now only that this system of values lives mainly in practice without

* Polanyi gave this lecture on 13 May 1969 at the University of Chicago. Three variants of the text can be found in the collections of the University of Chicago Library; two in Box 39, Folder 6 and one in Box 40, Folder 9. From the texts that Box 39, Folder 6 contains, we chose to publish the variant which includes corrections in handwriting. This text was published only in Hungarian translation: Polányi Mihály, "Értelem" in *Polányi Mihály filozófiai írásai*, trans. Nyírő Zsuzsanna (Budapest: Atlantisz, 1992) 178-201. In English it appeared only in parts in the fourth chapter of Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), compiled with the text of Polanyi's lecture given in May 1970 also in Chicago, with the title *Meaning*.

any explicit formulation of it, and yet embodies philosophic ideas, ideas that may be right or wrong. I believe that some of the ideas controlling today the work of universities are wrong. I hold in particular that the idea widespread in universities today, that academic studies should aim at being scientific, in the image of physics, is wrong. I hold that it reduces the scope and sometimes impairs the very meaning of academic enquiries. In my lecture on *Meaning Lost* I shall show how the universities thus contribute to the denaturing of man's image and to the reduction of human affairs to fragmentary mechanical aspects of them.

It is of course true that specialisation prevents universities from developing comprehensive interpretations of man's experience and that as they themselves fail to deal with great questions, they discourage the study of such questions. But I think this may be remedied if universities develop further – as some in America are already trying to do – a kind of universalised supplement to their specialised main body. My lectures here are part of such experiments in this university and I gratefully accept the responsibility for conducting them in this sense.

This then is the first conclusion I put to you. I say that we must accept the highly and inevitably still growing specialisation of academic studies, but that this system must be guided by a truer philosophy of knowledge and also be supplemented by comprehensive enquiries pursued within the universities, outside their specialised domains.

My choice of poetry and painting as subjects of my first two lectures will establish a theory of meaning broad enough to comprise in the structure of meaning both feats of the imagination and of observation. This merging of the purely imaginative with the strictly empirical is best illustrated by a striking idea of Ulric Neisser connecting the eye motions of a person dreaming in his sleep with the subject of his dream. It has been known for some time that the characteristic rapid eye motions of a dreamer can often be interpreted in the sense that the dreamer follows by his eyes the scene which he sees in his dream. Thus the eye motions form part of the dream. Neisser suggests that what the eye motions do in the dream is akin to the way our eye motions affect our perception of external objects as we scan the objects we are looking at. He concludes that „the mechanisms of imagination are continuous with those of perception.” (Neisser 1967, 86)

I have quoted Neisser's idea for its brilliance. There is much other evidence in his book developing a general relationship between our tacit awareness of clues pointing to a focal act or focal experience. This system supports in a most welcome manner the relationship between subsidiary and focal awareness which I have put forward in *Personal Knowledge* and since then in the past ten years, but its detailed comparison with my own views cannot be carried out here.

In my own view visual perception consists in seeing the joint meaning of the responses evoked in our body by the impact of light. This is an extension of gestalt theory. Gestalt psychology has established the way the details of an object are integrated to the sight of an object. To me this represents only the ultimate stage of

visual integration. I go back to the retinal image, to the feeling in our eye muscles and in the bodily muscles supporting the position of our head, to the sensations from our inner ear, to the hidden memories which shape our interpretation of objects and indeed to all the neural traces evoked by the light reaching our eyes. To me all these are the clues of vision and perception consists in the integration of these clues to the sight of their joint meaning.

And when I say ‘meaning’, I mean ‘meaning’ in the usual sense. In case this step may seem fanciful, let me emphasise it by my formulation of it in *Personal Knowledge*. “This process, by which the meaning of sensory clues is established in terms of our perception, is closely analogous to that by which we shape the meaning of denotative words in the lifelong course of applying them to a long series of identifiable instances.” (Polanyi 1958, 97)

The meaning of visual clues and that of denotative terms are both cases of knowing something. My idea of meaning will be strengthened by adding to these cases the meaning of doing something as we do in performing a deliberate action. When we lift an arm or start walking, we intend the result of a complex set of co-ordinated muscular contractions. We are virtually ignorant of the way this co-ordination takes place and could we learn all the details of our muscular actions, we could still not be able to set it in motion. We have in fact no direct control over our muscles and our action must therefore be directed to the result of their operations. We elicit these operations by our intention to achieve their result; thus they serve a purpose and this purpose lends them meaning. Their meaning lies then in implementing our action.

Action, while in progress, necessarily aims at the future, for which we can attend only in our imagination. Thus in every deliberate bodily action the thrust of our imagination implements our intention. In this mobilisation and guidance of our muscular equipment for an imagined aim we can find the nucleus of all discovery, invention and artistic creativity. But for the moment let me return from this rudimentary feat of imagination to the process of perception and that of attaching meaning to words.

Perception is not instantaneous, nor is it effortless. Even the smoothest scanning of a scene takes time and involves a remarkable feat of integration. Observations of eye motion during the viewing of a scene have established the fact that our eyes see the objects before it in a series of snap-shots taken from consecutive positions at the rate of about three shots per second. If, for example, we spend ten seconds for looking at an area before us, we collect thirty to forty different snap-shots and receive from them a single view of the objects seen. The pictures will not strictly overlap, for the same points of the area are viewed at various angles from our line of vision. But even if we disregard this deviation, we must recognise it as a strange feat that different consecutive pictures are absorbed by a process of integration which continuously builds up, and revises in building up, a single sight which eventually includes the whole material we have thus collected. Besides this collection of images

does not go on at random, the scanning concentrates on the parts showing more interesting details. Apparently the integration quickly establishes the general layout of the scene before us, and guides the eyes to bear on the more important regions.

These operations were discovered by students of visual perception and are hardly known to men at large while using these operations. Not only are we using them without knowing about them but, if informed about all their details, we could still not direct them: we have no direct control over them. We meet with a quite similar situation in moving our limbs by using subtly co-ordinated muscular contradictions that are unknown to us and that we could not control directly in any case.

As our intention to move our limbs sets in motion a complex bodily mechanism in its service, so the will to see something before us sets in motion another delicate mechanism of our body in the service of our purpose.¹

To move our limbs needs more effort than to look at a scenery, but the effort of making out what we see can also be strenuous, and such efforts can be extended to the work of a life-time as we expand the desire to perceive and understand usual spectacles in the pursuit of scientific enquiry. To start and sustain the mechanism involved in looking at any object is a purposive action and as such must have some anticipatory imagination as its guide, but the expansion of our eyesight into discovery enlarges the imagination into a creative act.

Thus we have the same strange mechanism both in motoric action and in the viewing of external objects. In both cases our imagination sets in motion elements over which we have no direct control, and this act implements our intention. If this is the way we produce new meaning, this procedure should also apply to the classic example of new meaning produced by naming an object, or hearing such a name and applying it to its object. Such is in fact the case. Each time we use a word as a name, whether in saying or hearing it, we establish a relation between the word and a range of other instances in which it was used before. Each of these instances is clearly distinguishable from the others and is yet covered by a single conception. As I thus add an additional unprecedented instance to this range, I enlarge the meaning of an appropriate case in this sense. We have evidence of such steady modification of meaning in the way it substantially changes the meaning of words from one generation to the next. You can see the innovating function of speech more easily in the use of sentences, for the number of available combinations is so immense that most sentences heard or spoken are unprecedented to the lives of those who speak or hear them. And while there are no strict rules for accepting an object as an instance of a known class, there are grammatical rules for constructing meaningful sentences. These rules are not explicitly known to the speaker or listener, and the fact that we yet effectively apply them has become still more surprising since the elaboration of grammar, due to Chomsky. To use language is, according to Chomsky, to apply "a deep and abstract theory, many of the concepts and principles of which

¹ The paragraph is in brackets and marked with a question mark in this variant of text.

are only remotely related to experience by long and intricate chains.” So in the most common cases of expressing a meaning or understanding a meaning, we are carrying out operations over which we have no direct control, and again, these subtle and complex operations are set in motion by our own intention aiming at an apt result. Our imagination is set upon expressing our meaning, or of understanding what another person means, and this effort of our searching imagination implements its own fulfilment. Perception, body motions, and the use of language all work under the same law which controls all our elaborate actions.

I have herewith expanded the principles of gestalt psychology by harnessing them to the powers of intelligent purposes. But let me go back for a moment to classic gestalt formations, for these too will support the conclusions I am arriving at. Take our recognition of a physiognomy, or of any other complex surface. Gestalt tells us that, once pictures are integrated into a whole, the parts lose their original appearance. While our attention is directed on the whole, its parts are reduced to a functional appearance and some may be altogether lost from sight. So we may say that when intentionally recognising a part-whole relation, we make sense of its parts, relaxing our sight of them in order to see what they jointly mean. And any search for this result is done by the imagination, which senses the presence of some meaning; and it is still the imagination that guides the pursuit of this meaning and eventually grasps it.

I think I have shown now that all meaningful actions, whether cognitive or practical, whether tacit or articulate, are the work of our imagination, labouring on machineries over which we have no direct control. Mathematical calculations and other formal inferences are no exception to this, for they are being lent meaning, as all language is lent meaning, by the tacit machinery I have shown here. But the decisive point on which all my thoughts of a meaning lost and a meaning recovered will hinge, is yet to be met. We reach it by asking, what happens when the quest for meaning arrives at its successful conclusion.

Let me start with the last case, the recognition of a coherent whole formed by hitherto meaningless parts. The imagination, which had searched for a possible coherence, has been set at rest, but the coherence we discovered remains at the centre of our attention. The many parts having fallen into their places, have taken on their functional appearance within the structure of the whole.

This is the relation I am after. We can safely assume it for the completion of a process of visual scanning. The several dozens of snap-shots are still before our eyes, but our attention is directed on the objects we have made out by our search; it is directed to the point at which our imagination had been aiming, that is at the joint meaning of the snap-shots that we have now established. A bodily movement reveals the same relationship, provided we take a case where there is an effort needed to find the skilful co-ordination of several motions. The successful working of the skill, on which the questing imagination had centred, becomes the focus of our attention as we practice the skill. And this brings up the case which is our main

interest here, for I want, in the first place, to define the meaning of spoken words. What does happen after the imagination, searching for the meaning of a sentence, has discovered this kind of meaning? Its place will be taken by our focussing on the meaning discovered. And this will be true also if the search had been for an adequate verbal expression of a known meaning. When the quest has been for the expression of a pre-given meaning, its successful sight will satisfy us by conveying that meaning.

So we can lay down some fundamental characteristics of all meaningful matters. Such systems consist of two kinds of elements. There are things in it that *have* a meaning and these things bear on something else, namely on that which *is* their meaning. And by pointing on that which is their meaning, the things that *have* a meaning deflect our attention from themselves and cause us to focus our attention on that which *is* their meaning.

Going back to our examples, we see that in a gestalt the parts *have* a meaning and the whole which they form *is* their meaning. The snap-shots we take when scanning a spectacle *have* a meaning and the sight of the objects discerned by us *is* the meaning on which they bear. The several moves of a skill *have* their meaning in the successful act which *is* their meaning. Words and sentences *have* a meaning in the message which *is* their meaning.

I have described how a meaning emerges in response to the imagination as it thrusts into an anticipation of such meaning. We shall see more of such wonderful mental achievements later. Now we are only at the point where meaning, once established, is held fixed firmly before us by our attention directed on it. So long as the integration, which produces the meaning of its parts, is kept up, the parts will have the meaning which is at the focus of our attention. But this bond can break. It may decay by disuse or old age, as when words, that were familiar, come to appear strange to us. But the bonds of meaning can also be instantly broken by shifting our attention from the integrated whole, that *is* the meaning, to the parts which, by virtue of their integration, *have* that meaning. It is easy to demonstrate this destruction of meaning for the case of a skill. I owe to Marjorie Grene the example of the famous tight-rope walker who told in his autobiography, that he had always to keep his attention on the moment when he would descend from the rope. Should he think instead of his next step, he would instantly lose his balance. It is common knowledge also, that a word loses its meaning if we keep repeating it while watching the sound we make and the movements of our tongue and lips. It is not so easy perhaps to destroy the coherence of a sight, but gestalt psychologists have observed that „Perception of parts hinders perception of wholes, and *vice versa*” (Helson, 1933).

Gestalt psychologists have amply described also the fact, at which I have already alluded, that a thing functioning as the part of a whole, looks different than it does when looked at as an object in itself when deprived of its function of participating in an integration. Such phenomenal effects accompanying meaningful integration

will come in presently, as I approach the problems of art, so I shall not go into them now.

But I must not continue to use the part-whole relation for describing the principles of meaning. This is to take a too narrow view of it. We must accept it that the characteristic feature of all conscious meaning is its liability to be wiped out by shifting our attention effectively from that which *is* the meaning to that which *has* this meaning. The clues which bear on the focal object must have our attention only in order to direct it to that object. They must be made to form pointers to the focus. The things that thus bear on the focus we shall call subsidiaries. Our awareness of them is a subsidiary awareness, which is essentially intentional. This reminds us that Brentano observed almost a hundred years ago that consciousness usually has an intentional object. But the structure of meaning, as I defined it, possesses not only an intention, but also a rootedness of this intentionality, that is essential to its content. An integration performed in this way may be called a *from-to* integration. We may then describe perception as a from-to knowledge, a skilful performance, as a from-to operation, and can say that the use of language also has a from-to structure, all these from-to relations being akin to the part-whole relations described by gestalt psychology.

I hope to show that these family relations will hold good as I develop them further, but we can see already some disparities which indicate important variations on our present scheme. I started by telling you of the way we process snap-shots without having any direct control over this operation, and likewise use co-ordinated muscular contractions for moving our limbs, without any knowledge, let alone any direct control, of this muscular mechanism. But absence of direct control was not so complete as we enlarge the bare moving of our limbs to the performance of a difficult skill. It is true that the co-ordination of limbs someone uses in walking a tight rope, will be destroyed by an attempt to co-ordinate his limbs by directing his attention to them. But in the course of learning a skill, it may be useful to practice some part of its technique. Our awareness of the words we are using must remain subsidiary to the meaning to which they point, but even so, we have clearly more conscious control over language we use, than we have over the co-ordination of our muscles for moving our limbs. Moreover, the level of consciousness can be extended in the opposite direction, where it becomes difficult to speak of our having any awareness of the subsidiaries of which we experience the meaning. I have explained visual observations as the joint meaning of the responses evoked in our body by the impact of light. These responses include our experience of many items of which we have hardly any sensations and neural traces which we cannot sense at all. It is legitimate to say that we are aware of these responses in terms of our visual images and that *in this sense* we are subsidiarily aware of them.

But this expansion of the conception of subsidiary awareness to a level of complete unconsciousness has been questioned. Yet as we commonly speak of unconscious awareness, unconscious motives, and so on, there can be no objection to calling

subsidiary functions at the level of unconsciousness a kind of subsidiary awareness. I think one will have to get accustomed to it. Later on, in my third lecture, I will show that the combination of subsidiary and focal awareness is needed for comprehending the relation between joint levels of reality and that so they sustain our knowledge of principles above the domain of inanimate nature. But first I want to develop the scope of from-to knowing in the use of language and also of painting, where I can show more fully the cognitive powers of the imagination.

The most elementary use of language is found in the use of a name to designate a particular person or building. And the simplest way of explaining how a particular name becomes attached to a particular person or object, is to assume that this is the result of hearing the word spoken in the sight of the person or building. We are told a word in the presence of the object and the coincidence of the two experiences becomes associated in our mind in the way associations are commonly formed between two things often seen or heard together. This explanation of the meaning attached to a name is so plausible that it has become widely accepted ever since the laws of association became known in the eighteenth century. But the relation I described of a word that *has* a meaning and thus bears on something else that *is* its meaning, contradicts a theory in which word and object are equal partners of an association.

Partners of association are in fact easy to distinguish from the relation of names to their object. Take the following example. On entering the Trafalgar Square in London you can see the National Gallery and the Nelson Column. Once you have looked at them in turn, each might recall the other in an equal manner. But suppose you notice a tourist guide pointing at the Nelson Column; you notice the Column and the guide's finger in two different ways. The Column is interesting in itself, but the guide's finger is interesting only by its capacity of directing attention to something else than itself. If then the guide tells his audience the name of the Column, we are not interested in the sound he utters, but in the sound's capacity to direct our attention to something else than itself, that is the Column. We may remember both the Column and its name, but the Column will be remembered for its own sake, while its name will be remembered only because of its meaning, which is the Column. The word in use has in fact no interest in itself as an object by contrast with the object that it names, which is interesting in itself, as an object.

This refutes the theory of verbal meaning as an equal association of word and object and confirms my view that meaning consists in a from-to relation. This conclusion has been anticipated to some extent by authoritative writers. The classical conception of language as a creative work of the mind does not envisage a purely associative relation of word and object. Edward Sapir, still writing in the spirit of this earlier philosophy, emphatically rejects the idea that association might constitute speech. Bertrand Russell has observed the peculiar 'transparency' of language, which is an aspect of the speaker's subsidiary awareness of words, by contrast to his focal awareness of that which his words mean. Erwin Strauss and S. K. Langer

have spoken in their different ways of the modesty of the sign in relation to the matters it designates. These impressions confirm the from-to structure of language designating objects.

Having now made sure that we stand on firm grounds, I shall take full swing for a somersault. But first a few words to take stock of matters that still belong to the position reached so far. Words and their meaning can be replaced by road signs telling the way, or else by maps or drawings from engineers; or by mathematical theories, which also serve to find your way about things. All these serve subsidiarily as indications, as denotative words do, and have it in common with words, that, when viewed in themselves, there is little interest to be found in them. We can lump together all these subsidiaries as *indications* pointing at something that is of intrinsic interest and thus have an inverted class of from-to relations where matters of great intrinsic interest take up the subsidiary position, even while *from* these we attend focally to things having *no* intrinsic interest. Suppose we look at a flag, or a medal, or the tomb stone of a great man. These things have no interest as objects, but our awareness of our membership in a nation can function subsidiarily in bearing on a flag. This happens when we look at our country's flag on a solemn occasion. An otherwise meaningless piece of cloth becomes then a moving spectacle and to some people a sacred object. Remember the kinship between linguistic from-to relations and the integration of parts to a whole. A name becomes attached to its object and almost forms part of it. We have here a similar link between a nation and its solemnly unfolded flag: the nation's existence, our diffuse and boundless memories of our pasts lived in it, become embodied in the flag. And the structure of a medal or a tomb stones, and generally of things of their kind, is the same. They do not indicate something as intrinsically uninteresting things do when we use them, as words for denoting an interesting object, but *stand for* an interesting object. They symbolise it.²

Indeed, to designate the United States by its name is structurally the very opposite of symbolising the United States by a flag. For to designate the United States is to integrate a name to a country, while to symbolise the United States by a flag is to integrate a country to a flag. The symbols I mentioned were inarticulate things, the indicators I enlarged upon were words, but this difference is superficial and disappears when I pass on to poetry and later to myth and ritual. We should have therefore a conception of meaning which covers all artificial cases of meaning as distinct from the meaning of perception, of skills and of such part-whole relations as we meet in nature. I shall use the word '*semantic*' for all meaningful relations that are contrived by man. This is an extension from the usual subject of semantics as

² A symbolization can be destroyed as can an indication by shifting the focus to the subsidiary (nation, etc.), but its meaning can be destroyed also without shift of focal attention by looking at the symbol as a material object. (see E. B. Browning: „just for a handful of silver he left us, just for a ribbon to stick in his coat.” The medal's meaning is destroyed in seeing it as a mere ribbon.)

used for the meaning of language, but this is merely to sanction the way I expand the structure of language to include all meaning contrived by man. Such kindred, but substantially different, contrivances, as trained powers of perception or invented skills, will be excluded.

We have then so far two types of semantic relations, these two, indication and symbolising, being inverse to each other. All further semantic relations, which will include poetry, have a structure in which there is no clear difference between the intrinsic importance of subsidiary matters and the focal object on which they bear. One of these I have skipped over by talking only about words that name a particular person or object. Most denotative words call things in general terms like man, table, wind, and thus identify the things meant as members of one class. This action includes a foregoing semantic integration, which establishes the conception of a class by integrating to it numbers of its particular members in the way, for example individual men, or tables, or winds, are made to form the conceptions of men, tables and winds. This integration that lies in the past is continued in naming a particular thing as a member of a class, thus making it a member of that class. I am of course skating here on ancient philosophical problems, but I think that what I am suggesting offers its true solution. The question is what kind of thing it is that the conception of a class refers to. Does the conception of 'human being' refer to someone who is both man and woman; both new born and aged; black, yellow and white, all at the same time; or is it someone who has neither of these qualities? And if it refers to instances each of which differs from the others, how can it claim to refer to all of these? The solution lies in our capacity to integrate specimens which differ in every particular, in the way we integrate two images formed by our two eyes, that differ in every particular, thus forming a joint view which has a single quality, the quality of depth, that is absent in both incompatible images. I shall say more about this kind of creative integration when it comes up in the study of poetry. I shall return to it in a moment when talking about metaphors, where we shall see more clearly how the joint meaning of incompatibles brings us significant novelties, but presents our eyes with an empty focus, as conceptions generally do. The integration of incompatibles, speaking from one imagination to another, imagination, will be found to be a feature of all representative arts.

Conceptions can be true or false and the capacity of true conceptions to represent the structure of reality has been studied in my book *Personal Knowledge*, where I concluded, that our whole intellectual life would be thrown away, should our conceptual framework be shown to be wholly false; man is rational only to the extent to which the conceptions to which he is committed are true. But I am more interested now in the power of art to show us something real and will rather go on here to tell of the way poetry can do this. I can take up this large subject here with only a few minutes, because my purpose is not to comprehend this great matter afresh, but to show how some of its known aspects fit into the pattern of semantics that I have derived from the structure of meaning.

I shall take two important features of poetry, one of which you note at a glance, before even reading any poem. It is its formal shape. At closer quarters a whole system of formal patterns is found which is the aspect of poetry I shall speak of. The second aspect of poetry I shall view – and shall indeed start with viewing it – is at the very centre of poetry: it is the poetic use of metaphor. Aristotle in *The Poetics* wrote that “The greatest thing by far is to have a command of metaphor.” And then he defines metaphor as “giving the thing what belongs to something else.” And in our own days Owen Barfield still writes that a metaphor is „say-one-thing-and-mean-another.” We have still got little further than to describe the metaphor as a deliberate misnomer.

A number of writers, beginning with I. A. Richards, have described the fact that in the metaphor a new powerful meaning arises from the interaction of its parts. But how can an affirmation ‘that A is a non A’ produce a combined meaning of these terms? Max Black says rightly that the question, how this interaction works, remains essentially unanswered. (Black 1962)

I said that the answer to this question will be found in our capacity to integrate incompatible facts under a joint meaning, as we do in covering a set of disparate objects under a single general conception of them; but I must start further back.

I shall accept the description of a metaphor as a creative act which may meet with our resistance, because its joint meaning may be difficult to conceive. I have said that most spoken sentences are unprecedented and hence strictly speaking new creations, but are yet usually understood immediately. They present a problem that is easily solved. Indeed, so skilful is our interpretative machinery that, provided a sentence is formed grammatically, it is difficult to fill its places with words however absurd their choice may appear – they will not yet make some sense. We must only try firmly to interpret the sentence. Linguists regard the sentence “colorless green ideas sleep furiously” as being fairly safe against making sense of it. But it is clear that “green ideas sleep furiously” may mean simply that “immature ideas foster violent dreams.” And with a little more trouble one should be able to account also for such ideas being colorless. The idea is not new, Leonard Bloomfield, a leading linguist in an earlier time, has suggested that all absurd combinations of words can always find a poetic interpretation.

Man’s well-nigh unlimited capacity to interpret grammatically shaped sentences offers an opening for the bitter incoherence protesting the state of man in our days. André Breton, who declared this programme for every thought and action, applied it to poetry by teaching that to compare two objects, as remote from each another as possible, or put them together in any striking and sudden fashion – this remains the highest task to which poetry can aspire (quoted by Richards 1936, 123). Ezra Pound’s lines *In a Station of the Metro* (quoted by Wheelright 1962, 80) offer such an example:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd,
Petals on a wet, black bough.

This fragmentation, which refuses to accord any meaning to our world, will reappear through my lectures here. It is spoken of by Yeats (quoted by Wheelright 1962, 78) in three lines which gives us an example of cool intellectual uses as metaphor.

Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land,
 Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand,
 What are all these fish gasping on the strand?

To declare a passionate faith in the mercy of Christ's crucified T. S. Eliot composed the multiply involved metaphoric lines (*East Coker, IV*):

The wounded surgeon plies the steel
 That questions the distempered part;

And full throated voice of passion speaks for example in Shakespeare's metaphor in which Richard II defies those conspiring to depose him:

Not all the waters of the rough rude sea
 Can wash the balm from an anointed king.

The structure of metaphor and the source of its powers can be demonstrated briefly on this example. Translated into prose it would say that if the ointment of his crowning were at issue, it would prove that all the waters of the seas could not wash this ointment away. The hypothesis is ridiculous and the claim attached to it absurd, but their metaphorical expression is clear and forceful. For it makes no absurd claims for an absurd eventuality, but affirms these, because it means by them something else than what they mean in themselves. The semantic mechanism of this re-interpretation is the same as that by which a flag is made to symbolise a country, with the difference that the flag is meaningless in itself, while the story of the seas trying in vain to wash off the balm of a king, though fanciful, describes a tremendous spectacle.

I have said that when a symbol embodying a significant matter has a significance of its own, which is akin to the matter that it embodies, the result is a metaphor. I must add to this here a feature I have omitted so far which will consolidate my story. I mean the working of successive stages in semantic relations. The meaning of spoken sounds is found in the words they form and the words in their turn have their meaning in the sentences they compose. On a biological level, the bodily responses evoked in us by a light ray form their meaning at the first stage in the icons that we witness by our snapshots, and the snapshots are integrated in their turn to their meaning as percepts. This is how a telling symbol integrates the matter it embodies into its own meaning and thereby speaks for it. This is how the story of the seas and the balm, which by itself is preposterous, is suffused by angry pride and defiance of the king, and becomes a tremendous enlargement of it.

It is the working of successive stages of semantic relations that has accomplished this enlargement. And enlargement – expansion of our experience – seems to be one of the acknowledged effects of poetry. I. A. Richards, for instance, has distinguished two kinds of poems. One kind develops an idea “by sets of impulses which run parallel

in the same direction”; while the second kind has for its most obvious feature “the extraordinarily heterogeneity of the distinguishable impulses. But they are more than heterogeneous, they are opposed. They are such that in ordinary, non-poetic, non-imaginative experience, one or the other set would be suppressed to give, as it might appear, freer development to the others” (Richards 1924, 250). Such poems as this second kind are, he claims, of a higher order. “The equilibrium of opposed impulses, which we suspect to be the ground-plan of the most valuable aesthetic responses, brings into play far more of our personality than is possible in experiences of a more definite emotion. We cease to be orientated in one definite direction; more facets of the kind are exposed and, what is the same thing, more aspects of things are able to affect us. To respond, not through one narrow channel of interest, but simultaneously and coherently through many, is to be *disinterested* in the only sense of the word which concerns us here” (Richards 1924, 251).

He seems to be showing us the capacity of the second kind of poem to expand our person through expanding our breadth of contact with aspects of still more things. And he seems to be implying that such expansion enables us to attain that broad, almost universal, detached “disinterestedness” so generally held to be peculiar to *aesthetic* interest, as against the merely sensual or utilitarian. I shall make use of this notion (in a more clarified form) in my later lectures.

In other metaphors, for example in the two lines of Ezra Pound, the integrated meaning of two matters may be more equally supplied by both than was the case in the sea and balm metaphor, and in the lines of Eliot we have a virtually mutual metaphor as described by William Empson (Empson 1951, 347). A metaphor may be passionate in the way in which that spoken by Richard II is, or it can be impassioned by points of different feelings as in Eliot’s two lines. It may sparkle by elucidating an interesting subject, as the three lines of Yeats do. But all these variations can be seen to be covered by man’s basic capacity for integrating two or more disparate matters in a single novel meaning. I shall illustrate this further when I shall speak of other works of art next week.

It is commonly known that metaphors, like jokes, lose their effectiveness by being explained in detail. We know that semantic integration is destroyed by switching attention from their meaning to that which has that meaning; in other words, from the point of focal attention to the subsidiaries which bear on that focus. Sometimes the shattered semantic integration can be replaced, even profitably replaced by an explicit procedure. But in many cases this is impossible. Centuries of philosophic efforts have been spent in vain in attempting to derive from the observation of a class of disparate particulars the general conception which covers them. I shall speak later of these vain exercises of making explicit such tacitly established relations. But it is enough to remark here that the loss of metaphoric powers due to explicating a metaphor, is one of the frequent cases in which a semantic integration cannot be replaced by an explicit relationship. We have seen how foolish Richard II would sound, if he declared his views on the inviolability of kingship by pointing out that

this can be compared with the incapacity of all the raging seas of the world to wipe off his royal unction – perhaps because his balm was hygroscopic.

As a rule a metaphor loses its force when transposed into a simile. But similes can also be immensely powerful. The power of two lines by Baudelaire is unsurpassed:

Le poète est semblable au prince des nuées,

Qui hante la tempête et se ris de l'archer.

On the other hand, Dom Moraes has told in his biography how in his student days he showed Auden a poem with the line “Women swaying their long hair, like trees.” “That won’t do.” Auden said crossly, “It won’t do at all. You can have trees swaying their long hair, or women swaying their long hair, but one swaying its long hair like the other won’t do.” The metaphor or the straight statement were acceptable, but the simile was intolerably prosy. The more subtle factors of meaning deprivation cannot be strictly defined.

The effect of rhythm and rhyme and other formal features of poetry can be explained on lines akin to the interpretation of metaphor. The two constituent parts of a metaphor are made to bear on a joint novel meaning of them. We are aware of them subsidiarily in their joint focal appearance. I think this holds also for the formal features of a poem. In reading a poem we are aware subsidiarily of its rhythm, its rhymes, its sound, its grammatical construction and the peculiar connotations of the words used. Each of these components can be examined separately, in itself, but this inevitably bedims and may even efface the meaning of the poem. Its meaning might be brought back to us with a deeper understanding of it, when we turn our focal attention back on it, or else it may have lost some of its freshness; but, in any case, our awareness of the components we have focally examined, must be reduced once more to subsidiariness.

In other words, the rhythm, rhyme, sound, grammar and all other more subtle formal aspects of a poem, along with the several allusions of its parts, all jointly bear on the meaning of the poem. We are aware of them focally in terms of what they add to that meaning and affect its quality.

This rich and delicate pattern of subsidiaries imbues a poem with the quality of a distinctive artefact. It lends it harmonies that no other speech possesses and declares its claim to be valid for its own sake. Its story is thus exempted from being heard as a mere communication of facts and demands to be heard instead by the imagination. Therein lies its independence as a work of art. I. A. Richards has long since described the isolating effect of poetic form, which I interpret here by the principles of semantic integration. He wrote:

“Through its very appearance of artificiality metre produces in the highest degree the ‘frame’ effect isolating the poetic experience from the accidents and irrelevancies of everyday life” ... “Much which in prose would be too personal or too insistent, which might awaken irrelevant conjectures or might ‘overstep itself’ is managed without disaster in verse.” (Richards 1924, 145)

One may wonder indeed what the content of Shakespeare’s 18th sonnet “Shall I

compare thee to a summer's day?" would sound in prose. After some compliments to the beauty of his mistress, nearly half of the sonnet is used at telling her that all her beauty will pass away; and then she is suddenly reassured, emphatically, that she will be an exception to this fate – only to be told next that this wonderful promise meant only that the poet's genius will keep his sonnet famous forever. And so her memory will be eternal. This story, which in prose sounds shabby, is redeemed by the beauties of the sonnet. This power of poetry I will have to view in the wider perspective of all the arts, to which I shall turn in my next lecture.