KEN HIRSCHKOP

Why Rhetoric is Magic to Modernism

Gottlob Frege was perpetually annoyed by the imperfections of ordinary, natural language, so much so that he proposed replacing much of it with a new *Begriffschrift*, a "concept-script" modelled on mathematical symbols, that would be sharper, clearer and more easily interpretable than the makeshift linguistic tools in use at the time. One of language's many logical faults was that it could give rise to phrases and words that seemed to make sense but which actually referred to nothing, phrases which thereby gave shape and apparent substance to imaginary entities, which would take on a life of their own in speech. In his influential article "On Sense and Meaning" (1892) Frege complains about meaningless phrases in mathematics before suddenly steering the conversation towards uncharted political waters:

> This lends itself to demagogic abuse as easily as ambiguity—perhaps more easily. "The will of the people" can serve as an example; for it is easy to establish that there is at any rate no generally accepted meaning for this expression.[1]

Thirty-one years after this article Frege would make clear, in a personal diary, just how politically conservative he was, but in his published work he stuck to "strictly logical" matters. Unless, of course, you think that one's choice of examples is symptomatic or telling. "On Sense and Meaning" often has to illustrate its arguments with sample sentences and these, in the first half of the article, are of the sort you'd expect: everyday observations about the morning and evening star, something about Homer and Odysseus, a bit about the astronomer Kepler. But the offhand comment about demagogues who might exploit the apparently meaningless "will of the people" sets off a torrent of

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[1] Gottlob Frege, "On Sense and Meaning," in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, 3rd edn, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 70.

political reference, for after that Frege's examples concern Napoleon's tactics at Waterloo, August Bebel's views on the fate of Alsace-Lorraine, and the dispute between Prussia and Denmark over Schlewig-Holstein. If clarity in expression seemed at first to be aimed at better mathematics and astronomy, by the end Frege is exploring a rather different application.

Rather different, and rather more complicated. For the rush of politically themed examples coincides with Frege's turn to the logical analysis of what came to be called belief sentences, that is sentences that describe what someone believes or thinks. "Bebel fancies that the return of Alsace-Lorraine would appease France's desire for revenge" is tricky from the logician's point of view because the truth or falsity of its subordinate clause does not—as it should in ordinary factual sentences—contribute to the truth or falsity of the whole.[2] Maybe the return of the Alsace-Lorraine would appease France, and maybe it wouldn't: it's a matter of opinion. But whether it would or not makes no difference to the truth of the claim that August Bebel believes it will (It's a problem that will bedevil the logical analysis of language for quite a while, reminding it of its limits).[3]

It's a matter of opinion—to be more precise, a matter of "public opinion." August Bebel was not a random individual, and sovereignty over Alsace-Lorraine was not a private question: the sentence concerned the intervention of a prominent political leader, and noted orator, on a politically explosive issue. Bebel had set out to influence public opinion, this strange new beast that roamed the now half-democratized expanses of the nineteenth century. All of which makes Frege's slightly earlier comment on the fictitiousness of "the will of the people" even more provocative. For one thing, Frege cites the very fact that there is no "generally accepted meaning" for the expression as evidence that the expression has no meaning, which amounts to making the will of the people the criterion for whether "the will of the people" exists. More telling, however, is that Frege complains not only that "the will of the people" has no reference—that there is no such thing, just a series of words that work grammatically, but

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[2] Frege, "On Sense and Meaning," 76.

[3] As Karl-Otto Apel has pointed out, the logical analysis of language will always come up against the intersubjectivity of language itself, which it cannot adequately explain or account for; see his *Analytic Philosophy of Language and the Geisteswissenschaften* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1967), Chapter II.

not logically—but also that the existence of this meaningless phrase itself may lead to "demagoguery," that is, to attempts to create the very popular will he insists is impossible.

One could say that Frege knows that "the will of the people" does not exist, and yet is afraid that someone might bring it into being, that he is caught in what Žižek calls "fetishistic disavowal," believing unconsciously in what he knows cannot be the case consciously.[4] But if the syndrome is his, it's not his alone, for the will of the people bothers a lot of people in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and what bothers many of them about it is the way it chases after, gets inflamed by, *believes* in such reference-less phrases as "the will of the people." The connection Frege makes between demagoguery and the imperfections of language becomes a motif of theoretical modernism, and the solution he offers—some kind of improvement in the linguistic mechanism, impelled by a better understanding of its workings—becomes the typical modernist response.

Or one could say that once again what is causing philosophy problems is rhetoric, a practice of democratic persuasion whose time, it seemed at first glance, had finally arrived. If, as Harvey Yunis has argued, classical rhetoric was an answer to the question "[H]ow, under the conditions that prevailed in Athens, would it be possible to speak to a large, diverse mass of anonymous citizens and induce them to render wise decisions?," then the massive expansion of citizenship and suffrage in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should have been the cue for its spirited revival.[5] Instead, it triggered a renewal of the old hostilities, as philosophers of remarkably varied stripes lined up to denounce their old adversary. Only now the adversary had morphed into something at once more diffuse and more threatening. It wasn't the Sophists and their sweet talk that incited the masses to foolishness—it was language itself.

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[4] Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not what They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 1991), 241-53.

[5] Harvey Yunis, *Taming Democracy: Models of Political Rhetoric in Classical Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 1.

Word magic

The problem with language, its fatal imperfection, had many different names, but they seemed to cluster around ideas of magic and myth, as if there were some primitive substrate in language, or in beliefs about language, that refused to give way to modern disenchantment. But the inclination to worry about some deep and primitive force in language itself depended on a logically earlier inclination: the fairly sudden shifting of attention towards "language as such," or "language in general." As is well known, the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of interest in and study of languages in Europe. In scholarly terms this took the shape of the discipline of comparative philology, with its elaborate language genealogies and arguments about sound change laws. In larger cultural terms it was expressed in the codification and promotion of the newly "nationalized" forms of French, Russian, Italian, and so forth.

Comparative philology did not suddenly peter out as the century neared its end, although there were some subtle changes of emphasis (most notably a fascination with dialectology). But its centrality was challenged by a new interest in "language" as such, as an anthropological phenomenon or fact, as a condition of human expressiveness and thought. Within linguistics this shift is symbolized by the name of Saussure and the idea of general linguistics. More generally, it's evident in what we would now call a "linguistic turn" taken across the intellectual field: in Anglophone philosophy, when the analytically minded begin to discuss philosophical issues in terms of the language with which we describe the world and express our ideas; in literary studies, when literature and "literariness" begin to be defined by a distinctive exploitation of certain linguistic resources (sound qualities, a constitutive metaphoricity, and so on); in continental philosophy, when language or the symbol becomes the centre of a new philosophical systems (e.g., in Cassirer and Croce); in the human sciences, when models drawn from linguistics form the basis of a new conception of social science. The turn to, and the exploration of, "language as such" should be thought of as the signature move of modernist thinking and writing about language.

"Language as such" was a powerful force shaping not only our conceptions of the world (that had been a persistent theme since Humboldt), but also our forms of community, our scientific exploration, and our political life. But the interest in

language as such more often than not took the form of a *critique* of language as such: either "an unceasing struggle," as Frege himself put it, "against psychology and those parts of language and grammar which fail to give untrammelled expression to what is logical" *or* an unceasing struggle against those parts of language and grammar that failed to give untrammeled expression to feeling and art.[6] "Language as such" emerges not as a state or as a mechanism as much as a field of forces, a phenomenon tensed with inclinations or proclivities that had to be kept in check.

Its proclivity for "magic" attracted the most attention. And if we start with quantity rather than quality of attention, then pride of place has to be given to the polymath C. K. Ogden, whose lifelong struggle with the problem of "Word Magic" took many forms. In an address to the Cambridge Heretics, the undergraduate Ogden, working under the influence of Victoria Welby, focused his attention both on the "[c]onfusions in argument and discussion, due in large part to linguistic or terminological Ambiguity" and to the sudden upsurge of interest in linguistic matters he had witnessed in the previous decade.[7] The confusions were tidily classified (irritants, metaphors, lubricants, mendicants, and so on), but when Ogden hazarded an explanation for them, he could only point to the persistence of older attitudes and outdated views of signification, most of which he traced back to the mystical view of names one found in the most ancient rituals and religions. Indeed, the name itself emerged here as a problem in its own right: "Barbarous ideas about the property of the name," Ogden insisted, "can … be shown to have a far wider significance than is generally admitted."[8]

Though Ogden would load a good deal of material onto this basic structure, his case until the late 1920s depended on these four interrelated claims: (a) that there

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[6] Frege, "Logic" [c.1879-1891], in *Posthumous Writings*, ed. Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach, trans. Peter Lang and Roger White (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 7.

[7] C. K. Ogden, "The Progress of Significs" (originally an unpublished talk given to the Cambridge Heretics on 19 February 1911), in *C. K. Ogden and Linguistics*, Vol. I: *From Significs to Orthology,* ed. W. Terrence Gordon (London: Routledge/Thoemmes Press, 1994), 25.

[8] Ogden, "The Progress of Significs," 39.

were systematic sources of confusion in language (b) that these confusions arose from a false understanding of the nature of language (c) that the false understanding derived from a magical understanding of the name, inherited from a benighted past, and (d) that the solution was not reforming language directly but devising and propagating a better theory of signification. What would change, however, were the stakes. Three years after the Heretics address the United Kingdom was at war and Ogden was busy editing *The Cambridge Magazine*, which became infamous for both its pacifist leanings and its generous coverage of the foreign press. So infamous that on the day of the Armistice Ogden's print shop was ransacked, an event that attracted the attention of the by-standing I. A. Richards, who met Ogden then and there, initiating a long and productive collaboration.[9]

In 1920 Ogden and Richards went public, announcing in a series of articles in *The Cambridge Magazine* a project of ambitious linguistic reform, for which, they claimed, they had "secured the co-operation of a body of specialists."[10] The body of specialists turned out to be mostly Ogden and Richards writing under a series of pseudonyms and altered initials (Ogden appeared as "C.K. Ogden," "C.M.," "Adelyne More," "C.K.O.," and anonymously). If reform required the sweeping away of outdated habits and superstitions, then enlightenment, in the shape of a new Science of Symbolism, was the solution. The establishment of a "linguistic conscience" (the term was borrowed from Welby) would depend on the success of this new science, because it was clear "that no practical value would attach to such an attempt if the outcome involved any extensive changes in the ordinary modes of speech."[11]

Nevertheless, Ogden and Richards could not resist providing "certain Canons or Rules, six in number, which govern the proper use of Symbols."[12] Of these canons, Canon I—"*One Symbol refers to one and only one Referent*"—and

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[9] See W. Terrence Gordon, *C. K. Ogden: A Bio-Bibliographic Study* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1990), 12-19.

[10] Unsigned [C. K. Ogden], "The Linguistic Conscience," *The Cambridge Magazine*, (Summer 1920): 31.

[11] Ogden, "The Linguistic Conscience": 31.

[12] C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, "Symbolism," *The Cambridge Magazine* (Summer 1920): 34.

Canon III—"*The referent of a contracted symbol is the referent of that symbol expanded*"—would prove the most consequential.[13] For the hypostasization of contracted symbols—the refusal to break them down into smaller constituent units—would turn out to be language's worst tendency and the list of contracted symbols so abused—"Virtue, Liberty, Democracy, Peace, Germany, Religion, Glory"—made clear just how serious the issue was: these were "invaluable words, indispensable even, but able to confuse the clearest issues, unless controlled by Canon III."[14]

The consequences were set out in a brief Biblical parody composed by Ogden:

> And when Homo came to study the parts of speech, he wove himself a noose of Words. And he hearkened to himself, and bowed his head and made abstractions, hypostasising and glorifying. Thus arose Church and State and Strife upon the earth; for oftentimes Homo caused Hominem to die for Abstractions hypostasised and glorified: and the children did after the manner of their fathers, for so they had been taught. And last of all Homo began to eat his words.[15]

As with Frege, the problem was not private conversation, or the technical discourse of science, but the province of public opinion, which was allowing itself to be swayed by "Abstractions hypostasised and glorified." This problem was the result of "lingering assumptions," disproved in science but refusing to die, derived from "the magical theory of the name as part of the thing, the theory of an inherent connexion between symbols and referents." [16]

The antiquity, expansiveness and sheer persistence of this magical theory of the name became something of an obsession for Ogden. The initial articles from 1920 and 1921 provided a brief resume of its history in the ancient religions, but in 1923, an article on "The Power of Words" drew a line from "logocracy" in Greece and Rome through to "Modern Methods," "More Modern Methods" and

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[13] Ogden and Richards, "Symbolism": 35.

[14] Ogden and Richards, "Symbolism": 36.

[15] C.M. [C. K. Ogden], "What is What?," *The Cambridge Magazine* (Summer 1920): 40.

[16] Unsigned [C. K. Ogden], "Thoughts, Words and Things," *The Cambridge Magazine* 10.2 (January-March 1921): 29.

"Most Modern Methods," climaxing in an attack on the warmongering chauvinist Horatio Bottomley, "an example," Ogden claimed, "of the exploitation of the power of symbols without parallel in ancient or modern times."[17] When Ogden and Richards published their definitive statement, *The Meaning of Meaning*, in that same year, "The Power of Words" became its second chapter, but there were intimations that this was but the tip of a polemical iceberg. For one thing, the title page of the book described Ogden as the author of an entire book on "Word Magic," although the book never appeared. Secondly, *The Meaning of Meaning* included an appendix that in some respects became more influential than the book itself—an account of "The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages" by the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, which cemented the notion of a "primitive" magical stratum in language that was only gradually displaced by modern conceptions of the linguistic. As time passed and *The Meaning of Meaning* appeared in new editions (there were 10 editions of this remarkably popular book by 1949), Ogden was forced to shorten his histories of "word magic," but he made up for it with nearly 200 pages of prose on the subject in the journal *Psyche*, which he edited after the demise of *The Cambridge Magazine*.[18]

In the late 1920s Ogden concluded that, despite the earlier assurances, theoretical enlightenment was not enough—the defeat of word magic required a direct intervention in linguistic conventions, which would take the form of a new, somewhat artificial language, Basic English. Basic English was justified to a great extent as a possible *lingua franca* that would grease the wheels of international commerce and international scientific understanding. At the same time, however, Basic English was described as "the most valuable exercise in the understanding of word-behaviour that has yet been devised"; it had a role to play in the fight against word magic.[19] This was not merely because Basic was a language stripped of what were regarded as unnecessary, merely stylistic overgrowths; it was mainly due to the way in which Basic exploited the "analytic

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[17] C. K. Ogden, "The Power of Words." *The Cambridge Magazine* (Early Spring 1923): 32.

[18] C. K. Ogden, "The Magic of Words," *Psyche* 14 (1934): 9-87 and "Word Magic," *Psyche* 18 (1938-1952): 19-126.

[19] C. K. Ogden, *Debabelization* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1931), 37.

tendency" embedded in English.[20] By this Ogden meant the fact that English used word order and auxiliary words like prepositions to achieve what other languages achieved by means of inflection: it was the analytic quality of English that, in Ogden's mind, made it a better candidate for a universal language than inflected Esperanto (though English chauvinism was probably the unspoken, but more powerful consideration).

The Ogden scholar W. Terrence Gordon has explained how the Canons of Symbolism provided the basic framework for the construction of Basic English, which was premised on the reinterpretation of words as collocations of smaller units of meaning.[21] This analytic tendency manifested itself most clearly in Basic English's attack on the "contractive nature of the verb."[22] Verbs were classical instances of the contracted symbols Ogden and Richards had spoken of before and Basic English was the way one could ensure their necessary expansion. The "operators," "directives," and "names" that Basic English offered instead of verbs and nouns forced speakers to acknowledge that

> the verb is primarily a symbolic device for telescoping an operation and an object or a direction (*enter* for "go into"). Sometimes an operator, a directive, *and* a name are thus telescoped, as in the odd word "disembark" (*get*, *off*, a *ship*); Latin goes so far as to throw in a pronoun, and a tense auxiliary….[23]

In this way Basic English became a practical means of compelling people to think scientifically. Its "practical analytic tendency," Ogden suggested, "in two respects at least has reflected modern scientific developments (a) away from the Word-magic which induced a reverence for linguistic forms and rituals; (b) away from specific and towards general names."[24]

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[20] C. K. Ogden, *Basic English: A General Introduction with Rules and Grammar*, 3rd edn. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1932), 25.

[21] W. Terrence Gordon, "From 'The Meaning of Meaning' to Basic English," *Et cetera* (1991): 65-71.

[22] Ogden, *Basic English*, 20

[23] Ogden, *Basic English*, 19-20.

[24] Ogden, *Basic English*, 28.

The two-pronged attack on word magic (through Science and Basic) implied that the success of public rhetoric had less to do with the adjustments speakers and audiences made to one another than with a danger built into language itself. For abstractions arose, according to Ogden and Richards, as convenient abbreviations of syntactic chains, built from names, operators and directives, which then, because they occupied the same grammatical space as simple nouns and simple verbs, were hypostasized, mistaken for immediate, simple symbols with immediate referents. What might seem like an innocent convenience in the case of "disembark" would, however, have fatal consequences in a case like "democracy" or "England." For bear in mind that these abstractions were not just hypostasized, but glorified, too. Word magic meant not just signs with fictional referents, but the confusion of the name with the thing referred to, the conviction that the name somehow contained its referent or was part of it, so that the use of the name endowed the speaker with power over its object.

What's curious about all this is that Ogden and Richards had offered an alternative, "modern" explanation for the rhetorical excesses they feared and deplored. The series of articles in 1920 had been followed by another barrage in the 1921, "decennial" issue of *The Cambridge Magazine*, which concluded with an article "On Talking" that extended the theory of signs discussed the year before. This extension included the acknowledgement that "[m]ost writing and speech" would be "of the mixed or rhetorical kind as opposed to the pure, or scientific, or strictly symbolic, use of words" and would accordingly

> take its form as the result of compromise. Only occasionally will a symbolisation be available, which, without loss of its symbolic *accuracy*, is also *suitable* (to the author's attitude to his public), *appropriate* (to his referent), *judicious* (likely to produce the desired effects) and *personal* (indicative of the stability or instability of his references).[25]

The list of potential demands placed on an utterance is apt to remind readers of a few similar lists of later vintage: Jakobson's six functions in "Linguistics and Poetics" or Habermas's types of validity in his universal pragmatics, for

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[25] C.K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, "On Talking," *The Cambridge Magazine* (Decennial Issue 1912-1921): 64.

instance.[26] But whereas someone like Habermas used this acknowledged multi-functionality as the jumping-off point for what was in effect a new theory of rhetoric, Ogden and Richards insisted that the rhetoric of mass culture and democracy depended on word magic, not rhetorical technique, for its success.

Even a brief look at how the two defined rhetoric provides a possible explanation. For if we think in terms of the classical rhetorical tradition, what's missing from rhetorical speech as defined above is *logos*, that is, the appeal to reason in persuasion. Ogden and Richards define rhetoric in terms of *pathos* (the appeal to emotion) and to a lesser extent *ethos* (the appeal to the character of the speaker): the rhetorical is the sphere of "attitudes," not argument. This is no doubt the flip side of their conception of symbolisation, which they explain as a purely passive process of associating stimuli—aural or visual—with particular "sign-situations." It's as if "magic" sucks up the entire active side of argumentation.

This wasn't an eccentricity peculiar to Ogden and Richards: in general, writers presumed an unbridgeable divide between public persuasion and rational argument. If you were interested in argument, you gave up on public opinion, and if you were interested in public opinion, you gave up on argument. So, for example, the most systematic attempt to fashion a rhetoric for the twentieth century, the monumental *New Rhetoric* by Chaim Perelman and L. Obrechts-Tyteca, turned rhetoric into a theory of argumentation that could be applied anywhere, from casual conversation to scientific discussion in journals. But this "complete generality" had a flip side—a lack of interest in the particular task of persuading a politically-minded public and the belief that much of that persuasion should be fenced off as "propaganda."[27]

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[26] Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), 350-77; Jürgen Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?," in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (London: Heinemann, 1979), 1-68.

[27] Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1971), 6.

Conversely, when the sociologist Gabriel Tarde came to define what he regarded as the new sphere of "opinion," he at once fenced it off from tradition, on the one hand, and reason—concentrated in elite cultural and political institutions— on the other. "All would be best," Tarde confessed, "if opinion limited itself to popularizing reason in order to consecrate it in tradition."[28] But opinion did not, he claimed, spread by public argument—it relied on the sociable sphere of conversation, where "the tone of their voices, glances, physiognomy, magnetic gestures" drew people to one another and proved to be "the strongest agent of imitation, of the propagation of sentiments, of ideas, of modes of action."[29] "It is rightly said of a good conversationalist," Tarde noted, "that he is a *charmer* in the magical sense of the word."[30]

Tarde's charmers were middle class: he was careful to distinguish the modern conversational, newspaper-reading "public"—literally the "chattering classes"— from the "crowd."[31] The concern with word magic is therefore not simply an element of what came to be called "crowd theory": the nineteenth-century argument that crowds, assumed to be plebeian, were distinguished by a weakness for irrational persuasion. When magic was associated with a distinctly proletarian audience—as in Georges Sorel's myth of the General Strike—its distinguishing quality was not irrationality, but its eminently practical, forward-looking orientation. True, Sorel disdained the entire rhetorical edifice of parliamentary politics. "Advocates of the general strike," he proudly announced, "turn their backs on the preoccupations of the liberals of the past: the tribunes' oratory, the moulding of public opinion, the coalition of political parties."[32] But if he identified the discourse of parliament with reason, it was with a crabbed,

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[28] Gabriel Tarde, "Opinion and Conversation," in *On Communication and Social Influence: Selected Papers*, ed. Terry N. Clark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 298-9.

[29] Tarde, "Opinion and Conversation," 309, 308.

[30] Tarde, "Opinion and Conversation," 308.

[31] See Gabriel Tarde, "The Public and the Crowd," in *On Communication and Social Influence,* 277-94.

[32] Georges Sorel, "On the barbarism of revolution" [an extract from *Materiaux d'une theorie du proletariat* (Paris 1919)], in Richard Vernon, *Commitment and Change: Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 112.

calculative kind of reason, with all the readiness for compromise we associate with "being reasonable."

The social myth Sorel opposed to parliamentary deliberation was, by contrast, a kind of imaginative elaboration or reconstruction of some aspect of the world, which gives "an aspect of complete reality to the hopes of immediate action upon which the reform of the will is founded."[33] There had been, of course, many general strikes in Europe before Sorel proposed "concentrating the whole of socialism in the drama of the general strike": their mythicization consisted in investing them with a peculiarly epic or sublime significance.[34] Dan Edelstein has shown how the concept of myth was refunctioned in the early nineteenth century: whereas myth had been understood before as a narrative drawn from the past, when transformed by Balzac and Baudelaire it became static and image-like on the one hand, and future-oriented, on the other. In the case of the modern myth, Edelstein argues, "its mythical qualities depend instead on its 'fatefulness,' or seemingly necessary connection to a *future* order of affairs."[35]

As a rhetorical strategy, therefore, the social myth hinges on convincing its audience that a particular political tactic is fated to be successful, and that it will introduce a qualitative, *principled* break in their form of life.[36] "Men who are participating in great social movements," Sorel argued, "always picture their coming action in the form of images of battle in which their cause is *certain* to triumph" [Emphasis, KH].[37] Myths, to return to Žižek's terminology, are vehicles of belief rather than knowledge: this is why, in the text where Sorel first introduces the concept, he can argue that myth may be the name for "the theories

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[33] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 115.

[34] Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 113.

[35] Dan Edelstein, "The Modernization of Myth: From Balzac to Sorel," *Yale French Studies* 111 (2007): 42.

[36] Edelstein has shown how the "fundamentalist" aspect of myth led to the political utopias, Saint-Simonian and Fourierist, of the nineteenth century: see his "The Birth of Ideology from the Spirit of Myth: Georges Sorel among the *Idéologues*," in Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, ed., *The Re-enchantment of the World: Secular Magic in a Rational Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 201-24.

[37] Georges Sorel, "Letter to Daniel Halevy, 15 July 1907," in *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E Hulme (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 20, emphasis added.

that the *savants* of socialism do not want to admit but which the militants regard as 'axioms beyond dispute'"—it may be that the unverifiable claim or theory, expressed in the mythic image, is a precondition of the action that will retrospectively "prove" it.[38] If this sounds odd, it's worth bearing in mind that from the classical outset, deliberative rhetoric was defined as a rhetoric aimed at the future, for the discussions at the popular assembly determined courses of action that were taken in situations shot through with uncertainty.

Myth finds its theorist

The association of myth with action is implied in Ogden and Richards and receives only a cursory justification in Sorel. It received a full-blown exposition, however, in the work of a far more systematic and sophisticated writer, Ernst Cassirer, who devoted the second volume of his three-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* to it. Cassirer was a noted defender of the Weimar Republic and of the neo-Kantian tradition; the seriousness with which he treated myth is therefore all the more significant and striking. For myth was not just one more symbolic form to be described and explained alongside the others: it was the seemingly irrational form that could only be properly understood if we made over our very concept of symbolism. The empiricist view that prevailed in the early twentieth century assumed that: a) the most primitive kind of perception was of sense-data b) by a process of abstraction and combination we moved from these atoms of data to objects and general qualities c) our symbolism basically copied this data in the form of names, properties, names for complex objects and so on. Each of these assumptions was false, according to Cassirer. The "immediacy" of sense-data was "no fact but a theoretical construction," an artefact of the world of theoretical science rather than its ground.[39] What actually preceded science, what constituted the material on which it worked was the world of myth. But the passage from myth to science "can never be truly understood if this primal source itself remains an unsolved riddle—if instead of being recognized as an independent mode of spiritual formation it is taken as

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[38] Georges Sorel, *Introduction a l'économie moderne,* 2nd edn (Paris: G. Jacques, 1922), 376-7.

[39] Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. II—Mythical Thought,* trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 34.

formless chaos."[40] Acknowledging myth as a distinctive form, as a mode of intellectual formation and not a problem or error would, in turn, require the philosopher to understand science, too, as a mode of forming concepts and creating a world and not a mere copying of the given.

What distinguished myth was the way in which it both did, and did not, transcend the world of things it symbolized. For "in the figures and images with which it replaces this world it merely substitutes for things another form of materiality and of bondage to things."[41] All properties or attributes of things were conceived of as shared substances, gods as simulacra of earthly creatures, and forces as substantial entities. The ideal itself is, in every case, understood as something physical and worldly. And this applied, most importantly, to symbols themselves:

> Every beginning of myth, particularly every magical view of the world, is permeated by this belief in the objective character and objective force of the sign. Word magic, image magic, and writing magic are the basic elements of magical activity and the magical view of the world.[42]

Mythical signs and images were parts of the things they designated, as if they were a physical attribute of them.

Cassirer's defence of myth did not stop there, however. The Cassirer scholar John Michael Krois has pointed out that as he composed the volume on mythical thinking, Cassirer came to realize that the strong claims he was making for myth were not nearly strong enough.[43] Myth was not merely one of several symbolic forms, as the three-volume structure of his study implied (the other two volumes were devoted to language and science): the mythical apprehension of the world was the soil in which all else originated. In a companion piece to the myth volume, the 1924 essay "Language and Myth: A Contribution to the Problem of the Names of the Gods," Cassirer argued: "None of them [the symbolic forms,

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[40] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II*, xv.

[41] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II*, 24.

[42] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, *II*, 24.

[43] John Michael Krois, "The Priority of 'Symbolism' over Language in Cassirer's Philosophy," *Synthese* 179 (2011): 9-20.

KH] immediately emerges as a separate, independent, and recognizable configuration, but each gradually detaches itself from the common mother earth of myth."[44] Myth and language, on this account, have a common origin in a moment when thought is "taken captive and held spellbound by this content as soon as it stands directly before it."[45] What guides this process, however, is not contemplation, but action: "Whatever in some way appears significant for desire and willing, for hoping and caring, for doing and the drives [*Treiben*]—upon it alone is the stamp of linguistic 'signification' pressed."[46] The shape of words and the determination of what signifies "come about in accordance with activity [*Tun*], not according to the 'objective' similarity of things, but according to the way in which the contents are grasped through the medium of activity [*Tun*]."[47]

As a consequence, from the outset words have mythical efficacy, and myth is bound up with words:

> The original bond of linguistic consciousness with mythico-religious consciousness expresses itself above all in the fact that all linguistic formations [*Gebilden*] appear *at the same time* as mythical formations [*Gebilden*], endowed with certain mythical forces such that the word of language turns into a type of original potency in which all beings and all events are rooted.[48]

This bond between language and action will reach its culminating, as well as its breaking point in the "the figure of the supreme *creator god*" that becomes the centrepiece of monotheism.[49] For the creator god represents not a distinct sphere of activity in the world, but action as such, and action as emanating from a subject: "mythical-religious consciousness," Cassirer enthuses, "is now oriented not toward an aggregate, an infinite number of particular creative powers, but

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[44] Ernst Cassirer, "Language and Myth: A Contribution to the Problem of the Names of the Gods," in *The Warburg Years (1919-1933)*, trans. S. G. Lofts with A. Calagno (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 168.

[45] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 159.

[46] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 163.

[47] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 164.

[48] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 169.

[49] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II*, 206.

toward a pure act of creation itself, which like the creator is apprehended as one."[50] And this action remains tethered to word magic: in the first of the Genesis creation stories "it is the word of God that divides light from the darkness, that lets heaven as well as earth emerge from himself," and this is replicated in other creation stories Cassirer mentions, where it is naming that transforms chaos into a world of determinate things.[51] The flip side of this awesome power, however, is the emergence of subjectivity, of will and ethical self-consciousness as the motive force for such action. Though the creator god names things, the god itself is now impossible to name, because substance has been dissolved into subjectivity. The God of the Hebrew Bible thus occupies

> a domain that cannot be described through any analogy with things or the names of things. For its designation there remains, from all the means of language, only the personal expression, the personal pronoun: "I am He; I am the First, the Last," as it is written in the prophetic books.[52]

But though Cassirer insists myth is central to symbolism, he is agnostic about its historical significance. On the one hand, "it signifies the first form in which, in general, the spiritual force of the word and language can be grasped as such": the *first* form, to be superseded by later, more mature conceptions of the force of language.[53] On the other hand, it is presented as a constant danger or temptation: in the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer claims that religion can never fully free itself from myth and that science must wage a constant struggle against mythical elements in its midst.[54] Science may surpass it, art may dialectically transcend it, but somehow myth hangs around, a forcefulness embedded in words that may always be renewed or resurrected.

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[50] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II*, 206.

[51] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 200. It's worth mentioning in passing that the second creation story in Genesis (2.4-24), from the so-called "J source," is quite different: there God's creative power is presented in terms of distinct physical actions. This, according to Cassirer, relies on a less developed conception of creation.

[52] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 195.

[53] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 183.

[54] Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II*, 235-61, xvii.

The social myth, the social order

Of course, Cassirer's intervention is itself a moment in the resurrection of myth: in his writing, myth earns a measure of justification from philosophy instead of the usual unsympathetic critique. Many years later, reviewing another, far more hostile book by Cassirer on myth, Kenneth Burke suggested that while the focus on myth was worthwhile, it elided something equally, if not, more important: the practice of rhetoric. If, Burke remarked, "you begin with natural magic, [then] the hortatory use of language to influence *human* conduct seems derivative from this derived magical use, rather than existing in its own right."[55] Collapsing rhetoric into magic meant that "with so much disturbing evidence of savagery in the modern world, we are invited to conclude that there is even more."[56] Myth may be important—or, rather, may have been important—but it was surely time to move on.

Unless, of course, the renewal of myth in a modern world responded to some need *within* rhetoric, some turn-of-the-century exigency that made these mythic forms more cogent, effective, or appropriate. Cassirer claimed myth was a distinctive symbolic *form*, and that these formal qualities, not its contents should be the focal point of any analysis; at the same time, his own analysis deals almost entirely with the substance of "the sacred," because it was this sphere that invited the creation of mythic configurations. Similarly, one can't help but notice that just as Frege was drawn by some magnetic force to examples from European politics, so "word magic" had an uncanny affinity for the political discourse of the day: "the will of the people" in Frege; "liberty," "democracy," "peace," and so on in Ogden and Richards; "the general strike" in Sorel.

We need to ask, therefore, why at this point in European political life it became necessary that, once again, "everything that is the product of subjectivity is interpreted as substantiality," that "all the energy of spiritual activity [*Tun*]" should be transformed into a mythic image, as Cassirer wrote.[57] Ogden and

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[55] Kenneth Burke, "Homo Faber, Homo Magus" (review of Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*) [1946], in *Equipment for Living: The Literary Reviews of Kenneth Burke* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2010), 350.

[56] Burke, "Homo Faber," 350.

[57] Cassirer, "Language and Myth," 183.

Richards thought this interpretation was the result of a short circuit in language, which bound the symbol too directly to the referent. But there's a subtle but important difference between their definition of magic and Cassirer's: they decry the lack of separation between name and thing, but for Cassirer what is glued together in the image is a name and an act, the creative force that brings the thing named into being. This accords neatly with what Sorel had to say about his beloved general strike: the myth of the general strike names not a thing, but a "coming action," for myths in general "are not descriptions of things but expressions of a will to act."[58] The general strike is a kind of subjectivity represented as something substantial.

In this respect, political myth would seem to have a great deal in common with the "image" obsessions of the aesthetic modernisms of the time. Charles Altieri has complained about how modernist poetics ditched rhetoric in favour of "a cult of presentational immediacy as exemplified in the form of the image or vorticism's 'masses in relation' or Eliot's 'objective correlative'": such images threw off discursive interests, modelling themselves on visual and aural aesthetic objects.[59] The myth of the general strike certainly fits this account: Sorel's myths, as Edelstein puts it, are "more static, iconic even, as though paused on a single image-frame."[60] But it's too simple to explain this as the aestheticization of politics, and not only because we know Eliot himself, myth-maker extraordinaire, was an avid supporter of Sorel (citing the *Reflections on Violence* as one of the six books examplifying the classicism he championed in his programmatic editorial for *The New Criterion*).[61] For Eliot's images, too, could be interpreted as the substantialization of some form of subjectivity, as expressions of a will to act that did not so much exclude subjectivity as condense it.

In short, it might be that myths and images were not always evasions of the rhetorical, because sometimes they were forms of it. But why did political

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[58] Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, 28.

[59] Charles Altieri, "What Theory Can Learn from New Directions in Contemporary American Poetry," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 68.

[60] Edelstein, "The Modernization of Myth": 33.

[61] T. S. Eliot, "The Idea of a Literary Review," *The New Criterion* 4:1 (1926): 5.

subjectivity have to take this form? What was wrong with the discursive, deliberative forms available to it?

A definitive answer is difficult, and it would be foolhardy to hazard one. But one aspect of the problem brings us back to the belief sentences, and "the will of the people," that troubled Frege. A new kind of rhetoric, which dealt in political myth and word magic, had become necessary because the tasks of rhetoric had changed. Although European parliamentary democracies inhabited modern, industrializing societies, their conceptions of rhetoric were tethered to republican ideas, sometimes explicitly, sometimes not. Rhetoric and eloquence were the means—to paraphrase Yunis—by which one could ensure that a fairly homogeneous citizenry in a transparent social order could make wise decisions. The long nineteenth century changed all that: the dissolving of the *ancien régime*, the atomizing of individuals, the extension (under pressure) of the franchise, and the new relations of anonymous exploitation made the very existence of social order an issue. The responses to this crisis are well-known: the invention of sociology, the emergence of political economy and the market as a new social model, the rise of statistics as a means of grasping the anonymous mass, nationalism.

Rhetoric no longer needed only to ensure wise decisions within the social order—it needed to help constitute that order itself. As Pierre Rosanvallon has argued, from the nineteenth century onwards, "the 'political' is called upon to be the agent that 'represents' a society to which nature no longer gives immediate form."[62] In this context phrases like "the will of the people," "democracy," and "the general strike" suggest forms of social order that have to be willed and invented, brought into being by the the beliefs of those whom they move to act. And if they retain some of the poetic quality associated with myth, this is not because they are, in and of themselves, immune or hostile to institutionalization, but because they depend on what Gramsci, having read Sorel, called the "spirit

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[62] Pierre Rosanvallon, "Towards a Philosophical History of the Political," in *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 61.

of cleavage," i.e., a decisive separation from the institutional structures of the day.[63]

New forms of social order, with no "natural" support. But order implies a stasis antithetical to myth, which, however iconic its appearance, contains "all the energy of spiritual activity." Discussing the specific case of France, where "the people" are a focal point of conceptions of social order, Rosanvallon points out that they are, strictly speaking, unrepresentable (the "Yahweh of the French," as he calls them, a phrase that's particularly apposite in the present context).[64] But although "the people" are impossible to pin down as a thing, the aporia of their representation can be momentarily resolved when they are present as an active force: "In action, as indissociably lived and narrated, the people is given tangibility by what it makes happen; sociological doubts are silenced by the evidence of behaviors and activities on the move."[65]

In that sense the doubters and sceptics—Frege, Ogden, and many more—are right to claim these hypostasized words have no reference, because word magic doesn't traffic in things. Its currency was the political will and subjectivity it brought into being, a subjectivity no less rational than that of the parliamentarians, but with a larger, more complicated task. Knowing that "the will of the people" was a condensation of energy and a goad to action would probably not have reassured Frege.

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[63] The phrase is found in Antonio Gramsci, Notebook 3, §49, *Prison Notebooks, Volume II*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 53.

[64] Pierre Rosanvallon, "Revolutionary Democracy," in *Democracy Past and Future*, 80.

[65] Rosanvallon, "Revolutionary Democracy," 92.