

## THE LANGUAGE-WATER YOU SWIM IN IS YOUR WORD-WORLD -- ELLIOTT #1903

*In Plato's PHAEDO, Socrates says our consciousness in this life is both limited and distorted in comparison with what will be our consciousness in the afterlife: we are fish not yet taken out of the water. The analogy, though illuminating, breaks down twice: the poor fish is LESS able out of water and has LESS life. In this thinksheet I'm concerned with how our particular language limits and distorts our perceptions and so our consciousness.*

1. Various modernly developed skills in language itself (linguistics: phonemics, morphemics, semantics) and in literature (literary-critical hermeneutics: form criticism, redaction criticism, structuralism, deconstruction) have been deepening and widening our awareness of what language is and how it functions in our brains (neuropsychology), our minds (linguistic philosophy), and our hearts/souls/spirits (symbolism). All this means for us (1) greater control over language-use and (2) more freedom from the trammels of language (a) by our own use, i.e., self-deception, and (b) by others' use (propaganda, brain-washing).

2. Knowing more than one's Muttersprache (born-speech) helps free one from the limits of one language, and sociology of knowledge helps free one from the illusion that human beings can speak/write context-free. To be what we used to call a "modern man," one must cultivate both of these freedoms--freedoms from yesterday's false claims and the arrogances pertaining thereto, and freedom for today's and tomorrow's humble but confident, "truly human," speaking/hearing, writing/reading.

3. INSTANCE: Atonement theology, East/West. For various linguistic reasons, the Greek-language East emphasizes, as Jesus' salvific effect, a transposition-illumination of consciousness (meta-voia); the Latin West (both RC and Protestant), Jesus' "pain" and ours--ours as the suffering of re-"pen"tance, "pen"ance (poen-itentia). So the East tends toward gnosticism and the West toward moralism-legalism.

EXAMPLE: Ac.11.18: God gives nonJews "the turning toward life" (in Greek, mind-turning or mind-change; through which the Hebrew peeps: te-SHUV-ah, turning, specifically turning back toward God). Neutral, "turning" and "change" are neutral; but not so what the Vulgate has here: poenitentiam ad vitam, a "pain"ful movement "toward life." Not surprising that the crucifix, almost unknown in the East, is the West's central religious visual, and theologia crucis (the "theology of the cross") the West's central theological nut to crack and eat.

4. This concentration on suffering produces Western theologians as different as Protestant Sölle and Schillebeeckx. Sinking as deep as she does, Sölle, of the nation which gave us the Holocaust, makes some important discoveries for us all (as in her superb book, SUFFERING); but there's a hard sadness in her heart, and a sad hardness in her "political theology." In conversation with her, and in reading her, I've not felt myself to be in the presence of a healed soul or (as was Simone Weil, also of the World War II sadness) a radiant soul. RULE: A theology of suffering cannot be more profound and helpful than the theologian's diagnosis of the suffering's cause, which also delineates "the way of salvation." All three, in Sölle, ride on the surface, the least profound level, viz., politics--a narrowness of which Schill. is not quite so guilty (but see Gabriel Fackre, "Bones Strong and Weak in the Skeletal Structure of Schill.'s Christology," pp.248-77, JEcumenicalStudies, Spr/84): the focus is evil-producing-suffering, not sin-producing-guilt--a focus locking one in to concentrating on the human CONDITION rather than on the human RELATION to God.

OVER

4. Schill. is speaking from, and primarily to, his RC background and foreground. My slight reading of him (which makes me perhaps less hesitant to comment on him than I should be) inclines me to see both his sweaty exegesis and his "eschatological prophet" emphasis as an effort to break out of the quasi-magical traditional RC understanding of Jesus as Savior, to confront his RC compeers with a fresh access to Jesus as suffering prophet for our time, and to engage non-RC Christian thinkers in dialog in a way that (fortunately) peels off RC historical peculiarities and (unfortunately, I believe) reduces the apostolic (i.e., NT) understanding from THE to A way of viewing the Christ Event (in Jn. Knox's language; the Jesus Event would be closer to Schill.). On all fronts, his theological project/experiment has been courageous, exciting, promising--and of course ("of course" for any courageous theologian!) also flawed by omissions, inflations, and distortions.

5. An author's POINT OF VIEW becomes clear as the hearer-interpreter asks about the text's omissions, comparative emphases among inclusions, moods, and motivations, vis-a-vis P-TIE-P (persons, times, ideas, events, and places). That's my combination of the old Biblical Seminary formal hermeneutical principle and Clifford Geertz's definition ("A religion is a system of symbols which act to produce powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in the people of a given culture."). A Buddhist author, aiming at emanicipation from suffering, will story-tell toward that goal: mythos will be in the service of ethos (as always and everywhere in religious leadership). Many modern Christian authors, both literati and theologians, are Buddistic in that the sufferer is seen not primarily (as in Buddhism) as the individual, but as society --here, Schill. and other liberation theologians. The "moods" are love, compassion, outrage--and the "motivations" are the social-political inferences/implications to be drawn from those moods.

6. Is there a biblical norm for judging an author's moods/motivations? The Bible is polar-normative. It's mystical tendency feeds on the moods of awe, reverence, trust, love--with, as motivations, adoration, love, obedience, taboo-observance, witness, community participation in and toward shalom; its militant tendency feeds on moods of anger, outrage, determination to be a change-agent--with, as motivations, divine action through prophetic confrontation, re-visioning of the heritage in the interest of justice and peace, re-structuring of institutions toward a shalom goal variously described (e.g., by Mondale, who lost his bid for the presidency last week, Nov/84) as "decency," "fairness," "equality." A Christian thinker who specializes in either pole will tend (1) to be, in the bad sense, either pious or secular, (2) to romanticize his/her focus (e.g., "the inner life" or "the poor"), (3) to denigrate Christian thinkers swarming around the opposite pole, (4) to go hyper/hypo on the biblical materials, self-interestedly distorting his/her exegesis/exposition, and (5) to lose the balanced life-view of the Bible and of Christian thinking through the ages. The resulting party-spirit (1) deprives readers/followers of balance and (2) discourages dialog with opposite-pole thinkers and even balanced thinkers.

7. Obviously, slogans serve the purposes of imbalance. Reagan's 1980 "Are you better off...?" blinded the narcissistic public to the other question now (pray God) resurfacing: "Are the poor better off...?" But even verbal roots serve imbalance. E.g., "PN" (pain, point, penitence, penance, penitential, penitentiary, pen, punish, pinch, repent, impunity, penal, penalty, pine): how powerful a root in the sociopsyche of the West (as, e.g., in Schill.)!

8. Where your reverence is, there will your religion be also. We need a critical theology of reverence.