Appendix. Word and Focus

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> This is not a final draft, and indeed I have no idea what a final draft might be.
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> *– Richard Lloyd-Jones, Jun 5, 2012, at 12:08 pm*

W.H. Auden suggested that if you want to identify a budding poet, you don't look for the message, but for the love of words. He also said that Time would pardon Kipling and Paul Claudel in spite of their ideas because they wrote well. Auden thus set a standard for teachers of English. The words themselves are what make writers. Having spent more than half a century exhibiting our language to students, I side with Auden.

Apparently I was intoxicated by words as a child. Adults were delighted by my four-year-old self enchanted by "bilaterally symmetrical." The term described a pattern on some sort of peg board and mattered very little as information, but I doubtless liked the effect that polysyllables had on my parents' generation. I treasured other big words, too, and used them liberally. Yes, I went on to write poetry, take part in school debating, and even act in school plays, and I thought the ideas were important, but the words bound me.

A church-going boy, I was hypnotized by the beginning of St. John's gospel, which was read aloud every other Sunday. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." I do not now recall whether I ever wondered about what it meant, but I liked it as a soothing punctuation for the service. I had to move the missal from the epistle side of the altar to the gospel side.

When I was warehoused in an army hospital I had time and no duty, but the hospital had a surprisingly good library. As a bored 18-year-old I found myself reading Bertrand Russell's history of philosophy and encountered some of the Greek philosophers who had influenced John. The "Word" was *logos*, the root of logic and all of those "-ology" studies that involved learning. I was sufficiently stimulated that when I was discharged from the hospital and the army, I wanted the V.A. to "rehabilitate" me as a philosopher, but their advisers seemed to think that English would be a more practical (!) major. (Eventually I had three majors—English, philosophy, and speech—all word fields.)

Thus, I was generally captivated by the philosophical and myth-making Greeks, and I explored the implications of their use of "logos" and their fondness for stories—or in the case of Plato, conversations. In a bit I'll explain that concretely, but first I'll offer an abstract and somewhat paradoxical view of language they led me to. I mean more than natural language; I include mathematics,

graphics, the arts generally, dress, and various codes. By insisting on this broader class I part from the Greeks and many 18th century grammarians by implying that languages are arbitrary but useful social inventions. Symbol systems. The Word is not the reality; it is merely a device indicating some aspect of a presumed reality. Words enforce reason upon chaos. That leads us to two propositions:

1. The power of language is that it enforces focus.
2. The limitation of language is that it enforces focus.

The teacher of composition is most likely drawn to the first proposition. We want our students to be clear and exact. Their papers should be efficient and have focus. I was fortunate in having my first teaching job in an engineering college. My students were juniors and seniors, sometimes former commissioned officers in contrast to my status as private, and I had no technical experience. (Hiring was an accident; I just happened to be in the right spot when the position opened and no one else was handy soon enough.) As a practical matter the students often had to explain to me what was self-evident to them.

"Beryllium? What's that?" "An alkaline earth metal? What's that?" And so it went. In high school I had learned about the periodic table, so eventually they would find a general class—a genus—that I could imagine. Then they had to lead me through the ways it was different from other elements and other metals, and so on. I knew the pattern of definition from Aristotle, so I could ask useful questions, and they could be politely patronizing in dealing with my ignorance. And like Plato, I sometimes over-played my level of ignorance, but they came to recognize the procedures of definition. You might reasonably expect that people who believe in the periodic table would imagine that Reality is neatly tabular. The biologists were especially susceptible to a belief in order. For them, as for the Greeks, words provided access to the World as it actually is. The *logos* is the pattern, the structure of reality. If you manipulate words (or numbers) correctly, you will learn the Truth. When Mark Twain has Adam and Eve name all of things of the world, he is assuming a kind of one-to-one relationship, albeit with a touch of irony. Plato's dialogues exhibit the same sense that exploring words is in fact exploring the world.

Even for engineering students such static definition is not enough, though. They live in a dynamic world and must examine actions, procedures, processes. Still, when they conceptualize an action, they arrest it so they can focus on relationships. They kill the tissue so they can put it on a slide under the microscope. Most likely, these are temporal relationships, but they start by making them static by naming the whole procedure or process and then by naming each sub-step of the action. Once the name is chosen, the action is contained as a "thing."

That name is not always self-evident. I recall a recipe for roast duck that began with the instruction, "Roast the duck in the usual manner." The discussion dealt primarily with making the stuffing. You can say that the recipe was mis-named, and so it was, but probably the author merely understood that the process was

defined by a duck. The chef was thinking of a duck as a given, a kind of framework for the real point of the recipe, and she simply assumed many of the steps of roasting were self-evident. Take another homely example of painting your living room. Do you think it begins with your awareness that the room is shabby? Or with choosing the paint? Or preparing the surface? That is, what is your focus implied in the term "painting the living room"? By giving the process a name, you limit your understanding of it so that you can get on with the job.

One might imagine that the result of the naming process leads to a flow chart or a tree diagram. The boxes on the chart represent steps, actions, but in the discourse they are static, visible segments of the whole. We analyze the whole process into components. The steps, too, are named and thus frozen into the text. Altogether, they make a pattern, a *logos*. Representing our understanding in a visual diagram makes clear how the abstracting, the stop-action, makes a process inert, dead. Eventually a reader re-activates, re-animates, the cadaver so that actions may take place. In a strange way the two-dimensional drawing is made four-dimensional by adding another dimension of space and then time, by escaping the focus of language.

Some intellectual purist might insist that because a process consists of actions, a writer should begin by identifying appropriate verbs representing actions, and indeed one might muddle among various steps, but until one finds a framing name, one cannot really begin. A collections of notes does not make a tune, random acts do not make a procedure. Euclid alone sees beauty bare, said Edna St Vincent Millay, for Euclid saw patterns. When the writer finds the name, the process can be described by finding sub-names.

For teachers a practical manifestation of this need to find a context can be seen in how some raters of student essays use analytical lists of skills to be assessed. Rating is a process. But the raters begin by listing qualities to be valued: organization, spelling, punctuation, images, tropes, what-have-you. The qualities may be inherent in "student essays" or somehow related to what skills a teacher is promoting. Each category is assigned a scale of points and then the essay is scored category by category and the points are added to create a score for the essay.

Some raters follow the rules. Some adjust the rules to fit other purposes they understand. If, for example, the essays are used for placement in composition courses of varying difficulty, there are probably cut-off scores showing who will be assigned to advanced courses and who will be sent to some remedial neverland. In such circumstances some raters make a holistic decision of the value of the essay in suggesting appropriate placement and then arrange the scores in different categories so they will add up to the appropriate cut-off number. They see the focusing term as "placement," not as "essay writing." The change of focus changes the reality.

Focus is a function of purpose, but purposes are usually mixed or multiple. One may write simply to inform some reader at a lesser level of competence, one may write to persuade, or one may write simply to see what emerges from words

put together. A tidy informative document may persuade a reader of its truth; a truly persuasive treatise must have information. And any writing is some sense exploratory. School writing often has no evident purpose other than persuading some rather that the writer is docile in following prescribed conventions, not a purpose likely to excite many students, but often quite practical. Docility is a virtue that delights parents and employers, so socially inventive behavior in writing or thinking may be less honored in mass education than is adhering to conventions. Critical reading and imaginative questioning of the status quo are honored in political speeches about education more than they are encouraged in the classroom itself or in the "world of work."

The difficulty for teachers at home or in school is greater than I have made it seem. After all, societies must have a common base of shared understandings. Languages serve commonality. Too much variation leads to rebellion and riot; too little leads to stagnation and bigotry. Purpose exists within a social context, so every writer is some sense a social critic while being an informer and a persuader.

Consider natural language, such as the one I am using, English. Each user of a language group, each person, has some variation from the base language. That personal variation is an idiolect. Related idiolects make up a dialect. Some privileged dialect is designated as "the language." In a democratic society there may be more than one view of what is "standard." For some 18th century grammarians (often bishops), the base language was a pre-Babel universal code, so for religious reasons they sought what they imagined to be the gift of God. Truly words represented reality, and somewhere there was a correct form. In an age that seeks to interpret the languages of apes and dolphins we are more likely to seek patterns that emerge from efforts of higher animals to form social groupings, and we accept the notion that some groups have more power than others.

Most likely we begin our sense of a proper language with our mothers and our immediate family. Our personal language is a sub-set of English different from the language of the larger community. "Mar-mar" and "wee-wee" and single word requests or piercing screeches may be intelligible to many adults, and may even be used within the family, but they are viewed with parental condescension. "He'll outgrow it." No, he'll adapt it and enlarge it for adult uses—perhaps the language he uses when he talks to himself, or more socially to a spouse. Consider how long-married people manage to know when to leave a party. It is the vocabulary of intimacy, a very private version of the common language. And it rarely makes trouble in a classroom because it is rarely discussed.

Trouble begins when we worry about dialects, the versions of English favored by groups within the larger population. A country comprised of immigrants and the children of immigrants borrows readily from other languages, and that is an accident of history, but the main reason for dialects is that three hundred million people cannot quite relate as bosom buddies. Earlier societies based on families and tribes that shared assumptions and quirks could adopt a common tongue, perhaps stratified by social rank, as in the King's English. Even within the

relatively small geographic range of England, however, many regional variations grew out of neighborly interactions. In the US, despite national radio and television, we have not eliminated the dialects of hyphenated Americans or social status or even geographic isolation. Asian, Hispanic, Greek, Italian, Irish, African, Appalachian, Nordic, blue collar, suits, tweeters, teenagers, and so on. Indeed, if poll takers can name some sub-group of Americans from whom to discover an opinion, you can find a related dialect. What then is correct English?

"Correct" is what pleases people in a particular conversation. In an ordinary high school or college classroom that means Edited American English, a fancy way of naming what is expected among responsible people doing the world's work. In the show-and-tell of the primary classroom or the written "story" of what happened at a birthday party a teacher may reward almost any intelligible utterance or manuscript. Eventually children have to be led to the linguistic and editorial conventions of grownups, because being grown up is the fate of us all, and we want to be assimilated. Teenagers may create dialects of their own which they treasure into old age as a badge of remembered past. Pre-adults may cling to their linguistic inventions in daily use until they realize they have become adults and don't need to emphasize their separateness. Yes, a few rebel, but most stay close enough to the normal discourse that they can be understood even in moments of their rebellious irritations, and "normal" allows for considerable variation. Among some politicians the language of power may be "folksy." Among minorities the variations signal alliances. "Pleasing" is specific for a person in some context.

When I was growing up, textbooks made issues of shall-will, of between-among, of split infinitives, of who-whom, of that-which, and many more fine points of usage. Fowler or Strunk ruled. Some editors still insist, but in ordinary discourse even fussy writers often ignore the old distinctions. Languages shrivel. We cut off the dead branches and watch new ones grow. My senior students in engineering and in literature in some sense wrote correctly and yet in styles so different that one might have considered that they used different dialects. True to their languages they understood the world differently. Their focus allowed them to map "reality" differently. Consider how the language of medicine creates a body different from the one you live in from day to day. A physician has to be clever to translate the layperson's sense of ailments into clinical talk, so she can deal with it, and only a few of us make sense of the medical books. To be sure, most adults have some facility in several dialects. We may be lost in Cajun or Creole or Gullah or even "street-talk," but we manage to accommodate many of the assumptions of special occupations and different social classes. We can switch dialects.

When in 1965 I taught in a summer program financed by the Rockefeller Foundation for 80 or so teachers of English in the traditionally black colleges, I had to cope with complex expectations. Our participants—especially the older ones—had invested time and ego in mastering Edited American English (EAE). Some were puzzled that the staff—both Black and White—seemed comfortable

with Black English Vernacular (BEV) in various farms, but the issue was dormant until we had James Meredith speak to the group. One of the teachers had had Mr. Meredith in class, and he spoke to us in BEV. The teacher was mortified not so much by BEV, but by the fact the four White instructors heard it. Her student, noted as he was, had violated the code expectations she felt marked the quality of her teaching. His focus was on excluding the white establishment. She and we heard the same sounds, but we interpreted the sounds differently. Incidentally, we all used the term "black," for African American came into vogue at a later time.

When we understand that language is the result of a social contract, we admit that even when we talk to ourselves someone is looking over our shoulder. I, a retired teacher, cannot help talking to a teacher, at least part of myself. Indeed, it is convenient here in talking to myself, in exploring what I think, that I evoke an audience of English teachers. I am the English teacher audience.

My words are English teacher words, but I am constantly exposed to the words of students who are expanding into language and society. What do they hear when I talk to them? How do they escape the limits of their family language? I recall fondly a brilliant honors student who was majoring in English and oriental studies. When she came to a final examination, which she thought silly, she filled a blue book with intricate pen-and-ink drawings of Chinese dragons. She also had a dim view of degrees even though she accepted a B.A. Eventually she wrote poems and made pottery. Maybe she essayed pots. Her languages—verbal and graphic—set her own limits, her own focus, and I was expected to enter her world. After all, I expected my students to enter my world.

Still, as a teacher, I cannot write an essay without trying to teach myself in a way that might teach others. Having lived eight and a half decades I have seen many wayward, unfocussed minds ramble associatively from notion to notion—I have made a few such excursions myself—but being a creature of a professional clan, a tightly bound family of scholar-educators, I am driven to make a point even when I don't have one. When I write to this extended family, I may have little information of consequence, yet in piffling, punning, decorating a phrase I remind myself and the others that we are a group and we play at trivia so we remember the bases of our common bonds. The point is merely that we exist, and that may not be "merely." At the moment of writing some sort of "I" exists even though in the next instant someone else will exist in my body. No writing can exhibit a whole self, if indeed that whole self exists. We are in some ways re-made in each situation, in each encounter.

Still all of my surface "selves" posit a world beyond language. As they focus their language in particular circumstances, they believe that they have captured an accurate view of a facet of the world. They also are constantly reminded that they have eliminated much of the world from their view, and the more they focus the more they cut out their alternate selves. Yes, focus denies the existence of much of reality. So, we have come to my second proposition about the limits of language.

Practical people ignore the reminders of the world beyond language, get on with their daily chores. Even faithful churchgoers may resist temptations to consider what the words might not reveal. They leave that sort of problem to mystics or poets or wayward minds. Even theologians sometimes play games with the surface of words rather than read beyond them. The rituals are soothing and imply some sort of assured order. Whenever some suggests a change in custom—say, wearing hats in church or not wearing hats—the congregation frets because their focus on order is disturbed. Translating the Bible—moving it farther from the pre-Babel purity—is a threat to conventional understanding. (If you are a 14th-century bishop in England it is also a threat to your temporal authority in the Church's hierarchies.) Even a new translation upsets modern churches. These changes force one to contemplate what might exist beyond the limits of focus.

Those who are curious to discover more about the world pushed out of focus by conventional languages constantly invent new ways to escape the limits of the languages they have inherited. Picasso and Duke Ellington, Darwin and Einstein, Keynes and Freud in their several ways tried to show us what we hadn't then noticed. Not one *logos*, but several. For most native speakers of a language, though, it is the poets and other creators of fictions who cause trouble. An old metaphor makes the point—the steel glass. In centuries past mirrors of real glass were rare—sheets of steel served to provide reflections of one's face. The sheets had twists and imperfections which rendered reflected images distorted. The distortions offered the means of satire and through satire remind one that conventions are not the whole of reality. Even when the harshness of satire is not intended, the poet deals in metaphor, a way of saying two things at once. Or, in another definition, the poet seeks an objective correlative, images that in some way give body to an abstract notion.

Perhaps I should explain. The distortions of satire—the twisting out of shape or out of focus—are in some sense false, but they serve to alert us to the exclusions of a conventional statement. If Swift suggests that we control population growth by eating babies, we may become aware of how incomplete is the planning of some social scientists. Students being forced into close reading of poems sometimes complain that teachers find too many implications, but even benign and trite love poems depend on multiple associations. Why is my love a rose? Is she red? Has she petals? Is she graceful? Why not a petunia? Or a columbine? Of course, my love is not really any of these things, but the poet tries to focus your attention on some particular quality. If the poem is much grander—say, the Aeneid—does it exist merely as "history" to tell about the founding of Rome, or is it a broader narrative dealing frustration, privation, and sacrifice against all sort of trials in order to achieve greatness? Of course, it is both and more because the poet hopes to reveal something important about the world beyond language.

T. S. Eliot's Prufrock struggles to say what he means and ultimately decides that he is unable to capture what he feels. In his love song he wants to tell the lady some overwhelming question, but in the end he has heard the mermaids

singing and does not think they will sing to him. He is neither Hamlet nor Od-
ysseus, no sailor on the Great Sea. But the whole portrait is a comment on the
times, where daily life renders one unable to represent an underlying reality. The
setting is a soiree characterized by arty but trivial chatter, a context in which a
middle-aged man expresses his awareness of a world he cannot enter. Eliot has
found objective events to suggest a reality beyond the events. That is the work of
any metaphor.

By definition all metaphors are mistakes, just as the images of the steel glass
are mistakes. The dog is obeyed in office? One does not really elect a cocker span-
iel to be mayor, and a person is not a dog. But clearly, we are asked to consider
the ways our mayor is like a dog. Some metaphors are so weary that we don't even
hear them as metaphors. Your sentences flow? No, rivers perhaps flow, but the
old phrase does not like raise the image of a river in your mind. Some mistakes
are more powerful than others. "Survival of the fittest" and the "struggle for ex-
istence" conjure up images of war and for some people make evolution into bio-
logical empire building. The people who deal in the images of letters on a double
helix have a calmer view of biological processes, but they are equally trying to
find a new language for expressing reality.

So I am back to the word and human efforts to access something real. The his-
tory of religious thought is a study of metaphors. Through false claims of identity
we enforce comparisons that might offer us a glimpse at the ineffable. We name
that which can't be known—God—but the name itself tells us very little. We pile
on abstractions—omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent, eternal—but that helps
little. The preachers I have heard rarely delve into these questions, partly because
they are really social workers using church doctrine to alter behavior, and partly
because they sense that the congregation would be bored.

Some sneer at the ancients who named multiple gods—a god for every special
need—and then arranged them in tribal families with all sorts of human failings,
but after all they were just finding metaphors from their sensory world as a way
of describing forces they could not apprehend literally. For us, human thought
made a great leap when it rolled up all of the subsidiary gods in to one God. To
be sure, many people then and now take the surface of the metaphor as though it
were literal—a gospel truth—and then have to think up stories in order to explain
the god's will. Indeed, some people take Biblical characters and treat them like
Greek gods.

Find your own image to suggest what is beyond the Word. Eve, the Great
Goddess, Aphrodite, Astarte, Mary—take whatever lady you fancy—and you are
puzzling about the female principle. You may focus on Woman as the fertility
partner, the mother, or the custodian of cadavers, but you have still not found
reality. Yin-Yang, the anima and the id, the body and soul, Higgs boson, what-
have-you. C. S. Lewis suggests that the person with greatest number of metaphors
has the greatest access to the world as it is. Probably most of us most of the time
walk comfortably along our customary paths. We put food and the table and then

go to bed. When we least expect it, the poet sneaks out and the Word shimmers and we are not sure of what we have seen.

Decades ago someone preached sermons that I did not listen to (in a narrow church the altar was far from the pulpit but being somewhat deaf was also helpful). I counted the bricks on the farther wall, until for a few seconds St. John delivered his Word.

June 2012