The majority of men behave toward language as our primitive ancestors did toward their wives: they gladly accepted their service, their ever-abiding presence, the atmosphere they gave to their lives, but scarcely thought or spoke about them—unless they found them unfaithful, unless Eve betrayed her husband. The rôle of language as betrayer has recently forced itself into undue prominence, thanks to the so-called school of semanticists. But language as such, whether it serves or betrays, is loved perhaps only by a few, the poets and the philologists. Poets tend rather to be too much in love with language to be able to speak rationally about it—a capacity given only to the philologists who combine, with their love for language from which their name derives, the calm of the scholar who is able to define what he loves (and it is just such a definition which will be attempted in this essay).

The famous French philologist Gaston Paris once wrote to a friend: "J'ai la philologie calme: c'est pour moi une épouse, non pas une amante." And yet for all their calm, most philologists find it difficult to understand why *all* scholars have not become philologists, since the first scientific tool in all fields of learning is language: chronologically first and first in importance.
For every scientific statement is couched in language; even an algebraic equation such as \( x = a^2 + b^2 \) is a sentence, grammatically construed according to the prevailing structure of Indo-European sentences, containing a subject and a predicate, together with the additional feature, not required in all those languages, of a copula. And the words of this sentence have a premathematical history which reveals their origin in the common speech of those peoples who have been concerned with the development of mathematics: for instance, the symbol \( x \) goes back to the initial consonant of the Arabic word for 'thing,' \( š\text{ay} \), that is, to the sibilant \( š \), which was written \( x \) in Old Spanish by both Christians and Arabs (cf. the French pronunciation \textit{Don Quichotte} for what is written in English \textit{Don Quixote}). Again, \textit{square} said of a number, testifies to a word-usage of the Pythagoreans, who used the corresponding Greek term 'tetragon' not only for the geometrical figure, but also for the arithmetical product of a number multiplied by itself, because they saw numbers geometrically arranged, in our case the \( a^2 \) as the area of a geometrical square with equal sides of the length \( a \). The algebraic symbols \( a, b, \) and \( x \) have been added to the common language in order to designate relational, not numeric values, classified into knowns and unknowns; the equal sign as a new type of copula freed from grammatical flection; the plus sign as a new type of conjunction opposed to the minus sign; and the whole mathematical nomenclature, detached as it is from any particular spoken national language, has the advantage of representing a system of internationally valid ideograms perceptible to the eye without the detour via the spoken particular languages. The mathematical terms are thus improvements on the common language—terms which may even find their way back to the common language. The eighteenth century philosopher Condil-
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lac has said: “Une science n'est qu'une langue bien faite,” and similarly the German essayist Lichtenberg has stated that our whole philosophy amounts to no more than to correction of word-usage.

Now just as the creation of a scientific or philosophical vocabulary represents a refinement on common speech, so our everyday spoken language is itself the result of innumerable refinements and creations, wrought by the human mind in the desire better to orientate itself in the labyrinth of the world—a tremendous improvement over the speechless state of the animals, indeed the greatest scientific progress before science in our sense was invented. We may define the spoken language as a system of sounds and sound-groups, produced by the delicate minimum movements of our articulatory apparatus, which are made to symbolize thoughts that have crystallized around certain points: out of the incessant and turbid flow of life certain entities have been isolated and endowed with a relative acoustic fixity and duration with the result that predications about them can be made. Without acoustic fixations by words of concepts such as night and day, atom, electricity, acoustic fixations which can in turn be fixed in writing, the human individual would have to recapitulate for every new thought the whole bulk of thoughts of mankind on the subject. As Shelley says: language “rules a throng of thought and forms which else senseless and shapeless were.”

Now such linguistic fixations, or words, as they are offered to the individual speaker of a language, are to him arbitrary, conventional, imposed by the chance of his being born into a particular speaking community. In general, no motivation of the meaning of a particular sound group or word can be given by the speaker: in the terms of Plato, no motivation for the words can be given by the nature (φύσεώς) of the things designated.
Why does *horse* not mean *cat* or the reverse? Why is the horse called in Italian *cavallo* and in German *Pferd*? And even in the case of onomatopoeias and interjections where an acoustic motivation of the words is possible, the particular speaker is bound to respect the convention of his speaking community: the rooster crows *cockadoodledoo* in English, *cocorico* in French, *kikeriki* in German, and still differently in other languages; if someone steps on your foot you will cry *ouch!* if you are an American, *au!* if German, *aïe!* if French. Nevertheless, the single speaker who uses *cavallo* in Italian, *Pferd* in German, *horse* in English can expect to be understood, or understood fairly well, by his fellow-countrymen as if in consequence of a tacit convention or pact—*βίας*, as Plato called it. It is this unwritten, but daily-renewed linguistic contract with one’s co-citizens, that daily plebiscite, which makes national cohesion possible—as is illustrated in reverse by the Biblical story of the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel. The average member of a speaking community feels so well at home in his mother-tongue that he would naively boast that no other language can express outward reality better than his: the anecdote of a Tyrolian German discussing with a Tyrolian Italian the merits of their respective languages is well-known. The German brings the discussion to a close with the remark: “You call a ‘Pferd’ a ‘cavallo’ but it *is* a ‘Pferd.’”

I have said that speakers of the same language understand each other *fairly* well, for in most cases the understanding is indeed not complete within the same community: cases of absolute unambiguity as the two mathematical usages of the term *square* are rather rare and represent the maximum possibility of understanding through words. With the majority of the words no such unanimity of understanding exists: the noun *square* itself has in the common language four or five different
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senses. In order to know what the word actually means in a certain situation we must know the context; if the context is zero, as happens to be the rule in newspaper headlines, we often fail to reach certainty. But even when the context is given, all the speakers do not always mean exactly the same when using a particular word: democracy is different according to the Communist and the non-Communist creed; and surely not all speakers are agreed on what shade of color is red as opposed to pink.

Understanding is then only based on that semantic kernel of the words on which all speakers of a language are agreed, while the semantic fringes are blurred. The founder of modern philosophy of language, Wilhelm von Humboldt, was right in saying that the speaking individual does not offer to his fellow speaker objective signs for the things expressed, nor does he compel him by his verbal utterance to represent to himself exactly the same thing as that meant by him, but is satisfied with, as it were, pressing down the homologous key of the other’s respective mental keyboard, with establishing only the same link in the chain of associations of things with words, so that there are elicited corresponding, though not exactly identical, responses.

Yet irrespective of the variable ratio of understanding our words may find, we behave generally naively as though we were perfectly understood. And this illusion is one of the great sources of man’s happiness: it gives him the feeling of being surrounded by a friendly world which shares with him all the associations he may have built up in his lifetime—for man fears nothing more than isolation in the universe. It is the enjoyment of the community of language which works at all public gatherings wherein the individual communes with the collective spirit. Great actors or orators give us a feeling of strength and elation because we realize that the maximum of expressivity with which
they are able to endow the common language does not disrupt
the flow of understanding between them and us. And even in
our most personal and intimate reactions we welcome the social
character of the word that expresses us in terms of age-old
experiences of the community: when we feel tender or sad we
are likely to say to ourselves the words tender or sad and feel
even tenderer or sadder—because we somehow have received a
ratification, by the language of the community, of our personal
state of mind. It is also their quality of social reassurance that
keeps adages, "old saws," alive.

Language is then a system of arbitrary, conventional, ambig­
uous signs generally not felt as ambiguous, and, in addition, a
system in movement at which the community is constantly
working. The use of the language by the community brings
about change—changes mainly due to shifts of attention which
in turn are conditioned by the law of diminishing returns, by
the fact that experiences which have become familiar to us
no longer interest us. We may assume, for example, that for
primitive man every situation was unique and required a unique
expression, a new kind of interjection or proper name, but that
with his growing experience he became able to subsume a new
situation under an older one and to express the former as a
variant of the latter: his attention shifted from the unique to
the regular, from the proper name to the common noun stage:
Latin tatta and mamma are originally exclamations of the
babbling child, reserved for the father and the mother, proper
names characterizing these unique persons in the family; but
the common nouns pater - mater, offering the babbling syllables
pä-mä- and provided with the suffix -ter, testify already to a
classification, the suffix being the linguistic expression of a regu­

larity perceived in the world, indeed a rhyme symbolizing a
perceived analogy by equality of sound.
The most frequent suffixes are found in the paradigms of nouns and verbs; in primitive times the verbal expressions *I go* and *we go* may have appeared as quite different experiences, not as concrete variants of the abstract verb *to go*: a remainder of such primitive thinking is the Romance so-called suppletive conjugation: French *je vais* - *nous allons*, Italian *vo* - *andiamo*, or the similar opposition in English *I go* - *I went*. The so-called irregular verbs, generally the ones most frequently used in our languages, are remnants of a state of civilization in which the power of abstraction was not yet sufficiently strong to see, behind the actions of different persons, one common abstract denominator. Regular flexion is a means by which new concrete expressions of actions can be subsumed under one heading. That nearly all third persons singular of the present have an -s ending in English is a conquest of the abstracting mind that posits a He-She-It-category. A minimum articulation, that sibilant -s formed by a certain position of the tongue against the teeth, has been given the task of symbolizing a grammatical category, that of activity of a third person while the rest of the paradigm of the present is characterized by a zero-ending: *he says*—*I say, you say*. It would seem that this system, which introduces a classifying principle into activity, a system in itself as neat and as scientific as that of Linnaeus in botany, should stay for ever in English. But, strangely enough, the -s as the privilege of the third person is not immune from change: one hears in colloquial renderings of a dialogue such forms as *says she, says I* and even *says you*. What has happened here, is that the attention of the speakers has shifted from the opposition: -s for the third person, zero for the other persons, to the relationship between partners in conversation, to the idea of their being united by the conversation: *says he* - *says I*, with the result that the -s of the third person passes to the first and second. Were
this popular innovation to be generalized, winning out over the objections of the schools and other conservative circles, the whole conjugational system of English would be wrecked and replaced by a new system in which the -s would be characteristic of the whole present tense—a change that would be welcomed by the contemporary “Leave your language alone” school of grammarians.

But this much must be granted to those linguistic anarchists, that such changes are not only mistakes or caprices of the language, but new categorizations due to shift of attention: as we have learnt from Freud, no mistake is only a mistake; no single mistake or innovation that becomes generalized in a language is in itself without meaning—although the sum total of the mistakes or changes that in the course of history have been superimposed one upon the other may give us a picture, reminiscent of the silhouette of European cities that have grown out of medieval towns, of confusion and irregularity which are mainly due to the conflict between the innovating and the conservative tendencies, or between several innovations. One may regret the appearance, in the twentieth century American English of the show business, of new words such as motorcade or aquacade which have been coined with a spurious suffix—cade cut out of the body of the model word cavalcade, of French origin. But not basically different are much older formations in the international lingo of musicians such as trio with an -o borrowed from duo, the Latin word for ‘duet’ [and French quintuor sextuor septuor octuor (‘quintette, sextette, etc.’) are modelled on the Latin word quattuor ‘quartette’]. In such violent linguistic mutilations, which are characteristic of the restlessness of the musical guild and the show-business people, there manifests itself an attitude of dissatisfaction with the traditionally given words, a shift of attention away from linguistic correctness. But
such an attitude occurs to some degree at all periods in language, and not only in the fields of flexion and suffixation.

The wear and tear undergone by language shows itself also in the semantic field. The English adverb *much* is in part replaced by *very*, a more emotional word originally meaning 'truly,' and by expressions involving exaggeration such as *enormously, exceedingly, awfully, devastatingly*. Similarly the Old French adverb *mout* (from Latin *multum*) has been replaced by *beaucoup, force, bien*; in Rhetoromance 'much' is expressed by *milliarius* 'a thousand,' etc. The language of modern advertising lives on exaggeration, but the law of diminishing returns can also be shown to operate here: after the overuse of superlatives ('the finest car in the world'), a more modest comparative, the comparative without comparison, is discovered ('a better car'—better than what?), and after so many advertisements of 100 per cent purity the claim of Ivory Soap to only $994\%_{100}$th per cent purity, with its novelty of precision in understatement, is a gain in expressivity.

The same drive toward the novel, the expressive exists also in the phonetic development of the language: probably because the speaking communities become tired of the familiar articulations they engage in those sound-shifts of which our historical grammars are full: the *g* of Germanic *garden* develops to the *j* of French *jardin*, a development which must have started with a minimum displacement in the pronunciation of the *g*—comparable to the *garden* pronunciation of our Virginians: the alterations *garden > g'arden > jardin* ultimately root in man's constant urge to make his language more expressive, by an exaggeration of the current pronunciation of sounds which leads to their alteration. The law of the minimum effort is not generally respected in language, which is inclined rather to squander efforts than to economize them. Limits to such expen-
diture of expressivity are imposed only by the system of the language as a whole; it may happen that the general system checks the particular innovation. In such cases the speaker is faced with the alternative: "Shall I actually say g'arden, I says, devastatingly, or shall I cling to the older system of expression?"

Perhaps at any moment in the course of the development of any living language a change is taking place, perhaps just beginning, perhaps reaching standardization; a change that may consist in additions to the language or in eliminations from it, as the seventeenth century English linguist Bentley has said: "Every living language, like the perspiring bodies of living creatures, is in perpetual motion and lateration."

But in spite of continuous motion and secretion in the language, the speaker never loses the feeling of mastering the whole system of his language, because this system never changes too dramatically during his lifetime: what one calls Sprachgefühl, feeling for the language, is the instinctive awareness, given to the individual speaker, of an existing equilibrium, of the range of possibilities within the given system which, however, he himself, with every utterance, helps unconsciously to extend or alter. Sometimes he may, by the ironical use of an innovation which he personally rejects, give citizenship papers to an undesirable: witness the hesitant introduction in our contemporary parlance of the word know-how whose originally ironical quotation marks tend gradually to disappear. Language as Wilhelm von Humboldt has said is not an ξργων but an ϵεργεία, an ever-moving force, not a constituted fact, but there exists also a stable aspect to the language—or else we could have no descriptive grammars—which mirrors indeed man's illusion that his language stands still, just as he thought for so many centuries that his earth stands still; only in the case of language he prefers ironically enough to ignore the fact that he himself is the most assiduous promoter
of change. Only when the historical linguist looks back at centuries of development of a language, for instance at the development of English since the time of Chaucer, is he forced to envisage the element of change, which he recognizes by calling the former stage by a different name, such as Middle English. The historian of language may even have a tendency to exaggerate the amount of change in the course of time: there are many features in our living languages which in fact have remained unchanged for millennia: the opposition French je suis - il est reflects the Latin opposition sum - est, which dates back at least 3,500 years. The historical study of the past stages of a living language gives us, then, insight into that delicate mixture of innovation and conservatism which makes up the texture of a language, as indeed of all human institutions.

One may compare the modern stage of a language not only with its own past, but also with other languages with which some kinship exists. The kinship can be of a threefold kind: cultural, genealogical, and elementarily human. The cultural kinship in linguistics is what in anthropology would be called 'acculturation': a superior civilization tends to extend itself to an inferior one and generally, along with the new concept elaborated by that superior civilization, the words in which this concept is formulated tend to be borrowed. Thus while English horse is a Germanic word, chivalry and chivalric are of French origin because the cultural development of chivalry was developed in France. These are examples of the so-called "loanwords" which testify to the cultural dependence of the community that borrows upon a superior community that lends. Sometimes it is not the material phonetic form, only the semantics of a loanword that is borrowed: whereas in the case of the x of algebra our modern languages have borrowed the whole word, phonetic form and meaning, from the Arabs, the
word *square* in its arithmetical use shows only the semantics of its ultimate Greek source *tetragone*. Nearly all the abstract terms current in modern languages are either phonetic or semantic loanwords elaborated by that Greco-Roman-Christian civilization which is the basis of Occidental cultural life. The modern biological and sociological technical term *environment* is a coinage of Carlyle's intended to translate Goethe's term *Umwelt*—which in turn is a translation from Newton's *circumambient medium* and Galileo's *l'ambiente*, themselves expressions ultimately harking back to Greek *periechon* ("that which encompasses and embraces," meaning alternatively, the air, space, or the world spirit). Similarly the French term *milieu*, originally *milieu ambiant*, reflects the *circumambient medium* of Newton and through this the Greek term *periechon*. It has been said by naturalists that the dust floating in the air over any one particular area contains particles which have gathered from the whole world; it is equally true that in any particular modern European language there are found loanwords from all over the world: the semantic dust that favorable winds of civilization have brought to us from all over, but especially from ancient Greece.

*Genealogical* kinship, different from cultural kinship, is based on an uninterrupted continuity of speech as exemplified by the Romance languages which directly continue Latin and are indeed a Neolatin—or by Latin itself, which along with Greek, ProtoGermanic, etc., directly continues the lost, but reconstructable Indo-European language. Whereas in the case of cultural kinship we are able to evaluate the debt, for example, of the English language to other civilizations, in the case of genealogical kinship we sense what English has in common with other descendants from the same Proto-Germanic and Indo-European ancestry. Sometimes an irregularity of English can best be explained by recourse to other members of the Indo-European family which
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may show a system in full vigor that tends to disappear in our language. Thus English has mainly lost the Indo-European distinction of cases such as nominative and accusative, preserving it only in pronouns (which generally belong to the most conservative part of the language); I am alluding to the difference between who nominative and whom accusative which tends to disappear in modern substandard English, a differentiation having its exact counterpart in Latin quis - quem, in harmony with the general opposition nominative-accusative in the declension of nouns: ignis - ignem. The confusion between who and whom which recently marred the text of a law passed by the New York State Legislature could have been avoided had the lawmakers become familiar in their youth with that Latin distinction. A professor of English once told me, when I insisted on the importance of Latin for the development of the grammatical sense in English-speaking students: “How will you teach Latin to students to whom I have not been able all my life to explain the difference between who and whom?” My answer was of course: “It is because they do not know Latin that they fail to distinguish between who and whom.”

The third kind of linguistic kinship is based on elementary human nature. All languages are akin qua human languages, that is as reflections of the general human mind. For instance onomatopoeias are found in all languages, although, as we have said, the particular onomatopoeias chosen for a certain concept may vary from language to language. Also, certain negative features, or hesitancies, which we find in a particular language may reflect a general human attitude toward the concept expressed—the attitude toward the future tense being a case in point: many languages lack a particular form for the future and replace it by the present, for instance colloquial German and in part Russian. Indo-European possessed a future tense charac-
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terized by an -s- infix, as the daughter-languages Greek, Indo-Iranian, and Lithuanian testify, but the -s- future of ancient Greek is lost in Neo-Greek which has built a new future from a modal expression ‘I will’ reminiscent of English.

In English, the future tense is obviously a relatively recent creation, not firmly cemented as an expression of time relation, as is shown by the alternation in its paradigm of shall and will (modal expressions which still sometimes retain their original sense: thou shalt not kill, will you sit down?); in addition the shall and will future can be freely replaced by going to (or, less freely, by the present tense: the ship sails tomorrow). In comparison with this loosely knit English future tense, the Latin future (cantabo-faciam), with its exclusive reference to future time, may seem to show an imposing precision; but to the closer inspection of the comparatist it is revealed as originating in modal expressions parallel to the English formation: faciam facies are originally subjunctives and optative formations meaning ‘I may do, may you do,’ and cantabo is originally a compound meaning ‘I become singing’ (comparable to standard German ich werde singen), in which bo is a separate verb related to Greek φύμαι, English to be. In other words, Latin which had lost the Indo-European s- future built it up again by means of modal expressions in the same manner as English and Neo-Greek have done. Again the Latin paradigms, seemingly so well-established, did not survive in Romance which rebuilt new futures by means of modal verbs: French je chanterai is a cantare habeo ‘I have to sing’; in Romanian the future is expressed by ‘I wish to sing’; in Sardinian by ‘I must sing.’ Finally, in French, the future tense is today on the point of disintegration, being replaced either by the present or by ‘going to’ (je vais chanter), in dialects by ‘I will.’

Why do we witness in the history of Latin and Neolatin
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(e.g. French) a thrice-repeated pendulum movement of alternatively building up a future tense and then destroying it (the Indo-European s-future yielding to cantabo, this in turn yielding to cantare habeo > je chanterai, this in turn to je vais chanter)?

A comparison with non-Indo-European phenomena shows that we are faced with a generally human fact: the ambiguous attitude of man toward the future: he approaches it over and over again with his emotions (his will, his feelings of duty, his self-reliance or fear of destiny), allowing the modal expressions to crystallize into neat intellectual expressions of the time relationship, only to let these again disintegrate and to replace them by new popular expressions tinged with emotion—and the pendulum movement may start over again. The English future tense is then only one among many manifestations of the ontological hesitancy of man, when faced with the future, between an intellectual and an emotional attitude. In its behavior toward the future tense the English language is less English than language, human language. It is such insights into both the continuity and variety of man's nature that give the historical linguist that divin piacere, that delight worthy of the gods, which Vico felt to be the prerogative of the historian or, in Jakob Burckhardt's image: historical consciousness makes us equal to the man on top of the mountain who senses, in what seems dissonance for the inhabitants of the valley, the greatest harmony.

Montesquieu's Parisian bourgeoisie (who surely lived in the valley), when faced with an influx of Persians into their capital, naively asked: "How can one be a Persian?" Comparative linguistics teaches indeed that one can be a Persian; this science is anti-bourgeois, anti-Babbitt in its essence; it reflects a civilized art of remembering the manifoldness and the range of human behavior.

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The young student who is laboriously trying to decipher a Greek or Latin sentence with its network of dependent clauses, participles and indirect discourse extending perhaps over a whole page, might draw some comfort from the thought that an ancient Greek or Roman would have had equal trouble with an English sentence with its cluster of prepositions such as: "Mama, what did you bring that book that I didn't want to be read to out of up for?" The mental gymnastics imposed on any deciphering of a foreign language text, ancient or modern, is a healthy training in the understanding of any human context, in that understanding characteristic of the humanities. This effort is of a particular kind, quite different from the procedure in mathematics in which one deduces consequences from a few, very simple axioms which have been isolated from the whole of reality. In any deciphering one is faced with a whole network of difficulties which present themselves in a lump at the same time: words, word-meanings, constructions, in themselves perhaps known to us, must be fitted together into that unique mosaic which alone makes sense—and, in addition (and this is again quite different from mathematics, which, once it has left the realm of outward reality, need not return to it), the particular outward situation described in the text may be unknown to us: the meaning of the text may become clear not by the Sprachgefühl for the particular language alone, but only by the additional application of our general human experience which may tell us which word-meanings and which constructions might fit the outward situation described in the text.

In order to penetrate this linguistic-situational web, we can only form for ourselves a tentative, rapidly anticipated hypothesis about the meaning of the whole passage, based on some details which we have immediately apperceived; then we may verify our quick assumption by taking up more slowly all the
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details, linguistic as well as situational, to see whether all of
them fit our first hypothesis: only when they do have we guessed
right. This is a circular operation, not at all a vicious circle,
but the basic operation in all the humanities, in history or
literature as well as in philology: it consists in starting from
certain details and attempting to establish a synthetic view of
the whole, later to verify whether all the details can be explained
from the assumed meaning of the whole. Significantly enough,
the so-called “circle of understanding in the humanities” was
discovered by the German classical philologist and Platonistic
philosopher Schleiermacher when he attempted to explain to
himself the criteria by which to proceed in the deciphering of
obscure passages in Homer, and it is the method by which all
deciphering and even the modern decoding techniques are
guided—and if the work of American counter-intelligence in the
last war that was able to save thousands of lives, has demon­
strated to the whole nation a possibility of practical application
of the humanities, an applicability which was equal to that of
the sciences (if not equally advertised), it must be remembered
that our counter-intelligence experts were using the methods of
Homeric textual criticism.

But language study offers not only lessons of tolerance and a
training in humanistic understanding. It also teaches us to
appraise the power of language on thought, the power of the
collective subconscious, as latent in the language, even in our
enlightened modern civilization. Every language offers to its
speakers a ready-made interpretation of the world, truly a
Weltanschauung, a metaphysical word-picture which, after having
originated in the thinking of our ancestors, tends to impose itself
ever anew on posterity. Take for instance a simple sentence
such as ‘I see him,’ in which the personal and transitive use of
the verb is the same as in ‘I kill him,’ ‘I throw it away.’ This
means that English and, I might say, Indo-European, presents the impressions made on our senses predominantly as human activities, brought about by our will. But the Eskimos in Greenland say not 'I see him' but 'he appears to me,' just as they say in the other cases just mentioned: 'he dies to me,' 'it flies away from me.' Thus the Indo-European speaker conceives as workings of his activities what the fatalistic Eskimo sees as events that happen to him. But in our Indo-European languages traces of the 'happening' type of expressions for inner experiences are not missing: in Latin one said for 'I dreamed,' 'it was seen by me in a dream'; a Russian must say in this case 'it dreamed itself to me'; and, in English, 'I remember,' which has taken the place of a former 'it remembers me,' may still today alternate with the impersonal 'it occurs to me'; German, the "language of dreamers" has a series of impersonal expressions such as es träumt, ahnt, schwant, deucht mir along with ich träume ahne, denke—all of which means that our Indo-European languages, some more, some less, still reflect an earlier cultural period where man conceived himself as more subject to action from outside than as capable of action of his own, more sensorial than motoric. Indeed, 'it occurs to me' is of the same impersonal type as that found in the meteorological expressions 'it is raining, snowing' in which obviously man refrains from asserting any action on his part. When Lichtenberg opposed Descartes' statement 'I think, therefore I am' by pointing out that the French philosopher had too lightly assumed the existence of a thinking ego on the basis of a speech habit which presents thinking as action on the part of the thinker, while he should have said 'it thinks in me,' he was reminding us, perhaps influenced by his native German, of that ancient irrational subsoil of the human ego which still lingers in us below the Cartesian pride of reason.
Now how should we explain the meteorological impersonal verbs with which we compared the type ‘it occurs to me’? Comparative linguistics teaches us that Greek impersonals such as ἰλὲ (‘it is raining’) and βροντα (‘it is thundering’) were originally simple nouns meaning ‘rain!’ ‘thunder!’—that is, emotional exclamations stating nothing but the existence of the meteorological phenomenon. But as old as these remainders of purely phenomenalistic expression are expressions such as Ζεὺς ἰλὲ, βροντα (‘Zeus is raining, thundering’), Zeus being an Indo-European God, Dyaus-pitā in Sanskrit, Juppiter in Latin, the Father-God of the bright shining day, who when he pleases can become the Juppiter Tonans. By these expressions an agent, a supernatural agent is posited to whom the outward events can be retraced. With the sentence ‘Zeus is raining’ man has attempted a first step toward science, to find causation in the cosmos, an explanation of the world by a myth: he has reached the first stage of science which the positivistic philosopher Auguste Comte has called the theological stage. Many languages still today show the imprint of that religious stage—for example in Hungarian one says for ‘it is raining’: ‘the rain er is raining.’

The second stage of science according to Comte is the ‘metaphysical’ one, in which occult natural forces or impersonal essences are assumed as causes: this stage is linguistically reflected by the ‘it’ in our modern type of expression ‘it is raining,’ where ‘it’ is a force x outside of us, considered as an agent. The third stage of science is reached, according to Comte, in the modern era of positivism when man no longer explains the world by anthropomorphic theology or vague metaphysics, but by the sense-data accessible to him and by their controllable relationships: but one will notice that this stage has not yet penetrated into our common speech which remains bound by theological or metaphysical tradition, ‘uncorrected’ by science.
in the sense of Lichtenberg and Condillac: we still do not say for 'it is raining': 'condensed atmospheric vapor is falling in drops,' just as we still continue, in spite of Copernicus, to say the sun rises, or sets. In Neo-Greek the phrase 'the sun is setting' is rendered by 'the sun is enthroned like a king,' in Romanian by 'the sun enters into sainthood'; in both cases the splendor and glory of the natural phenomenon is interpreted in terms of the human-superhuman splendor characteristic of Byzantine art. Similarly, although it would seem possible only in primitive prelogical animistic thinking that sex could be attributed to inanimate things, the majority of European languages have up to today retained grammatical gender ('water' is feminine in French eau as it was in Latin aqua). Language is then not satisfied with denoting factual contents, but forces the speakers to adopt certain metaphysical or religious interpretations of the world which the community may have learnt to deny. These obsolete conceptions remain latent in the language: just as Aeneas when all hope was lost carried his father out of burning Troy on his shoulders, so we tend to espouse our forefathers' beliefs and words in any emergency—when we will react atavistically: even atheists will then ejaculate God! and Voltaire has a libertine Swiss colonel pray in the stress of battle: "God, if you exist, save my soul, if I have one!"

The atavistic prelogical residue in our language, which may constitute a danger for the scientist unaware of the semantic fallacies of the latter (unaware, that is, of the "history of ideas" underlying our language), can however be used deliberately and with great aesthetic effect in literary art—in poetry.

When we hear in the refrain of a folksong inserted by Shakespeare into one of his plays the line "The rain it raineth everyday," we have the vague feeling that, although the factual content is no different from that of the conventional phrase 'it
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rains everyday,' the form chosen presents the fact in a slightly new light. There is here posited an irrational power that raineth: 'the rain rains' is indeed a quite unusual expression in modern English (though not in Hungarian, as we have said), suggestive, as it were, of another world than the one we are familiar with. In addition, certain linguistic and prosodic devices tend to enforce the impression that we have entered a world at the same time our own and not our own: the archaic ending -eth in raineth, which evokes times immemorial; the iambic rhythm here suggesting the monotony of perpetually falling rain (the rain it raineth every day); the repetition of the stem rain which reinforces the impression of monotony. Here then the arbitrary character of our words has been annulled and a particular significance has been given to the acoustic impression which has indeed become expressive of meaning. Thus words which had meaning only by convention (Өi m) have been made to express meaning in correspondence with their sound (pɔrə).

I have quoted a line of Shakespeare, which is surely not one of the most inspired, in order to show some basic elements required in the transformation of language by poetry: we found in that line a repristination of a mythological concept, symbolized by linguistic devices destined to give motivation to the arbitrary words of the language—and that is precisely what poetry generally achieves: to produce, by language-constructs differing from normal speech, adumbrations of a metaphysical world in which the laws of science, causality, practicality, as we know them and need them in our workaday world, seem no longer to obtain and in which we vaguely come to visualize other laws.

Indeed, the account of the creation in Genesis (which conflicts with evolutionistic modern science) is couched in a poetic language whose spell still today acts on all of us with undiminished force: "And God said: Let there be light, and there
was light”—the power of this line which already the pagan rhetorician Longinus had recognized as an example of what he called “the sublime,” that is, the grandiose expressed simply, resides in the word-parallelisms of the two sentences, and in the use of the conjunction ‘and,’ as a result of which the command of God is presented as leading inevitably and naturally to its own fulfilment. In the Hebrew original the parallelism is even more complete because the same verb-form serves for both the command and the fulfilment: j̄h̄i aur va-j̄h̄i aur. That miracle of miracles, the creation of light, has become simple, self-evident poetic reality. Here the onomatopoeia restored by poetry is much subtler and much more discreet than in the reproduction of the melody of rain in Shakespeare’s refrain.

It is even possible for poetry to evoke the rhythm of purely abstract thought. While it is relatively easy to compose poetry about love and spring, subject matters in themselves naturally poetic, the greatest challenge is offered to the poet when he proposes, as Lucretius and Dante have done, to sing of subject matter most rebellious to poetry, of abstract philosophical thought: “to make ideas sing” (in Valéry’s words). I shall choose a relatively small poetic organism in order to show how, by means of delicate prosodic devices, a philosophical idea can be made poetry: the sonnet of the Idea by the French poet Du Bellay (published in 1549). According to Plato the human soul is provided with wings wherewith to fly toward heaven, where dwells the divine idea of beauty, wisdom and goodness: the true reality of which all earthly beauty, wisdom and goodness is only an imperfect copy. Let us see now how the Renaissance poet has converted this Platonic myth, which is itself a poetic description of man’s constant aspiration toward the ideal, into pure poetry:
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Si nostre vie est moins qu'une journée
En l'éternel, si l'an qui fait le tour
Chasse noz jours sans espoir de retour,
Si perissable est toute chose née,

Que songes-tu, mon ame emprisonnée?
Pourquoi te plaist l'obscur de nostre jour,
Si pour voler en un plus cler sejour,
Tu as au dos l'aile bien empanée?

La est le bien que tout esprit desire,
La le repos ou tout le monde aspire,
La est l'amour, la le plaisir encore,

La, ô mon ame au plus hault ciel guidée,
Tu y pouras reconnoistre l'Idée
De la beauté qu'en ce monde j'adore.

The aesthetic secret of the sonnet seems to lie in the fact that the soul's striving toward the Idea is not only stated as in Plato's prose, but enacted with the help of certain linguistic devices. Du Bellay has here achieved an extraordinary convergence between rhythm and sentence structure on the one hand, and the content developed in the poem on the other, with the result that the reader feels unconsciously drawn by the language of the poem into a movement of the latter's—which, as we come to the end, is revealed to reflect the attractive force of the Platonic idea. Not only do the words suggest the upward movement, but rhythm and syntax encourage the reader who recites the poem to imitate this movement by modulation of his own voice, by musical intonation. Modulation and pitch are normally given with all speech, but the art of the poet consists in inducing us to use these devices in harmony with the content—expressively. It would be impossible for any reader to read the poem, or for any composer to put it into music, except by starting in a low register and raising steadily the pitch until finally, in the
last two lines, the Idea of Beauty is revealed to us in the Em­
pyreum—the rise of pitch becoming symbolic of the flight of the
soul toward ever higher spheres. Similarly, the sentence structure
in the first quatrain with its restlessly striving three incidental
clauses reflects the restlessness man may feel in his earthly prison,
even before the word *emprisonnée* in the main clause (l. 9)
will spell out the nature of our existence.

In the second stanza, with the two questions of benevolent
admonishment, there is already given a suggestion of liberation:
to the motif of the prison are now opposed the motifs of ‘wing
and flight’—and liberation is realized with the first là (‘there’) of
stanza 3, which everyone will read with great energy (* Là est
le bien que tout esprit désire*) as if the soul had already broken
its chains in an upward movement toward salvation, and the
sight of the goal were identical with the flight toward it. All
the restlessness of the two first stanzas is now transcended: in the
traditionally shorter second half of the sonnet there is repre­
sented the fulfilment of the desires described in the first half.
The elation that goes with libera­tion now manifests itself in
an *accelerando*, in a new restlessness, parallel to the earlier one,
yet totally different in nature: the five times repeated demonstra­tive adverbs là . . . là . . . (‘there . . . there’) are like
rungs on a foreshortened ladder that leads straight toward the
goal. The movement in these stanzas quickens and becomes
*staccato*, in breathless anticipation of that infinite and unlimited
enjoyment felt by the soul at the moment of the Epiphany of
the Idea; and with this supernatural appearance calm and
serenity at last prevail, as they are depicted in a double line
that is indeed *one* sweeping long line corresponding to the
triumph, elation, transfiguration of the soul that has reached
its goal:

*Tu y pourras reconnaître l’Idée
de la Beauté qu’en ce monde j’adore.*
L'IDEE DE LA BEAUTÉ is the apex of the poem, the zenith, as the nadir was notre vie in line 1, and also the highest point reached by the reader's voice—which, immediately after, will fall, as the soul, glancing backward on the stretch of way it has traversed, is able to discern now on this earth, ce monde, reflections or copies of the archetype of the Idea of Beauty. The final note in this cyclical poem in which indeed "the poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling doth glance from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven," is no longer one of contempt of this earth, but rather of reconciliation with our world which now appears transfigured by the poet's experience of heavenly beauty. The verb j'adore, to be sounded in a low register with calm emotion, that must somehow linger beyond the end of the poem, suggests a religious attitude, sustained, confidently established beyond all danger of the abyss.

Now all the lexicological, rhythmical, syntactical, and structural devices by which Du Bellay has succeeded in embodying an abstract philosophical idea, the attraction of man by the world of ideas, are at bottom due to that basic phenomenon inherent in human language, expressivity, but which here has been extended and intensified by the poet so as to produce in us the illusion of an 'as if'—a world in which the myths of yore come true. The desire for illusion, for surcease from the laws of causality is indeed deep-rooted in all of us: On the lowest level, in an age of mass civilization and of timidity of imagination, this desire will send many to the comic strips which give them the distinterested enjoyment of a world which, while freed from the modern implications of determinism and transfigured by the comic spirit or the spirit of adventure, can still somehow be felt to be their own world (and many will turn to the world of the Shmoos, those word-born beings that have developed out of the Yiddish word for 'profit, illicit gain' into prototypes of
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that abundance and goodness of the earth which is freely given to all men); on the highest level, the more boldly imaginative reader will enjoy Dante's crushing or elevating picture of an entirely imaginary world with a physics and a biology quite aberrant from our own, wherein it is love that moves the sun and the stars, and where the disembodied souls live in the presence of God, while miraculously retaining their earthly physical appearance and emotion.

But, we might ask, must man, in order to free himself by poetry from the prison of his actual environment, always take refuge in the poetry of past ages which necessarily embodies obsolete mythological and cosmological conceptions? Could modern man never turn to poetry that would express modern scientific truth with all its metaphysical implications, endowed with that artistic beauty and that realistic evidence which in Dante compels belief? Is the life-giving power of poetry reserved only for sublime folly, which makes real what the poet believes he knows, is it denied to the sober wisdom of truth that truly knows? The fact that there has not yet appeared a modern Dante who would make modern science sing (who would, that is, make science appear as belonging both to our own and to a transmundane world) is, however, easily enough explained: the burden of age-old myths still weighs too heavy on our words to allow them to express the mythology of our time. The greatest modern historian, Arnold Toynbee, the greatest because the most poetic, because he has sensed most keenly the necessity for modern historiography to free us from the doom of history, often has recourse to poetic myth—but his poetic myths are, as Friedrich Engel-Janosi has shown, those of the past (as when Toynbee explains the birth of new civilizations as the answers of a human community to the challenge of the Devil who has invaded the world of God). It is my personal feeling that the concepts of the
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moral world, of God and Devil, will not be abandoned altogether in the centuries to come, but will gradually be rephrased and shaded in consonance with our scientific knowledge of the physical world. After all, Dante’s poetic codification of medieval science and its synthesis with Christian theology came 1,500 years after the poetic codification by Lucretius of pagan untheological science. We should then restrain our modern impatience and wait for another 1,500 years for the poetic language to mature that would furnish adequate instruments for the expression of the scientific world-picture of Einstein and Curie and of the religious implications this may have. The mills of language grind slow, but they grind exceedingly fine.

I hope I have been able to show that language is not only a banal means of communication and self-expression, but also one of orientation in this world: a way that leads toward science and is perfected by science, and on the other hand also a means for freeing us from this world thanks to its metaphysical and poetic implications. Language, the raw material of poetry, is distinguished from the raw materials of the other arts in that it is already in itself a refined human artistic activity, an *energeia* which embodies meaning in sound produced by the most immaterial and elusive instruments of the human body (our breath playing on delicate keyboards behind the screen of our face). And this same material-immaterial activity: language, the main vehicle for communication of meaning in the business of this world, is able to transform itself into the rainbow bridge which leads mankind toward other worlds where meaning rules absolute.