

all to honest folks trying to protect themselves? If small, inexpensive guns can be as easily used to defend against crime as they can be used to commit crime, how can you justify bans on the only guns the poor can afford—the poor who enjoy less police protection than the rest of us do?

What about those “cop killer bullets” that NBC first warned the public about back in 1982? You know, those Teflon-coated slugs that can zip right through body armor. Have you ever seen a casualty list of cops laid low by bullets of this sort? Two cops, neither of whom were wearing body armor, were allegedly killed with armor-piercing bullets in 1976, and two years earlier another cop was crippled by a bullet that did penetrate his armor. That’s all I can find for the period before these bullets were banned in 1984. While the Clinton administration is pushing for a wider ban on bullets that can pierce armor, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms has recently released a report indicating that between 1985 and 1994, no bullet fired from a handgun penetrated body armor to kill a police officer.

Did NBC save civilization as we know it by warning us about these things so that they could be banned before they started further thinning the thin blue line? Hardly! Teflon-coated slugs had been around since 1966 or so, they were developed for the police, and they were not sold to the public. It’s also worth noting that practically any slug fired from a center-fire rifle of the kind commonly used by hunters will defeat police body armor. The right combination of shape, speed, and hardness of the projectile is what does the job.

Or take those terrorist-choice “plastic pistols” which Jack Anderson brought to the public’s attention back in 1986. They actually contain about a pound of steel and have become the favorites of many cops across the United States. How were the terrorist demons exorcised from these guns, and why hasn’t the press informed the public accordingly?

In his 1988 report on “assault weapons,” gun-prohibitionist Josh Sugarmann wrote:

The weapons’ menacing looks, coupled with the public’s confusion over fully automatic machine guns versus semi-automatic assault weapons—anything that looks like a machine gun is assumed to be a machine gun—can only increase

the chance of public support for restrictions on these weapons. In addition, few people can envision a practical use for these guns.

Note that Sugarmann accurately predicted public support for restrictions on “semi-automatic assault weapons” (an oxymoron; if it’s semi-automatic it’s not an “assault” anything) not because the public was informed, but because it wasn’t informed or likely to become so.

Back in May 1994, I finally became aggravated enough with NBC’s juxtapositions of machine-gun demonstrations and discussions of semi-automatics to call in a complaint. The woman I spoke to confidently told me that they were no longer doing the juxtapositions. Her confidence faded when I told her that I had just seen one. On August 15, 1994, after viewing another juxtaposition, I called in another complaint. The gentleman I spoke to said nothing in reply until I opined that it apparently did no good to call in complaints. He responded that anyone could make a mistake. When I replied that NBC had been making that same mistake for five years, he hung up. I called back immediately to get his name, and he told me that he didn’t have to take that kind of abuse and hung up again.

The next day, I called NBC again and ended up talking to David McCormick, the man in charge of broadcast standards. McCormick was quite pleasant and explained to me that efforts had been made to put a halt to the juxtapositions, but that NBC’s people, affiliates included, were so numerous and far-flung that monitoring them was difficult.

On August 25, 1994, I related my complaints about the juxtapositions and my conversations with NBC staffers to Andrew Lack, president of NBC’s News Division, via letter, with copies to the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and the general manager of NBC’s local affiliate. I have never received an acknowledgment of that letter. NBC did stop showing its misleading juxtapositions shortly before the crime bill with its ban on “semi-automatic assault weapons” was passed. However, NBC has yet to inform its viewers that for five years it led them to believe that the guns to be banned were already regulated machine guns rather than common, if exotic-looking, semi-automatics.

No wonder a recent Pew Research Center survey found that 67 percent of

the public believes that “[i]n dealing with political & social issues news organizations . . . [t]end to favor one side.”

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## LANGUAGE

### The Reality of Written Words

by John Lukacs

In the beginning was the Word. (Not the picture. Or the number.) We are now at the cusp of a movement into a new age when, for large masses of people, verbal images and verbal imagination seem gradually to be replaced by pictorial images and pictorial imagination. I shall attempt to describe one, perhaps seldom observed, aspect of verbal imagination. (“Aspect” is a word I do not like, but, in this case, it may be proper.)

Not only the sound but the visual impression of a word has a powerful, and durable, impact on our minds, indeed on our imagination. That impression, of course, is the consequence of literacy. And we must consider literacy not only a chapter in the long evolving history of human communications but also an increment of human consciousness. Still, I must begin with the sounds of words. That there is a difference between the spoken and the written word, and that in the historical evolution of mankind the first preceded the second, is obvious. (Consider only the origins of the word *language*, related in almost every language to the *tongue*. The *manufacture*—that is, the writing—of words came later.) Many of our earliest and basic words are onomatopoeic, sound-connected. This condition is more than an ancient survival or an aesthetic element. It gives an added meaning to words, a substantial dimension that numbers or scientific categories cannot offer.

There are still “progressives” who think that it is within the province of mankind to produce a universal and scientific world in which human commu-

nications will no longer be hindered by national and linguistic differences, which will give way to a universal and scientific language, with its formulas instantly recognized, accepted, and used by everyone. H<sub>2</sub>O is, of course, more scientific and more categorical than “water”; moreover, it indicates a scientifically fixed reality, with its potentiality of universality. Yet H<sub>2</sub>O has two shortcomings that are inescapable. One is that it refers to a condition which is abstract and which in reality does not exist, to a substance that consists of absolutely nothing but hydrogen and oxygen. Yet that is a desideratum (to be sure, a desideratum with all kinds of practical results) because, no matter how assiduous the process of its distillation, a 100 percent (and not a 99.9999 percent) H<sub>2</sub>O does not and cannot exist. And more important is the condition that “water,” while less precise, is more telling than H<sub>2</sub>O, because “water” (like “eau,” “acqua,” “agua,” “Wasser,” “viz”) sounds like water, while H<sub>2</sub>O does not.

More telling, because of its additional meaning. For words are not the symbols of things: They are symbols of meanings. And the meaning of meaning is that it carries our minds not only deeper, but further. Meaning is not mechanical or determined; it is spiritual and teleological. It is no longer sufficient for us to recall that the Greek word “logos” means both “word” and “reason.” We may have to understand that our recognition of the word as a symbol of meaning amounts to an enrichment of our reasoning.

Allow me to carry this argument a lit-

tle further. Yes, we think in words—but not only because of their sounds. Yes, words may carry a sense of music, which is, of course, a (if not *the*) fundamental element of poetry. But there is even more to them. When I hear (or read) “multitudinous seas incarnadine,” the grandeur of the music of those words carries with it a (perhaps smaller but still existent) sense of sight: Those oceanic words, with their wonderfully majestic swells, rise up not only in my ears but before the very eyes of my mind. Conversely, when two or three bars of music, a snatch of a musical “phrase,” keeps humming in my ears, I do *not* necessarily see their visual notation; I do not associate them with the score with its keys and staves. But when I hear a sequence of words, their written or printed shape intrudes in my mind somehow.

I have often thought that there is a profound—and sometimes mysterious—relationship not only between words and their sounds but between words and their shapes. “Egg” is not the most beautiful but perhaps the most perfect of English words, because it not only sounds like an egg but also looks like one. “Awkward,” too, sounds as well as looks awkward. This is so for certain names, too: Consider a name like Balzac. Thinking of the meaning of words and their visual shapes, we must consider that sight is the most intellectual of all of our senses; that we experience the world—and its words—not only from the outside in but from the inside out; that there is more to seeing than what meets the eye, because seeing is not only *inseparable from* but *simultaneous with* (that is, occurring together with) our imagination: not merely a reaction to stimuli but a creative act.

All of this is—or ought to be—obvious. It also relates to the condition that all human communications are necessarily imprecise and imperfect—wherein resides much of their meaning, and also their charm. The dictionary tells us that the equivalent of the English “honest” is the French “*honnête*.” But they are not equivalent. Despite their common Latin source (“*honor, honoris*”), through history their meanings have become, however slightly, different: “*Honnête homme*” is not the same as “an honest man,” and it is the very knowledge of such differences that enriches the charm of our knowing another language, of understanding another people. But let me again carry this a little further. We may listen to a foreign language that we do

not understand, and yet it may *sound* beautiful. *Looking* at an unknown language, it is not likely that we will find it beautiful. “Honest” and “*honnête*” may even sound alike, but not only are their meanings slightly different, they look different, too. (“Honest” does not only sound “honest,” it looks honest.) Another, vulgar example: Were a German, reading an English text, to pronounce “sheet” as “sh-” we would find that funny; but then the German word “*Scheiss*” is also thicker than “sh-,” not only in sound but also in sight.

I was reading an English novel in which one of the main women is “Hyacinth,” an accomplished and elegant lady. Her name does not particularly appeal to me, perhaps because it is outdated—anyhow, Hyacinth may look better than it sounds (long-legged, early-summer, a pale beauty even when *in floribus*). But what suddenly occurred to me—and I do not know why—is what would happen if Hyacinth were not only translated or pronounced but transliterated into my native Hungarian language. If a Hungarian who does not know English were to ask: What does this name mean? I would say the Hungarian word for the flower: “*Jácint*.” If he were to ask: How does this name sound? I would say “Hyacinth,” with an English pronunciation, not with an enforced Hungarian stress: This *may* strike my Hungarian conversant as a little odd, but I could assure him that it is not odd in English. But if he then were to write that pronunciation down, in Hungarian, there would be plenty of trouble. For “*háj-szint*,” in Hungarian, is a very ugly word, or compound of two words, both in their meaning and in their shape: “*háj*” meaning suet or lard, repulsive fat, and “*szint*” either “level” or the accusative of “color.” In sum: lard-colored, or something like that.

Within the constraints of our alphabet, of course. The Cyrillic alphabet transliterates. While “Churchill” has a wonderful shape in English, it looks terrible when rendered in Russian, and even worse when re-transliterated: “Tcher-Tchil,” as if it were the name of a Caucasian bandit. Terrible to me, of course. Were Russian my native language, would it look terrible to me? Probably not. I think that a Russian who does not know English would *see* (and perhaps even hear) that word differently from a Russian who knows English: To the latter, “Churchill” would still be

## LIBERAL ARTS

### LOVE IS A MANY-SPLENDORED THING

“Loving Couples Wanted To Home Test An Alternative Condom Design. Earn up to \$100 by participating in a study of a different condom design and material. Couples must be: Male partner age 18+; Female partner age 18-45; Willing to report on 8 condom uses.”

—from an advertisement in the Rice Thresher, the official student newspaper of Rice University

Churchill. But back to “Hyacinth”—what would happen if it were written in Hungarian as “Hájszint”? Written, more than spoken, with the consequence that among its readers the idea would occur that the English language, that English names, that English women are ugly.

If words were only symbols of things (this is what the computer suggests they are) their meaning would have the equivalence of facts. “Her name is Hyacinth. That is a fact.” But I, as an historian, have often shocked—without really wishing to do so—some of my students (and, alas, some of my colleagues) when I said that history does not consist of facts but of words about facts, because no “fact” has any meaning by itself. The meaning of any and every “fact” depends on our immediate association of it with other facts; moreover, its meaning also, and inevitably, depends on our statement (or call it “phrasing”) of it—whence there are statements in which the “fact” may be precise but its meaning may be untrue. And so the finding of the *mot juste* is the inevitable task not only of the poet or the novelist but of the historian, too, since his selection of every word is not only a scientific or aesthetic but also a moral choice.

Unlike his great adversary Churchill, who wrote better than he spoke, Hitler was not a master of the written word. He knew that; he said once that his *Mein Kampf* must not be read but spoken. He was right in that: There are long portions of *Mein Kampf* that are unreadable, rather than unspeakable. (But then “unspeakable” has a double meaning, too: Something that ought not be said.) On the other hand, 20th-century literature has plenty of examples of prose that are readable rather than speakable—an intellectual tendency that has, lamentably, seeped into the practices of modern or post-modern poetry, too: for poetry that is not speakable cannot be poetry at all.

Does this mean that the world is getting more and more prosaic, perhaps due to its evolving mechanization? No. If our images and our imagination are becoming more visual and less verbal, this does not mean that they are becoming less intellectual: to the contrary, since, as I wrote before, sight is the most intellectual of our senses. Of course, the increase of intellectuality is not necessarily a good thing. The sins of the spirit are worse than the sins of the flesh; a voyeur is no less of a sinner or a pervert than the men and women whose acts he watches

(or wishes to watch). There is, undoubtedly, an increasing intrusion of mind into matter—but this does not mean that words are becoming less meaningful in our lives. One of the earliest symptoms, beginning more than 100 years ago, of the popular transition from verbal to pictorial imagination was the printing of comics in the newspapers, something ready-made for *slow* readers; but most comic strips are meaningless without words in their balloons. Then came the cartoons of the *New Yorker* type, where the artwork is (or, rather, was) superior to the comics but is also dependent on the words of its captions, much more terse and condensed than those of the comics, and therefore more intellectual and suggestive. And now we have the Internet through which, on occasion, men and women fall in love by reading each others’ disembodied messages in words. In sum: The Age of the Book may be coming to its end, but the Word was not only there in the beginning; it will be there until the end.

What this means is that we may become more sensitive to the quality of words, including their visual forms, their shapes. This has nothing to do with the future of typography (though it does have something to do with the future of spelling). It goes deeper. It occurs within the conscious, not the subconscious, functioning of our minds—at a time when we must begin thinking about thinking itself. And thinking is inseparable from the words we know, including their various qualities. *Quantities* are definable and mathematically fixable. *Qualities* are not. Their sources lie deep in our minds. They are existential realities. Computers can do fabulous calculations of quantities—but not of qualities, in the sense in which Plato had recognized their existence.

The word *quality* is used by most educated people every day of their lives, yet in order that we should have this simple word Plato had to make the tremendous effort (it is one of the most exhausting which man is called on to exert) of turning a vague feeling into a clear thought. He invented the new word “*poiotes*,” “what-ness,” as we might say, or “of-what-kind-ness,” and Cicero translated it by the Latin “*qualitas*,” from “*qualis*.”

Thus wrote Owen Barfield in his *History*

in *English Words*, which I consider one of the most important works of this century. And in this inadequate attempt of an essay, I have tried to take a step further, to suggest the association of words not only with their histories and with their sounds but with their shapes, with their meaning perceived not only with our ears but also with our eyes. But perhaps Shakespeare had already known this when he wrote about imagination:

And as imagination bodies forth  
The forms of things unknown, the  
poet’s pen  
Turns them to shapes and gives to  
airy nothing  
A local habitation and a name.

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## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

### Reflections on a Texan’s Visit to Bosnia

by David Hartman

Since returning from a visit to Bosnia-Herzegovina arranged by The Rockefeller Institute to consult with the Republic of Srpska (one of Bosnia’s component states) on privatization of its socialist industries, I have given considerable thought as to what Americans (especially Texans) might learn from the recent decomposition of Yugoslavia.

Yugoslavia was created after World War I by President Woodrow Wilson and his allies at Versailles as an ill-conceived conglomeration of Balkan nations freed by the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. Serbia, which had been liberated from the Turks, had an uneasy coexistence until World War II, when it was conquered first by Nazi Germany and subsequently by Soviet-backed communists. The latter liquidated the non-communist, anti-Nazi resistance and superimposed communism. Following the