# In words we are made flesh: towards a new Cambridge philology

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The opening pages of the 'Introduction' to Raymond Williams's *Keywords* turn around two encounters, one related to speech and one related to reading. The speech encounter records a moment of shock at generational change, which found expression in Williams's formulation 'they speak a different language'. The reading encounter recalls a moment of recognition as the material basis of different languages is revealed by the entries for the words *culture* and *society* in the OED. These encounters are interesting because, while linguistics has always been willing to recognize different languages – indeed, that is its very object of study - modern linguistics has steadfastly refused to consider the possibility of different systematic systems of meaning operating within a single language (a simple impossibility within a Saussurean or Chomskyan paradigm). Linguistics has also avoided the question of how one might value such differences, if they were acknowledged. Williams's project, as crystallized in the two encounters, was thus at one level quite incomprehensible within the theoretical terms of modern linguistics.

By taking some simple examples from the history of early modern and modern English, I would like to demonstrate how both questions are nevertheless amenable to scientific investigation - albeit with the twist that, as in psychoanalysis, the ground of scientific proof in this case lies in intersubjective desire. In his 'Introduction' to *Keywords*, Williams confesses that he has no name for the study of which the book is an instance. What I wish to suggest is that an obvious name for such study is 'philology'. If Williams were to object that such a name is too concerned with etymology and the past, I would reply that the field could be distinguished as a'New Cambridge Philology', based as it is in I. A. Richards's practical criticism (in which interpretation is grounded in a collective determination of meaning).

Consider the first of my examples. Syntax is the simple word that captures those systems of a language that function at the level of word form and position to indicate such crucial features of the world as plural and singular, past and present, reality and desire. Early Modern English (roughly 1500–1700) had a distinctively different syntax to the Englishes which followed. When we consider for example Macbeth's famous cry, 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well/ It were done quickly', it is important to recognize that use of the subjunctive in the main clause - a use impossible in the language we now speak - gives a great deal more force to the two worlds Macbeth is hovering between: the world of the indicative, where he is a great warrior, an honoured thane and host to his king; and the hypothetical, subjunctive world in which he is a murderous host, a regicide and a king.

Even in this fairly neutral example it can be seen that I am already close to transgressing a founding taboo of modern linguistics, in that I am comparing the resources of Early Modern with subsequent versions of English. Early Modern English, even at the – in this context - unpromising level of syntax, could be argued to be in a variety of material ways a richer language than the one we have inherited from the eighteenth-century writers of grammar books and elocution manuals.

I am not suggesting that, when modern linguistics turned its back on questions of expressivity and value, it did not know what it was doing or that it was wrong. The primacy of Latin had been a snare for grammarians for centuries. The debate, so refreshing when, in Bengal in 1786, William Jones pronounced Sanskrit to be the finest of our father tongues had (after an extraordinary burst of scholarship which gave us Franz Bopp, Jacob Grimm, and David Friedrich Strauss's death blow to the fundamental belief that the Gospels were written down by men who knew Jesus and had observed directly the events they described) degenerated in Germany into foolish prattling about the superiority of Indo-Germanic. In fact, that prattling can now be read as a symptom of the national psychosis that affected the German people. Like all kinds of madness, it had its comic side. You have to laugh, for example, at Herr Doktor Professor Martin Heidegger's lunatic claim that only the Greek and German languages were capable of speaking the truths of philosophy. But laughter is shocked out of the system by Nazi belief in the sub-humanity of the Jews. One of the Nazis' most important pieces of scientific evidence for this claim was the linguistic history of the Jews. In a long and complex process, which includes as one of its side-effects the birth of Christianity, the Jews had abandoned their original Hebrew in favor of the language of the various linguistic communities in which they resided, the most important of these from the point of view of the history of Christianity being Greek. Much later, and as part of the transformation of medieval Europe, they developed a new language, Yiddish, a variety of Middle German. This history of a people who changed their

language while maintaining their beliefs was for the Nazis one of the major proofs that the Jews were a sub-human race. This Nazi belief in the indivisibility of word and flesh is insanity itself.

Modern linguistics wanted nothing to do with such mad theories that sprouted through the nineteenth century and grew into Nazi ideology. Moreover, linguistics had become a science. It had discovered for itself an object and a mission - a mission that was ethnographic and urgent. The urgency was most obvious in America, where the Amerindian languages were disappearing by the day. All those disappearing languages of the globe needed to be described in as much detail as possible, capturing as many of their features as our grammars would allow. The object, accordingly, was grammar itself: those fundamental operations, common to all languages, such as the distinction between nouns and verbs, the markers for cases and tenses, whatever those cases and tenses might turn out to be. To use Derrida's felicitous phrase, this science is the 'linguistics of invariance'.[1]

However, when we have granted linguistics its claims as a genuine science and repudiated utterly any claims that philology might exercise as a German science, there still remain questions of the value of languages, and of value *in* language, as well as other related questions that we will still wish to engage with scientifically.

One crucial question - the importance of which will become more evident as the twenty-first century progresses, but which Saussurean and Chomskyan linguistics cannot recognize even as a question - is how much variation is possible within a standard language. What is certain is that Early Modern English allowed for much greater degrees of variation than the language we now speak. The persistence of the subjunctive mood is one example. At a more local level, Early Modern English also allowed free variation in the forming of comparative and superlative. You and I can say 'most unkind 'or 'unkindest', but we cannot use the inflection and the intensifier together. Shakespeare could.

We are in the second scene of the third act of *Julius Caesar*. Caesar has just been assassinated, and his body lies on the stage. Brutus has spoken to the mob and convinced them it was his duty to Rome that had overpowered his love for Caesar. But Antony, standing over Caesar's body and displaying his mortal stab wounds to the mob, now reminds us - and them - of the claims of love:

> For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel: Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar lov'd him! This was the most unkindest cut of all . . .

That was not the unkindest cut, nor was it the most unkind cut, but if you think of all the unkindest cuts you can imagine this was the most unkind one of this already

[1]Jacques Derrida, 'Some Questions and Responses', in *The Linguistics of Writing*, ed. Nigel Fabb et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p.253.

frightful class of cuts. You can paraphrase this meaning in modern English but you could simply *say* it in Early Modern.

Shakespeare was writing just before a general regularising of the language that ran from syntax through experimental method to etiquette as the language was regularised. Through the seventeenth century there is a tendency to lose what little is left of residual Anglo-Saxon inflections, including the forms of the subjunctive. Prepositions, auxiliary verbs and word order become ever more important in the development of what is perhaps best technically described as an 'Anglo-Latin creole'.

Some of the syntactic changes are so fundamental as to pose crucial questions for any serious historian of the language. If we simply concentrate on lack of a subjunctive mood in English, for example, can we deduce anything fundamental about Early Modern English's tendency to find philosophical expression as an empiricism which is common to the Englishman Hobbes, the Anglo-Irish Berkeley and the Scot David Hume? Does the lack of a subjunctive mood encourage attachment to the indicative and find expression as a belief in the supremacy of present experience? If we wish seriously to entertain this thought, we must not confuse it with views which claim that language determines the world we live in, as though we were pre-programmed robots marching to the beat of a linguistic drum of metronomic stupidity. There is no question that Hobbes, Berkeley and Hume understood the semantics of the subjunctive. They all wrote Latin. However, even had they not, the concept of a subjunctive mood which predicates a more hypothetical reality than the indicative is easily taught to a pupil who has any aptness for the academic study of language. I can say that as someone who has little skill or range as a linguist.

However, when Hume pondered whether he would write in Scots, French or English, and as he balanced the claims of the cities he would be addressing – Paris, London, Edinburgh – he must have considered the resources that the three languages offered. Samuel Beckett, making a different choice - French instead of English, at a different age (late not early in life), and in a different city (Paris not Edinburgh) - is unreliably reported to have said that he wrote in French 'parce que c'est une langue appauvrie' – because it is an impoverished language. It does seem possible to me that the impoverishment of English which attracted Hume was the migration of moods from inflections to auxiliaries. A serious linguistic study would be complicated. But it is, I would guess, possible to capture systematic regularities that might have motivated Hume's choice. Or, if that seems too far-fetched, then turn the question around: Ask whether it is something in the water that makes empiricism such a feature of Anglo-Saxon philosophy,  rationalism of French, and idealism of German?

Let us consider two more brief examples of the semantics of syntax before we get

on to the hard stuff. One of the most famous scenes of Shakespeare's most famous play involves a confrontation between Hamlet and the Queen, when he spits out his desire to disown her as his mother. The opening exchange is already shocking in its verbal violence:

> Queen: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
>
> Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.
>
> Queen: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.
>
> Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue.

Leave aside the semantic dispute about fathers and tongues. Syntactically the violence of the exchange is marked by Gertrude's dropping of the intimate 'thou' for formal 'you'. Eighty years later, by the time of the Glorious Revolution, 'thou' was a poetic archaism. This distinction of pronominal address is common to European languages: *tu* and *vous* in French, *du* and *Sie* in German. Indeed the distinction is so widespread that it is generally formalised in the linguistic literature as the T/V opposition. There are Asian languages – Korean for one – which have more than two vocative pronouns, and which mark for age and status as well. English, on the other hand, is alone among major European languages in lacking any distinction of pronominal address. Such a distinction disappeared from educated speech, although not from poetry, in the space of some eighty years. Is there any kind of social or cultural deduction to be made from this surprising linguistic fact? The Quakers would certainly suggest so. As the educated class was dropping its 'thous' almost as fast as Estuary English has been adopted by the educated young over the last twenty years, the Quakers made the opposite move: they dropped formal 'you' and went around the country 'thouing' their betters to such effect that they could be found in courts of law insulting the local magistrates by addressing them with 'thous' and 'thees'. It is a pardonable exaggeration to say that everyone in England seemed set on removing distinctions of intimacy from the vocative pronoun.

Or think of the greatest of all our romances, *Pride and Prejudice*. Is it possible to imagine Elizabeth Bennet whispering 'thou' to Darcy? A class warrior like John Barrell might argue that of course she wouldn't, lest Darcy think her an untutored peasant girl. Such an objection, a feminist reader like Ashley Tauchert might reply, is to misunderstand how deep the change runs and how natural it has become. A fuller argument, which might illuminate the wider social history, would have to run the length of Williams's version of the great tradition through Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* to those much thumbed pages of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Indeed, in order to thoroughly tease out the implications of the loss of a pronominal marker for status and intimacy, one would also have to reckon the force of the poetic

archaism that allows Keats to speak so intimately to his Grecian urn. That force may be borrowed, or even stolen, from the one relationship where 'thou' has continued to be used to the present day: in conversation with God. It is normal to think of the Lutheran German states or Calvin's Geneva as the model of Protestant polities; but it is in England and English that syntactic intimacy is only possible with God.

A final, even more intriguing example of a syntactic change which takes us from form through meaning to value is the change in the system of possessive pronouns that takes place in two decades between 1590 and 1610: the twenty years during which Shakespeare dominates the stage. In 1590 there were only two possessive pronouns, 'his' and 'hers'. Only 'hers' was marked for gender. By 1610 there were three, for 'its' had joined them. This additional form meant both that 'his' was now marked as masculine and that there was a new syntactic possibility of gender-neutral possession. The increasingly sophisticated databases and search engines developed over the last twenty years now provide ways in which that change can be very closely tracked.

But enough of the sinuous verities of syntax. What of flesh and blood, sound and meaning? I simply do not have the competence to discuss the social and literary intricacies of sound, certainly the most important medium in which word and flesh interact. I can, however, indicate something of its importance with a simple example. Shakespeare's *Sonnets* now have a more assured place in the canon than they have ever enjoyed before. Booth's edition in 1977, and its subsequent host of fine competitors, intensifies our wonder at their linguistic miracles. Within the sequence, Sonnet 129 is distinguished for a number of reasons. It is one of only two poems in the sequence that does not address the lover. Both this sonnet and the other third-person sonnet, Sonnet 94, 'They that have power to hurt and will do none', form essentially negative judgements on the two different relationships that the sonnets as a series represent: the anguished, frigid longing for the sweet boy of the first 126 sonnets and the addictive physical desire for the Dark Lady of the final thirty-eight poems.

Thanks to Booth, we know that every one of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* plays with ironic distance between words of love and acts of flesh. But none starts as crudely as Sonnet 129, with its terrifying vision of the expense of spirit in a waste of shame. You need the Early Middle English glosses to read this first line as not only a description of male ejaculation but also a synecdoche that identifies the sexualised body of the woman with shame itself. For 'spirit' had a Renaissance meaning as a technical word for which our equivalent is *semen*, and 'waste' makes a pun on an Elizabethan equivalent to *cunt*. Indeed the whole octet turns, in the first word of the fifth line, on the moment of male ejaculation and the immediacy of the contempt that follows.

> Th' expense of Spirit in a waste of shame
>
> Is lust in action; and till action, lust
>
> Is perjur'd, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
>
> Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
>
> Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight.

Scansion of the fifth line and the history of the past tense in English require that we give 'despised' three syllables. The effect of this is to stress the voicing of the sibilant s as z, from despis'd to despize`d. Roland Barthes, that finest of literary critics, called this voiced sibilant z the castrating letter *par excellence*. But you do not have to cross the Channel to read and hear that the voiced sibilant accents the immediacy of that contempt. Helen Vendler reads this sonnet as an expression of generalised sexual regret,[2] which I don't think anyone would claim is an emotion specific to men. But Shakespeare is the greatest of the English poets because he is so precise; and this is a specific masculine climax of disgust and hatred for the too desirable female body. This hatred focuses on the word *lust* and its meaning for the poem offers itself as a definition of the word: 'Lust is . . .'.

Like the vast majority of the core vocabulary of English, *lust* is from the lexicon of Anglo-Saxon, the inflected Teutonic language brought to our shores in the fifth and sixth century after Christ's birth and just before Mohammed's in a huge wave of peoples which saw the German tribes sweep down from their northern forests to reach the shores of the Mediterranean. In Old English, as I must regretfully in this learned context call Anglo-Saxon, *lust* has the same meaning as it has in modern German: of pleasure, with an emphasis on physical pleasure. In England in the late sixteenth century, as Shakespeare was writing the *Sonnets* in that frenzy of composition that takes us from *Romeo and Juliet* to the exhaustion of the late tragedies, *lust* was developing a newer meaning, which would completely displace this root meaning. The new meaning, which focuses on sexual pleasure over all other physical pleasures and colours it with a guilt which is wholly lacking in its previous semantic field, draws both on the old and the new. Freud tells us that the male resentment of the female body, the resentment of the recognition of a female sexual position, is the most fundamental masculine narcissism. Nothing new there.

However, the seventeenth century in England did also see something very new: the culmination of a long historical movement which saw Europe abolish a separate female sphere and offer an emancipated woman a position of totally subordinate equality. The theorist of that position, in *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, is John Milton. His poetic gloss on both this new order of married love

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[2] HelenVendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1997), 550–54.

and the ruin of the good old cause is *Paradise Lost*. If you want a handy sociological term to capture the moment, Weber's 'Protestantism' or Norbert Elias's 'Civilising Process' are both of value. So we haven't got very far in our history of Early Modern English before we have moved from a sound change - which can be tracked as an effect of the history of the past tense of the English verb - to meanings which resonate into our contemporaneity, where lust has been reconfigured as the one physical pleasure, ever more closely identical to sex, which, in distinction from all other physical pleasures, must simply be indulged.

So far, however, the examples I have used to contrast the syntax and semantics of modern and Early Modern English do not yet really capture Williams's sense of 'they speak a different language'. While there may be practical difficulties in deciding when one form of the language gives way to another, there is at least the possibility of assigning different forms, either syntactic or semantic, to different historical periods. Indeed, the distinction between Early Modern and modern English is an indication of how easily we do that.

But there *are* some words which escape conventional semantics and which cannot simply be assigned to different periods of the language. These are words for which a definitive semantics is impossible, where speaker's identifications are indistinguishable from the word's reference and where, because every use involves deeply and unconsciously held beliefs, all speakers and writers may be assumed to be constantly tendentious. This is where people are speaking different languages using the same words. It is these words that Raymond Williams termed 'key', and a good example of one of those words is *literature*.

*A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles, Founded Mainly on the Materials Collected by the Philological Society* is one of the outstanding achievements of humanist scholarship. So it is not surprising that, when it comes to one of these key and complex words, the dictionary is always illuminating. This is the case even when - especially when - it stumbles. The good Dr Johnson, who left his money to his African servant, Francis Barber, left to the English- speaking peoples an incomparable intellectual legacy. When, at the end of the nineteenth century, Murray summoned the philologists of England and Scotland to construct the greatest dictionary the world had ever known, he commanded two intellectual tools. First, the initial generation of German philology had produced a comprehensive and accurate map of the family of Indo-European languages and their evolution through time. Second, he had Johnson's dictionary, which, as the semantics of one language by one man, will never be bettered. You have to go back to the original phoneticians, and their efforts to find scripts for sounds, to meet a linguistic achievement of this order.

Johnson's five Scottish drudges collated, but it was the great doctor who cast these collections into determinate meanings. To read his entry on almost any word is to

be instructed historically and conceptually. If we go back to our example of *literature*, however, Johnson does not have our modern meaning of the word and, without Johnson as guide, the OED, as Murray's dictionary is now universally known, plunges in the dark. Its authors are writing of a word which is bubbling with meaning and they are in the stew.

The root is the Latin word *littera*, a letter, from which we derive a whole series of words: *literal, literacy, literature*. But both *literacy* and *literature* are nineteenth-century coinages. Johnson has no word or concept for *literacy* because the concept of a technical command of writing and reading divorced from wide acquaintance with the best that had been written is unknown to him. Either you were learned or you were without letters of any kind. Indeed, this is the one sense of *literature* that Johnson does give: 'learning, skill in letters'; and he gives a few examples. This, the first sense in the OED, is however already noted as an archaic one and the force of the word is now located in a very new meaning. Whether the editors understood that a new sense of the word was emerging which gained its force because, unlike poetry, it was not articulated in a semantic field that included religion, is difficult if not impossible to tell. But there is no doubt that the word that *literature*, in a key and complex sense, replaced was *poetry*, which had previously combined this descriptive and evaluative function: *poetry* was often used to distinguish great writing from mere verse. The advantage of *literature* was twofold. On the one hand, it could include prose and particularly the novel, which had become so prominent a feature of the eighteenth-century market in books. Perhaps more importantly, *literature* held out the promise of a fully developed belief system. *Poetry* took its place alongside religion; but literature displaced it. It is this sense of *literature* which runs from Arnold to Eliot, Richards and Leavis to become a hoped-for alternative to religion.

This is the OED's attempt to capture the new meaning:

> Literary production as a whole; the body of writings produced in a particular country or period, or in the world in general. Now also, in a more restricted sense, applied to writing which has claim to consideration on the grounds of beauty of form or emotional effect.

The dictionary adds, in order to acknowledge its own hesitations about the definition offered: 'This sense is of very recent emergence in English and in French'. The examples which the OED uses for this sense are relatively unconvincing. In almost all cases they are ellipses for 'Greek literature', 'English literature', et cetera. What the dictionary definition misses is that there is a much more intimate link between 'the body of writings produced in a particular country' and 'writing which has claim to consideration on the grounds of beauty of form or emotional effect'. While it is possible to talk of 'World literature' or 'European literature', these are, unfortunately – think of Goethe and Hafez and the German

road not taken – tendentious formulations making claims that are only clearly met when one uses the national form: 'English literature', 'French literature', 'German literature'. For what is assumed in this sense is a continuity of both tradition and audience which makes of the literature a coherent whole. We are in a better position than the editors of the OED to understand this because, in this sense, English literature is now a closed series.

If the beginnings of English literature can be clearly dated, with Spenser's and Sidney's attempts in the penultimate decades of the sixteenth century to wish such a national literature into being and Shakespeare's delivery of the wished-for object, its demise finds its date in the second decade of the twentieth century. It is in that decade that the American cinema elaborated the narrative forms that have held the world in thrall ever since. Literature lost the dominance that the technology of printing had afforded it for four centuries. This change is a shorthand for a much more profound and longer cultural transformation, in which automatic knowledge of the *Authorised Version*, classical myth and the canon of English literature itself dissolved in a world of universal literacy and consumer culture in which 'literature' is simply a niche market.This moment, at which English literature became aware of itself as a medium, does of course give us the great flowering of Modernism in which Joyce, Woolf and Eliot rival the glory of the founding fathers as they bring English literature to an end and inaugurate our current era. In this current era, writing in English has rarely been more fertile, but it is impossible in either geographical or cultural terms to hold such writing to a single tradition or audience. It seems genuinely significant that the three great Modernist writers do not number an Englishman amongst them, for the English gentleman – that combination of warrior, courtier and poet for which Sidney was the exemplar for more than three centuries – had died in the trenches of the Somme and Passchendaele, where national destiny had become industrial butchery and English literature became just one more problematic term within European culture.

The first academic reaction to the death of English literature was to attempt to incubate what could no longer flourish in the inhospitable world of the twentieth century inside the tenderer environs of the universities. The most notable exemplar of this tendency was F. R. Leavis. When Leavis's formulations became sterile repetition in the sixties and seventies, the competing political and theoretical schools were all agreed on one thing: death to English literature (ideologically suspect and politically incorrect). As they attacked a corpse, the shock troops of Theory neglected to notice that the corpse was indeed a corpus: a record of a people's encounter with modernity and empire, full of contradiction and ambivalence – and often dramatised in key words. In sketching the meanings of literature – and *literature* - it might be possible to isolate three positions. The first links aesthetic merit closely to a national tradition and media ecology which places it in the past; a second, Leavisite, would discount national history and a media

ecology in favor of a primacy of aesthetic value attached to the written word; and a third, the orthodoxy of theory, would discount aesthetic value in favor of an account of literature as linked to historical forms of class oppression

It must be stressed, as Williams himself indicates, that in outlining such fields of meaning there is no simple question of correctness; and above all, no question of correctness by appeal to some authority of the past. However, the authority of the analysis (and this seems to me true of almost all Williams's examples) does take its authority from the present, both in Williams's own particular historical, social and ideological position and in the possibilities which the analysis opens up. The great benefit of the analysis of literature which I offer here (and which closely parallels Williams's) is that it enables one to speak of a dead language and a dead literature (and the problems and possibilities which that poses in terms of teaching) while celebrating the extraordinary contemporary explosion of writing in English. Let us leave aside for the moment the extraordinary richness that has produced the poetry of Derek Walcott and the novels of Doris Lessing and Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison's canonical *Beloved* and Tupac Shakur's haunting *Changes*. Let us not even – this is hard – talk of Bob Dylan, whose recent *Chronicles* confirmed him as my nomination for greatest writer of post-Second World War English, narrowly now ahead of Big Bill Burroughs. Scottish Literature has given us Alasdair Gray's monumental *Lanark* and James Kelman's *Not Not While the Giro*. And if I were to speak of my own clan there is Patrick McCabe's incomparable *The Butcher Boy*. To speak of this last would immediately launch us into film, because Neil Jordan's film adaptations of the story of Francie Brady and McCabe's later *Breakfast on Pluto* are essential to an understanding of the range and power of the novels. But we will meet film later in the argument.

All I wish to suggest for the moment is that the English language has just undergone the most significant change since, at least, the Great Vowel Shift of the fifteenth century. The dominance of a received class-based pronunciation, or Oxford English as it was in its heyday, as the absolute standard to which every class and colony aspired is dead. A dominance, which stretches from the eighteenth century to the Falklands War, is no more. Of course, the American colonies never accepted this evaluation. Nor did the Irish or the Scots. And indeed the northern working class stuck stubbornly to its voiced 'uz'. The list of exceptions should not obscure the dominance of a class pronunciation of English.

There is no Oxford English any more. James Fenton's great love lyric 'In Paris With You' and Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*, my favourite political novel, are not written in Oxford English. Well, of course, to complicate the picture, Fenton does write in Oxford English, but his is the international language of Auden, not the intonation which strove to identify class, nation and literature in an image of

empire. To analyse linguistically both Fenton's poem and McEwan's novel would require more space than this essay but, as it investigated the glories of a minor tongue of a global language, it would have to consider not only a range of international literatures but also the whole new series of media which start with film in 1895 but run through radio, television and others right up to the Internet.

What they are *not* is the imperial literature of Shakespeare, where tongue and nation are one. But that literature had been preparing itself linguistically since 1415, when an English king reported back to his Privy Council from a foreign war not in the French which had been the language of the English court since 1066 when Guillaume le Bâtard had conquered Harold and Gyrth Godwinson at Hastings, but in English. The writer of that first English dispatch was Henry Bolingbroke, Shakespeare's Hal. The victory that Henry V reported to his Privy Council was called Agincourt.

That language and its associated literature is dead. Its last great representative is the Nobel laureate of l953: Winston Churchill. When he spoke in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940, after the catastrophic fall of France, England faced a peril beside which Napoleon in the nineteenth century and Maarten Tromp in the seventeenth faded almost into insignificance. Churchill began with a precise description of the actual military situation. The difference between this report to the House of Commons and Blair's evasive lies about Iraq could not be more marked. The only bright light Churchill can discern is the evacuation of Dunkirk and the fact that Britain continues to command one of the three theatres of war: the sea. The first sentence of his conclusion draws on the resources of the Johnsonian periodic sentence and is a magnificent example of Victorian English:

> Therefore, in casting up this dread balance sheet and contemplating our dangers with a disillusioned eye, I see great reason for intense vigilance and exertion, but none whatever for panic or despair.

He then goes on to his justly famous conclusion:

> What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us.
>
> Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.

Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'

It is not to dispute the fineness of the hour, although the vision of the future into which I was born now seems over-optimistic if I may put it mildly, that one notes that the British Empire actually lasted only a further seven years, until Indian Independence gave us our midnight's children and a post-imperial literature. Churchill's language is a product of the total dominance of the printed word in the forms of the spoken language that Milton accomplished in poetry and Johnson in prose, a dominance that has evaporated almost as quickly as the empire.

To demonstrate this, I refer to three front pages from the *News of the World*, randomly selected from 9 December 1945, 9 December 1956 and 11 December 1966. The over twenty news items for l945 decline in l956 to six and in l966 to four. Along with the fall in the quantity of information, the headlines use a much simpler syntax and there is a marked simplification of vocabulary. This linguistic change has a very simple name: it is called television, and it bids fair to rival printing as a technologically conditioned transformation of a standard language. It may be that we will understand Williams's *Keywords* as belonging to a specific linguistic era dating roughly from the Great Reform Act of 1832 up until the beginning of Independent Television in l956. During that period there was a public sphere of the printed word, stretching from newspapers to books, in which political and cultural arguments were elaborated. To historicise Williams in this way may also make it clearer how to relate his work to his obvious and problematic predecessor: William Empson. It is a feature of Williams's work in general that he makes almost no specific reference to contemporaries and near contemporaries. In the 'Introduction' to *Keywords* he does, however, quote, and quote approvingly, from Empson's *The Structure of Complex Words*. There is no attempt whatever to locate the analyses of *Keywords* in terms of Empson's formulations. One of the reasons for this may be that Empson's focus is largely on poetry, and poetry from a time when poetry was a significant element within the public sphere. It may be that to elaborate Empson and Williams together one would have to take the media of language much more seriously than either of these Cambridge critics do.

If we turn to the present having noted that television may have inaugurated a new era of language, we must also note that this era has been complicated in the recent past by text message, email, Internet and other forms of digital communication. When we confront the distribution of language in the present, I think we are still poorly equipped to understand theoretically what is at stake. In particular, a kind of simple division between public (newspapers, books, parliamentary debate) and private (letters and conversation) breaks down if we consider the growing importance of language within institutions.

The terrifying spread of the ideology of Total Quality Management (TQM to its fans), for example, with its repellent corporate language, is one crucial case. I was brought up to believe that the previous generation had been willing to die to resist the evils of the corporate state. But every mission statement, with its explicit aim of compelling identification from the entire workforce, is predicated on just those evils. Kathryn Allan's paper on the word *excellence*, in CQ 49:1, concentrates on a new kind of keyword which is produced by the new verbal economies of mission statements and public relations. Allan shows how *excellence* is the most frequently occurring noun in university mission statements. The same noun is found in the repellent HEFCE-funded 'Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning', about which all one can say with certainty is that no one working there is either a gifted teacher or a learned scholar. *Excellence* occurs again in the even more repellent DfES 'Excellence in Cities' schools project, which was at the heart of the police investigation that entered the doors of Downing Street in the last days of the Blair government.

TQM loves nominalisation because thus it can believe in its Weberian bureaucratic heart that it has created things that can be counted, when in fact there are only qualities which can be appreciated. But *excellence* offers a further advantage. The Latin root for the word has a comparative meaning, which is retained in the adjective *excellent* but which disappears in the noun. What happens in this syntactic shuffle is nothing less than the disappearance of any proper discussion of the politics of education. If we reward 'excellent' pupils with resources, we will inevitably deprive others if the resources are scarce. If we allow for the fact that, other things being equal, the middle classes - and this applies to any of the developed countries - will over-perform academically, then we are stuck with wondering how to deal with the fantastic class bias of any modern education system. If we reward *excellence*, an abstract noun, and can pretend that there is no struggle for scarce resources, then we ensure, as New Labour has, that the rich are even more disproportionately rewarded. Let me take as further exemplification the stealthy plundering of resources for undergraduate teaching (to fund often worthless research) and the consequent need to take a Master's degree in order to produce an economically valuable CV. Yes, nearly 50 per cent of our population now takes undergraduate degrees. But those degrees are increasingly worthless. Only those from rich families, or with enough social nerve to borrow heavily from the bank, now certificate themselves properly.

As philologists, how can we contribute to the educational debate? The fantasy of 'speaking truth to power' is, I'm afraid, the last infirmity of noble minds. Power knows the truth, and in the era of television and think tanks doesn't care a hoot what the universities say. Indeed, Charles Clarke has made clear that New Labour intend to abolish them:

> The 'medieval concept' of the university as a community of scholars is only a

very limited justification for the state to fund the apparatus ofuniversities. It is the wider social and economic role of universities which justifies more significant state financial support.[3]

As good medievalists we know that the university is one of those institutions specific to the growth of Europe. Our modernising government is determined to destroy the proven heritage of nearly 1,000 years by setting the strategic aims of university research through the Arts and Humanities Research Council and similar mechanisms. This soft Stalinism is unapologetic about both its aims and its methods. Like all dictatorships, the first thing it must destroy is memory and the past. Mark Cousins has justly said that the only historic task which remains for the left is to save elite culture for the future.

*Elite* is one of William's keywords, but its current usage makes it resemble *excellence* as one of the crucial terms in defining New Labour's political project. It is derived, like *election*, from the Latin verb *eligere*, to choose, and its root meaning in English is a selection of the best. Its current political use derives from the sociology of Karl Mannheim and others at the London School of Economics, who developed the concept as a radical alternative to class. Given the division of labour in modern societies, there would be concentrations of power around government, around money, and around knowledge. These concentrations have been dominated by the ruling class, and were forged in the revolutions of the seventeenth century. The complexity of modern society made it impossible to abolish such concentrations of power, but the traditional ruling class must be replaced by meritocratic elites. The left argued consistently that there were more democratic possibilities, but failed through the sixties, seventies and eighties to provide successful models to make of these possibilities a reality. When New Labour decided to abandon its historic commitments to democracy and social justice to whore after Thatcher, the attack on elites was the one ideological element it retained from its days as the loony left. The real political question about elites is how they are recruited and how they function, particularly how they are held accountable. By promising a future free of elites, New Labour has constituted a modern elite, which recruits through cronyism and is completely unaccountable.

The literary equivalent of the New Labour use of *elite* is 'the canon'. There is an accepted wisdom, widely held amongst undergraduate students of English, that 'the canon' is an instrument of class domination and must be dismantled as a matter of urgency. The problem is that the canon is the most efficient search engine we possess to navigate the cyberspace of the infinite library to which more and more people will have access. Of course the canon must be interrogated, re-evaluated and understood as a historical construction. But the canon brings with it a map that allows a student to begin their own interrogation. The teacher who

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3 Charles Clarke, *Independent*, London, 17 May 2003.

abandons the canon and provides their own guide to the library leaves the student imprisoned within the teacher's choices and without the tools to begin their own investigation.

The most effective and sophisticated argument about the value of the canon is Frank Kermode's insufficiently appreciated *History and Value*. Kermode, the greatest literary critic and scholar of the post-war era, was trained in the old philology that dominated English departments, such as Kermode's Liverpool, which had started life as extensions of London University. His edition of *The Tempest* in l950 announced that the old philology, which had underpinned the great Arden editions of Shakespeare, now possessed new resources. German philology did not come to an end with the madness of Nazism. That Nazism had produced a scholarly diaspora – whose greatest names remain Benjamin and Auerbach – which brought wider cultural histories to the establishment of texts and whose members particularly concerned themselves with the afterlife ('Nachleben') of texts: the complicated processes of transmission and transformation by which a text travels out of its own time and into the present. In England the most important representative of this renewed philology was Aby Warburg and his invaluable library. The most hopeful future for literary studies I can envisage - and it is already part of the present - is the articulation of this philology of the diaspora with the new philology that Richards founded at Cambridge. *History and Value* represents Kermode's attempt, in the later stages of his career, to reflect on the complicated processes of transmission and transformation in his own lifetime. The final sentence of that book provides the most eloquent defence of the canon: 'Perhaps the best image for the way we endow with value this and not that memory is Proust's novel: out of the indeterminate, disject facts of history, a core of canonical memory; out of history, value.' Another way of putting this is to say that, in the face of Clarke and his ilk's hatred of history, all we can do as humanists is to continue to historicise.

So historicise. The reference in my title to a 'new Cambridge philology' may suggest to some a reference to Erasmus. In 1509 John Fisher, then chancellor of the university (later to be martyred by Henry VIII for his resistance to English nationalism), invited Erasmus to Cambridge to institute the teaching of Greek. Indeed, Erasmus is the first scholar that my alma mater paid to teach Greek. By all reports, however, Erasmus liked neither the climate nor the food, and I have to say I can't blame him; but he left Cambridge a great centre of Greek scholarship. By that time he was also busy preparing what is the founding text of philology: an edition of the Greek NewTestament which would apply the full resources of linguistic knowledge to produce the pure text of the Gospels. It was this text, published in 1516, that Luther used for his German translation in the subsequent decade. Erasmus had hoped that his edition would inaugurate a new era of peace, but instead he brought a sword. For the next 200 years Europe was to drench itself

in the blood of doctrinal warfare as Latin Europe splintered into the imperial nations.

I now certainly do not believe, as Erasmus certainly did, that there is one text that really does contain the truth, or one language. However, I do think there are many cultural and historical truths to be learned from developing the study of the way in which different systems of meaning operate within one linguistic community. Some such work might seem very far in subject matter from either Empson or Williams. London now has hundreds of languages. When my youngest son attended an inner-city London primary school in the mid nineties, there were a myriad of languages in the school. The novelty of this linguistic situation really hit me when, perusing a class exercise, I discovered that there were nine alphabet systems used by pupils in the school. In addition to our own Roman alphabet, there was not simply the Greek, Arabic and Chinese with which I was familiar, as well as others which I had encountered in books; there was also, for example, an Ethiopian alphabet that I had never even seen described in any of my philological or linguistic reading.

When Dante wrote the first European work of comparative linguistics, he distinguished between three languages. All three of them used *Si*, from the Latin, as the term for an emphatic 'yes'. But there is also an interrogative 'yes', which invites assent and which differed – in Italy it was *si* (and thus both grammatical functions had the same form – as in standard English's yes); in northern France it was *oui*, and in Southern France it was *oc*. One might hazard the historical linguistic guess that the reason for the development of this separate form of *yes* was the greater breakdown beyond the Alps of the inherited Latin language, and a constant need to make sure your interlocutor was following what you were saying. The linguistic babble of London has in the last twenty years led to the development of a similar form: *innit*. Indeed, in Dantean terms London could now be described as 'the land of innit'.

To pursue differences in language in this direction is to move far from Williams, although I have no doubt he would have recognized the interest of a rigorous study of how the different languages of London now divide and unite that capital. If, however - and much closer to Williams's initial project - we wish as 'new philologists' to pursue the modern history of the word *excellent* as devoutly as Erasmus searched to find the changes in syntax and alphabets which would enable him to read the word of God in its original purity, then, following a suggestion made by Joan Beal at the Sheffield 'Keywords' seminar, we have to start with that anthem of nineties youth, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Released in l989, its script seems to have been written before *Wayne's World* and it therefore takes precedence in recording what one assumes was a widespread linguistic fashion of the time amongst Californian youth: the use of the single exclamation 'excellent'

as the ultimate term of approval.

It is in some ways surprising that Williams – who, in his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, published just before *Keywords*, produced one of the most brilliant analyses of television – did not address in his methodological introduction to *Keywords* the question of media. He does, it is true, reflect on the distinction between written and spoken, but about the impact of what Walter Ong calls 'Secondary Orality' on the whole question of social meanings he has nothing to say. In that sense it is worth noting that *Keywords*, even in its l983 second edition, is a book of the fifties: a book about the language before television, a book which has more in common with Churchill than with us. However, there is little doubt that, if we wish to pursue Williams's concerns into the present, we are going to have to follow the language through some very unlikely paths – in this case from the world of the mission statement to a late eighties Hollywood film.

*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* turns on a history test. If the test is passed, world peace will ensue. The film's key, though perhaps not yet complex, word is 'excellent'. Bill and Ted are two amiable and inarticulate young dudes whose heavy metal band the Wyld Stallyns will come to a premature end if they flunk their test and Ted is sent off to military school. But they do not know that the music of the Wyld Stallyns is going to bring universal peace; and it is from that universally peaceful future that an emissary is sent back to take Bill and Ted on a journey through history to ensure that the Wyld Stallyns will make their peaceful music. The crucial linguistic moment of the film comes as the young dudes encounter their guardians from the future, and Ted tells Bill that he must make a suitable greeting. Searching desperately for a syntactic structure more appropriate to the pragmatic occasion than a simple exclamation, Bill rhetorically produces the greeting 'Be excellent to each other'. The film climaxes with Abraham Lincoln travelling through time to the high school reunion and finishing his speech with the call, 'Be excellent to each other,' to which, by that stage in the film, we know the appropriate response is: 'And party on dudes'.

Re-watching this film after sixteen years, it seems prescient about the centrality of knowledge of history to peace. The fate facing Ted is to be dispatched to military school, so we know now what the filmmakers could not have known then: that the future facing Ted is to be sent to die in Mesopotamia by evil men who would ignore every history lesson offered to them. But what connection is there between the 'excellent' of Bill and Ted, full of youthful utopian fantasies, and the 'excellence' of the mission statement? Syntax and nominalisation is one answer. But another answer probably comes from a similar phonological exercise, which follows the sounds of linguistic fashion. I am neither a phonetician nor a phonologist; but I would hazard a guess that the transition from velar to sibilant consonant gives a special pleasure which may not even be language specific.

The brief account offered here of *excellence* and *elite* differs from that of *literature* in that their explication involves an immediate appeal to the political. *Elite* and *excellent* are part of those series of managed words which now constitute the most powerful and dominant ideology the world has ever seen. How such words are to be related to the keywords of political and cultural debate of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and how they are distributed institutionally and by the media, are questions which still need to be formulated theoretically

What is certain is that the grounds for interpretation of meaning are, as Williams clearly recognized in perhaps the most moving section of his 'Introduction', not simply the present but also the future: the way in which the meanings under discussion are constelled and contradictory in the present and how they are pregnant with the future. There is, as he makes clear, no wish to 'purify the language of the tribe', no desire to be a Shelleyan legislator, for that would be to stand outside these complex processes. However, just as an analyst's interpretation finds its justification in the development of the cure, so the new philologist, anxious to provide what Williams describes as 'the extra edge of consciousness', will find his analyses justified or disconfirmed by developments in the future.

The reference to psychoanalysis is what provides the link between the most elaborated historical and social account of the language and the most personal and private level of language. Psychoanalysis is the practice which most directly attends to the exchange between word and flesh; indeed, it was Charcot's demonstration of the reality of that exchange which constituted the indispensable scientific evidence for which psychoanalysis attempts to provide an explanation. Charcot used to conduct his demonstrations in the grand amphitheatre at La Salpêtrière, Paris's teaching hospital. The most famous member of his audience was a Sigmund Freud drenched in the study of philology and physiology and high on cocaine. Psychoanalysis finds its initial question as a science in Charcot's observation, which he demonstrated on manycases, that patients suffering from hysterical paralysis were genuinely physiologically paralyzed, but that the paralysis affected not the biological but the linguistic limb. So, for example, such a patient, whose leg was paralyzed, would not suffer paralysis in those leg muscles that run up into the buttocks, despite the fact that, defined by the ordinary language sense of the word, their leg was indeed paralyzed. This is the fundamental question of psychoanalysis.

The question of how far such paralysis also affects the body politic, and what therapy or analysis, what 'edge of consciousness', might release such paralysis, is the most challenging question facing the new philologist. It is the task that Joyce explicitly set himself in *Dubliners* and it is the task that Paul Gilroy tells us we must undertake today if living after empire is to become a convivial rather than a melancholic experience. If any jibe that hysterical paralysis is old history, I ask

them to consider its contemporary transformation into anorexia nervosa, which is, as we speak, one of the most deadly diseases with which you can be diagnosed in London (with a mortality rate of 13%). What the discipline of English can contribute to such a task is the old philological effort: the establishment and evaluation of texts. How such work will feed into the future cannot be predicted or understood in advance. So it goes.