
2: *The Willing Compliance of Men's Minds*

The soul of man is incorporate in his words; As he speaks, we think he thinks.

John Donne¹

In his defence of Henry More's literary position, John Hoyles argued that the Cambridge Platonists "could not resurrect a Renaissance mystique in an age whose most positive contribution to cultural development had been the separation of word and thing."² Whilst Hoyles' assertion applies most strictly to the later years of the movement, it nonetheless places the group in the context of an opposition of *res* and *verba* which is one of the great rhetorical commonplaces of the West.³ In the seventeenth century, the opposition was of crucial importance in the development of utilitarian prose. Among many others, Bacon and Sir John Beaumont adopted the terms for the advocacy of a simpler style than the one they considered prevalent, "Consisting less in *words* and more in *things*."⁴ At mid-century the divorce between word and thing was most emphatically declared in Hobbes' distinction between words and objects of reality (that is, of substance);⁵ and in Cowley's view of Baconian philosophy.⁶ Language was

¹"A Lent Sermon Preached at White-hall, February 20, 1628", paraphrasing St. Ambrose, *De Abraham*, II.1.2.; E.M. Simpson, *The Sermons of John Donne*, VIII, p.34

²Hoyles, *The Waning of the Renaissance 1640-1740, Studies in the Thought and Poetry of Henry More, John Norris and Isaac Watts*, p.16

³For an overview of the tradition, see Howell, "Res et verba: Words and Things".

⁴Sir John Beaumont, "To His Late Majesty, Concerning the True Forme of English Poetry", l.56.

⁵Hobbes, *Leviathan or the Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*. I, iv, pp.12ff.

⁶"From Words, which are but Pictures of the Thought
(Though we our Thoughts from them perversely drew)
To Things, the Minds right Object, he it brought."

felt to have lost its power of expression in a welter of speculation, and, with extraordinary optimism, men set about to make sense of the world by applying themselves to the mastery of things. Quintilian's admonition, "let care of words be solicitude for things",⁷ though often echoed, was transformed by a new conception of language.

The Royal Society desired to return to "a primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many *things*, almost in an equal number of words",⁸ a kind of linguistic Golden Age.⁹ The assumption was that

the expressing of a thing by divers Words, does not more unfold its Nature, then when 'tis signed by one; because the use of Words is not to explain the Nature of Things, but only to stand in their stead, as Arithmetical figures are only notes of Numbers.¹⁰

In aiming at a concise perspicuity in writing, this ideal also demanded an algorithmic language, consciously manipulated by a detached observer. Its final object was the control of the external world; and an accurate and firm grasp of things by an impersonal spectator was the basis of its ideal speech.¹¹

Fundamental to both aims was the study of mathematics. Words were required to be, not expressive, but significant of things, just as mathematical symbols denote those concepts of which they are the "proper Terms"; and mathematics was the key to the mechanical world men saw

Abraham Cowley, "To the Royal Society", in Cowley, *Poems*, p.450.

⁷*Institutes*, Lib.8, Proem, 20,21.

⁸Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, pp.111-112

⁹The historical perspective is, of course, misplaced. Quintilian echoes the view of Cato the Elder: *rem tene, verba sequuntur*; a firm understanding of the "matter" will reveal itself in apt and proper expression.

¹⁰Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.61

¹¹On the interest in ideal or artificial languages, see R.F. Jones, "Science and Language in England of the Mid-Seventeenth Century"; Christensen, "John Wilkins and the Royal Society's Reform of Prose Style"; Funke, "On the Sources of John Wilkins' Philosophical Language"; DeMotte, "The Sources and Development of J. Wilkins' Philosophical Language". Smith *might* have been aware of Samuel Hartlib, *A common writing*, through John Worthington. See also Subbiondo, *John Wilkins and 17th-century British Linguistics* and Stillman, *The New Philosophy and Universal Languages in Seventeenth-century England: Bacon, Hobbes, and Wilkins*.

about them. Figures, in the rhetorical sense, were to be eschewed, as obscuring the operations of reason with the dark workings of the imagination, and to be replaced by the plainest style that might be. Where previously men studied words, they were to examine things alone, and call them by their properly defined names. Samuel Parker, for instance, firmly announced that “to Discourse ... in Metaphors and Allegories is nothing else but to sport and trifle with empty Words,”

because these Schemes do not express the Natures of things,, but only their Similitudes and Resemblances, for Metaphors are only Words, which properly signifying one Thing, are apply'd to signifie another by Reason of some Resemblance between them. When therefore any Thing is express'd by a Metaphor and Allegory, the thing it self is not expressed, but only some similitude observ'd or made by Fancy.¹²

Despite opposition, the growing movement in favour of clear and simple words, of transparent signs properly applied, aimed at the expression of a strictly philosophical truth, at the expense, if necessary of the poetic worth of world and word.

Things assumed primary importance in the scheme of values by which “this trick of Metaphors” was to be reduced to “a close, naked, natural way of speaking; positive expression; clear senses; a native easiness: bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness (as may be)”¹³ The reformed language was to be the product and tool of analysis, clear and distinct. So, it would not only be more fitted to the demonstrative arguments of natural philosophy; but would also “contribute much to the clearing of some of our Modern differences in Religion”,¹⁴ the origins of which lay in mistaking the relative importance of words and things, and consequent obscurity of thought.

Superficially, the Cambridge Platonists might seem to represent a theological movement parallel to this essentially secular impulse. They, too, castigated a merely notional or verbal knowledge, and insisted on a

¹²Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.75.

¹³Sprat, *The History of the Royal-Society of London for the Improving of Natural Knowledge*, p.113.

¹⁴Wilkins, *An Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, “Epistle Dedicatory”.

practical, not a speculative science of truth. Henry More became a member of the Royal Society, and corresponded with eminent advocates of the “new Philosophy”. Not least, he shared with Cudworth and Smith an interest in the works of Gilbert, Galileo and Harvey, as well as in mathematics and geometry. The Cambridge Platonists were well aware of the scientific developments of their time, and made their own contributions to the philosophy of space and time.¹⁵ Yet the Cambridge men retained a centre of concern which was distinct from that of the scientists. One aspect of their differences may be illustrated from their respective attitudes to mathematics. For the scientists, mathematics was a tool, the necessary key to a mechanical universe, the model in accordance with which other analytical tools were to be constructed. The Platonists, on the other hand, could not ignore the significance of mathematics “to the faculties of the mind”, and approached it “as an elementary or preparatory discipline designed to purify the mind.”¹⁶ As Whichote stressed, mathematics was an abstraction from the particular and material sphere:

in that study, Men Abstract from matter, they never concern themselves either with *meum* or *tuum*, but in all their common Enquiries they separate from matter.¹⁷

Mathematical and geometrical studies, in true Platonic and Pythagorean fashion, were a part of an inner spiritual development, as well as the foundation of scientific research.

The Cambridge Platonists were already familiar with the word/thing dichotomy in the 1640s. Ralph Cudworth elaborated on the theme before the House of Commons, observing the existence of “a *Caro* and *Spiritus*, a *Flesh* and *Spirit*, a *Bodie* and *Soul*, in all the writings of the scriptures.” He pointed out that “the *spirit* of divine Truths” cannot

express it self sufficiently in Words and Sounds, but it will best declare and speak it self in Actions: as the old manner of *writ-*

¹⁵Amongst many earlier studies, see Carre, “The New Philosophy and the Divines”; Fisch, “The Scientist as Priest”; Gregory, “Cudworth and Descartes”; Tuveson, “Space, Deity and the “Natural Sublime””; and Staudenbaur, “Galileo, Ficino and Henry More’s *Psychozoia*”.

¹⁶Brown, “The Mere Numbers of Henry More’s Cabbala”. See also A.Hall, *Henry More and the Scientific Revolution*, pp.40-47. We should not underestimate Smith’s considerable mathematical expertise.

¹⁷Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, II, p.400. cf. Worthington, *Select Discourses*, p.33.

ing among the Egyptians was, not by Words, but Things. The *Life* of divine Truths, is better expressed in Actions than in Words, because *Actions* are more *Living* things than Words; Words are nothing but the dead Resemblances and Pictures of those Truths, which *live* and *breath* in Actions.¹⁸

In the metaphor of incarnation there is allusion to the traditional theory of accommodation, but at the centre of the pattern of words and things, there is an intricate reference to *Ennead* 5.8.6, where Plotinus put his view of Egyptian hieroglyphics. They are, he said, thing-pictures, in which the ancients wisely “did not use the forms of letter which follow the order of words and propositions and imitate sounds and the enunciations of philosophical statements, but by drawing images” contrived to exhibit the absence of discursiveness in the “intelligible world”.¹⁹ In a world where non-discursive objects could by correspondence signify that other realm, it was a way of circumventing the inadequacy of language, an inadequacy of which Plotinus was constantly aware.²⁰

However, Cudworth’s attitude is based on the assumption that words themselves, as St. Augustine said, are also things: “Words and syllables which are but dead *things*, cannot possibly convey the living notions of heavenly truth to us.”²¹ Words have no magical efficacy in themselves, but by correspondence and analogy - what Samuel Parker would condemn as mere “similitude” - they can still symbolise “living notions” for the reader. The opposition between the simple meanings of *res* and *verba*, which consciously or unconsciously has entered the reader’s mind, is silently displaced by that between a living immanence and a dead representation, even while Cudworth *appears* to sanction the pattern of words and things. Just so he seemed to approve the value of things, with the Egyptians, and

¹⁸Cudworth, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at Westminster March 21, 1647*, pp.40-1. More was also concerned (like Milton) to claim that numbers have no inherent efficacy either.

¹⁹Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, p.256.

²⁰Regarding the adequacy of Plotinus’ view, see Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance*, especially his discussion of Athanasius Kircher (pp.119ff.).

²¹Cudworth, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at Westminster March 21, 1647*, p.5.(My italics.) For St. Augustine’s view, see St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, pp.8-9. cf. Fish, *Self-Consuming Artefacts: The Experience of Seventeenth Century Literature*, pp.21-43.

yet still deployed “the trick of the redoubled phrase” which is associated with the word-spinners.

Similarly, John Smith, when he argued that the true way of attaining knowledge “is not so much by *Notions* as *Actions*; as Religion it self consists no so much in *Words* and *Things*”, promptly placed the opposition within a larger context, of living, immanent truth, a powerful knowledge displaying it self in purified souls, as opposed to a dead systematic learning in which truth “too often is no so much *enshrin'd*, as *entomb'd*.”²² In doing so, he not only made characteristic use of the rhetorical device of a comparative or analogous structure for his words, but rendered the idea for the reader in the non-discursive experience of the tension between his ideas of the shrine and the tomb.

Ultimately, the terms of this context are also transcended, and a yet larger view takes their place. Smith, like the other Platonists, had read in Iamblichus of

the many preparatory Experiments used by *Pythagoras* to try his Scholars whether they were fit to receive the more sublime and sacred pieces of his Philosophy ... that he might ... work and mold the Minds of his Hearers into such a fit Temper, as that he might the better stamp the Seal of his more Divine Doctrine upon them, and that his Discourses to them ... *of things just and lovely and good*, might be written ... truly and really in the Soul, that I may use *Plato's* words in his *Phaedrus*, where he commends the Impression of Truth ... made upon mens Souls above all *outward writings*, which he therefore compares to *dead pictures* ... But it peculiarly belongs to God to write the Laws of Goodness in the Tables of mens hearts. All the outward Teachings of men are but dead things in themselves.²³

All human teaching, whether expressed through actions, like Pythagoras' “preparatory Experiments”, or through words, is dead in comparison with the living word of God. The human word was the less valued half of our first opposition, a distinction which had to be resolved. But the divine word reconciles all such terms in it self. It is both word and living action:

²²John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.3.

²³John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.315-316.

The Word that God speaks having found a way into the Soul imprints it self there as with the point of a diamond and becomes (“an intelligent word graven in the soul of the learner”),²⁴

a living source of vital knowledge. Though Pythagoras’ actions, like his speech, were intended as “a guidance of the soul” (*Phaedrus*, 271d), they were as nothing except they were enlivened, like that “true seed of a happy Immortality continually thriving and growing on to perfection”, the Gospel.²⁵

The contrasts are, of course, perfectly orthodox. They are expressions of the doctrine that, in the words of Lancelot Andrewes, “all ability cometh from God”, and “we err, if we ... think that any good thing which we enjoy cometh from any other but from God. ... As well the ability which man had by nature as our enabling in the state of grace, is from God.”²⁶ Any Anglican would have assented readily to the prayer which concludes Worthington’s preface of 1660:

That besides this *Paper-life* (which is all that Man can give to these Writings) they may have a living Form and Vital Energy within us;²⁷

and recognised the source of its impulse. For, although Smith, while declaring the inadequacy of Pythagoras, gives it a particularly Platonic cast, the doctrine has a sound Pauline foundation: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.” (2 Corinthians 3,5.) Yet, as the consummation of a gradually widening view, the doctrine illustrates the Platonists’ technique of expanding contexts, and leads the reader through literal significances to metaphorical and spiritual truths.

The extent of this divergence and expansion is apparent in Smith’s discussion of the ideal discourse, the Gospel. The Mosaic dispensation, like human writings, was “merely an *Externall* or *Dead* thing in it self, not able to beget any true Divine life in the Souls of men.” But the Gospel

²⁴John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.384; cf. *Phaedrus*, 277a, and John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.315.

²⁵John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.324.

²⁶Andrewes, *Ninety Six Sermons*, V, p.311.

²⁷John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.xxxi. The resemblance between Worthington’s phrases and Smith’s account of the gospel is significant.

is “a vital and quickning thing, able to beget a Soul and Form of Divine goodness upon the Souls of men.” The Law was unable “to hinder the violation of it self”, as a human “Inscription” is unable “to inspire life into those that read and converse with it”; the Gospel is

able to destroy the power of sin, and to introduce such a spiritual and heavenly frame of Soul into men, as whereby they might be enabled to express a chearfull compliance with the Law of God and demonstrate a true heavenly conversation and God-like life in this world.²⁸

Smith reduces the old Law written upon tablets of stone to its bare appearance, an inscription, resting its diminution upon a semantic change. He uses “external”, which has previously meant “objective rather than subjective”, and took its reference from the soul, to express a literal objectivity, with no reference outside itself. The Law is wholly external: it has no inside, and is no more than its material form, a mere thing. The Gospel, on the other hand, is raised to an immaterial plane of sheer energy, whose expression is potent, being “set forth *in living characters imprinted upon the vital powers of mens souls.*”

The Gospel is not a language which expresses the philosophical natures of things, though it has the greatest claim to truth. It is not even primarily verbal: it “does not so much consist *in Verbis* as in *in Virtute.*” The expression of the Gospel, one might say, is rather in its effects, which remains, even as they go forth, internal to a message which is

not so much a *System* and *Body* of saving Divinity, but the *Spirit* and *Vital influx* of it spreading it self over all the Powers of mens Souls, and quickning them into a Divine life: it is not so properly a Doctrine that is wrapt up in ink and paper, as it is *Vitalis Scientia*, a living impression made upon the Soul and Spirit.²⁹

The distinction is founded upon a psychological basis, not a material one: the Law is *foris scripta*, the Gospel is *intus scripta*. The one approached man’s soul only through external, and not at all of itself; the other is

²⁸ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp.311, 313, 315.

²⁹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.323.

a *Christ-like* Nature in a mans Soul, or Christ appearing in the Minds of men by the mighty power of his Divine Spirit, thereby deriving a true participation of himself to them.³⁰

In the pursuit of a distinction between an efficacious and a dead writing, a discourse of the spirit and a language of things, the original context and terms are finally discarded as wholly inadequate.

The ideal discourse, then, is a discourse only by metaphor: the most characteristic feature of a discursive thought and language, time, is essentially inapplicable.³¹ Realised in time, the Gospel is an emanation above time. The Law *was*, but the Gospel always *is*. For it is a participation in the same eternal spirit which dwelt in Christ, whereby it

derives it self in mighty Virtue and Energy through all believing Souls, shaping them more and more into a just resemblance and conformitie to him as the first Copy & Pattern: whence it is that we have so many waies of unfolding the *Union* between Christ and all believers set forth in the Gospel.³²

Set in this context, the assertion of Ficino, “Quid aliud Christus fuit nisi liber quidam moralis imo divinae Philosophiae vivens de caelo missus et divina ipsa idea virtutum humanis oculis manifesta³³” is, perhaps, true in more senses than he intended.

The movement of this thought bespeaks a subtlety of intellect and imagination which will not be satisfied with any simple dichotomy, or with any

³⁰ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.319. cf. Cudworth, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable House of Commons, at Westminster March 21, 1647*, p.47.

³¹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.131.

³² John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.340-1. The passage lends support to Saveson’s contention, on the basis of John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp.150-11, 319, 321, 340, that Smith adhered to the doctrine of hypostatic union. It is not necessary, however, to conclude with him that this is evidence of Oratorian influence (Saveson, “Differing Reactions to Descartes Among the Cambridge Platonists” , p.566). Once a Christian theologian has accepted the concept of deification, it is a conclusion which may well be reached independently. Cudworth, too, implicitly accepted the doctrine, and, if we agree that he was “the chief intellect among the Cambridge Platonists” (Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, p.219), Smith might equally have derived it from him.

³³ “What else was Christ but some living book of moral, ultimately divine Philosophy sent from heaven, and that divine archetype of virtue made manifest to human eyes” in *Opera* (Basle, 1573), I, p.25. cf. Robb, *Neoplatonism of the Italian Renaissance*, p.24.

rigid delimitation of experience such as that avowed by Samuel Parker, who considered that

if we will reflect upon our own Thoughts, we must confess that we cannot perceive the Ideas of Beings that are not placed with the Horizon of Sense.³⁴

The “objective rather than subjective, materialistic rather than psychological basis for language”³⁵ sought by the Royal Society was adequate only for the rigorous demonstration of philosophical truths about things “within the Horizon of Sense”. But the Platonists envisaged truths beyond the bounds of sense, and knowledge as something to be kindled rather than decoded, communicated rather than taught. When Benjamin Whichcote declared that “The Mind of Man is greater and larger than to be satisfied with any Thing in this World”,³⁶ he not only touched upon a constant theme of the movement, but he voiced a conviction upon which the whole motive of their prose depends.

A significant detail may illustrate the differences of intention. Samuel Parker used the metaphor of a “Horizon” to express a limit, a boundary of experience which confines our selves and the objects of our knowledge. Because we share this limitation with things, they are the objects of our proper attention, and therefore of our speech, the Epicurean source of a present satisfaction. Potentially, at least, the objective world corresponds to the capacity of the mind, in a diminished sense - deprived of

³⁴Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.85; cf. John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp.119, 394.

³⁵R.F. Jones, *Seventeenth Century Studies in the History of English Thought and Literature from Bacon to Pope*, p.150

³⁶Whichcote, *Select Sermons*, p.360. The sentiment is characteristic of the Puritan mind: “The mind of man is a vast thing, it can take in, and swallow down Heaps of Knowledge, and yet it is greedy after more; it can grasp the World in its conceptions”, said Thomas Hooker. (See Miller, *The New England Mind: The 17th Century*, p.66. The Platonists took it further, and proclaimed with Traherne that “It is of the Nobility of Man’s Soul that He is Insatiable” (Traherne, *Poems, Centuries and Three Thanksgivings*, 1.22). cf. Culverwel, *An Elegant and Learned Discourse of the Light of Nature*, p.201: “All beings they are within the souls Horizon. What can’t it grasp in its thought? what can’t it take in its eye? It can take in the several drops of Being, and it can take in much of the Ocean of Being ... For the soul of it self is more large and spacious, and scorns to be bounded with material objects, it self is a spirit, and so it delights more in spirituals. ... And then the desires of the soul how vast are these, and comprehensive? the soul can quickly open its mouth so wide, as the the whole world can’t fill it.”

its spiritual dimension. Smith, on the other hand, characteristically reversed the implications of the metaphor, exhorting his reader (or, originally, listener):

Open thy windows, thou Sluggard, and let in the beams of Divine light that are waiting upon thee till thou awake out of thy Slothfulness; then shalt thou find the shadows of the night dispell'd and scattered, and the warm beams of Light and Love enfolding of thee, which the higher they rise upon the Horizon of thy Soul, the more fully will they display their native strength and beauty upon thee.³⁷

The horizon is only a temporary (and temporal) limit to sight, a partial limit which may surely be transcended. It is not the edge of the world, of all that truly exists, but only of the world as we see it, from where we presently are. Yet, if we will, we may know also that which is beyond our immediate horizon - an obstruction of our own making, since "Every man hath a proper World, or particular Horizon to himself, enlarged or contracted according to the capacity of his mind."³⁸ For there is a sight which is the acumination of Reason, when with divine aid we "open that brighter Eye of our Understandings, that other Eye of the Soul", by which we may possess a knowledge "sweet to our tast, and pleasant to our palates, sweeter than the hony or the hony-comb."

When *Reason* is raised by the mighty force of the Divine Spirit into a converse with God, it is turn'd into *Sence*: That which before was onely *Faith* well built upon sure Principles, (for such our *Science* may be) now becomes *Vision*.³⁹

Like Smith's use of the metaphor, the Platonists' idea of experience was richer than Parker's, and hence, as Ernst Cassirer argued,

it is not the rights of experience that the Cambridge men contest, it is rather a certain philosophic narrowing of the concept of experience against which their protest is directed. What they advocate is a concept of experience which does not stand

³⁷ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.476. cf. pp.234, 383, 394.

³⁸ More, *Philosophical Poems: 1647*, p.357. cf. John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.76.

³⁹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.16.

in one-sided orientation to natural science, but which does justice to experience in all its functions, which besides scientific experience leaves a place for "spiritual" or intellectual experience.⁴⁰

Thus implicitly rejecting any Baconian disjunction between the varieties of experience, the Platonists enriched the motives of their prose accordingly. In repeated assertions of the important role of reason in religion, they demanded unequivocally that it be satisfied: for if "a man doth not admit what he receives, with a satisfaction to the Reason of his Mind; he doth not receive it as an Intelligent Agent, but he receives it as a Vessel receives Water: he is *continens* rather than *recipiens*."⁴¹ Mere dogmatism they eschewed, for the same reasons as Socrates, who

altogether shunned that Dictating and Dogmatical Way of Teaching used by the Sophisters of that Age, and chose rather an Aporetical and Obstetricious Method; because Knowledge was not to be powred into the Soul like Liquor, but rather to be invited and gently drawn forth from it; nor the Mind so much to be filled therewith from without, like a Vessel, as to be kindled and awakened.⁴²

Demonstrations which render one man's reason to another, and are only the products of discursive reason, though they command "either an answer or subjection",⁴³ are not in themselves satisfactory. Too often they "tast too sowre of the cask they come through"; and "the natural sagacity of our own Reasons" must be enriched by the "benign influence of holy and mortified affections."⁴⁴

If one is to address the whole man, and secure more than an intellectual conviction, sense and emotion must be linked with reason, as they are in Scripture.⁴⁵ Bare logical demonstration or Cartesian "clear and distinct ideas" are not in themselves adequate to the Platonists' intentions,

⁴⁰Ernst Cassirer, *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p.60.

⁴¹Whichcote, *Several Discourses*. IV, p.257. The theme is constant in his sermons.

⁴²Cudworth, *A Treatise Concerning Eternal and Immutable Morality*, p.137.

⁴³Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.256.

⁴⁴John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.12.

⁴⁵Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.303 (mispag. as 301).

which assume always that “things are better assured by concomitant Affections and by consequent Effects, than by Pretensions in the Notion ... bare Speculation, Knowledge and Notions is very little in the way of Vertue, unless it be savoury Knowledge or Knowledge with a sense.”⁴⁶ That is to say, satisfactory knowledge is to be found only when “Men hath the Gust of the thing as well as a precise separate abstract Notion of it.”⁴⁷ The Platonists never aspired to be linguistic geometers: their reason is not a purely deductive or discursive faculty, not a syllogistic or theoretical reason; and their knowledge is not a mathematical certainty, abstracted by reflection from the senses.

George Rust, the pupil of Henry More and associate of Jeremy Taylor, summarised the approach to this spiritual sensation in the sermon he preached at Taylor’s funeral.

This, therefore, is the soul’s progress from that state of purgation to illumination, and so to union. There are several faculties in the soul of man, that are conformed to several kinds of objects; and, according to that life a man is awaked into, so these faculties do exert themselves: ... there are faculties within us that are receptive of God; and when we arrive once unto a due measure of purity of spirit, the rays of heavenly light will as certainly shine into our minds, as the beams of the sun, when it rises above the horizon, do illuminate the clear and pellucid air: and from this sight and illumination, the soul proceeds to an intimate union with God, and to a taste and touch of him. This is that ... “silent touch” with God, that fills the soul with inexpressible joy and triumph.⁴⁸

Here Rust touches upon the central tenet of the Platonists’ theory of divine knowledge: the conformity of a faculty to its object, the sympathetic similitude which is the basis of both understanding and sensation.

The principle operates as the basis of their aesthetic in both the spiritual and material spheres: always “True *Delight* and *Joy* is begotten by

⁴⁶Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.304.

⁴⁷Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.304. cf. More, *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings*, p.63.

⁴⁸J. Taylor, *Works*, I, p.11. cf. John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.3.

the conjunction of some discerning Faculty with its proper Object.”⁴⁹ As both Smith and Whichcote emphasised,

There is nothing that can beget any pleasure or sweetness but in some harmonical Faculty which hath some kindred and acquaintance with it. As it is in the *Senses*, so in every other Faculty there is a *Natural kind of Science*, as whereby it can single out its own proper Object from everything else, and is better able to define it to it self then the exactest Artist in the world can; and when once it hath found it out, it presently feels it self so perfectly fitted and matched by it that it dissolves into secret joy and pleasure in the entertainment of it.⁵⁰

The fullest satisfaction arises only when all the faculties are gratified by one transcendent object in the soul, uniting them all “like so many lines meet(ing) in one and the same Centre.”⁵¹

Such a satisfaction provides the central impulse in Smith’s prose. It weds it vitally to a traditional theory of accommodation, in which all the rhetorical devices, inveighed against so persistently by the Royal Society, find their natural justification. In Smith’s view, summarised in speaking of Solomon, “whom we may not unfitly call *Sapientia Organum*”,⁵² and supported by St. Augustine,⁵³ metaphoric and parabolic language are an integral part of theological discourse. They are a necessary veil, so long as we only “see through a glass darkly.”

Whilst man inhabits the body, the incarnation of truth is one of the universal correspondences ordained by a benevolent deity, needful precisely because “*Nos non habemus aures, sicut Deus habet linguam*. If he should speak in the language of *Eternity*, who should understand him, or interpret his meaning?”⁵⁴ The metaphor of incarnation is crucial not merely because of Christ’s incarnation: the relation between figurative language and the “Divine Truth” which becomes “many times in Scripture *incarnate*”,⁵⁵ is also like that between the soul and the body. Given the

⁴⁹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.416. cf. Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.331.

⁵⁰ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.416

⁵¹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.419; cf. *ibid.*, p.413.

⁵² John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.378

⁵³ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.378

⁵⁴ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.171.

⁵⁵ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.171.

structure of God's creation, "*lumen supernum nunquam descendit sine indumento*".⁵⁶ Whether it be as the spark of a reasonable soul, or as the beams of divine truth, the *lumen supernum* descends always in a form accommodated to the earthly condition. All emanations from God, the further, so to speak, they depart from him, become more material; as the closer anything approaches to him, the more it partakes of spirit and life.⁵⁷ But they are none the less sustained and informed by the divine influence, without any suspicion of dualism.⁵⁸

The unity of Smith's literary view of the Bible, the Protean medium through which God "speaks with the Most *Idiotal*"⁵⁹ sort of men in the most *Idiotal* way", and the integral role of metaphor and parable is displayed throughout his discourse of prophecy. There he presents a highly sophisticated account of the nature of prophetic inspiration, defending the works of the prophets as at once truth and fiction.⁶⁰ In particular he emphasises the role which imagination has to play, showing that prophecy, which is "a free influx of the Divine Mind upon our Minds and Understandings" is addressed to "both the *Rational* and the *Imaginative* power."⁶¹

Under the impressions of the Divine Mind, the inspired prophet becomes the setting for, and a principal actor in an internal drama:

*the Prophetical scene or stage upon which all apparitions were made to the Prophet, was his imagination; and ... there all those things which God would have revealed unto him were acted over Symbolicallie, as in a Masque, in which divers persons are brought in. amongst which the Prophet himself has a part.*⁶²

God infuses into the prophetic imagination a symbolic vision, in which the prophet too is involved, as both spectator and participant. Like the monarch at a court masque, the prophet, still in possession of his reason, is

⁵⁶"The light from above never comes down without some covering" John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp. 172, 378.

⁵⁷John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.413.

⁵⁸It is in this context that we should set the metaphor of style as a "garment", when considering the Cambridge Platonists as writers.cf. Tuve, *Elizabethan and Metaphysical Imagery*, pp.61ff.

⁵⁹In the sense of "unlearned"; cf. Blount, *Glossographia*.

⁶⁰John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp.169ff.

⁶¹John Smith, *Select Discourses*, pp. 170, 178.

⁶²John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.222.

“the pivot on which the masque turns”, the one in whom “the final merging of symbol and reality” is (literally) achieved.⁶³ For, not only is the masque internal to him, but he is the ideal spectator of its symbolism. Under inspiration he perceives exactly that the divine vision is “a fiction within which the metaphor is true”, in a deeper sense than that applicable to any masque. His “masque world ... is a world of self-evident truths” in a richer, and a more positive way: the Truth is literally “self-evident” to him. He is more truly “at the centre of both the fictive and the actual” scene than the monarch, being himself the scene. But his characteristic excellence is that what he sees, he understands - precisely the kind of perception required by the masque which, hieroglyphically or symbolically, as Ben Jonson said, “doth or should alwayes lay hold on more remov'd mysteries.”⁶⁴

In the dual and simultaneous operation upon both faculties, while the imagination is “set forth as a stage” for the vision,

the Understanding of the Prophets were alwaies kept awake and strongly acted upon by God in the midst of these apparitions, to see the intelligible mysteries in them, and so in these Types and Shadows, which were Symbols of some spiritual things, to behold the Antitypes themselves.⁶⁵

Throughout the work, as in all his writings, Smith distinguishes between the reason and the imagination, as faculties of the prophetic mind, but in the characteristic operations of prophecy, he never divorces them. Each has its part to contribute to the divinely inspired drama of the mind, and ideally complements, not opposes the other.

Indeed, the very relation between those two faculties provides the fundamental scheme for Smith's theory of prophecy. When the imagination is “most predominant”, the “Scene becomes too turbulent” for reason “to discern the true Mystical and Anagogical sense”, which issues in a “very dark and obscure” expression. The “outward frame of things” is “set forth so potently” that the prophetic mind is “not at the same time capable of the

⁶³Stephen Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), pp.118, 32.

⁶⁴Orgel, *The Jonsonian Masque*, pp.66, 123, 125, 103. The final quotation is from the preface to Jonson's *Hymenaei*. On the Neoplatonic background of his masques, see Gordon, “The Imagery of Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* and *The Masque of Beautie*” and Gordon, “*Hymenaei*: Ben Jonson's Masque of Union”.

⁶⁵John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.179.

mystical meaning” which, though explained later, has yet “much obscurity still attending it.”⁶⁶ It is this division of the experience which redounds adversely upon its expression, not the use of too deeply metaphorical or parabolic language.

Such a prophet resembles all the Jews, upon whose faces was a veil, and who dwelt “so much in carnal converse with these Sacramental symbols which were offered to them in the reading of the Law, that they could not see through them into the thing signified thereby, and so embraced Shadows instead of Substance.”⁶⁷ The veil remains in the reading of the Old Testament, though it is, both literally and metaphorically, “done away in Christ”⁶⁸ Only the “Dispensation of grace” which has been “manifested to the world ... since our Saviours coming” makes the sacrament intelligible. For Christ is “the great Interpreter of Heaven and Master of Truth.”⁶⁹

The concept of Christ as Interpreter is associated by Basil Willey with an “unpoetic” view of Smith’s prose.⁷⁰ Smith quotes Plutarch as saying that

God hath now taken away from his Oracles Poetrie, and the variety of dialect, and circumlocution and obscurities; and hath so order them to speak to those that consult them ... in the most intelligible and perswasive language.⁷¹

But Smith himself interprets the passage in a way that allows for the survival of poetry: only “the Poetrie that was usually interlaced with Riddles and Parables was taken away in his time, and a more familiar way of Prophesie was brought in.”⁷² He implies that only the most obscure and turbulent poetry was removed, and further declares that, in any case, “the most intelligible and perswasive language” (that of the Gospel) was available “to our Saviour alone, the Dispenser of the true Law of God, inwardly

⁶⁶ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.179.

⁶⁷ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.322.

⁶⁸ 2 Corinthians 3,4).

⁶⁹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.320.

⁷⁰ Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background*, p.141.

⁷¹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.264. cf. Thomas Traherne, *The Church's Year-Book*, f.102v' (in Traherne, *The Works of Thomas Traherne IV*) and C. Marks, “Traherne’s Church Year-Book”, p.65.

⁷² John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.264.

to the Souls of Men; and therein conversing with them, not so much ... *Face to Face, as Mind to Mind.*"⁷³ This psychic communion does not belong to men, whose language is still made up of representations, symbolic and poetic, and therefore possibly sacramental.

The form of inspiration with which Smith feels the greatest sympathy is the "Hagiographical".⁷⁴ It is the "sacred Sympathy" which inspired the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, and which Proclus described as "alwaies conjoined with delightfulness and amazement, full of beautie and comeliness, concise, yet withall exceeding accurate."⁷⁵ In short, it is the inspiration of all exceptional "words of Wisdome, of Song, or Divine praise, in pure and elegant language", of an intelligible poetry.⁷⁶ This form of inspiration is associated with an ease and harmony of the mind: it is "*pacate* and *serene*, with no attendant turbulence.

For though these *Hagiographi* ... ordinarily expressed themselves in *Parables* and *Similitudes*, which is the proper work of *Phansie*; yet they seem only to have made use of such a dress of language to set off their own sense of Divine things, which in it self was more naked and simple, the more advantageously, as we see commonly in all other kind of Writings.⁷⁷

The purity and charm of their language reflects their inspiration, which is like that acquired through the "other Eye of the Soul".⁷⁸ It is accompanied "with such a *serene* Understanding ... such an Intellectual *calmness* and *serenity*"; in Jeremy Taylor's words, "with the eyes of holiness, and the intuition of gracious experiences, with a quiet Spirit and the Peace of Enjoyment."⁷⁹ Significantly, Smith appends to his description of hagiographical inspiration an allusion to Plotinus' words, translated by MacKenna as:

caught away, filled with God, he has in perfect stillness attained isolation; all the being calmed, he turns neither to this

⁷³ibid.

⁷⁴cf. Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background*, p.137.

⁷⁵John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.221.

⁷⁶John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.230.

⁷⁷John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.231.

⁷⁸John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.16.

⁷⁹John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.17; J. Taylor, *Works*, VI, p.393.

side nor that, not even inwards to himself; utterly resting he has become very rest.⁸⁰

Divine knowledge, whether it is achieved through natural light, or from direct inspiration requires “Tranquillitie” in the soul.

The deployment of parabolic and analogous language in hagiographical writings conveys just the quality of this “more naked and simple” intuition which is essential to the experience. It is a language “everywhere full of Divine sweetness matched with strength and beauty ... like *apples of gold in pictures of silver*.”⁸¹ This power it shares with all prophetic language: Smith especially insists that the words of a prophet are his own, spoken from and delivering his own experience.⁸² Without any alienation of mind, God “imprinted such a clear copy of his Truth upon them, as that it became their own Sense, being digested fully into their Understandings; so as they were able to deliver and represent it to others as truly as any can paint forth his own Thoughts.”⁸³ Like all literature, the prophetic books convey something, at least, of the writer’s mind, the structure of his experience.

If the Matter and Suubstance of things be once lively in the Mind, *verba non invita sequuntur*: And according as that *Matter* operates upon the *Mind* and *Phansie*, so will the *Phrase* and *Language* be in which it is express’d.⁸⁴

The familiar Horatian reference⁸⁵ expresses the continued relation of words to their source, the knowing mind whence they emanate.

Its implications are apparent from a consideration of the similar allusion by Montaigne, who wrote:

As for me, I am of opinion, and *Socrates* would have it so, that he who hath a cleare and lively imagination in his mind, may

⁸⁰Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.9.11., p.624.

⁸¹John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.378.

⁸²John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.274.

⁸³John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.273.

⁸⁴John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.273.

⁸⁵ *Scribendi recte sapere est principium et fons rem tibi Socraticae poterunt ostendere chartae verbaque provisim rem non invita sequuntur.*⁸⁶

easily produce and utter the same, although it be in *Berga-mask*, or *Welsh*, and if he be dumbe, by signes and tokens. verbaque praevisam rem non invita sequuntur.

When matter we fore-know

Words voluntarie flow

As one said, as poetically in his prose, *Cum res animum occupavere, verba ambiunt. When matter hath possest their minds, they hunt after words: and another: Ipsae res verba rapiunt. Things themselves will catch and carry words.*⁸⁷

The dictum suggests the mutual enlinkment of the mind, its words and “matter”. Rather than any divorce, it hints at a tie between words and things, discoverable in the self-revelation of speech, through the mind’s grasp of the “matter”.

Whichcote certainly agreed, repeating frequently that “Communication one with another, is a turning the inside outward, opening your Breasts one to another.”⁸⁸ Throughout, he maintained that “in converse there is a Communion, *per quam omnes transeunt in unitatem quandam*, whereby all pass into a kind a of Union, Communion, and mutual participation of Converse.”⁸⁹ Discourse is a manifestation, or incorporation of the soul, a revelation of the mind through the medium of language.

The theory of accommodation, and the unified experience of prophetic inspiration provided Smith with a coherent literary attitude. It was one which went beyond the Cartesian basis of “clear and distinct ideas”, and beyond the word/thing dichotomy of the Royal Society For, although to the prophets “the Matter was not ... represented alwaies by *Words*, but by *Things*”,⁹⁰ their writings spring from “their own Sense”. There is no magical expression of things spiritual or divine in words: they are of a different order, as sight is distinct from hearing. But words can still represent their author’s sense of things, and symbolise his own apprehension of divine truths.

It is precisely this, moreover, which is the source of the literary exper-

⁸⁷ Florio, *The Essayes of Michael Lord of Montaigne*, I, p.180. For Smith’s possession of a copy of Florio, see Saveson, “The Library of John Smith, the Cambridge Platonist” p.215.

⁸⁸ Whichcote, *Several Discourses*, IV, p.23. cf. pp.58, 78, etc. and *Alicibiades*, 1, 130.

⁸⁹ Whichcote, *Several Discourses* IV, p.430.

⁹⁰ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.273

ience. The reader or hearer responds to literature as to music. In the one the mind discovers its affinity to harmony, in the other its kinship with the soul incorporate in the words. So, says Smith, we often find that “any admirable Discourses, in which there is a chearful and free flowing forth of a rich Phansie in an intelligible, and yet extraordinary way, are apt to beget symbolizing qualities of Mind in a stander-by.”⁹¹ The experience of literature is firmly rooted, for Smith, in the imagination and experience of sympathy. The response of the mind to the body of words is analogous to the soul’s sympathy for the body. Words have no magic of their own, no inherent power: “no more than an Inscription ... is able to inspire life into those that read it and converse with it,”⁹² can words communicate an thing to us of themselves. They only “receive their efficacy merely from the willing compliance of mens Minds with them, so that they must be enlivened by the Subject that receives them, being *dead things* in themselves.”⁹³ Such is that “*Paper-life* (which is all that Man can give to these Writings)”⁹⁴ derived, like the life of the Animate, from the “sympathy”, here the “willing compliance”, put forth by Mind.

The two significant depreciations of the *Select Discourses* have rested upon their association with Descartes, and with the rationalist and linguistic limitations that culminated in the Royal Society’s programme for reform. Smith and his fellow Platonists are thus thought to have contributed to a decline in poetic values following the Restoration. Both the arguments implicate his work in a “non-poetic” concept of prose literature, characterised by clarity of thought and articulation, which implies a literary dualism. Definite limits are its essence. Words are signs to be decoded in order to reach a prior train of thought, or arrangement of things, which they signify. A sure knowledge of this thought, and “clear and distinct ideas” about it, more valuable than its expression, produce a clear and self-assured prose style. The appeal of literature to the senses, the intuition of a personal experience embodied in language, emotional exhortation and the traditional theory of accommodation are all degraded in this view to the status of deceptive rhetorical tricks.

John Smith’s concerns lay elsewhere. His writing does not rest on a psychology which admits of “clear and distinct ideas” as the central de-

⁹¹ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.292

⁹² John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.315

⁹³ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.315

⁹⁴ John Smith, *Select Discourses*, p.xxxi

mand of good prose style. His literary theory relies on qualities of life and sensation which call to corresponding faculties in the reader's mind as he willingly complies with their expression. Both the psychology and literary theory of the *Select Discourses* issue in a concept of sympathy which is equally inimical to the mechanism of Descartes, and the materialism of the Royal Society, and which makes them at least potentially literary in character.

One can reasonably suggest, too, that the works of the Platonists as a group were experienced as literary. Samuel Parker provides important evidence. Although appreciative of their moral teachings and practical theology, he severely censured their speculative theology, their logic and their metaphysics. The criticism culminates in an attack on Platonism for "affecting mysterious obscuritie and abstruseness, thereby to render their notions more solemn and venerable."⁹⁵ The fault, he says, goes back to the very roots of Platonism, in the use of "Emblemes, Fables, Symbols, Parables, heaps of Metaphors, Allegories, and all sorts of Mystical Representations", the evidence of "Poetick *Fancies*".⁹⁶ In effect, he goes so far as to deny Platonic works the status of philosophy, and calls them rather "Philosophical Romances".⁹⁷ Their "Metaphysical Discourses of Truth ... are nothing else but *Love-Stories*."⁹⁸ Samuel Parker, it is evident, objected to the Platonists' prose on grounds exactly opposite to those propounded by Basil Willey and J.E. Saveson, not as "unpoetic", but as too rich in poetry. Baconian as he was, Parker wished to confine the mind to philosophy, whose "Game is things, not words",⁹⁹ and to outlaw metaphor from serious discourse. Like the other Platonists, Smith wrote within an ancient tradition to which metaphor was fundamental.

⁹⁵Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.66

⁹⁶Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.67-8

⁹⁷Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.73

⁹⁸Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.74

⁹⁹Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, p.74