BEYOND WORDS*

*Code-name for a reconnaissance mission
into the borderlands of Comprehension

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> In reading with a sense for continuity, for
> contextual coherence, for wholeness, there
> comes a moment when we feel that we have
> 'understood', that we have seized on the
> right interpretation, the real meaning. The
> psychologists might say that this is a mere
> hunch, a mere intuition. But it is the main
> source of knowledge in all humanistic branches
> of learning, from theology to jurisprudence,
> from philology to the history of literature.
> It is a process that has been called 'the
> circle of understanding'.
>
> René Wellek

On a scorching summer's day, somewhere in the sands of the Sahara, an aged camel suc-
cumbs to the weight of its own arching back, crumples up, collapses in a heap and,
with no further ado, snorts out its last breath - something, one should imagine, that
is in perfect conformity with the day-to-day routine of life in this part of the
world, and yet another of a countless many that occur in more or less the same humdrum
fashion. Imagine, however, that this time the particular incident is witnessed by two
persons - one, a Western traveller, and, the other, a local Bedouin. Imagine, further,
that they both decide to make a record of the incident - the first, because he thinks
it may go down well with the prospective readers of the travelogue for the writing of
which he has signed a contract with an international publishing house, and the other,
because he deems it fit to let his tribal chieftain know forthwith about the loss to
his desert fleet. Now, I should not like to hazard a guess as to how each of them
would go about their respective tasks - among other things, never having been to the
Sahara, nor, for that matter, having ever seen a camel die. It seems, however, fairly
reasonable to speculate about certain features that would most certainly distinguish
the two reports.

To get straight to the heart of the matter, the traveller's report is

most likely to be picturesque and dramatic; the Bedouin's, by contrast, pithy and mat̲ ter-of-fact (the Arab's notorious penchant for verbal melodrama, apart). Now, this is hardly surprising, once we grant that, Who speaks What to Whom When and Where determine - to a considerable extent - How What is said is said and Why it is said in one particular way rather than another. My own description of the imaginary anecdote at the very outset of this essay may be seen as providing ample evidence in favour of the above truism.

In what follows, my aim is to explore certain of the implications of the thesis regarding the intimate connections between language and what one might, following J.R. Firth, call the 'context of situation', and show how they bear on the comprehension of written discourse.

In arguing towards my goal, I am, of course, making a crucial assumption - viz., that one can be said to have fully comprehended a piece of discourse only to the extent that one has come to appreciate the true communicative intent of the one who produced the text. Given this assumption, the rest of the reasoning is rather straightforward. If it is true that such factors in the context of situation as the identity of the speaker, that of the addressee, the time and place of utterance etc. influence the form (and, as I shall shortly argue, even the content) of the language produced, it only stands to reason that any moderate stretch of discourse must bear important clues, discernible perhaps only to the most searching eyes, that help the reader identify those factors within a decent margin of error. Also, it seems equally clear that one can grasp the communicative intent of the writer only by first coming to grips with these factors.

However, being able to isolate the various factors that together constitute the context of situation of a discourse is a mere first step towards getting at the communicative intent of the writer. The reader needs somehow to work out the rest of the way all by himself. It is my contention that the strategies that the reader brings to bear on this task are largely subjective and intuitive but amenable to principled scrutiny, being neither haphazard nor a-systematic. By way of a first approximation, I advance the following working hypotheses:

a) The communicative intent of the writer may be gleaned from a text by scrutinizing the clues that the text itself provides, in conjunction with the reader's previous familiarity with the socio-cultural context of the setting against which the text is projected.

b) The clues mentioned above fall into two neat categories: overt and covert ones.

c) Whereas the clues which are overt call for little or no background knowledge on the part of the reader, the covert clues remain, by and large, inaccessible to those who are totally alien to the socio-cultural context.

d) The clues of the covert type typically manifest themselves as certain choices (to

be discussed in detail, later on) made by the writer in phrasing what he says, the assumption here being that, given anything to say, a speaker/writer generally has at his disposal more ways than one (often, the alternatives that present themselves are legion) of saying it. The overt clues are characteristically linguistic of textual.

The distinction between overt and covert clues is a fairly transparent one. Although, for the most part, the focus of this discussion is to be centred round the covert ones, it may be worth the while to dwell on the overt clues briefly, even if the resultant picture turned out to be rather sketchy.

The best example of an overt clue to the author's innermost feeling, his overall attitude and unstated predilections that readily comes to my mind is the opening line of William Butler Yeats' well-known poem, Sailing to Byzantium - "That is no country for old men". Literary critics have often noted that a reader who fails to perceive the true import of the very first word - the demonstrative 'that' - is most certain to miss the soul of the poem, which is the uncanny emotional state of the poet. For, what distinguishes the Yeatsian treatment of the theme of escape from the all-too-familiar yearning for the world of fantasy so characteristic of Romantic poets[1] is the sense of fulfilment and ebullient complacence, as opposed to self-corrosive melancholy and silent nostalgia. It is in this connection that Yeats' use of the word 'that' where 'this' might equally well do the job (perhaps, even more appropriately, since the country in question turns out to be nothing but the work-a-day world of stark reality !) emerges as significant. The reader who persists in marvelling at the poet's preference of the word 'that' is soon led to the realization that the word holds the key to the poet's inner state of mind as well as the unusual point of vantage from which he is viewing the world. It turns out that the poet is spiritually already in Byzantium which, at least for himself, is no longer a figment of imagination, so that he is in a unique position from where he can regard the mundane world like an astronaut from a space-ship.

Deictic expressions are, no doubt, the paradigm cases of overt, linguistic clues to an author's private disposition[2]; but they are by no means the only ones. A P.R. Manager who responds to an inquiry from his boss concerning raging public opinion over an ongoing scandal involving the firm, by saying "The matter is being looked into with utmost care and urgency" is clearly leaving a psychological buffer zone between himself and what he evidently sees as a problem of someone else's making[3].

Covert clues work on an altogether different plane in that, although the loose end of the string is what the text explicitly says, one proceeds by reasoning out, not merely why the author said something in one way rather than another, but why he chose to say it at all, in the first place. Obviously, in order to arrive at adequate answers to either of these queries, one needs additional information about the context. More specifically, in order to answer the first query, one has to first decide what options there were for the author, and the second issue can only be

settled by deciding under what conditions the author could have not said what he
did say and still communicated with his readers.

I am tempted to believe that both these questions directly relate to
the assumptions and knowledge of the world that the writer and the reader share. That
this is indeed so may be verified by considering the following. Given that my next-
door neighbour, a certain Mr William Suppletoe, fell from the step-ladder while paint
ing the ceiling of his house - the third time now, since he moved in six months ago,
I may apprise someone of the incident in either of the following two ways (which by
no means exhaust the list of choices open to me):

1) Mr Suppletoe, my neighbour, had an accident this morning while painting the ceil-
   ing of his house. He slipped from the step ladder and fractured his right leg.
   This is the third time in six months that this happens.

2) Guess what? Bill has done it again!

Aside from the obvious registral distinctions, the two reports may also be distin-
guished along what one might, for want of a better term,call a 'scale of elaborate-
ness'[4]. The degree of elaborateness of a message form may be defined as the number
of information bits a speaker/writer employs in transmitting a single message[5]: the
greater the number of bits, then, the higher up the text will be on the scale of
elaborateness. Optimally, the lowest end of the scale is zero (i.e. absolute silence).
However, it simply is not possible to pre-determine an upper limit, since, in theory,
one is free to pack into one's message form as many bits of information as one might
please - one could, theoretically, go on ad infinitum, or rather, ad nauseam!

It is not difficult to see that such a scale of elaborateness is,under
normal conditions[6], a fairly accurate reflex of the background knowledge shared by
the speaker/writer and his addressee. Thus, going back to the reports (1) and (2)
above, (1), which is patently loaded with information bits and hence high up on the
scale of elaborateness, testifies to scanty common ground; (2), on the other hand,
signals the existence of an enormously large area of shared ground[7]. The paucity of
information bits in (2) is due to what has been called 'informational ellipsis'. And
ellipsis, it has been argued, "appears to be the prototype of verbal communication
under ideal conditions of complete complementarity in an intersubjectively estab-
lished,temporarily shared social world" (Rommetveit, 1974: 29). We may conclude that
the degree of elaborateness of a text is inversely proportionate to the area of shared
background between the interlocutors, or between the writer and his reader.

Nevertheless, neither the degree of elaborateness of a text, nor the
common ground between the author and the reader that it reflects tells us anything
about the author's disposition. In order to penetrate the author's mask, one needs
certain additional tools. Recent research in information theory has yielded certain
valuable concepts which may be called upon to serve this purpose.

The concept of 'negativism' is one such. Broadly stated, negativism is that inherent quality of an event that renders it newsworthy. In the words of one researcher, "negative events satisfy both human interest motivations in the audience, and, at a more abstracted level, generate socially functional news inasmuch as conflicts within society and deviation from social norms are critically relevant to the stability of the society" (Husband, 1977: 217) Thus, the birth of Sarah Jones's baby within six months from her wedding night, the sex maniac who stalks his potential victims through the surging crowds at Trafalgar Square, the Yogi who claims he has perfected the world's first supersonic flying carpet - all become newsworthy at once[8]. It may be that, the farther away the locus of an event happens to be from one's immediate sphere of relevance, the more intense the element of negativism needs to be, for the event to qualify as newsworthy. The converse too seems to be equally true. Thus, although there is nothing extraordinary about babies being born out of wedlock, the moment this happens to someone in the proverbial Jones's household, it is meaty enough for the topic-starved gossips of the neighbourhood. Negativism in its narrow sense is the driving impulse behind all gossip; viewed broadly - in the sense of, say, the occurrence of anything out of the common run, it seems perfectly legitimate to regard it as the life-force of most of what we report and comment on. It may be noted, in passing, that the so-called 'yellow journalism' is not just a matter of viewing the world through 'jaundiced eyes'; it consists in an exaggerated and malicious exploitation of what at bottom is nothing but the soul of all news reporting.

Closely allied to the concept of negativism is the notion of 'consonance', which requires that what is tacked on as new be consonant with what is already "there". In other words, the notion of consonance has to do with the attainment of a certain harmony between what the speaker/writer puts forward as new, and what the hearer/reader already knows or has so far been led to believe.

One might say that a writer is successful to the extent his writing is consonant with the expectations (including negativism) of his readers. A reader, on the other hand, is successful to the extent that he perceives what expectations on his part (whether or not he meets them) the writer intends his text to be consonant with. Furthermore, the degree to which the reader's expectations coincide with those with which the text is designed to be consonant, tells the reader where he stands vis-à-vis the writer in respect of his own system of beliefs and values, and what one might call his world-view. Needless to say, to the extent a text is dissonant with the expectations of its intended addressee, it is functionally inappropriate or, alternatively, infelicitous as a discourse.

We might test the usefulness of the two concepts by employing them with a view to interpreting the two reports (1) and (2) above. In (1), the phenomenon of negativism is revealed in the very manner of reporting the accident. In distancing himself emotionally from the incident - which he does by dint of cold and prosaic phraseology - the writer lets the unpleasant news create the desired impact on the reader all on its own. In (2), by contrast, the writer wilfully adds to the negativism

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by curtly passing on the news, as if it merited no further remark, giving thus the impression that, in a way, he rejoices in being able to report it. It is this heightened sense of negativism, coupled with the I-couldn't-be-bothered-in-the-least-about-the-bloke's-welfare attitude that makes (2) inappropriate as part of an excuse for, say, turning up late for work, whereas (1) is, by all means, admissible as groundwork for an apology of the sort.

If we set up a scale of negativism, along which to distinguish texts,(2) would occupy a position much higher than (1). On a scale of consonance, the comparative readings would depend on what factors we agree to treat as the dependent variables. If, for instance, we take the texts as occurring within felicitously conducted discourses[9], then, there will be hardly any appreciable difference in their relative ranking, since the texts have each a different addressee and it is reasonable to regard each as being consonant with the expectations of its respective addressee. If, however, the addressee is taken as the constant, the degree of consonance of the text will be substantially affected in the following manner. For the addressee of report (1), (1) will be consonant, while (2) will be dissonant. Similarly, for the addressee of report (2), (2) will be consonant, and (1) dissonant. This is so because, both over-explicitness and under-explicitness constitute dissonance.

It is worth pointing out at this stage that the analysis of a text in terms of scales such as negativism and consonance involves the use of certain strategies that are far from being anything like the mechanistic rules of sentence comprehension that scholars working in the field of psycholinguistics are wont to posit[10]. Whereas a mechanistic rule is definitive and fool-proof, the sort of strategies that we have been considering work on a hit-or-miss basis, and are therefore better classified as maxims. They operate, that is, heuristically, not algorithmically. This is inevitable because, to begin with, the scales themselves defy calibration - let alone graduation - on an objective, non-intuitive basis. Particularly unstable in this sense is the scale of negativism, since the assignment of a point on this scale to a given text would entirely depend on the reader's subjective judgement as to what constitutes negativism and to what extent the text in question manifests it--there being no normative or neutral text that carries no trace whatever of negativism[11]. Where no discrete and objective categorization is possible, mechanistic rules have no place either.

It is also important to note that the strategies under discussion are qualitatively different from the rules of inference (which may be traced back to certain fundamental laws of thought) that are oftentimes proposed in text and discourse analyses. Among other things, such rules are said to ensure textual cohesion and coherence. Thus, in the face of the sequence of sentences, 'The outbreak of malaria sent hundreds to the only hospital in town. The doctors panicked, because quinine was in short supply', it is reasonable to suppose that a competent reader - who, let us assume for the sake of argument, does not quite know what quinine is - ought to be able to infer that quinine is somehow vital to the treatment of malaria. This is so

because the collocational affinity between quinine and malaria in this sense is the key-stone that secures the structural unity of the text consisting,in this case,of the two sentences.[12] If it were not the case, the text would be a mere assemblage of mumbo-jumbo. Inference, to quote one writer, is "the process of deriving implicit facts from the initial set of explicit formulas according to some fixed rules of inference without interaction with the outside world" (my emphasis) (Bobrow, 1975: 16). It is this aspect of the inference rules that makes them different from the strategies - or, as we have agreed to call them, maxims. Rules of inference are designed to operate in vacuo; the sort of strategies mentioned in the foregoing paragraphs, by contrast,draw their very sustenance from knowledge of the outside world. Another important point of difference between the two is the following. Failure to make elementary inferences signifies total break-down in the act of comprehending a text; inability, for one reason or another, to use any of the afore-mentioned strategies only stands in the way of a fuller appreciation of the writer's communicative intent.

The discussion so far has highlighted three scales, viz., the scale of elaborateness, the scale of negativism and the scale of consonance. The first of these is a measure of the cognitive or psychological distance the writer of a text chooses to maintain in respect of his subject-matter; the second and the third point towards the writer's personal (as opposed to 'public') view of the matter, and what he expects of the reader[13], respectively. Corresponding to each of these scales there is a maxim, which the competent and rightly-equipped reader may fruitfully employ in the act of reading. We may, therefore, name the maxims after the scales.We thus have:

A) The Maxim of Elaborateness:

When a text is either over- or under-elaborate, treat it as one primarily addressed to someone other than you[14].

B) The Maxim of Negativism:

(Where the condition stipulated in (A) obtains) Expect the text to be high up on the scale of negativism.

(Where the condition stipulated in (A) does not obtain) Consider the writer as unfavourably disposed if the text is high on the scale of negativism and favourably disposed if it occupies a low point on the scale.

C) The Maxim of Consonance:

When the text strikes you as dissonant with your expectations, regard the writer as unfavourably disposed if you think that the negativism is exaggerated and favourably disposed if you find the text too low on the scale of negativism.

As may be verified, these maxims are ordered, and they lead to conclu-sions that overlap and reinforce one another. It follows that a reader who, say,finds

the negativism of a text unduly high might confirm his first impression by ascertain-
ing that the text is also dissonant with his own configuration of values,expectations,
and so forth.

In the remaining part of this essay, I wish to put the above maxims to
a full-dress test, using for the purpose authentic, rather than improvized, corpora.
I shall first present two passages, extracted from two different novels. Both novels
are set against the same socio-cultural backdrop, namely semi-urban rural India. The
passages constitute the opening paragraphs of the two works of fiction. A sympathetic
reader can easily detect the common underlying theme - the trauma of a society, cul-
turally insulated for years and thus marked by deeply entrenched beliefs, values and
social mores, that all of a sudden finds itself having to cope with the onslaught of
alien values - in one case, as the inevitable sequel to colonization by a race totally
different from every other it had ever been in contact with for centuries, and, in
the other case, triggered off by a sudden, perhaps precipitate, enthusiasm for mod-
ernization (in this case, a synonym for industrialization) coming hot on the heels of
a national rebirth in the form of independence from colonial yoke. I shall postpone
furnishing the reader with further bibliographical details, if only for the sake of
keeping up the suspense, and proceed to show how I, in my capacity as a reader born
and brought up in the same cultural milieu, am able to make certain claims about the
two authors, which I believe are likely to escape those readers whose cultural bag-
gage is different to mine.

Passage A   EXCEPT for the Marabar Caves - and they
were twenty miles off - the city of
Chandrapore presents nothing extraordi-
nary. Edged rather than washed by the
5 river Ganges, it trails for a couple of
miles along the bank, scarcely distinguish-
able from the rubbish it deposits so
freely. There are no bathing-steps on
the river front, as the Ganges happens not
10 to be holy here; indeed there is no river
front, and bazaars shut out the wide and
shifting panorama of the stream. The streets
are mean, the temples ineffective, and
though a few fine houses exist they are
15 hidden away in gardens or down alleys
whose filth deters all but the invited
guest. Chandrapore was never large or beau-
tiful, but two hundred years ago it lay on
the road between Upper India, then imperial,
20 and the sea, end the fine houses date from

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that period. The zest for decoration stopped
in the eighteenth century, nor was it ever
democratic. There is no painting and
scarcely any carving in the bazaars. The
25 very wood seems made of mud, the inhabitants
of mud moving. So abased, so monotonous
is everything that meets the eye, that
when the Ganges comes down it might be
expected to wash the excrescence back into
30 the soil. Houses do fall, people are
drowned and left rotting, but the general
outline of the town persists, swelling
here, shrinking there, like some low but
indestructible form of life.

Passage B   Chingleput ran the only sweetshop in the
village. It was static, even moribund,
during the monsoon, but in the ten months'
dry season it became mobile, trundled around
5 on the little cart Chingleput had decked
out himself. No one knew his name, least
of all Chingleput; they named him after the
town where he was born and bred and grew up,
alone, being without parents, and Chingleput
10 agreed that they should. He could do no
different. He was three at the time. What
is your name? they asked him, and when he
did not answer - he was a late developer,
did not talk till four - they called him
15 what was written up over the railway platform.
    Chingleput grew up more or less on
that platform. He sold sweets there, from
a tray balanced on his head, to the passen-
gers in the third-class carriages. The old
20 man made the sweets, overnight, in a small
cookshop in the town. Chingleput watched him,
and learned how, but the old man would not
allow him to experiment. He only wanted
someone young and sturdy to carry them
25 and sell them as quickly as possible, before

flies and ants could make fretwork of the
sweet glossy surfaces. He kept nine-tenths
of the gross profits for himself. When the
one-tenth net had added up, Chingleput left
30 the old man and the railway station and began
to trade on his own. He was a good sweetmeat
and pastry cook. The roasted nuts in his
ladus stayed crunchy to the end, and the
sugar he drew up on the ends of his tin prongs
35 came up as fine, people said, as maiden's
hair.
    But the machines were better. They spun
finer, faster, than he with his prongs. They
roasted nuts by the barrelful. The town was
40 full of machines.

From a careful reading of the passages, I am able to arrive at the
following conclusions:[15]

1) The author of Passage A is an outsider to the setting, whereas the author of pass-
   age B is an insider.

2) Passage A is addressed to an outsider, whereas Passage B is primarily meant for
   the consumption of readers who are, like its author, part of the cultural milieu
   of the scenario.

3) The attitude of the author of Passage A towards the scenario is one of little sym-
   pathy and determined intransigence, whereas the author of Passage B approaches his
   theme with an attitude of cold indifference and unquestioning acceptance of the
   reality.

    To what extent can I vouch for the soundness of these claims? The
answer is simple: I have no way of proving anything, for this is not an area where
mechanistic rules are operative. My intuition can at best be explicated in terms of
the maxims adumbrated above (And maxims, by definition, have no force of finality).
I shall do just this below, without committing myself to the further claim that, in
coming to my conclusions, I consciously and systematically reasoned, step by step,
in the same manner as I present the procedure.
    First, the comparative ranking of the two passages on the scale of
elaborateness. Passage A rates very high on the scale and hence the maxim of elabor-
ateness suggests that the writer is an outsider (Conclusion 1), addressing himself to

a target audience comprising, primarily, outsiders (Conclusion 2)[16]. Here are my reasons: For someone like me who grew up in the Indian cultural milieu, the following propositions constitute, among a host of others, the very fibres of the cultural fabric.

a) The holiness of a river is independent of the changing attributes of its physical surroundings, but is guaranteed by and enshrined in a mythology, handed down through generations.

b) A holy river is regarded as an object of veneration only at those points in its course where it bypasses a centre of pilgrimage.

c) Caves, temples and historic monuments like mausoleums, far from being 'extraordinary' ingredients of an otherwise ordinary landscape, constitute the very essence of an Indian township and a constant reminder of milleniums of history stretching through the present onto the future.

To extent, then, that Passage A highlights the obvious, it is high on the scale of elaborateness, and its author, a non-participating and unsympathetic observer to the scenario.

As for Conclusion (3), it results from the application of Maxims (B) and (C). The factors that push Passage A up high on the scale of negativism are, once again, related to the propositions that were claimed to be part and parcel of the cultural sub-conscious of an insider. Consider, for example, the observation that Chandrapore presents nothing extraordinary except for the Marabar Caves (lines 1 - 4). A parallel observation would be that the city of Edinburgh presents nothing extraordinary except for half-a-dozen lochs (one of which is believed to house a weird monster!) and, maybe, a few castles scattered here and there. A moment's reflection should suffice to convince anyone that this is essentially what one might call 'a tourist's view of things.'.For a native Scotsman, the Loch Ness Monster, Arthur's Seat, Lauriston Castle and Holyroodhouse Palace are all as Scotch as the blood that runs in his veins - indeed, as much as the bagpipe, the kilt and, no doubt, the haeggis! Consider, again, the reference to the abject monotony of the amorphous "low but indestructible form of life" (lines 33 - 34). The landscape at the North Pole might strike someone as an endless stretch of one and the same snow, but this 'someone' can certainly not be a local Eskimo, for whom there exist several finer distinctions in the snow that he daily treads on, providing, presumably, vital clues to hunting and fishing prospects as well as lurking dangers. Lawrence of Arabia,it seems not too wide of the mark to affirm, became one with the Arab cause the moment he learned to regard the endless sand-dunes of Arabia, not as a monotonous, indestructible stretch of land with a punishing climate, but as a rich, varied and awe-inspiring landscape.

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Particularly revealing in this regard is the expression "... ... and bazaars shut out the wide and shifting panorama of the stream" (lines 11 - 12). Now, a squalid, noisy oriental bazaar is understandably a nuisance to a Western tourist who has taken the trouble of coming all the way to the shanty-town just to appreciate the scenic beauty of the river that flows beyond it (cf. lines 16 - 17: "...whose filth deters all but the invited guest"). What the foreign visitor is likely to forget though is that for the local townsfolk the situation is exactly the opposite: the fact that they owe their very existence and the survival of the age-old civilization that sustains them to the river is of little immediate concern to them;   they are nevertheless aware that if it were not for the river, their market-place would probably be less swarming with people and more spacious to accommodate the ever-growing number of stalls and shacks, as well as the mountebanks, hagglers, pick-pockets, fortune-tellers, street-urchins, snake-charmers, vendors of aphrodisiacs, magic cures, trinkets and talismen, and what have you.

Passage B responds to the maxims to yield altogether different ratings It rates moderate on the scale of elaborateness. As for negativism, it is by no means exaggerated, but the passage is certainly not low on the scale either. Orphans and abandoned children may be common enough in villages like Chingleput. But this does not render the lot of these children any the less deserving of commiseration.   The unemotional and almost fatalistic resignation with which the author de-individualizes the character who is presumably going to play a key rôle in the evolution of the narrative is just one instance of the negativism which the passage presents. Both the sub-clauses of the Maxim of Negativism fail to apply here. The author is therefore neither favourably nor unfavourably disposed to his subject matter, which in turn accounts for the second half of Conclusion (3). All the same, the reality as the author depicts it, is as familiar to the intended readership as it is to the author himself. Therefore, for a reader who is an insider, there is no dissonance, or, alternatively, the text does not disappoint him as far as his expectations go.

That completes a skeletal but sufficiently illustrative analysis of the two texts. As repeatedly maintained all along, the entire approach is downright subjective, although, as I hope to have shown, a good deal of what goes on can be explicated in terms of a handful of maxims. The maxims themselves admit of further refinement and, possibly, further research might help isolate more maxims of more or less relevance to the strategies a competent reader employs in reading and comprehending a text.

The term 'comprehension' itself has been accorded a wider, more comprehensive sense than customarily done in the literature - hence the sub-title of this essay.

Before rounding off this discussion, let me reveal the bibliographical sources of the two passages: Passage A is an extract from E.M. Forster's A Passage to India and Passage B is taken from Kamala Markandaya's Two Virgins. Nearly half a cen-

tury spans the two works, a factor I have not taken into account in my analysis (I am
not sure whether the inclusion of the variable would have made any substantial dif-
ference). May it be noted that the analysis of the unstated predilections and prefer-
ences of the two authors is entirely independent of their literary merits. Samuel
Johnson's claims to the gallery of literary pundits are not in the least affected by
his proverbial prejudice against a certain nationality, nor indeed do the recent rev-
elations about Oscar Wilde's or Somerset Maugham's private lives detract from their
unquestionable status as past masters of literary art.

POST-SCRIPT

After I had written the first draft of this essay, I chanced to be
leafing through a collection of papers presented at a symposium on 'The Novel in Mod-
ern India', held during the Fifth All-India Writers' Conference at Bhubaneswar in
1959. I was particularly struck by the following observation by Prof. Bhabani
Bhattacharya, a leading literary figure and critic, in the course of his talk on Indo
Anglican literature:

> Indian writing in English has been a decisive factor in redressing the
> balance of false presentation by foreign story-tellers who, with their
> limited possibilities of true experience, have seen only the surface
> of our way of life, failing to reach deeper into our spirit (Bakhtiyar
> 1964: 45).

I take this remark as significantly reinforcing the intuition that I
have sought to 'rationalize' in the analysis of the two passages. It also lends fur-
ther support to the credo I have nurtured for some time that literary criticism at
its best has a lot to contribute to research on reading and comprehension, its most
gifted practitioners having by far out-distanced their more 'scientifically minded'
brethren when it comes to venturing into terrains where the familiar rules of explo-
ration seem inoperative. The literary critic, on his part, should only stand to gain
from a cross-fertilization of the fruits of the two fields of inquiry.

NOTES

This paper has been in the making for some three years and has, during this
period, been subjected to a succession of revisions. An early version was submitted
to the Doctoral Programme in Applied Linguistics at PUC-SP. A slightly modified ver-
sion was presented at the Encontro sobre Leitura at PUC-SP in 1982. In preparing this
final draft, I have profited from comments made along its several evolutionary stages
by friends and colleagues. In particular, I wish to put on record my thanks to Angela

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1. Recall, for instance, the following lines from John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale:

> Away, away, for I will fly to thee
> Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy
> Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

2. In a most insightful paper entitled 'Remarks on This and That', Robin Lakoff (1974) has drawn attention to what she calls 'emotional deixis', whereby a speaker reveals his emotional state through his use of deictic expressions.

3. The validity of this observation becomes intuitively clear as soon as we consider that an active sentence such as 'I will do it' is heavily weighted in favour of a promissory reading, while its passive counterpart 'It will be done' tends to be interpreted as having the illocutionary force of simple prediction. There is a straightforward explanation for this: the act of promising is above all one of assuming a certain commitment and, naturally therefore, ex hypothese puts the 'I' in the forefront - and, for this reason, passive voice, which relegates the agent to a syntactically and thematically less prominent position, is less appropriate to convey the force of promise.

4. The term 'elaborate' is due to Basil Bernstein, but its adoption here should not be viewed as implying a commitment to the broader tenets of the theory that has made its propounder one of the most controversial names in contemporary academic scene.

5. I am painfully aware of the gross limitations of this definition due to the presence of such undefined primitives as 'single message'. But this does not deter me from proceding, as my interest is in the heuristic value of the definition rather than its formal precision.

6. The phenomenon commonly referred to as 'beating about the bush' is abnormal in this sense.

7. This shared ground would incorporate not only the knowledge of such brute facts as 'Who Bill is' and 'Where he lives', but also opinions and prejudices, as, for instance, the idea that 'Bill is clumsy' or that 'His temporary absence from the neighbourhood is a good riddance'.

8. Note that 'negativism' in this sense is different, in an important respect, from

'markedness'. Promoted originally by the proponents of the so-called Prague School, notably Nikolai Trubetskoy, and more recently revived as a central criterion by the phonologists of the MIT-Harvard Paradigm, 'markedness' is restricted in its scope to cases where privative opposition holds. It cannot, in other words, handle cases where the opposition is gradual or relative to or dependent upon outside factors.

9. That is to say, such aspects of their textuality as cohesion and coherence, as well as appropriateness in context, are assumed to be given. The distinction between 'Text' and 'discourse' that I observe here is based on a paper entitled 'Directions in the teaching of discourse' by H.G. Widdowson, where the author defines the two terms - roughly - as "sentences in combination" and "the use of sentences" respectively (H.G. Widdowson, 1972: 92-93).

10. The theoretical presupposition of this approach is spelled out in the following quote: "A grammar of L is a mechanism which takes as input a dummy symbol S and provides as output an infinite set of structural descriptions of sentences in L. An ideal sentence recognizer is a mechanism which takes as input any waveform that is in fact a token of the sentence type in L and produces as output the structural description of the sentence" (J.A. Fodor, et al, 1974: 276).

11. It is arguable, though, that such registers as scientific writing constitute counter-evidence to this claim. See, however, Salmond (1982) for a demonstration that even the supposedly 'neutral' academic writing is far from being completely innocent of negativism in the sense in which we have defined it.

12. The unconvinced reader may test the validity of this claim by substituting, say, 'newsprint' for 'quinine'.

13. This is from the writer's point of view. From the reader's point of view, it would take the form of what he (the reader) expects to be told by the writer.

14. This is nothing but a logical corollary of the Gricean Maxim of Quantity (Grice, 1975) which disqualifies both prolixity and laconicity, unless otherwise justified.

15. I do not rule out the possibility of other readers - who are totally outside of the frame of reference of the two passages - coming to conclusions similar to mine. However, as the reader shall soon discover by himself, such conclusions are, more often than not, wholly impressionistic and tenuous at best, in a sense mine are not - resting as mine do on the firm ground of experience and of facts that may be retrieved from the sub-conscious to serve as vital links in the chain of reasoning.

16. It is important to recall that these ratings are, of necessity, subjective and relative. It is but natural that different readers might assign a different rating, since the sole factor here is the background knowledge that one brings to bear on the issue. Thus, the spot news item that says 'General João Figueiredo, the President of the Republic of Brazil, is to address the nation tonight from his official residence in Brasilia, the country's ultra-modern capital' is overly elaborate for a Brazilian reader, but presumably not so for a Portuguese reader, and possibly, even less so for, say, a Vietnamese reader.

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