Language and the Varieties of Critical Thinking

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Books Discussed:

Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think, by Susan Goldin-Meadow (Harvard University Press, 2003).

True to Life: Why Truth Matters, by Michael P. Lynch (MIT Press, 2004).

Four Cultures of the West, by John W. O'Malley. (Harvard University Press, 2004).

Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Paglia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems, by. By Camille Paglia (Pantheon, 2005).

Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats, by Helen Vendler (Harvard University Press, 2004).

To the far right of the altar stood an ordinary woman dressed in dark colors, poised and focused as if a dancer waiting for the music to begin. Silently, vividly, she enacted every word of the ordination liturgy in American Sign Language. I found myself ignoring the goings-on at the altar, watching her instead as I listened to familiar words that in her "reading" now seemed passionate and lyrical beyond anything I'd ever experienced in worship. Although her demeanor was closely composed, even demure, her hands called down a sacred fire. She felt it too, presiding with both grace and authority word-for-word alongside the bishop. I left that day wondering whether anyone has done a proper theological analysis of ASL religious language: I'm sure there's much we non-Deaf might learn.

Meanwhile, I set out to learn something more about the power of gesture. With an all-too-familiar ease, the right book soon appeared: Susan Goldin-Meadow's delightful *Hearing Gesture: How Our Hands Help Us Think.* From her ingenious empirical research at the University of Chicago, Goldin-Meadow concludes that speech and gestures together form a single integrated communicative system. In that system,

gestures are symbolic acts that convey meaning through imagery—including, at times, substantive information not available in the accompanying speech. The meaning of a gesture overlaps a little, or perhaps not at all, with the meaning conveyed in words: speech without gesture is impoverished, just as email is impoverished in comparison to conversation.

I was particularly intrigued by her research demonstrating that gesturing reduces the "cognitive load" imposed by an effort to communicate. I've seen bits and pieces of this research reported in *Science News* over the last several years: if you inhibit the ability to gesture, for instance by holding down people's hands with long-sleeved, lead-weighted gloves, then they have greater difficulty with a whole array of language-generation tasks.

That's a finding of considerable significance for writers, because keyboards keep our fingers unnaturally occupied. We can't gesture and type simultaneously, although of course writing by hand leaves the other hand almost completely free. Under the pressure of this research, I've become disconcertingly aware of how often I gesture in the little pauses that inevitably disrupt keyboarding. I'd always thought I was simply stopping to think. But I'm not just thinking: I'm wiggling my fingers inexplicably in a complex, pointed dance. I'd never noticed that before. My fingers are trying to wave their arms.

But at some level, we are all aware of this. We gesture even while speaking on the phone. We understand how much easier it can be to formulate what we are thinking by talking to someone rather than by writing in solitude. It's easier because in conversation we gesture. Even people blind from birth, speaking to another person they know is blind, nonetheless gesture. One of Goldin-Meadow's subjects, born without arms, nonetheless experiences her phantom-limb hands gesturing as she speaks.

No wonder, then, that "blocked" writers may need nothing more than a sympathetic listener willing to take notes while they talk. I spent hours doing so for seminarians when I served as Writer in Residence at Seabury, just as I did for English majors and dissertation-writers at Northwestern University decades ago. Goldin-Meadow's work demonstrates that composing while keyboarding is expensive multi-tasking, especially

when there's something complex to convey. Unless, of course, you keep stopping to wiggle your fingers weirdly—or, if working by hand, to wave your pen to and fro.

There are ample implications for preaching, or so it seems to me. When I preach, I find it tempting to grasp the pulpit firmly with both hands. It steadies my nerves, it holds my notes in focus, it keeps me in the vocal range of the pulpit mike. Thus anchored, however, I'm much less likely to gesture. But speech without gesture is merely reading aloud, whether from a written script or a nearly-memorized one. Only as I start to improvise from my notes, based on some responsive face in the congregation, do I start to gesture normally. I've long been aware of how reliably my little improvs will engage more of the attention of those listening, but I'd never thought to attribute that heightened energy to gesture. I need a clearer sense of just how eloquent gestures can be, so I've picked up an ASL dictionary. I'm tempted to take a course in ASL—or at least to script in some gestures early on so as to loosen my grip on the pulpit.

Implications for presiding at table are just as rich. Gestures there are often codified, it seems to me—if not stilted and mechanical. Goldin-Meadow's investigations should convince many to stop standing stock-still, flatly reading from a gilt-edged book. *Hearing Gesture* belongs on the "supplemental readings" list for courses in liturgy no less than courses in preaching.

Just as *Hearing Gesture* opened out my awareness of familiar experience, so also John O'Malley's *Four Cultures of the West* has taught me to see again and to rethink in new ways what I'd thought were familiar elements in Western cultural history.

O'Malley, professor of Church History at the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, contends that it is both useful and illuminating to consider how deeply Western history has been shaped by four competing styles of discourse. He explains how these competing cultures developed, how each was shaped by ancient texts, and how they clashed historically in the sixteenth century. *Four Cultures of the West* is a great read for any of us; and I can't imagine a more useful, more engaging book for seminarians who lack a solid background in Western cultural history.

Culture One, as O'Malley calls it, is the prophetic. Its mode of discourse is the imperative—Repent!—and the correlative demand for conversion, reform, and utter

commitment. No wonder, then, that movements in this style prefer slogans to arguments, rallies to negotiations. In explicating this culture, he focuses upon the Gregorian controversy over lay investiture. He doesn't talk about advertising, but surely it belongs here too.

Culture Two is academic and professional; its style is "analytical, questing and questioning, restless and relentless . . . critical of every wisdom . . . insatiably eager to ask the further question . . . ever ready to propose yet another perspective" (pp. 11-12). O'Malley rightly focuses on the recovery of Aristotle, the rise of the university, and conflict between the university and the humanist secondary school.

But in reading along, I found myself engaged instead with rethinking the familiar conflict between President Bush's confident slogans and his critics' painstaking analyses of evidence and warrants for one or another foreign policy decision in the last few years. When one of these critics gets too much publicity, Bush responds with yet another photo-op standing before a banner with a catchy phrase. Two cultures collide.

Culture Three, O'Malley explains, is the humanist; it was profoundly shaped by the recovery of ancient literature and rhetoric. Great literature, he explains, "reflects the complexities of life and the murky darkness in which our choices must sometimes be made" (p. 16). Given this take on the human condition, the humanist argues about probabilities, not certainties. The goal of inquiry is the likely solution, not the absolute truth. The humanist works to develop consensus, to define the common ground, or to attain astute compromise—not merely to win the argument or to prove the point.

Part of our political troubles at the moment, I suspect, is that most legislators are attorneys trained in the agonistic methods of culture two. So are most academic theologians, who train the priests who become the bishops who concern themselves with orthodoxy—with correct belief. What's needed both in church and state, I suggest, are astute humanist compromises that acknowledge the inherently, inescapably murky paradoxes shaping human life—compromises that seek honestly to serve the common good.

Culture Four is art, architecture, music, and performance—and hence liturgy. Christianity emerged into a Greco-Roman cultural matrix that was intensely visual,

O'Malley explains, in part because society was both poly-lingual and widely illiterate. As a result, Christianity had to convey its meanings in some measure through images and performances, processions and spectacles. Liturgy became increasingly central to this endeavor. But the other three cultures contend for control of the pulpit: culture one wants the "bully pulpit," demanding moral change. Culture two wants worship to enclose a classroom for instruction in orthodoxy. Culture three wants preachers to engage the social and political issues of the day.

No mere outline like this captures the quality of O'Malley's prose, which is richly melodic and elegantly precise. He wears great learning lightly and, like the best of teachers, he carries us along by his quiet delight in his material. I first read this book about a year ago on the advice of a friend, not thinking about this column at all. Since then I've been quietly astounded by how often his analysis has come to mind, adeptly explicating some conflict among thinkers whether ancient or contemporary.

And on second or third reading, I realized something else: O'Malley was a teacher of mine. In fact, I heard what must have been the earliest germ of this book in 1970 or so, in an undergraduate history course on the Renaissance. O'Malley would lecture entirely without notes, pacing back and forth across the front of the room with his hands clasped behind his back, staring intently at the floor, painstakingly explaining how the recovery of ancient texts reshaped Western culture. He looked up only momentarily, at the left to glance out the window, and on the right to glance at his students who, heads bent, were diligently transcribing his every word.

But I was only auditing. Rather than take notes, I listened closely, trying to understand and assimilate the vision, not the details. As a result, I alone looked back at him when he looked up from the floor. That distracted him terribly, I discovered: one skinny green-eyed girl on the far left, third row back, absolutely transfixed by how he could tell a story. I learned to drop my eyes as he pivoted into each turn. *Four Cultures of the West* demonstrates well the narrative skills that made him once such a popular teacher, despite his infamously detailed examinations.

Yet another angle on the potential complexity of language and thought is provided by Helen Vendler in *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats.* Vendler is second

to none in close readings of poetry: the *Chronicle of Higher Education* rightly described her as the "grand dame of poetry criticism." In *Poets Thinking*, which began as the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, Vendler laments the ways in which critical theory now ignores the lyric tradition in favor of longer prose—often nonfiction prose—more amenable to its own preoccupation with philosophical, social, and economic ideas. She contends, then, that the great lyricists have something intelligent to say. They are using the varied and complex resources of poetic language to re-enact or to convey the processes of their own minds grappling with experience. Poems portray thoughts in their unfolding, or thinking as an immediate human experience, "replicating in abstract symbolic structures the structure of emotional experience" (p. 119).

But as always, such theoretical concerns occupy no more than a few paragraphs here and there: center stage is given to close analysis of how poems deploy the specifically poetic techniques of imagery, word-play, line-length, prosody, and so forth. This is gloriously readable stuff: her chapters are short; the poems examined are quite famous and always cited in full. Furthermore, Vendler is a witty and elegant stylist herself. This, for instance, from her account of how Pope both mimics and mocks philosophic discourse in his "Essay on Man": "Living thought has to be quick and mobile, ever darting to extremes and polarities, but resting in none of them. Living thought must, like ordinary thought, characterize, allegorize, reason, denominate, and analogize—but it must also jump up and down, over and under, left and right; it must swell and contract, leap from register to register, joke and feel pangs. Above all, it must advance too swiftly for instant intelligibility: the reader must hang on for the ride, bouncing to the next hurdle hardly having recovered his seat from the last. It is as if the poet wants to say, 'This is what thinking really is like: have you ever known it?'" (p. 27). In comparison to Pope, the plodding philosophers plod indeed.

For Whitman, Vendler analyzes the "reprise" structure in poems such as like "The Sparkles from the Wheel" and "Come Up from the Fields Father." In such poems, Whitman first observes something, then steps back and looks at it again, far more closely. Numerous small shifts in his descriptive language in this "second look" give us not simply the scene but also Whitman's understanding of its significance—and hence, all told, a portrait of how perception progresses from initial physical notice to humane

understanding. Her analysis of Dickinson covers a generous handful of poems, providing what seems to me the very best short introduction to Dickinson that I've ever read. She shows how Dickinson devises variations of the step-by-step chronological sequence so as to convey how the mind registers catastrophe. Dickinson's experiments in how emotions distort sequence-perception serve in the end to portray time itself in a "topological and malleable fashion" (p. 91).

Vendler's analyses of Yeats focus on progressions of images in "Among School Children" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Vendler describes "Among School Children" as a brilliant meditation on life as loss, betrayal, failure, and decay. The poem defines selfhood not as the sum of (frail, evanescent) achievements but rather as the capacity of "inventive responses to the unchosen events of our fate" (p. 106). "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is one instance of the unchosen: Yeats describes his own habitual poetic sources failing him, but in that failure he finds ample new sources in what the poem calls "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Vendler's remarkable skills as a reader always send me back to whatever else I'm reading—or trying to write—far more attentive to all the many layers of significance writers have available. Like Goldin-Meadow on gesture, or O'Malley on historic varieties of discourse, Vendler reliably awakens me to how words work in the real world. Given that we are surrounded by blunt, blurry, often manipulative language, this is a renewal we all need at regular intervals.

Quite another approach to the same renewal is offered by *Break, Blow, Burn: Camille Pagia Reads Forty-Three of the World's Best Poems.* The screaming pink dust jacket proclaims that this is "a new literary bombshell," but in fact it's a fairly straightforward, reasonably engaging but not particularly rich set of close readings. Unlike Vendler, who habitually looks quite closely specifically *poetic* resources of meaning, Paglia tends toward paraphrase anchored almost exclusively on noting the deployment of single words. It's a workable approach, but it doesn't get as far as more richly literary approaches do. At times she inexplicably fails to comment on richly paradoxical lines that have long attracted critical attention.

On the other hand, this generous array of very short interpretations—just a few pages apiece—will fit very nicely into the small niches one has in an ordinary day. She opens out the poems quite successfully, which may be all one can reasonably expect in such brief explications. Quite aside from the publicists' hype, Paglia seems here to be arguing for intelligence and precision in the use of words, and, correlatively, for discipline and attention to detail on the part of readers. Both are salutary correctives for spinmeistering.

Another creative corrective is offered by University of Connecticut philosopher Michael P. Lynch in *True to Life: Why Truth Matters*. Assertions such as, "Well, it's a matter of opinion" commonly function as conversation-stoppers, he acknowledges. Such lines provide polite cover for backing away from disagreements we don't want to engage. There's nothing wrong with that! But there is something wrong—something seriously wrong—with thinking that truth itself doesn't exist, or doesn't exist objectively, or doesn't matter. The challenge, obviously, is how one might understand or claim that truth is meaningful and objective without falling into the trap of self-righteous absolutism. "Certainty is the privilege of the fanatic," Lynch contends (p. 29). Or as Voltaire famously quipped, "Doubt is an uncomfortable condition, but certainty is a ridiculous one."

On the other hand, there's something equally ridiculous about those who would assert that "tolerance" is the greatest political virtue. It's difficult to rally support for a position that one flat-out admits is no better than any of the alternatives. We are also heading for trouble if "tolerance" entails tolerating those who are intolerant, those who are self-serving, those who are fraudulent, etc. But how—rationally speaking—can we disentangle ourselves from such troubles without giving way to fundamentalist absolutism? Sometimes there are issues at stake that are far more serious than maintaining the superficial congeniality of a dinner party.

Using ordinary language (for the most part), step-at-a-time logic, and pointed little illustrations based on ordinary experience, Lynch outlines a defense of truth that I've been slowly reading and rereading for months. He begins with four "truisms about truth": truth is objective; it's good to believe what is true; truth is a worthy goal of inquiry; and

truth is worth caring about for its own sake. He defends these "truisms" from the familiar deconstructive critique by asserting that one can have such beliefs without grounding one's allegiance to objective truth in the possibility of some direct, superhuman, immediate knowledge of "things in themselves" as they exist apart from how they are perceived by human minds. Instead, he illustrates his claims and renders them persuasive by appeals to ordinary experience and common usage: *this,* he argues, *is what we mean by "truth."*

For instance, it's easy to illustrate persuasively that "It is good, other things being equal, to believe all and only what is true" or that most of us do in fact care deeply about knowing the truth whether or not it serves our own utility in any way. Illustrations can render a claim persuasive, or even probable, as classic rhetoric teaches; but they are not proof in a formal sense. That's okay with him, or with the kind of philosopher he is: he has already brushed aside the desire for absolute demonstration, for utter irrefutable formal PROOF, as an invitation to simple-minded fanaticism.

At first I bristled a bit at this argument by illustration and counter-example, but after much pondering I've capitulated. What matters most to me, I confess, is not arcane claims in ontology but the immediate prospect of speaking, hearing, and seeking the truth about the situations I confront. Lynch seems to share that concern: *True to Life* opens with a discussion of arguments about whether or not it matters if President Bush lied to the nation—as some have alleged—about the grounds for leading us into war. The choice before us, Lynch contends, is not simply between nihilism and absolute metaphysically certain knowledge. We can have—and seek—grounds for believing what we believe, and we can intelligibly argue with one another about these grounds. There's something very deeply exciting about walking, step by step, through such lucid, down-to-earth, perfectly accessible argument intelligently refuting the nihilist relativism that permeates our culture right alongside fundamentalist absolutism. Both are blind. Neither serve the common good nor the national interest.

After defending these four truisms, Lynch detours a bit into other theories of truth, and here the going can get much harder. One chapter looks at pragmatism and utilitarianism, one at logical positivism, and one at Nietzschean claims that "truth" has

been a fiction all along. Each chapter begins with excellent short accounts of the position in question, followed by short but very telling counter-instances that instead advance his basic claim that truth is objective, a worthy goal of inquiry, and humanly valuable for its own sake. The second half of each chapter tends towards more technical arguments. If I were using this book in a parish setting—which I certainly suggest doing—I'd excerpt these chapters very cautiously. In classroom settings I'd assign the whole book in a blink: *True to Life* ought to be required reading in the first term of seminary studies.

At least for me, the personally most exciting chapters are "Truth and Happiness" and "Sweet Lies." From his four truisms Lynch delineates a brief but telling argument that our fullest happiness depends upon personal integrity and intellectual integrity. If we want to be happy, he argues, we need to tell the truth, we need to be authentic, and we need to be honest, careful, open-minded, etc. in seeking the truth. "Happiness" by this account, is comprised of such elements as confidence about our own identity and a desire to avoid "sleepwalking our way through life" (p. 121). Integrity is not simply a primary moral obligation; it's central to the good life. I suggest these two chapters for youth groups or for any other parish group of people struggling to define themselves (midlifers, perhaps).

For the church generally, however, the most important chapter in *True to Life* is "Truth and Liberal Democracy." Lynch sharply critiques what he calls "relativistic liberalism" for contending that tolerance is the greatest political virtue as if *by definition* any position is just as good as any other—or as if "what is true" doesn't matter at all or doesn't exist. But short of absolutist claims, what's the alternative?

The alternative, he contends, is to realize that governments—due authorities of any variety—have no privileged access to the truth. Even in a democracy, majority vote or long-standing tradition cannot determine the truth. The truth is objective: it is not determined by the act of believing. Otherwise, for instance, the world was flat when the majority believed it was, or Japanese citizens were a political threat when the government said they were, or women were not worthy of church office when the authorities said so. Similarly, of course, God or God's will is not itself determined by

theologians: believing doesn't make it so. If believing made it so, then God did favor slavery when theologians favored it.

In Lynch's reading, what we have in place of such absolute accounts of the true are adequately supported *beliefs* about what is true—beliefs based on evidence, logic, etc. and thus inherently liable to change in the future if better or more complete evidence and argument shows up. "The will of God" may never change, but we have no infallible means of knowing it. We have only human means, paired with the ancient teaching that first and foremost we are to love one another as God has loved us.

Given this state of affairs, then, Lynch proposes that, all things considered, "*life goes better if one lives in a society where the government restrains itself, as much as possible, from advocating one conception of what makes like go better than another"* (p. 164; italics original). I'd suggest that Thomas Aquinas offers a much stronger formulation of this claim: it is always wrong to act in contravention to one's own conscience. Given the primacy of conscience, we cannot resign to the state—or to church authorities—our moral responsibility to develop a well-formed conscience and to obey its dictates.

"Conscience" in this sense offers a far stronger, more intelligible norm than mere "tolerance." But it's a complicated norm, or at least it gets me into interesting perplexities.

If I grant Lynch's analysis, which I'm quite inclined to do, then I must respect (for instance) a bishop who in good conscience either ordains gays or refuses to ordain gays—but I am, correlatively, obligated to ask the bishop for a full account of the evidence, warrants, reasoning, etc., behind his or her conclusion. I'm free to argue with that line of analysis; the bishop should listen to and honestly engage honest criticism. But neither of us can (or should) *force* the other to believe differently, to weight conflicting evidence different, or to act differently, than conscience dictates. That means I'll have to live with bishops whose views I think are mistaken—and they with me—which is to say all of us together. I suppose this leaves us with some variety of the claim that Anglicans are people who say they are Anglicans—and who in good conscience want to join the conversation.

I doubt that there are wise alternatives. I belong to a women's group in which one member routinely invokes the "it's all up to the individual's opinion" whenever people disagree. She's a bit phobic about argument, I suspect, or maybe she values group harmony more highly than intellectual rigor. Lately I've taken to noticing how she gestures when she invokes tolerance in this way: she holds up her hand, fingers together, palm outward. It's the traffic-cop sign for "stop."

But stopping the conversation like this can call to a halt everyone's honest struggle toward true beliefs. It stops the exchange of insights whereby we all might come just a little closer to formulating true beliefs and developing a well-formed conscience. Calling a halt isn't necessary, I propose, if we can cultivate less of the academic and prophetic drive toward absolute assertion, and more of a humanist's willingness to embrace paradox, compromise, the common good, and the logically inevitable constraints on our own ability to know absolutely.

It can be hard to listen closely, to listen openly, to attend rigorously. The mind in action is remarkably complex, as poets have shown us for centuries. It's even harder to cope with that complexity when I disagree with the position being explained and defended. But I'm intrigued by the ideal that in seeking the truth I am—among other things—offering to other thinkers the deferent attention that critics like Helen Vendler offer to poets like Yeats. I find that far more appealing than trading hostile assertions about who is absolutely right.

This is the last of my book-review essays for *Anglican Theological Review*. I've enjoyed doing this work; but because my only income is from my writing, I simply can't afford to continue a donation of this magnitude now that my time as Writer-in-Residence at Seabury has come to an end. I'm grateful for your attention and for your affirmations over the years. I'm sure Jackie Winters and Ellen Wondra will gratefully receive any thank offerings you are moved to send *ATR.*

Think of me, if you will, the next time you pray "for all who seek the truth."