

CHAPTER-II  
LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

## Chapter II

### LANGUAGE, PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY

Now let us begin from some typical areas where the problem of meaninglessness is apparent, namely philosophy and poetry. One may wonder why is it that in philosophy and in poetry particularly there is a problem of meaninglessness while in science the problem is relatively unknown. It may be said that scientific language is stereotyped and technical. Scientists only try to discover the laws of fact and describe them in most precise way. And in doing so language indeed very much matter to science. Otherwise it would not be possible for scientist to carry on such activities as making hypothesis, recording, classifying, systematizing, generalizing and so on. But the problem lies in the fact that the manner in which language matter to science is not the same as it matter to philosophy and poetry. Scientists require minimal varieties of linguistic expression to describe their result. Here there is only the recording of certain information about the fact more precisely e.g.

$$F = \frac{Gm_1 M_2}{R^2}$$

(Given that F = Force between the two bodies of M, G = Gravitation,  $M_1$  = mass,  $M_2$  = another quantity of mass).

Scientists always try to restrict their words to their symbolic use to 'take all the colour out of them'.

They are very much busy with giving informations about the world or objective facts, not with the manner of making explicit these informations nicely or elegantly. Here style of saying does not matter so much. And where style of saying does not matter so much the question of ordering or arranging language differently from that of ordinary language does not arise. So the question of violation of semantical and syntactical rules are relatively unknown and so the concept of meaninglessness also is relatively unknown because the concept of meaninglessness is highly related with the violation of syntactic and semantic regularities. Many scientific sentences, however, often can appear bizzare to common man at first sight. For example, scientific expression like "Nothing is really solid" may seem bizzare to common man because in common usage things like tables, chairs, trees are spoken of as "solid". "Nothing is really solid" is a misleading assertion unless scientists specify how they are using the word "Solid".

In scientific writing the words are of no intrinsic importance, references made by the words are all important. Because the chief concern of scientists is to give information about the fact and their interrelations. In contrast to scientific language the language of poetry and philosophy do not consist only of referential or symbolic usage but of

something much more. It is the business of poet and philosopher to look at the world from infinite dimensions. They try to acquire concrete knowledge of the 'reality' by personalized experience. And in doing so 'reality' stands in a relative manner. The poet and the philosopher portray them in their own way. His experience of the world is modified by the structure of his language. The function of language in this respect is not to clothe or robe the thought i.e. the medium by means of which we inter-communicate information about the existing reality. On the contrary language of poetry and philosophy create reality in its own image. Both the philosopher and the poet are not the passive spectator of the existing world - they are also involved in thinking of diverse possibilities of reality. And this is the common ground between the philosopher and the poet. Both engage in transcending acts which extend the limits of ordinary experience or sensory experience. To the extent a scientist say something which is akin to common sense understanding. He may be accused of saying something nonsense like "space is actually matter". The root of the philosopher and the poet in doing philosophy and writing poetry is a kind of discontent or dissatisfaction about the existent things. Poet and philosopher always try to enrich the concept from their intuition. They interweave things or events with new meanings, a

potency which is entirely intuitive. They are very much sensitive about the power of words. And this is clearly reflected in their use of metaphor - extended use of words. It helps them to get hold of new ideas. And this metaphorical use of language is the supreme ornament of style.

They are rattling breakfast  
plates in basement kitchens,  
And along the trampled edges  
of the street  
I am aware of the damp souls  
of house-maids  
Sprouting despondently at area  
gates.

(T.S.Eliot, Morning at the Window, 1917)

Here the transference of the qualities of some sort of deprived plant growth to the housemaids souls represents an attempt to describe their social status.

Language, Coleridge claimed, is the 'amoury of the human mind', an instrument of the imagination. Language is an instrument by means of which we reach beyond the immediate world perceived by the eye. One of the chief functions of poetry is to evoke emotions or feelings.

She lived unknown and few  
could know  
When Lucy ceased to be;  
But she is in her grave, and O !  
The difference to me !

(William Wordsworth - Lucy)

Here the simple words are used to evoke the most powerful emotion.

Style also plays an important role in the poetic language. At a conference on 'Style in language' held in the United States in 1958 it was suggested that the style of a person is as his fingerprints.<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer described style as the 'phylogonomy of the mind'. And in this stylistic effect vagueness of meaning or words is an important source. Many thinkers announce that vagueness is in fact one of the basic principles of the symbolic aesthetic. Wittgenstein in his Philosophical Investigations also gives a similar view. He says

But is a blurred concept a concept  
at all ? - Is an indistinct photograph  
a picture of a person at all ? Is it  
even always an advantage to replace an  
indistinct picture by a sharp one ?  
Isn't the indistinct one often exactly  
what we need?<sup>2</sup>

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1 Roger Brown, in Style in Language, ed. by T.A. Sebeok, Cambridge Mass., reprint 1968, p.378.

2 L.Wittgenstein, PI, Basil Blackwell, 1976, Sect. 71.

In the poetry of E.E.Cummings we find phrases like "a man wearing a round jeer for a hat", "children building this rainman out of snow" and so on. And although the above phrases violate some semantical rules we can understand them and this semantic violation creates the imagery desired. For novelty the writer use any word that serves him, even the word may be ambiguous or new. The context of the utterance helps us to understand what the speaker tries to say. Sentences which are anomalous in this way, that is, by the employment of ambiguous, and new or uninterpretable words are known as "nonsense". But this semantic violation is permitted for poetic effect. Shefali Moitra says,

... Sentences in scientific language bring down the possibility of meaning variance almost to nil. This is made possible by the fact that the universe of discourse is predetermined and that it does not have to be determined by the context of use.<sup>1</sup>

The language of poetry possesses reality and value in its own right and not only as an instrument or vehicle of communication. Ultimately we are fascinated or enchanted by the use of language, by the form of language. And the language

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1 Shefali Moitra, "Literal Meaning and the Role of Context" in Logical Form, Predication and Ontology edited by Pranab Kumar Sen, Macmillan India Ltd., Delhi, 1982, p.183.

itself has become marvelous creation in the poetry.

"A rose-red song with sky-blue tune, a little scent laughter".<sup>1</sup> Here there is a grammatical contiguity between the word 'red' and 'song', 'blue' and 'tune' but there is no semantic consistency between them.

Here it can be said that some poetry leads us to a world, or creates a world which can not be expressed by a customary language - the poet breaks or at least ruffles the boundaries of customary language or preestablished linguistic system consciously. Paul Valiry says "... ambiguity gives poetry its delicate charm".<sup>2</sup> Even for some poet nonsense is more poetical than sense.

The problem of meaninglessness also finds its way in philosophy. And it finds its way in philosophy because of the vagueness involved in the very definition of philosophy and the nature of philosophical thinking. In the case of philosophy to ask the general question like "what is philosophy?" "What is the meaning of the word 'Philosophy'?" would leave unanswered since there is no one reportive definition of philosophy. Different person or group of

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1 Sukanta Chowdhury, The Select Nonsense of Sukumar Roy, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1987, p.56.

2 Francis Scarfe, Art of Paul Valery, Heinemann, 1954, p.56.

persons use the word 'philosophy' to stand for very different things or activities. So to ask the question about philosophy it would be better to ask in this manner : what do you mean by the word 'Philosophy'? Elmer Sprague says,

The question "what is philosophy?" is like the question "what is furniture?" both "philosophy" and "furniture" are words that can be applied to many things ... to answer the question "what is furniture?" One must detail the different ways in which the word "furniture" may be used. Similarly, an answer to the question "what is philosophy?" requires a detailing of what the word may mean.<sup>1</sup>

Now I shall focus my attention on the issue that every philosopher or group of philosophers makes a particular system - a system of belief and what can meaningfully be said is also determined by that particular system. When two systems made by the philosopher or group of philosophers contradict with each other the problem of meaninglessness creep in. And this can be explicate properly by presenting the instances of various kinds of conflicting views about the same subject matter in philosophy.

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1 Sprague Elmer, What is Philosophy : A Short Introduction, New York, Oxford University Press, 1961, pp.3-4.

### Philosophy in contrast with natural science

announced the ultimate nature of the world or the nature of the world as a whole on the basis of logic (while the natural scientists' description of the world is subject to empirical observation). And the philosopher can conceive the infinite number of logically possible world. As a result there we can find the idealists world, the world of materialists and so many. Idealist philosophers believe that above and beyond the perceiving world there is a world of extraordinary state of affairs. And it is the task of the philosopher to search out such extraordinary state of affairs lies concealed (the world of ideas, the world as God's mind). And the logic they give in favour of their argument is that the world of sense does not provide them satisfactory objects of knowledge because of its ever changing nature. Only the ideas can provide them an alternative satisfactory model. Behind the changing phenomenon there lies the unchanged and unchanging substance which provides permanent and eternal objects of knowledge.

In contrary to the idealists logic about the existence of the world of Ideas materialists give their logic in favour of the world of sense or the perceiving world. According to them the statements made by the idealist for

proving the existence of something that lies beyond the perceiving world would not make sense. They are simply meaningless expression. For a statement to be meaningful to an empiricist the thing talked about must in some way be the sort of thing that can be experienced. Thus the statement made by the idealist such as "God has a perceiving mind", "The world of Ideas are the ideal forms of sensible objects" are regarded by the empiricists as meaningless.

In poetry and in philosophy language has a peculiar importance. Philosopher and poet have no alternative but to do this through language itself. By the nature of their art they must be concerned with language (if philosophy can be regarded as a kind of art). The root for both of them is a kind of dissatisfaction - dissatisfaction about the ordinary or everyday use of language or it may be about the ordinary concept of reality. Doing philosophy and writing poetry is an attempt to unfreeze habits of normal thinking, to redeem them by less rigid and restricted one. The nature of philosophical and poetical language is such that "the very manner of saying is intrinsic to what is said".<sup>1</sup> The philosopher and the poet is the generator of a new

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1 Margaret Chatterjee, The Language of Philosophy, Allied Publishers Private Ltd., Calcutta 1981, p.134.

language game - the possessor of highly linguistic imagination. Philosophical writing express insights - the way in which the world is conceived and the manner in which they are expressed is an integral part of it. The ways of saying or style determine what someone wants to say. In expressing his subtle experience, his insights or vision, philosopher sometimes goes beyond the boundaries of everyday language. Though they use the ordinary words they use them in a very deeper sense. This kind of activity of the philosopher involves linguistic imagination and for which no rules can be given. In doing so they even sometimes terminate into vagueness or unclarity. Following Wittgenstein we may say occasionally the "blurred edges" can do the job very well. Waismann also says this :

A philosopher, instead of preaching the righteousness or ordinary speech, should learn to be on his guard against the pitfalls ever present in its forms ... just as a good swimmer must be able to swim up stream, so the philosopher should master the unspeakably difficult art of thinking up speech, against the current of cliches.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Waismann, "How I see philosophy" in Logical Positivism edited by A.J. Ayer. The Free Press, New York, 1959, pp. 262-63.

The question naturally arises : Does everyday use of language - the language we use in ordinary conversation, not a proper way of using language ? It is all right. But from this it does not imply that one cannot use language differently. A man who possesses limitless fund of imagination or possesses subtle insight can bring a new sense from the apparent nonsense. Even a paradoxical sentence like "Matter does not exist" is made by the philosopher. And this comes from his extraordinary kind of experience. Philosophical arguments enable us to see things in a new way though they do not conform logical rules. Waismann says,

The essential difference between philosophy and logic is that logic constrains us while philosophy leaves us free : in a philosophic discussion we are led, step by step, to change our angle of vision, e.g. to pass from one way of putting a question to another, and this with our spontaneous argument - a thing profoundly different from deducing theorems from a given set of premises ... The essence of philosophy lies in its freedom.<sup>1</sup>

And the root of the concept of meaninglessness lies herein i.e. in freedom - freedom to think and expressing it.

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1 Ibid., p. 364.

Every philosopher thinks in his own way, in his own ontological background or framework. Outside his conceptual framework certain expressions - expressions of different philosophical background seems to him not false but meaningless. Thus the concept of meaninglessness have their origin in the nature of philosophy itself.

It also finds its way in poetical language as I have mentioned earlier. Poetry involves a kind of immediate and witting embodiment of insights in verbal form. In expressing their insights, their imaginary world, they transcend the limits of existing language and establish a spirit of nonsense. Sukumar Roy named this special vein of nonsense the rass or spirit of whimsy. In his Rhymes without Reason (Abol-Tabol) we find nonsensical expressions like :

A pochard and porcupine, defying the  
grammarians, Combined to form a  
porcochard, unmindful of their variance.

And this literary nonsense creates an apparent gravity which is absent in popular rhyme. A poem is a world of its own. Unlike the prose it does not accept the conventional vehicle of language. In poetry the mind is active, having to make its own system. In poetical diction the words can no longer be given their proper meaning and the ordinary

symbolic process is foiled. Elizabeth Sewell says :

It is necessary to postulate at once two syntaxes, that of prose which we have known from your youth up, and that of poetry about which anyone who writes poetry will have glimmerings, but which is not taught in the schools.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Elizabeth Sewell, The Structure of Poetry, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., London, 1951, pp. 100-101.