

## On a Philosophy of Expression by Brice Parain, Albert Camus

### On a Philosophy of Expression by Brice Parain<sup>1</sup>

It is not certain that our time has lacked gods. Many have been proposed, usually stupid or cowardly ones. Our time does, on the other hand, seem to lack a dictionary. At least, this is obvious to those in this world in which all words are prostituted—who hope for justice that is unambiguous and liberty that is unequivocal.

The question Brice Parain has just raised is whether such a dictionary is possible, and, above all, whether it is conceivable in the absence of a god to give the words in such a dictionary their meanings. Parain's recent books are concerned with language.<sup>2</sup>

But even his early essays took the unreliability of language as their subject matter.<sup>3</sup> Parain's long and scrupulous reflection would be enough to earn him attention and esteem. But his books are timely and important for many other reasons, which I shall mention in my conclusion; and despite the apparent speciality of their subject, they are always pertinent.

What is Parain's originality? He makes language a metaphysical question. For professional philosophers, language poses historical and psychological problems. How did it originate, what are its laws—these are the limits of the inquirer's ambition. But there is a primary question that necessarily concerns the very value of the words we use. We must know whether our language is truth or falsehood: this is the question Parain chooses to discuss.

Yet talking is apparently the easiest thing in the world. We lie when we want to and tell the truth when we must. This is not the problem. What we need to know is whether or not our language is false at the very moment when we think we are telling the truth, whether words have flesh or are merely empty shells, whether they mask a deeper truth or are merely part of a wild-goose chase. Actually, we already know that words fail us sometimes at the very moment when our heart is going to speak, that they betray us even more often in our moments of greatest sincerity, and that at other times their only use is to trick us by appearing to leave no problems.

We know quite well that "to pay one's debt to society," "die on the field of battle," "put an end to one's days," "make total war," "be rather weak in the chest," and "lead a life of toil" are ready-made expressions whose purpose is to camouflage heart-breaking experiences. But the questions Parain asks are even more imperious. For the problem is to know whether our most accurate expressions, our most successful cries are not in fact empty of all meaning, whether language does not, in short, express man's final solitude in a silent universe.

What this adds up to is a search for the essence of language, and a quest for words that can give us the same reasons we require of God. For Parain's basic premise is that if language is meaningless then everything is meaningless, and the world becomes absurd. We know only by means of words. If they are proved useless, then we are finally and irredeemably blinded.

But indulging in metaphysics means accepting paradoxes, and the metaphysics of language follows this rule. Either, in fact, our words translate only our impressions, and, partaking of their contingency, are deprived of any precise meaning; or else our words represent some ideal and essential truth, and consequently have no contact with tangible reality, which they can in no way affect. Thus we can name things only with uncertainty, and our words become certain only when they cease to refer to actual things.

In neither of these cases can we count on words to tell us how to behave. And tragedy begins as a consequence. "We cannot," says Parain, "accuse language of

being the instrument of falsehood and of error, without at the same time, and for the same reasons, accusing the world of being bad and God of being wicked."4

And, quoting Socrates in the *Phaedo*: "The misuse of language is not only distasteful in itself, but actually harmful to the soul."5

The situation Socrates faced is analogous to our own. There was evil in men's souls because there were contradictions in communication, because the most ordinary words had several different meanings, were distorted and diverted from the plain and simple use that people imagined them to have.

Such problems cannot leave us indifferent. We too have our sophists and call for a Socrates, since it was Socrates' task to attempt the cure of souls by the search for a dictionary.

If the words justice, goodness, beauty have no meaning, then men can tear one another to pieces. Socrates' effort, and his failure, lay in seeking this impeccable meaning, for the lack of which he chose to die. The value of Parain's *Recherches* lies in a similar concern for these urgent consequences.

His first effort is one of honesty. He sets out, with the greatest clarity, the paradox of expression: "If man chooses the sensualist hypothesis, he will obtain the external world but lose knowledge; if he chooses the idealist hypothesis, he will obtain knowledge, but will not know how to deal with tangible reality and his knowledge will be useless.

In the first case, his language will become literature; in the second, the logical system, developed from a few simple propositions, will soon appear as the fruit of a dream, or as the appalling amusement with which a prisoner might occupy his solitude."6 We understand now why language for Parain is not only a metaphysical problem but indeed the root of all metaphysics.

And it is not without good reason that he offers his researches both as an inquiry into our condition and as an introduction to the history of philosophy. Any philosophical system is, in the last analysis, a theory of language. Every inquiry about being calls into question the power of words.

The history of philosophy for Parain is basically a history of the failures of the mind, confronted with the problem of language. Man has not managed to find his words. And perhaps it is possible to think of the metaphysical adventure as both an obstinate and sterile quest for the masterword that would illuminate everything, for an adequate "Open Sesame," the equivalent of "Aum," the sacred syllable of the Hindus.

In this respect, Parain's researches show that from classical Greek philosophy to modern dialectic, considerations of language have moved toward an attitude of acceptance and resignation.

Attempts at justification have been replaced by a study of the rules of expression. This evolution is paralleled by the one which, in our century, has replaced metaphysics with the cult of action, the quest for knowledge with the humble wisdom of pragmatism. "Knowledge and becoming are mutually exclusive," wrote Nietzsche. Thus, if we want to live in "the becoming," we must give up all hope of knowledge.

The Greeks, however, those great adventurers of the mind, tackled the problem head on. The pre-Socratics began by defining a motionless and transparent universe, in which every object had its corresponding expression. Nor did they recoil before the consequences of this initial claim.

For if each word is guaranteed by an object in this world, nothing can be denied, and Protagoras is right to proclaim that all is true. Knowledge is inseparable from sensation and discussion becomes impossible. This world cannot

be objected to, and we need only speak to tell the truth.<sup>7</sup>

But Gorgias can just as well say that all is false, since in fact there are more real objects than words to designate them. No word can give a complete account of what it designates, nothing can be proved since nothing can be exhausted.

Greek thought oscillated for a long time between these extreme conclusions. And it is not without significance that it should have found its purest literary form in the dialogue, as if Protagoras and Gorgias had to confront each other tirelessly through centuries of Hellenic thought. Socrates' object, and Plato's, was to find the law that transcended our acts and our expressions. We are not very certain about Socrates' conclusions.

We know that he chose to die, perhaps proof he believed more in the virtue of example than in verbal demonstration. But as for Plato, Parain correctly remarks that the Dialogues are nothing but long struggles between language and reality, in which, paradoxically, reality is the loser.

For the theory of Ideas marks the victory of words, which are more general than objects and closer to that ideal land of which this world is but a pale copy. For words to have meaning, their meaning must come from somewhere else than the tangible world, so fleeting and so changeable. This "elsewhere," to which so many Greek minds appealed with all their strength, is Being. Plato's solution is no longer psychological but cosmological.<sup>8</sup>

He makes language an intermediary stage in the hierarchy that proceeds from matter to the One. The logos is a species of being, one of the spheres of universal harmony. Next to it, this world has no importance.

Thus, from the fifth century B.C., the definitive problem is laid out: the world or language, nonsense or eternal light. This is the sharp division that Aristotle, anxious to remain within the familiarity of earthly things, rejects. The Aristotelian theory of proof, whereby words are correct only by convention, but by a convention that rests on an accurate intuition of essences, is an ambiguous compromise.

This is the choice Pascal brings back in all its cruelty. Uncertain of language, trembling before the enormity of falsehood, incapable of making paradox reasonable, Pascal merely convinces himself that it exists.<sup>9</sup> But he denounces this paradox better than anyone else: "Two errors," he writes. "1. To take everything literally, 2. to take everything spiritually." Thus Pascal suggests not a solution but a submission: submission to traditional language because it comes to us from God, humility in the face of words in order to find their true inspiration. We have to choose between miracles and absurdity; there is no middle way.

We know the choice Pascal made. With a few important nuances that I shall mention further on, it is obvious that for Parain too this dilemma constitutes the basic problem. But he nonetheless studies the considerable effort modern philosophers have made to arrive at a compromise less insulting to reason. Such a compromise already begins in Descartes and Leibnitz, and I should point out that the chapters devoted to these philosophers in Parain's *Recherches* are absolutely original. The compromise, however, finds its best expression in German philosophy, especially in Hegel. We know that, characteristically, German philosophy hit upon the idea of deifying history.

Precisely, history, taken as a whole, is considered the common expression of unity and of "becoming." Actually, it is no longer a question of unity or the absolute, in the classical sense. There are no longer any truly atemporal essences. On the contrary, ideas realize themselves in time. One of Hegel's texts quoted by Parain is a striking illustration of this position: "It must therefore be said of the Absolute that it is essentially Result and that it is only when it reaches its conclusion that it succeeds in being what it is in truth, its nature consisting precisely of being at one and the same time its own

fact, subject or becoming."<sup>1</sup> This will immediately be recognized as a philosophy of immanence. The absolute no longer stands in opposition to the relative world, but mingles with it.

There is no longer any truth, but there is something which is in the process of creating itself, which will become truth. And, similarly, language is nothing but the totality of our inner life. The truth of a word is not something it owns, but something which creates itself little by little in sentences, speeches, literature, and the history of literatures. The word "God," for example, is nothing outside its attributes and the phrase that acknowledges Him.

Separated from the pile of notions men's hearts and the history of mankind have accumulated and continue to accumulate around it, the word itself is insignificant. All words thus form part of an unending adventure that moves toward a universal meaning. At that point too language is being, because being is everything.

I have not enough space here to discuss the idea. Interested readers may turn to Parain's discussion. What he does, briefly, is to confront Hegel with the objections any philosophy of immanence raises: we cannot conceive of a truth that has neither beginning nor end, that participates at one and the same time in the physical and the universal. Metaphysics is the science of beginnings, and the demands language provokes are more categorical than the replies that one can furnish with it.

Is language truth or falsehood? To reply that it is truth "in the process of self-creation" (and with the help of falsehood) is possible only if we carry our abstractions right into the heart of concrete things. In any case, this reply cannot satisfy the trenchant paradox with which the mind is here confronted.

The history of philosophy always brings the thinker back to the Pascalian dilemma. The aim of Parain's *Recherches* is to use new arguments to underline a paradox that is as old and cruel as man himself. It would indeed be a mistake to imagine that what we have here is an argument which simply concludes that the world is meaningless. Because Parain's originality, for the time being at any rate, is to keep the dilemma in suspense.

He does of course say that if language has no meaning then nothing can have any meaning, and that anything is possible. But his books show, at the same time, that words have just enough meaning to refuse us this final certainty that the ultimate answer is nothingness. Our language is neither true nor false. It is simultaneously useful and dangerous, necessary and pointless. "My words do perhaps distort my ideas, but if I do not reason then my ideas vanish into thin air." Neither yes nor no, language is merely a machine for creating doubt.

And as in every problem that involves being, we find as soon as we advance a little further, to the point where our condition is called into question, that we are in the midst of darkness. A brutal "no" would at least be a definite answer.

But this is not what we find. However uncertain language may be, Parain does feel, in spite of everything, that it yields the elements of a hierarchy. It does not provide us with being, but it allows us to suspect that being exists. Each word goes beyond the object it claims to designate, and belongs to the species.

But if it indicates the species, it is not the species in its entirety. And even if we were to bring together all the words designating all the individuals of this species, this would not make up the species itself. The word contains something further, but this something further is still not enough.

The author refrains from drawing conclusions, and, as he says himself, his book begins and ends with the expression of misgivings. He allows us to guess, though, where his feelings and his experience will lead him. His apparent aim is

to maintain choice and paradox: "Any philosophy," he writes, "which does not refute Pascal is vain." This is true, even for minds without a penchant for the miraculous.

In any case, the apparent objectivity of the writer might give the impression that his admirable books contain a metaphysics of falsehood that has already had a very great defender. But while Nietzsche accepted the falsehood of existence and saw it as the principle of all life and all progress, Parain rejects it.

Or, at least, if he agrees to acknowledge it, he does not give it his approval—preferring, at that precise moment, to resign his judgment into the hands of some higher power. This philosophy of expression ends indeed as a theory of silence. Parain's basic idea is one of honesty: the criticism of language cannot get around the fact that our words commit us and that we should remain faithful to them. Naming an object inaccurately means adding to the unhappiness of this world. And, in fact, the vast wretchedness of man, which has long pursued Parain and which has inspired so many moving accents in his work, is falsehood. Without knowing, or without yet saying, how it is possible, he knows that the great task of man is not to serve falsehood. When he finishes his analysis, he merely glimpses the fact that language contains a power that reaches far beyond ourselves: "We ask language to express what is most intimately personal to man. It is not fitted to such a task.

It was made to formulate what is most strictly impersonal, what, in man, is closest to other people.<sup>2</sup> It is to this higher banality that we should perhaps limit ourselves, for it is there that the artist and the peasant, the thinker and the worker, come together. Because language goes beyond individuals, and its terrible inadequacy is the sign of its transcendence. For Parain, this transcendence needs a hypothesis.

We are well aware that here, confronted with the Pascalian choice, Parain leans toward the miraculous and, through it, to traditional language. He sees as evidence of a god the fact that men resemble one another. The miracle consists of going back to everyday words, bringing to them the honesty needed to lessen the part of falsehood and hatred.<sup>3</sup>

This is indeed a path that leads to silence, but toward a silence that is relative, since absolute silence is impossible. Although Parain may tell us that his book stops short of ontology, his final effort is to pursue with the most silent of beings that higher conversation in which words are unnecessary: "Language is only a means of drawing us to its opposite: silence and God."<sup>4</sup>

At this point the critic should call a halt. The essential in any case is not yet to know which to choose: miracles or absurdity. The important thing is to show that they form the only possible choice, and that nothing else matters. But I think I would be justified in pointing out, in my conclusion, that this is where Parain's apparently very highly specialized investigations tie in with our century and its destiny.

They have, in fact, never really been removed from them, and it is not irrelevant to learn that in their author's eyes Parain's books constitute one single meditation, extending over a number of years, intimately linked to the history of his life and our times. What characterizes our century is perhaps not so much the need to rebuild the word as to rethink it. This amounts to giving the world its language.

This is why some of the great artistic or political movements of our time have called language into question. Surrealism is a good illustration of how a philosophy of expression can be closely related to social criticism. Today, when the questions the world puts to us are so much more urgent, we search for words with even more anguish. The lexicons that are proposed to us don't fit.

And it is natural for our best minds to form a kind of passionate academy in quest of a French dictionary. This is why the most significant works of the

1940's are perhaps not the ones people think, but those that call language and expression once more into question. The criticism of Jean Paulhan, the new world created by Francis Ponge, and Parain's historical philosophy seem to me to answer this need, though on very different planes and with very marked contrasts between them.

For they do not indulge in Byzantine speculations about grammatical motivation, but ask a number of basic questions that are a part of human suffering. It is in their inquiry that our sacrifices find a form.

Only one thing has changed since the surrealists. Instead of using the uncertainty of language and the world to justify every possible kind of liberty-calculated madness or automatic writing—men are striving for an inner discipline. The tendency is no longer to deny that language is reasonable or to give free rein to the disorders it contains.

The trend is to recognize that language has the limited powers to return, through miracles or through absurdity, to its tradition. In other words, and this intellectual move is of the highest importance for our time, we no longer use the falsehood and apparent meaninglessness of the world to justify instinctual behavior, but to defend a prejudice in favor of intelligence.

It is a question merely of a reasonable intelligence that has returned to concrete things and has a concern for honesty. It is a new classicism—and one that expresses the two values most frequently attacked today: I mean intelligence and France.

For many reasons, the book Parain promises us on the ontology of language takes on great importance. But in the meantime, over and above any differences of opinion, let us begin by recognizing how deeply he resembles us. A taste for the truth, a lesson in modesty following scrupulous analysis informed by the most extensive documentation, this is the education one receives from Parain's books. We cannot turn our back on such works. We still have much to do, and we are still subjected to the most torturous questions.

But it is certain that, whether we turn toward miracles or toward absurdity, we shall do nothing without those virtues in which human honor lies—honesty and poverty. What we can learn from the experience Parain sets forth is to turn our back upon attitudes and oratory in order to bear scrupulously the weight of our own daily life. "Preserve man in his perseverance," we read in *Essai sur la misère humaine*, "it is through this that he becomes immense, and gains the only immensity that he can transmit." Yes, we must rediscover our banality. The question is merely to know whether we shall have both the genius and the simple heart that are needed.

Article published in *Poésie* 44, 1944

1 Brice Parain (born 1897) was an author whose political preoccupations coincided with those of Camus at a later stage in his career. Thus on p. 184 of *Carnets II* (Alfred A. Knopf edition, p. 144), in November 1946, Camus noted down Parain's remark that "the essence of modern literature is recantation," and later used it as one of the main themes of *The Rebel*. Parain had written, in an article published in *Combat* on November 11, 1946, and entitled *Le caractère commun des productions actuelles*, that modern literature was characterized not by despair but by "palinodes, in other words, a return to commonplaces." "In the last fifty years," he continued, "we have seen all kinds of such returns. Once again it was Rimbaud who showed the way. The others, naturally, have followed. We have had Claudel and devotion, Gide and duty, Aragon and his voice quivering from patriotic emotion, Jean Paulhan and rhetoric, surrealism which has returned from different kinds of magic to different kinds of rationalism, even to positivism, pacifism which has gone to war and even existentialists who have become professors of ethics." Camus took over this idea himself and made it into

one of the central themes of *The Rebel*, arguing in his chapter on the Pozt's Rebellion that in Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and surrealism, "complete conformism follows merciless revolt." –P.T.

2 *Essai sur le logos platonicien* (1941), *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* (Gallimard, 1943).

3 *Essai sur la misère humaine* (1934), *Retour à la France* (Grasset, 1936).

4 *Recherches*, p. 141.

5 Hackforth's translation.

6 *Recherches*, p. 56.

7 Similarly, if we conclude that we cannot name what does not exist, everything that has a name therefore exists, and there is not one of man's dreams (Jesus or Pan) that does not possess reality. If, on the contrary, we conclude that we can name what does not exist, we are without any rule.

8 *Essai sur le logos platonicien*.

9 How words do have meaning! For us, Pascal is a great philosopher. But in Clermond-Ferrand, on the street where he was born, there exists a Pascal Bar.

1 *Recherches*, p. 149.

2 *Recherches*, p. 173.

3 "Not to lie means not only refusing to hide our acts or our intentions, but also saying them and meaning them truthfully. This is not easy, and not something painlessly achieved."  
*Recherches*, p. 183.

4 *Recherches*, p. 179. But from that point onward, the new problem that arises is how to reconcile the existence of falsehood with the existence of God. This, I assume, is the problem Parain will tackle in his next hook.

The end