

WALTER REDFERN

TRYING TO THINK THE UNTHINKING, OR, THINGS TO DO WITH CLICHES

My favourite French expression is à cheval. Not in the sense of 'on horseback', where I feel (to use an idiom from my native Liverpool about as comfortable as a cow on a bike). But rather in the sense of straddling, bridging the gap. Or, given the tendency to fiasco that marks much human enterprise, falling between two stools. What I am à cheval between, you will decide for yourselves. None of this is by way of an apology. You, students of rhetoric, should already have read my opening spiel as provocation, indeed as attack. But attack in the musical, not the military, sense. Though I will be using a scatter-gun.

Ortega y Gasset once wrote that 'commonplaces are the tramways of intellectual transportation'. Can we detect here some ecstasy (transport), clashing with the idea of fixed rails? (And there is the fear of going off the rails. Rapture can automate; the thrill of thinking grow cold. The familiar Classical dictum 'Tout est dit' fed into the disillusioned 'Everything has already happened'. In 1880, the Director of the Russian Patent Office petitioned the government to dissolve his department, on the grounds that nothing new remained to be invented.

Our true Penelope is Flaubert. As Felman put it, Flaubert is 'our commonplace'. Flaubert's choice example of the mineral stupidity of the human race was a certain Thompson of Sunderland, who carved his name in letters six feet high on Pompey's column in Alexandria. For Flaubert, when it comes to clichés (and everything does), we are all (including Gustave himself – to use Sartre's affectionate term of condemnation for his pathfinder – we are all the family idiot. In Madame Bovary. Flaubert offers the existential cliché: the secondhand life of Emma, getting ruinously into debt as she tries to live off borrowed romance. Flaubert's backlash against cliché is the tactic of exaggeration and excruciation. If he cannot evacuate clichés, maybe he can saturate the world with them, give everybody a bellyful. And hopelessly (Flaubert would never have

stomached the automatism 'hopefully'), he would reduce us all to blissful silence. Part of him recognised, however, that such elective or enforced mutism would still leave cliché the upper hand, for 'silence gives consent'. Even his notorious project for a book about nothing, presumably intended as an escape from commonplace, is itself an élite cliché, like most inverted or twisted responses. Yet Emma Bovary herself is energised by clichés; they get her, and keep her, going, until she exhausts her capacity for self-delusion. Clichés, like military rhetoric in the trenches, send her over the top.

Emma, a parasite, is a plagiarist. Whereas the Classical poet usually confesses his larcenies, the Romantic, if nabbed, blames his on a broken home. All of us, even when we've graduated from the cradle, continue using cribs for the rest of our natural. Institutionalised plagiarism, while seldom pursued in England with the methodical vigour it was in France, was for a long time practised also in English schools. Think of those exercises where pupils are instructed to complete series of set expressions ('As fit as a ...'). In the 19th-century French version, or perversion, pupils were urged to write as if they were Cicero, etc. By a vicious circle, in these circumstances, the thief robbed himself, of a fully or even moderately personal expression. Jules Vallès's hero, Jacques Vingtras, complains: How can I impersonate Mucius Scaevola without the benefit of a charred wrist? In protesting stereotyped exemplarity in a spirit of serious play, in addressing the dangers inherent in not having a style to call your own, Vallès ends up inventing a self and a style that are inimitable. Proust, who enjoyed both limp wrists and a hard head, recommended parody as invaluable training for a writer; he himself energetically mastered his awe of Flaubert via pastiching his prose. Such a response was therapeutic, exorcising and educational. Proust put stylistic play to work. People in general had been doing this instinctively since the beginning of time, for parody predates Eden (Satan as the ape of God). Even if the anathema against cliché is largely a post-Romantic phenomenon, the urge to resist and mock cliché is surely not bound by time, place or culture.

The Americans certainly did not invent, but they have boosted, the desire to do something useful with stock material. 'Familiarity breeds contempt, and children', said Mark Twain, thereby putting many marriages in a nutshell. The set phrase is here given an extension, and the familiar made somewhat strange. We talk about turns of speech

(tours in French). Language, with our active support, can lift itself on its points, and take off, as the word trope itself suggests. Human beings had been practising lateral, or up-ended, thinking millennia before de Bono codified the knack. Even subconsciously, in dreams, we can sidestep, renew or complicate the given. A pursued animal twists and turns in order to survive. In general life, of course, twisting (ankle, knee, neck) often grates or anguishes; we do not like to have our arms twisted. A fractious child, in some regions of Britain, is called 'twisty'. The two sexes can, respectively, get their knickers or their tassel in a twist. By all of us the twist can be gone round. A twist is, etymologically, a length of rope. Give a twister enough of it and he will hang himself. Joys and risks surround the whole business. Above all, it is necessary for psychic and social health. Unexamined taboos need to be scanned, altered and dislodged.

Clichés, like puns, can be put or made to work. Twisting clichés by the tail may help to retrain them, restore them to full employment in new contexts. Manipulation need not only be bent; it can set the crooked straight. After a particularly trite protestation of love by a woman, Cabrera Infante's narrator adds: 'From such corn mighty oath grow'. This rapid switch on acorns-oaks debunks the preceding commonplace. Though we sometimes forget this, clichés often begin as figurative phrases, and literalising them can give them back a strength they formerly possessed. In one of Flaubert's sketches, a father catches his son boozing in a bar and exclaims: 'Tu n'es qu'un pilier d'estaminet' (You're holding up the walls of this pub), whereupon the lad changes into a doorpost. Flesh is turned into thing in this transmogrified cliché; and it is ambiguous whether the censorious father has wrought this chastisement, or whether the boy's response guts the parental discourse. Vallès reactivates the idiom 'manger son pain à la fumée du rôti' (to be only a looker-on) by having his starving young hero wave his stale crust in the smell of fish frying downstairs. This is an existential twist, essential for survival: he needs to 'tromper sa faim' (to stave off his hunger). Vallès's hero here puns for his very life. A related variant of literalisation is the tactic of dumb insolence, as enacted by the oppressed peasants in Ignazio Silone's Fontamara. They take official obfuscations at face value, and thus engage a return to basics. Wilful misreading or deliberate mishearing can have the virtue of at least passive resistance to tyranny.

Some writers of the type termed in French 'révolutionnaires de salon', often seem incapable of distinguishing between verbal questioning or ridicule and storming the Bastille. They appear to take concepts like 'subversion' literally, and thus become victims of their own metaphorisation. It is very hard today to laugh anyone out of office, as politicians in alleged democracies learn the formerly aristocratic or totalitarian art of brazenness. Still, even politicians go on twisting. Churchill's (inaccurate) dismissal of Clement Attlee as 'a sheep in sheep's clothing' tried to imply that Attlee was simply what he looked like. A militant feminist might say 'One man's meat is another woman's poison'. Much twisting, whether of words, ideas, handkerchiefs or attitudes, no doubt springs from desperation and panic, like that of deadlined journalists having to come up with something eye-catching. More reflective reworking produces a mock edict like 'Register all puns', with the scrawled corrigendum underneath: 'Puns don't kill people; people kill people'. The exchange on this graffito mingles views about the pointedness of wit with the controversy over gun-ownership. Within the advertising industry, agencies beget metaslogans which take off from rival claims, as when Carlsberg claims that 9 out of 10 cats say that their owners prefer it to other lagers. As with punning, ironic diversion demands the complicity and intelligence of a partner, who has to know what the ironist is getting at. This is the area splendidly caught in D.J. Enright's coinage, 'the wrought-ironic'.

As for the various modes of twisting, Milner has listed some of the major ones: phonological ('Diplomacy: the noble art of lying for one's country')— I would prefer the term 'metaplasmic', as this example involves the alteration of only one letter—; morphological; syntactic lexical ('Hang-over: the wrath of grapes'); and situational. Twists can work by opposites, as in Robert Desnos's 'langage cuit' (cooked language) which he opposed to 'langage cru' (crude/raw language). Revamping proverbs or idioms can be, like homeopathy, a way of treating like with like, taking a hair of the dog that bit you. In addition, the very rigidity of structure in maxims, proverbs, slogans and other congealed forms seems positively to invite reversals, permutations, substitutions. A collaborator of the OULIPO régime, Bénabou, seeks to encourage others to spawn their personalised aphorisms, and proposes as an example this twist on Clausewitz: 'L'art est la continuation du hasard par d'autres moyens'. This example is significant, for

Oulipiens blending Surrealism and Classicism, 'favour constrictions and loathe randomness, except insofar as such generation of new material from old is potentially infinite (as in Queneau's Cent Mille Millions de poèmes. Classical as well as Modernist writers have worked to resuscitate clichés. In his Polite Conversation, as Pat Rogers points out, Swift's characters 'know what their word-board tells them'. Yet the effect is strangely full of life. Rogers goes on: 'The demented farce has something to do with the inexhaustible flow of stale expressions'. Also a great punner and ironist, Swift in this area too 'is constantly burrowing beneath the surface of humdrum conversational language, so as to bring up amusing or damaging implications unsuspected in normal usage'.

It does not go without saying that tropes can stall into tropisms, that twists can be forced and futile (like the vast majority of puns). This happens especially when the originating metaphor has virtually sunk without trace and is beyond raising. It is unprofitable to joke about the wing of a building ('the castle was wounded in the left wing'), or the arm of a chair (the carpenter had to put the chair's broken arm in a sling'). Much twisting, like much play, is half-hearted or lazy, imitative; we talk of 'idle pursuits'. Milking clichés can turn sour. The twister bandies words. 'Bandy' also suggests askew, as 'bent' connotes deviant or criminal. Even reactivated clichés have to be spaced out, as do puns, or they may grow wearisome, and slow down the helter-skelter pace of usual reading or talking. No doubt all writers, unless they have something to hide, beg to be read in slow motion, but this is baying for the moon, or pissing against the wind. Rejigged formulae have their greatest impact if the total work of which they are the highspots is also dedicated, like Madame Bovary or Queneau's Le Chiendent, to undermining habitual modes of thinking, feeling or expressing. Otherwise, many reversals have long since become mechanical new clichés ('Let's have some new clichés!' ordered Sam Goldwyn), of the 'man bites dog' type.

All of us like to spend what Cabrera Infante, a little after and away from Henry Miller, calls 'quiet days in cliché.' Even or especially twists lean on the commonplace they transmute; they preserve it by alluding to it. The 'permissive society', even with its 'repressive tolerance', cries 'Anything goes!' and feels 'nothing is sacred'. Four clichés in succession, but their conjunction makes a point. A true scholar with a fine sense of

humour like Gershon Legman still criticises 'the dubious merriment of the "perverted proverb"', sometimes shortened to 'perverb'. In the custom of literalising idiom people have come to expect the turnaround, to feel secure if it appears and frustrated if it does not. Marcus Cunliffe finds a troubling coincidence between capitalist practices and those of much contemporary humour and intellectual enquiry: 'The demand for "turnover" in the economic order causes a craving for "turnover" or rather "overturn" in the realm of imagination and the intellect'. He is frankly hostile to 'this relentless formulaic inversion, with its unearned knowing "novelty"'. Yet innovation by renewal is not always so methodical. There are happy accidents, windfall-proneness, as in serendipity. In themselves, clichés can contain plural meanings. In more senses than one, we can pull chestnuts out of the fire, at the risk, naturally, of burnt fingers. The idiom 'loose connections', for example, yields approximate association of ideas; a hint of madness; raffish acquaintances; a malfunctioning mechanism; distant contacts; to cast off moorings; and hit-or-miss coition. 'Different strokes for different folks' suggests varying ways of: swimming; administering corporal punishment; caressing; calligraphing; making friends with oarsmen; having a thrombosis; and making love. In both cases, not double but septuple entendre. Now, it is true that the specific context would indicate the proper meaning, but the realisation of other, improper meanings, once gained, colours all later responses to the phrase. Finally, in this area, my twist on a current series of double-talk: 'X do it.....' (e.g. 'Surfers do it standing up'). My proffering is 'Dons do it in their sleep', which is a quadruple entendre. On the literal/idiomatic level, it contains: dons teach in a comatose fashion; or, dons teach with no sweat. On the figurative/suggestive plane: dons make love without concentrating (the distraught professor syndrome); or, dons make love as easily as falling off a log. If clichés did not exist, we at-a-removers, we metamongers, would have to invent them.

It should be blatantly obvious that my personal cliché is the urge to see or to put puns everywhere. They are my passé-partout of the multiple French terms for cliché, my U.S. Cavalry. I never suffer, however, from that other unthinking reflex: the rush to apologise for puns. While I find obvious and pointless puns an especially excruciating form of automatism, which gives the listener a kind of mental lockjaw, I reject the implications of the French twist on 'jeux de mains. jeux de vilains' (roughly, no

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mucking about; literally, rogues are dextrous) -- 'jeux de mots, jeux de vilains' (wordplay is rogues' play). I relish the way effective puns can tip the wink, sous-entendre as well as double entendre. Since writing Puns, I have become aware of a gathering movement to 'recuperate' this mode, indeed to make it modish. This fits in, I take it, with the navel-reviews and general self-referentiality of much presentday literature and critical practice. Punning is playing language at its own game, for while human beings have collectively built up language, made it what it is, no individual can master it totally, and to that extent it escapes us and enjoys a kind of autonomous existence. Puns have always got everywhere; as Swift said, like fleas. There are even punning clichés. 'See Naples and die' (e poi Mori) is one such, for Mori is next door to Naples, and itself the scene of more than one lethal plague. And the Land of Nod, where some of you would no doubt like to be right now. Many undoubtedly do feel that punners are shysters, who play dirty tricks on others with words. For such critics, puns, which to me are the agents of central intelligence, should be spat upon and marginalised. Even confirmed wordplayers like Christopher Ricks occasionally ask themselves: 'Or am I imagining all this?' as they tuck into what strikes non-believers as a Barmecide Feast of language.

Are we in control of verbal associations? Our minds are mini-Rogets. We were all Rogeting words long before Roland Barthes egged us to roger them. Freud judged that, as with coincidences in action, language too can meet us half-way, through what he called 'linguistic compliance'. Though of course it takes two opposite motions to complete a true encounter; it takes two to tango. We can collaborate with language, as Ricks showed Orwell cooperating with cliché in his journalism. We do not have to follow rigid rails set down before us. This view grants us more dynamic choice than Lacan's influential decree that 'to the unconscious things are what they sound like. Paronomasia is one of the tropes that reveal the unconscious'. It seems that Lacan, with his often idiotic punning, tended to insinuate that he was the unconscious of his neophytes. I like the anecdote about Lacan confessing to Sartre his insane rage when he discovered his little daughter clumping about in his great clod-hoppers. Was this a case of following in the old man's footsteps, or stepping into dead man's shoes? For his

part, Lacan read this everyday childish event as a murder of the genitor. He could not stand reality punning back at him.

Whereas I believe that purposeful punning and twisting are a sign of life, for pessimists much within language tends towards death. Schopenhauer: 'The actual life of a thought lasts only until it reaches the point of speech.... As soon as our thinking has found words it ceases to be sincere or at bottom serious. when it begins to exist for others it ceases to live in us, just as the child severs itself from its mother when it enters into its own existence'. I find this passage curious. It suggests that others are needed to give the kiss-of-life to our stillborn thoughts, or a kind of eternal relay-race, in which the guttering torch is rekindled by the next carrier. The idea is gloomy for the individual, if promising for the species. Both Emerson and Max Müller considered words as 'fossil poetry'. Fossils may be durable, but they can hardly be brought back to life. Clichés are not fossils; they are more the living dead. Are rejuvenated clichés alive only in the sense that selected bits of our cadavers may still be useful to other livers? Is it the same cliché if it has been tampered with? To 'rejase' is to reuse junk as something else. Some rejased objects are identifiable, others unrecognisable.

Lakoff and Johnson, in Metaphors We Live By, thoroughly document how pervasive and systematic are our daily clichés. 'Time is money' proliferates into: 'I don't have enough time to spare for that', 'You're running out of time'. 'Is it worth your while?' and so on. The authors' own discourse is clichéic, and heavily redundant. (I have rarely read a more reiterative text. Strange how many academic works spell things out as if for patronised infants). Their emphasis on networks of metaphors might suggest that we are trapped inside our habitual utterances, or it would, if we were not able to modify and renew these moulds. Ricks, in a very fine distinction, calls for 'a vigilant - not beady-eyed -- engagement with clichés', though I feel he is preaching to the converted when he argues: 'Clichés invite you not to think -- but you may always decline the invitation, and what could better invite a thinking man to think? I think myself that many clichés which maybe should have caught their death long since lead a charmed life, can be given a new lease of life, can indeed be socially, the life and soul of the party. Clichés are as large as life and a fact of life. Do we always even understand them? They may be dated, or used in a private sense or context. Like proverbs they can

often seem paradoxical, enigmatic. 'Blind men and lame men copulate best'. With astigmatism and flat feet, I don't quite make it. In some traditional societies, proverbs act as a form of bondage (of the non-kinky variety), but also as a locus of competitiveness: proverb-jousts. Surely, we are often lulled into acceptance of received ideas by their very rhythm. Papal bull instructs the faithful to use the rhythm-method (also known as 'Vatican roulette'): safety in numbers, I suppose. The rhythm-method of clichés likewise numbs the mind, until we strike back.

I am not entirely convinced by McLuhan's sanguine faith that 'to release energy in the cliché needs the encounter of another cliché. But I know from a long marriage of two minds (and our sweet old etcetera) that my wife's writing style, cornucopiously spread with cliché but propelled by her passionate educational beliefs, has an invigorating impact on those who read it. I am less impressed when the dauntingly well-read Umberto Eco relaxes, becomes a Little Sir Echo, as when he writes of the film Casablanca: 'When all the stereotypes burst out shamelessly, we plumb Homeric profundity. Two clichés make us laugh but a hundred clichés move us, because we sense dimly that the clichés are talking among themselves, celebrating a reunion... Just as the extreme of pain meets sexual pleasure and the extreme of perversion borders on mystical energy, so too the extreme of banality allows us to catch a glimpse of the sublime'. We have heard this song before (play it again, Umb) from consenting and relenting aesthetes. It is a perfect example of High Camp.

There are less strident ways to defend, and indeed celebrate, clichés. They have their day, like any dog. Where would we be without such instantly applicable codes, such memory-joggers (that lovely French term, pense-bête), such professed solidarity? And think of the opposite: the desire to be original at whatever cost can produce the most godawful tripe. Michael Frayn is reluctant to dismiss as banal our common kit of metaphors: "At the back of one's mind", "to run over the alternatives", "something stirred in her memory", "he groped for words", they're brilliant! A whole literature, really, trodden down into the soil like last year's leaves, fertilising, unrecognised and forgotten, whatever pushes above the ground now'. 'The poet', says Max Jacob, 'measures out his clichés' (I would add: if he is T.S.Eliot, with coffee-spoons). 'He cannot do without them, or he will be incomprehensible'. This view combines the

tactics of spacing out and of padding, two essential parts of any discourse. Where would we be without clichés (I repeat, as clichés quintessentially do)? Much of our complaining, our illusions of mental superiority, our joking, our creativity (especially in its recycling aspect) would have no material to work on or to kick against. Jean Paulhan wonders why clichés are singled out for opprobrium, when rhythm, rhyme, literary genres, and fixed social forms like the family, have many of the same characteristics. His simple answer is: they are shorter, easier to focus criticism on. His study of the formulaic, competitive, but sociable and productive hain-tenys of Madagascar enables him to think well of clichés, against the élitists who decry them. He finds (and I concur) that the whole phenomenon of cliché is a polysemous mystery, a baggy monster a bottomless pit.

Paul Valéry, whose mind was quicker on its pins than most, denied there was such a thing as an idée fixe: 'Nothing is more walkabout than an idée fixe'. His essay on the topic, with its set-up of two thinking men clambering about vigorously over seaside rocks and exchanging machine-gun sprays of thought, enacts this idea about ideas. Or does it? As someone once said of an American pundit 'He writes like a revolving door'. That is: always on the move, but in circles. No wonder Valéry was so addicted to the Ouroboros motif, the snake biting its own tail.

While it is obvious that a heavy dose of clichés can paralyse the brain and kill off a conversation, I do not want to believe, with Pietra, that their deadliness reminds us of emptiness and death: 'Le lieu commun ne dit pas rien; il dit le Rien' (The commonplace does not say nothing; it conveys Nothingness). Less macabre is Herschberg Pierrot's description, 'cet ineffable qu'est le cliché'. Yet Samuel Beckett of all people, dismissed such talk of the ineffable by reminding that all of us know perfectly well how to eff. Contrarywise, I need to remind myself that, as one exquisite proverbial cliché says, fine words butter no parsnips.

The instrument we all play expertly is the second fiddle. A keen student of slogans, Olivier Reboul, stresses that intellectuals too need slogans, high-cultural ones, such as quotations from authors or illustrious critics, because being an intellectual and trying to think for oneself is a lonely and anguishing occupation. 'Understandably the intellectual', he says, 'is tempted to rally to a clan, to think in ready-made formulae,

which free him from himself'. How vulnerable we are to foreign aids; we need brain-sized condoms. I see twisting, in all its forms, as such a prophylactic. To pick up on my opening motif *à cheval*, we are astride clichés (and this particular horse's colour is, of course, chestnut). They bear us, transport us (in both the utilitarian and the exalted sense): they can run away with us. But we have reins and knees and voices, to change their course. We can mix clichés, like metaphors, and end up in that challenging position: between the frying-pan and the deep blue sea. Or idioms can telescope, like this one I once heard: 'There's more ways than one to swing a cat'.

One last thought. If the theory proves correct that the universe is heading for a state where everything will be thrown into reverse gear, and time will run backwards, then people will have to rethink all our accumulated clichés. And coin some new ones.

Walter Redfern is professor of French at the University of Reading. His most recent publications include: Queneau: 'Zazie dans le métro' (London, 1980), Puns (Oxford, 1984). Clichés and Coinages will be published by Blackwell in September 1989.