

Forum

Forum Policy: Members of the Association are invited to submit letters commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of scholarly and critical interest generally. Decision to publish will be made at the Editor's discretion, and authors of articles commented on will be invited to reply. Letters should be fewer than one thousand words of text; footnotes are discouraged.

Hopkins' Linguistic Deviations

To the Editor:

I found Jacob Korg's paper on "Hopkins' Linguistic Deviations" (*PMLA*, 92 [1977], 977–86) absorbing and stimulating reading. However, his thesis, that Hopkins' unconventional language works not referentially but self-reflexively, seems to me based on assumptions not beyond challenge. Korg explicitly assumes that "language that is occupied with the self-conscious investigation of its own properties cannot also be referential; a text cannot simultaneously test its relation to reality and offer predications about reality" (p. 977). On the contrary, I think that all language does, in fact, always do both, and various other things besides. Roman Jakobson, in defining the "poetic function" of language as distinguished from its referential, emotive, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions ("Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960]), makes clear that these functions are not mutually exclusive, but are all exhibited in all uses of language; the uses may be distinguished according to which function is dominant.

There is a further assumption made by Korg that, again, I would question:

The writer who aims primarily at representation will not quarrel with linguistic conventions but will exploit the enormous power of consensus they embody, in order to achieve the transparency of style that exhibits his subject with least interference. (p. 977)

Korg draws the analogy, borrowed from Ortega y Gasset, that

just as the eye can focus either on a windowpane or on the scene outside it, but not on both, the artist must choose to direct his audience's attention either to what his work represents or to the technical means he uses in creating it. (pp. 981–82)

But the eye *can* focus both on the windowpane and on the scene outside, not, to be sure, simultaneously, but in rapid succession. In looking out a window, we perceive, say, the plants on the windowsill, the pattern and texture of the drapes, the paint of the win-

dowframe, the streaks on the glass, the shrubbery just outside, the expanse of lawn, the hedge bordering it, a car passing in the street beyond—and so on, to the limits of visibility—not in an instant, but in rapid succession and alternation. Reading a text, like looking at a field of view, is a *process* with duration, culminating in a synthesis of what has been apprehended progressively.

Korg adduces examples supposed to make "self-evident" his point that representation requires conventionality of language. On these lines from "The Sea and the Skylark"

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,
His rash-fresh re-winded new-skeinèd score
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl . . .

he comments "the unconventional constructions make it difficult even to identify the subject, and certainly render it less plain and vivid than the simple 'I see the city pigeons veer, / I mark the tower swallows run . . .' from 'The Alchemist in the City'" (p. 980). Unconventional, "difficult" language indubitably directs the reader's attention to itself. But to take the difficulty of "deviant" language as prohibitive of an effective representational function is to confuse referentiality with ready comprehensibility. Attention to the structure and texture of the message can, in fact, lead to an attention to its signification. It might be argued that writing that resists the intelligence almost successfully—as Wallace Stevens said every good poem should—ends by bringing the referent before the reader with exceptional force.

Korg evidently does appreciate this operation of Hopkins' language, for he declares:

Hopkins' unconventional poetic techniques aim, not at the recognition that is the goal of representation, but at estranging, unconforming effects that animate and enlarge perception. (p. 982)

This suggests a more adequate characterization of the effects of the two passages compared by Korg earlier: surely an enlarged perception of the lark soaring and singing is produced by the language of "The Sea and the Skylark," as opposed to our mere recognition of the pigeons and swallows of the early poem.

Korg is apparently by no means insensitive to the complex operation of Hopkins' language, but the model of linguistic function in terms of which he attempts to discuss that operation is inadequate for the purpose. According to this model there are two basic functions of language, the referential and the self-reflexive, and these are opposed and mutually exclusive. But these two functions are not, after all, incompatible; moreover, in laying the logical foundation of his argument, Korg fails to take account of other functions of language, to say nothing of the possible complex interrelations of these functions in actual texts. Thus it is that what is perhaps his most accurate and useful generalization about the operation of Hopkins' language comes in an aside: commenting on the effects achieved by the language in "Spelt from Sibyl's Leaves," he says, "If these effects can be called mimetic, they imitate what has been envisioned, not observed . . ." (p. 984). This is a function different from either reference to an object of the external world or direction of attention to the text in and for itself. Its acknowledgment is an insight that has, unfortunately, no place in Korg's model as initially presented.

Korg's treatment of Hopkins' much discussed coinage, "inscape," also provokes objections. Korg writes, ". . . while [Hopkins] had much to say about the inscapes to be found in nature, the evidence seems to show that he considered the inscapes of poetry to be qualities located in the poem itself, not borrowed from nature by representational effects" (p. 981). Korg finds Hopkins' identification of inscape with "design, pattern" inconsistent with what he takes to be the usual interpretation of the term as signifying "an especially faithful perception of the individuality of an object, a scrupulously exact mimesis" (p. 981). An attentive study of Hopkins' uses of the word—as noun and as verb—will show that the concept involves individuality *and* design *and* perception: "inscape" has reference to the individual design of an integral whole, as perceived by a sensitive observer-interpreter. A poem, as a made linguistic object, will have, if it has unity, its own inscape—its own individual design. The properties of language are such, however, that the poem can, at the same time, convey the inscape of an object not itself, an object perceptual, conceptual, or imaginative. It is by no means evident that "the inscapes of the poem obscure, instead of enhancing, the inscapes of the world" (p. 981). There is nothing to prevent the attention compelled by deviant language from returning redoubled upon the experience articulated by that language.

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Mr. Korg replies:

Actually, the views about deviation and poetic language in my article correspond pretty well with Eleanor Berry's and with those in the essay by Jakobson, which is, after all, cited in my notes. Berry fails to appreciate this because she bases her comments on a few sentences isolated from the article and ignores the rest.

She tries to saddle the article with the view that deviation excludes reference. The sentences she quotes about "self-conscious investigation" and "predications" may be used to create this impression, but they appear in support of the main contention, immediately preceding, that "representation cannot be the sole, or even the dominant, effect of linguistic deviation," a view that harmonizes, as far as it goes, with Jakobson's analysis of the multiple functions of language. The argument amounts to saying that, among the functions of language given by Jakobson, deviation should be associated with metalanguage, not with reference.

The article consistently recognizes that language has multiple functions, one of which may dominate without excluding the others, and it pays particular attention to reference. It admits that "Language . . . cannot escape entirely from either its representational or its expressive functions"; it cites a passage from de Man on the coexistence of representational and nonrepresentational elements; it says that deviations "exert pressure against the orthodox comprehensibility of language"; it describes some deviant language from Hopkins as "effective as objective description"; and it maintains the view that representation is present, though not primary, in the deviational situation up to the last sentence, where it repetitively alludes to "the referential function [language] cannot wholly escape."

Berry's observations on Ortega y Gasset's optical image do not, I think, involve any real contradiction, for she admits that self-reflexive and representational elements can only be apprehended successively, not simultaneously. Reading is, no doubt, a synthesis; but there is nothing to prevent its being a synthesis of the representational and the nonrepresentational. She cites the article as saying that "representation requires conventionality of language." The actual words are: "The most representational language . . . is that which adheres to convention; deviation must involve some sacrifice of imitative effect," which is, I believe, a different statement. My observation that the subject of some of Hopkins' unconventional language is difficult to identify is not, as Berry surely realizes, a demand that poetry ought to be easy to read; it is, fairly obviously, a way of saying that the dominant function is not representation.