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Windy Words:
Towards a Pneumatic Linguistics

Þench ʒet on oþer half. hwet is word bute wind.

I. Word is but wind

"On the other hand," says the early 13th-century *Ancrene Wisse*, "consider: what is a word but wind?"[1] The writer is addressing a group of anchoresses and advising them on how to deal with anger. Part of his[2] argument concerns the emptiness of words and the vulnerability of the anchoress who falls at the puff of such a word: "Too weak is her purpose if a puff of wind, a word, may topple her and cast her into sin, and who will not feel dismay at a wind-fallen anchoress?"[3] In this essay I shall attempt to draw together two apparently different interpretations of this passage, the pneumonic and the spiritual, and set them to work in the search for the nature of language.

The *Ancrene Wisse* is one of a group of English spiritual texts from a period when the English language was at its lowest ebb. French was the language of the nobles and much of the gentry, and Latin that of the Church. It is a manual for a group of anchoresses in the West Midlands, generally assumed to be written in English

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1   *Ancrene wisse* f. 33 verso; Tolkien 1962: 65. In the body of this essay I use y and th for original and þ when quoting *Ancrene Wisse* and *Ayenbite*.

2   For brevity's sake I fall in line with the general assumption of the writer's gender, although it must be said that there is no conclusive evidence. See for instance Savage 2003 for a discussion of the participation of the anchorites themselves in the writing of the book.

3   'To wac ha is i-strengthet thet a windes puf, a word, mei afellen ant warpen into sunne, ant hwa nule thunche wunder of ancre wind-feallet?' (Tolkien 1962: 65).

for an audience which had no Latin.[4] My point of departure in this essay is the question of the language in which the word is puffed – as Jacques Derrida has pointed out, it matters in which language the question of language matters.[5] Our writer peppers his text with Latin quotations, usually translated for the anchoresses. Here, for instance, he quotes Gregory the Great, Impius vivit pio velit nolit (p. 56)[6] 'The impious man lives for (the benefit of) the pious man whether he will or no,' explaining that the hostility of the ungodly is as a wind that should fan the anchoresses' love of God; and a little later he quotes St Bernard of Clairvaux: *Quid irritaris quid inflammaris ad verbi flatum, qui nec carnem vulnerat, nec inquinat mentem* (p. 57)[7] 'How come thou art irritated and inflamed at an inflated word, which neither wounds the flesh nor harms the mind' – clearly an early version of 'Sticks and stones may break thy bones, but words will never harm thee.' There can be little doubt that the writer's thoughts, at least when his pen was in his hand, ran on his Latin reading, and we are justified in claiming that any cleric writing a devotional work in English at this time would have pondered the Latin expression of the statement 'Word is but wind.' The matter of language in this case is the word, and he could hardly write the word 'word' without remembering that the word was made flesh, and dwelt amongst us. In the linguistic context of medieval England the incarnation of the word must surely be a matter of translation, of uneasy shiftings: is it *word, parole, verbum* or even *logos* which is translated (carried over) from the spiritual to the embodied state? These terms in these different languages speak in significantly dissimilar accents of body and spirit even before they each and individually become Christ. Further, the other term in our passage, *wind*, carries with it (translates) a wide conceptual spectrum, from the bodily puff of the villainous English expletive that topples

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4   Lock (2004: 209, fn. 7 p. 228) discusses suggestions that *Ancrene Wisse* was originally composed in Latin. I rely on Lock's essay for some crucial points in this part of my discussion.

5   'On ne devrait jamias passer sous silence la question de la langue dans laquelle se pose la question de la langue.' – 'One should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised.' Derrida 1985: 166, 210.

6   Pope Gregory (d. 604), *Commentaries on Job (Moralia)* in Migne 1815–1875: 168–69.

7   St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), *Traité de la fuite du monde* in Raynaud 1840: 154.

the frail unwary anchoress, to the wind – or spirit – that moves upon the waters.

At what point does it start or stop becoming important whether I am discussing the writer's own meaning, or the meaning I am reading out of the text (an extrapolation of the text or a new beginning?), or the text's own independence of both the writer and the reader? And at what point do these movements start and stop for you the reader of *my* text? We must reaffirm the continued relevance of this by now familiar question, so often put aside; my intention is not to seek insights into the world-view of 13th-century anchorites and their mentors, important though that may be, but into the movements of language which inform these views, and which continue their work as long as they survive as texts. My question, what is the Latin translation of 'word is but wind'? is neither trivial nor solely socio-historical; it invites us to examine more closely an essential component of language, the nature of words and winds.

The *Ancrene Wisse* has already given us a lead in the quotation from Bernard, who speaks of *verbi flatus*, the bodily belching (or farting) word which inflames the anchoress to anger instead of wafting her into higher realms. The motif of the empty puff of words is a Biblical one: in Jeremiah 5.13, "And the prophets shall become wind, and the word is not in them;" and in Job 6.26, "… the speeches of one that is desperate, which are as wind." The term used in these passages in the Vulgate is *ventus,* the normal Latin term for 'wind' as a phenomenon of weather.

However, if we turn to the original Hebrew a different picture emerges. The Hebrew term for 'wind' here, *ruach*, is overwhelmingly used in the Scriptures to apply to the wind which is at the same time the breath of God; the corresponding Greek and Latin terms are *pneuma* and *spiritus*. Psalm 33.6 is of particular interest to us, since the terms 'wind' and 'word' come together; and here the King James Version renders *ruach* as 'breath': "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the hosts of them by the breath of his mouth." Earlier translations such as Wycliffe (late 14c.), and the Catholic Douay-Rheims version (1582) have "the spirit of his mouth"; Luther has *Hauch* 'breath'.

John 3.8 is a particularly fine example of the tension between English and its sources. The King James Version has "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." In this passage the original Greek uses a single word, *pneuma*, for both 'wind' and 'spirit', which the Vulgate echoes with *spiritus*.[8] We can be sure that the underlying term is the Hebrew *ruach.* In giving us two terms for the original one, the King James Version fails to articulate the original understanding that the wind that blows as it will, and the spirit of life that God breathes into his creatures are one and the same thing. The Catholic Douay-Rheims uses only 'spirit' where King James has 'wind' and 'spirit' in this passage, as do earlier English translations: the Anglo-Saxon text (probably late 10c.) has *gāst* 'spirit' (Bright 1904: 12), and Wycliffe (late 14c.) has only 'spirit'. But Luther's translation has 'Wind' in the first place and 'Geist' in the second, and most later translations into English, including Tyndale, distinguish between the two terms.

This estrangement between 'wind' and 'spirit' obscures John's allusion to one of the most beautiful and enigmatic of the oldest Biblical texts at this point, Genesis 1.2: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." Here again the Spirit of God is a wind and a breath, *ruach*, *pneuma.* The English translation has lost the image of the wind on the sea, and has lost the ability in one word to express the spirit of this wind.

Clearly, *wind*, *breath* and *spirit* are different concepts in Modern English which fall nicely into quite different slots in whatever construction we imagine for our concepts. But what are we to do with the Greek text? Is the first *pneuma* in John 3.8 to be regarded as a cyclone over the eastern Mediterranean, while the second is a member of the Christian Trinity? If so, the two *pneumata* are homographs with different meanings, like the English *lie*, and the Greek text is indulging in an elaborate pun. Puns are admittedly

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8   This example, and indeed the burden of what I have to say in this essay about *pneuma* and the semantic development of words such as 'spirit', are culled from Barfield's essay "The Meaning of 'Literal'" (Barfield 1985).

commonplace in the Scriptures,[9] but this is not what is happening here.

A conventional strategy would be to assume that the ancient texts were more ready to employ metaphor and analogy than their late medieval and renaissance translations, and that this is one of the symptoms of the tension between Latin and English. But 'tension' is hardly the right word: something has already snapped. If we turn to our dictionaries we find lists of several 'meanings' for ancient concepts of this sort. Thus *ruach* is given in 15 pages of Volume VII of Clines's *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Clines 2010: 427–440) as having the primary meanings 'wind, breath, spirit,' all of which have a host of secondary meanings (as these three terms would do in modern English). Clearly, however, this elaboration of meaning is not a feature of the Hebrew word, but of its English definitions, which suggest an apparent fragmentation into the broad semantic range of our time. This is usually explained with the idea that primitive plodding man, who already had a word for the wind in his hair, later acquired a spiritual bent and invented an unseen world of spirits that needed a new terminology. However, instead of making new words for new concepts, as he had always done before, he invented metaphor and poetry to voice his emerging spiritual imagination. If, with Owen Barfield, we cannot bring ourselves to accept this contrived scenario,[10] we might be tempted to assume that the ancients simply had a more limited vocabulary, making few words do for a wide range of ideas.

But this would be to see things from a very parochial perspective. Perhaps the most heartening development in Western thought over the last few hundred years has been the slow dawning of an understanding that other people think differently, and that this means that *we* think differently too. This is a major departure, although it is still hardly more than embryonic. In this territorial world it is natural that it should occur primarily as a spatial understanding, between opposing factions; but we must also learn to apply it in the dimension of time. This is the hermeneutic approach, the attempt

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9   See for instance Holquist 2001: 62–65 on Peter, Babel and the Tetragrammaton. On the Tetragrammaton, see for instance Barfield 1988: 113–115.

10   See for instance Barfield 1988: 79–83 and 122–125; and Barfield 1985.

at avoiding, in our understanding of the past, those ideas and sets of mind which belong only to the present.[11] From any standpoint, the viewer necessarily sees any other standpoint as limited: we see what is missing according to our canon, but are by definition blind to what *we* lack according to *their* canon. In this case, it seems we have developed the habit of standing in a stiff breeze and *not* experiencing it as a spiritual force, for example the Word of God. The modern sheep farmer blows down the throat of a new-born lamb to encourage it to take its first breath, without an awareness of his own breath as a microcosm of the Spirit of Life. Today we can speak of seeking 'inspiration' in nature without hearing the Latin words for 'breathe into' which are still discernible in the word. In short, it is clear that there is a radical difference in our conception of the world and that of our ancestors: we have fragmented these concepts into not more detailed, but *different* ones. The Hebrew and Greek languages of the scriptures go back to a time when the wind on the hillside *was* the breath of a spiritual being, and so there was no need for two different words. We breathed it, and it was the spirit which gave us life; we were in-spired, in-breathed by a higher – or at least *other* – force. *Ruach* and *pneuma* simply named that force.

Of course, the written word is always conservative, and the fragmentation of these and other integral concepts had certainly begun by the time the scriptures were written. We can see this in the Greek and Latin translations of the *ruach* of empty verbiage of Jeremiah and Job which I quoted above: here the Greek has *anemos* and the Latin *ventus*: the fragmentation of concepts has already begun. English translations before King James are usually content to use 'spirit' where King James has 'breath' or 'wind', a fragmentation also fully apparent in Luther. I have not the expertise to say to what extent the writer of *Ancrene Wisse* would have made our distinctions between wind and spirit. That is not the tenor of my argument. I am simply making the point that in writing "word is but wind" he is likely also to have framed the thought in his mind in Latin, and we are entitled to ask the nature of his 'wind' in this

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11   Hans-Georg Gadamer would of course take this further: see for instance "The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem" in Gadamer 2008: 3–17 (especially p. 9), where he affirms the intrinsic nature of prejudice in our modes of understanding.

phrase: was it *ventus* 'wind' or *spiritus* 'breath, spirit'? For we would be speculating indeed if we assumed that this choice of possibilities had not also occurred to him.

I have already stated my resolve to avoid discussing any writerly intention, and yet now I am speculating on a possible esoteric meaning behind the puff of the word in *Ancrene Wisse*. I ask the reader to bear with me briefly – I have a point to make. The writer introduces his point with the phrase *Thench yet on other half* 'On the other hand, consider.' Let us see for a moment how far we can go with the idea that *on other half* is hinting at another mode of reasoning, 'on the other side' of the discourse, inviting us to choose the other reading: *Quid verbum nisi spiritus?* 'What is word but wind-as-breath, wind-as spirit?'[12]

The *Ancrene Wisse* was indeed translated, about a century later, into Latin. The manuscripts at this point use *ventus*, the metrological wind: *Iterum cogita, quid est verbum nisi ventus* 'there again, consider: what is a word but wind' (D'Evelyn 1944: 37). This was the choice of the translator in another century, and does not enter into my argument, except in one small detail. The introductory phrase *Thench yet on other half* becomes in the later Latin *Iterum cogita,* 'there again, consider,' as studiously down-to-earth as its choice of *ventus.* If there is any hint of the esoteric in the original, the later Latin version has suppressed it.

On other half is a common phrase in Middle English, used to introduce a new turn in the discussion. The phrase can however be used in a more mystic context: the mid-14c. *Ayenbite of Inwyt* or 'Remorse of Conscience', in the section *Vor to lyerny sterue* 'Learning how to die,' speaks of the boundary between life and death and the division of the soul from the body, using *half* to signify either of the material and spiritual aspects of life: *and yef* [if] *thet bodi is of this half: the herte / and the gost* [spirit]: *is of other half.* A little later, speaking of the 'little stream' that separates life from death, we read: *Dyath* [death] *is of this half, lif* [life] *of othre half.*[13] Interest-

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12 *Spiritus* would be the preferred term in classical Latin for the bodily breath. My thanks to Sigurður Pétursson, who to my delight suggested this translation before I had mentioned my own preference. Tibi certe spiro, Sigurde.

13 Morris 1866: 72 (fol. 21 in the manuscript).

ingly, this paragraph in the *Ayenbite* begins with the phrase *Yet eft ine othre manere* 'Yet again in another manner,' in the same way as our passage from the *Ancrene Wisse* – but here avoiding *half.* This may of course be coincidental, or a change of usage over time, but it may also be avoiding *half* because of its mystical use in the rest of the discussion.

I fear I have led my reader into a trap. I am not prepared to argue for a spiritual interpretation of our passage in *Ancrene Wisse,* even if I actually rather like the idea. Instead it is precisely the speculative nature of my discourse which I wish to focus on. Whether or not I am justified in reading *on othre half* as an esoteric hint by our writer, the fact remains that I am dealing with a palpable readerly construct. I ask my reader to focus not on the cogency of this construct, but on its existence. It clearly lies there in the text – I could not have read it into any phrase I chose. It was presented to me by the words themselves, for if the writer did not mean them, where else could I have found them? This is not a so-called Freudian slip, since the words are not mine: if the idea came from my own subconscious then it was an autonomous (because prior) sleight of language which gave it expression. And in fact this argument would also hold if it *were* a Freudian slip; and for that matter it would hold if I were simply remarking on the weather or telling someone I loved them. Language would be there ready for my use, just as *on othre half* lies there waiting on the page for me as I read speculatively into the text.

We may not flinch at this point. We must concede that since we are dealing with *pneuma*, our discourse is *pneumatological*: but how are we to understand this term in a modern context? It is first used in English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, with the meaning 'spiritual' rather than 'material.' The same is true of the term *pneumatic*, which in contrast has only recently lost its spiritual scope, retaining only a material, or rather technological reference.[14] It seems the dominant spirit (!) of the age is no longer able to

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14   The *OED* quotes Dr Johnson's note on *Hamlet* I.i. "According to the pneumatology of that time, every element was inhabited by its peculiar order of Spirits." The same may be said of 'pneumatics': the *OED* quotes Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1869): "what are called metaphysics or pneumatics were set in opposition to physics," and the *Contemporary Review* of the same year, referring to "metaphysical pneumatics woven out of scholastic brains."

express the whole breadth of *ruach* and *pneuma* and *spiritus* in one term without assuming a 'literal' or core concept, probably the most material one, 'wind' – and relegating the other meanings to some sort of figurative language. I am unable to break out of these terminological straits, for here again language has the upper hand. What I can do at this point, however, is to affirm that I would *like* to be able to use the term 'pneumatology' to refer to the *pneumatic* (in the modern sense) processes of speech *without denying the immaterial processes*, and that I look forward to a time when this might become more generally possible. This essay is intended as a nudge in that direction.

I am in very good company. Heidegger says: "Speech understood in the fullness of its meaning transcends – and does so always – the physical-sensible side of phonetics. Language, as sense that is sounded and written, is in itself suprasensuous, something that constantly transcends the merely sensible" (Heidegger 1982: 35). Heidegger's formulation points towards the idea that language transcends *itself*, that the material phenomena of language, its speaking and writing, is transcendent *as* language. This can only be understood as granting language a good deal of autonomy. As Humboldt had said, in his careful and slightly confused way, "Language … possesses an autonomy that visibly presents itself to us, though inexplicable in nature, and, as seen from this aspect, is no production of activity, but an involuntary emanation of the spirit, no work of nations, but a gift fallen to them by their inner destiny" (Humboldt 24). Humboldt's thought is clouded here by his perceptions of nationality and a hierarchy of their languages and cultures, and Heidegger, too, is not altogether free from such thoughts; but that aside, I wish to make their thoughts my own.

This transcendent autonomy has often been demonstrated: anyone who has written on the *remainder* of language has provided ample evidence – Lecercle (1990) gives a very fine overview of the matter. In what follows I shall fall to the temptation of illustrating again an already well-illustrated point.

II. Morning's minion

> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, …

The first line of Hopkins's 'The Windhover' (1877) declares the burden of the sonnet, to be resolved and completed in terms which I shall claim are indices towards a much wider, transcendent domain. The first line sets the framework for this completeness: the casual adverbial of time, *this morning*, is transfigured by its repetition into the immanent morning, the king-dom of daylight. But now the repeated pattern m-n-n of *morning* demands *minion*, and Hopkins accepts the proffered word – language speaks through him. The beloved underling, minor accident of the morning, a small, long-tailed, wind-blown European falcon variously called a windhover or a kestrel, takes from the morning the burden of the poem.

In spite of Hopkins's metrical characterization of the poem, "Falling paeonic rhythm, sprung and outriding,"[15] the first line is a regular iambic pentameter, but to be so it ends in the middle of a word. For a brief moment the King is named, but it is as if this moment had never been, as if the language had bridled momentarily, instantly to recover and herald the dauphin, the prince of the kingdom, Christ our Lord to whom the sonnet is dedicated, the beloved chevalier (line 11), riding on the wind. The morning, the kingdom of daylight, not mentioned again after the second line, remains the unspoken subject of the poem; and of this kingdom the king remains hidden throughout, behind these forms, Aquinas's *latens veritas* (Britain 1962: 257). All that is said of the grace, power and beauty of the little falcon harks back to the unsaid.

The reverberations[16] are intense, and yet they subside as the sonnet progresses, to the mundane, the 'shéer plód' (line 12) of man's treading. And as the day fades into the evening in which this morning's morning is remembered, the same beauty is echoed in the dying embers of the evening fire, and with a sigh, *Ah, my dear*, the poet addresses again the beloved being that listens to him,

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15   Hopkins, 1941: 29. For the metrical note, see p. 106.

16   Not, alas, a reflex of *verbum*, unless the reader wishes; language has bridled again.

embodied as the morning, the windhover and the dying gold-vermillion embers, and all beyond these.

> The Windhover:
> To Christ our Lord
>
> I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
> dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding
> Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
> High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
> In his ecstasy! then off, off forth on swing,
> As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend: the hurl and gliding
> Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
> Stirred for a bird,— the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!
>
> Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
> Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
> Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
>
> No wonder of it: shéer plód makes plough down sillion
> Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
> Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

Hopkins's sonnet is pregnant with the larger domain in which it is composed. I have written elsewhere of the explicit 'indices' that centre a text within its horizon, and the implicit 'pollices' that point to coordinates beyond that horizon.[17] I have discussed the proliferation of voices that seem to cluster around these pointers, and associated them with the familiar concepts of *discours indirect libre* and "unspeakable language."[18] Hopkins offers the sprung rhythm of his poetry for bodily delivery, and he punctuates his text with accents and small capitals accordingly; it seems he regards his

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17   Pétur Knútsson 2010. *Index* is the Latin for the pointing finger; *pollex* is the thumb.

18   "With novelistic discourse language, as writing, enters for the first time into the realm of the unspeakable … The unspeakable enters discourse, occupies it, and demands silence" (Lock 2001: 75). – "This emancipation of the single word, its diastasis in a plurality of voices, also inevitably ushers into the text a host of gestures from outside, transforming it with multitextual plurality: the explicit reference to another text, the bent finger pointing over the local horizon, demands the same mute intonation" (Pétur Knútsson 2012: 203).

own poetry as monologic, single-voiced. But how does the reader intone the king who disappears as soon as the whole word is spoken? How is the *Ah* of *ah, my dear* (rhyme and reiteration of the earlier apostrophe, *O my chevalier*) to be spoken aloud? Here are the points in which language has the upper hand, transcending the abilities of the individual poet and of the individual reader, and transcending the greater context of which it, language itself, can speak in words. This transcendence is pneumatological, both word and spirit.

In fact, this synthesis in one term is unavoidable. For we cannot accept that these movements be wilfully ignored in a treatment of linguistic structure – or for that matter that they are confined to so-called 'poetic' language. They exist in the puff of all words, the non-materiality with which Heidegger imbues his understanding of *Saying*, of the thought which he and his interlocutor in "A Dialogue on Language" are so loath to address in material words (Heidegger 1982: 1–54). But at the same time these words depend-pneumatalogically-on the animal bodiness of the *verbi flatus*.

If we are to justify the synthesis, I believe we may do so by pointing to the autonomy of language, its existence prior to utterance, in the understanding of Heidegger's or Gadamer's formulation that man does not speak language: language speaks man. Is there a bodily sense in which we can accept this approach?

III. Where is language?

There is no seed as fertile as the seed of language. It travels without wind or current, and takes root in any soil. Its spore lies dormant where mankind has not yet trod. Yet when I asked, in disbelief, *Ubique?* and the answer came at once: *et hic*, I felt a mild surprise; for here, at least, on the mountainside, I had expected silence.

How foolish! How feeble my concept of silence![19] The wind whistled in my ears, and amongst the stones; a plover was calling. My silence was merely an absence of language, even simply a constitutive pause in the dialogue, the pause before the careful

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19 "Silence as emptiness, as absence of discourse, seems to be beyond modernity's means of attainment" (Lock 2001: 76).

answer, the pause that follows the lie. For I had in any case been talking to myself whenever I found breath in the climb, hearing only my own silences. Wind in me and me in the wind. And so a perilous question arises: if silence is a feature of language, when does language ever start, or ever stop?

The questions What? and Where? and When? are not clearly differentiated: one may supplant another. A studied reply to the question What is language? may be to indicate its time and location: Here it is, at this time. The question means: Where/when does its form and matter reside? Where is its body, and its structure? Does it reside in us, or we in it? (And what would be the bearing of any difference between these two?)

Let us put aside for the moment the problem of location of the human mind, and disregard the story of its peregrination, with Aristotle as travel guide, around the human body.[20] For the sake of the argument we will assume that, as modern science tells us, the mind resides in the brain. And let us similarly put aside the fact that the story of our understanding of human consciousness has not achieved closure either, if it ever will.[21] Let us accept for the sake of the argument that the human mind is a result of bioelectric activity in the neurons of the brain, with a range of semi-autonomous circuits in the spinal chord. This is no worse a metaphor than many; we have turned our back on the vapours and humours of medieval mental science, and on the valves and furnaces of the industrial revolution. Today our technology offers us electronic circuits, and so the late twentieth and early twenty-first century human brain is visualised as a computer: this is at least no less fitting than a crucible. We can perhaps see hints of future brains in the writings of scientists such as Roger Penrose, who would allow the principles of sub-nuclear indeterminacy to make quantum computers of our mental processes (Penrose 1990); but we must wait for the next undreamt-of technological paradigm before we can start sneering at the naivety of the computer metaphor. For the present, then, language flickers in the synapses of the brain. But only there?

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20 See for instance Gross 1995.

21 See Þorsteinn Vilhjálmsson 1996 for a rational-scientific approach to the problem of scientific metaphor which takes a similar tack to mine.

It is standard practice, in our world today, to reify concepts such as 'language' to such a pitch of concretion that we can locate them in time and space. The 20th-century insights into the enormous complexity of human language and the almost incredible propensity of small children to acquire it coincided – perhaps concomitantly – with the invention of computer technology, and it became almost inevitable that linguists would suggest that the human brain was 'preformatted' to enable rapid language acquisition. The predictive success of this hypothesis and the relative lack of counter- evidence has obscured the fact that it is hypothetical. Computers retain configured states which are popularly known as 'memories', and this metaphor has been so readily catapulted back on to our understanding of ourselves that the most respected linguists of our time commonly – and in all earnestness – refer to the linguistic propensities of human minds as being the result of 'hard-wiring' of neural circuits in the brain. This acutely painful notion is widely accepted as a scientific fact, such is the vitality of uncritical technological metaphor.

Thus the observed fact of almost automatic human language acquisition, the quasi-systematic nature of language structure, the roughly spatial organization of apparent brain activity, and the structure of modern computer technology, have coalesced in a rigidly bounded tautology outside which no linguistic work is perceived as valid. Let us pause to remember that this is an aspect of what Heidegger called "the complete Europeanization of the earth and of man," whereupon his Japanese interlocutor rejoined: "Many people consider this the triumphal march of reason" (Heidegger 1982: 15).

Reason is, in the last analysis, a matter of faith; at least in the validity of its foundations, the *and,* the *if* and the *is*. The computer metaphor for the brain is not, in fact, particularly apposite, at least for those who believe that natural systems are blind, that nature *builds forward* rather than unfolds. For the metaphor suggests prior design in the form of the entelechies that clearly reside in the computer, which is a tool manufactured by humans for their own purposes. This ubiquitous double-think occurs as a sort of conceptual diglossia: we use metaphor as concrete reality until we change the

matter of our discourse, perhaps in mid-sentence, and admit the trope. Thus it is possible to read Gadamer and applaud the felicity of his image of language working somehow in us and around us, his brilliant parallels between the unconscious flow of our language and the glorious oblivion of the game: "the very fascination of the game for the playing conscience roots precisely into its being taken up into a movement that has its own dynamic" (Gadamer 2008: 56). But whenever we return to our 'hard' sciences we are quick to pack the whole panoply of language back into the neurological circuits of the diminutive human skull. If we do not do this, we are accused of metaphysics.

It may be that I may not evade the charge of metaphysics in this essay as a whole, but I can clearly deny it at this point: my contention is that it is not necessary for strict positivist science to locate language solely in cerebral neurological activity. The accepted wisdom that language is 'hard-wired' into our brains does service as long as we do not forget its essentially notional character, and do not insist that this is *all* that language is.

This is an ancient bone of contention between the scientific and the spiritual modes of understanding. Thus the Church tolerated – and even welcomed – Copernicus as long as the hypothetical character of his explanations was made clear. The fuss over Galileo was not, as it is usually explained today, that the Church championed Ptolemy against Copernicus: in the mind of the thinkers of the time the disagreement revolved around the fact that Galileo refused to present his ideas as notional (Koestler 1989: 443–444; Barfield 1988: 49–50). Ptolemy's absurd cycles and epicycles were seen by the Middle Ages as clearly notional,[22] and as such were tolerated by the Church; but Galileo's crime was that he wanted a reified worldview. He claimed that it *was physically so*, and this was the brave new world which upset the Church. Galileo would have been aghast

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22 The first chapters of Ptolemy's *Almagest* seem to a modern reader to be an impassioned evocation of some real physical truth about celestial movements. But by Book II we are into an elaborate discussion of the relative values of two different hypotheses, the hypothesis of epicycles and the the hypothesis of eccentricity, and Ptolemy makes is quite clear again and again that both of them are in good accord with the appearances: he does not seem at all upset by any inability to choose between the two. I rather side with Owen Barfield's statement that Ptolemy considered his own cosmology notional (Barfied 1988: 51, footnote 1).

at Heidegger, centuries later, calling his mode of thought 'prejudice nurtured through the centuries [those same centuries!] that thinking is a matter of ratiocination, that is, calculation in the widest sense' (Heidegger 1982: 70). (Yet we trust that Heidegger, too, shrank from the burning of Giordano Bruno.)

We accept, then, as liberal-minded thinkers, the computer metaphor to explain our brains; but it does not follow that all the characteristics of language activity and development are present solely in this 'hard-wiring'. Even the computer metaphor would presumably allow for software as well as hardware. There is no reason that I can see why the organisation of language should not in some regard be a feature rather of the language system than of neural configuration. Large domains of language are clearly acoustic rather than psychological, while others appear to depend upon the structure of ambient reality rather than any other structure. As such they are supposedly prior to their sojourn in our brains. While it is clear (still within our metaphor) that the diachronic development of language involves complex flows of input and feedback among large populations of human brains, and that the individual brains themselves are the repositories of this information, this does not preclude the possibility of organising principles in the system itself. In other words, we have no grounds for ruling out the presence of a dynamics of language initiated outside the human consciences involved, beyond a certain distaste for the idea.

Bemoaning the attrition and decay of language in the middle of the last century with the claim that "the words themselves seem to have lost some of their precision and vitality", George Steiner (1985: 44)[23] is compelled to confront this distaste, admitting that his formulation "assumes that language has a 'life' of its own that goes beyond metaphor … Most linguists would regard implications of internal, independent vitality in language as suspect." This is also my experience. When I have mooted with colleagues the possibility of an autonomous dynamic in language, this has typically provoked strong reactions: the idea of language *working on* the human brain instead of the autonomous brain generating language

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23 Steiner's "The Retreat from the Word" is written in 1961.

appears to many to verge on the abhorrent, although it does not seem that such a stance would necessitate any particular change in the present modes of linguistic analysis in themselves. This distaste is reminiscent of earlier attitudes towards heresy, which is why I mentioned faith a little earlier. The stock response is to ask, "Where do you suppose language came from, then? Extraterrestrial beings? God?" I cannot see the relevance of these questions to the accepted practice of linguistics. My colleagues do not find it difficult, in their linguistic analyses, to disregard the question of where the human mind came from, although it seems to me that that is as difficult a puzzle as the question of language. The human mind – by which they usually simply mean the brain – has simply evolved, they say, like any other system. And language hasn't?

The human brain, according to the present state of our scientific beliefs, is a substrate which supports (among other things) a complex system known as language. This implies that, without the substrate, the system cannot become manifest; but it does not follow that its organization as a system is an essential quality of the substrate alone, or is controlled by the substrate alone, although it manifestly thrives there. Natural phenomena occur continually in the form of activity in substrates without being generated or even maintained by them. A wave in the sea is a perturbation of water; it is a movement, not an object; a verb, not a noun. If it were not for the wind that moves upon the waters the sea would not act in this way, as it sometimes doesn't. Of course it is sensible of us to treat the wave as an object, to run away when it approaches lest we get our shoes wet. We can study waves, calculate their dynamics, protect our shores from erosion, design mechanisms to turn their energy into electricity. But waves roll through the sea, and pass on; the sea enables them, but does not generate them.[24]

The human body, we are told, renews all its molecules over a certain span of years. This formulation is in itself a reification of the human body. We might better say that the material substrate sus-

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[24] "Waves are not generated by the sea, but by the wind." But the wind, too, is perturbation of the atmosphere. Let us ignore the question as to what generates whatever it is that generates the wind (moving upon the waters). The point to focus on is that the wave, like the wind, *acts as if it had been generated.* Or rather, that is how we can usefully think about it; as long as we remember that it is not generated by its medium.

tains the form of the human body, although it is itself in flux. Thus our memories retain their form, at least to an extent, under these conditions (whether hard-wired or trapped as humours). It seems that our bodies are no more substantial than the waves of the sea; it is *form* which survives its movement in time through the material substrate.[25] The linguist who would enmesh the phenomenon of language wholly and solely in a net of brain cells is in fact doing no worse than you or I who feel without a shadow of doubt that our forefingers this year are the same ones we waggled seven years ago – as, in many ways, they are, although their appearance may have degenerated slightly. Our linguist accepts the acoustic transmission of language as waves of air-pressure, relying on but not generated by the atmosphere; but when these perturbations move on through the ear and into the sparking synapses of the human brain, all this delicate organization is seen as a creature of the brain itself.

This is actually a metaphysical stance. The linguist who would refuse to grant language any degree of autonomy from the 'brain', must do so on the grounds that this would involve a measure of entelechy, or 'vital force', in language, a *spirit* in words. The suspicion arises that our linguist has an underlying preference for keeping the 'vital force' in the living human mind: hardly of course a conscious preference, for it would admit a spiritual dimension to reality. Our linguist rejects the very idea of a 'vital force' and regards the human mind as a system which has evolved along complex but ultimately mathematical-physical channels of sequential cause and effect, and yet still finds it more difficult to see a principle of organization in language itself rather than in the structure of the human brain.

Heidegger sees language as manifesting itself in the mind as a wave in the sea: "Language manifests itself in speaking, as a phenomenon that occurs in man" (Heidegger 1982: 96). My proposal in this essay is to admit both possibilities, and indeed see them in synthesis.

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25   Lynn Bry's (1996) observation that non-human cells in the body are ten times more numerous than the actual human ones gives added poignancy to our insistence on self-reification.

IV. Pneumatology and the winds of uncertainty

But any synthesis of these two points of view will not be some mean trajectory between two vectors, for the non-ratiocinatory (rather than non-rational) figure of 'language speaking in man' can hardly be measured against a metaphor of hard-wired neuro-circuitry. The former is not falsifiable, in the Popperian sense, while the latter is a scientific metaphor that we routinely – for the sake of our peace of mind – forget will eventually become obsolete. Our synthesis must be enabled by some other means.

As a first step, we might argue for some sort of scientific scepticism, asking linguists to suspend judgement, to recognise the metaphorical and temporary nature of their paradigms, to avoid extrapolating authoritatively from them over uncharted territory, and above all to accept the likelihood of the existence of such territory. Atli Harðarson (1996) resolutely defends scepticism, bravely demonstrating the failure of all attempts to circumvent it. Although some of his arguments give me pause, I cannot but accept his main premise – within the limits of a natural scepticism – that scepticism cannot be demolished by rational means. But herein lies the rub. Atli Harðarson is arguing, as are most of those he discusses in his essay, within the framework of what Heidegger (as we saw earlier) calls *ratiocination*, the narrowly provincial European mode of thought which has become, to all intents and purposes, global. For Heidegger this type of thinking is marked by language decay, while true thinking takes place in the realm of poetry. To be sure, Atli Harðarson touches in his essay on attempts to implicate language in a disavowal of scepticism: "Some of Wittgenstein's followers seem to look on his theory that language owes its existence to human communication as a refutation of the sceptic's doubt as to the existence of other people" (Atli Harðarson: 22, my translation). Although I admire and enjoy the logic of Atli Harðarson's discussion, I shall follow Heidegger half-way out of the ratiocinatory mode – halfway because I fear I have already disregarded Heiddeger's warning against "reduc[ing] poetry to the servant's role as documentary proof for our thinking," and thus "for [getting] the whole-point: to undergo an experience with language" (Heidegger 1982:

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63) Perhaps I am heartened by the fact that Heidegger himself breaks this injunction; at any rate I shall again use poetry in what follows to demonstrate my point.

In discussing Hopkins's 'Windhover' I tried to show how language takes control in its orientation towards the transcendent. I shall end now by pointing out a realm of human experience which can persuade us that we have knowledge of a wider material realm, in spite of logical scepticism. As before, this experience is mediated by poetic language.

Robert Graves's poem "The Thieves" (1961: 139) describes the breakdown of individual physical identity in the act of love, by playing with the concept of ownership:

> Lovers in the act dispense
>
> With such meum-teum sense
>
> As might warningly reveal
>
> What they must not pick or steal,
>
> And their nostrum is to say:
>
> 'I and you are both away.'[26]

The Latin possessives meum 'mine' and teum 'thine' are rejected as worthless: instead the lovers rely on nostrum, Latin for 'ours' which has come to mean, in English, a home-brewed remedy. The thought hinges here on the various meanings of the same word in two languages. Faced with the strictures of ownership the lovers adopt the remedy offered by this linguistic shift: they absent themselves.

> After, when they disentwine
>
> You from me and yours from mine,
>
> Neither can be certain who
>
> Was that I whose mine was you.
>
> To the act again they go
>
> More completely not to know.

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26 Graves is here following Shakespeare's *Phoenix and Turtle:* "Either was the others mine. / Propertie was thus appalled, / That the selfe was not the same". 'Property' may here mean what we would call 'individuality' (cf. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edn., 'property'), but Graves's poem is all about property, and thieves.

The result is that when they again lie side by side, two separate bodies, they cannot fully reconstitute their separate civic identities; their only recourse is to return to the act of love to try to bring their unknowing to perfection.

This union of numbers, the first and second person, brings to mind Martin Buber's vision of man's confrontation with the material and spiritual worlds (Buber 1986). Buber presents two 'primary words', unspeakable, and yet couched in language: *I-Thou*, the spiritual, and *I-It*, the material. In these two primary words there are two kinds of *I*. The *I* of *I-It* is the *I* that experiences the material world, the normal *I*, the *I* of everyday. It represents by far the greater part of our thoughts and actions; without it we could not function. But the *I* of *I-Thou* does not experience; it is the I of relation, the self in relation to the world, to the existence of other people, and to the spiritual:

> No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between the *I* and the *Thou*. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the union of the whole. No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervenes between the *I* and the *Thou*. Desire itself is transformed as it plunges out of its dream into the appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only when every means has collapsed does the meeting come about. (Buber 2000: 26)[27]

In Graves's poem the *I* of experience has found two bodies to inhabit, and has met there with another *I* on the same quest. If this is to be resolved, the *I* of experience must cease to be: only the *I* of relation, of *I-Thou*, can partake in this knowledge. Thus it is not true to say that the two identities have *experienced* each other's existence, since the *I* of *I-Thou* does not experience. Instead, it participates, which is the spiritual mode of knowing.

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27 Martin Buber (1878–1965) was a seminal Jewish theologian. *Ich und Du* was first published in 1923, two years after the appearance of the Catholic Ferdinand Ebner's *Das Wort un die geistigen Realitäten: Pneumatologische Fragmente*. Ebner's treatment of *I and Thou* is said to have informed the final third of Buber's work (Green 1980: v). The writings of Buber, Ebner (1882–1931) and Franz Rosenzweig (1887–1929), who was also a Jew (Glatzer 1953), form the core of German pneumatalogical and dialogical (and thus language-focused) writing in the first part of the last century. According to Green this movement has been described as "a Copernican revolution of modern thought" (Green 1980: v).

This can only be mediated by poetic language; but poetry is also built up of words, materialised in breath, in ink on the paper. The material existence of the words enables their spiritual existence. Knowledge of the existence of another person erases scepticism; yet it weakens no bastions of logic, and undoes no science: it translates them all.

In a sense – not the sense of this essay, and hardly the sense of any who have troubled to read so far – I am misrepresenting here, for I have suppressed the final stanza, which after the transcendent promise of the first two flattens the thought again into a typically Gravesian commonplace.[28] But the poem is out of Graves's hands now, and indeed out of mine. Like the barber's whisper in the tale of King Midas, its language is blowing in the wind, and will seed itself at its own pleasure, quite independently of any human attempt to control it.

This is, of course, personification, one of the besetting sins, we are told today, of Romanticism; and I suppose I can hardly expect many generative linguists to accept the idea that language can have a will of its own. As I have hinted, this is a little strange, for many of them – though by no means all – would accept the idea that individual humans can have a will of their own. Accepting "will" as a real *something* is one thing, but limiting it to being a property of humans seems to me to be another. If man speaks language, then attributing will to language is indeed personification; and if language speaks man, then attributing will to man is linguistification. I am not sure I see any difference between these two.

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28   The last stanza reads: "Theft is theft and raid is raid / Though reciprocally made. / Lovers, the conclusion is, / Doubled sighs and jealousies / In a single heart that grieves / For lost honour among thieves."

ABSTRACT

This paper borrows the term 'Pneumatology' from writers such as Ferdinand Ebner to refer to a linguistics which addresses both the material and spiritual aspects of language, looking further afield than the individual human brain for an account of linguistic form. It begins with a speculative esoteric reading of the phrase "Word is but wind" in the 13th-century *Ancrene Wisse*, involving a Barfieldian discussion of the way in which the single Biblical term *ruach/pneuma /spiritus* has become fragmented into 'wind', 'breath' and 'spirit' in later translations. Examples from the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Graves are used to support these suggestions. The primary focus is on the linguistic processes which enable these readings.

Keywords: Ancrene Wisse, Owen Barfield, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Graves, pneumatology

ÚTDRÁTTUR
Andinn í orðunum

Í þessari grein er fræðiheitið ‚pneumatólógía' fengið að láni frá höfundum eins og Ferdinand Ebner til að lýsa málfræði sem gerir bæði efnislegum og andlegum þáttum tungumálsins skil og veitir tungumálinu sjálfstæða tilvist utan hins efnislega mannsheila. Fjallað er um esóteríska eða dulda túlkun á setningunni ‚ekki er orð nema vindur' í enska 13. aldar ritinu *Ancrene Wisse*, og hvernig biblíuhugtakið *ruach/pneuma/spiritus* greinist í hin ólíku hugtök ‚vindur', ‚andardráttur' og ‚andi' í seinni tíma biblíuþýðingum. Greiningar á ljóðum eftir Gerard Manley Hopkins og Robert Graves eru notaðar til að styðja þessar tillögur, en þungamiðjan í greininni er umfjöllum um þær aðferðir sem tungumálið sjálft notar til að ýta undir slíka túlkun.

Lykilorð: Ancrene Wisse, Owen Barley, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Robert Graves, pneumatólógía

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