OH WORDS, WHAT FUN TO GROAN WITH THE PAINS YOU BRING US

A paper by Edgar A. Towne prepared for presentation to The Indianapolis Literary Club on October 15, 2012.

As I am sure you know, I have been a preacher and a professor. I have been practicing in professions that do things with words. A file drawer of sermons, preached over many years in many churches in many cities, will help me persuade you that my practice has been not to preach a sermon more than once. My sermons may have been boring to listen to. But I have tried to avoid being bored while preaching and writing them. There is a painful struggle to find the right words just to title a sermon, let alone words with which to preach it. But if you can avoid being bored, all of this effort can be fun.

Words, of course, are combinations of letters from an alphabet. Associated with a syntax or grammar developed in the discourse of a community of our species *Homo sapiens sapiens,* this constitutes a language. Over the course of many millennia languages *spoken* emerged among an earlier hominid species from which we have evolved on our planet, earth. This ability to communicate lead some 50,000 years ago to a more rapid cultural evolution. Only during the last 5000 years, do we have literary evidence beside the previous archeological evidence of the cultures of several civilizations and the myths and rituals that gave meaning to the lives of persons who lived with them.[1] We have the literature (language *written*) of ancient Greece and Rome that has so greatly influenced our western culture. We have the literature of Egyptian and the ancient Near Eastern cultures of Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Persia.

We have the literature of ancient Israel, part of which has influenced our culture strongly as *Tanach*, from which came our Hebrew "Old Testament." We have the literature of African, Polynesian, Indian, Chinese, and other Asian cultures. Swahili is especially important in eastern Africa, Sanscrit in India and Asia. We have the literature of native Latin American and North American cultures. So words make languages possible, and languages make literatures possible.[2]

Some written languages were and are pictorial. Chinese and Japanese, the cave drawings of south Asia, east Africa, and west Europe, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the cuneiform figures chiseled in rock and cut in soft clay tablets are examples. These pictorial figures, of course, assume the form of words when their language is spoken. So human minds can receive information from both pictorial figures and words, by which meaning is created in them.

But we can say *metaphorically* that words can draw pictures. They do this as they are understood by the mind that hears them spoken or reads them written. These pictures are called "meanings" and are in or before the mind by means of the interaction of the speaker and hearer, text and reader. A meaning is an event that is in the mind of the persons engaged in this interaction. A marvelous *literal* example of the transaction between text and picture is William Blake's depiction of the biblical Ancient of Days. I attempt now—assuming I understand what I am doing—a literal description of what I mean by "a meaning in or before the mind."

As an event or picture in the mind, a meaning may seem fragile, for you and I may misunderstand one another. The spoken word is uttered and is gone. It is vaporous, we might say, because it is carried on the breath. The *Oxford*

English Dictionary observes the word "humor" is related to the old medicine that spoke of the "humours" or vapors of the body.[3] However the word is spelled, it names a mental disposition, "that quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, jocularity, facetiousness, comicality, fun." This citation combines the action of an actor with its effect upon another. In this case the effect is the quality of a meaning: enjoyment, fun. As vaporous and ephemeral as this may seem, nevertheless, such a meaning—as an event in the mind—is a physical event. Mental phenomena are biologically based, as analytic philosopher, John Searle, has said; but Terrance W. Deacon reminds us that mental phenomena are just that—not physical.[4] We need not disparage our enjoyment of humor; there is a knowing in it. The O.E.D. also informs us that the English noun, "wit," is related to the German verb *wissen,* to know.

All of this is going on when the preacher is writing a sermon or the professor is writing a paper for publication. There is the constant struggle with words. They have to be the right words. They have to sound right. I mean they have to be pronounced correctly. Problems occur when two different pronunciations of the same word can be correct. Words and pronunciations have to be connected to their meanings in a reliable and familiar way. But I wish I could remember when all of this came undone with me. I mean when I took pleasure in getting meanings and words all twisted up.

I do remember that I first noticed it happening in our family. It was around our dinner table. I can't recall just when this happened, and it probably happened even before we had grandchildren at our table. I wish I had kept track

of the occasions when this happened. I wish I had kept track of the words involved in them. I do remember its happening during the very young years of our grandson, David, who is now in his first year of university studies. Words easily got off-track in our conversations. It could happen to David or to his father or to me. It was almost a kind of pathology, as if we enjoyed causing pain to one another and to one's self. Sadism and masochism in one dose. Whatever it was, we didn't care. Somehow, we took pleasure in it.

I am quite sure I do remember one of those mishaps with words. I said to our grandson, "Please appease your grandma and eat all your peas." Even at his early age, David would come back with a pun of his own. Everyone at the table would groan—and then laugh. Now that you know my subject is puns, you are entitled to a collective groan. But wait! There are things we can learn from puns about how we think, how language works, and how language works on us. A pun is so important that scholars made up a big word for it. A pun is a "paronomasia." John Pollack, a professional punster, versatile and enterprising author, has written a fascinating and well-documented book, *The Pun Also Rises*, that examines the pun from every angle you can think of.[5] I can only open up the subject for our consideration tonight.

We are used to having words at our disposal. They need not be voiced or be in mind when we look out the window and see trees, yards, and our neighbors' houses. We can't help seeing trees as trees, yards as yards, and houses as houses. So it is probably not possible for us to imagine what human or proto-human experience was like without words at hand. No doubt some gestures, sounds or

signs, were quickly devised to assist in the practical tasks of living. As with words and language, some reliable relation between gesture and object would be established, then taught and learned. It is this reliable relation between words and meanings that is violated, which creates the effect puns have on us. Obviously, then, not only our thinking but also involuntary events in the brain are affected.

I think it is safe to say that none of us can introspect these involuntary events in the brain. So, as I have said, I will only mention them tonight. When someone makes a pun, they think and act voluntarily, willfully; we all like to get our way. We are like Humpty Dumpty who replied to Alice's objection to his use of the word, "glory." "'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean,--neither more nor less.'"[6] So I think part of the fun of puns is having our way with words before anyone can get in the way of our speaking them. The groans come *after*.

This suggests that *spontaneity* is an important factor in the punner's success. The pun is made before the listener can anticipate it. The deed is done and there is no way to escape it. It is like receiving a blow in a sword fight. What can one do but groan? If you still have your head. Or it is like a gaffe when you make yourself the butt of a joke, and there is nothing to do but laugh. And hope you have laughed it off. Of course, spontaneity is primarily a factor in conversational punning.

On second thought, I'm probably making too much of the difference between puns that are encountered in conversation and those that are encountered in reading. There is a temporal element even in puns that are encountered

visually—as in cartoon strips, for example. But the reader has the responsibility to encounter the cartoon panels one-by-one in sequence. On April 17, 2012, a Beetle Bailey cartoon appeared in *The Indianapolis Star*. Zero, the not-so-smart soldier is bent over laughing. General Halftrack says, "What's so funny, Soldier?" Zero replies, "I just made up a joke . . . 'Why can't the jeep get up the hill? Because it was **tired**." The general walks away muttering, "I need to get re-tired." This shows that puns can run off one another. They have a *linear* quality both in conversation and in reading. Visually, even though the pun is all there in the sentence, the sentence has to be read from start to finish. If you read the end of the sentence first, you have cheated yourself of the pain and pleasure of the pun. For example, consider this pun published on May 2, 2012, in my wife Marian's hometown paper: "I got a job at a bakery because I kneaded dough."[7] Two words are involved; one has a literal and a colloquial meaning (dough); the other is pronounced the same with different spellings (kneaded, needed). A similar but simpler version appeared in a Bizarro cartoon in *The Star* on July 24, 2012. A gunman holds up a bakery truck driver, demanding "Gimme all your dough!" I suppose the moral of all this is that whether you love or whether you hate puns, the responsibility is yours to let the pun do its job. Unless you do, you can't do either. Does a pun exist at all, unless *someone* lets it do its job? Is a pun nothing more than a language entity—spoken or written?

I have already spoken about "meaning" relating to puns as an actual event happening in the mind. The term "wit" was mentioned in relation to this. This suggests, at least to me, that there are puns that do not turn on the sound or

spelling of words. It may sound like a controversial claim—that a pun may be made out of ideas only. But I agree with Pollack that "Punning is all about connecting ideas, no matter how disparate." Consider this pun from the *Freeman South Dakota Courier*: "I used to think I was indecisive, but now I'm not so sure." Of course, words are involved; the pun—if it is a pun—turns on the word "indecisive." But the impact of the pun on our minds, depends entirely upon the quality of the mind of the person voicing the pun and the person appreciating it. Something about that mind has gone "off the rail," as we say. That is the power of the pun. But in this case it is entirely a matter of ideas. A pun is more than a language entity, as it is when it is like that type when punsters make themselves the butts of their own jokes. Such a pun need only be thought without being voiced. It is not a physical thing.

I cannot resist reporting to you a perfectly goofy sentence told in his autobiography by the great Egyptologist, John A. Wilson, who was not afraid to tell this joke on himself. Despite its being noticed, the sentence remained in all the editions of his book, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt*, published in 1956. Above a table of the dates listed chronologically of the dynasties and more important kings, this was printed: "Names not in this book have been omitted."[8] This is not a pun, of course. It illustrates a self-effacing kind of self awareness.

But there is more than a twinge of self-awareness in punning. The punster must enjoy the pleasure of it or suffer the pain of it, whatever the case may be, and preferably both. I have come up with puns about which I have laughed so hard, I couldn't speak the pun to my listeners. So I was glad to know that there is

a rule for punning that authorizes this. John Pollack speaks of a certain Thomas Sheridan, who in1719 published a defense of punning titled, *Ars Punica.* Rule No. 9 states: "The Rule of Risibility: A man must be the first that laughs at his own pun." I say, "Right on!" Is that is the current lingo? Maybe I should say, "Cool!" "Absolutely?" Whatever. There is another rule that I can't help mentioning. Rule No. 8 is the Rule of Interruption (with a pun). This was part of a strategy I recommended in "How To Win at Theology or the Science of Nikology," published in a graduate school journal when I was in a cynical mood.

Defining a pun is risky business. So far as I can tell, John Pollack evades a definition by immersing himself in matters of where the word comes from, its etymology, and a discussion of the many types of puns. But it seems to me one has to have a working definition of what a pun is in order to speak about it, as I am trying to do. Pollack takes issue with the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for reasons I think are quibbling. But I choose to use the O.E.D.'s definition because it is such a prestigious authority that it should impress you on my behalf. Here it is: "The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect, a play on words." I can complain about this definition too, because it does not pick up on the pain of puns. Though the word "play" suggests the fun of puns, it overlooks their seriousness. After all, there are homonymic, homophonic, homographic, polysemic, paradigmatic, and syntagmatic puns. One of the weaknesses of my paper tonight is that I have not said—and will not say—any

more about the role of the imagination in pun creation. It is a serious and scholarly matter classifying puns, analyzing puns, picking them apart. Oh, that reminds me, one of the greatest things about *nit-picking* is the amount of creativity and imagination that goes into it. A hoped-for benefit of my paper this evening is that it has drawn this creative work out of you. Of course, this implies puns are also no fun. If a pun is fun, then why nit-pick about it? But nit-picking is fun. Oh, well.

The serious business is that puns have to be distinguished from other things, lest people be confused, and even mistaken! I have heard people say that to speak mistakenly is to tell a lie. Politicians admit to being mistaken, but not to telling a lie. So there must be a real difference there. What large animal has four legs and a trunk? . . . A buffalo, of course; I lied about the trunk. Lies must be confessed, which I have just done. But can one lie in a joke? If not, then that was no joke. But I've let myself be carried away from my subject, as you may have noticed.

In conclusion, now that we know what a pun is because we have a definition of it, we will know better what a pun is when we know what a pun is not. I know you expect me to cite the most up-to-date authorities. The Wikipedia, accessed on May 19, 2012, assures us that a pun is not a *malapropism*. My dictionary defines this as a "ridiculous misuse of words." I think this might describe a pun also—unless there is no misuse of words in punning that is a wrong use. My copy of *The Reader's Encyclopedia* describes it better as a "blunder" in the use of words.[9] This is better because the blundering and

bumbling character of playwright Richard Sheridan's Mrs. Malaprop attaches to its meaning. The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that a *quibble* is like a pun—which is not obvious to me. But a pun is not a quibble, which is a way to avoid the point at issue by an irrelevant diversion. A quibble is a "cavil," my dictionary says, which it is, of course. So that's settled. I leave it to you to say how a quibble is like a pun.

It will undoubtedly be of interest to you that a pun is not a *spoonerism.* This is an ordinary transposition of sounds, wittingly or unwittingly. If you want to be extraordinary about it, you can call it a "metathesis." In the early 20th century a respected and well-liked Oxford professor, the Rev. Archibald Spooner, lent his name to the condition that afflicts some people, by which involuntary events in the brain lead to the involuntary jumbling of words in their thought and speech. Sometimes this can be very embarrassing. I can offer a benign example. "There is a rouring pain" as I write this looking out the window. "Spoonerism" is a term that suggests the humorous aspect, but such involuntary speech may indicate a pathology of the brain that is a matter not to be made fun of.

Well, there you have it. I've concluded by identifying a pun by what it is not. Of course, a pun is not so many things in the world, that that way of identifying a pun fails completely. And I have not mentioned that a pun is not a Shaggy Dog Story. My strategy has only clarified the differences in the meaning of several words that have been coined to identify things similar to puns. Even so, with these words we identify complex kinds of human experience, out of which they have emerged to name these experiences, so their meanings may be

fixed in our vocabulary as we get on with the project of being both rational and laughing human beings.[10] There is nothing under the sun like fun with a pun, which I am sure someone, sometime, has already said somewhere.

ENDNOTES

1. Christian de Duve, *Life Evolving: Molecules, Mind, and Meaning* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002). Mircea Eliade, ed., *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).

2. Mario Pei, *The Story of Language* (New York: Mentor Books, 1949, 1963). Max Black, *The Labyrinth of Language* (New York: Mentor Books, 1968). R. Whitehouse and K. Piquette, *The Materiality of Writing* (London: Cambria P., 2010).

Leslie Van Gelder represents and interprets finger flutings in the Rouffignac and Gargas caves in southern France in her late husband's book: Kevin J. Sharpe, *Sleuthing the Divine: The Nexus of Science and Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress P., 2000). These are mnemonic devices drawn by men, women, and children, and are a precursor to writing.

For a description and pictures of a 10th century b.c.e. rock inscription of a semitic alphabet see Ron E. Tappy, "This Summer: The 2006 Season of Excavations at Tel Zayit, Israel," *Panorama*, 45. 3 (Spring, 2006), 8–9, and Ron E. Tappy, "The 1998 Preliminary Survey of Khirbet Zeitah el-Kharab (Tel Zayit) in the Shephelah of Judah," *Panorama,* 46.3 (Lent, 2007), 7–36. This journal is the alumni magazine of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

3. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1989).

4. John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), ix. Just as I finished writing this paper, my copy of a book I had ordered arrived: Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012). On the first page this book says, "we lack a scientific understanding of how sentences in a book refer to atoms, DNA, or anything at all." The meanings our minds recognize in the words and sentences we speak are virtual; they are there in our minds. This information, the content of any sentence we speak or write has no mass, yet it has physical consequences. There is a kind of absence to it. Deacon coined the word, "absential," for this quality. We live with this reality unaware. His book is intended to remedy this, and he complains "A causal role for absence seems to be absent from the natural sciences" (3).

5. John Pollack, *The Pun Also Rises: How the Humble Pun Revolutionized Language, Changed History, and Made Wordplay More than some Antics* (New York: Gotham Books, 2011, 2012).

6. Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodson) *Through the Looking-Glass*, 191, in Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & other Stories* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1994).

7. *Freeman South Dakota Courier*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (May 2, 2012).

8. John A. Wilson, *Thousands of Years: An Archaeologist's Search for Ancient Egypt* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 143. Wilson discusses his experience as a young man working with prestigious archeologists, such as James H. Breasted and William Foxwell Albright. James Henry Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933). H. and H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobson, *Before Philosophy: the Intellectual Adventure of Ancient* Man (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1946, 1971). William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U. Press, 2nd ed., 1957).

9. William Rose Benet, Ed., *The Reader's Encyclopedia* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1948). Bennett A. Cerf and Donald S. Klopfer, eds., *Twelve Famous Plays of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (New York: The Modern Library, 1933), in which the character of Mrs. Malaprop appears in "The Rivals," 1775.

10. On the complexities of language and semiotics, the theory of signs, two books that have informed me are the following. James H. Bunn, *the Dimensionality of Signs, Tools, and Models: An Introduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). Robert E. Innis, Ed., *Semiotics: An Introductory Anthology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985).