Language, Art, and Deep Study

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In the Spring 2011 Issue of the *Research Bulletin* (Vol. XVI No.1), I published an article titled "An Outline of a Study Methodology." The article described a four-step protocol for studying demanding texts. In Fall 2012, while preparing to describe this protocol to an organization unfamiliar with Steiner's work,[1] I realized that there is a whole background to this approach, a background that I had taken for granted while writing and speaking to Waldorf colleagues. After a few conversations, the idea that there may be some benefit to an explicit description of what was assumed in the original article motivated this second piece. At the end of this article, I have re-presented a brief description of the methodology itself. The spoken character of the original presentation has been left largely intact.

The Twofold Nature of Language:

In every language what is originally a connected and unified whole is broken into two parts: signs and meaning. Written and spoken languages are only the clearest examples of meaning-making. Body language, facial expressions, and the use of color, tone, symbol, clothing, and every other manner through which we communicate thoughts, feelings, and attitudes—all follow the same principle. On the one hand there are perceptible signs (letters, gestures, sounds, and so forth), and on the other there are never-perceptible meanings. No meaning is ever sense-perceptible. Obviously, words written in a language you do not understand convey no meaning for you, and culture-specific gestures (e.g., "thumbs up") are not always understood by persons in a different culture. The meaning is found not *in* the words (written or spoken) or gestures, but *through* them. Words also don't have a finite meaning. That is why new thoughts can be expressed with "old" or familiar words, and also why those familiar words can be misunderstood in their new arrangement.

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Secondly, for a language exchange to exist, we have to have a speaker and a listener to the speaking. I use the terms "speaker" and "listener" here in a broad sense; "author" and "reader" are also applicable. The speaker experiences some meaning, produces a set of signs, and the listener has to interpret those signs and arrive at the intended meaning of the speaker. We can speak of *mis*communication only because the assumption is that proper communication *could* have taken place, that is, the speaker and the listener could have ended up understanding the same thing (the same meaning). An exchange assumes two entities capable of producing and understanding meaningful signs. We cannot speak of a miscommunication in the conversations that I have with myself in the shower.

Summarizing, then: in language we have perceptible signs, hidden (non-sensory) meaning, a speaker, and a listener. This summary sounds simple, but it points to fields of study that extend well beyond the theme of this article. We will restrict ourselves here to the study of texts, but the principles we explore have wide and far-reaching consequences. They point towards a view of the world, including the natural world, as having the nature of a text, rather than

being a world of objects, and to a spiritual discipline aimed at reading this text rather than reducing it to non-meaningful formulations. A text implies both interconnectedness amongst the separate "words" and an author. There is a human and natural ecology implied that we have to leave largely in the background.

The Four Levels of Language:

For simplicity and clarity, I will discuss written and oral language here, though other forms of speaking in the sense just mentioned would also apply in most instances. Also, importantly, the levels are not separated by stiff boundaries. Most uses of language flow between levels, and there are innumerable midpoints as well. Think more watercolor wash than oil paints. The transitions are not sharp.

1. The first level of language is what we can call *Information*. Examples of this level are owner manuals, ordinary directions, and road signs. The essential characteristics of informational language are that: 1) the meaning is finite, and 2) it is intended to be comprehended entirely and with as little effort on the part of the listener as possible. In fact, the success of this level of language is measured by precisely these comprehension-criteria: did the reader fully understand how to operate the camera after looking at the manual? Did the driver find the destination? Did the soldier understand the command? The aim is to have as little ambivalence in the text as possible, with no room for opaque language. If the listener does not understand the communication readily, then it has not been a successful exchange. Anyone who has ever tried following poorly given directions knows how unsatisfying they can be. Conversely, a well-written set of instructions makes the work simpler to accomplish and more successful. In short, on the informational level we want the signs to reveal the full meaning and the meaning readily discerned by observing the signs.

2. The second level of language is what I would like to call *Discourse*. This is the level on which the exchange between the participants is ongoing, the roles of speaker and listener change at least occasionally, and which is open for new meanings to emerge while it is ongoing, and perhaps even later. The archetype of this level of language is a *good question*: even the questioner does not fully know the answer, and there is a common sense that the realm of meaning is fluidly entering the exchange, appearing as signs in the perceptible world. The discourse differs from the informational level in its quality of unfinished-ness. New ideas are possible and even welcome. However, one requirement of this level (that distinguishes it from the next level) is that the realm of meaning should still emerge as fully expressed as possible, so that the participants still end up with a common, *thinking* understanding of the meaning. Less of the meaning is conveyed at the initial stages of the signs than was the case on the informational level, but we want it, in the end, as fully fleshed out as possible.

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Just this once I want to point to an intermediate level between the four main ones, so the basic fourfold structure is not understood as being too rigid. For example, an *argument* can happen entirely on the informational level, but it can also reach towards the level of discourse by becoming a conversation. The main difference has to do precisely with the willingness of the participants to consider new possibilities. Inasmuch as they strive only to prove the rightness of their pre-existing views, the argument will remain informational in character. But where there is openness, a discursive level can be reached. Similarly, when appeal is made to emotions through the use of charged terms, the next level is woven into the experience, albeit often in its debased aspect.

3. The third level of language is *Poetry*. With poetry we are entering a level of language in which the meaning is no longer comprehensible through thinking alone. There is always a quality of feeling that is added, and that has to be experienced by the listener (or, more commonly, reader) if the poem is to be "fulfilled." A good poem captures a quality of feeling in such a way that the reader can find it as well. A bad poem is still a set of signs of the poet's experience, but those signs give the reader no meaningful experience. With good poetry there are qualities that cannot be expressed in informational-level alternatives. It captures something that has to be felt, and the feeling-comprehension of the reader has to capture the feeling-expression of the poet. We are now dealing with a level of meaning-making that requires what Georg Kühlewind calls *cognitive feeling*. We will return to this shortly, but for now, note that the signs already convey the potential meaning less fully than at the level of discourse. We can point to legends and myths as forms of poetic language. Their meaning is multi-layered and requires effort and inner participation on the part of the reader. A good novel is also poetic in this sense; the distinction between prose and poetry is not important here. When signs are used to manipulate the emotional state of the listener on behalf of the speaker's agenda, we meet the debased form of the poetic level. This is how most forms of propaganda and advertising operate.

4. The fourth level of language is *Demanding/Meditative Texts*. On this level, the signs are but tips of immense icebergs (or, better perhaps, "light-bergs") of meaning. The writer or speaker has had a fully conscious experience of profound spiritual truth, and has tried to cloak it in words that, however, can only be understood as a kind of code. There are communications of this nature in all esoteric traditions. Comprehension on this level of language is intensely demanding of the reader or listener (hence the designation), and requires an exceedingly mobile level of inner experiencing. One of its most salient characteristics is that it cannot be understood unless the reader is willing to give up the certainty that pervades the simpler realms of language. By demanding this flexibility, the text can lead to comprehension that transforms the reader. When we talk of using art in deep study, it is for texts written at this level that we are directing our efforts. There are many forms of harm that can befall those who try to understand demanding texts on a simpler, especially the informational, level. For example, some religious groups try to interpret Scripture as an informational text, i.e., literally. Inevitably, the result is a cocooned and in-bred framework of untenable concepts, such as the idea that the world was created in six twenty-four-hour periods.

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Art:

As already mentioned in the case of poetry, art is also a special case of meaning-making. The artist utilizes a medium (color, form, sound, movement, words, and so on) to clothe in sense-perceptible vestments an experience from the realm of meaning. This experience need not have been fully conscious, but it must, if it is to be meaningful to others, have some communicable dimension. Great art, said Paul Klee, does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible. We can ask: makes *what* visible? In the sense of our line of thought, it is *meaning* that is made visible (or audible, etc.). But this "making visible" has the special quality I mentioned earlier: perceiving it requires a kind of feeling. This is not feeling in the sense of emotions. It is not a me-feeling, but rather a feeling for the qualities present in the artwork, a feeling of "that." This is why art

appreciation can grow over time and even be taught. At first we have me-feelings: I like it, or don't like it, and so on. Later, we can put these emotions aside and contemplate the art on its own terms: we can live into the yellow streams and the black lemniscate almost as though we were painting them, streaming with our consciousness into the work in order to discover its ineffable qualities. The stories of its creation, the technique, the materials, the composition, all of these can add layers of experience that enhance our comprehension of what "it says." Of course, we can still like it or dislike it, but we can understand, or rather experience directly, its qualities regardless of our emotional response.

Artistic creations, as with the poetic level of language, are nearly always incomplete; they require an audience to experience them in order to become "fulfilled." Almost all artists will tell you that the most highly valued opinion for them is the opinion of their peers. When someone else who speaks your artistic language finds your work good, there is a sense of completion that even selling it for very high prices cannot give.

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There is an exception to this general principle, and it is an important part of the process I want to describe next. When art is created in the process of studying demanding texts, the creator of the art can also be its audience, and in that sense it is complete because one person can be both the artist, or speaker, and then later on, the listener. We can tell ourselves artistic stories. This rarely satisfies artists in other situations. But the artistic phase of the study does not have to satisfy others; it is a step in a ladder of comprehension that each participant creates for him/herself. We do not have to be good painters, eurythmists, or poets to use those arts meaningfully during the study process.

An Approach to the Study of Deep/Demanding Texts:

Writing a summary: Write the passage in your own words (10-20% of length). For a longer text, summarize each theme within the text (every 1 to 4 paragraphs, typically). Groups can divide the text into themes and have each person or small group summarize one section. Regardless, read the summaries in order, first forwards and then backwards from the end to the beginning.

Reducing the summary: Reduce each summarized passage to a phrase, e.g., as a chapter title. Repeat the reading forwards and back. Next, have a discussion on the movement of the themes in the passage or text. Try to "see the text from above."

Artistic engagement: Render the summarized segment artistically. This can be in poetry, painting, drawing, music, movement, sculpture, or any other artistic language. It is better to try for the gesture of the passage than for specific details from it, since we are now trying to develop the cognitive feeling, and we are seeking for movement rather than "stuff." When the entire passage or text has been rendered artistically, the participants can read the summaries and the chapter titles as they move from section to section of artistic renderings, even backwards again, and then sit quietly and ponder the artistic rendition and what it "says."

Questions leading to meditative verses: Each participant tries to find a real question, some theme from the text that s/he wants to contemplate further because it feels pregnant with potential meanings that have not yet become perceptible. Then, the whole meaning of the passage is brought full circle back to a meditative text, only this time it is the student's own creation. By trying to express the dynamic meaning of the text in a new dynamic,

meditative form, the student can attempt a level of comprehension that approaches the original experience of the author. As lesser lights than the author's we follow, we accept that our verses will not equal the originals, but, nevertheless, we come nearer to the level that Kühlewind calls *cognitive will.* This is the level of cognition in which everything is movement, willed, but with a "soft" will, a receptive and gentle will that is the essence of every truly creative act. Demanding texts are written through this kind of *gentle will,* and should be approached only in the same way. We are trying to become receptive, but actively receptive. The artistic phase served as a *stairway to heaven,* if you will, and now if we are to "walk with the angels," we have to become writers of code, capturing in few signs the wide fields of meaning in which our contemplative process has landed us.

If we follow the gestures of the discursive, the poetic, and the meditative levels of language through this study sequence, we see that the three soul forces have to undergo a kind of inversion:

Thinking, which in the ordinary course of life has an acquisitive nature, has to become intuitive, that is, to merge with the spiritual realities around it.

Feeling, which is ordinarily self-directed in the form of emotions, has to become cognitive and sense the qualities of things.

Will, which is ordinarily an outward, forceful element, has to become the "soft will" of receptive, meditative knowledge.

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Endnote

1. Original lecture given to *The Academy for Jewish Religion,* Nov. 11, 2012.

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