

Theological Bafflegab or How to Unsay It

"Multiphasic Jabs Against Bafflegab"¹ is the title of an article recently carried by *The N.Y. Times*. Its author, Fred M. Hechinger, documents the "fog of obfuscation" caused by the "Jargonization of America." He cites examples of current gobbledygook as used in the professions of medicine, social sciences, and linguistics. Since he failed, however, to include theology in his list, permit me to add this supplement to his catalogue.

As an overture to my "Verbal Cacophony in B-flat Major," here is a brief history of sophisticated crutch words of recent vintage. (A crutch, by the way, is a word that is frequently misspelled, often mispronounced, and invariably misused because it is usually misunderstood.) "Quintessential" was able to dislodge "archetype" as King of the Crutch. Although "Quintessential" is still being used (and, therefore, abused), it has become quite "relevant" to discern "paradigm" on the "horizon." Since it is the mark of intelligent discourse to define the area under discussion, "paradigm" entered into illicit union with "perimeter" to produce "parameter." "Parameter" has soared to the top of the charts as the currently-reigning hit on the "Crutch Parade."

Crutch words are solitary chimneys belching smoke into the semantic sky. "Jargon," however, refers to whole sentences and paragraphs which marshal even simple words into its relentless enterprise of polluting the verbal atmosphere. The "quintessential paradigm" of jargon in the field of theology has recently appeared in

America's most illustrious theological journal. From the title alone the reader is warned about the impending onslaught gathering on the horizon.

The article is called "Christian Apophatic and Kataphatic Mysticism."² To be fair, I admit that *apophatic* and *kataphatic* are not crutch words, but legitimate members of a specific terminology that any science needs as tools of the trade. Nor do I have any quibble with using foreign phrases which are also *bona fide* members of scientific terminology. So, I am not too disturbed by this sample: "The *Exercises* tacitly presuppose, therefore, the metaphysical dynamics of the act of faith, wherein the *fides quae* is tasted and reveals its meaning because of the *fides qua* in whose light it is seen."³ This sentence from the article, however, is a mere *hors d'oeuvre* compared to the *piece de resistance*, which immediately follows:

Just as a person examining a psychological illustration of Figure/Ground perceives a changing Figure/ Ground before his eyes, during the consolation without previous cause the specific Christian mystery becomes Ground or horizon through transparency, and what was previously Ground or horizon (supernaturally-elevated and Christ-anointed transcendence) becomes Figure by directly dominating consciousness in a quasi-intuitional felt-knowledge in which the exercitant becomes pure openness and receptivity to his homeward-tending love.

I challenge any philological Rube Goldberg to diagram that sentence! I am sure that the author's meaning would have been clearer in German, although that language doesn't even bother to use such humble device as slashes, hyphens, and spaces to produce its verbal juggernauts.⁴

The article I have quoted deals partially with the classic *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The author has succeeded in showing how the smokescreen of jargon can wrap the "Cloud a Unknowing" with a "fog of unsaying."

I have engaged in the text-producing generation (writing) of this article, so that you, the text-processing analyst (reader), may protect yourself against the multiphasic bafflegab of circumlocutory obfuscation.

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¹*N. Y. Times*, December 26, 1978. p. C5.

²*Theological Studies*, December. 1978.

³*Ibid.*, p. 421.

⁴The Bonn Government's efforts to compile a *Grunddeutsch*, or Basic German, have been reported in the *N. Y. Times*, Sept. 29, 1978.