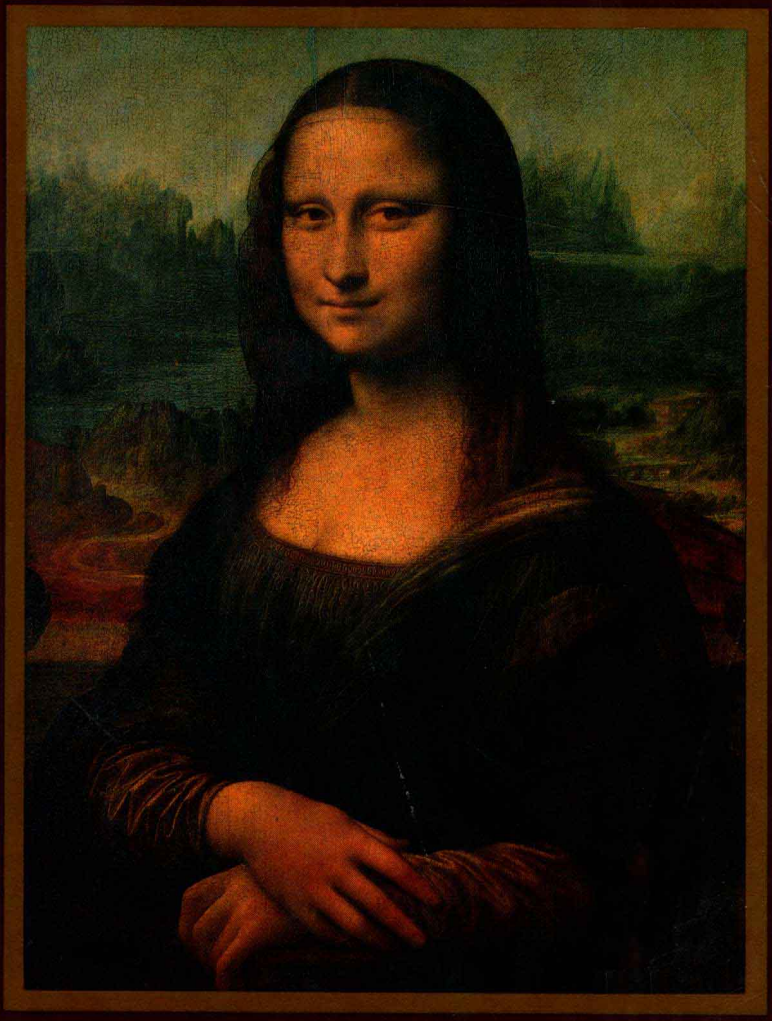
Clichés and Coinages



Walter Redfern

CLICHÉS AND COINAGES

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To Angela, my far better half,
who gives the kiss of life
to the deadest things.

Imprimatur
'Quid humani a te alienum putes (sic)?'
'Nihil (Et quid obstat? Nihil)'

Myles na Gopaleen

'Wonderful!' I ejaculated.
'Commonplace,' said Holmes.
Conan Doyle, *passim*.

Let's have some new clichés.
Sam Goldwyn

Qu'on ne dise pas que je n'ai rien dit de nouveau: la disposition des matières est nouvelle; quand on joue à la paume, c'est une même balle dont joue l'un et l'autre, mais l'un la place mieux. (Let no one say that I have said nothing new; the arrangement of the subject is new. When we play tennis, both partners use the same ball, but one of them has a better aim.)

Pascal

Les lieux communs ne se révèlent qu'à ceux qui les étudient humblement et avec une grande pureté de coeur. (The meaning of commonplaces is revealed only to those who study them with humility and great purity of heart.)

Léon Bloy

Times there are when I forget the world exists,
and yet, and yet,
come the next day,
keep I must the trodden way.

W. D. Redfern (16¾)

Acknowledgements

I dedicate this book to the lot of us, for where would it have been without our conjoined, unstinting, competing and ubiquitous contributions to the dead and the quick in language?

Within this greater structure, the microcosm: my wife, Angela. Herself indoors or outdoors, she has aided my self to evolve in life and on paper.

More locally, Patrick Hughes, whose fascination with the overlap of all things frequently criss-crosses mine, and whose visual spectacles correct my short sight. Keith Foley, who generously shared his neologbook with me. We keep each other going by neologrolling. Doug Pye, who gave me hints about the rhythm method. Geoffrey Strickland, who reminded me of what I tend to neglect: context.

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I am indebted, indeed desperately in hock, to Michel Schneider's powerfully suggestive *Voleurs de mots*. I am a plagiarist, said the Cretan plagiarist.

And of course, to close the family circle, my universal uncle, Tom Cobbleigh.

Any unattributed neologisms or twists on clichés are, as far as I can tell or remember, my own. As are all translations. I supply the original only when its language is remarkable in some way. All puns and the occasional Gallicism are intended and remorse-free.

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1

Declaring an Interest

I will use I a good deal in this book. Partly because we is too conspiratorial, regal or editorial: presumptuous.[1] I is, strangely, more modest. I will use we when I feel more confident that my views are shared by others – how many, though, I could never dare to guess. One of the sporadic premisses, then, is that some people think at times approximately like me. This assumption seems relatively sane. Without it, I would only be burbling into a bottle launched from a desert island. While that situation does bear thinking about, I mainly prefer not to. (The cliché skulking here is Vigny's 'Une bouteille à la mer': it is a champagne-bottle carrying the proudly unkillable message in the poem). If you disagree when I use we, you will possibly mutter: 'Speak for yourself'. I promise, in what follows, to do that; and hope that it is catching.

I went to grammar school, then to Cambridge and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris. I was born the wrong side of many things in Bootle. My mind and my prose reflect these varied facts of life. I am interested in (that is, intrigued by and caught up in) both common and elite culture. I am drawn to clichés, as I hate debts and prize freedom from influence. Born in a would-be free port, hostile to automatic 'pietas erga parientes' or towards *almae matres*, not much of a patriot, a blind fan neither of the present age nor of any previous one, still less hankering for any imaginary one, as a teenager I wanted vainly to be the admiral of my soul, if I was too pessimistic to aim to be master of my fate. Largely because my chief rival at school, and subsequently one of my most durable friends, submitted proudly to letting the style of leading poets infiltrate his first attempts at writing poetry, for my parallel first shots I refused on principle even to read any such mentors. Talk about the anxiety of influence. In middle age, both his and my poems are recognizably individual. The whole complex, known variously as irony, 'la contre-finalité', Sod's Law, or Resistentialism, seems to me to rule the world. In wanting to distance myself from my competitor, I backed into parody,

pastiche: knocking-jobs on him and his several begetters. My independence depended. It was all an impossible dream, but it helped to make me what I am. For my sins. For what it's worth. The premature existentialist, the only self-begetter, has come roughly down to earth.

After my previous study (*Puns*) – and a Nandi proverb holds that 'there is no saying without a double meaning'[2] – what drew me to clichés and neologisms? Without being in the remotest a spiritualist, I am permanently fascinated by the spirit more than the letter: the implied, the buried, the inadvertently revealed, the second degree. Already in *Puns* I had briefly examined clichés and neologisms for their connections with puns: rejuvenation, recycling, creativity, or at least activity. If the pun is, at its infrequent best, a 'sudden bright idea', clichés are long-lasting, possibly eternal, grown dull ideas. Neologisms are something else. A sign that there is still life (still life!) in the old dog (or, to accommodate feminists and equity, bitch). That language and creative thinking have not yet given up the ghost. A few lines, already raddled with clichés – though a slight change is as good as a rest. Does your heart sink? Hopefully, stick with me. I could say just as well: listen to yourselves. We are all more parasitic, and more inventive, than we credit. And there might be some loose connection between the two. Clichés and neologisms: strange bedfellows, you might think. I am arranging a shotgun wedding. This book is about passive and active borrowing, uninventive or creative parasitism. A bipartite study, it resembles a centaur, a mermaid, or a pantomime horse. My target is diffuse, squashy. I leave precision to watchmakers, or to statisticians and economic forecasters, those digital poets. John Gross called *Puns* an omnium-gatherum.[3] Clichés, too, are hold-alls, as are portmanteau words. Until the contents of all our brains are filed and instantly updated on some umpteenth-generation computer, I cannot possibly check whether my clichés are yours, or vice versa. I have to take shots in the dark.

Though by temperament and choice I am sedentary and love my wife, in words I can hardly resist taking off. Friends speak charitably of my 'glancing' approach. More honestly, I know that each time I light on a word or an idea I feel the need to take off from it, often in several directions. I land as a pheasant; I take off as a covey.

Taxonomy, the naming of parts, opposes my favoured approximation. I like aiming at being approximately to the point. Besides, language itself has anarchist tendencies, which chafe under, throw off or wriggle around any would-be imprisonment by rigid rules. I do not share the penis-envy that the so-called soft sciences feel towards the so-called hard. Nor do I want to shelter behind the riot-shields of OK names. Take me as you

find me. In intellectual matters I prefer unhappy families, more varied and idiosyncratic. Though here and there I will try to give the kiss of life to the suspendedly animated terms of traditional rhetoric, I would echo Paul de Man (once in a while won't hurt): 'Not only are tropes, as their name implies [turns], always on the move – more like quicksilver than like flowers or butterflies which one can at least hope to pin down and insert in a neat taxonomy – but they can disappear altogether, or at least appear to disappear.'[4] My atheism is of the catholic variety: I want to corral rather than to pigeonhole. If I interchangeably use the varied terms for clichés (and neologisms), it is not because I wish to fudge matters, but because I value overlap and embracingness. Rhetoric itself is notably incestuous, so much so that chiasmus seems the quintessential rhetorical operation. I stand in the shadow of Sir Thomas Browne: 'There are many things delivered Rhetorically, many expressions therein merely Tropicall [i.e. speaking figuratively], and as they best illustrate my intention.'[5]

We apply two basic metaphors to language: as clothes ('threadbare'), and as organism ('dead languages', 'the sick state of the language'). The one is superficial and secondary, the second central; but both can mislead by freezing the topic. Speaking or thinking clichés is as easy as riding, or falling off, a bike. Some people believe that thinking or talking *about* clichés, or indeed about any of the multiple aspects of language, will make you fall off your bike. This is the common fear, especially in England, of analysis; analysis is breakdown, as in the old joke about the man who, once told of the anatomical intricacies involved in getting out of a chair, was ever after unable to rise from his. I am not a linguistic scientist. I do not take sides in the following confrontation: 'It is better to be a doorkeeper in the house of philology than to dwell in the tents of the rhetoricians.'[6] My favourite French expression is *à cheval.* Not in the sense of 'on horseback', where (to use an idiom from my native Liverpool), I feel about as comfortable as a cow on a bike. But rather in the sense of straddling, bridging the gap. Or, given the tendency to fiasco that marks much human enterprise, falling between two stools. I do have a tongue in my head, and differing quantities of other tongues. Many linguistic scientists reinvest the dogmatism they have withdrawn from value-judgements about language use in taxonomic obsession. As T. E. Hope said, 'for 99 per cent of the population language is not something one views detachedly at all, but an essential item of man's make-up like the use of his limbs or his senses. Philologists, on the other hand, [are] used to conceiving of language as a discrete entity.'[7] I only sometimes believe that ignorance is bliss. Obscurantism never opened anyone's eyes. Why, the more thoughtful infant-school teachers today

begin the process of teaching tots to be critical about language. We all are so instinctively, besides, and just need reminding. 'Mark my words', 'to watch one's tongue': whether in ultimatums or self-censoring nervousness, everybody's doing it.

> If people are bright enough to learn the language of money – as they must be if they are to pay their taxes and buy their goods without falling prey to legal or illegal con artists – they are bright enough to learn the language of language – with a bit of help from linguists who have acquired a sense of their social responsibilities.[8]

Engagingly, Bolinger had earlier defined the linguist as 'the metaperson par excellence', and compared such activity to 'a physician's healing himself, to repairing a boat while remaining afloat in it, and to lifting oneself by one's own bootstraps'.[9] The first two of these are feasible, if not the third. Often we talk unthinkingly of clichés. The very fact that so many people shrink from scrutinizing language suggests how central it is to everything. It is the fear of narcissism, navel-reviews, that makes many shy away from analysis.

The first part of my book is not, like Eric Partridge's, a dictionary of clichés, but rather an analysis of the *idea* of cliché. Examples will be mainly conspicuous by their absence, despite the good-sense warning of a colleague, Christie Davies, that readers will feel cheated if denied instances. (As he is a collector and student of ethnic jokes, perhaps his reflexes differ from mine.) I am implicitly inviting readers to fill in the gaps themselves. If my insights are valid, this should be easy. If they are askew, no amount of examples will save me. A related reason is the hope of not dating too badly. Clichés, besides, abolish the barriers between the individual and the mass. Even Barthes speaks of 'all the codes which constitute me, so that in the end my subjectivity takes on the generality of stereotypes'.[10] As in *Puns*, I will call on English, French and American approaches to my topic. After inventing the term and (it often seems) the habit or practice, many French writers have disowned clichés more cuttingly than their British/American counterparts have. They represent, therefore, an extreme case, a yardstick. I take what examples I have from both literature and everyday speech. While books and chat obviously differ, all of us can and do misuse our powers of speech and thought.

> Much written and spoken expression these days is equivalent to the background music that incessantly encroaches on us ... It thumps and tinkles

> away, mechanical, without colour, inflection, vigour, charm or distinction. People who work in the presence of background music often tell you and sometimes with pride that they don't hear it anymore. The parallel with language is alarming.[11]

Thus Edwin Newman, speaking strictly. I myself want to moralize as little as possible. One of the many dangers of studying clichés is of sounding like a reactionary snob, lamenting a finer age, however mythical, and higher standards ('more means worse'). Whereas we are all vulgarians. When it comes to clichés, the whole of humanity is the scapegoat; all humans are beyond the pale. So who shall give the first shove? It is always others, it does not go without saying, who mouth clichés. Yet even the most moderately honest teacher, parent, friend, person in the street or at workplace, must have many a time winced and wished briefly to be struck dumb, because of the horrors they have just uttered. Is it possible to be original, or even relatively fresh, about clichés? If I let myself be paralysed in advance, even though I recognize the risk of brain-damage by dwelling on them, would I not be surrendering to the inert in life?

They get everywhere. Especially into sports reporting: why, for instance, do sinistropedal footballers alone have an 'educated foot'? Unavoidably, to think and write about clichés, I have to emulate the page of Good King Wenceslas, and put my feet into ready-made tracks. I will put my foot in, no doubt, in more ways than one, but, like that boy, boldly. 'Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue': a motto for brides, stand-up comedians, and many writers. I would like to feel that every cliché is here used knowingly, but I can never be sure that I am always vigilant or putting them productively to work. The study of clichés is inescapably a study of knowledge (and of ignorance), of how we transmit or acquire it, and of what difference it makes to us.

My reluctance to classify, as distinct from circumscribing or hinting, is due to my belief that it is wrong strategically and maybe ethically to tranquillize the spirited. And clichés *are* spirited: vestiges of life, haunting the present, and still able to trouble and direct it. So many studies of clichés I've read – especially by psychologists, linguisticians, or sociologists – end up by mechanizing the quarry, thus giving themselves sitting ducks. They do not give the subject its head, or its due. So I am not just being evasive (though I don't mind being elusive), when I say, in effect: don't fence me in; let me ride over the wide open country that I love. Clichés are alive, and surprisingly free. I seek to get under their skin.

Just as an impersonator can point up what is peculiar and significant in a famous public figure, so my kind of mimicking, intended to be critical (for impersonation, at its best, is a comment), may illuminate this other kind of well-known public figure: the cliché.

2

Language Schools, or Grounding in Cliché

Although exploring every avenue suggests pith-helmets in suburbia, I will try, however lacunically, to do that. There will be no compelling logic about the sequence of the chapters, for clichés have the knack of curling back on themselves, perhaps to ensure survival. If I had to plot the curves of my arguments, they would be at very best a series of interlooping circles. The Olympics Committee partakes, however, more of the internecine than of the ecumenical. Clichés are varied. They can take the form of writing up (exaggeration, embroidering), or of writing down (taking the steam or the barb out of menace, simplifying knottiness). What they often lack (as current English lacks this word) is *adéquation*. This does not mean (there is literally a cliché for every occasion) that they are dispensable or irrelevant.

Whereas we have the capacity for second thoughts – adaptation, twists, questioning – clichés are first thoughts, unexamined, in fact often non-thoughts or automatisms. This common knowledge represented by cliché sustains the status quo. Thus, 'relate to' and 'identify with', splendidly good-hearted as ideals, too seldom involve a courageous leap of imagination, too often a diminishing of the target. Putting yourself in someone else's shoes can be an act of annexation rather than of surrender and sympathy. The current cliché of the 'System', whether the system is that of *1984*, intergalactic science-fiction, job-networks, or any everyday experience of frustration, got its boost from Rousseau and his persecution-mania. Systems can be tackled and subverted, if not overthrown, head-on or deviously, as can clichés, which are piecemeal systems of thought and expression. I agree with Lerner that frequent use is not a criterion.[1] A lavatory is not more of a cliché than Christmas-tree lights. Perhaps it is less of one, as it is not pretending, unless beribboned and bewigged, to be anything but what it is, whereas those glass cartridges carry a heavy cargo of obligatory meanings (fête and fellowship).

The archetypal student essay cautiously begins with a definition of terms. Like a good part of our language, we borrowed the word *cliché* from the French. It may be an echoic word, like 'click' and 'clack' in English. Because of its origins, together with 'stereotype' in printing, and its later extension to photography, the term parallels the development of modern technology. Imitation, identical reproduction (cloning, before its time), such associations led on to the figurative meaning (because reproducibility entails wear-and-tear) of mechanized mental processes and textural fatigue. If modern culture is indeed moving away from print towards pictures, a present-day updating of the term would be 'image': something fixed (though air-brushable), inspectable and influential. I start, as we all do, with education, where we receive our first formal grounding in set ways of thinking and expression.

Even when we have graduated from our cradles or carry-cots, we go on using cribs for the rest of our natural. 'Nous sommes chacun plus riche que nous ne pensons; mais on nous dresse à l'emprunt et à la queste; on nous duict à nous servir plus de l'autruy que du nostre'. (We are all of us richer than we think, but we are brought up to beg and borrow; we are drilled to make more use of what is another's than of our own).[2] The French word *répétition* means both reiteration and rehearsal. We all repeat by way of learning our lines for a future performance, whether on the theatrical or the social stage. Repetition, indeed, is the most basic characteristic of life, for what is more repetitive than breathing, eating, excreting and sleeping? The most endlessly usable particle is re-. Repetition ties us in knots. From an examination-script I recall: 'This avoidance of repetition represents the author's obsession with the repetitive pattern of life'. The very fact that humankind relies on generation to perpetuate itself ensures the centrality of repetition. Each new generation needs to be told and to rediscover old ideas. Much of the time we live off left-overs – often tastier than the real thing.

'The cliché leaves us staring banality straight in the eye',[3] and is therefore troubling and educational. The instance reminds us of the generality, or it would if education more frequently worked to lead out rather than to stuff in. There is a long history of the teaching of rhetoric in French schools, above all in Jesuit establishments, for this order makes no bones about catching early. Normative education easily becomes force-feeding, well-known to French geese. The alimentary metaphor is apt. The seventeenth-century novelist, Charles Sorel, in his *Francion*, tells of his studies, when the boys were obliged to make a *capilotade* (a pot-pourri or ragout) of selected passages from authors, instead of being encouraged to develop their own thoughts and expression.[4] What was