We call a sentence "literal" when it means what it affirms on the face of it, and nothing else. If some sentences are not literal, that is because it is possible, by recognized linguistic usage, to affirm or express one thing and to mean another thing, either instead of or as well as the first. An extreme case of meaning another thing instead (which I will call "substituted meaning") is the rearranged code. In P. G. Wodehouse's *Leave it to Psmith*, a young man outside an Underground Station goes up to a number of complete strangers in turn and tells them to their surprise (and sometimes annoyance) that "There will be rain in Northumberland tomorrow." But what he really means is: "Are you the person who advertised in the Personal Column and later wrote asking me to meet you here?" Perhaps the code is hardly a *linguistic* device; but it will serve as a kind of marker for the terminal point of "substitution"; and we may profitably compare with it the *cliché*, or completely *fossilized metaphor*. If, for example, I tell anyone to "leave no stone unturned," there is hardly more of "stone" in my meaning than there was of "rain" in Psmith's. All that is left is the substituted meaning: "Try every way you can think of!"

When we turn from "instead of" to "as well as," that is, to sentences which convey a secondary meaning, while still in some measure retaining the primary, or literal, one (I will call this "concomitant meaning"), we have already crossed the frontier between prose and poetry. At least I think our examples would practically all have to be taken from among sentences which are characteristic—though not necessarily successfully—poetic. They would range from allegory at one end of the scale, where the two meanings continue alongside, on more or less parallel lines, to
face meaning of an expression as the vehicle and any other meaning which it also properly conveys as the tenor. These two terms I propose, with grateful acknowledgments, to adopt.

Now there is a school of thought which holds that the tenor of a meaningful metaphor could always, if it were thought fit, be expressed literally. The passenger in the vehicle could, if he chose, get out and walk. If it were not so, these thinkers hold, the tenor would not deserve the name of “meaning” at all; it would amount to no more than an emotional overture. A meaningful expression, as distinct from an emotive one, imparts information; and there is no information (they insist) which is not communicable by discursive and literal statement. It is not, by the way, only those who are insensitive to the workings of imagination who take this view. Apart from Dr. Richards, Susanne Langer, in her book Problems of Art (1957), in the course of making an acute and valuable distinction between art as symbol and the use of symbols in art, commits herself to the general statement that “there is a literal meaning (sometimes more than one) connoted by the symbol that occurs in art.” And again, genuine symbols “have meanings, and the meanings may be stated.”

The other school of thought holds that the tenor of a meaningful metaphor or symbol cannot always be expressed literally. However it may be with codes and allegories, there are also “creative,” or “semanal,” or anyway some sort of metaphors and symbols, whose tenor cannot be communicated in any other way than through the symbol, and yet whose tenor is not purely emotive. Whether what is so communicated is information will depend on how we choose to limit the word “information”; but it is certainly meaning. The adherents of this school might well object to my use of the word “concomitant” and prefer some such term as “manifold” or “multiple,” but I will continue to use the word “concomitant” without implying any particular relation between vehicle and tenor, or that the one is always clearly distinguishable from the other.

The meaning we attach to the word “literal” in many of the contexts in which it is commonly used (and these are of course not limited to the realms of poetry and art) will be found, I believe, to depend a good deal on the issue between these two contrasted views. At the moment, however, I shall content myself with having stated them, while I move on into another field and try approaching the subject from a different direction.

Hitherto we have been considering only sentences, but it is not only sentences that possess this quality of being a vehicle with a tenor. That is also very frequently the case with individual words. Since I shall be saying a good deal about “meaning,” I had better mention that I am aware that there is a sense of the word “meaning” in which an individual word outside
a sentence has no meaning. But this limiting sense of the term “meaning”
is really based on the premise that all meaningful language is discursive and
therefore that the only meaningful symbols are the discursive symbols of
logic. In other words it presupposes that the first of the two schools of
thought which I have mentioned is right and the second is wrong. I shall
be suggesting later that there are difficulties in the way of such a supposi-
tion. Meanwhile it is enough that, when I talk about the meanings of in-
dividual words, I shall be talking about whatever it is that lexicographers
and etymologists do talk about. For reasons which I hope will appear, I do
not think it is possible to form any reliable ideas on this subject without
taking full account of the historical approach, and it is so that I approach
it.
Consider the four words, outsider, noble, gentle, and scruple. If we ap-
proach them etymologically, we find a sort of graduated scale in the rela-
tion between vehicle and tenor which they exemplify. When we meet the
word outsider, we are normally still aware, even without reflection, of its
vehicular connotation of spatial externality, even though our main con-
cern is with its tenorial significance—which will be caddishness, or original
genius, according to the context. Noble is still used occasionally to signify
social rank, irrespective of high character (which is of course its tenor).
Gentle, a word with a similar history, has already ceased to be used with a
class or social import except in the obsolescent compounds gentleman and
gentlewoman. In the case of scruple, it takes a little erudition to be aware
that once upon a time it, too, was a vehicle with a distinguishable tenor;
for we have to go to another language (Latin), from which it is derived, in
order to ascertain that scrupulus originally meant a small, sharp stone—the
kind that gets into your shoe and worries you.
In all these four cases the vehicle is a reference to something in the out-
side world, while the tenor conveys a moral quality or a feeling not accessi-
bile to sense-observation. (I am going to call it something in the “inside”
world. There will not be much danger, during this paper, of anyone for-
getting that we talk in metaphors.) And of course, as soon as we start ex-
ploring the history of language in this way, the deluge of available examples
makes us feel like the sorcerer’s apprentice. The shortest way I can think
of to get our minds straight into the middle of all that line of country is to
quote a few sentences from the section on language in Emerson’s longer
ever essay on Nature:

Every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if
traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from material appearance.
*Right* means straight; *wrong* means twisted. *Spirit* primarily means
wind; transgression, the crossing of a line; supercilious, the raising of the eyebrows. We say the heart to express emotion, the head to denote thought, and thought and emotion are words borrowed from sensible things, and now appropriated to spiritual nature. Most of the process by which this transformation is made is hidden from us in the remote time when language was formed . . . .

I have chosen Emerson, but the observation is one with which, it seems, everyone agrees. For instance, it was summed up as follows by Jeremy Bentham:

Throughout the whole field of language, parallel to the line of what may be termed the material language, and expressed by the same words, runs a line of what may be termed the immaterial language. Not that to every word that has a material import there belongs also an immaterial one; but that to every word that has an immaterial import, there belongs, or at least did belong, a material one.

Essay on Language, Section IV

It is fairly obvious that, if we are to consider the meaning of the word "literal" in any general sense—that is, not simply as a technical term in the art of rhetoric—all this is very relevant indeed and requires further examination. For instance, it is clear that the words of this "immaterial" language, of which Bentham speaks, are, or were at one time, what we have been calling vehicles, with an immediately physical reference, but having as their tenor the "immaterial" language. Or, avoiding the technical terms, it is clear that they were used figuratively. Are we equally justified in saying that they are, or were, used metaphorically? Was the figurative import always created by a definite mental act of substitution? In some cases it certainly was. The word scrupulous is a good example of these cases—I am not even sure that there isn’t a passage in Cicero somewhere, where he introduces the metaphor with a rhetorical flourish. But the facility with which, from a few such cases, the general inference has been drawn that all immaterial language came about in this way is remarkable. Bentham, Herbert Spencer, Max Müller all take this long jump in their stride and, though other voices have been raised in this century—for instance, Ernst Cassirer, Bruno Snell, and R. B. Onians—it is still the general view. Dr. A. S. Diamond, in his book The History and Origin of Language (1959), simply takes it for granted.

If this inference were correct, it would follow that all nouns which to-
day have an immaterial import and no other (transgression, supercilious, emotion, and so forth), have behind them a history in which we can distinguish the following four stages: a first stage, in which they had an exclusively literal meaning and referred to a material object; a second stage, in which they had concomitant meanings; a third stage, in which they had a substituted meaning, though the original one had not quite vanished; and a fourth and final stage, in which their meaning has again become (though much altered) exclusively literal. The Greek word πνεῦμα and Latin spiritus and anima are commonly given as the typical examples of stage 2. We think of the third chapter of St. John’s Gospel where the same Greek word πνεῦμα has to be translated spirit in one sentence and wind in the next sentence of the same verse. I have already given outsider as an example of stage 3 (for the quality it denotes is immaterial) and the modern English word spirit will do very well once more for our example of stage 4.

Under examination, however, this presumed historical progress gives rise to a number of questions, two of which were briefly considered many years ago by Professor C. S. Lewis in a paper entitled “Bluspels and Flansferses,” which was printed in his Rehabilitations (1939). He distinguished between the magistral and the pupillary metaphor: “The first is freely chosen; it does not at all hinder, and only very slightly helps, the thought of its maker. The second is not chosen at all; it is the unique expression of a meaning that we cannot have on any other terms” (pp. 140–41). The two questions he raised are: When? and What? When exactly, at what point in its history, did the stage 3 meaning of the word spiritus (during which it still connoted something to do with wind or breath) turn into stage 4—the present-day meaning of our word spirit? And (much more difficult semantically) what happened, when it ceased to be a vehicle with a tenor, and became a mere literal word? Now the fact that we cannot say exactly when a change has taken place does not of course mean that it did not take place; and we perhaps need not worry unduly about the first question—though in point of fact it is a good deal easier to presume a gradual transition in such a case than actually to imagine the process in detail. Just as it is easy to talk of an emendation “creeping” into a text, but very difficult to form a concrete picture of any halfway point in that mysterious journey.

The problem of what happened is a much more prickly one; for it raises the whole question of what a literal word of immaterial import does mean. What does it refer to? Anatole France had a very simple answer for this question. He said these words really still have only their original, material import—and for that reason we need not worry too much about philoso-
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The metaphysician constructs his system by putting together noises which are no more than the perfected cries of dogs and monkeys, cries to which we have gradually attached a significance which we believe to be abstract, when they are in fact only loose or vague. Obviously this will not do. Nobody except an esprit fort seriously thinks that the word spirit means “wind” today; but what does it mean? Nor is it only words like spirit, soul, mind which are puzzling. To what, precisely, does each one of them refer—the tens of thousands of abstract nouns which daily fill the columns of our newspapers, the debating chambers of our legislatures, the consulting rooms of our psychiatrists? Progress, tendency, culture, democracy, liberalism, inhibition, motivation, responsibility—there was a time when each one of them, either itself or its progenitor in another tongue, was a vehicle referring to the concrete world of sensuous experience with a tenor of some sort peeping, or breathing, or bursting through. But now they are just “literal” words—the sort of words we have to use, when we are admonished not to speak in metaphors. What do we mean when we say that?

It is here that the blessed word “entity” generally rears its head. An abstract noun, used literally, means—or is thought to mean—an entity of some sort, a real entity, if you are a Hegelian idealist; a fictitious entity, if you are a positivist. Bentham tells us that:

With every name employed an entity stands associated in the minds of the hearers, as well as speakers; and that entity, though in one half of the whole number of instances, no other than a fictitious one, is, in all of them, apt to be taken for a real one.

And he goes on to emphasize the misconceptions, errors, and ambiguities that have arisen as the result. I do not know that the logical positivists have added much to this way of putting it. What I want to question is the validity of this whole approach to the problem, this whole way of thinking about it.

Why have people fallen into the habit of talking and thinking on the footing that nouns refer, or at all events are expected to refer, to entities? You will remember that the presumed history of these literal words of immaterial import has gone through four stages, in the first and last of which their meanings were exclusively literal, while in the two intermediate stages they functioned as vehicles having a tenor. We may call the first stage—at which they are presumed to have referred solely to material objects—the “born” literal, and the last stage—at which they are presumed
to refer to immaterial entities, real or fictitious—the “achieved” literal. Now I believe it will be found that our whole way of thinking about the achieved literal is based on a tacitly assumed analogy with the born literal. We assume that it is not the natural, simple nature of a noun to be a vehicle with a tenor, because nouns did not begin that way. They began life as plain labels for plain objects and that is their true nature. It was only later, as a result of the operation of human fancy in metaphor-making, that they came to be used for a time as vehicles with a tenor, and when that stage is over and they have once more achieved literalness, we feel that they have reverted to their pristine innocence and become once more labels for objects, even if we are firmly convinced that the new objects do not exist. Better a fictitious entity than none at all—for a noun to be the name of!

If I am right about this, and there is a confusion between our notion of achieved literalness and our notion of born literalness, it is clearly important to be sure that at least our notion of born literalness is roughly correct. And that is what I now propose to examine.

At the beginning of this paper we found that there were two schools of thought about the relation between vehicle and tenor; one holding that they are always detachable, and that the tenor could also be expressed literally; the other holding that that is not always the case. Let us therefore consider the concept of born literalness from each of these contrasted points of view in turn.

The concept of born literalness assumes that all words of immaterial import began with an exclusively material reference and subsequently acquired an immaterial tenor as a result of the metaphor-making activity of human minds. Now adherents of the first, or detachable, school of thought—which I will call the explicationist theory of metaphor—are bound to assume that the immaterial tenor, upon its first appearance among our primitive ancestors, could in the alternative have been expressed literally. But in order to achieve this, those ancestors must already have possessed other words with an immaterial reference. But how did those words acquire their immaterial reference? Not by metaphorical activity—unless there had already been still other words available; and so on ad infinitum. It follows that, if you believe that whatever can be expressed metaphorically can also be expressed literally, you cannot at the same time believe that man’s first words had a purely material reference and that an immaterial tenor was subsequently added by way of metaphor.

The second—or implicationist—theory of metaphor, which holds that the tenor cannot necessarily be taken apart from its vehicle and expressed literally, escapes this difficulty. But it still has to assume that the immater-
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ial content, which afterwards became the tenor, was conceived separately and without the help of any verbal vehicle. Somehow or other our ancestors had acquired a bit of self-knowledge (knowledge of the “inner” world) without the help of the instrument of speech and then they chose a word with which to clothe that bit of knowledge metaphorically. I am a primitive man, who has just become aware of a sort of immaterial something within me, but I have no word for it. In my experience up to now, it is not even the sort of thing for which there are words. What I have got available is a bunch of strictly literal labels for things like sun, moon, cloud, rock, river, wind, etc. None of these words has any immaterial overtone at all. That is an essential condition; for otherwise they would not be literal (as born literals are assumed to be literal); they would already be vehicles with a tenor. The word for wind, for example, means to me simply what we today call air or oxygen, the physical stuff that keeps on coming into and going out of me. I now take the step of substituting my word for, and with it my thought of, wind for my wordless thought of the sort of something. That is the picture.

And of course it is an impossible one. It is not impossible that new meanings should make their first appearance as metaphor. On the contrary in our time it is the common way. Discovery, consciousness itself, and symbolization go hand-in-hand. But we must remember that metaphors and symbols today are created by minds already acquainted with figurative language as a normal mode of expression. What we are trying to imagine now is the first metaphor in a wholly literal world. And that does imply precisely this primitive and verbally unsupported notion of the “sort of something” which I have tried to depict. But it is impossible to believe that things happened in this way.

It is impossible to believe, because consciousness and symbolization are simultaneous and correlative. We can believe that a growing awareness of the sort of something which we today mean by spirit was inextricably linked with a new use of the word for wind. What it is impossible to believe is, that up to that moment the word for wind had been as semantically aloof from the sort of something as Psmith’s remark about rain in Northumberland was semantically aloof from the information he intended to convey to Freddie Threepwood.

If there was no prior, no “given” affinity between the concept “wind” and the other immaterial concept of “spirit,” the latter concept must have been originally framed without the aid of any symbol. It must however, as tenor, have been separable from its vehicle when it acquired one. The first of these two consequences is, in my view, epistemologically un-
tenable on several grounds; but it is enough that the second is pointedly inconsistent with just that "implicational" type of metaphor which is the only one we are any longer concerned with, since the explicational type has already been shown to be incompatible with born literalness. If, on the other hand, there was any prior affinity between the concept of wind and the other (inmaterial) concept, then the word must already, from the moment of its birth, have been a vehicle with a tenor.

I think we are bound to conclude that this was in fact the case. We have escorted the concept of "born literalness" to the frontier and there is really nothing left to do but to hand it over to the consular representatives of the land of Not-being, or perhaps better say the land of dream. It occupies a clear and conspicuous place in so many minds that I hardly know what to call it. "Chimera" suggests fancifulness and vagueness, but the historical fallacy of born literalness is neither vague nor fanciful. Perhaps specter is the best word. Literalness is a quality which some words have achieved in the course of their history; it is not a quality with which the first words were born. And let us be clear about the consequences. The born literalness which we have rejected is a literalness of the material, not of the immaterial language. We mean by a "literal" word or meaning one which is not a vehicle with a tenor or one which is a vehicle without a tenor. But the vast majority of the words by which we today denote the objects of the outer world have at some stage in their history been vehicles with a tenor, and, if that is so, it follows (except in places where a tenor was added by late and deliberate metaphorical construction) that they began life as vehicles with a tenor. They too can only have achieved a literalness with which they were not born. Just as our immaterial language has acquired its literal meanings by dropping the vehicular reference, so our material language has acquired its literalness by dropping the tenorial reference. That which the physiologist takes to be the literal meaning of the word heart, for example, is no less "achieved" than that which the theologian takes to be the literal meaning of the word spirit. Whatever else the word "literal" means, then, it normally means something which is the end-product of a long historical process.

Abandoning the specter of born literalness, we shall also abandon the whole dream of fixed entities with which literal meanings must somehow correspond. What then are we left with? What solid ground have we to stand on? The linguistic analysts have already suggested that there is none. According to them, the meaning of a word is the way it is used in sentences, and it may be that there is not much to quarrel with in this doctrine, if it stops there. They do not however appear to stop there, for they
seem to infer from this a sort of lowest common measure and to equate
the meaning of any word with (to quote Mr. Gellner) "the way it is used
by an unimaginative man about the middle of the morning." On the other
hand, when it is a question, not of inference or assumption, but of any
further development of the doctrine, they do stop there. For they do not
appear to be interested in any sort of historical enquiry. Whereas, if the
meaning of a word in the twentieth century is the way it is used in the
twentieth century, I would have thought that that makes it all the more
interesting and important to enquire into the way it was used from time to
time in previous centuries.

Although I have been dealing with words, it cannot be said that my
conclusions affect words only. If the word on its very first appearance was
already a vehicle with a tenor, then the given affinity which I suggested
between the concept of wind and the concept of spirit must have been
"given" in the nature of things and not by some kind of friction in the
machinery of language. I think it will be found that to assume otherwise is
merely to smuggle back into our thinking the specter of born literalness, or
at all events the sort of world, the sort of relation between nature and
the mind of man which must have given rise to born literalness and could
not therefore (as we saw when we laid the specter) have given rise to an
immaterial import. Bruno Snell put it neatly in his book The Discovery of
Mind (1946, translated 1953), when, in dealing with one of Homer's meta-
phors, he maintained that man could never have come to experience a rock
anthropomorphically if he had not also experienced himself "petrormorphi-
cally."

It follows that neither nature nor man will ever be understood, though
certainly physical nature—and perhaps physical man, too—may in the
meantime be very skillfully manipulated, until we accept that nature is the
reflected image of man's conscious and unconscious self. We must remem-
ber that the human body is itself a part of nature. As long as the historical
fallacy of born literalness holds sway, Freud's half-truth that many images
have a bodily significance will be swallowed, without leading, as it should,
to the reflection that this is only possible because the body itself has an
imagin big significance. I think it also follows that the mind of man is not, as
Coleridge put it, "a lazy onlooker" on an external world but itself a struc-
tural component of the world it contemplates.

I conclude that the second of the two schools of thought mentioned at
the start—the implicationist school—has hold of the truth. The other, the
explicationist, view is founded on the assumption that all meaningful lan-
guage is discursive; this assumption is itself based on the premise that lit-
eralness of meaning is some kind of unclouded correspondence with a
mindless external reality which was given from the start; and this premise
in its turn requires the specter of born literalness to keep it in countenance.

As to the meaning of the word "literal," there is no difficulty about it,
and everyone knows what it means as a technical term in the art of rheto-
ric. In any wider sense, bearing on the general relation between material
and immaterial language, what we call literalness is a late stage in a long-
drawn-out historical process.

There is of course a sense in which words must be said to mean what
they are believed, and therefore intended, to mean; but nouns of the so-
called material language do not in fact correspond with real and wholly
material entities. The belief that they do so is responsible for the fuss
about entities, real or fictitious, upon which to found the meanings of
nouns of the so-called immaterial language. In this factual sense there is in-
deed no such thing as literalness. The most we can safely say, therefore, is
that the literal and discursive use of language is the way in which it is used
by a speaker, who is either unaware of, or is deliberately ignoring, that real
and figurative relation between man and his environment, out of which the
words he is using were born and without which they could never have been
born.