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The Cliché as Complaint and Critique

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The cliché is a peripheral term in our critical vocabulary. Reviewers, critics, and editors speak of clichés, but dictionaries of critical terms rarely provide entries on the word. This paper asks whether pointing out clichés represents a form of critique or whether it is just quibbling, and how we draw the line between scrutiny and pedantry.

It's easy to say what clichés are. It's easy to define them: "Clichés are overused expressions. Once these expressions were original, but today they are stale and trite." It's also easy to gather examples: "Do people in your company use the following overused expressions? 24/7, branding, cautiously optimistic, cash cow, corporate culture, cutting edge, deliverable, global strategies, going gang-busters, guestimate, interface, leverage, micromanage, move the cheese, multitasking, paradigm, stakeholder, synergy, user friendly, value added, visioning, win-win" (Jaderstrom 28). "Those terms are all groaners, to be sure. But my vote for the single most annoying bit of business jargon: 'It is what it is'" (Crumpley 42).

Clichés involve the continued "use" of "overused" expressions. This happens everywhere, not only in companies. "The older I get, the more intolerant I am of overused expressions in newspapers and on cable TV news shows" (Walsh 5). So, overused expressions in newspapers and cable TV news shows: "Have you noticed that one of the favourite phrases of politicians and pundits lately is 'going forward'? 'The president will, going forward, begin his 2012 campaign in earnest.'" Or: "Instead of saying that a politician is postponing a decision or letting the other side take the initiative, he or she is said to be 'kicking the can down the road'" (Walsh 6). And then: "You don't have to be a rocket scientist," "Can't get my head around," "The idea doesn't have traction" (Walsh 5-6).

"The older I get": there is a hint of grumpiness in the reaction to the cliché. Perhaps the people who complain about clichés also complain about sloppy punctuation, or the decline of good manners. When there is talk of clichés, the stern editor is speaking: "I still actively edit out the phrase 'real world' when manuscripts arrive [. . .] The cliché is only rivalled in its over usage by the term 'hands on'" (Gerking 8). Or the veteran teacher of composition: "We think of it [the cliché] in connection with teaching composition to high school children, and the graces of style to foreigners" (Lerner 249). Or the mocking conservative columnist: "Well, maybe you're not *comfortable with that*. Are you *comfortable with that*? I suppose it depends on your *takeaway*. If you're *comfortable* with your *takeaway*, I do hope you choose to *share it* with us. Whether you share it or not probably depends on what *community* you choose to be a member of. I hope it's a *nurturing community*. And *sustainable*" (Ferguson 4). Or the literary critic: "When Don DeLillo has a character say something 'quietly' you know he's drawing on a long tradition of 'said quietly' as a conventional announcement that the remark it follows should be taken as particularly impressive" (Kermode).

Editors, teachers, columnists, and critics: the cliché involves observation and explicit commentary on the speech and writings of others. Those others comprise pundits and politicians, managers and salespeople, high school students and foreigners, other writers, and other critics. Good authors busy with producing their own primary texts presumably react to the existence of a cliché by avoiding it, so they don't use the word, they don't employ the category, and don't draw attention to their judgment: the critical operation remains concealed. What you see or read, what becomes visible in the text, is the silent replacement or suppression of the cliché by a fresh and unexpected formulation. That is, you see "creativity."

But editors, teachers, commentators, and critics work with and on the texts of others. They have to demonstrate linguistic and stylistic vigilance openly and directly; they label, correct, criticise, and demand alternatives. When pointing out clichés, the tone can be concerned, pedantic, sarcastic, sometimes amused and frequently weary: "Forgive me if I've criticised this one before, but it just won't go away" (Walsh 6). Those who speak of "overuse" and "unfortunate popularity" always do so, of course, from a position of *experience* (Lerner 250). The problem with the cliché is one of iteration. The critics of clichés have experience, bordering on exhaustion. Their complaint reads: I have seen this, heard this, too many times before. The watchful reader is either amused or irritated, he or she either finds the cliché ridiculous or infuriating, but is always experienced.

It's easy to gather clichés and easy to say what they are, to define them; the cliché is "a stereotyped phrase, a commonplace phrase" (OED) or the cliché is a phrase that has lost its impact through "constant and prolonged use" (Shaw 79). I would say: it's far too easy. It's so easy to state concisely yet accurately what the cliché is that people feel again and again that there is nothing much to say. All there is to do, in fact, is gather more examples. There are plenty of lists and collections of clichés, presented to warn and entertain, but rarely, almost never, are there conceptual explorations.

Look, for instance, at dictionaries of critical terms or lexicons of literary studies and aesthetics. The cliché is hardly ever seen as deserving of an independent entry, and when it does receive a longer treatment, or any treatment at all, it is typically paired up with a more prominent term. A recent seven-volume dictionary of basic concepts in aesthetics does not contain an entry on the cliché (Barck). A lexicon of literary history does list cliché, but only to refer to the article on formulaic popular fiction; it is apparently only relevant as a term in relation to genre studies (Fricke 278). A ten-volume reference work on rhetoric also deals with the cliché, but then as a subcategory under the concept "stereotype," which constitutes an important term in social psychology and sociology (Reisigl 1368). A 2007 dictionary of literary terms does not feature an entry (Burdorf). A 2006 dictionary of aesthetic terms does include a brief entry, but then proceeds to link the cliché to kitsch, a critical concept in art history and the theory of art, and to the system of *topoi* in ancient rhetoric (Hebekus 187).

The cliché, then, seems to be located on the periphery of our shared critical vocabularies, and as a minor critical term, it can never be sure of inclusion in encyclopedias and lexicons. And when it is included as a term, it is rarely viewed as an independent concept, but attached to some older, richer, and more complex notion. Popular genre fiction is an entire domain of literary production; the books we see in supermarket aisles and at the airport. Kitsch is a pejorative term for art, or non-art, that

delivers cheap, fake, and easily consumable sentimentality. In rhetoric, *topoi* or commonplaces play a part in the generative grid or set of procedures and rubrics that allow the trained orator to construct a speech on any given issue. Stereotype is a common term for simplistic and frequently negative overgeneralizations about out-groups, prejudicial notions stubbornly resistant to revision. All of these terms can of course be plausibly linked to the cliché. There are clichés in romance novels. And like kitsch, the cliché works as a pejorative term for artistic-expressive failure. And surely, the *topos* or commonplace of ancient rhetoric must have something in common with the annoying “commonplace phrase.” Finally, the cliché is a set expression, an obstinate combination of words, so it may make sense to associate it with frozen psychological attitudes to particular social, national, ethnic or racial groups. Still, the frequent and inconsistent linking of the cliché to a variety of weightier concepts betrays a certain perplexity. There is oddly little to say about the cliché, hence always better and easier to move on to a more promising concept with a clear disciplinary identity (kitsch in art, stereotype in psychology, *topos* in rhetoric etc.). The utter unmysteriousness of the already-known and already-digested is the problem of the cliché, and, it seems, the problem for those who seek to write about it. It’s so easy to define the cliché, it doesn’t even have a fixed disciplinary home; it’s not a concept, just a word, without any stable scholarly affiliation.

But the cliché is not best thought of as a thing or a name for a group of distinct verbal items. Instead, the cliché is an effect of and in reading, a consequence of having read. It is, as we saw above, a word used quite frequently by professional readers, such as editors, teachers, critics and reviewers. The use of the concept depends on an “art of recognition” by a reader and hence “cannot exist outside of the reading process” (Amossy 34). “Overuse” is therefore not an unambiguous fact about a phrase, not one of its indisputable properties, but a determination made by someone who is immersed in discourse. Clichés are sequences of words *deemed* tedious, which is to say that only the reader in the know will discover the cliché. This is the reader who does not simply absorb or assimilate the text, the reader for whom familiarity does not facilitate easy and quick comprehension, but for whom such familiarity can become an issue and a problem.

The term cliché, then, signals a critical operation. The operation consists in the classification of an instance of use as over-use, in the identification and simultaneous rejection of the overly familiar. For the experienced reader, the textual expert, recognition implies rejection; that which can be so easily recognized ought also to be removed. The reaction takes place in an instant; the reader cannot *not* recognize a phrase or cannot control or prevent the “*déjà-vu-effect*” and hence cannot choose not to reject the expression (Amossy 34). This spontaneous and uncontrollable *déjà-vu-effect* makes the term “cliché” the verbal equivalent of an irrepressible sigh or a grimace of irritation; one imagines the reaction to the perceived cliché as visceral and immediate, however much it builds on years of reading, years of textual immersion and discursive training. The expert reader is also the hyper- or oversensitive reader, sophisticated to the point of nervousness, overly intolerant to certain insistent stimuli, a reader who is prone to rolling her eyes in exasperation.

Against this background, the cliché seems to belong in the neighbourhood of the complaint rather than that of critique. This could at least partly explain why the cliché has not been deemed worthy of much exploration—it simply does not possess the seriousness of critical terms such as kitsch

or stereotype. Those who invoke these more venerable concepts cast a severe gaze upon the pernicious psychological habits (stereotype) or ubiquitous inauthenticity (kitsch). In contrast to such charges against pervasive cheapness and fakeness or near-ineradicable negative bias, the annoyance at recurrent phrases does not uncover a grave offense. The conceptual content is too thin; reacting to the cliché is just a matter of irritability and idiosyncrasy.

Even when a critic seeks to elevate the cliché to the status of a genuine critical term, justification is needed. “[C]liché is a disease that must be stamped out,” Frank Kermode writes, “it infects the mind and even the heart; it makes it impossible to be honest.” This is a strong statement, but since it comes in a review, it’s not quite the beginning of a sustained attempt to move the cliché into the vocabulary of critique. And even in a review, such a strong statement on the dangers of cliché requires a little bit of extra work, an excuse: “The severities [directed at clichés] may seem to be, but aren’t, mere pedantries” (Kermode). From this prefatory defence one can infer that the focus on clichés is typically taken to be revealing, not of the object of criticism, but of the critic. He or she risks coming across as a mere pedant.

The rejection of clichéd language is not critique, but something more like quibbling, or an activity located somewhere between serious intellectual scrutiny and mere pedantry. I linger on this point partly because it does lend some specificity to the cliché as a type of judgment. The cliché is not simply a term for an expanding stock of phrases but a complaint that we voice in the process of reading; and it is a particular kind of complaint—or marginal or weak critique—articulated on the basis of a particular pattern of experience, one that compels readers to speak of “overuse.” It names a recognition shadowed by weariness, mild contempt, embarrassment, frustration or sarcastic amusement. It is a word we have for our groaning, wincing, cringing, our tired laugh or rolling eyes. The question is then whether this term deserves to be regarded as an instrument of critique, whether it represents a legitimate form of evaluation, rather than merely a useful editing strategy. Can the discernment of the cliché ground the repudiation of statements, texts, and discourses, given the marginal status of the term in our culture of critique?

There are many ways to criticise statements. Let us say that a politician gives a speech and we listen, critically. What resources do we have at our disposal? How can we quarrel with the propositions? There are plenty of things we can do. We can fact-check assertions to see if claims about the world correspond to states of affairs in the world. Perhaps the politician shows his or her ignorance, or is being dishonest. We can use basic logic to reconstruct the arguments and determine whether they are valid or not, whether the premises lead to the conclusions. Looking at announced or suggested programs or policies with the help of recent research and available expertise, we can try to evaluate whether these programs or policies are viable or realistic. Then there is the rhetorical assessment: we can judge the organization of the speech, the ability of the politician to speak appropriately and well, to inspire confidence or produce elation. Finally, academics and intellectuals go deeper and study how statements emerge out of and belong to larger discourses constituted by constraints and exclusions, or how they appear as manifestations of ideologies and forms of consciousness, which in turn are conditioned by socio-economic structures.

There are also, of course, plenty of clichés in politics, plenty of tired phrases, but would the continued use of overused expression give us reason to criticise a speech in a way that would go beyond a mere call for more scrupulous editing? The cliché, for instance, does not indicate a problem of reference, of factual incorrectness or untruth. When the listener or reader points to a cliché, he or she does not primarily point to clear evidence of a politician's ignorance or dishonesty. The reliance on a popular phrase is distinct from the intentional or unintentional dissemination of falsehood.

In 2012, David Bromwich, a professor of English at Yale, published a portrait of the incumbent American President, Barack Obama, in the *London Review of Books*. It speaks about the man or the figure, President Barack Obama, but since the author is a professional reader, painting a portrait or judging a character involves a lot of reading. The article can be viewed as a case of the intellectual pronouncing judgments on the politician, the man of letters speaking of the man of action—a familiar and tedious scheme, vulnerable to facile objections. (What do intellectuals know about politics? What do English professors know about anything?) But Obama is a president who writes, with two books published before taking office, and a politician known for his eloquence. To read those books and to listen to those speeches should not count as a completely idle exercise.

The question is with what means Bromwich levels a critique of Obama, or how he establishes that Obama is a problematic politician. Does he look for dishonesty, flawed arguments, ideological attachments or something else? To begin with, Bromwich really is preoccupied with falsehood, with inaccurate statements and half-truths. Invoking David Maraniss's biography of the young Obama, he claims that Obama's personal history *Dreams of My Father* must be viewed as a work of fiction. The actual story of the President's youth is "partly falsified to support the claims of the author's later self" and the "aloof and ironic hero portrayed in *Dreams* was a literary creation". As an author at least, Obama is prone to rearrange what happened; he does not stick to the facts, although it is unclear how politically damning this is. In another passage, Bromwich accuses Obama of repeating "half-truths that are functional lies," and succumbing to the fantasy that his words do not always need to correspond to the world because they are powerful enough to change it. I quote this only to show that Bromwich employs standard instruments of evaluation and critique: the president is not always entirely honest; his words do not match up with reality.

The portrait of the president is, so much is clear, "unremittingly acerbic" (Bell). But Bromwich is also concerned with Obama's style of speaking and, in a key passage, speaks of the political problem with clichés:

Maraniss's findings about *Dreams from My Father* throw considerable light on one aspect of Obama's public presentation since 2009. I mean his copious reliance on cliché. He knows a cliché when he speaks it. He uses it to accommodate an imagined audience, with a condescension he thinks the audience does not detect. But this is a practice that cuts against genuine respect. The consequence, for his political stance, is an unanchored populism, a plea for unity among many constituencies without a footing in one. Obama's gambit has been to carry himself as if, since he comes from everywhere, and every class and tradition flows through him, he can never be accused of being parochial, marginal or the tool of special

interests. (Bromwich)

This passage contains, I would submit, the rudiments of a theoretical treatment of the cliché, an account of why it is irritating and what it might reveal, at least in the domain of political communication. The cliché is still the easily recognizable because overused expression; that is implied in the argument, but Bromwich indicates its political dimension or effect.

To begin with, Bromwich does not view the continued use of overused expressions as a glaring failure of creativity or expression. That is the standard assumption when clichés appear, and it is easy to understand why. If a person says again that which everyone else is already saying, then he or she reveals a lack of creativity and originality—an obvious conclusion. And if a person says that which everyone else is already saying, it is also a failure of self-disclosure, for one learns nothing about the particularity and individuality of the speaker. This slightly different accusation reads: you do not express yourself and perhaps there is no distinct self to express, for by recycling the already said and already thought, you only express society, or society expresses itself through you (Norberg 84).

But none of these criticisms apply directly to Obama, because in Bromwich's account, the president exhibits something like a politically motivated avoidance of creativity and revelation. Obama wants neither dazzling displays of originality nor the disclosure of individuality and specificity, both of which could attract and endear but also exclude and alienate. Bromwich's Obama in fact knows very well that he is using clichés, and this use amounts to a transparent rhetorical strategy. His aim is to accommodate as large an audience as possible, and he does this by speaking the language of the many, which is to say: by reiterating clichés. For a politician, the wide distribution of what some call clichés works as a helpful index of the acceptability of these expressions; the cliché's "unfortunate popularity" is also simply its broad popularity.

That the cliché is deployed as part of a rhetorical strategy should not come as a surprise. To sway an audience, the politician must restate and proceed from what his or her audience already recognizes and believes; he or she must understand and respect shared ideas, or "common sense." But in Obama's case and others, the reliance on the already said and already shared goes too far and becomes suspicious, at least in the eyes of an attentive listener. Bromwich alleges that Obama does not come across as someone who himself believes in the clichés; he claims that he can tell that these clichés serve only as a convenient device of inclusive, non-conflictual communication. The President seems inauthentic in Bromwich's eyes, perhaps even manipulative. But the hint of condescension discerned by Bromwich, the detached use of clichés, ultimately points to a problematic vision of politics. Obama's crucial error is that he seeks to speak to and tries to woo too many people at the same time and in doing so relinquishes or refuses commitment to any one constituency, as if their demarcations, different interests and diverging hopes and desires did not matter.

To use again the phrases that have been used the most, to rely copiously on cliché for the sake of accommodation: that is, rhetorically, something of a failure of courage. It signifies the speaker's wish to appeal to all and hence also an unwillingness to determine his or her persona or assume definite political contours, which could provoke antagonism. What Bromwich is reacting against in his discussion of clichés is a bland, even feckless universality, or a fake universality, insofar as it is

accomplished only by withholding commitment to any one specific group and withdrawing from membership in any one demographic. Obama can even be called an aloof ironist insofar as he allegedly believes himself to be above the substance of many of his utterances, and to hover above any defined political group (Mascat 233).

The cliché betrays a tactical desire to speak to almost everyone. The risk is that you then speak to no one, and that those who feel that they represent something specific take offense. This is Bromwich's complaint—or his critique: Obama is guilty of a failure of address. By using a language he is not especially committed to but believes will satisfy most people, the politician avoids confirming his loyalty to a particular audience, as if he could float above the strife of some groups with other groups. Yet antagonistic engagements between factions are what constitute politics to begin with (Schmitt 26). In that sense, the cliché can represent nonpolitical language; it is inserted to soothe rather than take a stance, to secure approval rather than delimit an identity. (In politics, the opposite of the cliché is not, as in literature, the novel, fresh and creative expression, but rather the idiom used only by a particular group, or even better: the genuinely disputatious, controversial statement, greeted by some and rejected by others.)

The cliché, defined as the broadly popular, eminently useful and hence also annoyingly overused expression, cannot serve as the medium of perceived or imagined interaction between specific people. Since the clichéd expression is so pervasive, it discloses very little about the speaker in his or her particularity, and since it is thought to appeal to most people, it also does not seem deployed to reach a specific recipient in his or her particularity. This obvious lack of communicative exclusivity may produce disappointment; an audience may feel that it is not properly addressed, not properly recognized, but all-too cheaply wooed. One can even detect a slight trace of personal disillusionment in Bromwich's portrait of Obama the orator: the President is not speaking to me but seeks to reach out to everyone and hence to no one; his reliance on widely used phrases means that no one is especially invited or valued. Obama clearly does not want to be my enemy, Bromwich seems to be saying, but I can hear that he is also not quite my friend.

The cliché, the determination of a case of annoying overuse, signifies a type of communicative failure. What kind of failure depends on the situation—and the reader's or listener's attitude. In most cases, the reader judges from a position of (imagined) superiority. Spotting a phrase that has been used too many times before, the reader quickly refers it back to the writing or speaking self and views it as a failure of creativity and originality. The writer who recycles the supposedly exhausted formulation is judged a poor writer, or an unforgivably dull and uninteresting person, or not really a person at all in the sense of possessing distinct individuality. But if the reader is expecting to be spoken to and recognized, the cliché designates a rhetorical failure, an absence of proper respect. A speaker's continued use of formulations that have been used again and again and are known to have worked reliably before is taken to betray a lack of genuine interest in the recipient. This recipient is then offended at the thought of being taken for granted rhetorically, and hence of remaining unseen. The cliché is a poor suitor.

Clichés are repeated words, words that have been spoken by many and even seem to be uttered by an "anonymous voice" (Amossy 35). In the cliché, some blurry, capacious entity like the

whole of society seems to be talking; the expression is circulating so widely that you can no longer make out the voice of any particular person. When we come across the annoyingly banal expression, it is as if the scene of discourse suddenly feels overcrowded—by a faceless “everyone.” The experienced, sophisticated reader who discerns the cliché hears society speaking through the writer and is amused by the hollow claim to individuality that the mere fact of the writing represents. The standard accusation reads: You may think that you are saying something clever or insightful, but, in fact, it’s just society, the anonymous collective voice, that continues to chat in and through you. But then there is also the reader or listener prone to disappointment or sensitive to slights, expecting to be addressed and rhetorically attended to. He or she has another, equally valid response to the appearance of the cliché: the ubiquitous, exhausted phrase reveals that I am being spoken to *as if I was nothing but society*, as if I had no features beyond those of “everyone.” It signifies a kind of careless over-inclusivity, a lack of concern for specificity and context. The possible reactions to the cliché include not just mild scorn for those who cannot speak or write creatively, but the troubling suspicion of being denied particularity.

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