Mediation

By Raymond Williams

Mediation has long been a relatively complex word in English, and it has been made very much more complex by its uses as a key term in several systems of modern thought. It came into English in C14, from fr mediation, of mediationem, IL, from rw mediare, L—to divide in half, to occupy a middle position, to act as an intermediary. These three very different senses of the Latin word have all been present in English uses of mediation and of the verb mediate which was later formed from the noun and from the intervening adjective mediate. Thus two of the earliest examples of the use of mediation in English, both from Chaucer, carry two of the three main senses which became established: (i) interceding between adversaries, with a strong sense of reconciling them—‘By the pope’s mediation ... they were acorde’ (Man of Law’s Tale, c. 1386); (ii) a means of transmission, or agency as a medium—‘By mediation of this litel tretis, I purpose to teche ...’ (Astrolabe, c. 1391). From c. 1425 the third early sense, now obsolete, is recorded: (iii) division or halving—‘mediacion is a takyn out of halfe a nombre out of a holle nombre’.

In general use senses (i) and (ii) became common. Sense (i) was repeatedly used of the intercession of Christ between God and Man, and politically of the act of reconciling, or attempting to reconcile, adversaries. Sense (ii) covered intermediate agency, from material things—‘not to be touched but by the mediation of a sticke’ (1615)—to mental acts—‘the understanding receives things by the mediation, first of the externall sences, then of the fancy’ (1646). Meanwhile mediate as a verb carried both these senses, while mediate as an adjective carried not only the senses of intermediary and intermediate but of an indirect or dependent relationship of this kind, as which mediate was regularly contrasted with immediate. Thus: ‘the Immediate Cause of Death, is the Resolution or Extingishment of the Spirits ... the Destruction or Corruption of the Organs is but the Mediate Cause’ (Bacon, 1626); ‘Perception is either immediate or mediate ... Mediate, as when we perceive how (ideas) are related to each by comparing them both to a third’ (Norris, 1704); ‘all truth is either mediate ... derived from some other truth ... or immediate and original’ (Coleridge, 1817).

There was thus a complex of senses ranging from reconciling to intermediate to indirect. It was into this complex that various specific uses, in certain modern systems of thought, were inserted by translation, usually of the German word Vermittlung. Sense (i), of reconciliation, was strongly present in Idealist philosophy; between God and Man, between Spirit and World, between Idea and Object, between Subject and Object. In its developed uses, three stages of this process can be distinguished: (a) finding a central
point between two opposites, as in many political uses; (b) describing the interaction of two opposed concepts or forces within the totality to which they are assumed to belong, or do really belong; (c) describing such interaction as in itself substantial, with forms of its own, so that it is not the neutral process of the interaction of separate forms, but an active process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated, or by its nature indicates their nature.

The political sense of mediation as reconciliation has remained strong, but most modern philosophical uses depend on the idea of a substantial rather than a merely neutral or instrumental mediator. How this is defined of course varies. In idealist thought, the apparently separate entities were already parts of a totality; thus their mediation shared its laws. A different use of totality, in the Marxist tradition, emphasized irresolvable contradictions within what was nevertheless a total society: mediation then sometimes took on the sense already present in English as indirect connection. It is still often used in an unfavourable sense, in a contrast between real and mediated relations, mediation being then one of the essential processes not only of consciousness but of ideology (q.v.). This use of mediation has chimed with the modern use of media or mass media (q.v.), where certain social agencies are seen as deliberately interposed between reality and social consciousness, to prevent an understanding of reality. A similar sense of the indirect, the devious or the misleading is present in some psychoanalytical thought, in which unconscious (q.v.) content undergoes mediation into the conscious mind. These uses depend on an assumed dualism, of reality and consciousness, or of unconscious and conscious mediation acts between them, but indirectly or misleadingly. Yet there is also, in addition to these uses derived mainly from sense (b) above, a variety of uses which depend on sense (c). These are now perhaps the most important. Mediation is here neither neutral nor "indirect" (in the sense of devious or misleading). It is a direct and necessary activity between different kinds of activity and consciousness. It has its own, always specific forms. The distinction is evident in a comment by Adorno: "mediation is in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought. What is contained in communications, however, is solely the relationship between producer and consumer" (Theses on the Sociology of Art, 1967). All 'objects', and in this context notably works of art, are mediated by specific social relations but cannot be reduced to an abstraction of that relationship; the mediation is positive and in a sense autonomous. This is related, if controversially, to formalist (q.v.) theory, in which the form (which may or may not be seen as a mediation) supersedes questions of the relationships which lie on either side of it, among its 'producers' or its 'consumers'.

The complexity of mediation, in current use, is then very apparent. Its most common, but conflicting, uses are: (1) the political sense of intermediary action designed to bring about reconciliation or agreement; (2) the dualist sense, of an activity which expresses either indirectly or deviously and misleadingly (and thus often in a falsely reconciling way), a relationship between otherwise separated facts and actions and experiences; (3) the formalist sense, of an activity which directly expresses otherwise unexpressed relations. It can be said that each of these senses has a better word: (1) conciliation; (2) ideology of rationalization (q.v.); (3) form. But in the real historical development of mediation as a concept it has been the relationships between these distinct senses which, understandably, have been the subject of prolonged inquiry and argument, and especially the relations between (2) and (3). The long and intricate inquiries and arguments have left their varying marks on the word, which, in its most thoughtful uses recalls, if it cannot solve, some inevitable and important difficulties.

See DIASPORA, EXPERIENCE, IDEALISM, MEDIA, UNCONSCIOUS.