How Rare Is Chairman Mao? 
Dummett, Frege and the Austere Conception of Nonsense

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The Beast had lurked indeed, and the Beast, at its hour, had sprung. 
(H. James)

One of the most important sources of the “resolute” approaches to interpreting Wittgenstein’s Tractatus is a view of nonsense originally developed by Cora Diamond as an interpretation of the views of Frege as well as of the early Wittgenstein. In the seminal papers in which Diamond’s interpretation was first set out, Michael Dummett’s reading of Frege appears as a foil, a representative of a conception of nonsense opposed to what she calls the “Frege–Wittgenstein” view. In subsequent developments of the resolute approach, primarily in the work of James Conant, this opposition has become known as one between the “substantial” conception of nonsense (hereafter Substantiality) and the Frege–Wittgenstein “austere” conception (hereafter Austerity). Most of this paper is an attempt to assess the true extent of this opposition. I focus mainly on Diamond’s two early papers: “Frege and Nonsense” (Diamond, 1991a; hereafter FN) and “What Nonsense might Be” (Diamond, 1991b; hereafter NMB), and on the parts of Frege: Philosophy of Language (Dummett, 1981; hereafter FPL) to which resolute interpreters tend to refer in characterizing Dummett’s views. My main conclusion, given a fairly leisurely examination of these texts, is that there is in fact much less opposition between Dummett’s views and Austerity than is usually supposed. In addition, this examination unearths some commitments of Austerity that are not fully or explicitly acknowledged. Making these commitments clearer points to a tension in Austerity that is avoided by Dummett’s, or at any rate a Dummettian view of nonsense.
Substantiality vs austerity: initial contrasts

Diamond begins her accounts of the austere view of nonsense by contrasting it with the substantial view. In FN the contrast is set up with a question. In “On Concept and Object” Frege writes “what is ... said concerning a concept can never be said concerning an object; for a proper name can never be a predicative expression, though it can be part of one. .... The sentence

1. There is Julius Caesar

is neither true nor false but senseless” (1984, p. 189) Diamond’s question is: Is it possible to describe this “sentence” “as a putting of an expression for an object – a proper name – where one for a concept should go[? I]s it possible to identify an expression as a proper name when it occurs in the wrong place, or what we want to call that?” (FN, p. 73). Dummett’s answer to this question, she claims, is yes, referring to his account of the sentence

2. Chairman Mao is rare

in FPL. Dummett writes that this sentence, “while perfectly grammatical, is meaningless because ‘rare’, though in appearance just like a first-level predicative adjective, has the sense of a second-level predicate” (FPL, p. 51). Diamond takes this explanation to amount to “the idea ... that we get a meaningless sentence when we put a proper name where the argument term should go,” that is, (2) results from putting the proper name ‘Chairman Mao’ in the argument-place (indicated, as Frege does, by ‘ξ’) of the second-level predicate ‘ξ is rare’, but logically this is the wrong kind of argument-place for a proper name to occupy. We get a fuller picture of what it is to be in the wrong kind of argument-place in NMB, where the contrast between Substantiality and Austerity is set up over the issue whether the sentences

3. Caesar is a prime number

and

4. Scott kept a runcible at Abbotsford

are nonsensical for the same reason. Diamond takes Dummett to hold that they are different types of nonsense, pointing to his notion of logical