

# Editorial

## The Questioning Call

The startling juncture into which we are thrown when confronted by extremities, theoretical or practical, necessitates a searching examination of the material at hand. Such a process must implement a vigorous erudition concerning the latent structures, but perhaps more importantly employ a sensitive and sensed awareness of the elemental that infuses all grids through which we work our thoughts and bodies. It is work done through language, spoken and written.

Yet there are times when we find that "words cannot express," when the structures are so complex or saturated in such emotion that the automatic, parochial language resource is not enough to disclose the immense web in which we find ourselves caught all at once. One of the assignments of the linguistic utility is to categorize, to lay plain, delineate and simplify ideas, people, or events in an ordered, graspable immediacy. When the immediate, however, whether in intellectual study or quotidian experience, becomes so broad and terrible in force that we find ourselves for a moment "struck dumb in the simplicity of fire,"<sup>1</sup> it is a fatuous expenditure to attempt to fill that void with the ready-to-hand words whose utterance often becomes pleonastic as they fail repeatedly to encompass the infinitude of thought or relation. This, then, becomes the time to sit silently for a while and work hard for language instead of harnessing it to the usual dray. We must be willing in our endeavors to disrupt the normal usage, to dig beneath the sedimentation of the contemporary vernacular. Then we illumine not only the practices beneath our words but, as well, what lies at bottom: that which bequeaths us our knowing. "What is proper to knowing," as Emmanuel Levinas avers, "is not its possibility of going unto an object . . . its prerogative consists in being able to put itself in question, in penetrating beneath its own condition." Knowledge stops when a thing, other, is defined by absolute terms; knowing is constant "calling in question."<sup>2</sup>

What lies at the bottom of a vacancy in language promulgated by the unsettling flash of the elemental is an emptiness that lures us toward withdrawal into clear category and repetition. As Freud pointed out, the compulsion to repeat senselessly, with easy and definitive words in the face of difficulty or horror, is a human response to the abyss: to fill the void that resides in the darkest recesses of the psyche.<sup>3</sup> At this juncture, our most dire wishes are utopian, aiming for death on the surface, but longing at core for fecundity. The pull of thanatos becomes the salient drive: the desire to be free from struggle by virtue of eliminating the tension, the perpetual dialogue between desire and its end. If we succumb to the death drive in our languaging by turning aside or letting the concurrent euphemisms rest imperiously upon our experience, then we do not learn. We are perhaps gratified—the tension dissolved—but falsely so. Such simple gratification does not require patience, generosity, or gratitude toward the material with which we are presented. What we are called to do is to extend the tension, the dialogue. Roland Barthes has described this painful disruption, discomfiture, this "unsettl[ing of] the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, [that] brings to a crisis his relation with language" as bliss.<sup>4</sup> Fecundity materializes not through easy gratification, but through the work of bliss. The true and rich pleasure of learning about ourselves as humans, in time, in the world, on earth, can only come to us through the blissful tautening of the perpetual question.

So we may live with the void, but we cannot live in it. We are human, we must speak, communicate; we rely on words and the words of others to shape us. The "calling in question," then, is essential in our proclivity to describe, explicate. It is a moment of care, of ingenuity, insight. Cauterizing the laceration of the liminal or traumatic with sweeping, dictatorial generalizations that propel us into either terror or ataraxy

becomes a stark adjudication of humanity as soulless. Only in honestly accessing this “calling in question,” the deepest and most demanding drive, can we begin to express our condition, in historical time and beyond it, without succumbing to what some would term as “bad faith.”

Knowledge, erudition, is a great power in this undertaking in its keenness and discernment, and the careful scholarship of academic examination and analysis, drawing lines between movements of thought and evidentially disseminating meaning within motive, often proves exemplary in this mode. But knowing, in fact, must be balanced by the ethical ground, the call of conscience that entails not only strength and fealty, but also the pliancy of mercy and humor. The language of literature and poetry espouses the ambiguity of a detachment that is not detached from the teeming incongruencies of human action and thought. Both movements in our languaging, the disruption of academic analysis and the communion of literature and especially poetry, are essential to the questioning. As Toni Morrison, Czeslaw Milosz, and many others have declared, language witnesses us<sup>5</sup>: so let the language of our theoretical and noumenal responses bear witness to the many disparate facets of our flesh: our questioning, our beliefs, our heroism, vulnerability, mortality, our lives.

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### Notes

1 William Butler Yeats, “Vacillation,” *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Collier, 1989) 252, line 75.

2 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969) 85.

3 See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, ed. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogart P and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1920), 7-64.

4 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 14.

5 This is not to say that the intellectualism of analysis and the emotive and experiential pull of literature do not cross camps in the general action that each conveys. Each can participate in either disruption or communion (a kind of synthesizing stroke). But by the nature of their respective arts, analysis demands a rational delineation of components, while literature works on the empathetic powers of the human.

6 See Czeslaw Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983) and Toni Morrison, *The Nobel Lecture in Literature*, 1993 (New York: Knopf, 1995).