

Contact

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When someone there is standing before us, we have been cautioned that he is not speaking with his own voice but speaking the language of his gender, his family, his class, his education, his culture, his economic and political interests, his unconscious drives, indeed his state of physical health and alertness. Are we then doing no more than interpreting what he says and does? Do we ever make contact with what he means for himself when he says "I"—with his visions, the story he tells himself of his life?

What an extraordinary power, this power of the voice to put us in contact, not with our own mental images but with persons and things themselves!

We catch on to the purring of the kitten, the frantic cries of the bird, the snorting of the distrustful horse, the complaint of the caged puma. We pick up the tone of the blackbird marsh, the hamlet meditating in the Himalayan mountainscape, the shifting dunes under twilight skies. As our words form, the tone of these things and events resounds in our voice. The pacing and accents of our phrases express the calm or the frenetic movement, the rhythm and periodicity or jerks and explosions of the things and events. Our words articulate the agitated tone of a column of ants, the syncopation of the dockworkers unloading a ship, the purple majesty of the Pacific ocean under dawning Madagascar skies. Our words reverberate the tone of a cave, a cathedral, a dance, the pacing, the rhythms, the expanse, they return the muffled or dead silence.

Words put us in touch with things. Come, I'll take you out to meet the great whites! the old fisherman tells us. As he speaks to us, our attention is drawn not to images in his mind, nor images in ours, but drawn to the sharks themselves. When we go out to the ocean with him, he shouts: There they are! and his words make us see them, shadows deep in the turbulent waters. He recognizes individual sharks whose bodies, whose ways he knows; he identifies a shark he has not seen before. We descend into the ocean with him, and meet these very sharks that his words on the boat have introduced us to and presented to us. And when, now, we speak of them, it is not concepts nor images in our minds but those very sharks that our words make present again to us.

The properties and behaviors of things are retained in words. The one

who says with conviction “I am a dancer!” “I am a doctor!” has the conviction that the words that put forth what the dance hall floor and lighting are or what the surgical instruments are, are words that can be counted on about things that can be counted on. With words we stay in touch with things. Because of words the real world lays open to us, beyond the narrow confines of what our eyes now see.

Words do not simply label things we see and touch; they invoke and reveal things. They bring out traits in the complexity of a thing, map out relations in the dense tissue of nature. They focus our attention, they lead us to see contexts, sequences, interactions. They slow down and intensify the contact our bodies are making with things and events or accelerate them, turn them in new directions, focus the eyes and the hearing or let them drift. Chanting, intoning, blessing things, words enhance things, bring forth their glory. Insulting people, cursing events, words unleash forceful blows against them, mortifying them, wounding them.

Words work an artistry on things, that of metaphor and metonymy. They reflect qualities, halos, colors from other things onto this thing. They endow things and events with names, titles, nicknames.

Like penguins, zebras, and buffalos, humans are gregarious animals. But penguins, zebras, and buffalos act as though what the other penguins, zebras, and buffalos have in their minds is plain to see, and they even act as though what skuas, lions, and wolves have on their minds is clear. Humans, especially educated ones, academics, postmodern postcolonial academics talk as though what others have on their minds is opaque and hypothetical. Don't we have the everyday experience that others looking at me, talking about me or to me are only addressing some role I occupy in a society, some pantomime I am performing, some set of clothes and haircut I am wearing; they see and address the American, the professor, or the decently-dressed restaurant client. And I—this individual me—think for myself and act on my own, behind that image they see. Doesn't it work the other way too? The agent or agency inside my head listening and interpreting is decoding according to its own code. So we have to be made to recognize this, and examine that code, its class, race, and gender categories and paradigms. When we go to different places inhabited by members of our own biological species, are not what our eyes see of them but tourist images—facial contours, complexions, and garb that look exotic only to us? And when someone there is standing before us, speaking directly to us, we have been cautioned that he is not speaking with his own voice but speaking the language of his

gender, his family, his class, his education, his culture, his economic and political interests, his unconscious drives, indeed his state of physical health and alertness. The effort to know him gets detoured into efforts, ever more evidently fragmentary and superficial, to know all these layers. Today the professionals who study these things write books exposing how superficial and deluded have been the efforts of the experts: exposing the imperialist, the Christian, Victorian, romantic, or Orientalist fables written by those people who left their homelands and fell in love in some remote place, married, and never returned; the positivist, Freudian, or Marxist fables of the last generation of cultural anthropologists; the rationalist, structuralist, or postmodern fables of the current generation.

The Voice that Makes Contact

Yet here is this really amazing fact: it happens every day that someone exterior to me approaches and makes contact with me—the real me, the core me, whatever I can take to be me. I feel a force that plunges out of the passing forms and clamps on to me: “Hey you!” “Hey Al!” Isn’t it quite striking—really our today so sophisticated theories of language do not account for it—that I feel these words coming straight at me, finding me, taking hold of me? The words have penetrated right through the role, the social identity, the visible and interpretable form, to the very core that is me. An appeal is being addressed to me, a demand put on me. Each time I do answer on my own, I have found it undeniable that that is what has happened. How “Hey man!,” “Hey Al!” cut through the image and role I had been holding up! I may well sense immediately that the one who stands before me and addresses me has a mistaken idea of what I am and what I have done, but how his word “you” touches the real me to arise behind that mistaken idea!

When someone with whom I have been in touch only by telephone for a long time greets me: “Hey Al! Come in! How happy I am to see you!” I feel, I know I, the real me, I in my individuality, am welcomed. When I am insulted, the words and the gestures touch me inwardly: I can brush it off, ignore it, dismiss it with contempt, act as though my status and my composure are utterly unaffected, but inwardly I am humiliated, wounded, diminished, mortified. When someone apologizes to me for some tactless or slighting words, for some hurt or outrage, the words penetrate right to the core me, the real me, all that I can mean by me, and that is vindicated,

reinstated, restored. When someone is speechless at the sight of me, visibly constrained, paralyzed, I know that he or she does feel my pain, is afflicted with my suffering. When someone, exasperated by the officious personage, the decent and public identity I persist in confronting him with, seeks to deviously or directly, viciously, hurt me or torture me, it is not that personage nor my corporeal shell but me that he or she makes contact with.

You

Who are you who appear before me, whom I address? You affirm yourself in saying I. "Here I am!" "I saw, I heard, I did..." "I say, I tell you..." Grammarians see no content in that "I"; for them it is but an empty shifter, merely designating the agency that is now issuing that utterance. But for you, your word "I" is dense, for you stand in that word; with that word you take a stand.

Your Word of Honor

"I," you have said, alone and to yourself, "am a mother." When you have affirmed "I", "I am a mother," you impressed that word upon yourself, and your substance retains it. The "I" that seemingly only reports your past commits you to it. The next time you utter "I" this subsequent "I" corresponds to and answers for the prior one. "I got mad when my petition was just ignored..." "I am so happy I quit my job." With these words the present I puts the past I in the present I. The I that quit or that got mad is the I that is now speaking. "I am grown up; I am on my own now." Already to say "I a man..." is to commit yourself to manly behavior; to say "I a woman" is to commit yourself to womanly deeds. To say "I am young still" is to put your forces outside the roles and role models.

The utterance "I say..." "I do..." "I am a..." does not simply report a commitment, but enacts the commitment. The power to fix your own word in yourself is a power that leaps over the succession of hours and days to determine the future now. One day, deep in the secrecy of your heart, you said "I am a dancer," and it is because and only because you uttered those words that you are now on the way to becoming a dancer.

The remembering of these words you implant in yourself is made possible by a brushing off of the thousands of impressions that crowd on your sensory surfaces as you move through the thick of the world. The I arises in

an awakening, out of the drowsy murmur of sensations. It especially requires an active forgetting of lapses, failures, and chagrins—which persist as cloying sensations that mire down your view into the past and into the open path ahead. There is a fundamental innocence in the I, which stands in the now, and from this clearing turns to the time ahead and the time passed. To say “I” is to commence. “Now I see!” “I will go!” There is youth and adventure in the voice that says “I.”

“Now I see!”: these words, once you fixed them in yourself, leave you free to observe the passing scene without tentatively arranging it around one center and then around another. “I will go” leaves you free for whatever interruptions, distractions, momentary amusements the day brings. Through innumerable interruptions, contraventions, invitations, and lures to do other things, you feel the uncanny power of these words. You felt the power in them which was the sole evidence that they would prevail.

“Now I see!” “I am still young.” To utter “I” is to pledge to honor those words. Nobility characterizes, in someone in high station or in low, the man of his word, the woman of her word. Noble is the man who is as good as his word, the woman whose word is a guarantee. Servile is the one who does not speak on her own, does not act on his own.

Your word “I,” “I say...,” “I am going to...,” “I am a...” is the first and most fundamental way you honor yourself. Saying “I am a dancer” you will seek out dance classes, you will train every day with exclusive resolve, you will endure being left out of company selections, dancing in troupes that got miserable reviews by the critics, you will never act on the basis of failure. It is yourself, and not dance, you dishonor if you do not do these things.

“I will be right over...,” you say to a friend in distress, putting forth your resources and your loyalty in that word “I.” “I will take care of your mother...” “I am going with you on the search...” “I am your lover and I say...” Whenever you say “Here I am,” you expose your body, put it at risk, give it to others, sacrifice that body.

The word of honor you have fixed in yourself is the real voice of conscience. Your dancer conscience is not at all a critical function, a restraining force, like the daimon of Socrates which speaks only to say no to the instincts. Your artist conscience does not torment you with guilt feelings. In the words “I am a dancer!” “I am a mother!” “I am young still!” you feel instead upsurging power, and the joy of that power. Your pride in yourself is a trust in the power of these words. There is a trembling pulse of joy in those words, and a foretaste of joy to come. One trusts one’s joy, for joy is

expansive, opening wide upon what is, what happens, and it illuminates most broadly and most deeply.

The word you have fixed in yourself is fixed in your sensibility, your nervous circuitry, your circadian rhythms, your momentum, and your tempo. It vanishes from the conscious mind which can fill itself with new words and scenarios. You no longer have to recall, in the midst of morning concerns that require your attention, that word “dancer” uttered in yourself; you instinctually head for the dance studio and feel restless and tied down if you are prevented from going.

It is this word that makes you thoughtful. The rows of trees and the daily movement of clouds overhead, the birds that chatter in your back yard, the landmarks and the paths you take every day, the tasks that are laid out for you every day, the patterns of conversation with acquaintances, the concepts that exist to classify these things and the connections between them—these lull the mind which glows feebly in their continuities and recurrences; they do not make it thoughtful. Instead, thought results from language, thought arises out of the word you put to yourself—a word of honor. This word interrupts the continuities of nature and silences the babble of others in yourself. It is the power you feel in yourself when you fix yourself with a word, stand and advance in that word, the feeling that you are making your own nature determinable, steadfast, trustworthy, that makes you look for regularities, necessities, calculable forms in the flux of external nature. Once you have said “I will be a dancer,” you begin to really determine what the things about you are, you begin to understand anatomy, the effects of exercise, of diet, the effects of great teachers and grand models, the workings of a whole cross-section of urban society. It is the man or woman of his or her word who is thoughtful.

“For my part, I think...” “Here is what I am going to do...” To say “I” is to disconnect yourself from the others and from discourse with others. “Now I see,” you say in the middle of a discussion, and you may stay in the discussion to argue for what you see and try to affect the subsequent movement of their thoughts and decision. But more likely the main effect of your insight will be to determine the line of your thoughts and decisions after you leave the others. Your word of honor does not get its meaning from a dialectic and its use is not primarily in a language game with others. In fact the one who goes around saying to everyone “I’m going to be a dancer” is seeking their permission and support, and there is cause to suspect that he has not really or not yet fixed these words on his heart. There are those who

have never told anyone, and who are driven by their secret intoxication with this word. Secrecy sets this word apart from the profane common talk; it sacralizes it. Secrecy also maintains for yourself a space for giving free play to doubts, second thoughts about what you have said to yourself, as well as giving free play to fantasy about it.

Your Story

When, alone and for yourself, you affirm “I am a dancer, I am a primatologist, I am a runaway,” you invoke a future to which you bind your present, and the successive stages toward that future. And once you identify yourself you see and tell, first to yourself, where you came from, how you came to be here and to be a dancer, a primatologist, a runaway. It is once you have affirmed “I am a singer, I am a herbalist, I am a sexual outlaw,” that you have something to tell, which is not just the anonymous and haphazard succession of accidents, beginning with the accident of your conception and birth, and the passing scene which is the passing scene of anyone and everyone.

To yourself, to this dancer, oceanographer, backpacker you are you recount where you came from, what position you hold in a family, a social gathering, the economic or political arena, what you have done or are seeking to do here or in the future. Present here in the now, you envision the trajectory of your own life extending from your birth to your death. To make clear and deal with your feelings, to elaborate your decisions, to appraise the course of your initiatives, you recount for yourself a story of which you are hero, antihero, victim, or bystander. Your feelings, your decisions, your reactions, and your actions unfold your life in ways that induce you to realign the plot, introduce new characters, account for new events.

The geographical, economic, and social situations which figure as the setting of events and encounters in your life are themselves identified in the narrative you and others tell of them. You shift points of view and narrative voice; you incorporate into it your story as it is told by others. You insert it into, or compare it with the plots of stories told of others in the newspapers, in the media, in literature, in the anonymous legends, myths, and epics of our culture.

But the story you tell yourself about who you are and where is a story unlike any story ever told. You find that your situation, your vision, the accidents and windfalls of your path do not fit into a logic such that, given

them, the consequence or conclusion could be deduced, do not fit into an empirical determinism such that, given the causes, the effects could be predicted. Your story does not fit into the available cultural patterns: epic, comedy, tragedy, romance, sitcom, farce. Even if you are everyman and no one, you are so in a here and now that has never before occurred and will never be repeated.

Your Fantasy Space

To be sure there are plenty of models and explanations out there. There are the explanations given in physical dynamics and electromagnetism, and in physiology, neurology, genetics, evolutionary psychology, and pragmatic reason. But all that—the meaning-systems of our culture—has to be applied to your environment and your body in order to enable you to make sense of how your body functions or does not function in the situations in which you find yourself. In seeking to do so you may find the explanatory system has internal flaws, or else that it does not adequately fit your situation. Moreover, the explanatory system, the categories, are general, while you are an individual finding yourself in a body, a sensibility, and a situation not really like any other. You fill in the gap with images retained from the past and which have not dissipated, which continue to hover about you. You fill in the gap with images that are fragmented, zoomed large, coagulated over other images. As you project the plot of your life into the coming days and years, there are pure guesses, hopes against hope, wishes made on a star, miracles you momentarily dare invoke, that fill in blanks. For the gap is your fantasy space.

There are two mistakes currently being huckstered about your fantasy space. The one is that it is the template that converts the hungers and thirsts of life after what it needs into unlimited desires. The second is that it is produced by a fundamental drive in life to elaborate meaning for itself. Slavoj Žižek, following Freud and Lacan, interprets the images that figure in your fantasy space as symbols, symbols of the object *a*, of lack, of the irremediably absent object of desire. Invoking such an absent object, producing an image, a symbol of it, would transform your wants and needs, always finite, always in principle satisfiable, into desire, desire for the infinite. This insatiable desire, that does not know what it desires, that longs for the totality, for the infinite, is the Hegelian spirit in us. The spirit, thus conceived as a relay of the need that defines us as living organisms, is, Hegel

said, negativity.

But you, in being healthy, in being alive, generate energies in excess of what you need to satisfy your hungers and thirsts. A living organism is not an abyss; it is a dynamo. These excess energies have to be discharged. In so much of what you do, awakening because your body is recharged overnight, dancing in the morning sunlight, going for a mountain hike on the weekend, you give without expectation of return. You do not simply dissipate these excess energies; you channel them in determined directions, where as they flow out of you they intensify into feelings of exhilaration. And this is what you felt when you formulated that word of honor you put on yourself: it is with the feeling of having energies over and beyond what your organism needs to maintain itself, having energies to burn, that you uttered those words: I am a dancer! I am a mountaineer! I greet everyone with passionate kisses of parting! And it is these words that activate your inner fantasy space, these excessive energies that produce those radiant and captivating images in you.

That inner vision in your fantasy space channels an ecstatic release of excess energies. You know inwardly that you have in your flesh and blood kisses and caresses to squander on someone, that you have a tenderness and an excitement to give someone such as no lover has ever yet given anyone. You have the conviction—felt in the upsurge of excess energies, felt in exhilaration—of having the strength and the spirit to train and to inspire your body to dance as no one has ever before danced; you feel inwardly you have the heart and the nerves to endure all the risks, disasters, failures, and savageries of the revolution. Trapped, imprisoned, straightjacketed, you know a will that shall not bend and the terrible force of your curses.

Slavoj Žižek, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, conceives of one's fantasy space as the place of a private myth. Like a public myth is the particular way a particular community organizes the environment into a meaningful pattern, so in your fantasy space you chink up the gaps in the meaning-system of your culture with your own symbols. But a myth is not simply a map of the environment using more concrete symbols than those used in modern economics, sociology, political science, history, biology, physics, and astronomy. Myths are also visions, visions of visionaries and seers. They are not just overarching conceptual frameworks; they are visualizations. The visions of Dante, William Blake, and James Joyce, the visions of the great myths, Gilgamesh and the Mahabharata, the Iliad and the Ring of the Niebelungen present visions of a transfigured and glorified world or

the glowing ashes of an incinerated world. The visionaries and seers do not simply map out symbolically and consecrate the established economy and politics of a community; they present another world. Neither the visions of Isaiah nor Homer, Milton, and William Blake, nor those of Simon Bolivar, Che Guevara, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela simply make the existing environment intelligible.

And in fact neither the fundamental word you give yourself—your word of honor, nor the visions that take form in your fantasy space have as their fundamental function to make your existence and your life intelligible to yourself. It surely is a mistake to imagine that the essential activity at the core of an individual is an activity of elaborating meaning. Your individuality is not constituted by spinning of an ever-wider spiderweb of intelligible relations. Visions—the visions of visionaries and seers, the visions of your youth, the visions generated by the word of honor you have planted in yourself—have to be taken dynamically in their activity of formulating, shaping, because intensifying, your insights and your feelings. They confirm, consecrate, and escalate the surges of your strong and ecstatic feelings. Daniel Paul Schreber, in naming his anus solar glorifies his sense of its radiant seductiveness. Georges Bataille's obsessive image of a third eye, opening on top of his head to look directly into the sun, intensifies his boldest and most extravagant impulses. Such terms and images do not get their sense from the context; they intensify your gratuitous forces and form incendiary points that blaze new paths and new contexts about them.

Your practical programming, your drawing up of mental blueprints and engineering your undertakings, your own character management work to implant and extend a zone of lucid intelligibility in your life and environment. But your fantasy space is dominated by a sense of chance and luck. The improbable chance that you were conceived and born, the chance that you—you—are alive, the unforeseeable accidents that befall you each day, the auspicious and baleful omens, the good and bad luck that really are what gave heat and light to you, the you that says "I."

Weak impulses, themselves arising when life is weary, fagged out, constricted, seek satisfaction and contentment; your strongest impulses discharge excesses of energies. The strengths in life actively seek out the surprising, the bungling, the nonfunctional, and the absurdity of a system where everything works, and bless them with peals of laughter. They seek out the corpse of the fallen hero, of the hummingbird fallen from poisoned skies, to hallow them with your grief and tears. Laughter and tears, blessings

and cursings are the strong emotions that drive you to discharge the excesses of energies in your healthy organism upon a world full of sound and fury signifying nothing, a world of the free forces of nature, the sparkling of flowering fields and the dunes of ice crystals, the shimmering of the winds and the wrath of storms.

Contact with You

And me—how do I know these things about you? How do I make contact with you?

To make contact with someone whose physical body I see is not to grasp his or her identity conceptually and respect his or her boundaries and inner space. Greeting you with “Hey man!”, the cocky tone of those words hail in that individual a man, not a student, a waiter, or a stranger. It is first by the tone of voice that we make contact and communicate. I catch on to your urgent, frantic, panicky, exultant, or astonished tone; your voice resounds in my own. To answer the frenetic tone of a young person who bursts into my office with the stentorian tone of settled and regulated officious life is, before I refuse to understand really what she will tell me, to refuse her tone—to refuse her.

“For my part, I think...” you say. “As far as I am concerned...” What depth of meaning is in that word “I” you utter? Behind it is that word “I am a mother, I am a dancer, I am an adventurer,” that secret and solitary word you have put on yourself. Yet when I address you I do have a sense of that word. In the tone with which she says “Don’t worry, I’ll be there,” I sense the caregiver the nurse is for herself, has committed herself to be. In his jeans and plaid shirt, his mud-caked work shoes, his bared arms and bronzed face, in his awkward, uningratiating way of speaking, I sense his youth who has come to apply for my construction job is really a builder, a man committed to work with his hands on stone, cement and wood. I went to this camp of biologists in the Amazon which accepts paid visitors to supplement their income, and as soon as I see her, thirty-fiveish woman with uncombed blond hair and rough hands, greeting me in her California accent, I know she is for herself an outdoorswoman, a rain forest dweller.

I also sometimes know that you have abandoned the word of honor you planted in yourself in your youth to take on a purely social and successful existence. “He was soon to be head clerk; it was time to settle down,” Flaubert writes. “So he gave up his flute, exalted sentiments, and poetry; for

every bourgeois in the flush of his youth, were it but for a day, a moment, has believed himself capable of immense passions, of lofty enterprises. The most mediocre libertine has dreamed of sultanas; every notary bears within him the débris of a poet.” But then there is a visionary in every strong and healthy person, in the youth, that is, the insolence, impetuosity, brashness, and bravado of that person.

In my hypocritical or aggressive insistence to address an official identity, I nevertheless do divine the you you are for yourself. I speak to you as the dean, colleague and facilitator you officially are, while in the officious tone with which you repeat the details of the university regulations I hear the control freak you are lording over other adults. At the zoo I respect your right as the parent, though in the flat warnings and admonitions I hear you addressing to your children I understand you have married and become a parent in order to pursue your inner tyrant and sadist identity. I persist in addressing you as the convenience store clerk I and the company require, though in the bored and flippant tone with which you answer my question I realize that you are a prince of the inner city night.

To respect you is to recognize and acknowledge the one you are, the one you affirm yourself to be. In practice to respect you is to listen to you tell your story. To respect a child, a foreigner, a street person, a delinquent is to listen to him or her telling his or her story. For the teacher or counselor, respect is to listen to the story the troubled child in school tells; for the couple, respect is to listen to the story the spouse has to tell of the dispute they fell into; for the marriage counselor, to listen to the story each of the spouses have to tell; for the psychotherapist, to listen to the story the neurotic has to tell in his or her own words. To begin to respect one’s adversary in a dispute, one’s neighbor or one’s spouse who has become one’s adversary, is to listen to the way the other recounts the sequence of events that led us into this conflict.

“Everybody’s got a story,” the policeman says with a disabused shrug, meaning that the story is put together as an alibi or a justification. And it is true that the story is elicited by the face of another who accuses and judges. But people recounting a trip to a far-off place, grandparents emigrated long ago from another land, friends recounting events from a childhood so distant now tell stories that convey no instruction nor moral, and that elicit neither blame nor praise. And all those friends and acquaintances seated together over meals, talking on the telephone, strolling in the park, spending evenings and weekends together, making stories out of small

alterations of the workplace routine, out of people encountered and things seen on walks down the sidewalk, out of spectator sports watched passively on television—everybody's got a story, and listening to the stories is what silences the moralizing prig within.

There are two constructions put on these stories which have to be rejected. The one is the Hegelian notion that what is at stake in these stories, in all human encounters, is the demand for recognition. Hegel bases that on his idea that there is no immediate self-consciousness; the only way I can become aware of myself is on an exterior mirror. The master sees his mastery on the prostrate bodies and fearful eyes of the slave; the slave sees his servitude in the fearful force of the master. For Hegel everything we do, dress up or dress down, join a health club, go to college, have a wedding are so many maneuvers and stratagems of our fundamental desire for recognition. But that is not the dance floor, the Mexican market, the dive boat, the rain forest, the seats in the back garden where you and I come upon one another; Hegel's world is the world of politicians, where each would be nothing but for the PR they ceaselessly put out, it is the world of Hollywood celebrities for whom even bad publicity is good publicity, for they are nothing without press agents and paparazzi. Hegel quite ignores the sense of your identity you find in the word of honor you secretly and inwardly implant on yourself. Hegel knows only fear as what circumscribes our isolation and our identity; he ignores the inner joy and pride and the inward sense of excess, upsurging force, the exhilaration you know in affirming, alone and to yourself, I am a sensualist, I am a runner, I am a birdman.

There is also the notion that each of us is subjected to a fundamental ethical demand that we justify our lives. This notion, that we must live our lives under accusation, an accusation in everyone who faces us, is to be resolutely refused. For the story you have to tell, to yourself and to me, is not a story of so many plans, initiatives, achievements that would be the diagram of your life. In fact you were born by chance, and all the decisive turns in your life—that you were born in a suburb in the richest country of the world or in a hovel in the vast outer zone, that you had a normal human body or a genetic defect, that you had the brains to get through school and perhaps the university, that you happened to meet someone you fell in love with, that you are of an expansive happy disposition or melancholic, that you somehow were free to release your excessive energies or were constricted fearfully to your needs and wants: all that was each time a matter of good or bad luck. This repeated sense of blows of good or bad luck leaves you gaping

open to an outside where move unintelligible, visibly random forces. Your fantasy space is not an inner representation which you contemplate, figure out, find the meaning of, understand. It is the reflections, halos, mirages of the world in which you lead your lucky and unlucky life, which makes you laugh and makes you weep, makes you cry out blessings upon or curses.

The things you see, the rustle, crackling, and tones you hearken to, the roughness and the sleekness you touch are not just pieces of a puzzle you have to understand. In fact there are no intelligible concepts that grasp the languorous liquidity of the water in the bath, the tang of lemonade, the velvety green of springtime, the foolishness of a kitten rolling a ball in the sidewalk and tumbling over itself. These things make you laugh, and the laughter comes as a disruption of the means-end and cause-effect rigor of the world of work and reason. This outburst of pleasure is a strong active engagement with things not graspable in concepts and formulas, things without sense nor justification. Laughter is released by the outbreak of incoherence in discourse, the breakup of meaning, by awkward, bungling efforts, and by goals that collapse when you have laboriously reached them. The peals of laughter hold on to the moment when the past that gave drive and skill to movements breaks off, when the future that gave sense and purpose to words and actions disconnects. There is just left the present, the naked and meaningless things, the thrashings of bodies—and the excess energies of you who laugh. The energies ricocheting off the raw things fuel the peals of laughter. And what else is orgasm but a generalized laughter of the body?

The strong active engagement with things decaying and dying, with a lamb hit by a passing truck and deer fleeing a forest fire, is not the reactive, self-referential feeling of displeasure, but active grief and tears. There is no laughter without tears, no blessings without curses. Words of blessing open up your heart and say yes to what is more vast and grander than yourself, what exceeds your power to grasp and penetrate and understand. Curses confront what threatens your life and the lives of the tree-frogs and condors, the coral fish and the Himalayan forests, confronts it in all its evil and all its force and pits the force of your words against it.

Contact with your Fantasy Space

For me to make contact with you is to make contact with that inner fantasy space in which you turn the kaleidoscope of images and omens of good and bad luck around the word of honor you have implanted in your-

self. But is such a thing possible? Is not your mind a private theatre with but one possible spectator; is not your fantasy space the place where you elaborate your private myth? Of course it is possible; nothing so much fills our time together.

Laughter and tears make us transparent to one another. In a foreign airport the language of passengers I do not understand makes them strangers to me. Then a designer-dressed matron comes stalking about giving orders, then whap! suddenly slips on the polished floor and her voice stops in the thump of her ass. My laughter rebounds in the laughter of the others about me and theirs in mine, and I understand their laughter and understand them and understand they are people of my kind. In Salvador in Brazil during Carnaval a couple are dancing clad in the tuxedo and white wedding gown in which they were married, in this street during Carnaval, thirty years ago. As they dance they embrace and disrobe one another, revealing under the tuxedo the naked body of a woman, under the wedding gown the naked body of a man. Our eyes are held on them and fevered, and we feel a current of complicity with the crowd about us, men and women, white and black, adolescent and aged. When a child emaciated with AIDS is wandering about lost, I see his distress through my own tears.

The primary, active vocalization in laughter and tears issues in the fundamental forms of speech. We gather together to tell our hilarity or our sorrow; we speak of the things we bless and those we curse. And in doing so we communicate with one another, we come together. For communication information and giving orders are secondary, derivative, incidental forms of language.

Listening to the old woman living alone tell her story, she tells of the apple tree she just planted or the kittens her old cat, —out carousing with a disreputable alleycat, astonishingly still able to get pregnant—will have; she tells of the son in California who never writes or calls but, she believes, will visit soon; she tells of her own mother who visits her sometimes, at night; she tells of memories of yesterday and of long ago that made her laugh or made her cry. It is not through the official and intelligible categories: female, widowed, old, born in Oklahoma that I make contact with her, but in listening to her tell her stories, making contact, through laughter and tears, with her fantasy space that I make contact with her. And I do so not out of some strategy to gain her recognition of what I am, nor to understand her or understand life. There is no moral to her story; I learn nothing from it, spending the time unprofitably.

Respect is in practice listening to your story. Immanuel Kant said what commands our respect in other people is the evidence that they do exist on their own. They do so, he said, as rational agents. A rational agent is not just driven this way and that by external lures and internal unconscious drives and instincts. He is also not deluded by fantasies. What we respect in others is their rational faculty, that power in them to lead their own lives according to what they understand.

But sound reasons are everywhere the same. A rational person would judge any situation just like any other rational person would. It follows that according to Kant's conception what we really respect is the universal rational faculty, and not persons in their individuality. There would be no such thing as respect for individuals as such.

What imposes respect is my sense of you as a being affirming yourself in your laughter and tears, your blessings and cursing. The jeers of strikers before the threats of the factory owner, the grief of a widow—it is bravery and strength that grieves—the affection of a child for a puppy, command our respect. The misery of the trapped jaguar, the exultation of the young eagle taking to flight, the playfulness of the wolf cubs command our respect.

To attend to you, to be considerate of you is to defer to you, is to some extent to subordinate my behavior to you. It is to expose myself to you—expose myself to being violated, outraged, wounded by you. To approach you with respect is to expose my seriousness of purpose to the flash-fires of your laughter, to expose my cheerfulness to the darkness of your grief, let you put your blessing on my discomfiture and suffering, expose myself to the shock waves of your curses. For me to approach you is to trouble, lacerate, bruise, wound you and to be wounded by you.

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