

VOICE, HISTORY, AND VERTIGO:
DOING JUSTICE TO DEAD VOICES THROUGH IMAGINATIVE CONVERSATION

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Introduction: The voices of Szerb and Sebald

I attempt, within the framework of my tale--a tale that is both remarkably eventful and yet true to life from beginning to end--to show French society in the age of Louis XVI, along with its literature, prevailing sensibility and notable personalities, and to bring all this together in a living tableau, rich in implication, which provides a picture of the way the French Revolution came about. In terms of form, the book is somewhat experimental, and I am naturally curious to see how it will be received by the public.

The person speaking is Antal ('Toni') Szerb (2009:16), introducing a book entitled *The Queen's Necklace* which he wrote between 1941 and 1942, and which was found among his papers after his death. Antal Szerb was starved, exhausted and beaten to death in the Nazi labour camp of Balf, western Hungary, in 1945. 'Sadly, Toni Szerb is no longer with us here; we buried him yesterday', wrote fellow-inmate, the Hungarian poet Gabor Halasz, on January 31st, 1945. Szerb was 43 years old.

I had not heard of Antal Szerb before coming across a review in the *Times Literary Supplement* (Scurr 2009). But I was attracted to the voice immediately: how it managed complex but fluid sentences. It conveyed a personality I was interested to hear more from.

Szerb wrote novels, anthologised poems, and composed studies of literary history and theory. Elected President of the Hungarian Literary Academy in 1933 --aged only 32-- he became Professor of Literature at the University of Szeged in 1937. But then his *History of Hungarian Literature* and *History of World Literature* were banned, with the onset of the Second World War, due to his Jewish ethnic origins. A final novel, *Oliver VII*, published in 1942, had to be passed off as a translation from the English of a work by the (invented) A. H. Redcliff since no 'Jewish' work could be printed at the time.

Szerb chose to remain in Hungary, despite being given opportunities to escape the anti-Semitic persecution as late as 1944. In 1943 he was called up to serve stints in a 'labour battalion'; after the German occupation of Budapest on March 19th 1944, he was sacked from his job and his 'conscription' was made permanent. Nine months later he was dead.

His last recorded writing was a letter from Balf dated December 6th 1944 to his family:

My Dear Ones, I am infinitely saddened (...). Balf is awful, and we are in dire straits in every regard. I have no more hope left, except that the war will end soon; this is the only thing that keeps me alive. It is getting dark now and

I am really not in the mood to write more. All of you, have faith that we shall see each other soon, and love your poor Toni.

Characteristically, however, what I hear in the voice is geniality, a playfulness, a lightness of touch and self-irony:

I expected something from literature, my redemption, let's say, because everyone's redemption is individually tailored and mine ought to have come from literature.

It did not; nevertheless, I spent my entire youth in a happy purgatory, because I always felt that within minutes I would understand what I hadn't understood before, and then Beatrice would cast off her veil and the eternal city of Jerusalem would reveal itself to me.

It was in history, however, according to his reviewer, Ruth Scurr (2009:12), that Szerb found a refuge, a means to come to terms with the present 'railway terminus of Western culture'. History he loved: 'Feelingly, deeply, passionately. The way I love Italy. And tea. And sleep. History is my home. Or rather, perhaps, my country of refuge' (Szerb 2009:15). In particular, as an exile from the present, exiled from his earlier beloved haunts of foreign libraries, he immersed himself in the puzzle of how another exhausted civilization--the French Ancient Regime--arrived at its final end in 1789. As suggested by his translator, Len Rix, Szerb felt an abiding nostalgia for people and places that 'time had simply finished with' (cited in Scurr 2009:12)—the 'dark people' as the Russian

phrasing marks them—and a sympathy, too, no doubt. Ideally, art should preserve such ‘finished’ sensibilities threatened with anonymity. Their individuality could be redeemed through a sympathy that was human, universal, in the same way that a canon of world literature and its historical recognition could speak to everyone, regardless of the barriers of time and space. ‘My way’, Szerb insisted, ‘is to speak as one human being to another, looking to find kindred spirits and good company’ (cited in Scurr 2009:12).

I have begun this essay with a story of Antal Szerb because I find his voice such good company. The voice manifests a personality I find congenial: it is immediate and individual. Yet the paradox is unavoidable: voice is ephemeral, and of Szerb’s there is merely a historical trace. I conjure imaginatively with verbalizations (not even vocalizations) which have been brutally silenced decades in the past.

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Seven months before Antal Szerb died, W.G. Sebald was born in the German village of Wertach im Allgäu (on May 18th 1944). His father was absent and did not reappear from a prisoner-of-war camp in France until 1947; he had joined the German army in 1929, during the poverty-stricken period following the First World War, and remained in the army after the Nazis came to power. The Sebalds were part of an intensely reactionary rural world, wedded to Bavarian traditions, wary of the alien, and they had prospered initially under the Third Reich. The father was to remain a detached figure during Sebald’s boyhood, saying nothing about the war. Only in his father’s photograph albums was Sebald later to find evidence of the Wehrmacht’s Polish Campaign of 1939: grinning soldiers amid burning villages.

Leaving Germany as a young adult, Sebald studied German language and literature at the Universities of Freiburg and Manchester, taking up the position of assistant lecturer at Manchester in 1966. He settled permanently in Britain in 1970, securing a lectureship at the new University of East Anglia and finally becoming Professor of Modern German Literature there. (He died in 2001 as a result of a car crash.) Sebald wrote in German, first publishing in Germany, and only then working closely with English translators. And he continued to see himself as a German in exile. Domicile in Britain, we learn, was a kind of exilic response to the silences and absences he had found around him as an adolescent in Germany despite the relict traces of physical destruction and psychical trauma. One had to break the circle of silence and search for some kind of redemption in memory.

In *Austerlitz* (2002a), Sebald tells the story of an eponymous protagonist who discovers that his name is not really 'Dafydd Elias' and that he came to Britain in the 'kindertransports' of 10,000 children for whom the British government arranged an escape from Nazi Germany in the late 1930s; Austerlitz sets off on a vain search for conclusive evidence of his parents' ends in Nazi camps. In *The Emigrants* (2002c), Sebald had earlier traced the stories of four Jewish exiles from Nazi Germany, seeking new identities and belongings as doctor, painter, valet and teacher in New England. Contrastingly, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (2004a) found Sebald revisiting the Allied Forces' air bombardment in the last years of World War Two, when a million bombs were dropped on 131 German cities, killing some 600,000 civilians and destroying more than seven and a half million homes. *After Nature* (2004b) recounted the history, as poem, of three men, painter Mathias Grunewald, botanist G. W. Steller and Sebald

himself, taking the form of a comparative exploration of the burden of past uncertainties on present living.

Collectively, Sebald concluded (2002b:295), ‘our history is but a long account of calamities’. What kind of justice does such a past demand? And what kind of justice can the living provide? What testimony can one afford that does not merely reproduce lapidary statistics or else descend to sentimentality or fiction? At one point in *Austerlitz*, Sebald’s narrator is visiting the Belgian fortress of Breendonk, which had, between 1940 and 1944, served as a Nazi penal camp. Let me give an excerpt from Sebald’s (2002a:30-1) singular narrative voice:

[W]hen I look back at the crab-like plan of Breendonk (...) the darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as I think how little we can hold in mind, how every thing is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. Histories, for instance, like those of the straw mattresses which lay, shadow-like, on the stacked plank beds and which had become thinner and shorter because the chaff in them disintegrated over the years, shrunken--and now, in writing this, I do remember that such an idea occurred to me at the time--as if they were the mortal frames of those who once lay there in that darkness.

The world ages and the lost histories multiply. One cannot presume to share another's past sufferings—it is morally compromising to appropriate tragic memories, Sebald insists—and yet voices seem to call out to the present even from the inanimate detritus of past lives. To consider the historical void of extinguished life is to risk ‘vertigo’, as Sebald (1999) titled another work.

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Voice, history and vertigo: these comprise my theme. When, in the words of A.M. MacIver (1961:187-8), the stuff of history is the countless actual doings of countless individuals, and any general account is true or false in proportion to its representing or misrepresenting the individual doings--‘an ideal written history would tell the whole story of everything that ever happened to every human being’--how is a human science to do justice to individual lives that lapse constantly into oblivion?

My hope is to take advantage of the paradoxical nature of voice; also to exploit an idea aptly expressed by G.K. Chesterton (1936: 128) that ‘imagination has its highest use in a retrospective realization. The trumpet of imagination (...) calls the dead out of their graves’. One does justice to dead voices by imagining them into conversation.

The silent character of voice

There is a very suggestive passage in Virginia Woolf’s novel of historical transcendence, *Orlando*, where she describes the diversity of which an individual is likely to be composed. A multitude of different people or selves lodges in one human spirit, she writes (1980:192-3), each with different sympathies, attachments, rights and contributions. Hence the range of characters one person can comprise and the

ephemerality of expression of each: one only comes when it rains, another in a room with green curtains, another when Mrs Jones is not there, another with a promise of a glass of wine. Each self makes different terms regulating its appearance. Perhaps, Woolf concludes (1980:196), people talk aloud only because their different selves are conscious of disseverment and are trying to communicate one with another: when communication is again established, they fall silent.

Woolf's primary concern is that of the biographer (here, of 'Orlando'): how does one deal with the multiplexity of a subject when their versions may number in the thousands? But her observations can also inform a characterization of voice. One cannot assume that one knows another by virtue of what they appear to say. To the contrary what they say aloud is likely to represent a tiny proportion of their voicings, most of which will remain silent and comprise that internal dialogue that is the constant accompaniment of human consciousness. To phrase this somewhat differently, an individual life is partly to unvoiced as well as voiced verbal expression. It is likely that what is unvoiced will comprise by far a greater quantity of expression: what breaks the surface of the self is, like the tip of the iceberg, only a tiny proportion. It is very possible that what we hold to be dearest and truest and most personal we are most loath to give up to public scrutiny: indeed, what is dearest and truest and most personal is that which is hardest to enunciate in public language. It is certainly the case that to comprehend what a person speaks, to apprehend its significance fully and most truly, it would be necessary to contextualise it by way of everything that that individual is at the same time *not* saying aloud (Rapport 1993). I have used the word 'gratuitousness' in the past to attempt to delineate the radical disjuncture that exists between the traces of self that appear in voiced form and that

which remains unvoiced: not only the sole property but the provenance alone of the individual himself or herself to witness (Rapport 2008).

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Not only is voice ephemeral in nature, however, a momentary expression of self (albeit that the verbalization may be recorded, even written to begin with), but its character may be described as inherently tricksterish. Is what another hears a true, entire, open and plain expression? Very likely not. Such expression is, indeed, very likely impossible. The relationship between voice and individual identity is always an ambiguous one, complex and partial. One might speak of disjuncture or fracture between the two. One might say that individual voice is ever mediated by the rhetorics of silence. Moreover, ambiguity and complexity increases since the gratuitousness of an individual's inherently interior consciousness is not the only element in the disjunctive silence. Let me examine the silent character of voice a little further.

'Useless knowledge' was a phrase made famous by Charlotte Delbo (1995), concerning her time spent in Auschwitz-Birkenau as a Communist member of the French Resistance. What use is it to know, as a result of Lager experiences, that hunger makes human eyes sparkle while thirst dulls them; or that at night one hopes for life but come the morning one hopes for death; or that when one witnesses the body of one's murdered mother one is not necessarily brought to tears. This kind of knowledge must be unrehearsed and unlearned, Delbo concludes, if one wishes to go on living: the evil is inexpressible.

Delbo's insight introduces us to a range of circumstances that make it impossible or inappropriate to voice that which one knows and could express and might otherwise

feel a need to express. There are all manner of situations of mood and temperament, of politeness and taboo, as well as what might be termed extreme otherness or alienness, such as the atrocities of war, which militate *against* the voicing of personal knowledge. How appropriate is it to tell one's spouse that their ageing lessens their attractiveness in your eyes? Is it not the case that, in the novelist's words, 'in human relations kindness and lies are worth a thousand truths' (Greene 1974:58). Likewise, there is, according to anthropologist Richard Fardon (2008:251), a 'social logics of action' which might make it inappropriate to voice abroad social facts that figure prominently in Western expectations of liberal sociality: how useful are proclamations of Western liberties to the African peasant farmer, the citizen of the tyrannous Asian regime, the veiled Middle-Eastern female, to whom the knowledge risks exacerbating senses of exclusion and disparagement. It may be the case that humans are a single species and that cultures are contingent symbolic constructs, but the complexities of political loyalties and inequalities may necessitate the silencing of such truths in favour of strategic relativism and essentialism and communitarianism. More mundanely, a social system may be based on the tabooed expression of true feeling between spouses and their in-laws, or between junior and elder; and a complex organization--a hospital, an orchestra--may be based on a purported ignorance in one section or level of what is truly felt or experienced within another. It might be inappropriate, for the functional effectiveness of the organisational whole, that the doctor or the conductor hears what the porter or the percussionist truly feels about their role or their performance.

There is, in short, a politics to silence, a culture and a sociality and a personal temper to silence. Meaning and identity are not truly voiced, things are not said, because

of shyness and laziness and kindness, because of mannerliness and convention, because of political expediency, because of social functionality. Even should an individual give voice, one is not necessarily vouchsafed a release from ambiguity concerning its true or full meaning. As has already been suggested, if the original context of a person's words is their personal world-views--the selves and landscapes in which they construe themselves consciously to be living and acting (Rapport 1993, 2003)--then the social context of their expression will always be a diminishment. Individuals express themselves, externalise themselves, by way of symbolic languages of one kind or another (words, paints, clothes, actions) whose meanings are ever a matter of approximate, formal interpretation by others than their original speakers.

If what I have dubbed the rhetorics of silence advances a likelihood of miscommunication, of the hearer misconstruing what the voice of the speaker intends to convey by his or her symbolic usage, then the cases of deliberate misdirection, of feigning meaning, only add to the ambiguity surrounding voice. How often is it the case that the individual will put on a voice that is not essentially his or her own for the purpose of playing a role. It might be argued that a large part of social relationality is role-playing: one relates to those around one by passing oneself off as that which convention or manners dictate. Passing becomes the social norm as a means for individuals to deal quickly, routinely and effectively with the host of others and the host of situations whose negotiation they must manage in ever moving their lives forward (Rapport 2010).

Even should one intend to speak plainly, and intend to be understood fully, the opinion that one voices in one minute might not always hold for the next. In this way the ephemerality of voice concerns not just the medium of its expression--breath, sound

recordings, words on paper--but also extends to that which is conveyed: does the individual give voice to a world-view that has any abiding authenticity for them?

Voice, in sum, is ephemeral and tricksterish, and surrounded by silence. The relation between voice and identity is never unambiguous. One cannot will one's way to a direct apprehension of another, nor a full comprehension. Putting on voices, distorting voices, mishearing voices, misremembering voices... what is left of that tantalizing attractiveness, the initial promise of personality to which voice inhered?

Digression: The conversation of civilization

In a celebrated essay, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1962) identified different kinds of human consciousness, which he called 'idioms'. Practical activity was one idiom, concerning itself with desiring and obtaining. Science was a second (inquiring and understanding) and poetry was a third (contemplating and delighting). The idioms pertained to different aspects of our humanity, Oakeshott explained, to different 'voices'. Here were different ways of our being human and displaying a human awareness.

We need not expect all human voices to be as conversant or fluent in the same idiom, Oakeshott continued; certainly not at the same time. Nor should the differences between idioms be thought of as disagreement. Science, poetry and practice were different 'species' of awareness: they led adjacent lives in the environment of human being and they were not in a hierarchy. Indeed, here was a variety and a complexity we might wish to celebrate; certainly not to diminish. That we human animals could conjure

with knowledge ('science'), with beauty ('poetry') and with gratification ('practice'), with equal ease and likelihood of achievement, and yet with very different kinds of conscious awareness and expressiveness, was perhaps the identifying characteristic of our species.

'Civility', for Oakeshott, delineated an appreciation, both on an individual level and a collective one, of the range of our possible human modes of conscious awareness. To be 'civil', individuals and groups needed to educate themselves in the diversity of human achievements: become versed in their historical development, their particular distinctivenesses, and their human uniformity. For science, poetry and practice--our very different ways of being in the world--developed alike from general human capacities.

Oakeshott called the civil appreciation and coming-together of human achievements the 'conversation' of humankind: human civilization *was* this conversation, a manifold of different voices. The voices in the conversation did not comprise any simple hierarchy--reason was not sovereign or alone, and neither was sentiment or will--and nor did the conversation amount to an argument. The conversation of humankind was essentially that: a meeting point of humane voices, a civil coming-together of all kinds of awareness.

Civilization manifested itself, then, in a continuing conversation which was more than an inquiry or a contest or an exegesis or a debate, or even an accumulating body of information. It contained all of these, and more, but these were rather passages within the whole. The conversation posited no necessary claims to disinter truth, to prove propositions or to reach conclusions: it did not seek to persuade, refute or inform. Rather, the conversation amounted to a record of human achievement in its diversity and

complexity; it embodied both the generality and the particularities of human capacity to act in and on the world.

Oakeshott considered the idea of 'the conversation of mankind' to be of more than merely historical interest. He believed that versed in the conversation individuals and groups might be further provoked. The conversation was a human inheritance but also a context for future expression, affording 'place and character to every human activity and utterance' (1962:199). It is in this sense that Oakeshott has been described as a *conservative* philosopher: he appreciated the way that the past might contextualise the present. But he also recognized the human capacity for radical engagement, for transforming what is given by history. This was why he characterised the conversation of mankind as an unrehearsed intellectual adventure: 'thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another' (1962:198). Responding to and provoked by what they find being conversed, the voices of different individuals, and the voices of the same individuals in different idioms, obliquely correspond to one another without assimilation. Science did not become poetry which did not become practicality: just as Oakeshott's own voice was no one else's, and Oakeshott the philosopher did not necessarily speak with the same voice as Oakeshott the lover of horse-racing. The different ways of being human did not reduce to one another, just as different individuals did not. Nevertheless, being all human, there was a sense in which they breathed the same air. Taking wing, they related to one another playfully, obliquely, in flight.

Oakeshott's notion of 'humane conversation' is a complex one. I find it both moving and provocative. To employ his own terms I believe it was a notion in which Oakeshott himself vested a number of voices. He felt it to be true historically; he found it

to be apt aesthetically; he wished for it to be seen as having practical import. To attend to the conversation of humankind was to secure a civil society that was historically lodged, cognisant of the different spheres of the human, and respectful of those individually embodied capacities from which our achievements in science, poetry and practice derive. Proceeding simultaneously in public and within ourselves, Oakeshott concluded that such conversation had claims to being our greatest human accomplishment.

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Voice is ephemeral and tricksterish, surrounded by silence, and the relation between voice and identity is never unambiguous, *and yet* voices possess an attractiveness: in spite of all, I find that they retain a personality. Oakeshott's conversational metaphor leads me to suggest that certain voices from the vertiginous past may yet *speak* to the present. The voices are intimate, affecting, personal. I am touched by the 'poetry' (in Oakeshott's idiom) of Antal Szerb. I find that we converse. Certainly, the conversation is my imagination, my interpretation, but in it I can suppose a *humanity* transcendent of the particularities, the distances and fractures, of time and space.

This remains a supposition. There is no assurance to be had that the voice I take to be Antal Szerb's (or any other's) is authentically his. What personality, and whose, does his voice convey to me? I have no way of knowing with any certainty. But these vagaries of voice apply equally to living interlocutors, even those with whom I converse regularly and routinely. Communication is always an individual interpretation, a personal translation: from symbolic form to meaning; from one embodiment to another's. For better or worse, however, I discriminate: *this* person I like, *this* voice I trust, and not this other. There are qualities in the voice of Antal Szerb that attract me and lead me to wish

that we might further converse. Until I am led to interpret otherwise I maintain the assumption that Szerb's is an ironic but not cynical personality, playful, amused and sceptical, psychologically informed, scholarly and humane.

Imaginative conversation

I return to W.G. Sebald's question: What kind of testament can the present provide that does justice to the disappearing past which is more than a lapidary reproduction of statistics or a descent into sentimentality and fiction? The answer I shall suggest concerns the testimony of voice, in particular of voices in conversation. I would bring Antal Szerb and others into the present and future by imagining the part his words *might* play in all manner of conversations in which he *might* have been interested to contribute. I shall write him into symposiums that might be held among a number of favourite historical figures of mine: they speak together on a particular theme that seems fitting to my understanding of the personality their voices convey. I shall give an example below.

This is not a new idea, of course. Indeed, it is ancient (cf. König 2008, Long 2008). Plato famously sought to preserve the voice of Socrates in the third century BCE by means of a genre of sympotic dialogue: an imagined discussion of set speeches between Socrates and his pupils. The tradition continued with the likes of Plutarch, in the first century CE, writing Latin dialogues that reworked Hellenic sources for the purpose of giving depth to Roman culture. Macrobius, in the fifth century CE, had Virgil and other great past Latin poets speak through characters in the present for the purpose of demonstrating the abiding choir of Roman wisdom. Another ancient tradition sees the

centuries-old differences of opinion between the rabbis Hillel and Shammai recorded dialogically in the Mishnah (Talmud) of the third century CE.

According to Plato, the genre of sympotic dialogue was nobler than writing monologic texts, conveying a diversity of perspectives in such a way that conversion to the truth was more effective, as well as being a way to philosophic discovery as such. Plutarch, likewise, praised the openness of the genre. Of course, the irony involved has not escaped critical attention: whether the dialogues purport to be between allies or disputants or simply with oneself, all are in a sense monologues inasmuch as they have been put together by a single author. When dialogue became one of the experimental means of representation tried in anthropology, after a celebrated debate on ‘writing culture’ called into question the notion of monologic objectivity (cf. Rapport 1997), the pseudo-collaborative nature of the exercise was savagely critiqued. According to Stephen Tyler (1986:128), the claim to represent another and to bring them into presence by way of pseudo-discourse is to perpetrate a totalistic illusion: indeed, a ‘terroristic alienation’ more complete than positivism.

But this is too extreme. Given that to write of another is always to run the risk of writing fiction (Berger 1988:126), there is a proportionality that can be observed. My project is to provide a testament in the present to others’ past voices by willing that those voices will preserve an integrity that is their own. The context is different from their original expression, the context is one of my own construction, but only partly. If I manage the sympotic exchange with sufficient discrimination then I have the non-censored words of each imagined interlocutor engender their own context. The conversation is a juxtaposition of contexts, in which the voices are heard pronouncing

verbatim: in their own idioms, their own intonations, in a word their own personalities, on a theme that is of their choosing and not mine.

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For instance, let me imagine the following humane conversation, across time and space, by a set of interlocutors intent alike on a disquisition concerning what I might entitle, ‘The anxiety and the adventure that attend upon the temporal nature of human existence’.

Antal Szerb (2001:74) begins, let me suggest. He observes that ageing can give rise to a delirious fever, the individual aware that:

his body was somehow caught up in slow but visible processes of change, as if his skin was shrivelling at the speed of a minute hand ticking round a clock.

To which Philip Larkin (1990:107) interjects:

Strange to know nothing, never to be sure / Of what is true or right or real, / But forced to qualify or so I feel (...) for our flesh / Surrounds us with its own decisions (...) / That when we start to die / Have no idea why.

It is then Virginia Woolf’s (1969:100) turn to comment:

There is no stability in this world. Who is to say what meaning there is in anything? Who is to foretell the flight of a word? It is a balloon that sails over tree-tops. To speak of knowledge is futile. All is experiment and adventure. We are forever mixing ourselves with unknown quantities.

And Franz Kafka (1983:294) can but concur:

Nothing is granted to me, everything has to be earned, not only the present and the future, but the past too –something after all which perhaps every human being has inherited—this too must be earned; it is perhaps the hardest work.

It is then Søren Kierkegaard's (1992:214) judgement that:

The unhappy man is always absent from himself, never present to himself.

But E. M. Forster (1983:47-48) wonders whether this need be the case:

We know that we come from the winds, and that we shall return to them; that all life is perhaps a knot, a tangle, a blemish in the eternal smoothness. But why should this make us unhappy? Let us rather love one another, and work and rejoice. I don't believe in this world sorrow. (...) [B]y the side of the everlasting Why there is a Yes—a transitory Yes if you like, but a Yes.

The point, Friedrich Nietzsche (1997:127) argues, is to be joyous in the individuality of the fortuitous self:

In his heart every man knows quite well, that being unique, he will be in the world only once and that no imaginable chance will for a second time gather together into a unity so strangely variegated an assortment as he is (...). [He is] uniquely himself to every last movement of his muscles, more, that in being thus strictly consistent in uniqueness he is beautiful, and worth regarding.

To be true to this individuality, John Stuart Mill (1963:182-4) adds, is to be free:

It is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way. It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character (...) Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing.

There are parting words of Ben Glaser's, a refugee from Nazi Germany and my mother's second husband, which sum up this affirmation of the world's possibilities:

Mach es gut!

Yet, the freedom, the joy and love are only counterweights to the ignorance, instability and ageing, and also, in Stevie Smith's (1985:120) estimation, the loneliness:

Loneliness and the fear that waits upon it strikes at the physical heart, so that there is a pain that is physical with the physical pain of a very extreme icy coldness. (...) Oh death could not be more cold. And this coldness of this loneliness and fear carries with it its own most searching pang, the burden of a prophecy: I am your future. So that even the relief of death appears as a vain thing, and life-in-death our sole whole scope and penalty.

So, Antal Szerb (2001:232) has the last word:

Everyone has to find his own way to die.

Coda: Context as Conceit?

I have said that the original context of a person's words is their personal world-views, and I have admitted that the context which I provide in the above imagined conversation is different from the words' ordinary expression, Yet I have also argued that the context which I construct is only partly novel: that there is a way in which this symptomatic exchange preserves the integrity of each voice. Is this more than an argumentational conceit?

My way to claim both of these things as possibly true turns on an observation of Elizabeth Smart's. Artistry in verbal expression, she suggested—in poetry and in prose

and in oratory and in song—derived from ‘the passion that one word has for another’ (1983). The artist formulates an expression in such a way that the words possess and display a distinct and necessary—and aesthetic—partnership with one another. One might also describe this as the artist possessing a personal signature and style. The way in which words are afforded ‘passion’ in their particular placement is distinctive to a writer, and is something to which a discriminatory ear of another may be attuned. I feel I hear Antal Szerb—and Stevie Smith and Friedrich Nietzsche—as himself or herself: voice inheres in words artistically arranged so that an individual identity and personality is also conveyed by their expression.

It is thus that I can argue that my interlocutors’ words engender their own context even as their imagined conversation is a juxtaposition of contexts for which I am responsible.

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