

VANITY FAIR

CULTURE

Unspoken Truths

Until cancer attacked his vocal cords, the author didn't fully appreciate what was meant by "a writer's voice," or the essential link between speech and prose. As a man who loved to talk, he turns to the masters of such conversation, both in history and in his own circle.

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*I have
seen the
moment
of my*

TALKING HEADS Heraclitus, Leonard Cohen, Callimachus, W. H. Auden, and Nelly Sachs.

greatness flicker,

And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.

—T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock."

Like so many of life's varieties of experience, the novelty of a diagnosis of malignant cancer has a

tendency to wear off. The thing begins to pall, even to become banal. One can become quite used to the specter of the eternal Footman, like some lethal old bore lurking in the hallway at the end of the evening, hoping for the chance to have a word. And I don't so much object to his holding my coat in that marked manner, as if mutely reminding me that it's time to be on my way. No, it's the *snickering* that gets me down.

On a much-too-regular basis, the disease serves me up with a teasing special of the day, or a flavor of the month. It might be random sores and ulcers, on the tongue or in the mouth. Or why not a touch of peripheral neuropathy, involving numb and chilly feet? Daily existence becomes a babyish thing, measured out not in Prufrock's coffee spoons but in tiny doses of nourishment, accompanied by heartening noises from onlookers, or solemn discussions of the operations of the digestive system, conducted with motherly strangers. On the less good days, I feel like that wooden-legged piglet belonging to a sadistically sentimental family that could bear to eat him only a chunk at a time. Except that cancer isn't so ... considerate.

Most despond-inducing and alarming of all, so far, was the moment when my voice suddenly rose to a childish (or perhaps piglet-like) piping squeak. It then began to register all over the place, from a gruff and husky whisper to a papery, plaintive bleat. And at times it threatened, and now threatens daily, to disappear altogether. I had just returned from giving a couple of speeches in California, where with the help of morphine and adrenaline I could still successfully "project" my utterances, when I made an attempt to hail a taxi outside my home—and nothing happened. I stood, frozen, like a silly cat that had abruptly lost its meow. I used to be able to stop a New York cab at 30 paces. I could also, without the help of a microphone, reach the back row and gallery of a crowded debating hall. And it may be nothing to boast about, but people tell me that if their radio or television was on, even in the next room, they could always pick out my tones and know that I was "on," too.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

- [James Joyce's *Ulysses* as a literary force \(Christopher Hitchens, June 2004\)](#)
- [Gore Vidal goes "loco" \(Christopher Hitchens, February 2010\)](#)

Like health itself, the loss of such a thing can't be imagined until it occurs. In common with everybody else, I have played versions of the youthful "Which would you rather?" game, in which

most usually it's debated whether blindness or deafness would be the most oppressive. But I don't ever recall speculating much about being struck dumb. (In the American vernacular, to say "I'd really hate to be dumb" might in any case draw another snicker.) Deprivation of the ability to speak is more like an attack of impotence, or the amputation of part of the personality. To a great degree, in public and private, I "was" my voice. All the rituals and etiquette of conversation, from clearing the throat in preparation for the telling of an extremely long and taxing joke to (in younger days) trying to make my proposals more persuasive as I sank the tone by a strategic octave of shame, were innate and essential to me. I have never been able to sing, but I could once recite poetry and quote prose and was sometimes even asked to do so. And timing is everything: the exquisite moment when one can break in and cap a story, or turn a line for a laugh, or ridicule an opponent. I lived for moments like that. Now, if I want to enter a conversation, I have to attract attention in some other way, and live with the awful fact that people are then listening "sympathetically." At least they don't have to pay attention for long: I can't keep it up and anyway can't stand to.

When you fall ill, people send you CDs. Very often, in my experience, these are by Leonard Cohen. So I have recently learned a song, entitled "If It Be Your Will." It's a tiny bit saccharine, but it's beautifully rendered and it opens like this:

*If it be your will,
That I speak no more:
And my voice be still,
As it was before ...*

I find it's best not to listen to this late at night. Leonard Cohen is unimaginable without, and indissoluble from, his voice. (I now doubt that I could be bothered, or bear, to hear that song done by anybody else.) In some ways, I tell myself, I could hobble along by communicating only in writing. But this is really only because of my age. If I had been robbed of my voice earlier, I doubt that I could ever have achieved much on the page. I owe a vast debt to Simon Hoggart of *The Guardian* (son of the author of *The Uses of Literacy*), who about 35 years ago informed me that an article of mine was well argued but dull, and advised me briskly to write "more like the way that you talk." At the time, I was near speechless at the charge of being boring and never thanked him properly, but in time I appreciated that my fear of self-indulgence and the personal pronoun was its own form of indulgence.

To my writing classes I used later to open by saying that anybody who could talk could also write. Having cheered them up with this easy-to-grasp ladder, I then replaced it with a huge and loathsome snake: “How many people in this class, would you say, can talk? I mean really talk?” That had its duly woeful effect. I told them to read every composition aloud, preferably to a trusted friend. The rules are much the same: Avoid stock expressions (like the plague, as William Safire used to say) and repetitions. Don’t say that as a boy your grandmother used to read to you, unless at that stage of her life she really *was* a boy, in which case you have probably thrown away a better intro. If something is worth hearing or listening to, it’s very probably worth reading. So, this above all: Find your own *voice*.

The most satisfying compliment a reader can pay is to tell me that he or she feels personally addressed. Think of your own favorite authors and see if that isn’t precisely one of the things that engage you, often at first without your noticing it. A good conversation is the only human equivalent: the realizing that decent points are being made and understood, that irony is in play, and elaboration, and that a dull or obvious remark would be almost physically hurtful. This is how philosophy evolved in the symposium, before philosophy was written down. And poetry began with the voice as its only player and the ear as its only recorder. Indeed, I don’t know of any really good writer who was deaf, either. How could one ever come, even with the clever signage of the good Abbé de l’Épée, to appreciate the miniscule twinges and ecstasies of nuance that the well-tuned voice imparts? Henry James and Joseph Conrad actually *dictated* their later novels—which must count as one of the greatest vocal achievements of all time, even though they might have benefited from hearing some passages read back to them—and Saul Bellow dictated much of *Humboldt’s Gift*. Without our corresponding feeling for the idiolect, the stamp on the way an individual actually talks, and therefore writes, we would be deprived of a whole continent of human sympathy, and of its minor-key pleasures such as mimicry and parody.

More solemnly: “All I have is a voice,” wrote W. H. Auden in “September 1, 1939,” his agonized attempt to comprehend, and oppose, the triumph of radical evil. “Who can reach the deaf?” he asked despairingly. “Who can speak for the dumb?” At about the same time, the German-Jewish future Nobel laureate Nelly Sachs found that the apparition of Hitler had caused her to become literally speechless: robbed of her very voice by the stark negation of all values. Our own everyday idiom preserves the idea, however mildly: when a devoted public servant dies, the obituaries will often say that he was “a voice” for the unheard.

From the human throat terrible banes can also emerge: bawling, droning, whining, yelling,

inciting (“the windiest militant trash,” as Auden phrased it in the same poem), and even snickering. It’s the chance to pitch still, small voices against this torrent of babble and noise, the voices of wit and understatement, for which one yearns. All of the best recollections of wisdom and friendship, from Plato’s “Apology” for Socrates to *Boswell’s Life of Johnson*, resound with the spoken, unscripted moments of interplay and reason and speculation. It’s in engagements like this, in competition and comparison with others, that one can hope to hit upon the elusive, magical *mot juste*. For me, to remember friendship is to recall those conversations that it seemed a sin to break off: the ones that made the sacrifice of the following day a trivial one. That was the way that Callimachus chose to remember his beloved Heraclitus (as adapted into English by William Cory):

*They told me, Heraclitus; they told me you were dead.
They brought me bitter news to hear, and bitter tears to shed.
I wept when I remembered how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking, and sent him down the sky.*

Indeed, he rests his claim for his friend’s immortality on the sweetness of his tones:

*Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.
Perhaps a little too much uplift in that closing line ...*

In the medical literature, the vocal “cord” is a mere “fold,” a piece of gristle that strives to reach out and touch its twin, thus producing the possibility of sound effects. But I feel that there must be a deep relationship with the word “chord”: the resonant vibration that can stir memory, produce music, evoke love, bring tears, move crowds to pity and mobs to passion. We may not be, as we used to boast, the only animals capable of speech. But we are the only ones who can deploy vocal communication for sheer pleasure and recreation, combining it with our two other boasts of reason and humor to produce higher syntheses. To lose this ability is to be deprived of an entire range of faculty: it is assuredly to die more than a little.

My chief consolation in this year of living dyingly has been the presence of friends. I can’t eat or drink for pleasure anymore, so when they offer to come it’s only for the blessed chance to talk. Some of these comrades can easily fill a hall with paying customers avid to hear them: they are talkers with whom it’s a privilege just to keep up. Now at least I can do the listening for free. Can they come and see me? Yes, but only in a way. So now every day I go to a waiting room, and

watch the awful news from Japan on cable TV (often closed-captioned, just to torture myself) and wait impatiently for a high dose of protons to be fired into my body at two-thirds the speed of light. What do I hope for? If not a cure, then a remission. And what do I want back? In the most beautiful apposition of two of the simplest words in our language: the freedom of speech.

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