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‘Omen Nomen:’ Naming and the Nature of Life

Patrick Jemmer

*Je suis le ténébreux, – le Veuf, – l'inconsolé,
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule étoile est morte, et mon luth constellé
Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*

Gérard de Nerval: *El Desdichado* [1].

Let us continue with our metaphor of Adam and Eve’s adventures in the Edenic Garden of Language [2], [3] with the realization that “Men and women want to live creatively, intensively and successfully in the world. They long to fulfill the potential of their nature ... What Adam and Eve sought from the tree of knowledge ... was the practical wisdom that would give them blessing and fulfillment” [4]. But now we learn that on succumbing to this Serpent-given “practical wisdom” Humankind had already fallen into a philosophical trap in the form of a “ ... constant logocentric quest” [5], in search of “the inexpressible, the mystical” where “*omen nomen nemoni hominis [est]*” – “an omen to noone is the name of a man.” Now the word “Logocentrism derives from the Greek logos, ‘the word by which the inward thought is expressed’ or ‘reason itself’” [5], and Derrida argues that “Reason has been shaped by a dishonest pursuit of certainty which I have diagnosed as logocentrism” [5]. The problem is that “Logocentrism desires a perfectly rational language that perfectly represents the real world. Such a language of reason would absolutely guarantee that the presence of the world – the essence of everything in the world – would be transparently (re)present(ed) to an observing subject who could speak of it with complete certainty. Words would literally be the truth of things – like ‘Word made flesh’, as St John put it. Pure communion with the world – that is the seduction of logocentric Reason” [5]. We can negotiate the nature of this language trap metaphorically by invoking Nerval’s “deliciously incomprehensible sonnet” [6] of loss (the first stanza of which is quoted above) in which “He has compressed years of experience into a few words, but these words are the quintessence of that experience, not a series of clues to

events in his own life" [7]. We find that in " ... this richly connotative piece, almost every word is a symbol evoking a cluster of ideas and feelings, and, because of this, the reader has frequently selected, according to his lights, the meaning which is appropriate for him" [7]. The problem with this is " ... to determine whether each of several interpretations of a given symbol is equally important to an appreciation of the work as a whole, or whether there is a basic meaning for each word-symbol to which all others are subsidiary. The crucial reason for this is that "Since poets are dealing with words, and since each of these contributes to the total significance of the poem, it is incumbent upon the critic to find the basic meaning, the fundamental tone, of each word-symbol, and to relegate other meanings to their proper secondary role" [7]. Derrida might well lament with Lacan "Words represent me, but are not for me ..." [8] " ... It's a nightmare! The certainty of reason is a tyranny which can only be sustained by the evils of repressing or excluding what is uncertain, what doesn't fit it, what is different, reason is indifferent to the Other" [5], where "The Other is thus the place of language, external to the speaker, and yet, since he or she is a speaker, internal at the same time" [8].

Now "Man is man only through language" [9], but even so, "Language does not provide us with a proper identity: the words we use are used by other people, on television, in books, in the media. *The words do not belong to us.* They are alienating. Even when we want to say something intimate, linked to our heart, like 'I love you', we might be inhibited because we have heard so many other people say this. ... It is as if the words are the property of someone or something else. ... They belong to the Other" [8]. We must therefore naturally ask: what of humankind's maturation and development; its move towards species individuation through language? How can we escape the "tyranny" of the "certainty of reason"? Well, Lacan's insight was that "'The unconscious is structured as a language.' ... This is Lacan's most famous pronouncement. What does it mean? How can the unconscious, which is instinctual and, by definition, unknowable to the subject, be structured as a *language*?" [5]. The answer to this is that "The unconscious functions by signs, metaphors, symbols and in this sense it is 'like' a language. ... But Lacan's point is that the unconscious only comes to exist *after* language is acquired" [5]. So the development of the unconscious language is through "Generalized symbolic media [which] are communication devices that allow processes at a lower level in the control hierarchy to be transacted in a higher level system" [10], that is " ... the unconscious ... is constituted by a series of chains of signifying elements. Like an infernal translating machine, it turns words into symptoms, it inscribes signifiers into the flesh or turns them into tormenting thoughts or compulsions" [8]. What is the nature of this "infernal translating machine"? Well, first of all, "Saussure bequeathed a decisive *binary model* to postmodern theory. Language is a sign system that functions by an operational code of *binary* oppositions" [5]. Now, such oppositions consist of " ... a pair of contrasted terms, each of which depends on the other for its meaning. There are many such oppositions, and they're all governed by the distinction, *either/or*. If we accept this, it establishes conceptual order. Binary

oppositions classify and organize the objects, events and relations of the world. They make decision possible. And they govern thinking in everyday life, as well as philosophy, theory and the sciences" [11]. Moreover, we might like to think that "The human mind functions in model binary sets – noise/silence, raw/cooked, naked/clothed, light/darkness, sacred/profane and so on. Minds working logically (that is *culturally*) unconsciously duplicate nature" [5]. For example, "Why have we chosen the colours green, yellow and red for our traffic-light system? Because it is a 'fact of nature' that our colour code signals for *Go – Caution – Stop* mimic the same structure found in the spectrum. Green is a short wavelength, red is long and yellow lies midway. The brain searches for a *representation* of the binary opposition (go) +/- (stop), and finds green and red and also the intermediate colour term (*!*) caution, yellow" [5]. And there are important implications for this, since "This apparently simple binary contrast of substitution and combination generates higher degrees of complexity and might be said to account for the imaginative or symbolic use of language – in other words, the possibility of meaningful *fictions*. For instance: paradigmatic substitution involves a perception of *similarity* which can generate *METAPHOR* – 'a tower of strength', 'a glaring error' – descriptions that are not literally true. Syntagmatic combination involves a perception of *contiguity* which can generate *METONYMY* (naming an attribute or adjunct of the thing instead of the thing itself – 'crown' for royalty, 'turf' for horse-racing) or *SYNECHDOCHE* (naming the part for the whole – 'keels' for ships" [5]. Thus in Lacanian terms "It is through language that the child enters the social world, – the symbolic order – as an '*!*' ... But with a crucial difference for the *male* and *female* subjects" [5]. We will return to this male-female dichotomy-zeugma later. Now "the meaningful fiction" of the " ... Symbolic order refers to the system of pre-existing social structures into which the child is born, such as kinship, rituals, gender roles and indeed language itself. Identity assumed at the Imaginary phase is finally constructed by the Symbolic order, the realm of the Father who prohibits the mother-child 'incest' relationship. Language belongs to the Father, that is, to the patriarchal order of the *phallus*" [5]. Under these assumptions, let us consider the famous aphorism "'I think therefore I am.'" What happens to this famous Cartesian proof of self-identity in the structuralist view? The '*!*' or unitary human subject – the very cornerstone of Western logic and philosophy – dissolves into a *signifying language-user*. The '*!*' is a language fiction, signified by *use*, not *meaning*, and generated in much the same way as metaphor or metonymy. Structuralism is unhelpful in explaining what *motivates* the language-using subject, i.e., the individual. The logic of the system entirely surpasses and evades the subject's *reasons* for using language. Saying 'to communicate his personal thought', is not good enough. How did 'personal thought' get into the system, anyhow?" [5]. Furthermore, we are able to go on to answer the question: "What, then, is the 'universe,' the bigger, smarter source that chooses the words for us?" [12]. And the forthcoming answer is that my "universe" is " ... a state of the language-brain conditioned by my consciousness, existing only in interaction with it. This is the covenant. So that what writes is neither '*!*,' nor 'language,' but I-in-language, the self-process of experience and desire mapped onto the language-web, physical brain and virtual brain acting together" [12].

However, what if there are circumstances which are “undecidable” in terms of these binary oppositions, where “Undecidables disrupt this oppositional logic. They slip across both sides of an opposition but don’t properly fit either. They are more than the opposition can allow. And because of that, they question the very principle of ‘opposition’” [11]. Let us turn our attention to Cain the “wretched one” (whose name connotes “created” or “acquired,” as well as alluding to “smithcraft”) who was the elder son of Adam and Eve and was considered a gracious gift from God [13]. Or was he? For there are other sources which suggest that “the serpent not only desired Eve but actually had sexual relations with her that produced Cain” [14]. But whatever his genesis, he slew his younger brother Abel (“breath” or “nothingness” [13]): so the “Created” murdered “Nothing” and was banished by God. In this logo-myth we can read the Lacanian “... power and organizing principle of the symbolic, understood as the networks, social, cultural, linguistic, into which a child is born. These precede the birth of the child, which is why Lacan can say that language is there from before the actual moment of birth. It is there in the social structures which are at play in the family and, of course, in the ideals, goals and histories of the parents. Even before a child is born, the parents have talked about him or her, chosen a name, mapped out his or her future. The world of language can hardly be grasped by the newborn and yet it will act on the whole of the child’s existence” [8]. Thus “If the child is captured in an image, he or she will still assume signifiers from the speech of the parents as elements of identification. As a mother raises the baby to see its reflection, she might say ... You look just like your father” [8]. The importance of this is that “These are symbolic pronouncements since they situate a child in a lineage, in a symbolic universe. The baby is bound to its image by words and names, by linguistic representations. A mother who keeps telling her son ‘What a bad boy you are!’ may end up with either a villain or a saint. The identity of the child will depend on how he or she assumes the words of the parents” [8]. Thus “The child does not suddenly decide to put himself or herself in the shoe of some ancestor or family member. Rather, the speech which he or she hears as a child will be incorporated, forming a kernel of insignia which are unconscious ... [This explains] how the subject has ‘become’ what a parent prophesied or how he or she has repeated the mistakes of a grandparent” [8]. Now “A word does not reveal its meaning so simply. Rather, it leads on to other words in a linguistic chain, just like one meaning itself leads to others” [8] and once again we see that “...the sound departed from the heart of God and embraced the whole space of this world; but as soon as it turned out to be evil, then the sound again retreated back” [15]. So in the light of this can we understand that “In Husserl’s view, to express oneself is to be behind the sign ... To attend to one’s speech, to assist it. Only living speech in its mastery and magisteriality, is able to assist itself; and only living speech is expression and not a servile sign” [11]. Thus “The voice is the privileged medium of meaning ... This is phonocentrism: the voice is the centre” [11]. The implication is that for an “expressive” sign (as designated by Husserl) “If living intention is to animate it, it will need the presence of its living producer. So, what’s the privileged form of the expressive sign? The speaking voice,

superior to all other forms because it seems present (proximate, immediate) to the silent, interior consciousness. Husserl reproduces the phonocentric priority" [11]. The nomenclature of this story carries the hidden message that "As we come into the world capable of destruction, we also come into the world with creative capabilities" [13]. And this evokes the idea of "the trace" which suggests " ... that all language is subject to undecidability. The play of the trace is a kind of deforming, reforming slippage – an inherent instability which language cannot escape. This applied to philosophical language as well. The vocabulary of metaphysics (being, truth, centre, origin, etc) has to be recognized as a vocabulary. It's a set of words, and they cannot escape the play of the trace. Now if the trace is a constant sliding between presence and absence, those philosophical words cannot establish full, replete presence. This strikes at the very roots of Western metaphysics, because it's the claim to full presence which underpins metaphysical concepts and procedures" [11]. Further, we read in Genesis 4 that "{15} ... the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him" [16]. We find that "The Mark of Cain, or cross, symbolizes a hammer, for Cain was a Worker in Metals" [17], and even today, "... tav [the cross] survives as tav, ... its name is still understood in Hebrew to mean 'mark,' ... According to legend, this branding, final letter, tav, was the 'mark' mentioned in the biblical book of Genesis as being placed by God upon Cain" for his protection [18]. And, interestingly, despite subtle snake-lore in the passages we read about Satan, "A monstrous Serpent on his Belly prone, / Reluctant, but in vaine: a greater power / Now rul'd him, punisht in the shape he sin'd, / According to his doom: he would have spoke, / But hiss for hiss returnd with forked tongue / To forked tongue ..." (Paradise Lost X: 514 – 519 [19]) we note that "S's hissing sound need not always be bad: In Jewish mystical tradition, the Hebrew sibilant shin was equated by sound with the element of fire and was exalted as one of the three 'mother' letters" [18]. And returning to Cain, and his mark, we find that there is even a relationship between S and T, as described by Lucian in AD 100, in his 'Consonants at Court,' which "imagines a lawsuit between two rival letters: the Greek S letter, named sigma, and the T letter, tau. Speaking before the judges, S denounces T as an agent of dictators and repression: 'They say it was T's shape that tyrants copied when they first set up the cross to crucify men. This vile device is called a stauros, and it gets its name from tau'" [18]. Thus crucifying stauros, tool of redemption through death, itself reminiscent of Greek sauros, 'lizard', is born of hissing-S and protecting/crucifying-T. Moreover, "ST can be expressed hieroglyphically as \$ symbolizing the serpent and the T, the cross or the Tree of Life. It is the life (serpentine) force pushing thru the growing point, threshold or 'site'. The pairing of S and T strongly accents foundation, the 'seat' of consciousness. Set, the oldest Egyptian god, forms the basis of all the other gods, and being so basic or low he is considered evil" [17]. Thus "It's always possible to OVERTURN a metaphysical binarism, to reverse its hierarchy by privileging its second term – for instance, to privilege body not mind, Man not God, the complex before the simple, absence rather than presence" [11]. Furthermore in figure of the "serpent and the cross" we see how "... Derrida sets the trace across the Saussurean sign – an undecidable presence-absence at the origin of meaning.

Language is premised on an interweaving movement between what is there and not there. Language is always an interweaving, a textile" [11], a style of text an interspersing of S and T. From a Deconstructivist perspective we can read this parable as saying that "It was incorrect to suppose that anything reasoned is ever universal, timeless and stable. Any meaning or identity (including our own) is provisional and relative, because it is never exhaustive, it can always be traced further back to a prior network of differences, and further back again ... almost to infinity or the 'zero degree' of sense. This is deconstruction – to peel away like an onion the layers of constructed meanings" [5]. In fact, "Undecidability disrupts the binary structures of metaphysical thinking. It *displaces* the 'either/or' structure of oppositions. The undecidable plays all ways, takes no sides. It won't be fixed down. It leaves no certainty of privileged foundational term against subordinated second term. The unfixing of this certainty is the unfixing of metaphysics" [11]. And so it may seem that we Cain set aside the Serpent, its life story stated ... Or are we Abel to? We continue this slippery Deconstructivist construction in the following article.

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