

AUTHENTICITY AND LANGUAGE: an extract from a journey

Note: the following text is an edited extract from a series of 30 letters written to Moses. The Jewish Quarterly published the letter concerning Primo Levi. However, the letters concerning Authenticity have never been published.

Exploitation of the possibilities that the interpretation and different meanings of words throws up an essential part of the politician's trade. For them, words are like playing cards. To win a game of cards requires strategic use of the hand you are dealt. Alone, a card has no meaning. In the context of a game it may prove a winner if played at the right time or totally useless in another situation. The 'language game' here is the servant of another game with different rules, aims and objectives. The reaction against the "cynical use of language" betrays a hankering after words that have an authoritative stature. So the other reaction is one where we seek some criteria that might lend authority and legitimacy to a text. This is the parallel to the West's attempts to view its democratic forms as "better" than other forms of social and political organisation. In literary terms, it is the search for "authenticity".

Søren Kierkegaard spent a great deal of his writing exploring problems of authenticity and his "authorship". What characterises authorship appears to be the converse of the politician's use of words. If the politician's language is a tool, then the "author's" is an integral part of his or her person. We sense that the author's expression may be "authentic" as it cannot be spoken or written in any radically different way because what has been said or written is as much a part of its author as his or her face.

But authenticity can only be conferred by a readership. It is easy to confuse the notion of authenticity with what Kierkegaard called "authorship". Authorship describes the relationship the writer has with his vocation, his texts, his commitment to develop his ideas. This is the "life" of the writer – the "need" to write. It may or may not be "authentic". Authenticity is a quality that is felt by the reader. It is a quality of language usage, an ability to draw on a vocabulary that evokes a powerful response. Authorship is to do with self-expression (although Kierkegaard asks profound questions about the "self" that is being expressed): authenticity is a quality of communication.

If the New Testament, especially the Pauline texts, is what Frank Kermode calls the first "modern" literature, it is because it marks a break from the Hebrew scriptures in its interest in personal revelation, internal transformation and purely individual faith. In literary terms, autobiography and the novel are in the Christian tradition. So too is Kierkegaard's fascination with authorship. Authenticity, however, has roots that go much further back and will probably long outlive the literary forms that have held sway in the West in the past few centuries. It is the authenticity of the Old Testament writers that is important to us – not their authorship. And it is the authenticity of any other creative writer whose subject matter is the same as the scriptural narrators that is instantly scrutinised by comparison with their formidable predecessors. So, in their own time, Thomas Mann (Joseph and his brothers), Joseph Heller (God Knows), Wilfred Owen (Abraham and Isaac) and others have drawn on Hebrew scriptures for inspiration and effect. But their accounts are held up for comparison with the "originals" – and the criterion is authenticity.

I wrote the 30 letters to Moses in a naive appeal for "authentication": knowing that my "readership" was a man who died around 4000 years ago. With such an audience in mind, it is scarcely surprising that the issues of authenticity and authorship were likely to become

confused. With no perceptible response from my reader, my own view of whether what I wrote was "authentic" went unchallenged. (Narcissus thought he was beautiful). So the process of reflection upon my own authorship was the same process as reflecting on the text's authenticity.

The solution seemed simple. Why not go through the discipline of having the letters published? Then authenticity could be decided by discerning readers, and this "objective" response would separate out these confusing concepts. But this would miss the point of the entire enterprise. If what I was attempting to do was to bring about some meaningful form of "encounter" between Moses and myself – why court the distractions of publication just to discover if other people believe in the encounter?

So what was my motivation? Was I trying to realise my "authorship"? Did I want to appeal to a wider readership than Moses for some "authentic" stamp of approval? Or was it his undoubted status and authority with which I was attempting to engage? It is interesting how all these words have one root – the Latin word 'auctor'. This does not just mean author (or writer) but also creator, founder, maker, inventor. For me, it is a word packed with dynamic energy and meaning. Let us unpack it to draw three simple definitions:

AUTHORSHIP relates to an internal "need" to write. It addresses the way we create and generate our own continually-evolving personality. We all do that: the author just does it through language, in a way that is potentially more public.

AUTHENTICITY relates to this more public dimension: the meaning and perceived truth of the writing by the reader.

AUTHORITY relates to power and social status: and we all have a complex relationship to this as motivation.

Now the web of motivations spun from 'auctor' is probably too fine to see, although its sheer weight and density is undeniable. Authorship's problematic existence drives many to induce some "greater truth" upon which authorship's existence is contingent. I am sure that all scriptural redactors consciously wrote with this in mind. In this perspective, 'truth speaks (through) the writer' – the author (or creator) is beyond the wielder of the pen. We may be reduced to the status of 'a tool'. The easy rejection of this "metaphysical" view fails to retain the importance of that feeling that on occasions overtakes an author when you write but know that you do not have complete control over your material. It is a powerful feeling: you "know" the material has a life of its own. Your relationship with this dynamic, partially autonomous (N.B. the 'auctor' root again here) 'subject' is the key to your learning and development. You do not need to restrict this relationship by thinking of your 'subject' as your instructor and yourself as a mere passive recipient. Such master/servant relationships may provide security for the servant and a firm foundation of certainty from which a great deal of written material can grow (the Bible must be the longest book in common circulation). But it is not a relationship that allows any substantive changes in time. Finally, it is as monochrome as the far more common relationship where the writer is the complete master and the material is totally subject (e.g. in text-books or best-sellers written to a formula).

In the relationship between author and subject that I am keen to foster, there is a mutual respect. Within this respect grows the freedom to develop and express one's personality in a

way that each knows does not harm the other. When I wrote the 30 letters, Moses (and all the ideas and movements associated with him) were my subject. I think I showed how he could be seen as the 'master' ('auctor'/founder of a religion) – and I as little more than the latest of a long line of people dominated by his inheritance. Similarly, if one were to regard the letters as being written to a formula (or as a text-book!) then I could be regarded as his 'master' ('auctor'/writer/inventor) and Moses as merely a pawn in the play of my imagination. But what I was striving towards was to inhabit an authorship less sterile than these relationships. This was what I meant when I spoke of an encounter between Moses and myself as human beings.

Motivation within authorship, then, appears to be describable. Motivation as regards authenticity is a strange animal, however, that is far more elusive. For whom must the letters have meaning outside of the relationship between Moses and me? If the answer is a coy "whoever reads them", then the follow-up question "who do you think that they might be?" cruelly exposes the author's lack of analysis of this whole issue. "Are you speaking to the Jewish community about our shared culture? Are you addressing Christian, Islamic and other readers about parameters within which shared values and differences might be recognised?"

Was my abiding obsession with racism drawing me into an attempt to broaden the foundation of anti-racist understanding? The answer to all these questions, and many others, may well be affirmative, but whose approval did I most seek (if any)? Whose affirmation that what I was saying was meaningful to them would legitimise this undertaking? For whom must the letters feel 'authentic'? The strange animal, 'authenticity', has feet in every camp, eyes that look in many directions simultaneously, and a body with ill-defined edges. But if it listens to anyone, it will be those who have not erected CERTAINTIES in their lives or, if they have, are conscious of the way that such props weaken our ability to think, to feel, to encounter others.

Motivation owed to the writer's experience of authority is a great favourite for all psychoanalysts to speculate upon. A few years ago, I taught a class called 'Men against Sexism'. All the (male) students found themselves drawn to reflecting upon one relationship above all others – the one with their father. This authority figure is often projected onto others – not just fathers. The images focus on real historical characters (Buddha, Christ, and of course Moses) as well as God. The experience of authority figures we encounter in our own lives may determine many of our social, political and personal attitudes. As ultimate figures of authority – all fathers are deficient (be they my father or my children's father). For those who seek the comfort and certainty of anything at all that can be described as "ULTIMATE", their search for alternative authorities can be seen as a reaction against the discovery of the shortcomings of their father. So, at this level, I could be seen as wanting to write to Moses because of my disappointment with my father. Now I may well have felt this disappointment – but social expectations of fathers are so high that most children feel the same. This is just the butt-end of living in a male-dominated society as far as fathers are concerned. However, to believe that my writing to Moses was part of my search for ultimate authority was to ignore absolutely all the content of what I was saying. No doubt there is a search for authority – just as there is for authorship and authenticity. But it is the nature of this authority that I was trying to tease out. I was conscious that I was not simply projecting onto Moses the effects of some supposed paternal deprivation.

Moses' authority derives from his contribution to our humanity – not some specious assignation of divine status. So my motivation as it relates to the "power and social status"

derived from his authority was not a search for stone tablets. I was really interested in the power and status that Moses holds in our culture only insofar as it authorises the critical appraisal of power and status in the World. The de-humanising effects of power and status preoccupations (and the absolute de-humanising effects of belief in ULTIMATE authority) were a powerful spur to my motivation. But the challenge to such preoccupations cannot simply be the replacement of one 'school' with another.

Similarly (following Locke, Bentham and others) it cannot be an enlightened liberal attitude of denying the legitimacy of a philosophy of authority whilst attempting to appeal to our 'fraternal' feelings to assert that there really is a moral solidarity between us all. Morality and ethics exist within an authoritative code – not by way of some sort of "contract" between us all as equals. All the theories of social relations based on the "brotherhood of man" fail to recognise that all brothers, and sisters, had parents. It is this paternal (or maternal) relationship within which authority has been fostered. And this relationship has a firm place in our culture and traditions despite, or maybe because of, the continually-changing face of family life from one generation to the next. Perhaps my motivations in writing to Moses were at once a recognition of his powerful influence on the institution of the family ("Honour thy father and mother"), his own complex relationship with power and status (Jewish prophet/failed pharaoh?) and his authority as a man with all the weaknesses and failings that, for me, makes his authority authentic.

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