COMMUNION AND THE IMAGE OF LANGUAGE

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The premise of this essay is that of Romans 11:36, "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things . . . ." God is our source, the guide of our creativity, and our goal. It follows that human actions have significance not only because they are done by us but because they are quickened by Being.

Truly to understand what we do in this world requires, therefore, that the disciplines which analyze human behavior consider the source in Being of that behavior. This is something many of us are reluctant to do, preferring the opinion that the hypotheses of science and the speculations of theology are about quite separate realms.

But there is only one realm. Perspectives differ, naturally, and as a result the dimension of science cannot be that of theology. The one focuses on that which is conditioned and the other on the unconditioned, as Paul Tillich once said in his little book, *What Is Religion?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 59. But neither point of view can be absolutely divorced from the other. To understand the conditioned it is necessary to intuit however faintly the freedom of ultimate creativity. More specifically, "The dignity of the schorlarly and scientific attitude demands that every scientific judgment be pronounced with the universal idea of man in view . . . ," Hans Urs von Balthasar asserted in *The God Question and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1967), p. 34. Science requires theology no less than analysis needs synthesis.

The subject of this essay is the communicative process, especially that sort of conversation which culminates in the most meaningful relationship of all—not understanding per se, but interpersonal communion. It follows from what has been said that any anaylsis of such a significant moment must begin with a contemplation of the prior communion of individual human beings with Being. This prior communion is itself preceded by the shock of recognition we experience when, face to face with ultimacy, we discover that we have nothing to say, and this too should be considered if we are to accord to linguistic science the dignity of which Balthasar speaks.

The human species came silently into the world, as Teilhard de Chardin wrote in *The Phenomenon of Man* (Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 184, 186. The genesis of a conversation or a dialogue whose sub-

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ject, directly or indirectly, is of supreme importance to the speakers, and which therefore can lead to communion, is also in silence, the silence of Being itself. This is as true of certain kinds of talk as it is of myth and religious symbol. This essay explores some of the implications of this dimension of communion.

The prior communion: openness

When confronted with ultimacy we seem to face Void. Not merely an abyss which, being chaos, would be minimally comforting, for something would after all be there. Not emptiness, which is structured by what surrounds it, and such a pocket in reality would orient rather than terrify. No: Void, having no features reminiscent of who we imagine ourselves to be and no structure we can grasp in the way we "know" our perceptual world. Emil Brunner once called it "alien" (*The Mediator*s *A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith* [London: Lutterworth, 1934], p. 107).

But we want to be comforted when we confront ultimacy or turn to Being. We want to be reassured, to touch the identity of the familiar. And this is not always possible. Indentity itself, that we think of as the known and the personnae we think of as our "selves," prevents it.

The result of our confrontation or supplication is that we realize that it is we who are empty because, among other errors, we had attributed to personal and cultural myths the realities which had brought mythic language into being. We had in fact set up idols, beginning with those ponderous fictions called personality. Fortunately, we are brought somehow to see this in a "... moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known," as Richard Niebuhr put it in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), p. 111.

We now know that Being will be void for us so long as we are empty of being. This beginning of wisdom comes to us, it seems, as a gift, because surely our burdened minds could have had no way of lighting their own way. Much later, perhaps, we will come to understand that our moment of comprehension was in fact a moment of communion as well as a gift, that what we had felt as alien was actually an Other with whom we are given to share the responsibility of authenticity.

I suggest that what is here abstractly presented as psychomachia is what precedes and perhaps accompanies every moment we are open to the construction of equivalency in communication—a kind of linguistic rapprochement. For this kind of verbal coming together, no matter how limited, provided that it is not merely diplomatic, is characterized by a willing, selfless creation of areas of agreement. This

is a process which alters our previous notions or beliefs even as it alters our expressive capability, most obviously our linguistic capability—and thus effectively reconstructs to some degree our concept of self. Such a process can only have been initiated by a spiritually radical renovation.

One of the more observable effects of conversion has always been this alteration in the way we express ourselves (from which can be inferred a change in self-concept). In fact, some of the more remarkable shifts in expressibility of people who have undergone a profound religious experience survive in their writing. We can trace the sometimes abrupt changes taking place after such an experience in the works of Augustine, John Donne, C. S. Lewis, and William Byrd, the composer.

Any cultivated (but pagan) Roman, on opening his copy of Augustine's *Confessions,* would have been dismayed to see how the Latin of educated discourse had been changed by the remaking of Augustine's mind. Familiar words like "soul" and "fall," Peter Brown tells us, appear in strange contexts which warp their semantic structure in unprecendented ways (*Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970], pp. 165-169). The coherence of discourse itself is disrupted by novel doxologies and apostrophes to the Creator to whom the book is (shockingly) a personal address. Of course, the educated world had long been aware that Christians habitually preferred to use the structurally simpler Latin of the streets, of slaves, and of women—witness the Vulgate translation of the Bible by Augustine's contemporary, Jerome. What Augustine did was more extreme. Instead of merely switching to the nonstandard dialect like his countrywoman Vibia Perpetua, who kept a prison journal before her maryrdom in 202, Augustine altered the nuance of sophisticated Latin while retaining its syntactic structure, a change in mode whose individual stamp is perhaps owing to the unusual process of his conversion.

John Donne changed his language in somewhat the same manner. After the death of his wife Ann in 1617, Donne underwent a profound spiritual reorientation with the result that his sermons were noticeably more intense, the thought and emotion in them more closely wedded than before, so that the extremes of his earlier paradoxical style were no longer required. This later prose depends less on verbal virtuosity for its effect than on a more intimate vision of the Incarnational union of man and God.

Finally, to any reader of C. S. Lewis, the new style of his poignant little book, *A Grief Observed* (1961), which records his change from

angered rejection of a hopeful future upon the death of Joy Lewis in 1960 to loving acceptance is astonishing. The sentences are short, colloquial, frequently fragmented, and subject to startling changes in tone. Never before had Lewis written such sentences, but then never before had his faith collapsed "like a house of cards," as he put it, to be rebuilt to a truer vision.

Language is not the only expressive system which is changed after our confrontation with Void and our experience of the prior communion. A famous example of how musical expression is altered is that of William Byrd, the Elizabethan composer who, upon experiencing a profound development in his religious conviction—he was, perilously, a Roman Catholic— expressed himself in a series of Latin motets the music and words of which were of an entirely new kind.

Obviously, what happened to effect these expressive changes was drastic and thorough, and can only have been initiated by a shock which makes not only the dismantling of the communicative surface imperative but necessitates alterations in the generating deep structures as well.

It may be worth noting that apparently no one, the structure of whose expression has been changed by religious experience, ever reverts to an older mode, if only because such changes become inlayed —if, sometimes, idiosyncratic—parts of community habit. Augustine went on to write the utterly novel *City of God,* Donne later created the *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), a collection of meditations entirely unlike any previous writing he had done, and Lewis continued the style of *A Grief Observed* in the subsequent *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer* (1964). He never entirely returned to the more balanced syntax of, e.g., the wartime *The Screwtape Letters.* As for Byrd,, he created even more profoundly different music later in life, after still deeper religious commitments at a time when the government was tightening its control over adherents to the Roman Church.

Somehting like this stylistic restructuring, though obviously by no means so drastic, happens every time we have a conversation which is either directly or indirectly about matters of ultimate concern and which culminates in an equivalence so intense that Roman Ingarden called it communion (*The Literary Work of Art* . . . ..[Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973], p. 392). For the genesis of such a conversation, as Ingarden says, is first of all openness to the other. There is no desire to dominate the other or to win an argument, to score debating points or to charm a companion by the force of one's personality. In fact, we begin by creating a new community based

on a willingness to adjust linguistic structures and meanings. "Thus it is precisely in several persons' complete surrender to each other," wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "that their new person becomes real and there arises a 'community of new persons' " (*The Communion of Saints* . . . [New York: Harper & Row, 1963], p. 125).

A "complete surrender" is not an abdication of responsibility. To be open to another does not lead to a wholesale adoption by any person of the ideas or the commitment of the others. More likely, a mutual linguistic accommodation results in the new point of view which had not existed before. "From that moment on, they become inhabitants of a partly shared social world," R. Rommetveit tells us, "established and continually modified by their acts of communication" (*On Message Structure: A Framework for the Structure of Language and Communication* [London: John Wiley & Sons, 1974], p. 23).

Only one person is required for the initiation of this process, for in a sense we are all potentially co-bearers of revelation, needing sometimes only to have our awareness wakened by another. As Saint Paul wrote to the Romans: "We conclude that faith is awakened by the message, and the message that awakens it comes through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17, *The New English Bible*). Truth is latent, thought Augustine, and it is necessary only to discover its presence within us *Tractatus in Joannis,* 26:7). Something we say or even some gesture, like an embrace, can sometimes recall another to the prior communion.

Certainly only one person is required to react to a work of art, like a piece of music or a poem, which appeals to the prior communton in hearer or reader—provided only that as Tillich reminds us, "it hits the human mind in such a way that an ultimate concern is created" (*Systematic Theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967], III, Pt. IV, 125). The work of art is a finished statement of equivalency in which the laws of the medium have been altered by the artist's openness to expression. And art, as Balthasar reminds us (p. 56), has its genesis in prayer—i.e., in that kind of prayer which reestablishes one's awareness of Being.

We who come to the work of art with open expectation engage in dialogue with it. It does not master us, usually, but rather offers itself for reconstruction. In reading a poem, for example, we are bound to accept the semantic structures of the key words in the poem as those structures are given, but we are bound as well to bring to their interpretation our own semantic honesty. We adjust to the poem but we have made changes in it, and out of the tension a new "community" has been fashioned which does in fact possess a linguistic reality of its own which, as Martin Heidegger put it, prepares us to be "laid

hold of by Being itself" (*Holzwege* [Frankfort-am-Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1950], p. 45).

Every conversation can be new and can end in communion. Every esthetic experience can be new and can also end in communion, for the genesis of both art and the verbal construction of equivalency is the need to dismantle the idols of the tribe as well as our personal fetishes and so live that Being lives in us, so create that our creativity is that of Being. "Man must suffocate through man if, in this everlasting meeting with himself which makes up daily life, he meets no one else save man . . . ," wrote Balthasar (pp. 142-43).

The building of communion: equivalence

All men and women share a double equality. We are all equal in having to divest ourselves of enshrined egoisms and a percepual world closed to the future. This process of cleansing is constantly renewed, of course. Generally its effects are imperceptible, though sometimes our renovation may seem to occur so abruptly as to constitute a turning, a conversion. At any rate, as a result of this radical remaking, we approach one another with empty hands, equal before expectation.

Our other equality is our intensely personal previous confrontation with ultimacy, where it had seemed to us that we were faced with an absence even of absence until we realized that what we faced was the essence of estranged humanity. It must be Void before it quickens, and so must we.

Because the orgin of our two equalities lives in us, and because the origin of creativity is love, we find when we come together for the creation of human community that the communicative process is one of increasing equivalence in what Teilhard called ". . . a harmonized collectivity of consciousnesses . . . " (p. 251).

The beginning is halting and slow, usually; in fact, it is procedural. We begin with the adjacentcy of a close relationship or even intimacy. This is followed by a stage during which culturally specific rules are tacitly adopted or modified: e.g., the rule which permits older people to interrupt younger speakers. As the talk proceeds, approximate equivalents in meaning and linguistic structure establish the manner in which such equivalents will be discovered—usually by a mutual appeal to a particular kind of common experience. A discussion about death might be based on shared military experience, for example. Exact equivalents can never be found, of course, since none of us can inhabit the same perceptual space or move through the

same time. But even a rough agreement is sensed as being productive and as contributing to harmony.

So far the procedure is based on modifiable rules, many of which like co-occurrence and interruption rules have been investigated. We internalize these rules at a fairly early age, and work within their parameters. (Of course, the "language games" for specific forms of life like that of the academic or the legal must be learned later in life.)

Suddenly there occurs interpersonal communion. This is not merely intense empathy. There is the conviction that two are no longer two but one in some mysterious fashion which defies analysis. It is a recognized topos in fiction, where it tends to be cheapened by extravagant statement ("... between us there was eternal life"—Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout or Changing Scenes* [1968], II, Four) or by the omission of any prerequisite stages: '"Yes," he said, and as he smiled down one of his rare and beautiful smiles, they touched, it seemed, a moment of complete understanding" (Olivia Manning, *The Great Fortune* [New York: Doubleday, 1961], p. 172). It is difficult to describe this experience for, as Balthasar says, "But mostly nothing tangible will happen, nothing except this tiny, hardly noticeable movement towards each other, this turning, somewhere perhaps beyond all words and experiences, so that it cannot be actually perceived, but is realized only from the consequences" (p. 152).

Linguistic science cannot explain the nature of this experience, since apparently it is right-brain activity, inaccessible to analysis, the right brain concerning itself with wholeness and relationship, among other non-analyzable realities. But one capacity of language is decidedly pertinent in any analysis of the stages which precede communion. This is its symbolic capacity, the ability of human beings in community to create linguistic patterns in such a way that even humble speech acts (as those appearing in a New Testament parable or even an ordinary conversation) can refer not only to a manifest content or subject but to the mind's response in a moment of insight to the presence of Being in the world—in exactly the same way that openness responds only to revelation.

This symbolic capacity creates language acts, symbols, and myths whose astonishing significance is seen primarily both when they are first uttered and when conditions present at their creation are again in effect: men and women in community whose characteristic verbal mode is equivalence and whose impetus is love. They are not merely assents to consensus, or hypotheses, or exclamations; nor are they merely paradigms of behavior and exemplary stories either at the moment of their creation or at the moment of their re-creation; they are out-

ward signs of an inward and spiritual presence. Karl Jaspers called them "ciphers of Being" (*Truth and Symbol*—the final section of *Von den Wahrheit* [New York: Twayne, 1959]).

Functionally, these ciphers of Being become part of the world's mythology or its religious language, or part perhaps of one community's memories of an individual speaker the moment they have achieved their purpose—like the myths of the ancient Mediterranean world, whose moment has long passed. ("Not a single Greek myth has come down to us in its cult context," writes Mircea Eliade in *Myth and Reality* [Harper & Row, 1963], p. 158.)

Their artifacts may linger as mythology, or a remembered revel atory talk may continue to command belief. Akhnaton's followers must have reverenced tales of the sun, and the followers of Jesus collected and honored his sayings. But the once inspired semiotic can be read again and again by selfless and loving minds either individually or in community, like the community of the Church to which even the solitary can belong (cf. Psalm 68.6); and when it is, writes Wolfhart Pannenberg, the cipher is again filled by "... *the* reality to which religious language ... is related in its transcending fore-conception beyond itself and everything finite" ("Toward a Theology of the History of Religions," 1962, in *Basic Questions in Theology, Collected Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], II, 105).

When Simone Weil recited the Lord's Prayer, she wrote in her spiritual autobiography, "The infinity of the ordinary expanses of perception is replaced by an infinity to the second or sometimes the third degree. At the same time ... there is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence" (*Waiting for God* [New York: Harper Row, 1951], p. 72).

Pannenberg refers to the "transcending fore-conception" of such experienced symbols of Being's presence. The presence is invitational, and points to the future as indeed the whole process from its initiation in the prior communion does. We had anticipated communion, though perhaps not always consciously. Having experienced the prior communion, we look for its image and frequently find it in the great symbols of myth and revelatory discourse which must by their very nature as symbols, as ciphers, place us in a position to be transcended; for, as Weil said, in them "... it is God who seeks man" (p. 195). We also find the image of communion in "ordinary" talk.

Conclusion

Without the immediate presence of the divine, all words are either empty or merely pragmatic. At the moment of its complete effectiveness, language is dynamic, and by catalysis dissolves the securities of bias and customary linguistic patterns. Men and women are loosened thereby from egoism. Their attention is focused no longer on speakers or even on the content of the message as such, but on the creativity for which the message has become key.

We are changed as we discover who we are. In willingly adjusting our personal and cultural idiom to that of the other, as in fact we often do on even trivial occasions, we alter our self concept. Perceptual reality is of course the world we see, touch, hear, and feel. It is a sensory world which our brain interprets, and therefore it is a world whose coherence is linguistic. Change the language and you change this world: you change who you think you are. We willingly do this in all serious talk, and if the talk is sufficiently intense, the alteration will be all the greater.

Egoism necessarily decreases as we draw closer, and it may be that we will have so altered our relationship that the purpose of the talk, while being retained, will have been transformed; it will seem to have become iconic of relationship, and the aptest word we afterwards find to describe the conditon of which it is iconic is likely to be "love."

There can be two interpretations of this movement from intimacy through correspondence to communion. The first is that of linguistics, which correctly points out the inevitability of linguistic adjustment, of mutual correspondence, given the necessity of communication. And of course the effect of successful communication is bound in some degree to be euphoric. People frequently get high on good talk, and this has always been considered one of the values of conversation in periods like the eighteenth century, when talking was an art whose end was pleasure.

The second interpretation (and that of this essay) sees the genesis of the process in our primal confrontation with ultimacy. It suggests that the need to diminish willfulness or egoism resulted from this confrontation and preceded the work of linguistic calibration. It assumes that the new linguistic community, identifiable by its innovative structure and its novel semantic parameters, flows from an absolute equality before Being. Communion begins the process and therefore ends it. When we have passed through all languages, writes Karl Jaspers, "In the moment that is eternity, we surmount them, having attain-

ed the incommunicable imageless" ("The Issues Clarified," in Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity, An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* [New York: Noonday, 1958], p. 89).

Only this reading of the process is holistic. For, if human creativity is initiated in the perception by individual men and women that life demands the dismantling of idols—that behavior exists not for its own sake but for the sake of life, then we should seriously consider the foundation of dialogue in unicity rather than in disparity.

There is a larger consideration to the importance of which this essay may perhaps bear witness.

The story of the creation in Genesis suggests that creativity makes meaningful the face of the abyss through a structured progression which is seen as very good. Human community, of which language is both constitutive and which it images, mirrors this creativity. At the end of our lives we may therefore as members of community anticipate not a Void but another transcending of equivalence into a third communion as we relinquish completely the limited transcendence we know. In death, Bonhoeffer's words will become literally true: "The meaning of love is consummated where one's own person is no longer seen . . ." (pp. 202-203).