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Giving My Word

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Chrétien, Jean-Louis, *The Call and the Response* (trans. Anne A. Davenport; New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

Few activities are more familiar to us than conversation. Many of our most elevated and most intimate experiences are mediated by an exchange of words. No wonder, then, that the art form that most directly represents the shape of events in a human life, the drama, consists of little else than interpersonal dialogue. The fact that conversation frames and carries so much of our daily life may well be the reason why we easily overlook the meaning of this most commonplace happening, why we forget to ask what our talk says about us and our way of being in the world.

In his 1992 *The Call and the Response* (*L'Appel et la réponse*), the phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien offered a great service to thought by venturing a foray into this theme. Far from taking language for granted, Chrétien holds that man's power to name the world poetically lies at the center of his unique vocation as spirit-in-the-flesh. The labor of words cannot be a matter of indifference to us, since we always already find ourselves gifted for and sent into this task. Our speech, Chrétien observes, is principally a response, and our inner mandate to respond to reality sheds light on what it is to be a created person. This calling to give utterance to the world is, to be sure, preceded by what things enunciate about themselves in their self-enactment. Each substance's own manifested intelligibility offers, then, something like an appeal to man, who in perceiving the thing can know it, and in knowing it can speak it. But things can address us in this way first because we exist in a state of listening, that is, we are ordered in such a way as to receive what things show of themselves so we can return to them the name they cannot claim for themselves.

All speech is at bottom celebratory; by giving things our words, we magnify the beauty that first elicited us. Invoking Augustine, Chrétien writes: "If beauty is the very voice of things, the face-to-face encounter through which beauty grips us is not in its essence a speechless contemplation

but a dialogue.” If our speaking is foremost a dialogical response to the things we name, then it cannot be that things mean nothing before we give voice to them. Each substance receives its own significant wholeness first from the divine Logos of whom its own nature is an expression. Paul Claudel in the first of his *Five Odes* speaks of the poet’s naming of things as a “repetition”—as a radical reenactment, that is, of God’s creative deed. In this way, man’s interpretation and articulation of the meaning of finite things is not only an answer to the compelling appeal they make to him. More than this, man’s poetic recapitulation of creation is fundamentally sustained by the divine Word’s invitation for him to enter into cooperative dialogue with God. Knowing the world is a form of conversation with things, and, as such, is already the beginning of prayer to the God whom all things confess merely by disclosing themselves. We thus come to ourselves always already addressed from without and from above. We are beheld and hailed by God from the beginning, and, as embodied persons, this address that holds us in being is mediated by our experience of fellow creatures.

Profoundly, Chrétien sees that we are not only disposed to offer a response *to* the world, but are constituted in our very being *as respondents*. The first call by which we are beckoned is God the Word’s creation of us in our conception, and we see the power of this call, addressed to us so we may be, in the fact that we respond to it long before we are conscious that we exist having heard it. This is “the response that we ourselves are... a ‘here I am’ provoked by a ‘come here.’” Our most basic answer to this original vocation occurs in all that we do and comes before any decision to adhere to it, though the whole effort of our lives is to learn to live out this stance most responsibly—which is to say, most generatively.

But if to be a person is to be given a voice to answer the love that summons us from the beginning, if then being is antiphonal, we can never so perfectly respond that the abiding divine call that precedes us would cease to exceed us infinitely. Fittingly, Chrétien does not view this essential belatedness of our word as tragic, but instead as the source of a perpetually-renewed adventure of praise: “the excess of the call relative to any possible response or to any act of hearing is precisely what parts my lips again and again in order that I may sing what shatters my voice.” We are carried into this song, even as it is our own to sing. God promises himself to me so faithfully that he creates me not only for but into partnership with him, speaking his promise *in me* through the “immemorial yes that is uttered by my very being, by my very coming into existence, over each and every particular yes that I will have a chance to proffer in my life.” Entrusted to ourselves, and hence existing most basically as respondents in a sacred conversation, we are nevertheless tasked with learning to return a true word, and even one to which we can freely be true forever. We are made finally to live out a vow for which we are wholly answerable.

If there is something in me that responds before I even recognize that I have heard a call, does that mean that there is a speaker deeper in me than my own speech? In the third part of the work, “The Other Voice,” the author considers a range of philosophical voices on the presence of an “inner alterity” within the self. Is there a dialogue within me (a dialogue between me and myself) that is in some measure the wellspring of my dialogue with the world? Without deciding on this question, Chrétien gives us to think that the power to speak necessarily implies an openness to community that rests on a kind of intrapersonal community within the self.

In keeping with this, he appreciates not only that the word is born of our encounter with things, but that language is even the medium through which we come to understand the world at all. “We speak only for having been called, called by what there is to say, and yet we learn and hear what there is to say only in speech itself.” As Aquinas recognized, our knowledge of reality is always verbal, at least in the form of the “inner word” or concept wherein our mind has received other substances. If language is present at the deepest sources of our understanding of the world, however, language can never belong merely to the individual, but is necessarily social. Ultimately, I conceive the world so that I can communicate my understanding to another, or learn from what another has to say, and thereby contemplate the world together with my like-minded interlocutor. The commonness of any given tongue suggests further to Chrétien that our own speech is in itself plurivocal, bearing within it the voices of all forebears and contemporaries which we cannot but repeat, translate, and answer. Language, he says, has a “choral character.” In giving my word, as I do already in testifying to any truth, I representatively take a stand on behalf of those whose language I have inherited, but also speak for those to come. “I speak by answering, but my response endures only by calling other words that will answer it ... The response of others is the future of our speech, a future that is always already present.” As Walt Whitman would have it, “I contain multitudes”—yes, but my own voice is for this reason also meant to find its place within the multitudes that make up the chorus of the great tradition, and, finally, within the multitudes that make up the eschatological chorus where the Church as one speaks her vow everlastingly before her Bridegroom, where God’s creative word of promise is consummately fulfilled.

This mutual presence of other voices within my own and my own voice within others is not only a mark of what it is to be spirit, but is rooted too in our natural embodiment. In the fourth and final section of the book, “Body and Touch,” Chrétien turns his attention to how the flesh and its self-feeling signify our original belonging with others. “To feel oneself is not a beginning, but a response to the appeal made by a sensible that is other than myself and that elicits the exercise of my acts. I never start by saying ‘I,’ I start by being ‘thou-ed’ by the world.” This body wherein my voice resonates bears in itself an intimation of my dialogical existence, my corporate membership in a community within which I can grow into my voice—by daring to promise myself. I thereby carry out my mission of responding to God, and do so together with and on behalf of everything whose appealing wholeness has moved me to know that God’s ever-addressing Word is “living and active” (Heb 4:12).

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