1

The Quest for Language

Engaging the Head and the Heart

The time of silencing is over, the time to speak has come.

Martin Luther

The Word in Words

When the mind is at sea a new word provides a raft, wrote Goethe three hundred years after Martin Luther's time. However, these words could not have been truer for Luther, for the limits of language set the limits of his world. Language constituted the very communicability and linguistic being of human beings.

Martin Luther is celebrated as a virtuoso in the art of translation as well as the architect of the modern German language. This is accepted without significant controversy across the theological and ideological spectrum. While his linguistic adeptness went uncontested, his theological stances, to the contrary, present a different picture. His theology is both championed by followers as well as decried by foes. Such discrepancy in the reception of the Reformer suggests an interesting query. Is the *form* of Luther's thought, as rendered in his use of language, independent from the *content* of his theological contentions? The initial argument here sustains that this is not the case. The form implies the content and vice versa. The creative use of language for the sake of communicating the gospel is tied to Luther's understanding of the communication of the *logos* with the flesh. This is best illustrated with an examination of the language Luther employed.

17

The Reformation movement and particularly Luther were concerned with the recreation of a language capable of giving voice to the voiceless, of turning unarticulated utterances into meaning, of constituting knowledge for empowerment, because the Word communicates in the medium of language(s), idioms. Between the divine utterance of the addressed Word of God and the language of the people we find the cultural equivalent of the distinctively Lutheran rendition of the Council of Chalcedon's (451 CE) doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*, the "communication of attributes or properties," in all its three classical Lutheran genres in which it expresses itself (*idiomaticum, apotelesmaticum,* and *majestaticum*).[1] What the *communicatio idiomatum* means for Christology parallels the relationship between the Word and language: the semantics of the Word are meaningful in the vernacular (*genus idiomaticum*); the effective deeds of the Word are performed in language (*genus apotelesmaticum*), and the defiled character of human languages and communication is capable of the sublime Word (*genus majestaticum*). It did not end there. The reverse, complementary process also was true: The broken and diffident quotidian vernacular finds itself totally present in the majestic Word of God rendering it humble and meek (*genus tapeinoticum*).

Luther's understanding of language puts into practice his doctrine of the person of Christ, including the disputes over the Lord's Supper. This is the practice of the *ecclesia*, this earthly order of creation that is the space for a "marvelous exchange" to take place. This celebrated christological axiom[2] finds its linguistic equivalent in his argumentation during an academic disputation in 1537: "All words are made new when they are transferred from their own to another [semantic] context."[3] The new language (*nova lingua*) is the result of this transference. It is not an epiphany, an unambiguous manifestation of the divine. Strictly speaking, there is no epiphany in Luther's theology; the divine manifests itself in debased conditions. And where this communication happens, there is the church. Luther's understanding of the church as the creature of the Word (*ubi verbum, ibi ecclesia*) is grounded on this assumption.[4] For him, the Word cannot exist without the people of

---

1. On the *communicatio idiomatum* in general, see Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 622 n. 268. The analogous relationship between Luther's Christology and his understanding of language has been well presented by Steiger, "The *communicatio idiomatum* as the Axle and Motor of Luther's Theology." A similar argument in connection with the sacramental dispute with Zwingli is presented by Thomas Wabel, *Sprache als Grenze*, 257–73

2. *Mirabilem mutacionem*. WA 39/1, 435, 11.

3. *Omnia vocabula fiunt nova, quando e suo foro in alienum transferuntur*. WA 39/1, 231, 1f.

4. The expression Luther used was this: *Ecclesia enim creatura est Evangelii*. WA 2,

God, and neither can the people of God exist without the Word of God.[5] To give it a sharp focus: the question of language in Luther is ultimately about the communication of the Word, and therefore also with the body of the communicative language hosting it. Therefore, to separate the Word of God from the vernacular, or to have a theology of the Word apart from human communication with all the botches of the vernacular is a form of linguistic Nestorianism. This would sustain that the Word attaches itself to human words without becoming the very words spoken in the quotidian argot.

The vernacular with all its limitations, ambiguities, and imprecisions is the host of the Word as Mary carries God in her womb. And the Word is present in the broken vernacular not in spite, but because of its defective character. This defective character in communication theory is dubbed as "noise," which impairs communication. Gregory Nazianzen's maxim that "what is not assumed is not redeemed," finds its linguistic equivalent here. If the Word is not in the "noise," communication can never take place; Babel would prevail.

The limits of one's language are not an impediment to the revelation of the Word just as the corruption of the flesh does not prevent it from receiving the infinite. On the contrary, the whole meaning of the Word becoming flesh lies in the very corruption of the flesh. That Christ has been made sin (2 Cor 5:21) is how Paul phrased it, and one finds in Luther the scandalous definition of Christ as *maximus peccator*. The attempt to make the flesh worthy before it can host the divine is comparable to the cleansing of language from its vernacular "transgressions" in order to make it worthy of the Word. It is no wonder that Luther would find in the contempt shown toward the base vernacular (including his own!) the same attitude he found in his own monastic experience of trying to become worthy of divine righteousness. It is therefore in language and its limits that we will find also Luther's appreciation of glory dwelling in the frailty of the flesh. Any such an attempt to find a prelapsarian language that is scientifically unequivocal (*wissenschaftlich*) and semantically univocal (logical positivism) borders on a form of Gnosticism.

It is in the inability to use one's language or the active suppression of the vernacular's validity as a vehicle of the Word that Luther would find a correlation to clericalism's purported ontological difference between those specially called (*vocati*) and the laity. The result is Luther's "engaged

---

430, 6f. In reference to the church as a continuing creation of the Word, see WA 3, 533, 1; 6, 130, 26; 30/II, 681, 34–38.

5. WA 50, 657–61. The absence of the Word describes the condition of hell: "Also muss yhe widderumb die helle seyn, da Gottis wort nicht ist." WA 10/III, 192, 20f.

literature,"[6] which is in itself a practice of fighting for language in the very midst of itself. As Luther wrote in a letter to Spalatin early in 1519 ". . . (so it follows) in the midst of common language we have been battling."[7] And the effects of this struggle reverberate in Luther's own text producing rippling effects of which he is quite aware. In comparing his own language to Melanchthon's, he praises the latter's style, logic, and clarity, which he felt exceeded his own. But then he concludes, "I have been born to take up an open fight with the mob and devils, therefore my books are much more tempestuous and belligerent [than Melanchthon's]."[8] It is in the midst of the freedom of language that Luther fights against the oppression of language, against its subjection, against the language of oppression.

It is in the axis between language and oppression that some of the most significant contributions of Luther for the Reformation movement can be located. And this finally encompasses all of his theology. In what follows I will suggest that for Luther language is the medium between the constitution of the self (*coram meipso*) and the relation to the Other both individually and collectively (*coram Deo* and *coram hominibus*). Language is what allows one to be placed outside of oneself (*extra se*), to use the image of Luther's eccentric anthropology.[9] For Luther, the "genius of languages" (*die Art der Sprachen*)[10] is authenticated in its very use by the "common person."[11]

The focus of Luther's theology was the ordinary folk, their use of language, especially, in how they expressed their relationship to God, to everyday lives and to themselves. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the tract literature, etc., an example of this commitment and a pointer to the Reformer's own anticlericalism, and is not to be seen as an idiosyncratic peculiarity. This linguistic gesture brought about the liberation from institutional mediations that controlled the access to the sacred, to life, and to the people. In Luther's case, such liberation happened through the relativizing of institutional orders encoded in linguistic systems and their régimes of truth controlled by the academia and its philosophy, the courtroom and its jurisprudence, politics and its legislations, the market and its economy, and by the church and its "spirituality."

---

6. Stolt, *Studien zu Luthers Freiheitstraktat*, 139.

7. ". . . *mixtim (utfit) vernacula lingua digladiabamur*." WA Br 1, 301, 16f.

8. WA 30/2, 68f.

9. Using Luther's terms, the other two foci of the Reformation movement could be subsumed accordingly under his understanding of the relations *coram mundo* and *coram hominibus*. See Ebeling, *Luther*, 198–200.

10. WA 18, 155, 4f.; LW 40:165.

11. WA 18, 154, 20f.; LW 40:164.

On Language and Oppression

In Luther's linguistic move we find a compelling illustration of the liberating aspects of the way the Reformation situated one's relationship to the world and to God, as well as its impact in distinct semantic realms entailing different rules. Such insight allowed Luther to recognize that for the Word to be heard anew the Word needed to move not only vertically on the relation between God and the world, but also horizontally through different semantic fields of everyday life, from philosophy to the market, from the pulpit to politics, from the kitchen to the court, from the carnival to the children's playground.[12] To transgress these linguistic realms and the limits of their distinct uniqueness and relative legitimacy—to themselves as well as to the Word—destabilized the grip of power held by the régimes of truth of the day and the disciplinary confines into which each of them was secluded.

Anders Nygren has argued that to understand the uniqueness of Luther one needs to recognize "different motif contexts" that operate in his discourse, which changes the meaning when a word moves from one context to another.[13] This "semantic shift"[14] is now well recognized when it pertains to the relationship between theology and philosophy. My argument here is that such semantic displacements do not pertain only to the relation between the spiritual and the earthly régimes, but apply as well to "lateral" semantic moves in which words from diverse everyday-life realms break in and create unexpected meaning. Such lateral semantic transfers free a given context of meaning to entertain newness. And in this liberation offered by the unexpected meaning that breaks in Luther also saw the space for the incursion of the Word of God. It is in the disruption caused by these semantic displacements, in the disquieting "noise" in the midst of communication, that space is opened for the formation of what Luther called a "new language" (*nova lingua*) shaped by the grammar of the Spirit.

The surprise of another word, different than those legislated by the dominant régimes of truth that norm the church, the State, the economy, and the household, breaking into these domains, is for Luther an eschatological event. By the limits, at the *eschata*, of one's régime there is the promise of novelty. Thus in the text of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," the so-called

12. The prefiguring of Wittgenstein's theory of language-games is well explored in Wabel, *Sprache als Grenze*.

13. Nygren, *Meaning and Method*, 368. Nygren built his case on Wittgenstein's "language games" metaphor, which he renders as "context for meaning." Ibid., 243–64. A pertinent analysis of the construction of meaning within a semantic domain is offered by Bielfeldt, "Luther on Language."

14. The expression is found in Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," 123.

Marseillaise of the Reformation, we find these words: "Let this world's tyrant rage; In battle we'll engage! His might is doomed to fail; God's judgment must prevail! One little word subdues him."[15] For Luther this battle with the world is also the strife of words (*pugna verborum*) for the sake of communication, for the sake of allowing the Word to be uttered. Where this does not happen, there "this world's tyrant rage" reigns. The tyrant who imposes a normative language sets the limits to the world, framing it and keeping the Word at bay in well-regulated and disciplined domains. How does this happen? The following digression with the help of some illustrations will etch the contours of the interface between language and oppression.

Dissimulation and Heteroglossy

In a study of popular culture in Brazil, José de Souza Martins pointed to a regular phenomenon that affects subaltern groups in society alienating them from official language. "Metaphor, occultation, dissimulation, silence, remain as the language that documents the persistence of the same violence that caused its origin . . . in the language of the oppressor."[16]

The encoded or canonical official language of hegemonic institutions is not only an instrument for the communication of power, but it is itself the exercise of power that works by depriving other voices of legitimacy. That is the end of communication, the end of conversation, and the transformation of language into a tool of power and control. The end of a conversation always implies the silencing of the other voice. Domination and oppression are, therefore, always constituted in and by the language of the one who dominates. In this sense the imposition of a linguistic system indicates the very demise of the actuality of language, the suppression of vernacular, the language of a group, the silencing and dissembling of the knowledge of the other. This is why under the dominance of a régime of truth that cannot be contested resistance is manifested in the reverse side of language, in occultation, in jest, in silence, in curse, in whispering, or in cries. These are the limiting fields in which language is at the same time suppressed but in its non-actuality, in silence and dissimulation, the emergent other voice, heteroglossy, is documented first by the very fact of its absence. But it is an exclamatory silence, an eloquent reticence!

In Shakespeare's dialogue between Prospero, the conqueror, and Caliban, the native, in *The Tempest*, a late text of 1616, he has Caliban say,

> You taught me language; and my profit on't

---

15. *Lutheran Book of Worship*, Hymn 269, trans. Catherine Winkworth.

16. Martins, *Caminhada no chão da noite*, 116–17.

Is I know how to curse; the red plague rid you,

For learning me your language![17]

The observation is pertinent. Between official languages—the language that imposes power and defines knowledge—and the dissimulated languages of those who survive and resist in dissemblance and silence, there is a cleft that the institutions ignore, suppress, or hide. Mary Douglas' often-quoted remark that "every society is fragile in its margin" is right on target in showing that the margin is not the fragile side of a society, but is where the fragility of any society manifests itself. This is why any instituted society needs to hide its margin to prevent it from becoming visible. And it becomes visible by establishing its own word, by naming its world. The other voice has to be suppressed because it implies the emergence of a new world.

In the prologue to the *Gramática de la lengua castellana*, written by the Spaniard Antonio de Nebrija—published in 1492 (the year of the Spanish conquest of the New World, when the boy Martin Luther was attending school in Mansfeld) and dedicated to the Spanish queen, Isabella—we read the following:

> Language has always accompanied domination . . . and since Your Majesty has imposed your yoke to a number of barbarian peoples and nations of different languages, in consequence of their defeat, they would be obliged to receive the laws that the winner imposes to the defeated, and then, the latter could gain the knowledge of them [the laws] through my grammar.[18]

This *Gramática*, considered the first grammar book in the modern sense of the term, was not by coincidence written on the occasion of the European confrontation with the newly discovered languages of the natives in the New World, languages never encountered before. Language, in its formal sense, has not always accompanied domination, but when it did—and in this Nebrija is right on target—the consequence of domination was the destruction of the very soul of a people, of the possibility of naming their world.

Throughout history the demand for a language has been intrinsically linked to the human search for self-determination and open communication. The silencing of language is a demonic phenomenon.[19] It deprives the subject from emerging and leaves her or him under the control of alien

17. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I, ii.

18. Quoted in Romano, *Os mecanismos da conquista colonial*, 79. Nebrija's *Gramática* is regarded as the first modern grammar produced in the Western world.

19. See my article "Idols and Demons: On Discerning the Spirits."

forces. António Vieira, Jesuit missionary in Brazil and one of the most acclaimed preachers of the seventeenth century, gave us a poignant description of the relationship between language and oppression.

> The incapability of expressing itself was the situation of Brazil and the main cause of its ills. This is the reason why nothing was more difficult for Christ than to heal a possessed mute. The worst crisis faced by Brazil during its illness was the silencing of its speech.[20]

Even when not mentioning the exegetical grounds for his remark (probably Mark 9:17–29), Vieira was right on the meaning of Jesus' exorcisms. In almost all cases, demonic possession in the New Testament is associated with the incapability of a person to utter an authentic word; either the demon speaks through the person, or the person stutters, or the possessed person is dumb. As much as language provides the limits of one's world (Wittgenstein)[21] or, conversely, provides a home for being (Heidegger),[22] its silencing, or suppression, is a cipher that allows for the possibility of recognizing the limits of one's world. The silencing of a speech documents and reveals (indeed, *sub contraria specie*) the powers of domination. But it is at this very limit that the experience of heteroglossy, by the insurrection of another language, the language of the other, that newness announces itself and attests that another world is indeed possible.

The Insurrection of the Vernacular

There is no great historical event that is not associated with a linguistic phenomenon. The Reformation movement owes its historical impact to the way in which it was able to incorporate the language of the people into its political, religious, and cultural program, expanding it, giving it a dynamic formation and a public character.

It has frequently been stressed that the Reformation's effectiveness cannot be dissociated from the Renaissance's renewal of the classic humanist values. Marked by a return to the classical values of the Western world, the Renaissance represented an elitist move toward the rebirth of classicism within a medieval and feudal world entangled by institutional constraints administered by the church and the empire, and by the emergent powerful financial institutions. There is hardly anything popular about all this. But

20. Quoted in Westhelle, "Apresentação," 119–20.

21. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 148.

22. Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, 276: "It is only language that affords the very possibility of standing in the openness of the existent. Only where there is language, is there world."

in an ironic way the Renaissance also contributed to the insurgence of the "common folk"[23] onto the stage. This coming onto the stage was hastened by the Reformation movement that also helped to shape this movement of common folk providing for a yet richer and more variegated choreography.

As Mikhail Bakhtin demonstrated well in his study of Rabelais,[24] the Middle Ages at the dawn of the Renaissance was divided by the split between popular national languages and medieval Latin—in his terms, between "popular" and "official" language. Medieval Latin attempted to adjust as much as it could to the regional linguistic variations, resulting in a feeble cosmetic attempt at "official contextualization" (certainly a contradiction in terms). The Renaissance's renewal brought back a classic, Ciceronian Latin that had the merit of exposing the syncretistic efforts of corrupt Medieval Latin by manifesting its very limits and its deformed face; it had failed to give voice to the people, to allow for heteroglossy, for different voices to enter the conversation. In the words of Bakhtin, "the very desire that the Renaissance had of re-establishing Latin in its antique and classic purity turned it into a dead language." At the same time, it also unmasked the ideological trick of Latin alchemists eager to transform it into a workable, everyday language. Bakhtin continues, "The Latin of Cicero illuminated the true character of medieval Latin, its true face, that people saw practically for the first time: until then they had their language (Medieval Latin), without perceiving its deformed and limited face."[25]

The Renaissance opened and revealed the cleft between two cultures, the popular and the official, a cleft somehow disguised by Latin as *lingua franca*. The end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth were marked by this twofold phenomenon: the emergence of classic humanism alongside the dissemination of popular vernacular literature and folk legends. Renaissance humanism, observed Franz Lau, "was the discoverer not only of the antique languages, but also of the language of the people."[26] If the first was an appeal to the past and the recovery of classic human values for the construction of the present, the second was an invocation of the present and the affirmation of nationhood for the reconstruction of the past. In this way, as A. G. Dickens pointed out, they both acted as "midwifes of the Lutheran Reformation."[27]

---

23. For the role of popular imagery in the theology of the Reformation, see Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*.

24. Bakhtin, *A cultura popular na Idade Média e no Renascimento*.

25. Ibid., 411.

26. Lau, *Luther*, 90.

27. Dickens, *German Nation and Martin Luther*, 21–22.

The twofold process is never as simultaneous and interconnected as in the humanist emphasis on the biblical languages together with the re-emergence of popular myths and folk-legends. The recovery of particular myths to sustain the national identity was even read into the biblical text, as with the story of Tuisco ("*Teutsch*"), a legendary postdiluvian offspring of Noah, conceived to be the founding hero of Germany.[28] In another myth that linked the popular with the biblical past we have the story that before "tongues became diversified at the tower of Babel, the human race had spoken German."[29]

If every nation, as Octavio Paz often remarked, is based upon a myth, it was the reconstruction of the German mythology that gave voice and identity to the people by providing them with a language. "Through the myths," observes Paz, "each man and woman of the group felt part of the totality of a natural and supernatural time, for all the dead were also members of the tribe."[30]

Opposing Germany to France (where people and culture would presumably have an original identity) Nietzsche regarded the Reformation as the moment in which a primordial power inhabiting an abyss beneath cultural life came forth and surfaced. Identity became for a moment visible. Luther embodied this affirmation and was its emblematic figure. He was for Nietzsche the one "to whom we shall be indebted for the rebirth of the German myth."[31] And this was for Nietzsche the myth of the people and not of the empire.

In this context, the Reformation movement began to build its own program. Far from being unified, it was nonetheless able to give expression (even if for a short period before it became itself institutionalized) to the imagination of a people, long suppressed by the very limits imposed by the prevailing institutions that through language established the limits of the world (among these institutions the church). Concealed in an array of dialects, the dissimulated languages have their power and knowledge submersed in the strict limits of contexts of meaning closed to otherness.

A Kind of Little Discourse

The most revealing face of the emergence of the vernacular, along with myths and folk-legends that it brought to light, was the remarkable development of

---

28. Ibid., 23–24.

29. Ibid., 16.

30. Paz, *La otra voz*, 72.

31. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 136–37.

the publication of leaflets and pamphlets (*Flugschriften*). The publication of leaflets and pamphlets was known before the Reformation. It was the literature of the masses, breaking with the pattern of aristocratic book production, and was greatly facilitated by the printing press.[32] Yet the early years of the Reformation in particular were marked by an astonishing increase in the production of pamphlets indicating that a new birth was in labor and coming into life. Between 1518 and 1525 the number of pamphlets published in Germany increased six-fold.[33] Latin continued to be used as a language also for the larger public, but the radically new phenomenon that catapulted the literary production was the massive output of German texts.[34] These were the years of pamphleteering. However this new literature was not only *aimed* at the larger public; it facilitated the emergence of a new class of authors. Martin Arnold in a fascinating study has pointed to this new phenomenon, not to be found in the years before 1523: people belonging to the working class, including women, could be counted as authors in a business previously dominated mostly by the clergy.[35]

In this context Luther made a major contribution, being quite conscious of his own intentions even when his pamphleteering practice led him to be discredited and held with suspicion and contempt, as we can read in the opening paragraphs of the *Treatise on Good Works*:

> And although I know full well and hear every day that many people think little of me and say that I only write little pamphlets and sermons in German for the uneducated laity, I do not let that stop me. I believe that if I were of a mind to write big books of their kind, I could perhaps, with God's help, do it more readily than they could write my kind of little discourse.[36]

But for Luther pamphleteering does not mean simply the selection of the public to whom the text is addressed at the exclusion of others. Against Karlstadt he argued that knowledge should not be limited to the confinement of a dissimulated language of a group unable to articulate itself efficaciously against the hegemonic powers.[37] In his "Introduction" to the *German Mass* he laments what has happened to the Bohemian Waldensians who ended up "hiding their faith in their own language to such a degree

32. Dickens, *German Nation and Martin Luther*, 105 See also Arnold, *Handwerker als theologische Schriftsteller*, 43.

33. Arnold, *Handwerker*, 38–41; Dickens, *German Nation and Martin Luther*, 106.

34. Dickens, *German Nation and Martin Luther*, 46.

35. Arnold, *Handwerker*, 43–44, 327.

36. WA 6, 203, 5–14; LW 44:22.

37. Dickens, *German Nation and Martin Luther*, 33.

of not being able any longer to speak to anyone in a clear way."[38] Certainly the mechanism of dissimulation was operative among the Waldensians after centuries of atrocious persecution. Luther might have missed that, but he certainly believed that with the Reformation the time to speak out publicly had arrived, and the time to dissimulate turned into an opportune moment and a venue for people to speak their word. In his defense of public education, the emphasis on the instruction of biblical languages was not intended as moving away from Latin (which he did regard a great poetic language), but as an enhancement of knowledge for the benefit of the youth among whom he (following in this Erasmus) included women, who were traditionally marginalized from formal education (with the exception of those who through religious orders could pursue intellectual endeavors).[39]

Language as Communication

The importance of Luther for the normative nature of the German language is widely recognized and celebrated. However, even for those who assess Luther's view of language as an external expression of an existential language-event (as in Gerhard Ebeling) or for those who follow a cultural-linguistic interpretation (as in George Lindbeck), little attention has been given to the importance of language as the articulation of popular aspirations and desires in the semantically dynamic historical context of late-medieval Europe. These two assessments of Luther's use of language, exemplified by Ebeling and Lindbeck, have a history in linguistic theory that reaches back a few centuries but finds its origin in the late-medieval opposition between realism and nominalism. While medieval realism regarded language as the formal principle that constituted reality as such, nominalism approached it as a functional expression of the world in socio-cultural established conventions. In classic modern linguistic theory, we find it for example in the distinction that Wilhelm von Humboldt suggested between seeing language as either *ergon* (a work) or as *energeia* (an activity). Humboldt favored a view that language is "the continual intellectual effort to make the articulated sound capable of expressing thought."[40] Thus, for him, *energeia* (and not *ergon*) was the true expression of the nature and craft of language. Language

---

38. WA 19, 74, 13–16; LW 53:63.

39. Wiberg Pedersen, "Can God Speak the Vernacular?," notes the remarkable use of the vernacular as a theological language in the writing of religious women three centuries before the Reformation, suggesting it as a gesture that prefigures the Reformation itself.

40. Quoted in Morse, *New World Soundings*, 12.

in this case is the outer hardened crust of an inner vitality. The locus of truth that ought to be sought is the inner experience out of which the external expression ensues.

This existentialist and expressivist interpretation of language is a position that in the contemporary research on theological language has been associated with the name of Gerhard Ebeling and has had a significant impact on all those who followed his lead in Luther research. For Ebeling, "the authority to use the language of faith is a matter of experience. Language arises only from experience."[41] Conversely what can be regarded as meaningful at the semantic level must be traced back and reconstituted as a subjective experience. Experience is what alone authenticates language.

The opposite view was inspired in modern times by the structural approach to language as presented in Ferdinand Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, analogous to Humboldt's *ergon* and *energeia*. For Saussure *langue* represented a structurally stable and formative set of rules that was rather the cause and not the effect of experience, while *parole* was regarded as particular, even idiosyncratic, deviations from the norm. Here the external has priority over the internal. George Lindbeck, working with the distinction between a linguistic-cultural model (language as *ergon*) and an experiential-expressive model (language as *energeia*) says "that the former reverses the relation of the inner and the outer. Instead of deriving external features of religious language from inner experience, it is inner experiences which are viewed as derivative."[42] Grammar conditions and controls semantics; meaning presupposes assent to abiding rules.[43]

Are we bound to these two options for our reading of Luther's own view of language? *Tertium non datur* in this binary alternatives? In relation to the contextual situation of Luther's time and the problems issuing from the confrontation between official languages and their régimes of truth, on the one hand, and the popular insurgence of heteroglossic "transgression," on the other, either of the options fails to help. The experiential approach is

---

41. Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory*, 206. See also his distinction between "pontentiality" and "act": "even the most perfect distillation of a language into vocabulary and grammar must ultimately concede victory . . . to the living and concrete use of language" (ibid., 90).

42. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 34.

43. Ibid., 17–18. This dual option certainly has a significant genealogy of analogical binaries in Christian theology, which can be traced back to Paul's distinction between "letter" and "spirit," the medieval opposition between "love" (as *exemplum*) and "work" (as *sacramentum*), the Protestant debate between the orthodox defense of the *fides quae* and the Pietist case for the *fides qua*, and other distinctions more vaguely related. What characterizes the present debate is that it is applied to religious language and doctrine as such.

incapable of accounting for the power-relation in the confrontation among languages, especially between popular and official usages. It will have to regard some of the boorish expressions in Luther's parlance as idiosyncratic oddities. The cultural structural approach, in its turn, detects well the process of restoration of doctrine as a foundational grammar buried in cultural misrepresentations, official or popular, but is unable to recognize the dynamic nature of language, and the displacements of meaning it produces by moving through different semantic fields.

I would like to suggest an alternative approach, following an insight of Mikhail Bakhtin in his reactions against both the subjectivist experiential position that views language as the objective expression of a subjective drive or experience (*energeia*), and the cultural-linguistic analysis that focuses on the codified norms of linguistic systems (*ergon*). Criticizing the opposition between spontaneous versus formal language that is presupposed in both schools respectively, Bakhtin suggested that what is at stake is communication, not language as such. And in communication one needs to focus on the emergence of utterances under the contextual conditions within which they appear. An utterance "will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot, in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve."[44]

What Bakhtin is looking for in language is neither its systemic, grammatical character nor the experiential well out of which it springs, but precisely the emergence of voices that are other than the system (yet they do appear at the surface of language). These voices, these appearances, disturb and institute meaning *in loco*. However, this meaning is created because of the shock issuing from the clash among different semantic fields and not as a new spontaneous creation. This is what his understanding of heteroglossy amounts to: "Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualization as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress."[45] Bakhtin's concern is with the insurrection of language. Language is not the formal principle of reality or an outer manifestation of inner experience, it neither structures reality nor is it a husk of its inner being. Language is always a function of communication, it is the attempt to keep in tension the relation between the heteronomy of linguistic rules and norms that want to institute reality (Bakhtin's "centripetal forces"), and the autonomous drive toward "reinventing" it (Bakhtin's "centrifugal forces"). Communication emerges neither

44. Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 428.
45. Ibid.

when the linguistic forms break down nor when we just pour our hearts out. If language is about communication, then language fulfills its purpose when there is a transgression of a restricted semantic domain, a "collision of senses."[46] In the words of Bakhtin,

> Thus at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth . . .[47]

In other words, communication happens in and through language not because people are united under an Esperanto, or share the same experiences; it happens unexpectedly at the moment when one listens to another's language and wonders, "How is it that we understand it?" (Acts 2:7–8). Communication is always a linguistic surprise precisely because it happens in the midst of "noise." What makes sense is first something unheard-of; it sensitizes.

As an event of communication,

> language . . . lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's . . . It exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own.[48]

Apart from the reference to the people's mouth, which is also Luther's metaphor for language, it is important to realize that communication implies a transgression of confined semantic domains, a moving of utterances from one realm to another. This lies at the very core of Luther's above-mentioned comment: "All words are made new when they are transferred from their own to another [semantic] context."[49] Different from "poetry," from the creation of language (which is still pre-communicative[50]), linguistic

46. Bielfeldt, "Luther, Metaphor, and Theological Language," 127.

47 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 291.

48. Ibid., 293–94.

49. *Omnia vocabula fiunt nova, quando e suo foro in alienum transferuntur*. WA 39/I, 231, 1–3, A I]. The context of the discussion is the meaning of "works" when used *coram deo* or *coram mundo*.

50. This is why poetry, strictly speaking, cannot be translated. It is pre-communicative but not anti-communicative. It is to communication what bricks are to a building. See Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 296–98.

communication happens not in creation of language but in this transgressive movement across semantic domains.[51]

Luther Laughing at the Devil

Nietzsche defined the Reformation movement as the stupendous moment of the stirring of primordial powers underneath a cultural shell.[52] Although this was not the work of Luther alone, he became its emblematic figure. This emblematic character of Luther—who, however, claimed he did not want to be a master[53]—has all to do with this mixture of humanist sophistication, erudition and piety blended together with grotesque profanity in style. In a certain way, he represented and unified the very contradictions of the cultural context of the time. And with this he was able to bridge the cleft that separated the heart of the people from the sterile official culture, creating what Bakhtin called the locus of collision. In the words of Agnes Heller:

> Luther essentially differed from all previous renewers of religion, not because he was oriented toward the world (many others had been as well), but because the notion of election had no part in his ideology and practice . . . He was a man un-shamed of his particularity, unlike St Augustine; on the contrary, he accepted it.[54]

Luther could be content in calling the German people fools or himself a barbarian or a sack of worms or a prideful idiot, and so forth. Some of these

51. The difficulty of maintaining the dialectical relationship and a steady focus on the locus of collision (Bakhtin) between linguistic system and language-event will reveal also the somewhat conservative trends in Luther's understanding of institutions. While the Reformer recognized the relative character of institutions, he was not yet able to regard them as transient. This ambiguity in relation to institutions is the same that will show itself in the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures, where the oscillation between inerrancy and hermeneutics remains unresolved. See Ruokanen, *Doctrina divinitus inspirata*. For an appraisal of Luther's disregard for institutions, see Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 162–64. But the ambiguity of Luther's early "modern" attitude yet still caught in a medieval world is classically presented by Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*. See also chapter 19 below.

52. Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 136.

53. WA 8, 685, 14; LW 45:71.

54. Heller, *Renaissance Man*, 203. Heller's comments about election and vocation not playing a role in Luther seem to be off the mark, considering the role that both had in Luther's theology. What I read Heller saying is that by leveling all callings and no longer accepting a special vocation that separated clergy from laity he was in fact including himself among those who did not have any calling that essentially distinguished him from anyone else.

expressions could be taken as typical of medieval penitential utterances and practices if it were not for the obvious ironic sense embedded in them. The point is not so much humility (false or not) as it is a carnival-like attitude toward everything.[55] He showed the fearlessness of a fool, but in everyday life and not in the midst of a feast when jest and satire were tolerated and even expected. With his language, Luther brought the carnival to academia, to the pulpit, to the square, breaking down the disciplined frontiers in which these utterances were allowed. He could as much laugh at Melanchthon's dedication to astrology (still a respected discipline, not clearly distinguished from astronomy), saying that he would profit more sitting by a keg of beer,[56] as he could show his rage against his enemies calling them apostles of the devil or simple asses. In fact he regarded himself to be even more foolish in believing he could teach them anything. Such remarks can be multiplied.[57]

The point, however, is not to show idiosyncrasies in Luther's personality, but to indicate that his burlesque attitude is to be taken as a central characteristic of his own theological practice and not occasional odd deviations. A world divided between the official pomp of the instituted language of the church and the grotesque humor of the lower strata of society that provided the motifs for the carnivals was combined by Luther's jests and theological subtleties. Boorish and burlesque motifs invaded the controlled realm of theological discourse. If we take even the most serious and somber of Luther's texts (mostly those in Latin) although the form does not reveal his attitudes of mockery and jest, the motifs do. The classical remarks in Luther's theology of creation about the mask or wrapping (*larva* or *involucrum*) of God[58] represent theologically a rupture with the representational attitude that prevailed in theology. The metaphor of the mask is not simply a new way of speaking about God. It broke with the medieval realism going simultaneously beyond the parsimonious and skeptical stance of the nominalists. It touched the people's imagery in which the mask had a very concrete and popular significance, and it was not the *prosopon* of the Greek theater. To elucidate the images evoked by the mask trope in a context not distant from Luther's own, Bakhtin offers the following commentary:

> The motif of the mask . . . is full of meaning within popular culture. Masks translate the gayness of alteration and reincarnation, the happy relativity, the happy negation of identity and

55. On Luther's scatological language, see Oberman, *Luther*, 106–10.

56. WA TR I, 7, 9f. (nr. 17).

57. Plenty of such illustrations are provided by Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil*.

58. See WA 40/I, 173–74; LW 26:95–96.

> singleness of meaning, the negation of the stupid coincidence
> with oneself; the mask is the expression of transference, of the
> metamorphoses, of the violation of the natural frontiers . . . the
> mask incarnated the principle of the life-game; it is based on a
> peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the
> most ancient rites and performances. The complex symbolism
> of the mask is copious.[59]

"In every line that Luther wrote," commented Karl Holl, "it is apparent what unusual compulsion toward imagery possessed him."[60] And certainly here the verb "possess" has an allusive meaning.

Luther's possession by imagery had the very character of possession, of being occupied by the imagery of popular culture, to the point of breaking linguistically with the dichotomous views of society, between the official and the popular. The burlesque in Luther's theology is what allowed the people's imagery to break into and out of the official language of ecclesial and political institutions.

There is a technique of reversals applied ingeniously by Luther that links him to the popular burlesque of the carnivals, not however in the feast of fools, where it would be routine, but rather in the interdicted space of the pulpit, of academia, and of publications. Expressions like "God cannot be God without being first the devil," present a reversal that corresponds to this other reversal: "the devil will not be the devil before being God."[61] Such reversals are typical of the transvaluation of popular culture in the realm of the festivals, in breaking with established dominant conceptions: the fool is king, the king is fool.[62] The enraged monk said to have thrown a pot of ink at the devil would later in a libel against the Duke of Braunschweig say that he is "laughing at the devils."[63]

The burlesque character of Luther's language has amused a number of commentators, and he is here and there quoted on behalf of courageous defiance. But would this not be a way of shifting the focus away from the deeper core of his burlesque, turning it into a mere idiosyncratic jest? Or else, is Luther not all too frequently submitted to a Romantic transformation of the burlesque into satire, with its negative and lugubrious humor

---

59. Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular*, 35. On the motif of the mask, see chapter 8 below.

60. Holl, *Cultural Significance of the Reformation*, 147.

61. WA 31/I, 250, 24–25; LW 14:32.

62. For examples of these reversals in popular culture, see Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, 59–94

63. WA 51, 469, 23; LW 41:185.

surrendering the open laughter of the text?[64] In Luther, the ambivalence of the polarities in his humorous reversals is not a reified antithesis. This brings him rather close to the grotesque with its regenerating comic attitude toward the subject matter. Bakhtin defines the grotesque as "the style in which the corporeal and material principle is perceived as universal and popular, opposed to all separation of the corporeal and material roots of the world from . . . all that has an ideal and abstract character, from all that has pretension of meaning detached and independent from earth and the body."[65]

And such is the character of Luther's remarks when he talks about (scholastic) reason, calling it a harlot, or when he says that the church is the great whore (*magna peccatrix*). To take the latter as an analytic remark on the nature of the church, as it is often done with the former on the matter of reason, makes it evident how the point is missed completely.

In the same spirit he ridicules those who separate heaven and earth as distinct sites.[66] The burlesque and even the grotesque in Luther brings forth his sensitivity toward the mentality of the people that can, in life and language, live with the *complexio oppositorum*. This acceptance of paradoxes can turn the noble into the most scorned and make of manure a pleasant sight. In the following quotation from the attack on the Duke Henry of Braunschweig/Wolfenbüttel, entitled "Against Hanswurst," Luther uses a German carnival figure (*Hanswurst*) who in the festivals carries a long leather-made sausage around his neck, wearing a colorful clown-like costume in typical farcical vulgar burlesque. And there he writes: "You should not write a book before you have heard an old sow fart; and you should then open your jaws with awe saying, 'Thank you, lovely nightingale, that is just the text for me!'"[67]

This is what I mean by the popular grotesque in Luther's language and style. While much has been said about the importance of Luther for the German language, his theological burlesque has been regarded more as an attitude of jest or contempt than as a carnival-like subversion of institutionalized values, in order to open space for the dissimulated language of the people to emerge and even to authorize it. And this coheres with his theological program. The quote from Klopstock is frequently cited: "No one who knows what a language is can come face to face with Luther without venerating him."[68] But particularly the Romantic appraisal of Luther's lan-

64. On the distinction between the burlesque character of the medieval popular language and its satirical reappropriation in modern Romanticism, see Bakhtin, *Cultura Popular*, 35.

65. Ibid., 17.

66. LW 37:280–81; cf. WA 49, 224, 30f.: *Quando dico Celum celi domini, non intelligo celum situ et loco distincto terra, sed ich meine das regiment mit.*

67. WA 51, 561, 25–28; LW 41:250.

68. Ebeling, *Introduction to a Theological Theory,* 28. For the classical Romantic

guage has been notorious in failing to recognize his appeal to the popular grotesque as constitutive not only of style and form but of the very theological practice he was engaged in.

When Luther argued that "Christian theology does not start at the top, in the highest altitudes, . . . but there at the bottom, in the deepest profundity,"[69] he refers to the very core of the language he uses, to the utterly vulgar and pamphleteering character of his writings. In a style marked by the popular boor, Luther intentionally wanted his pamphlets to provide for a transgressive language through which the people could articulate their feelings and longings. It can only be understood in this locus of collision (Bakhtin) in which communication takes place.

Yet in all of this he was not only a practitioner of communication breaking through semantic domains to elicit new meanings. He was also a poet engaged in unearthing what Bakhtin called pre-communicative utterances to which his hymns attest. Poetry, said Heidegger, is what "first makes language possible."[70] And this concern comes explicitly to the fore when Luther laments not having read more poetry: "How I regret now that I did not read more poets and historians, and that no one taught me them! Instead, I was obliged to read at great cost, toil, and detriment to myself, that devil's dung, the philosophers and the sophists, from which I have all to purge myself."[71]

Looking People in the Mouth

The importance of Luther's linguistic subversion is correctly associated with his translation of the Bible. Luther was not the first to translate the Bible into German, but he was certainly the first one to make vernacular German into the normative principle for the whole translation of the Scriptures. "I don't know of any other ground," he said in reference to the validity of norms for uttering theological statements, "than the one offered by the genius of languages as God has created them."[72]

---

appraisals of Luther in the literature, see Bornkamm, *Luther im Spiegel der deutschen Geistesgeschichte*.

69. WA 40/I, 79, 25–26; LW 26:30.

70. Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, 283.

71. WA 15, 46, 18–21; LW 45:370. Luther's poetics is a theme of itself that cannot be dealt with here. It suffices to mention that poetry is to communication what metaphors are to language insofar as it discloses new semantic associations. See Brecht, *Luther als Schriftsteller*.

72. WA 18, 155, 4–5; LW 40:165.

What is important in the translation of the Bible was not the effort of making the message of the Scriptures understandable, but rather of articulating the people's imagery in biblical language. This is exemplarily expressed then in his essay "On Translation."[73] There he reacts against the attack he received for his German rendering of Romans 3:28 with the expression "only by faith." In the original Greek, the adverb "only" is not present. In beautiful examples drawn from vernacular expressions he justifies his introduction of the adverb as necessary for the translation to be in good German for people to grasp the intended meaning. Accusing the Papists of knowing German less than an ass, he summons all who want to judge his Bible translation to learn the language people speak and how they speak in everyday life:

> We must not, like these asses, ask the Latin letters how we are
> to speak German; but we must ask the mother in the home, the
> children in the street, the common man in the market place
> about this, and look them in the mouth to see how to speak, and
> afterwards do our translation.[74]

Hegel recognized the magnitude of this effort well when he said: "for the Christians in Germany to have the book of their faith translated into their mother tongue is the greatest revolution that could happen. Only when uttered in the mother tongue is something my property."[75] Even if Luther did not know the Italian play of words—*traduttore/tradittore*—that makes a translator a traitor, he certainly knew the Greek verb *paradidōmi* which can mean both handing over in an act of treason or passing on the tradition (cf. Mark 14:10 and 1 Corinthians 11:23 where the same verb is used for Judas' treason and Paul's conveyance of the words that Jesus spoke at the last supper). And it goes unavoidably in both ways: the translator

---

73. WA 30/II, 632–646; LW 35:181–202.

74. WA 30/Il , 638; LW 35:190. In defense of the use of the neutral in referring to the bread as the body of Christ, Luther was not concerned to show the literal accuracy of the neutral Greek but pointed to the fact that this was the way a German would speak: "Nu wyr wollen ursach sagen, Warumb Christus 'Tuto' odder 'Das' und nicht 'Der' vom brot saget. Ynn Deutscher zungen gibts die art der sprache, das, wenn wyr auff eyn ding deutten, das fur uns ist, so nennen und deutten wyrs eyn Das, es sey sonst an yhm selbst eyn Der odder Die, alls wenn ich spreche: Das ist der man, davon ich rede, Das ist die Jungfraw, die ich meyne. . . . Hier beruffe ich mich auff alle Deutschen, ob ich auch deutsch rede. Es ist ye die rechte mutter spräche, und so redet der gemeyne man ynn Deutschen landen." WA 18, 154, 12–21; LW 40:164.

75. Hegel, *Werke*, 20:16–17; "Erst in der Muttersprache ausgesprochen is etwas mein Eigentum."

becomes a traitor and the traitor becomes a translator. Luther claimed the latter in his defense of translating Romans 3:28.

Language is the "mirror of the heart," said Luther quoting a popular expression.[76] But it is more and less than that. It is more because it opens a possibility for an encounter with otherness in the transference of semantic realms, as we have seen. However, it is also less, because it is also the heart's prison, the limit of one's world. There is no justification through language alone. Language only spans the space that the heart inhabits and in which it gains a profile and a mask that joyfully reveals and answers its secrets and longings and simultaneously conceals and hides mystery. Language is the earthly stuff with which the ecclesial régime conveys and conceals the presence of the Word in a similar way as equity (*Billigkeit*) does for the economy, and reason does for the political régime. These three—reason in *politia*, equity in *oeconomia*, and language in *ecclesia*—are the vortexes in and through which God's justification can be both revealed and hidden in the midst of the stations of life we journey through. As such they form the matrix in which Christ's *parousia*, the eschatological moment, announces itself.

Luther's criticism of medieval realism—language as the formal principle of reality—brought him closer to nominalism—language as the arbitrary signifying accident of reality itself. However, he would not stay attached to nominalism either. He went beyond, envisioning language and particularly the vernacular as the score for the inscription of the melody of the Spirit. Luther said it well: "The Holy Spirit has its own grammar; people who grammatically speak falsely, may, regarding the sense of it, speak the truth."[77] That means: new meanings and realities are not only given shape, but also brought about through language in its heteroglot dynamic movement.

Such a stance in Luther's theology has been called a mixture of philosophical nominalism and theological realism.[78] Through it, Luther contributed to the liberation of the desires and aspirations of the people hidden by the instituted linguistic régimes and kept away from the public sphere. By looking people in the mouth, Luther brought the vernacular, the language of the people, out of the confinement of privacy into the public and allowed its grotesque character to invade the official realm. The carnival was brought to the pulpit and to academia. All of this was entirely consistent with his theological program of letting God be God. Although Luther's search for language is inextricably linked to his theology, his main accomplishment was to free language from the confines of its disciplined domains. And in

76. WA 11, 408–416; LW 29:305–14.

77. WA 39/II, 104.

78. Työrinoja, "Nova vocabula et nova lingua."

this lateral move of displacing words among and across its semantic (and heteroglot) domains, new meanings were produced. What was kept silent and hidden could then find an utterance; words conveyed the Word, communication was won in and through the "noise."

In its indebtedness to the nominalist's supra-structural view of language, the existential-expressivist school of contemporary Luther-reading misses the point in its attempt to trace the Reformation's insight to some grounding experience; it misses that which cannot be reduced to inner experience, but arrives coming from other semantic domains as an advent. Much of the Reformers' insights came not from subjective experiences surfacing at the level of language, but from transgressing semantic fields and bringing words along. This linguistic displacement evinces unexpected new meanings (as the example of the mask illustrates). And, in their indebtedness to medieval realism's formation of reality out of the rules and grammar of language, the cultural linguists' reading of Luther miss the fact that language and communication are heteroglot through and through, as Bakhtin insisted. For Luther, the grammar of faith is always a transgression of its own domains. Whatever is secured in language, as in the writing of a book, is simultaneously also concealed by it: "That one must write books is already a great transgression and an infirmity of the spirit."[79]

The consequence of these remarks for the study of Luther seems to be self-evident. The point is not primarily to know how the dogmatic content of Luther's theology can restore a doctrinal nucleus or to find in it a new expression of faith experience. It is how the principle by which Luther articulated his theological thought offered space for the people to articulate the language concerning their relationship to themselves, to the world, and to God, beyond the confines of the régimes that controlled and regulated the proper use of language, creatively transgressing and crossing them.

While many regret the fact that Luther's theology was not more systematic, I am suggesting that the "unsystematic" nature of his writings cannot be dissociated from his theological program of "looking people in the mouth" and giving back to them, like one who lifts a mirror, authentic words, stories that raise them out of silence and dissimulation, constantly transgressing disciplinary domains. In the Reformer there is "systematic" indisposition against systems. That is what prompted him to speak. As Luther said in the presentation of his treatise *To the Christian Nobility*, "the time of silencing is over, the time to speak has come."[80]

---

79. WA 10/I, 627, 1f.
80. WA 6, 404, 11–12; LW 44:123.