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On Witnessing

Paolo Valesio

I

In any international symposium, the interplay of discourses is complex (semiotic crisscrossings, an atmosphere of discordia concors, and so forth), but the roles of the participants are generally simplified by the relief in which each one of them is cast as the representative of a particular national culture. Accordingly, none of the other participants in this symposium had to question his or her representativeness, whether of Italian (Bologna) or American (Yale) culture. Good or bad, no such certainty is available to the present writer.

I speak from the perspective of the Italian American, the least glamorous and least vocal of all the clamoring minorities in contemporary America, a minority structurally complex and not yet fully visible. In the inner articulation of that minority, still largely to be studied, what I have to say here comes from its expatriate wing—one component among several, but a fully legitimate one, of the Italian American community.¹ My speaking position is that of a transatlantic witness, not in the sense of one speaking from another Atlantic shore (a comfortably safe retreat, and witnessing positions are never such), but in the sense of one dwelling in a spiritual space between two shores. These tentative thoughts, though developed in monologue, prepare a dialogic script, which might be titled “The Professor of Confusion Meets The Professor of Silence.”²

The subject of my remarks is primarily the American university, despite my deep links with the world of the Italian university. In the academic systematization of the human sciences in the United States, ideological constraints tend to dominate discussion and define a new kind of orthodoxy, creating a situation banalized but somewhat complacently mischaracterized as “political correctness.” For the sake of free expression in the contemporary American university, such ideo-

¹. The nonhyphenated spelling better expresses the nature of the concept.
². I owe the category “Professor of Confusion” to my colleague Robert Viscusi, who is developing it in an ironic and parodic way (he himself is a very lucid intellectual). I have been working on the subject of silence for several years now. See, for example, my “A Remark on Silence and Listening,” Oral Tradition 2, no.1 (1987): 286-300.
logization must be resisted, but without diatribes and resentment; otherwise, one would uselessly mime just that ideological style which threatens the full deployment of discourse.

This, then, is a groping and stammering attempt to speak within the university, and what precedes has already indicated why any attempt to speak within the university today cannot be otherwise.

II

The underlying problem is as ancient as the institution of the university. An old question has acquired renewed urgency in the new orthodoxy: How does one really speak (that is, express oneself freely and deeply) and really think within the university? The best essentialist or—allow me this weighty adjective—ontic (as opposed to historical) conception of the university is one that proceeds by a via negativa. The university’s basic function is controlling freedom of expression, at best by channeling it toward putatively useful goals and at worst by censoring it.

Excavating the etymology of the term professor is no optional ornamentation or mannerism—it means unearthing an essential semantic limitation, a limitation worthy of pause. Indeed, the word’s etymological power is precisely what animates one of the earlier spiritual definitions of Western modernity, that within the opening paragraph of the anonymous collection traditionally called The Little Flowers of Saint Francis, a classic in the genre of Western narrative spirituality—“as the principled foundation of his Order, Saint Francis chose for himself twelve companions who professed the deepest poverty.”

3. I will not even make the gesture of addressing the boundless bibliography on the history and concept of the university, but rather limit myself to mentioning a recent contribution—Jaroslav Pelikan, The Idea of the University: A Reexamination (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Pelikan’s book is relevant here because it explores the problematic relationship between the secular and the religious ideologies of academic study, with reference to John Henry Newman’s work on the idea of the university. I use the term “university” in a non-universalistic sense, simply as a metonymy for the academic study of the human sciences in their connection with the legal and social sciences; the exact sciences are remarkably different, and I have no competence to address them.

4. “Santo Francesco elesse al principio del fondamento dell’Ordine suo dodici compagni professori dell’altissima povertà.” Thus reads the text in Luigina Morini, ed., I Fioretti di San Francesco (Milano: Rizzoli, 1979), 59, as well as in Francesco d’Assisi, Gli scritti e la leggenda, ed. Giorgio Petrocchi (Milano: Rusconi, 1983), 775. But the textual tradition of Little Flowers is very complicated, and we still lack a critical edition. Thus, for instance, in the institutional Franciscan edition, the text is different—“santo Francesco elesse dal principio del fondamento dell’Ordine suo dodici compagni possessori dell’altissima povertà.” See Biblioteca Francescana di Milano, ed., Fonti Francescane (Padova: Messaggero di S. Antonio Editrice, 1980), 1453 (variant readings italicized). “Possessori” is a weak reading, and fortunately, “professori” is recorded in a footnote to the Fonti Francescane edition. In a modern English edition, the sentence is translated as “St. Francis, when he began to found the Order, had twelve chosen companions who were followers of the most complete poverty.” Raphael Brown, ed., The Little Flowers of St. Francis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 41. “Followers” is weaker, not only with respect to “professori” (which implies a leading rather than a following), but also with regard to the variant “possessori.” “Began to found the Order” renders only the chronological
an early modernity, to be sure (written as it was in the beginning of the thirteenth century), but a modernity nonetheless. The sentence is emblematic of the delicacy and multiplicity of problems this text poses for the translator. But what matters is the strong reminder that a professor is somebody who professes essential values. This should engender in us an attitude of prudence, indeed of modest reticence, in our interpretation of the word. It is why I prefer to envision a subdued professoriat (closer to the stilus humilis of comedy than to the stilus sublimis of tragedy), Professors of Confusion and Professors of Silence.

The real question, however, is not so much what a university person professes (a direct response to the epic level of the quoted narrative might turn out to be too emphatic) but how this person professes. The most productive stance for the professor (the only one, at least, in which I feel at ease) is one of self-emptying. Here again, my stammering and stuttering has hit upon an exalted model to which I do not propose to respond directly. Rather, the kind of self-emptying that I have in mind is one that is informal, mild, and, so to speak, good-humored.

According to this modest proposal, the professor recedes into the background (makes himself or herself scarce, to use an idiom far from sublime) so that the student may come into full presence. This self-emptying requires hard work and is not a passive or brutal absence of the teacher. The teacher continues to work, to bring up ideas, images, and feelings, more precisely, to underline values that transcend both herself and the student. Essentially, what I am describing is an attitude of witnessing. By freeing the students, it makes possible real originality, which is a flowering of the human person, not a trick or technicality.

III

To make this model more concrete, I will remark on one specific activity within the humanistic enterprise, a shared activity around poetry. Once again, a stuttering, stammering description, but I am
confined to this terminology ("a shared activity around poetry") because what I have in mind is something broader and yet more discreetly articulated than the teaching of creative writing, although such teaching is certainly an integral component of what I am describing.

If the poetic enterprise is at all a secular one, poetry is the closest secular equivalent of the sacred in the sense that it seems impossible not to repeat for poetry what has been said of the sacred—that it is the question of the absolute and the absolute of the question.

When clear aesthetic or cultural standards are no longer available (as is true today both in Italy and in the United States), on what basis can a writer of verse "project" herself (both in the sense of Italian progettare, "to plan, to program," and Italian proiettare, "to transport in the imagination, to externalize") as a poet? On what basis can she hope to be called a poet someday? Only by the absoluteness of her abandonment. Only by practicing poetry more as an abandonment to the absolute than as a research of the absolute can one aspire to the name of "poet."6 Poetry is a mission to which everything else must be subordinated. Idealistic? Maybe. Metaphysical? Perhaps. These are not for me terms of opprobrium. But neither are they relevant to an abandonment to the absolute in the continuity and concreteness of everyday experience. And, to forestall superficial applications of the jargon of cultural criticism, let me note that there is nothing elitist about this project. On the contrary, to abandon oneself to the absolute is to find oneself a cipher, always inadequate with respect to poetry.

One might object that defining poetry in terms of the absolute is to exclude it from academic discourse, which is essentially technical, utilitarian, and rationalistic. But accepting this objection means acquiescing in the very controlling/censoring power that is so problematic in the academy.

I am not thinking of rebellion or aggressive challenge or of a "sit in" notion of poetic activity. I am only advocating (and, within the limits of my possibilities, practicing) a bringing-into-presence of the poetic absolute within the necessarily relativistic context of the university. Such is the foundation for a shared activity around poetry. And I use the term "activity" because I want to designate not only what the university calls "study" (although this is the essential component), but also desultory, tangential, and occasional reading, meditation, digression, and conversation. Shared activity is the proper background for the teaching of creative writing, even when what is taught is prose

6. I am thinking of Balzac's La recherche de l'absolu, for example, where the "recherche" turns out to be a dogged, willful, and ultimately pathetic search.
rather than poetry. Without this principled context, the teaching of
creative writing becomes mechanical and external.

The requisite humility with respect to the general cause of poetry
must not be confused with the humiliation of an effacement. The epist-
emological lesson of critica militante, i.e., contemporaneous, day-in-
and-day-out, critical activity (it is for me slightly worrisome that En-
lish does not possess a real equivalent of this crucial Italian idiom) is
that poetry cannot really be conceived productively outside of the
human figure of the poet, with all its limitations, defects, weaknesses,
inconsistencies, and idiosyncrasies. If the ontological basis of poetry is
the already-described relationship with the absolute (a spiritual locus
which, being sacred, is only partly humanistic and, indeed, only partly
human), the ontic basis of poetry is the all too human figure of the
poet. Creative writing is therefore the natural continuation of critica
militante.

In the background of teaching-as-witnessing, of teaching around
poetry, is the wonder of a constantly renewed miracle, the miracle of
the coming-into-being of poetry. Against the overwhelming weight of
the poetic tradition, a weight whose real challenge is that it represents
a forbidding accumulation of beauty, not of technical tricks, new
poetry continuously and astonishingly comes into being. And if new
poetry cannot be taught, the wonder at the spectacle of it can.

Ezra Pound chided the university system for its "strict avoidance of
anything as brilliant and heretical as the creative
impulse." What
remains valid from his militancy is not the polemic or pars destruens
(the anti-academic rhetoric), but the positive element or pars con-
struens, the reflection on poetry developed in ontological terms as a
way of thinking/talking about poetry in its blossoming, its coming to
life (in statu nascenti).

This latter part can be accommodated within the university. Teach-
ing a creative writing course is a witnessing. Specifically, it is a form
of listening-to-writing, which is related to but subtly different from
listening to reading or speaking. When an instructor listens to stu-
dents reading their compositions in turn in front of the class, she is
engaged in a peculiar activity somewhere between mental reading and
listening to an oral performance. The instructor listens, but she listens
to a performance where the written or writerly aspect wins over the
oral one; that is, she witnesses what is normally hidden, the birth of

7. I quote from his essay "The Cultural Failure of America," published with some cuts and
with the euphemizing title "Where Is American Culture?" in The Nation of April 18, 1928, and
now reprinted in reduced version in Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to Periodicals,
original title restored ("Il Fallimento Della Cultura Americana") is now available for the first
time in Italian, with commentaries by Lawrence Rainey and Paolo Valesio, in Poesia: Mensile
writing. There is in this something intrinsically poetic, even when what is being read is a prosy vignette.

The university functions in this as a frame of reference for the construction of a delicately interconnected set of linguistic pacts—the pact of listening (the instructor and the other students listen in an intense and sympathetic silence, broken only by short interventions), the pact of expression (the student is given freedom of expression, though she must learn to earn and manage that freedom), and also, when the written language is not the student's mother tongue (as in the present case), the pact of boundaries (the student accepts a much more pervasive revision of her text than she would normally, but as compensation, enjoys a certain sense of liberation, a sense of freedom to express herself in language without the burden of the past). Such a creative writing course re-etymologizes its relationship to the notion of discourse in two senses—it is (1) a dis-course in so much as it is far from the typically rigid and bureaucratic college course, and (2) a discourse, fluid and liberated, a discourse that runs or courses on, gliding as smoothly as the terrain allows it to proceed.

Many perspectives and problems emerge at this point. But I recall that, in the dialogue I am working towards, the role I chose was that of the Professor of Silence. Now, therefore, I will at last be true to my part.