

Capriccio

John Eliot Holmes - Claire Holmes - Marie Hamilton

The following three essays came into my hands somewhat unusually, six or seven years ago now. I tend to think they were written by the same person but my daughter Claire has never been so sure. From time to time I too experience a frisson of doubt about this. If pushed, though, I'd say it was extremely likely not only that they share the same author but also that they form an intended trilogy. Apart from the significance of the way in which I got hold of them - of which more later - they exhibit obvious thematic and stylistic similarities, to say nothing of the telling appearance in two of them of Soren Kierkegaard, for whom pseudonymous literary polyphony was a way of life. However, whereas his stages of aesthetic, ethical and religious are commonly regarded not as literally chronological but as categories that come and go, the pieces presented here should probably be read in the order in which they are introduced below.

"Old manners" by Carole Wilding is the first and most conventional of the essays. It adopts a faintly patrician tone and proposes a largely unexplained notion of ancestral authority as a justification for immediacy in speech. This is apparently intended as a kind of antidote to political correctness. The desire to manage language is thereby faulted for just not being old enough – as if the nouveau riche were buying up stately homes – and also for having no sense of how easeful conversation tugs at the formative tissues of liberty. Again, what this actually means is hardly explained at all.

The whole thing is very nebulous, but its surprising conclusion appears to be that we should find the courage for some form of eccentric socialism in an age when most of the people espousing leftish ideas are public sector types ensnared by symptoms pretending to be cures. Ms. Wilding speaks of "the pseudo-professionalisation of bureaucrats and the bureaucratisation of professionals, the dismal ubiquity of plans and strategies, the craven acceptance of managerialism and performance indicators, and the banality of mission statements". I can only concur.

"Letting language be" by Sophie Clefs moves things on by sketching an essentially a tragic sense of the *experience* of speech. Language promises an impossible harmony, we are told. Once you grasp this, a snare has been set for your life, one that tightens the more you struggle. In what is surely an allusion to the first paper, we hear that a conservative appeal to ancestral authority and classical poise is not enough after all. Genuine peace is that which we take straight to the grave.

“A Kierkegaardian twilight” by Neil Anders seems to move us on again, this time into a religious communication. But what we get is an almost impossibly attenuated Christian suggestiveness – just the hint of something extrinsic to our own efforts. The piece also contains an extraordinary (but, once more, poorly explained) implication that an extrinsic grounding for the self - and for the opacity of language – would entail that we would *rightly* struggle not only to say what we mean but also to mean what we say.

I believe the real author of these essays was one David Evans, whom I knew briefly in Norwich in the summer of 2002. It is said that he moved to Edinburgh in Scotland a year or so later, but my attempts to trace him there ended in failure. He seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth. If he is still alive, he would now be very old.

In the main, he was an outwardly unremarkable character, devoted to his wife and son, whom I never saw. One admittedly unconvincing story had it that they had ended up in New York after he had died in Paris, of all places. I do recall him talking about Paris - a Stravinsky pilgrimage, if I’m not mistaken - but he got back from that visit safely enough, and I also have a feeling that his wife hated America. I never heard of any close friends, just a few colleagues whom I also knew (professionally, and not at all well).

They remembered him with fairly mixed views: kindly, aloof, witty, awkward. A fantasist, even a Walter Mitty type, someone said, but I never got any explanation of the kind of fantasy he might have gone in for. He was very fond of classical music, but went to concerts alone. All in all, he seemed like one of those intensely private individuals whom one would take to be unmarried and childless, possibly homosexual.

In fact, he once told me that he was drawn to women more than men in all respects. He hated the sound of men laughing together. Like C S Lewis, it was a sound he associated with venality. But he loved being a father. Nothing brought him greater pleasure than to watch football with his son, sharing a few beers. So utterly normal – indeed, what so many people would wish for yet often don’t manage to attain. Otherwise, though, sociality seemed to be a closed book.

Intriguingly, he also told me it was very likely that he was the most misanthropic person I had ever met but that he had been granted the social skills with which to disguise the fact – most of the time. He was a civil servant, although his bizarre view of this was that he was a confidence trickster. Here was my only direct hint of the fantasist theory. I sometimes wondered if he was a bit like the Cambridge spy Donald Maclean, who, when drunk, sometimes revealed his treason to people who just couldn’t hear what was actually being said to them quite plainly. If so, for whom was he spying? Judging by these papers, he was trying to infiltrate the opacity of his own words, in the pay of a foreign power that could not be named.

So how did I get them? Quite simply, he gave me some CDs he no longer wanted - he was the kind of person who would have more than one recording of a favourite

symphony or string quartet – and there was an old floppy disk amongst them. I laid it aside and forgot all about it. Soon afterwards I heard he had moved to Edinburgh. He never said goodbye, but then we really hadn't known each other at all well.

I assumed the floppy disk was useless on account of its antiquity, but one Saturday morning I found my daughter Claire (then only seventeen) had printed off its contents, her curiosity having been aroused by having heard my wife remark that she wouldn't have been surprised if David Evans had put something quite nasty on there. My wife had never much liked him, calling him "plausible". And indeed she wasn't convinced subsequently that the contents hadn't indeed been a bit nasty.

"Old manners" she thought a piece of nonsense that couldn't make up its mind whether to be quirky left or nuanced right. "Letting language be" persuaded her that Evans had suffered from obsessive-compulsive and narcissistic awareness of his speech acts. As for "A Kierkegaardian twilight", it just annoyed her. She thought it was an aggrandisement of the language-illness into death-haunted pseudo-religious sleight-of-hand. Jane has a way with words (and hyphens).

But she didn't put me off. Her scepticism seemed to me to be missing the pulse or heartbeat I could discern in this peculiar writing. It crept up on me slowly over a period of months. The stuff about language - so alien when I first read it - had rung true once or twice, and my wife even suggested it had inculcated a certain morbidity in me that had never before been part of my make-up. I wished I could see again the person whom I assumed had been the author of such unsettling material. Yet this question of authorship still troubled me.

Of course I googled the names Carole Wilding, Sophie Clefs and Neil Anders, but nothing interesting came of it. They were pseudonyms, all right. But did that mean the real author was the person who had possessed the floppy disk? David Evans had been an appositely enigmatic character, but, in truth, the author could have been anyone really. Even more apposite was the idea that he had become irretrievably unknowable.

Unlike her mother, Claire was very taken with her find. She had been trying out people like Kafka and Virginia Woolf, and was susceptible to the idea that mysterious existential tracts of some sort had been found *by her*. All three papers rippled through her being. She was quite strongly inclined to believe that there really might have been three different people - not necessarily with those names - who had been asked to try writing in the style of a fourth person, and to elaborate certain themes. The obvious place where this might have occurred would have been a university tutorial group carrying out some sort of literary experiment. If so, there might have been ten or twenty efforts to begin with; maybe these were just the best three.

Certainly, the first two contain one or two very informal references that suggest a tutorial or seminar context rather than readiness for publication in a journal or suchlike. For example, Sophie Clefs says at one point (of Wittgenstein) that "maybe I just want to

find in his life and work some stories to intellectualise the incorrigibility of my strange personality. I don't really care any more". Not very professional, but, on the other hand, the paper is beautifully written, and its impact on Claire can hardly be overestimated.

Later, I stumbled on a radio programme about Kierkegaard, which was how I heard about his penchant for pseudonyms and literary puzzles. So maybe a philosophy or theology tutorial was likelier, I thought to myself. The essays were clearly not philosophy, but you sensed that philosophy was there in the background. Claire and I started our own little tutorial group, which annoyed Jane.

In the six years since all this happened, Claire has turned into an enigmatically original thinker, but yet, if this makes sense, an *unintellectual* thinker. Nowadays she is likelier to have her nose in P G Wodehouse than in Kafka.

But she has always remained loyal to the essays of Messrs. Wilding, Clefs and Anders, not only because they got her round a corner in her life but also because, once she had turned it, she preferred them to most of what she then encountered at university.

They are now being published at last, although most of the editorial work has been done by Claire's partner Marie Hamilton, a lovely person whom Jane and I now count as a second daughter. It has been a great relief to us that our first one - beautiful and poised as she is, but potentially the most solitary woman in the world - has found someone with whom to share her life, someone similarly out of sympathy with the managerial impress of the present age. In fact I sometimes think that Claire and Marie are out of sympathy with any thinkable *polis* at all, and that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that they could sometimes be located outside conventional probity.

Now it has to be said that the girls have read an awful lot of nineteenth and twentieth century literature that has simply passed me by, but I like to think nevertheless that they enjoy my company, and that I do occasionally interest them with remembered snippets from a strong classical education. I actually went to university intending to study Latin and Greek before being pressurised by my parents into doing law (I graduated but never practised, and despised the profession from the very outset) and so, apposite to our present concerns, I was familiar with the second volume of Plutarch's *Moralia*, containing the famous Letter to Apollonius.

We hear in this how Silenus, when Midas inquired of him what was the best thing for mankind and the most preferable of all things, was at first unwilling to tell, but eventually gave the following answer –

“A life spent in ignorance of one's own woes is most free from grief. But for men it is utterly impossible that they should obtain the best thing of all, or even have any share in its nature (for the best thing for all men and women is not to be born); however, the next best

thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as possible.”

Of course it will be objected that this is a terrible way to think, and that it is refuted by a moment's further thought. After all, for example, would it dictate that one should care nothing for the urgency with which doctors and nurses rush about a hospital to save a child's life, or alleviate a child's suffering?

However Claire and Marie led me to appreciate that this discerns no *presence* in the Silenian lucidity, which can be seen as an edifying discourse compatible with the egalitarian virtue of hospitals and schools but antagonistic to the ubiquitous instrumentalism that looks around all the time to see what can be equalised next. Yet there's a tension here. Don't the two things overlap?

Well, maybe. The material published here seems to me to go some way towards relieving that tension, although I have to warn that none of it is the stuff of debating society contestation. But maybe that's all the more reason to commend it to a wider readership, just in case surprising motions of the heart are only a page or two away.

Old manners

Carole Wilding

We live in an age when government ministers relish saying that Latin and Greek are all very well as ornament but have nothing to do with the central themes of education. Yet reading Pliny in fourth year (perhaps along with my discovery of Charles Lamb, and, in particular, “The Superannuated Man”) was the single most important thing that happened to me at school. But the pedagogic assumptions which I cherish from those days were dwindling fast even then, and now they are either unintelligible or actively reviled.

Even when the case is made for a more sophisticated version of the former 11-plus system, and even when private schools are defended against charges of elitism and exclusivity, the pedagogic is unlikely to be part of the argument. And, in my experience, pupils from these schools are as unlikely as any other young person (in Britain anyway) to imagine that Pliny or Charles Lamb - or Schubert or Schumann - might be capable of making them uniquely happy.

In truth, the proponents of academic selection and the users of fee-paying schools are usually just interested in planning the careers of their children - in consolidating the web of social and cultural complexities taken for granted in modern middle-class existence - and, once you scratch the surface, they actually look markedly similar to the new egalitarians whom it pleases them to despise.

Few people in either camp actually know what a privileged education would really be like, so few really want their children to have one. I suppose this encapsulates the way in which I'm attracted to conservatism but repelled by Conservatives.

A richly privileged education could never be available "inclusively", but, in my experience, those lucky enough to enjoy such a privilege (I had no more than a few flakes of it) are often compellingly clear that it should be shared. It can only be shared realistically, though, by remaining what it is in itself. It can't be shared in terms of a plan that changes out of all recognition the nature of the original privilege. But it should be shared as well as possible, so state education should aspire to put private schools out of business on their own terms. Socialists should relish high taxes to see them spent on teachers freed from citizenship-engineering and on doctors and nurses freed to set their own agendas.

Interestingly, symphony orchestras doing "outreach" work in poorer communities are often told to keep classical music to an accessible minimum and concentrate on television theme tunes, and "songs from the shows". In schools, children are to be allowed to handle the instruments, but should not be bored by hearing that Wagner comes after Mozart. No doubt all of this will be a condition of the local Council subsidising what it perceives to be elitist entertainment, and there's the rub. They don't know what the original privilege is.

As a socialist, I like to tell the story of an elderly lady - my cantankerous aunt, solidly working class - who, in the weeks before she died, heard Beethoven's symphonies and quartets for the first time and said it had been the most wonderful experience of her life, and that she would have loved to have known this music earlier. "But I never thought it was for the likes of me".

The privilege is Beethoven, not the middle-class milieu that would hijack him. However, by telling orchestras to keep him out of school visits or community concerts, instrumentally-minded educationalists and community strategists obviously have no notion that they're democratising access to his symphonies. But instrumentally-minded people will have been educated instrumentally, and so they may not really know what their egalitarianism is for. We need egalitarianism with a clear and compelling purpose, not an ideological one.

Getting rid of inequality by sharing a travesty (of whatever was supposed to have been unfairly exclusive) is what you end up with if it is already settled that sharing is bound to be a good thing, regardless of what actually gets shared. And good things are indeed to be settled. They will be in a plan.

Absurdly, something called community planning is now at the heart of enormous swathes of primary legislation in contemporary Britain, generating the vapid sub-plans and doctrinally sound strategies that supply a dismal vocabulary for the pseudo-professionalised civil servants who vote for it all in the first place.

In other words, the public sector has become hopelessly ensnared by symptoms pretending to be cures: the pseudo-professionalisation of bureaucrats and the bureaucratisation of professionals, the dismal ubiquity of plans and strategies, and the craven acceptance of managerialism and performance indicators. A marvellous library will be closed because its so-called *footfall* is disappointing.

A traditional rightward complaint about this civic *kitsch* would be that we were over-governed, but a better complaint would be that the loquaciousness of government is much worse, and that the language of rules and regulations is actually quite bearable until it is turned against language itself. Yet the malaise runs much deeper than its symptoms in central and local government and in the education and health sectors, dire though these are. In a strange kind of levelling that flings itself

out across the whole of society, one hears oneself more and more saying things that other people say - even though they are completely empty.

A few months ago I overheard a conversation about the pop singer Peter Gabriel's remark that, if the world could only have one father, it would choose Nelson Mandela. The conversation went something like this. The first speaker said she thought that that this was a repellent remark. The second rather glibly predicted that what was supposedly repellent was presumably Mandela's earlier status as what some people would call a terrorist, along with the controversies surrounding his second wife Winnie.

But the first speaker demurred, saying she didn't know enough about Mandela to offer an opinion about his moral stature. Her problem was with the remark. She had been almost viscerally struck by its hollow ring. While she had no difficulty with people making a case for Mandela if they wanted to, she could not imagine feeling remotely at ease - conversationally - with Peter Gabriel. It was the talking about it that was the problem. A curiously deep problem.

One of the points here is that words nowadays are increasingly taken to be in need of doctrinal settlement. You can't be kind if you remain more or less unmoved by inequality. That is to say, if someone is extraordinarily kind, but oblivious to or sceptical about social programmes to assist the marginalised, we want to take the word "kind" away from them - to disallow its application to them.

For example, I remember how common it was for people of my parents' generation to say that no nice person could possibly have voted for Margaret Thatcher, and how it provoked something of a crisis in their social circle when it turned out that someone had - secretly.

It also seems to be a diversity too far to say that some inequalities may be quite acceptable. This is refused absolutely. Contestation of it is an imperative. Any inequality can be remedied by humanistic planning, and there should be no end to the effort to do so. Continuous improvement, as they call it in management-babble.

In this way, doctrinal egalitarianism distorts the immediacy of our impulses. In medicine, for example, it fuels monomaniacal obsessions with diet, smoking, the supposedly social causes of poor health, and so-called "awareness-raising". Their language having been crushed by instrumental heaviness, it's no surprise that doctors and nurses end up hating some of these elements (e.g. managerialism) but affirming others. The things you would actually want to be egalitarian get muddled up with the bureaucratisation that flows from looking around all the time to see what can be equalised next.

Doctors and nurses preside over something marvellous, but some (by no means all) are still bewitched by the relativism that occurs when a doctrinal culture eases them away from their better judgement, just as a great liner turns slowly and imperceptibly in port but does eventually end up facing the other way. Yet the difference between those who don't end up facing the other way and those who do is not always clear-cut.

I once spoke to a group of people in local government (in the United Kingdom) who revealed that they had become so weary of the culture of managing language that to varying extents they had actually reinvented themselves as mildly racist or homophobic or sexist - just to make a bit of conceptual and emotional space for themselves, or, as one of them put it, "to feel I could breathe properly".

But then they would encounter tales of dreadful racial harassment or homophobic violence, and recover (almost as if by surprise) their sense that, needless to say, not a single one of them was

remotely disposed towards unkindness in these spheres. Nevertheless, their naturalistic sense of themselves had buckled under the weight of the doctrinal.

Yet I couldn't quite formulate there and then how enormously important it was that, under that weight, words just gave way. You were then left with the nauseating feeling that what you had said had been a poor player allowed onstage by a malign presence, a presence that had prevented the appearance of a different utterance altogether, a remark not still there in the shadows offstage but irretrievably lost.

Why should we necessarily think badly of someone *uneasy* with homosexuals, or disapprove necessarily of any hint of racism (such a clumsy word). I can easily imagine a nicely brought-up sort of person with prejudices they might act on, probably wouldn't, but, either way, prejudices they would never turn into the stuff of common cause with other people. What exactly is supposed to be wrong with that? Not all the caprices of our personalities need be corrigible.

Of course it will be said that this is just plain wrong, and that it amounts to insisting that you simply like the caprices of your personality, and that you are too obstinate to face up to what they would mean if they were reflected in social policies. That could be a telling criticism, but then again it might be doctrinal exaggeration.

Sometimes the would-be managers of language will say that their approach amounts to no more than an extension of good manners. I'm tempted to agree! Like a modern extension added insensitively to a beautiful old building, it's an ugly and graceless defacement impeding easeful style. In conversation, easeful style tugs on the formative tissues of liberty. I trust old manners to be enough, as surely as I want to live in an old house.

And if it is said that old manners are not enough, we need to ask if the insufficiency is being adduced by people in the thrall of language-use that has been settled doctrinally, and if what they say depends on manipulated words.

The authority for "politically correct" judgements is only a few decades old, but it has already swept aside centuries of ancestral authority for the insight that immediacy in speech is deep and natural and *proportionate*. It has also swept aside the concomitant assumption that, when words are unkind, it is because of the unkindness of the speaker. It can't be - or shouldn't be - because they are words proscribed recently in the name of kindness.

But after you've been hectored to the contrary, you can never recover your original Edenic condition. Sin begets sin, said Macbeth, and, once you've heard the dismal idea that words are no longer to be trusted to do their naturalistic work but are to be judged for their tactical potency or political acceptability, you can never un-know what, in a better time, you wouldn't have known.

There is a kind of lost innocence that is irrecoverable as soon as the knowledge of possibility is foisted upon you. You can insist provocatively and theatrically that you are going to go on using an offending expression because the offence is a sham, but it's too late. In a way, the hectorers always win. But - always - this is less about the words that are proscribed and more about revised meanings of the words that are used to justify the proscriptions.

Here then is what is so abysmal about what might otherwise seem like a faintly comical mania for trying to make people nicer by the management of language, or by turning education into social engineering. The problem is that managing language works, but it doesn't make people nicer, it just changes the meaning of nice, and drains the word sanctimony of any meaning at all.

It is tempting to say that, as the organisational outlets for goodwill multiply, its original content is divided, but it would be foolish and uncongenial to deny that the very opposite can be true. Some proliferations of organisational outlets are easily worth the cost of corresponding diminutions in immediacy (e.g. the post-war welfare state and health service).

George Orwell knew that deciding whether instrumental sociality still flowed recognisably *from* goodwill - and not *towards* totalitarianism - was going to depend on felicitous conversation. Otherwise, if simple imaginative elegance were to disappear from the spoken and written word, socialism was on a path to perdition. But then it would be necessary not to blame socialism, and for individual confidence in it to refuse to turn against itself - even in the face of doctrinal conditions designed to expropriate it.

Orwell accomplished this. He wouldn't let them take his eccentric socialism away from him, even though the increasingly manipulative discourses of the left excluded him from where he otherwise wanted to stand. He stood there just the same.

It would have been easy for him to have turned against himself in secret despair. The hysterical aggrandisement of a failure of nerve certainly makes for an intriguing and nuanced form of conservatism, but it's still just running away from socialism in the end.

Letting language be

Sophie Clefs

“If I had planned it, I should never have made the sun at all. See! How beautiful! The sun is too bright and too hot. And if there were only the moon there would be no reading and writing” – Ludwig Wittgenstein, on a moonlit night, as remembered by Oets Bouwsma in Wittgenstein: Conversations, 1949-1951 (p. 12).

Mallarmé said poetry should make air and silence hang around a word, but air and silence hang around all words, if we can only feel it. Of course it's a commonplace to hear that “there was a bit of an atmosphere in the room”, but this isn't what I mean.

The genuinely interesting atmospheric phenomena bearing down on language are climatic conditions that elude the best explanations for them. Although things like the destructiveness of unsympathetic interlocutors or felt somatic dips in the spoken reportage of our prior remarks might *begin* to explain plausibly enough our despondency over the things we say, such explanations actually tell us very little - although, disastrously, they tempt us with the promise that more can be prised out of the little we think we know.

But you can never future-proof your next utterance, or (more likely) the next conversation when someone doesn't take the baton from you to let you feel that, yes, they have a sense of what you're passing to them and that, yes, they're taking it, and that, look, it's being handed back already.

Explicative trails become overgrown very quickly. They may even be false altogether, right at the beginning. For example, there is an indescribable gravitational pull that prevents us from

answering questions like “why did you do that?” by simply saying “well, there it is anyway”, or by just wagging a Cratylus-like finger.

Instead, we are drawn into a circle of plausible explanations which pretty well defines what we take language to be. Like moths drawn to a flame. But what if the plausible explanations just aren’t true, at least not in the sense in which they bear down upon us? *They cast a spell*. And then we steer our rationality accordingly. The spell deepens.

I don’t actually know much about philosophy - I’m going to go on to speak briefly about Kierkegaard, but I think of him simply as a great writer - yet it has to be said that one philosopher whose status as such is not ordinarily in dispute *does* hold a special appeal for literary types like me. This of course is Wittgenstein.

Now the “literary Wittgenstein” annoys philosophical purists quite a lot, and perhaps even encourages a suspicion on the part of one or two of them that he too, like Kierkegaard, wasn’t really doing philosophy at all. But most purists just object to his unquestioned status as a world-historical philosopher getting muddled up with vague and uncritical fancifulness. Personally, I couldn’t care less one way or another. For me, the only sure thing is that a lot of his remarks have been embedded in my mind for years.

In particular, apparently he said to someone that music had come to a full stop with Brahms, and that even with Brahms he could begin to hear the machinery. *I like to think he could hear the machinery in language, and in the very experience of speech*. Perhaps the machinery has to be there - he may have thought it didn’t - but what if it can be much more apposite (to where it has to be) than is commonly the case?

He was once told about a general who had led from the front and earned the affection and respect of all his men. In a near-hopeless situation, he had gathered them together to be honest about their dire predicament, and to say that it had been an honour to lead them, and to have known them, and that he would look forward to knowing them without rank in the life to come - if there was one. Wittgenstein’s reaction to the story was to regret the bit about “if there is one”.

After the First World War, he rebuked Bertrand Russell for talking about setting up some sort of peace organisation, and Russell asked him if he’d rather he set up an organisation to promote war and slavery. The reply? “Yes, rather that, rather that!”

I think he meant it! Within Russell’s tone-setting, I really think he meant it! One of his friends said that when he stopped you from saying something *he looked as though by speaking you would inflict a wound!*

It seems to me that you grasp a lot of what he was on about if this penny drops, and if you can get the hang of the idea that he was always trying to resist the compulsion to think that value had to show its workings, as if its meaning lay in the conceptual machinery which the world attributed to it. Or maybe I just want to find in his life and work some stories to intellectualise the incorrigibility of my strange personality. I don’t really care any more.

The experience of language is utterly contingent. Every sentence is vulnerable to the thought – no, the *feeling*, the awful vertiginous *feeling* - that it could have been different as subjective experience, even if identical in a hypothetical (yet of course impossible) transcription, but that the difference is irreducible, or unknowable as anything other than its brute facticity.

There are many more atmospheres than explanations for them, and many dank atmospheres that are *caused* by the will-to-explain, not by the absence of understanding. *Or so I would guess.* I'm already trying to say too much.

It may also be saying too much to observe that there is no philosophical or scientific hubris that will ever accommodate how my reception of my boyfriend's faint smile can be the overwhelmingly important part of how I experience what I am saying to him - literally conflating my experience of speech with his experience of listening? Even this seems to run up against the limits of language.

Words are tools for business and life, not apposite to illness and death. Not the surface play that goes on uselessly above mysterious latencies. Not the infinite vacuity that chatters even when we expect to be most ourselves.

But all of this barely scratches the surface. The opaqueness of conversation is felt pervasively and deeply and abysmally. It forms the unchanging seasons of an overcast and sunless world. Yet of course this will seem obscure. Ice covers the fields, but few see anything wrong. Did communities in the past sometimes move across rougher ground, sure-footed in their sharing of richer traditions? Not really, I would think. And, even if they did, the fear would be that, in a sunlit world refreshed by great gales blowing down the centuries, the shadow would turn out to be that of an authoritarian polis.

Much smaller communities of initiates might look more propitious, given over to trying to speak and listen and receive in poise and balance, exposition and recapitulation, allowance and discovery, and space and silence and harmony and wonderment. But attempting to say things that are magically light simply results in tragic heaviness. We don't know why. We can't know why. And we can hardly think that we should follow an explicative trail!

Language promises an impossible harmony. Once you sense the enormity of this, a snare has been set for your life, a snare of the kind that tightens with resistance. And almost no one would see you were caught in it. If you struggled, no one would think "Ah, what a deep nature, here is someone for whom language promises an impossible harmony!" They would just see you thrashing about and draw the conclusions possible *for them*. And you would know this and struggle all the more.

Auden observed that we became our admirers, but, caught in this snare, you become your detractors - or those who were just never anywhere near understanding you. But if it seems a dismal thought that we can make not even the slightest corrective impression on the world, and that we are going to be remembered (very briefly) for our foolishness, and certainly not for what we actually meant, there is consolation in remembering that of course corrective impressions antagonistic to explanation can never be reliably explicative.

Even world-historical creative figures who offered such impressions were disallowed them by admirers and detractors alike. Think of Kierkegaard, sanitised nowadays by the impulse to imagine we must at all costs be looking for *necessary* sense (i.e. sense that counts as sense because it remains amenable to explanations of what supposedly *makes it* sense).

But we can look elsewhere, and spot the secret notes he left behind for those who know there are other places to look. He wrote in his journal of an old folk song about the weeping of a young girl whose lover had not come to her: "*I saw the Jutland heath with its indescribable solitude and its lonely lark - and now one generation after another arose before me, and all the girls sang for me and wept so bitterly and sank into their graves again, and I wept with them*".

These forgotten girls live again when their words are read by someone attuned to their sorrow, but such sorrow is still *of* the world. Perhaps Kierkegaard left behind his quintessential words for readers in whom the world waxed and waned on this question of the explicative, readers not at home in the world at all.

For example, the pseudonymous flâneur Johannes Climacus sometimes went in for little reveries in Copenhagen cemeteries, extraordinarily beautiful pieces that deserve to be read slowly over a lifetime, not summarised. Yet it seems impossible not to mention one reflection that is particularly apposite here.

In this passage - a touchstone for the whole Kierkegaardian authorship, I think - Climacus writes of the unprotesting silence of a forgotten warrior whose gravestone has been defaced, and its surrounding railings vandalised. *He does not gesticulate, he does not protest, he does not flare up in a moment of inwardness, but, silent as the grave and quiet as a dead person, he maintains his inwardness and stands by his word.*

The poetic implication is that we too will have to be dead before we find the unprotesting silence we need, but that this will still say something about our lives, if only we can come to the thought. And coming to the thought will have much to do with passing beyond the discourses of the world - especially their self-conscious quibbling and nitpicking about what words mean.

Once it was the hatefully legalistic who kept on asking “but what do you mean by that?” Now it is a commonplace assumption that everyday talk must quite rightly stop and start in this way, cut off from the suspicion that interpretations and definitions might be infinitely poorer than the untrammelled and immediate experience of the words being interpreted and defined. Everyday talk is a flurry of irreducible maieutic impulses and recognitions and particles of reserve that feel overwhelming precisely when you grasp that they *necessarily* defy their attendant will-to-causality.

Of course *letting language be* is no doubt a conservative impulse, although it is surely far from being exhausted by conservative idioms. Still, though, classical poise and ancestral authority are undoubtedly suggestive of how we might yet recover a more primitive way of speaking - a conversational style in which our words no longer commend themselves to the analogy of a laboratory experiment. But (to revise a well-known saying of Karl Kraus) the world will make of itself a testing-station not for its end but - much worse - for its supposed explanation.

But, in the end, the experience of language should be enough to remind us time and again that genuine peace is that which one takes straight to the grave. And the silence of the grave is not amenable to any kind of Promethean theft. The yearning for seamlessness in speech and writing - and in listening and reading - might be a dyke against sin (which is no small thing) but felicitous speech no more redeems the insufficiency of conversation than a lovely day in the country means we are going to live forever.

A Kierkegaardian twilight

Neil Anders

“There is something artful and false in our speaking; we have our lives in completely different categories; we sit and torture ourselves to find expressions and are embarrassed in the presence of kings. Imagine a man who has made up his mind, has understood - my life is sacrificed; there is nothing, nothing ahead of me but suffering - this makes him so earnest that he is unlikely to be at a loss for what he shall say, although it does not turn out to be eloquence, or, least of all, oratorical technique (which does not concern him at all and right here is the secret). He is too earnest to trouble himself in the least about the world: if a person has integrity he will not be at a loss for what he will say. The dilemma simply comes from loving ourselves and the world: the one who hates himself and the world soon makes up his mind what he will say.” – Soren Kierkegaard, Journals, 1851

Kierkegaard wasn't much of one for the public, believing as he did that St. Peter had gone too far at the first Pentecost, establishing a ruinous crowd (congregation) of 3000. Nothing there, then, about the recognition of Jesus being something that has to pass through the channels of ecclesiastical mystery. Instead it seems that, before God, two is a crowd and three is a spiritless age. This may sound like a recipe for solitary fanaticism until you realise that for Kierkegaard one is a crowd too.

Of course he made one of his early pseudonyms write a little book about these things, an extraordinary reading of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah (and downtown Copenhagen in the nineteenth century) that softens us up for the implication of his much later authorship that the Jesus of faith can never be recognisable at all without becoming less than he has to be (in order to be Him).

But then there's the sense that there may yet be something. A shadow at the foot of the garden. Maybe just the neighbours' cat. Maybe not. This Jesus can't tell anyone to do anything, or recommend any course of action. He's just the suspicion of something that exceeds not only the limits of our language but also the attempts of humanistic optimism to annex and occupy that limitation.

Very little is left in such a formulation. This is travelling very light. But there are literary and spiritual spaces of attunement for it, cloistered communities not of initiates protecting philosophical ornament but of genuine thinkers doing something quite different.

It seems we should travel lighter even than self-accompaniment. Yet this must overlap (at least a little) with everyday talk. Although such talk can only have a slender part to play in leading people into proximity to spaces of attunement, it is still true that, if

public discourse worsens, its deteriorated state will be less capable of leading people into the proximity.

Nietzsche's madman goes about with a lantern in the bright light of the morning because people going about their everyday business in the market place still sense the light of a dead star. The light of a star can be sensed for a long time after it has stopped shining. The "tremendous event" of the death of God is still on its way to us, and secular thinkers have not the remotest sense of how cold and dark it will become.

But it won't be cold and dark; it will just be gloomy and overcast as attunement slips unnoticed out of human history. Heidegger probably meant to hint towards the end of his life that we might yet be stirred precisely by the deathly stillness of this twilight.

Is this any kind of religious category at all? Some would say not. When Gandhi was asked what he thought of western civilisation, he replied that it would be a very good idea. Kierkegaard thought that Christianity would be a very good idea, but saw little indication that it had ever existed. What little indication he was prepared to concede pointed to a provocatively extreme sense of transience. Philosophically and theologically, he really was a bit of a wild man.

As Emily Dickinson says, life is death we're lengthy at, death the hinge to life. This means not that we can turn death into something meaningful but that death can turn us into something meaningful - into what God means by us - if we can look at the crucifixion and recognise the almost impossibly attenuated knowledge of Christ's significance which Kierkegaard risked saying was somewhat different from the usual theatricalities of church and state, workplace and commerce, war and peace, and even family and friends. Is this the *antagonism* of the eternal? A sense of antagonism circling above the most unlikely of targets?

Kierkegaard certainly espoused an abysmal insularity, although, in the lonely moonlight of the Jutland coastline, the melancholy roar is maybe that of grace, withdrawing as it must before coming back in again. It has long been suggested that, for this most self-revocative of authors, the loss of ethics and the absence of faith are ironic conditions for holding on to them. Irony is the condition for saying anything authentic at all. And comportment towards death.

But, as the theologian George Pattison puts it, the Kierkegaardian manner of keeping the remembrance of death is not simply to turn away from the world and remain amongst the graves. It is to look upon the world with an intensity and luminosity that throws into relief the shadow of death inscribed in every ephemeral phenomenon. Thereinafter we can say little of what we mean and mean little of what we say.

Kierkegaard never even did a day's paid work in his life. More importantly, had he lived longer, and had his father's money run out as it surely would have done, it is still

pretty well impossible to imagine him working in an office like Kafka, or in a bank like Eliot. At the heart of this was his acute sensitivity to what it feels like to speak.

The most virulent worms that crawl into public and private language are microscopically-small tubes of poison that used to breed particularly well in organised religion (Kierkegaard's notorious pamphleteering attack on the Danish Lutheran Church is of course apposite here) but now find ideal places to lay their eggs in the categories of the modern workplace.

The bridge between the two ages has probably been the traditional middle-class career, and its disastrous conversational idioms. We can be pretty good at saying the right things - we can make a career out of it - but, in the words of Isaiah, "their hearts are far from me, in vain do they worship me". Kierkegaard emphasises time and again that only outstanding personalities are able to bear the advantage of the power of speech.

But he certainly didn't mean that we should watch what we say all the time. On the contrary, our circumspect speech is never our true likeness. No speech is. Our likeness is glimpsed precisely inside the felt opacity of such self-spectatorship. So-called politically correct speech may be less a libertarian problem than a spiritual one.

However public talk need not be entirely off the radar. Of all the thoughts that probably just won't occur in an overcast and disenchanting world, the chance of thinking the thought of an extrinsic grounding for the self (and so also for the opacity of speech) is a big chance to miss by default. Kierkegaard always tries to salvage the thinkability of that chance, and public talk is always a possible bridge towards retrieval. But attunement is never a matter of storming the barricades.

Rather than "grasping at finitude" - the Kierkegaardian expression most apposite here - we should instead be waiting upon a kind of understatement of the self, an understatement not so much unintelligible in public discourse as cut off by its disrepair. The track disappears before we get too close to the strange implication that there is a question about whether a certain kind of thinker (who may be more in love with life than anyone else) really wants to live at all.

Although notorious for being impenetrably difficult, Kierkegaard was capable of whimsical and even childlike turns of phrase, especially in the voluminous journals. I have always loved this curious little entry from 1849:-

He takes a walk one day in a beautiful wooded area. It has just been raining; everything smells fresh and fragrant; it occurs to him that he never or only rarely had felt so indescribably, so ineffably good.

As he walks along the thought comes to him en passant: what if you took your life - and he does it.

Here there is no premeditation about such a step, no sequence of events, nor any violent agitation. The thought comes to him something like this: see, there is a delightful little flower; he commits the deed in about the same state of mind as that in which one bends down and picks a little flower; therefore death in this case would be a kind of well-being carried to a higher power.

Six years later, he did finally take leave of a life of loneliness and melancholy - but yet also great joy, I think - in a Copenhagen hospital in 1855. Just before the end, he was visited by his nephew, who, although clearly aware that florid recollections would be dismissed as Romanticism or religiosity, went on nonetheless to record in his memoirs that his uncle's parting words had been quite ordinary words really, but that they had been accompanied by a look of which he had never since seen the equal, a look that radiated with an elevated, transfigured, blessed brilliance.

"Everything was concentrated in the flood of light from these eyes: profound love, beatifically dissolved sadness, an all-penetrating clarity, and a playful smile . . . like a heavenly revelation, an emanation from one soul to another, a blessing . . ."

Kierkegaard was fond of the Biblical story about the pool of Bethesda, where the waters had miraculous properties only when an angel descended to stir them. Similarly, he knew that presence in what we say was stirred by something extrinsic. Can we come to learn the intricate steps of an inward movement that abides in the twilight and stillness of our words? I think the Kierkegaardian authorship - and the life behind it - point to this unsurpassably wonderful accomplishment, although due pessimism must be acknowledged regarding the proximity of such things to public discourse.