"Chicken" and Poetry: The Unspeakable and the Unsayable

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I like to play "chicken" with my students, most of whom in our post-positivist age have never really experienced the power of language, though every freshman can repeat the truisms retailed by English teachers from the early grades onward and wholesaled by "communications" specialists in the academy, the media, and the marketplace: through language, you discover truth, convey ideas, gain professional and economic advancement, convince individuals, sway the masses, sell products, preserve freedom, defeat falsehood, gain status. Yes, we agree, language is like atomic energy, a mighty force that can be used for good or ill, to heal or kill, an instrument more delicate than the surgeon's knife and more ominous than any other weapon in the history of humankind's arsenals.

Yet, on a less grandiose scale, in a more immediate sense, in the homely atmosphere of a beige, chalk-dusted classroom, with the whirring continuo of a perpetually ill-adjusted air-conditioning system, I like to play "chicken" with my students.

Here are the rules of the game. I'll start with an innocuous expletive, "Darn!" I'll pause and then utter something a bit more potentially offensive: "Damn!" Now the agon reveals itself. Either my oaths will continue to grow worse until I chicken out, can no longer bring myself to the next, more scabrous term, or a student will raise his or her hand, indicating that he or she is unable to tolerate the next move in the game. The student is chicken, though usually it's several members of the class who are unable to let me proceed.

The tensions that the game generates come not from mere etiquette, not from formulaic Puritan propriety, but rather from, I know certainly, dark caverns of psychic constraints that I as a teacher of language-use can experience but not adequately explain. If the game works—and it always does—the mood of the room seems concentrated in the electric focus of the ambient, unvarying whir of sound from the air-conditioning duct, inhuman, inexplicable (since Carrier's engineers should have been more proficient), and timeless. The pause before we giggle and relax is a suspended moment.

Needless to say, unspeakability comes not only from sexual and other taboos, but from any of the limits set by a given community—including limits of credibility (not many would pay serious attention
to the argument that the earth is flat), or genre (as we all know, if something looks like or is called a poem, we lose much of our audience), of beliefs and values (any statements made by Kremlin officials are propaganda).

If you think I’m overdramatizing, try "chicken" the next time you have the chance for a parlor game. You’ll experience the mystery of the unspeakable.

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Both D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller took to painting, though neither was a Rembrandt, who chose palette, paints, brush, and canvas as a first and primary means of expression.

In Taos, my wife and I saw a collection of Lawrence’s art, gathered by the enigmatic Saki Karavas in his office in the old hotel that he ran. His cluttered desk was in the middle of the room, and two pairs of his shined shoes sat on the floor by the wall. The admission charge, paid to the desk clerk, was two bucks each. We had just come from the mountain ranch, where we visited Lawrence’s tomb, and had signed the register just beneath the line on which a Nebraskan had penned flowingly, "Lawrence lives!"

"Red Willows" lives in our memory: naked bathers in a stream with a red willow fringe. In the foreground, a young man, crouching like a frog and viewed from the rear. His torso is an optical illusion, a gestaltist ambiguity, an impossibility such as those which obsessed M. C. Escher. At one moment, the figure is a swimmer, about to launch off into the stream. At another, his torso is a penis, the buttocks perfectly formed glans. He is both swimmer and phallus.

Any interpreter worth his or her salutation can give a perfectly reasonable explanation of this image: D. H. the repressed homosexual doing bugger imagery in a moment of nasty artistry. In language, with such outrages as Lady Chatterley, he had reached the limits of speakability, and so he changed his medium.

And yet, such a reasonable explanation is far too easy, belies what we sense—when we are playing chicken, when we are being honest with ourselves—about the nature of our knowledge, for we know much more than we can say. Not only is language bound by the manacles of propriety (whatever that might be in our daring game of "chicken"), by the limitations on our gutsiness to utter that which is in principle speakable; it is also shackled by the limits of the sayable.

D. H. Lawrence, like all of us, knew a good deal more than he could ever say.

Of course, Lawrence could have "spoken" his homoeroticism, and did speak it both in the suppressed beginning of Women in Love and in the conclusion of that novel. In the last scene, Ursula asks Birkin, "Did you need Gerald?"

"Yes," he said.

"Aren’t I enough for you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "You are enough for me, as far as a woman is concerned. But I wanted a man friend, as eternal as you and I are eternal."
"Why aren't I enough?" she said. "You are enough for me. I don't want anybody else but you. Why isn't it the same with you?"

"Having you, I can live all my life without anybody else, any other sheer intimacy. But to make it complete, really happy, I wanted eternal union with a man too: another kind of love," he said.

"I don't believe it," she said. "It's an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity."

"Well—" he said.

"You can't have two kinds of love. Why should you!"

"It seems as if I can't," he said. "Yet I wanted it."

"You can't have it, because it's false, impossible," she said.

"I don't believe that," he answered.

You say to me, "But 'Red Willows' is nothing more than a pictorial statement of what Lawrence said explicitly in other places, as in the conclusion to Women in Love, an obstinacy, a theory, a perversity."

"I don't believe that," I answer. "In part, yes, the painting strains at the limits of 'speakability,' but goes beyond those bounds into the realm of the unsayable, the sort of knowledge that is as certain as the flick of a dry fly toward an eddy in Rock Creek and the sort of knowledge that is not certain at all, that flicks dimly and briefly, like a grouse gliding through the aspens across the creek, or perhaps not a grouse at all, for one can't be certain, knowing only that among the white stripes of aspen trunks a dark blur materialized and vanished."

My choice of Lawrence as an example is in part fortuitous, in part predestined. He fits the case, and I am a Lawrentian.

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What is poetry, essentially, but the attempt to say the unsayable?

Elsewhere I have written that an economic theory can account for wealth, but only a story can explain what it means to be wealthy. The science of aerodynamics explains the flight of a 747, but only a poem can convey my exhilaration when I feel the first lift of takeoff and hear the shocks thump to their full extension as the wheels leave the ground.

It is useful here to think of a distinction made by Susanne Langer in 1942 between discursive forms and presentational forms. She is on the track when she says, "I do believe that in this physical, space-time world of our experience there are things which do not fit the grammatical scheme of expression. But they are not necessarily blind, inconceivable, mystical affairs; they are simply matters which require to be conceived through some symbolic schema other than discursive language." And the psychologist Endel Tulving helps, with his distinction between verbal and episodic knowledge. The verbal is conceptual, depersonalized: "The formula for table salt is NaCl." But episodic knowledge is biographical, personal, contextualized: "I remember learning the formula for table salt, NaCl, from a dog-eared, navy-blue chemistry text during my freshman year in high school. In class, I sat next to Anne Holt and..."
Perhaps, for a beginning, we can say that poetry is the residue, the excess, after the discursive, purely verbal element of meaning has been extracted—what remains after "alembification," to use one of Kenneth Burke's favorite terms. Once our students have stated and hence removed the thesis of "Sailing to Byzantium," the leftovers are poetry, a kind of knowledge so puzzling that a whole industry labors away to account for it. (No Fermi Lab for this gigantic enterprise, of course.)

If there is an excess, it was created by someone: the author or the reader. Or both. Since you and I can take anything to be a poem, we can create excess—superabundance—in any text. Or, alternatively, we create the excess and hence take the text to be a poem. Guilt-ridden as we are, we will always attribute the fecundity to the author, not to our Spartan selves.

In the game of "chicken," we can force our students to experience the principle of speakability. In the game of poetry, can we force our students to experience the principle of sayability?

4

Starting, I presume, with Aristotle, "rhetoric" has through the centuries undergone the pressures and counterpressures of definition. On the one hand, rhetoric is the art of finding the available means of persuasion in regard to any subject whatever, and, on the other hand, it is the search for identification, consubstantiality. (As I think of numerous other hands, the image of the many-armed Indian goddess arises, but I shall desist.)

Not that I can resist adding my own definition of rhetoric to the hundreds that we could accumulate with a couple of hours in a modest public library. Tentatively, stipulatively, without signing contracts or taking oaths, asking in advance for tolerance and forgiveness, I shall posit, for now, that rhetoric is the study of the unspeakable and the unsayable.

Though I will not, in this essay, limn the anatomy of the newly conceived field, we could begin to think of rhetorical theories of scene (for speakability is always an intense agent-scene dialectic), of rhetorical epistemology (following the leads of Kenneth Burke), of a rhetorical psychology, and, not least, of a rhetorical linguistics. (With what fields of knowledge would the rhetorical stop? What area of inquiry is arhetorical?)

But rhetoric has never been merely a "study of" subject; it has always concerned "how to." Consider this description of a freshman English course:

*English 101: The Unspeakable and the Unsayable*

Introduction to the principles and practices of pushing language to its limits. Students will be encouraged to produce writings that test the very limits of speakability. The class will also write much poetry in an attempt to say the unsayable.

English 101 as the "chicken" game and the poetry game!
Then what about English 400, Advanced Composition? I can think of three possibilities. The first and most obvious is that it be a course in painting—beyond the unsayable to the visual image:

*English 400: Beyond the Sayable*

Students will use paints, brush, palette, and canvas to express their ideas. No writing. No class discussion.

The second, and certainly most practical, turns out like this:

*English 400: Business Writing*

Instruction and practice in writing such documents as reports, memos, proposals, and business letters. Assignments will be individualized according to the career goals of the students.

"Business Writing," you see, would result from an act of purposeful forgetfulness, a general strategy so necessary for survival in the academy and of the academy that a study of our institutions of higher learning should concentrate on what faculties and administrations don't think they're doing rather than on what they say they're doing and what they actually think they're doing. (The discrepancy between what they say they're doing and what they actually think they're doing is also an important source of understanding for disinterested observers or partisan investigators.)

When it is proposed, the third possibility is almost certain to encounter trouble with the university's curriculum committee, and yet it follows most logically from our argument and is in many ways the most attractive:

*English 400: Silence*

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