

MODERN AGE

A QUARTERLY REVIEW



The Haunted House of the Human Spirit — An Editorial

IF ILLUSTRATIONS OF the central role of the relationship of language to our humanity were needed, the current spate of exhibitions and congresses in Italy devoted to the Etruscans would provide them. For two centuries archeology has provided us with a flood of Etruscan and imported Greek artifacts from Etruscan graves. New finds, such as the recently discovered undisturbed tomb at Orvieto, increase the wealth of material objects. Even so, without a significant literature in Etruscan and without a real knowledge of the language of the Etruscans we can only guess at the nature of the culture and spirit which animated these predecessors and ancestors of the inhabitants of modern Tuscany. The "mute stones" do not speak unless they bear an inscription in a known language.

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger spoke of human speech, of language, as "the house of being." Language is essential to humanity. It is indeed a "house" that provides order, protection, boundaries, continuity, and, above all, memory. The social character of language lives out of a distant and sometimes undiscernible past into the present. Every word bears a structure of order, of value, of historical experience out of the past and into the present reality. Without a past

there can be no human personality and no humanity. Our native language is indeed our "mother tongue."

In *Memoirs of a Dissident Publisher* Henry Regnery reports a conversation with the German writer Luise Rinser, wife of the composer Carl Orff. Regnery remarks that a particular church they were visiting together had great appeal to him. Standing before the iron grill that separates the choir from the nave of the church, he said to her that it made him feel "deprived of something" because he was "an outsider to it."

"She said in response that to those who grow up in it, the Church is like an old, old house one's family has always lived in. The floors are creaky, uneven, and on many levels; it was built over many centuries and in a completely haphazard fashion. 'But we love it,' she said. 'It is a part of us, and we wouldn't think of living anywhere else.' On the other hand, she confessed, she couldn't imagine moving into it if she had not grown up in it."

A fellow Catholic might have asserted that the glory of that old house is particularly due to the fact that, like a language, the house is not of one's own devising. Other sorts of houses are all too like the homemade religion of sectarian Christianity. (Could Dante have written

the *Divine Comedy* in Esperanto?) It is, or was, simply a given, what Burke calls one of those great, unbought graces. Now that the iconoclasts have desecrated it, liturgy committees have devised the actions that will take place in its sacred precincts, and theologians working in the minor key of contemporary rationalism tell us how the *Deus absconditus* no longer dwells there together with men, we are thrown back upon our memories of what once was and hear ghostly echoes of the sacred language and the sacred books.

In a diary entry for August 14, 1928, Virginia Woolf notes, “. . . But then, as I remind myself, half the beauty of a country or a house comes from knowing it. One remembers old lovelinesses: knows that it is now looking ugly; waits to see it light up; knows where to find its beauty; how to ignore the bad things. This one can't do the first time of seeing.”

In time to come the twentieth century will be seen as the century of the “displaced person.” Not since the “migration of nations” in the late Roman and early medieval periods have men in such large numbers and from such obscure points of origin been driven into new and strange landscapes. The displacement, moreover, has been spiritual and intellectual even more than it has been physical. From the 1920s onward the city, the Left Bank, California, or Western society in general and the United States in particular have been the refuge of hundreds of thousands, no millions, of spiritually displaced persons. They have left behind landscapes, houses, cultures, the permanent and fixed meanings of their lives. From the past they could take with them one thing only: their native language, in their sacred books and in the literature which was the distillation of their culture. Language, indeed, became the haunted house of the human spirit, “a home away from home.” The great literature of the twentieth century is exile literature.

Ours is a society in which few men live in the houses in which they were born, few live in the landscapes which were their homelands. Technology has trans-

formed the conditions and sometimes it seems the very values of life. Religion, the essence of changelessness, has seen fit to conform itself to transience. Who today characterizes Catholicism by the phrase *semper eadem*? As Henry Adams observed, we have entered the era in which “whirl is king.”

Language, however, maintains a stability which defies sudden and precipitous change. Stephen Spender in *The Struggle of the Modern* notes, “Language of its own nature repudiates a complete break between past and present. A ‘revolution of the word,’ in the sense of words changing completely their sense and becoming something else, is one kind of revolution that is impossible, a revolution in human nature being perhaps another.” Language is conservative; it is traditional. Not only are the words themselves slow to change but the symbolization of order which makes it possible for us to sort through the “booming buzzing confusion” of experience is even less subject to change. It is not true, as William S. Gilbert asserts in *Iolanthe* and political commentators have tirelessly repeated

That every boy and every gal,
That's born into the world alive,
Is either a little Liberal
Or else a little Conservative!

Insofar as they are human and learn to speak their mother tongue, they are conservative and remain so at the deepest levels of consciousness throughout life.

It is for this reason that revolutionaries whose aim is not simply political change but the transformation of human nature make the transformation of language the essential first step to revolution. A new language must be invented, or old words must be filled with a new content before “the new Soviet man” can emerge. The National Socialists invented their own “party Chinese” in anticipation of the emergence of the Aryan *Übermensch*. This effort to change human nature through the ideological transformation of language began with the French Revolution. The revolutionary effort to transform

language and empty it of its traditional content is one of the many profound insights of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The effort is a vain one. The intractability of the past is no better illustrated than by an example taken from Etruscan culture. The Etruscans, like the Romans after them, relied for a knowledge of the will of the gods upon the sector of heaven from which lightning flashes came and the sector of heaven into which they went. In order to know the cosmic forces one needed to know the *templum* of the heavens, the regions of the sky, a kind of cosmic map. For this purpose the sky was divided into sixteen segments. These segments of the heavens corresponded to sixteen segments of earth. The priest who read the cosmic signs selected the point at which the cosmic and the earthly *templa* were congruent. Lightning, like the flight of birds, originates in one segment of the heavens and moves into another. From origin to disposition the path of lightning and the flight of birds revealed the forces of the cosmic order. The twentieth-century use of the word "template," meaning a technical design or map, seems at first hand in its secularized form to have little to do with the flight of birds or the flashing of lightning; but at the deepest levels of consciousness the order of science and the order of the cosmos are one.

Nevertheless, although revolutionaries cannot change the content of language, they can turn the "house of being" into a haunted house in which the echoes of humanity have been detached from a human identity. Language then becomes only one more painful reminder of a lost status and a past grandeur. One sees one's

culture, one's religion, one's grandchildren searching for a lost word, a faintly remembered meaning, in the way a victim of Alzheimer's disease struggles vainly to instance inchoate feelings into words.

Poets, priests, artists, and humanistic scholars are entrusted in a special way with the preservation of the symbolic register especially as it is expressed in language. The humanists are the great conservatives of every age. They live from the tradition even when they live against the tradition. They are the historical memory of mankind and because they are they guarantee to us our humanity. The "treason of the clerk" is always the refusal to fulfill the role to which he has been called: he exchanges the contemplative for the active life. In our day that treason is the consequence of the beguilement of politics. Today thousands of conservative intellectuals mistake political activism and the manipulation of power for their calling. There are other and more important things for them to do. It is they who construct and guard "the house of being." Sometimes an ivory tower is the only defense against barbarism.

It is good to remember that the founders of the conservative revival of our day were not politicians. That revolution was first made in the minds of men, and political leadership, no matter how important it is, is after the fact. To live fully within a great literary, philosophical, artistic, or religious tradition is the highest calling a man can have. It is to be fully human and not to live within the realm of diminished vision and faltering expectations.

— Stephen J. Tonsor