

Language, Pain, and Fear · Gerald L. Bruns

ROUSSEAU BELIEVED that human language originated in the expression of fear. Here is his version (from the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*) of what happened:

A primitive man, on meeting other men, will first have experienced fright. His fear will make him see these men as larger and stronger than himself; he will give them the name *giants*. After many experiences, he will discover that the supposed giants are neither larger nor stronger than himself, and that their stature did not correspond to the word *giant*. He will then invent another name that he has in common with them, such as, for example, the word *man*, and will retain the word *giant* for the false object that impressed him while he was being deluded.

Notice that man's first word does not refer to the world; it gives shape to fear—it gives fear the shape of a giant, makes fear metaphorically visible. And it is in terms of this giant, that is, in terms of the metaphor or figure of giant, that man first names himself. He is himself the literal meaning of the metaphor *giant*; that is, he is the literal meaning of his own fear.

This wonderful idea provokes another: Suppose it were the case that in every human utterance there remained some original deposit of fear—some metaphorical residue of that primitive panic which accompanied or perhaps even caused the first appearance of words. One could therefore speak of fear as the hidden meaning of all human speech, as if it were so that the very words I am speaking now contained a secret expression of fear. Fear is the latent content of human speech, the secret of its origin and use. This would mean that *language* is the language of fear. Fear requires no special language, no special style or figure, because it is the native ingredient of speech itself, part of that which makes a thing what it is (on the principle that whatever is part of the origin of a thing is also part of its nature).

It is in the nature of what is hidden to break out into the open, as when fear takes over language completely—throws off its disguise and turns speech into a scream. I once knew a man who counted the screams he heard during the day. He said: "The scream of joy is merely a bad song." A true scream requires great scrutiny. One of the things you can learn from a scream is that fear is unspeakable, like God. It is expressible, to be sure: you can see it immediately when it writes itself across the face of one of your children, especially the most vulnerable one. But you can never say what it is. The true scream is wordless because fear cannot be put into words. The person who says

he is afraid of something has merely adopted a certain manner of speaking. The truly frightened person can tell you very little. Hence the genius of fear, which can express itself without ever giving itself away. It communicates itself in the manner of a disease, and can of course consume a whole people. I am talking about dumb fear, which is at once plain and mysterious, like a perfect meaning. It is something no one misunderstands.

Fear is the perfect metaphor of pain: the meanings of these two phenomena shuttle back and forth, turning the one thing into the other. Here let me refer you to Wittgenstein, who said: "The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness." Wittgenstein knew that real questions are incurable: you do not really do anything about them—mainly you think about them. For example, Wittgenstein wanted to know: What would you do if you had a pain but no word to express it? The question is not hypothetical, because pain cannot be put into words. The word "earache," for example, expresses no pain. What do words know about pain? Physicians know about pain: the physician is the reader of pain. Pain is the informing spirit of his literacy, but notice that for the physician the word "earache" expresses, not pain, but some defect of structure or tissue. The physician's job is to see through pain, presumably to arrive at its cause or to know the true companion of its appearance, but this means that pain as such has for him the character of something that makes sense on paper, whereas, of course, for the one who feels it there may be no sense to be made of it at all.

You can learn from Wittgenstein that the meaning of a word lies in its use in a situation, not in its reference to something real. The word "earache" does not require a real earache for it to make sense: an earache is not the meaning of the word "earache." From a physician's point of view this is how it works: to find out the meaning of a word requires you to study the situation in which it is used, whence you may learn that something has gone wrong and requires to be healed. Meanings always repose in situations, not in words.

The patient may feel, however, that, as logicians used to say, matters differently obtain, as when pain endures past the point of healing. An earache has a particular tenacity in this respect—it can transcend its cause: it aspires *not* to be the cry of its occasion; it is often intransitive, existing on its own, not meant to be interpreted. It is independent of all defects: a free pain.

An old Jesuit, a man of unspeakable cunning, once said to me: "All men are the servants of pain. We are its principal medium."