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Ulysses' Voice

Genuine voice is often so deeply hidden under the lesser imperfections of ourselves. I do not mean “genuine” in the truth-telling, soul-bearing sense. I mean it in the sense of reflecting the whole voice to its true extent, whether this manifests itself in coyness or bluntness, just the *truth* of voice, even bogged down by its human emotional baggage, is more complete than the false “niceness” of guarded voice. Words confuse us so much, especially when they come from the mouth, not yet dissected by mind and pen. They plunge us into such things. I have seen myself and my friends consumed by all sorts of vibrant, powerful, often self-threatening emotions, as a result of the mere words of others. We base such pieces of ourselves on that which is seemingly so random yet planned, so misdirected yet dead-on, so freeing yet harmful: voice. “Words will never hurt me,” ends a familiar children’s rhyme. If we have nothing else with which to completely glorify yet completely maim our fellow man, we have the power of words. If anything, voice is one of our greatest demons.

On December 8, 1995, the day that Jean-Dominique Bauby suffered a stroke to the brain stem which rendered him completely paralyzed, my father had a routine appointment with his ear/nose/throat doctor. Since late 1989, he has been without a voice box, speaking by bringing air from his lungs up through the remains of his trachea. The physician whom he visited that day meets with him twice a year for tracheal check-ups. Then, my father was a seventy-one-year-old man whose voice box had been missing for six years. Jean-Dominique Bauby was a forty-three-year-old man who, suddenly, lost his voice and his movement in a clap.

Bauby was reduced, physically. Confined to bed, he was unable to move any part of his body aside from his left eye. This is “locked-in syndrome”—his Self was “locked” within a body which had seemingly turned on him. We worry so over our bodies, as if they are somehow really under our command. They are joined to yet completely separate from us, residences of our Selves which often self-destruct. Bauby’s body concealed itself from him as it encapsulated him—his situation was one of ultimate *taking* and ultimate, horrific *keeping*. He was burdened by that which had forsaken him. His physical movement was gone, his physical control was gone, his physical voice was gone. The Self that was Jean-Dominique Bauby, however, was present, injured yet present, within his failed shell of a body. With his left eye, the only muscle which he could still control, Bauby constructed an alphabet of blinks, and began to dictate, letter by letter, his words to be written on paper.

I think that it is easy to forget that Bauby’s words were in their raw state—there was no seemingly-easy revising, scratching out, starting over. He blinked his life in a silent loudness, in a pure unbroken line. He blinked *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* to be written, experienced by others. It is not a depressing narrative of a sick patient, but a mere, wonderful story of *life*, told in the midst of death-ness. To salvage his Self from the wreckage of a body, and to scream it out in all its joy and humanity and simplicity, is Bauby’s exaltation of voice.

Throughout the *Commedia*, Dante the pilgrim encounters various characters with heightened or degraded levels of Voice. Through the power or falseness of their words, they reveal their blessedness or damnability. In the Eighth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Dante meets perhaps the most “false-voiced” resident of Inferno, the soul of Ulysses. He is grouped with the Fraudulent Counselors, punished for his verbal deception by confinement in a two-pronged, tongue-like flame. His soul, burning, is physically joined to that of Diomedes, sharing the torment.

Ulysses' voice is dehumanized through sin, reduced to a trapped, awkward, writhing thing:

Ulysses' "formal sin" is his bastardization of language - beguiling his final crew into journeying with him, through an almost-bribing, condescending voice. The true sin, which runs deeper than the "formal" one, is his desire, raw and unceasing—the desire to *know* the world, in an all-conquering, dominant sense, above all else. Ulysses has used his voice, with all its potential for truth, as a vehicle of his self-lie. Now, his voice is maimed, almost brutish in its sound and presence. He has chosen, through his sin, to be what was forced upon Bauby—"locked-in." His speech, degraded, has encapsulated him eternally, and his voice is eternally broken. To use one's voice in a manner which is so utterly *false*, states Dante, is the absolute self-entrapment. To destroy, by choice, that with all the potential for beauty, is repulsive.

Dante encounters, in Heaven, the most blessed voices. In the Sphere of Jupiter, the pilgrim speaks with the Eagle, a great form shaped by the soul-lights of several blessed Selves. Like that of Ulysses, these souls take on the appearance of flames, but not jailed, tormented. They shine out rather than being encased within. Their fire-light is a radiating glow, not a violent, bright, concealed burning. The speech which emanates from these joined voices is not clumsy, but musical: here, in Paradise, voice is completely whole and completely self-magnifying. The sin of speech which damned Ulysses is absent; voice is used in a merely *present*, true sense, without undertones of want. The voice *is*, even if the words it speaks are difficult for the pilgrim and the reader to comprehend, even if they are seemingly grounded in something wholly larger than us. Just the being of the true voice is essential, and the hearing, the internalizing of it is an extension of its power.

I love the term "voice box." It leads us to believe that our voices are confined to small cubes between our chests and heads. Since my father's voice box is gone, cut away, does this mean

that he is without a voice? Since Jean-Dominique Bauby's voice box was rendered mute, non-functional like the rest of his physical self, was he without a voice? What was it that blinked out the book of his life, *The Diving Belt and the Butterfly*, if not his voice? I think that voice flows all through us, constant and strong, like water. Our words, even stifled like Bauby's and like, to a lesser extent, my father's, still spill out all their marble-like colors. Our voice moves us and is moved by us. It is not the capability of our voice which truly matters: Ulysses was known as a magnificent orator. *How* we use it is critical. Words slap me about so often; they slap us all about. I find that the words of those my age can cut me and heal me the most. It is not the extreme words which have such great an impact—the straightforward, childish “mean” things said, or the praising, fawning speech—it is the undertone of words, the hidden things of words, the muddled meaning of words, even the lack of words, which injures us all so deeply. I think that it is more difficult, as an emotional being, to see, even briefly, that glimmer of truth behind words, than to be hit with the extremes of words. This feels strange to write, because it would seem that the most direct would be the most true and the most real, but I don't think this is really always the case. It is that which is hinted at, thought of, pondered over after it is said, which has the greatest ability to harm and transcend and impact. Voice, and how we present it, is, I think, the most obvious hint at our Selves. True voice, though impeded somewhat by the trappings of our emotional humanity, is the greatest window to another's Self, and this is why the multi-leveled-ness of voice is so frightening. It is exhilaratingly frightening to see bits of others revealed, and to reveal bits of oneself. This is what Bauby does—reveals himself in his purest, most unhindered state. Our voices must be used, so in using them, we must be non-Ulyssean. To maintain the voice, despite paralysis, despite laryngectomy, despite insecurity, despite want, despite all which makes us us yet also

hinders us, is the key. To share the wholeness of our voices, our trying, potentially-harmful, potentially-beautiful voices, is key. We must keep our voices true and speaking.