

A discussion on the powers of language and cosmology in Rosenstock-Huessy's The Fruit of Lips.

Since Descartes validated human intellectual pursuits with his famous 'Cogito ergo sum', and the subsequent advent of the scientific dichotomy of object verses subject, the human experience (subjective explanation) of reality had been put on the backburner in the quest for ultimate truths concerning reality. The external world that science illuminated, measurable and testable, predictable and quantifiable, for a while seemed to leave no space for the millennia of human expression and imagination that had occupied and shaped reality previously through myth, legend, shamanism, and even the arts, painting, textiles, and poetry. Yet this separation of man and world, by the mid-nineteen hundreds came full circle, and the scientific mind began to reinvigorate questions about its own validity, its own basis for inquiry at all.

The social sciences, including psychology, which represent this self-conscious inquiry into the validity of *any* thought, are now being inundated with a new methodology (as distinct from quantitative methods of Science) whose philosophic roots can in part be traced to the 'speech-philosophy' of Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy. The new *qualitative* approach to understanding the human world, that is, the human perception of the entire universe – whether through the lens of a microscope or the ecstasy of an Amazonian shaman – is through enquiry into the singularly human-defining *thing* that enables us to discuss anything in the first place: language. Theses being expounded today in any social science, from psychology to classical history, almost inevitably have to deal with this newly invigorated self-consciousness into the primacy of language in, or rather *as* the human enterprise.

In *The Fruit of Lips or Why Four Gospels*, Rosenstock-Huessy puts forth a remarkable interpretation of the meaning and purpose of Christ and the Four Gospels in exactly this light of the primacy of language. This primacy infers implicitly the power of language. Rosenstock-Huessy finds humanity as the midpoint between four fronts of reality (the 'Cross of Reality'), past, future, personal and social, the experiences of which we mediate and try to balance in everyday life with the creative powers of language. In this essay I will briefly consider some basic sociological perspectives on language as power; then in light of this I will reflect upon Rosenstock-Huessy's *The Fruit of Lips*.

Sociologically, the fundamental property of language is productivity, *Sociology* (Applebaum, Chambers 1995). Language therefore is in itself a power because it produces. Terrance McKenna, in one of his many lectures on the evolutionary origins of humanity understands this primacy of language,

[Language is] our unique ability to *provisionally* code sound [not to mention movement, gesture, visual and textural stimuli] to meaning so that we then can freely command and reconstruct the world...The fact that it is contrived, provisional, is very interesting. It doesn't arise out of the gene structure. Rather it is agreed upon by individuals who are living at the time that the linguistic structure, whatever it is, emerges into consciousness. Since individuals are replaced, the language is much more in flux than the genome (1987).

McKenna here takes a step beyond describing the merely spatial powers of language, as being the provisional naming of things at one point in time and for all time, in as much as *every new generation* seeks to add *its own proviso* to the linguistic structure. This articulates the dimension of *time* necessary to the power of speech, and this dimension is fundamental to Rosenstock-Huessy's speech philosophy.

For Rosenstock-Huessy, to be human is to speak; and more importantly, to speak meaningfully is to speak anew about the history of speech; that is, like McKenna alluded to above, to seize and build upon the linguistic structures and cosmological frameworks of the past, to command "the wave-continuum of the spirit," as Rosenstock-Huessy puts it. He continues, "We, too, must speak. And we cannot speak unless we are sure that we continue to speak and that we may reach into posterity." Rosenstock-Huessy posits that language is humanity's vehicle through time. By digesting and building upon the past, we create fresh meaning for our present lives, while granting future generations the right to live in new worlds. This guarantees the *continual* production of linguistic prerequisites for new cosmologies at every point in time, for all time.

The underlying concept, therefore, is that a history of speech is the true measure of human history, as Rosenstock-Huessy says, "We are not studying the history either of the Church or of the world. We are laying down the foundations for a history of the human spirit." Rosenstock-Huessy's major thesis in *The Fruit of Lips* is that "Jesus occupies the centre of

the history of speech.” But, furthermore, his thesis concerns the perpetuity of this spirit, or *the Word*, as follows, “I hold that we are the fruit of lips, and that our lips shall bear fruit.”

The remarkable nature of *The Fruit of Lips* lies in the second part of the title—‘or *Why Four Gospels*’. Rosenstock-Huessy’s hypothesis is that the four gospels are to be read as a package because they have a symphonic arrangement that must be read in order from the beginning of Matthew to the end of John. This position, Rosenstock-Huessy clearly states is in defence of the gospels, which were torn apart by 19th Century biblical criticism, reduced to source material, and consequently devoid of all their power *as Word*. This is because the texts read from the beginning of Matthew to the end of John disclose a steady linguistic transformation that facilitates within the reader, and itself *is* a redefinition of the history of speech: “the mind cannot help believing in a change of mind from a change of style.” Thus Rosenstock-Huessy would hold that to ignore this arrangement is to deny oneself of, what is essentially a linguistically catalysed spiritual transformation.

The change of style spoken of above originates in Jesus himself because, as Rosenstock-Huessy illustrates it, the Word is “the fruit of the fruit of the four streams of speech preceding him.” Rosenstock-Huessy describes a linear progress in the speech of antiquity, which successively push the boundaries of linguistically generated cosmologies further out into space and across time. He calls these stages “listening posts” under the proclamation, “Tell me who [you listen to] and I shall know who you are.” Despite a lack of significant ethnographic evidence, and little academic research presented in this chapter on ‘the Speech of Antiquity’, Rosenstock-Huessy’s sharp insights and eloquent style should satisfy any reader with a basic understanding of anthropology or ancient history.

The genesis of human speech, we can only assume began in ancient tribal culture. The hallmark of tribal speech and cosmology is with an emphasis on ancestry (Rosenstock-Huessy). The assumption behind this seems to be that, concerning their origins on earth and in the cosmos, such remote cultures have virtually nothing they can be *sure* of—apart from the undeniable fact that they are here because their grandparents gave birth to their parents, who gave birth to their present generation. Therefore, it would be only natural that the foundations of tribal cosmology revolve almost exclusively around this one surely knowable fact. The void that exists beyond the definite knowledge of a tribe’s lineage can then be delegated to myth and ritual, which enliven the unknown past and make it liveable in the

present. This then perpetuates the lives, stories and practices – the speech – that allowed the ancestors to perpetuate life, engendering the same ‘perpetuative’ power in the current and proceeding generations. Rosenstock-Huessy defines this type of speech in these terms: “Listeners to the spirits of the dead created ritual.” And this process certainly is ritualistic because it does not *grow* – it merely *sustains* or suspends the tribal culture across time.

“The second phase lifted the heart of man into the universe” (1978). This second mode of speech grew out of the apparent explosion in cosmological boundaries that would naturally come with development and sophistication in astrological science and mathematics. Mapping and following the stars is the trademark of Old World temple cultures like those in Egypt, China, and the Near East (Rosenstock-Huessy), as well as the New World’s Maya, Aztecs, as well as many others. This increase in knowledge of the *visible* universe would naturally add a significant spatial component to the foundations and assumptions of the ancestral-temporal tribal cosmology. These people Rosenstock-Huessy calls, “Listeners to the skyworld and the cosmic universe” who “built the temples.”

“Once ritual was established in tribe and empire, poetry, the third flower of antiquity, began” (1978). With cosmologies broadening, and human understanding enveloping greater and greater tracts of time and space, nature only seemed to get greater, more unconquerable, more terrifying: it was the rules of ritual, the laws of cities and peace-time which compensated for the unpredictable greatness and violence of Nature. Poetry arose from this cosmological milieu essentially as a transfigurative power, as Rosenstock-Huessy notes, “Poetry transfigures that nature which ritual has freed from panic...however [it] cannot make the world’s laws or peaces better than they are.”

The next stage in the speech of antiquity Rosenstock-Huessy attributes to Israel, and their unique cosmological attainments that can be found in the Old Testament. Israel’s speech is unique among the three other streams of speech outside it in that it *denied* these other streams. Cosmologies surrounding Israel were furnished by ritual, idol, temple, and art. Rosenstock-Huessy uses the story of the Tower of Babel to illustrate the diabolical state of this linguistic milieu outside Israel, “...the more rituals or temples were built, or the more poems imagined, the greater became the confusion of tongues...Israel withdrew from this world of...locally restricted myths...Israel voided the temple...Israel voided the arts.”

Israel's speech was merely "that real speech...was yet to come." Therefore as "Listeners to the future," Israelites "became prophets" (1978).

This 'confusion of tongues' is central to understanding Jesus as "the centre of the history of speech" (1978). The messianic faith of Israel permitted Jesus to step up and complete the work it had begun. Their negation of cosmologies that were bound to nature, bound to ritual, bound to myth and art, in a sense made way for a newer and greater 'headspace' to handle the inception of a linguistic mode that would institute massive and *continual* breakthroughs in cosmology. However, Jesus did not do this by negating or avoiding the modes of speech preceding him—he *fulfilled* them, i.e., put an end to them:

Jesus did not say that poetry or magic or ritual or prophecy were not excellent. He knew they were and how well he knew, he proved by his creative inventiveness of new ritual, his poetical genius of the parable, his effortless superiority to obsessions and demons, his prophetic insight into the future of the world's history. But with all these four rivers of speech filled to the brim, he emptied himself of all of them. He...decided to change into the seed of a future completely protected against mere times. The old dividedness of the human soul by these canyons wrought in us through the flow of these rivers of speech was to cease (1978).

This process is indicative of a unification of the four *cosmological steps* that these 'four rivers of speech' represent. Jesus is the culmination and completion of the cosmological evolution that occurred throughout antiquity.

"The lips of the living Jesus, wonderful as his words must have been, cannot be listened to by us. His lips must reach us...The lips of the historically effective Jesus have been the four Gospels" (1978). To investigate the effectiveness of the Gospels, Rosenstock-Huessy dissects the character of Jesus that we *inherit* from the Gospel writers in an attempt to understand *how* it is that the Gospels convey or *emulate* this pivot in the history of speech, or: how did they translate *the Word made Flesh* back into mere Word? For it is explicitly stated,

Christ had not written. And the whole truth of the Cross was based on this: his sheer incredible and certainly super-human faith. Who among us dares entrust his greatest truth to the silliness of unbelieving

neighbours? But since this had been dared, the example was set (1978).

The gospel writers were presented with a demanding task, one that would require the skills acquired from, alone, the Word's transforming powers.

Compellingly, at least to a student of modern psychology, Rosenstock-Huessy executes the above dissection to reveal Jesus' character through sharp insights into the gospel writers' own characters, particularly Matthew and John. The reflections of these two gospel writers upon the character of Jesus, in fact, believes Rosenstock-Huessy, reflect something about themselves which they see in Jesus. This is true also for Mark and Luke, although the arguments for these two are convoluted because Mark receives his diction from Peter, and because Rosenstock-Huessy treats Luke's gospel as including Acts, making it a 'two-part'. Nevertheless, it is in these personalised reflections, called the gospels, that Rosenstock-Huessy endeavours to find the character of Jesus, and hence the answer to the question, is the Spirit of the Word *made Flesh* communicable in mere words, and which are ultimately bound to subjectivity?

The idea that we choose friends in whom we see something of ourselves may be seen as narcissistic in the psychoanalytical eyes of a social psychologist, but Rosenstock-Huessy understands this to be a vital mechanism for the efficient communication – and *constitution* – of Spirit through Word, as he says, "The Master obviously lives in all of [the gospel writers] *at a different degree of distance*. As there are shortsighted and farsighted people, friend and foe, so a man is not represented fully at any one of the four distances."

Rosenstock-Huessy cleverly explains these four distances in terms of ICTHUS, the Greek word for 'fish', which is an acronym for the four names the early Church gave Jesus: Saviour, Son of God, Christ, Jesus. Each gospel writer, and therefore each gospel, conveys these four facets of the whole character of Jesus, as they convey the individual *relationships* each of them had with Jesus: "Matthew the sinner knew the Lord to be...saviour...Mark knew him from the first as the Son of God...Luke saw in him the "Christ" who converted Paul to whom Jesus had never spoken...and John, the kindred spirit, understood him as an older brother, that is, he thought of him as "Jesus," personally" (1978). Although this brief quotation will suffice for this essay, Rosenstock-Huessy lays out in great detail across a number of chapters the reasoning behind these judgements of the gospel writers.

Through these four mirrors of four specific facets, the *whole* character of Jesus is revealed. Furthermore, Rosenstock-Huessy takes this situation to its penultimate sociological articulation in pointing out that for this disclosure to effectively occur to readers of the Gospel, ICTHUS must be reversed in its presentation. "...*Such a reverse of nature is the necessary sequence of human articulation!*" Rosenstock-Huessy takes this as a fundamental law of speech, which acts to distinguish the transmission of the Spirit of the Word from "nature and the mere evolution of time" (1978). The explanation for this, says Rosenstock-Huessy, follows: "That the world sees not us but our worldly function first is the experience of any living soul...The outer man is known before the inner..." This law is therefore manifest *as a sequence* of four individual perspectives on Jesus. At the two extremes, Matthew, the saved, introduces us to the outer man, Saviour of all humankind, while John, 'the kindred spirit', introduces us to the inner man.

The appendage Rosenstock-Huessy adds to this law beautifully articulates its simple but profound purpose: "the historical acts are known before their long-term meaning." In this phrase, entire Gospel is wrapped up as a complete package with a collective purpose.

It may be apparent, however, that the above disclosure of ICTHUS does nothing to actually articulate the linguistic transformation from the speech of antiquity, which Jesus, the Word, came to initiate. Yet it would be wrong to discard this 'ICTHUS formulation' as therefore an arbitrary insight, either because it renders the gospels as subjective accounts, or because it superficially has no bearing on the transformative function of the Word.

On the contrary, Rosenstock-Huessy believes that the subjectivity made apparent by the ICTHUS formulation *is* imperative, as it offers the only rightful foundation upon which the linguistic transformation can be constructed and conveyed. This is because, "the Gospel writers themselves *must* be the documents of the linguistic change by the Word (1978, emphasis added)." Under no other circumstance than total subjectivity can Spirit be received, transmitted, or emulated, *or witnessed*: thus to objectively observe the 'independent gospels' is to *miss out*. This is the crux of Rosenstock-Huessy's impassioned plea to the 'century of criticism'.

Consequently, each of the four gospels represent four steps in this monumental transformation, because each gospel represents *the transformation of each of the gospel writers*: this is their authority. When this is understood in the light of the ICTHUS formulation, it becomes apparent is that each gospel is there to help *us*, readers two-thousand-years-removed, make the *same* four incremental steps closer to the Word—closer to the *same* transformation that was wrought upon Matthew, Mark, Luke and John by the Word made Flesh.

Since the dawn of human awareness – of seeing our nakedness – we have had to make sense of the world entirely through language. It seems natural for there to be an order in the progress of *things named*, and cosmologies built, from tribe and ancestry, to empire and territorial dominion, to cosmopolitan leisure and individual freedom in the arts, to the unknown and the unspeakable. Jesus makes each of these streams of speech known at an individual level, and this is how he lives within each of us: A newborn knows its mother's face before anything, and is reared and supported, socially and psychologically, by the family. Once children feel themselves established *as children* with parents, brothers and sisters, and grandparents, they move into the world and establish territory in schools, churches, sporting groups, and friendship circles. Once established in life and validated as an autonomous and capable entity by family and social upbringing, the adolescent takes the time to step to the boundaries, to find their freedoms and challenge their inhibitions, to find their uniqueness. Once this is done, the young adult may step, with faith in the forces that have shaped them, into the unknowable future that stretches fifty, sixty, or however many years in front of them.

Eugene Rosenstock-Huussy's speech-philosophy plays a big role in *remembering* the message and power of the Word. Each of us must take up the Cross and follow him: by digesting and making human history *our own* history, we make our present lives seeds for the future of future generations. It is this temporal, yet deeply subjective nature of the Spirit that Jesus wishes us to partake of, which Rosenstock-Huussy reminds us of, and to which the spatial revelations of a techno-economic world are so fundamentally blind.

References

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Chris, this is a very sensitive & thoughtful reading of a remarkable book. In a short essay you've managed to bring out the depth & power

of R-H's Fruit of Lips. It is a pity that the conclusion falls away & that you don't do more with the ideas developed through the essay. Still, I enjoyed it very much. Well done. It's a pity that in other bits of the course (weekly attendance, group projects etc.) you didn't get it together. Anyway, I can see you are really thinking about this material.