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We Wretched of the Earth

The Search for a Language of Justice

JOHN C. HAWLEY, S.J.

“In the beginning was the Word,” writes John—God’s revealing utterance that “was made flesh and lived among us.” This incarnational character of the Word, this “living among us,” has demanded of Christians in each age a reinterpretation of its original and ongoing meaning. If the protean nature of God’s self-expression has seen a continuing “translation” in each age, though, it is becoming increasingly evident among church members that a similar task is also required in each ethnic milieu. The “us” among whom the Word lives is made up of many communities of discourse, and a logocentric theology like Christianity must take special interest in the self-expressive nature of the ongoing local struggles for a forum. Implicated in the colonization of much of the world and the imposition of Western languages, the Church, as a matter of justice, now finds itself examining the role of language in any people’s self-definition and consequent worship of God.

The shape of Christendom is changing, and the pace of that change is accelerating. The “Third Church,” as Walbert Bühlmann has dubbed Christendom in the emergent nations, will soon set the agenda for the century to come. In 1900 there were 392 million Christians in Western developed countries (Europe and North America), and 67 million in southern countries (Asia, Africa, Oceania, and South America); 85 percent of Christians were in the First and Second Church, 15 percent in the Third

Church. By 1965 there were 637 million Christians in Western developed countries and 370 million in southern countries; 63 percent were in the First and Second Church, 37 percent were in the third. Current estimates suggest that by the year 2000 there will be 796 million Christians in Western developed countries and 1.118 billion in southern countries. Forty-two percent will be in the First and Second Church; 58 percent will be in the Third Church. This change is even more striking in the Roman Catholic Church, 70 percent of whose members will live in the developing countries in the year 2000 (Bühlmann 20).

As the makeup of the church has changed, so has consideration of its role. A new recognition has emerged that the Roman Catholic Church should stand independent from the political intentions of colonizers; the 1953 decree of the bishops of Madagascar, for example, explicitly acknowledged that self-government was a natural right (Bühlmann 43). As recently as October 1991, Pope John Paul II told Fernando Collor de Mello, President of Brazil, that "the objectives of the church in its purely religious and spiritual mission and those of the state pertaining to the common good are certainly different. But they coincide in one point: humanity and the well-being of the country." This common objective involved, he said, the modernization of work conditions, the creation of jobs, a halt to "the violence that has already taken so many lives," and the provision of financial and other services for million of peasants (Cowell, "Pope Challenges" A4). Then addressing Indians of the southern rim of the Amazon basin, he announced that "the Pope has not come, like the bandits of the past and the prospectors of today, to search for gold," and he asked their forgiveness for the "weakness and defects" of some missionaries during centuries of evangelism (Cowell, "Pope Asks" A3).

The search for a national voice among the constituents of this new Christendom is clearly evident in their writers, but that search must first choose the language most appropriate to its expression. In her recent novel *Jasmine*, Indian novelist Bharati Mukherjee has her Punjabi narrator ironically observe that her new American husband "comes from a place where the language you speak is what you are" (8). If he were a native American, the irony would be complete. She, also, is not English, so their language does not fully define who they are. This is crucial because, as the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin argues, our engagement in language does, in fact, shape our self-definition.

Consideration of this dilemma often takes on a religious cast among the writers themselves. Most postcolonial novelists who write in English, or

whose works have been translated into English, have been baptized. They attended religious schools and, for better or for worse, have been shaped by that experience. Their novels, poetry, and essays increasingly call not only for restitution—of their precolonial identity, of their postcolonial voice—but frequently do so specifically in terms of a biblical call for justice. With a lacerating irony, this struggle for justice among peoples upon whom the Gospel was sometimes cruelly imposed draws its strength from the Bible's example of Yahweh's enduring righteousness, the prophets' call to fidelity, and the significance of the individual in the eyes of God.

"In his conversation with Saint Bernard in Paradise," writes Bakhtin, "Dante suggests that our body shall be resurrected not for its own sake, but for the sake of those who love us—those who knew and loved our one-and-only countenance" (*Art* 57). This "one-and-only" incarnated specificity fascinates Bakhtin—but not as it might have fascinated a Sartrean, as the inescapable prison of our individual isolation. Bakhtin's analysis of the human condition, instead, transforms existentialist isolation.

His notion of dialogism, the idea that "we call forth, and are ourselves summoned by, the words of others, which we make our own . . . through borders we build around them" (xliv), is by now relatively well-known. This notion, perhaps, approaches a "door" in the Sartrean prison; the implications are made even more apparent in Bakhtin's earliest writings, dating from 1919 to 1924, in which "there are no things in themselves, no possibility of an actual object understood as an it-itself; [and] thus, the dialogic subject, existing only in a world of consciousness, is free to perceive others not as a constraint, but as a possibility: others are neither hell nor heaven, but the necessary condition for both" (xxxviii). Social interaction demands a porous margin of subjectivity—neither a complete submission to the other, nor a solid wall of difference.

Briefly put, in the Bakhtinian world there is an inescapable "otherness," but our very sense of our distinct self is dependent upon an interaction with the other. I look at someone else and see things about him or her that that individual is dependent upon me to "see": the backdrop, the facial expression, the gestalt. Bakhtin's emphasis in his discussion of this phenomenon is not on the conquest of one by the other, but on the simultaneity of their identification: "the resulting simultaneity is not a private *either/or*, but an inclusive *also/and*" (xxiii). Identity, for Bakhtin and his followers—the identity of a nation and certainly the identity of an individual—is, therefore, an activity rather than a thought. It is an ongoing "mythmaking," in the view of another theoretician (Mariátegui 187–88), which expresses

itself as a conversation. No healthy individual wishes to be subsumed by the other: each admits his or her status of foreigner, even in the face of the beloved.

These theories about language and identity take a sharper focus in writers whose language is historically tied to forces that controlled and suppressed the "otherness" of subject peoples. The Senegalese novelist Cheikh Hamidou Kane, first educated in a Koranic school and eventually at the Sorbonne, notes in *Ambiguous Adventure* that he was "personally conquered" by the French through their imposition of their language: "their alphabet. With it, they struck the first hard blow at the country of the Diallobé. I remained for a long time under the spell of those signs and those sounds which constitute the structure and the music of their language" (159). The true power of the French, he claims, "lay not in the cannons of the first morning, but rather in what followed the cannons," the language and culture that were imposed (49).

José María Arguedas and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o also speak for this increasingly vocal world, with its prophetic judgment upon the colonizers and its salvific witness to the interdependence of Christian peoples. Ngūgĩ puts it succinctly: "The oppressor nation uses language as a means of entrenching itself in the oppressed nation. The weapon of language is added to that of the Bible and the sword in pursuit of what David Livingstone, in the case of nineteenth-century imperialism, called 'Christianity plus 5 percent'" (*Moving* 31). Writers such as Arguedas and Ngūgĩ represent a pattern repeated throughout the postcolonial world: the Bible, implicitly identified in their writings with the oppressor, nonetheless offers a paradigmatic justification and strategy for liberation.

José María Arguedas was born in a remote Andean village in 1911 and died in Lima, by his own hand, fifty-eight years later. His mother had died when he was three, and his father, a lawyer, remarried when the boy was six. Arguedas did not get along with his stepmother and spent most of his time with the Quechua servants. When he was thirteen he was sent away to school, but his fascination with the world of the servants seems to have shaped his entire life: he later became an anthropologist, a musicologist, an ethnographer, a linguist specializing in Quechua, a poet, novelist, and translator of indigenous myths. He made what liberation theologians call a preferential "option for the poor" (Boff 416), aligning himself with them in a struggle against his own class.

Unless one is a Quechua, the Spanish language is by now identified as the natural language for all the former Incan lands. For Arguedas, how-

ever, it embodied the heritage of cultural domination of the Indians by the colonizers. In 1958, accepting the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega prize, he proclaimed, "I have not become acculturated" (Columbus 23). As we have noted, Arguedas was not, in fact, Quechua: he only desperately wished he were and was suggesting as much in his acceptance speech. His novels are written principally in Spanish, but employ Quechua regularly, implicitly asserting the ongoing presence in Peru of these people and their heritage. Of course, despite his claim in accepting the award, Arguedas did have the rather conspicuous trappings of apparent acculturation to the colonizing powers: a doctorate from the University of San Marcos in Lima, for example, where he served as head of the anthropology department at the time of his death. But his suicide suggests an internal division that plagued his life and his stories, a division that he saw no way to heal. It tore him apart, but he also recognized in this angry polarity a power that might be channeled into a salvific dialogue for himself and his Peruvian society, if *both* learned the other's language.

Like many writers in the postcolonial world, Arguedas grew increasingly uncomfortable with his own alienation from the poor that was one consequence of his mastery of the "master's" language. His was, in the words of one critic, a "mythological consciousness," which developed in three stages. The first was a "pre-historic, generative" stage, in which as a child he learned Quechua, the language of the Incas, a language in which "the circumambient situation affects the meaning of root words"—a language, therefore, with "far greater contextual immediacy than either Spanish or English" (Columbus 22). The second stage of his developing mythological consciousness, the agonistic and abstract phase, is symbolized by his formal education and the world represented by the Spanish language. In this experience, writes Claudette Columbus, "the lexical, the lettered, the systematized tried to sever Arguedas from his roots, from the people of his heart, from his place in a community, from his personal past" (23). The third stage of his development in mythological consciousness came in his mature years of fiction writing; here, "the individual accepts a basic helplessness as the condition of openness to others and to the world" (24). Closed, defensive, and self-protective systems are abandoned in favor of an ongoing development of the ancient stories. As if referring to this stage, Arguedas writes that "within the isolating and oppressive walls, the Quechua pueblo (considerably arcaicized and defending itself by dissimulation) *continues* conceiving ideas, creating songs and myths" ("Palabras" 431).

In an entry in his last diary Arguedas saw himself as living between two

ages: "The one that closes is the one of the whip and impotent hatred, funereal uprisings of fear of an oppressive god; and the one that opens is the cycle of light and liberating force . . . the liberating God, that God which reconciles and reintegrates" (qtd. Trigo 29). Will it be, he wondered, a humanistic atheism, as in Feuerbach, or can it also be the liberation of Christianity, incorporating its reintegration into the original condition as a servant of humanity? In the light of his suicide, it would seem that Arguedas was not optimistic in his own response to these questions. With our growing recognition of the disparity between the First and the Third worlds, we are not surprised by Arguedas's despair. Considering what we have noted regarding the third phase of mythological consciousness, the transcendent liberation he envisioned would demand a rejection of self-sufficiency, of rationalism, of the sort of individual who creates himself or herself and who "knows" and dominates: it would demand, in short, a rejection of the colonizing mind. Arguedas did not see this happening.

Far removed from Peru, the experience of Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o nonetheless echoes the mixture of anger, hope, and fear so evident in Arguedas. It also embodies a rejection of the western European model of human, and specifically Christian, expression. Ngūgĩ grew up in Kenya and vividly recalls the stories in Gikuyu that he heard while working in the fields as a child—the same language he spoke at home. This corresponds with Arguedas' first stage of mythological consciousness, the "pre-historic and generative" stage. He began his schooling in the village of Kamaandura; at first this missionary-run school conducted classes in Gikuyu, but after 1952 the colonial regime demanded that all education be in English. This was Ngūgĩ's equivalent of Arguedas' second stage of mythological consciousness. As Ngūgĩ remembers it, "language and literature were taking us further and further from ourselves to other selves, from our world to other worlds" (*Decolonising* 12). English became an enforcement officer especially in the lives of the imaginative and eloquent. If they wished to write, they had to play by the rules set down by the missionaries and the colonial administrators who controlled the publishing houses. The Literature Bureau in Rhodesia would only publish novels that had religious or sociological themes free from politics: "Stories of characters who move from the darkness of the pre-colonial past to the light of the christian present, yes. But any discussion of or any sign of dissatisfaction with colonialism. No!" (*Decolonising* 70).

In Ngūgĩ's opinion, the rise of universities in Africa in the 1950s

brought another form of colonialization. The best writers, a Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, or Kofi Awoonor, ended up producing "the Afro-European novel" instead of writing their own people's literature. This sort of Europeanized writing squandered the tightly controlled access to non-governmental and non-religiously aligned publishers and evaded the bold social criticism present in the very novels such authors were imitating. Thus, writes Ngũgĩ, "the African novel was further impoverished by the very means of its possible liberation" (*Decolonising* 70). The earlier control was bad, but so was this false new freedom. Recognizing his own complicity in this scheme, Ngũgĩ includes himself in the list of co-opted authors. Since 1977, however, he generally writes and publishes first in Gikuyu, seeing his own people as his principal audience, and then has the book or essay translated and published in English. This immersion in the language of his roots symbolizes Ngũgĩ's movement into the third stage of mythological consciousness, a recognition of self-empowerment through the very means of apparent alienation.

Some have criticized Ngũgĩ's decision to write in Gikuyu as an unnecessarily political response to his religious and literary training, but his defenders maintain that the colonized have little choice these days but to foreground a choice that all writers in fact make. Terry Eagleton argues that all literary theories are politically grounded. In his view, far more suspect than Ngũgĩ's confrontational stance are those disingenuous theories, supposedly apolitical, that "offer as a supposedly 'technical', 'self-evident', 'scientific' or 'universal' truth doctrines which with a little reflection can be seen to relate to and reinforce the particular interests of particular groups of people at particular times" (195).

The same might be said of theories of missiology and ecclesiology, as revisionist church historians have demonstrated in their analyses of the complex role their spokesmen and spokeswomen have played in colonial cultures. And, as the political insight that informs Eagleton's own vision draws much of its strength from Marxist analysis, so do those contemporary theologies that associate themselves with processes of liberation. For a Christian literary critic, and perhaps for others, the intersection of these disciplines provides a lively source for a discussion of fiction that is explicitly moral in its tone and marginalized in its voice, fiction like that of Arguedas and Ngũgĩ.

Both the literary theory Eagleton describes and the theology informing my analysis here share what Pedro Arrupe calls "an attention to economic factors, to property structures, to economic interests which motivate this or

that group"; both share a "sensitivity to the exploitation that victimizes entire classes, attention to the role of class struggle in history . . . [and] attention to ideologies which can camouflage vested interests and even injustice" (308). Whatever may be true of Marxist literary analysis, however, it must be noted that truly Christian liberation theology does not attribute an exclusive character to historical materialism nor to an economic framework for reality. The notion of class struggle, seen as the inevitable vehicle for historical evolution in Marxism, is here tempered by the broader framework of biblical prophecy and the call to conversion. The Latin American bishops, writing in 1979, note that there is an inspiration for liberation that is contained in the Bible. Relying on strict Marxist analysis dangerously leads, in their view, to "the total politicization of Christian existence, the disintegration of the language of faith into that of the social sciences, and the draining away of the transcendental dimension of Christian salvation" (Puebla 245). Like native peoples in the face of a colonizing power, the bishops are here objecting to the usurpation of their voice, their "language" of faith.

As Gustavo Gutiérrez, the best known of these theologians notes, liberation theology "implies a firm, Gospel-oriented witness to God's love and, as a concrete expression of that love, a firm commitment to those who are most oppressed and dispossessed" ("Criticism" 419).¹ It means "not becoming accustomed to seeing the newspapers filled day after day with pictures of mutilated corpses, of mass graves, of innocent people mowed down. . . . It means maintaining a permanent attitude of shock and rejection in the face of . . . indignities" (420). "Our task," he writes elsewhere, "is to find the words" (*On Job* 102).²

If a sense of ultimate hope and a belief in the transcendent distinguish liberation theology from strict Marxist analysis, therefore, the sense of urgency and the emphasis on praxis, or action, distinguishes it from other theologies. These theologians do not see liberation as a topic to be studied, but as an event in which to engage. As Leonardo Boff notes, liberation theology "examines the concrete practice of the oppressed, their progress and their allies; it asks about the participation of individual Christians, base communities and sectors of the church in the overall liberation process. . . . it is necessary to participate as an active member in a particular movement, a base community, a center for the defense of human rights, or a trade union. This immersion in the world of the poor and oppressed gives theological discourse a passionate edge, an occasional mordancy, a holy wrath—and a sense of the practical" (416–17). Such theologians are making a case

for the retrieval of the theological language of the preexilic prophets, and they are meeting with opposition from those who now speak the colonizer's language of stability and control.

There is, of course, a common "language" of myths and symbols in these various cultures. As Ngūgĩ himself notes, "I use the Bible quite a lot, or biblical sayings, not because I share in any belief in the Bible, or in the sanctity of the Bible. It's just simply as a common body of knowledge I can share with my audience, and the same is true when I'm writing in Gikuyu language" (Wilkinson 130). Still, what is generally missing in any confrontation between language groups, however metaphorically we may wish to apply the term "language," is an acceptance of the truth that is tied to the language itself. Perhaps the words that are effective in one culture are specific to it and can never fully be translated. In Ngūgĩ's *The River Between*, for instance, "Gikuyu myth and Judaic Old Testament touch, and in the touching the established order of each is threatened. . . . Opposing tribal religion and cosmic structure is Christianity—equally as biased, equally as ordered, and equally as necessitated by the psychological dispositions of the people who espouse it" (Howard 100). Yet Ngūgĩ describes himself as having been "deeply Christian" when writing this novel, as though he sensed that a hidden language of faith needed to be unearthed from the arbitrary historical encrustations. He describes the writing of the book: "In school I was concerned with trying to remove the central Christian doctrine from the dress of western culture, and seeing how this might be grafted on to the central beliefs of our people. 'The River Between' was concerned with this process" (E. Wright 97).

A parallel struggle shapes the works of Arguedas. Anyone familiar with the Catholic Church as represented in his *Deep Rivers* will see little social concern in that institution. Arguedas, in fact, depicts the Church as a great enslaving instrument. The indictment the novelist brings against the Spanish overseers is brought with even greater force against the policing function undertaken by the Church: the rector imagines his paternalistic words to be a necessary caution for his flock. However well-meaning he considers himself to be, he clearly embodies for the reader a pacifying role that maintains colonial power. As Pedro Trigo, the novelist's best critic, has noted, "the urgency for liberation impregnates all Arguedas's work" (37, my trans.) and there *is* liberation in the novel. This conclusion is demonstrated in detail by Gutiérrez (*Entre* 75–78). But the distinction Arguedas makes is important: it is a liberation that is brought to the Church from forces arising in, and defining, the indigenous peoples. This act of libera-

tion in Arguedas, though not made to appear explicitly Christian, shares with liberation theologians an emphasis upon the local, even "base," community as essential to and even coterminous with one's individual "salvation." Arguedas holds out less hope for transcendence than liberation theologians, however, embodying whatever little there may be in characters who have been driven crazy by their immediate circumstances.

A literary critic with an interest in liberation theology would implicitly address Arguedas's and Ngũgĩ's challenges to institutionalized religion and explicitly foreground a shared search for transcendence by stipulating the commonality of a human "metalanguage," possibly a literary equivalent to natural law, while still embracing the irreducibility of localized languages. The positing of a "metalanguage" would be an act of faith in the value of an ecology of heteroglossia, an option for explicit recognition and valorization of the other's language as *forever* Other. It would demand the patience to withhold a self-comforting digestion of the inexplicable and inexpressible in the Other. It would conduct its criticism almost with the reverence implied in Martin Buber's suggestive phrase "I and Thou." It would allow and even encourage difference, and resist the need to categorize or canonize.

The paradox that becomes increasingly evident in the closing days of the twentieth century, however, is that the *linguae francae* that have helped establish a global village have historically implied the subjugation of one community by the other. The result, which is increasingly resisted, is the obliteration of difference. And this is especially true in the realm of language. As Ngũgĩ notes, "a specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history." In the context of this discussion, this insight is particularly significant because, again in Ngũgĩ's words, "language carries culture, and culture carries . . . the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world (*Decolonising* 15-16). This specificity amounts to the "otherness" that polarizes individuals and communities, with a resultant devalorization of one by the other.

Like Arguedas, Ngũgĩ identifies the poor as the seedbed of the cultural specificity and language, the site of implicit defiance of the imposed order: "What prevented our languages from being completely swallowed up by English and other oppressor languages," he writes, "was that the rural and urban masses, who had refused to surrender completely in the political and economic spheres, also continued to breathe life into our languages and thus

helped to keep alive the histories and cultures they carried. The masses of Africa would often derive the strength needed in their economic and political struggles from those very languages. Thus the peoples of the Third World had refused to surrender their souls to English, French, or Portuguese" (*Moving* 35).

As Arguedas and Ngũgĩ exemplify, and as the critic Simon During has noted, "in both literature and politics the post-colonial drive towards identity centres around language, partly because in postmodernity identity is barely available elsewhere" (During, "Postmodernism" 43). The unfortunate historical pattern, as Ngũgĩ points out, has been the denigration of the local language and the elevation of the colonizer's (*Moving* 32). And today the global village obliterates difference: all is consumed, relativized, homogenized. Resistance to the ease of communication in the language of the former colonizer, on the other hand, as with Ngũgĩ, is a political recognition that something (or someone) is lost in the translation.

As any liberation theologian would emphasize, and as Mikhail Bakhtin recognized, the human condition is such that we are in this boat together. And we are called upon to row. That is to say, there is an ethical component to this interactional philosophy of personal and national identity. In his earliest published essay, for example, Bakhtin asks, "What guarantees the inner connection of the constituent elements of a person? Only the unity of answerability. I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life" (*Art* 1-2).

And what would an effectual understanding of literature possibly demand for the contemporary, postcolonial, postmodern Christian? "Answerability" seems a suggestive response. In the context of the essays in this volume it is a wonderful term, because it implies the prior question—a question posed by others, by other cultures, by others' needs as "they" stand before "us" and babble in an intransigently foreign tongue. It suggests a demand, as well, lest the question be left hanging in the air. As communal as such a critic believes the human situation *ultimately* to be, honesty and justice require that those in traditionally colonizing countries stand up for the wonder of an "invading," alien word: one that disrupts; one that makes new.³