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Saving Words: A Theological Response to the Twentieth-Century Crisis of Language

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IN HIS RECENT BEST-SELLING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL, *ANGELA'S ASHES*, THE Irish-American writer Frank McCourt depicts the inarticulate melancholy of a little child, Eugene, whose twin, like so many other babies of the poor, has succumbed to malnutrition. The older children of the family know that Oliver is dead and buried; but, at his tender age, Eugene is incapable of comprehending an event that even sophisticated adults, when they are brought close to it, can scarcely grasp. The toddler's simple, well-intentioned parents try to explain: "Oliver is in heaven

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Christian faith requires words, for words are fundamental to our humanity and to the Christian gospel. More, words have great power. Yet, in this age, words have been debased and robbed of their meaning. But we have no alternative. In all humility, Christians speak words to convey the word.

playing with angels and we'll all see him again someday." But Eugene is only two, and he "*doesn't have the words and that's the worst thing in the whole world.*"¹ Not to have the words: the worst thing in the world.

It seemed to me appropriate, in view of the title and stated purpose of the journal sponsoring this lecture, to attempt a meditation on words and the state of language, written and spoken, in our society today. In one way or another, the history of Christian theology in the twentieth century has been the attempt—after what some would call “the death of God” but I would rather call the death of Christendom—to find “the words” to express what Martin Buber called “the inexpressible meaning”² that does not die with the waning of a religion or the decline of human doctrines. The attempt has sometimes proven more compelling than late-nineteenth-century critics of the faith anticipated. Especially in the first half of this century, words poured forth from the theologians, and many in the pulpits and pews of Europe and America were inspired by them. As the century closes, however, we seem far from confident that we have, or even can have, “the words.” Our world appears inhospitable to much of the language of our venerable tradition; and we Christians, whose consciousness of our need to communicate persuasively with the world is increased by our knowledge that our witness is no longer automatically either expected or (necessarily) welcome, often manifest a conspicuous discomfort as we attempt to give expression to our faith.

How, in a society teeming with words and overwhelmed by images that far outshine the Babel noises of our much speaking, can we still hope that *our* words will be bearers of meaning—yes, of *redemptive* meaning? Or have we, too, perhaps, quietly given up on language? Is that why our preaching and teaching (I speak of the remnants of classical Protestantism especially) are so hesitant, so tentative, so merely imitative, so lacking in confidence and, often, so terribly predictable? Why do we scramble, so many of us, to embrace all the technologies that can seem to add weight to our messages—the weight of visual order and uniformity, the weight of easy duplication and propagation, the weight (if one may call it that) of speed? Do we not know, all the while, that none of these externalities, quantitatively enhancing as they may be, add anything to the quality of our messages? Or have we too been seduced by the marketplace into believing that the machinery of communication has rendered obsolete the torments of the true communicator?

And then, in another but related vein, why do we so obviously abhor silence, so that we fill up the blank spaces and necessary pauses of our daily lives, as of our worship, with excited and often thoughtless talk, like unsophisticated advertisers who insist that every bit of white space in their newspaper ads be covered with print or images? Can words that come to be apart from thought, and therefore apart from silence, expect to convey anything beyond the usual neuroses of “the chattering classes”? Why, in the self-congratulatory age of information, do so many of us

¹Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (New York: Scribner, 1996) 81 (my italics).

²Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937) 113.

suffer from cultural and historical amnesia, not least of all the so-called computer-literate, who before a sonnet of Shakespeare or the prose of Thackeray or a chapter of St. Paul are thrown into confusion?

A line from the writings of one whose prophetic witness has been too much ignored in academic circles, the French lawyer and lay theologian, the late Jacques Ellul, has arrested my attention and suggested my title, "Saving Words": "Anyone wishing to save humanity today," writes Ellul, "must first of all save the word."³ My meditation on words will be goaded by that provocative challenge and will include three parts. In the first, I simply remind you of what you already know as students of the scriptures: that the Christian life and mission are inseparably linked with language. In the second, with the help of some keen observers of the age, I reflect on the fate of language in our contemporary context. And in the third, I ask how Christians may meet the challenge to their faith and vocation that is posed in our time by what Ellul calls "the humiliation of the word."

I. GOD'S WORD AND OUR WORDS

Let us recognize from the outset that the doctrine of the incarnation of the word of God constitutes a permanent critique of human language. Whatever positive meaning the enfleshment of the divine *Logos* may have for faith (and as the central confession of the Christian movement its meaning is symbolically inexhaustible), its negative import is clear: if God's word must finally, by God's own counsel, be expressed in a life; if the mystery of the love that has generated that word can only be revealed through the medium of the crucified one and communicated to us through the ongoing presence of a transcendent and indwelling Spirit, then nothing less than this incarnate, Spirit-illuminated word may be allowed to assume the position of ultimacy. Our words, even when they are wrested from the agony of deepest thought, even when they represent the refined and trustworthy meditations of the centuries, fall far short of the truth that they strive to attain. And their fall is greatest when, forgetting the ineffability of the reality by which they are enthralled, they present themselves to the world as though they were as such the truth. If God's word alone is sovereign, then all our words are relegated a priori to the realm of relativity. At its very best and most beautiful, human language does not rise above the penultimate. And this is only to state with respect to language what Tillich called the Protestant principle: that nothing finite may presume infinity, nothing conditional unconditionality, nothing temporal eternity, and so forth. Our words, our dogmas, our theological systems, our prayers, our Holy Scriptures themselves can only point, awkwardly, to a living truth that forever eludes containment.

Were this the only observation about human language that is made by the Judeo-Christian tradition, however, it would not by itself constitute the full prob-

³Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 254.

lematic of this subject. After all, it is not exceptional to Christians that they know (when they are true to their sources) that reality profoundly transcends language. There are instances and intimations of that wisdom in every mature reflection on human existence, in every profound philosophy, in every enduring religion. What lifts this dimension of the Christian understanding of language into its full-blown state of theological dialectic is faith's awareness that, despite this strict and humanly insurmountable limitation of our words, they are nevertheless—*nevertheless!*—absolutely required of us. We are not allowed to retire into silence, or rest in the honest recognition of our deep incapacity for truth, or find an abiding satisfaction in song-without-words—for instance, in wordless spirituality or mystical ecstasy. “Necessity is laid upon me,” writes Paul, “yea, woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel” (1 Cor 9:16, KJV)—and one can almost feel the anguish in this statement; for the “must” Paul experiences, the *necessitas* that drives him to kerygma, is so relentless that the word he must use to describe it, ἀνάγκη, suggests not only compulsion but distress. Speech is a veritable fate that accompanies the call to discipleship; and, like most of what we experience as destiny, we rarely accept it without protest and an often rekindled desire to have done with it.

That desire is best expressed, I have always thought, in one of Jeremiah's laments—though it is there, explicitly or implicitly, in all the prophets and in Christ himself, whose last temptation (Kazantzakis aside) may have been the temptation to silence. In Jeremiah, however, that temptation is stated unreservedly:

O Lord, thou hast deceived me,
and I was deceived;
thou art stronger than I,
and thou hast prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day;
everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I cry out,
I shout, “Violence and destruction!”
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, “I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,”
there is in my heart as it were a burning fire
shut up in my bones,
and I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot. (20:7-9, RSV)

There are echoes of this lament throughout the scriptures—for instance in Acts 4:20, where the disciples, charged by the authorities with uttering unlawful claims, reply almost apologetically, “[W]e cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.” For the disciple community, speech is not a matter of choice. It follows ineluctibly from the experience that creates faith. It cannot be held in.

This compulsion to speech has often annoyed the critics of our faith. “Poor

little talkative Christianity,” writes E. M. Forster,⁴ the great English wordsmith whose fear of verbosity permitted him to craft only five or six novels in the space of a relatively long life. Has there ever been a religion more given to words than ours? Think of St. Thomas, Luther, Hildegard, Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, with his nearly endless outpouring of “church dogmatics”! Or Bonhoeffer: seventeen volumes of collected works in a lifetime cut pathetically short. “Poor little talkative Christianity”! When this charge is laid against the simplifiers, who reduce everything to slogan and cant, we are all apt to agree with Forster. But an Augustine or a Simone Weil can only be accused of verbosity by the ignorant. What is this “necessity” that drives faith to speech?

Paul, as usual, provides the most direct and immediate reason:

“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” [he writes, quoting the prophet Joel]. But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?...So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:13-17)

“Faith,” declared Anselm of Canterbury, “seeks understanding”—and we have yet, in North American Christian circles, seriously to grasp this fact! But faith also seeks articulation, and the greater the understanding that is granted to faith the greater the compulsion to find the right words to express it—the *foreknowledge that it cannot be adequately expressed notwithstanding*. For faith believes the promise that God’s word will not return to God void (Isa 55:11). Through the “foolishness” of what we preach, declares Paul, God brings some to faith (1 Cor 1:18-25). It is not that our words themselves have the power to do this; they are no more than water or bread or wine apart from the spiritual transformation they must undergo to become bearers of *God’s* word—which is why Luther can speak of preaching as sacrament. Yet, this tradition of Jerusalem never bypasses the human act of witness in favor of the seemingly more direct approach of immediate spiritual enlightenment.

Why, we may well ask, is this so? Why, when the obvious aim of divine providence is the communion of Creator Spirit with the spirit of the creature, does this tradition place such emphasis upon language—especially when it is so conscious of the limitations of language? There is some evidence, after all, that the Bible knows about that manner of spirituality that St. Thomas experienced—the mystical visitation that caused him to despair over all that he had written in his mighty *Summa* and to view it as “straw.” “I know a person in Christ,” writes Paul, “who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—[who] was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor 12:2-4).

⁴E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1924) 124.

Yes, this spirituality of the third heaven, which has again become interesting to many in our time, is known to the Bible. But the tradition of Jerusalem on the whole rejects it—as Paul does when, in responding to the taunt of some that he, too, ought to give evidence of his apostleship by speaking in tongues, he says (almost angrily) that he “would rather speak five words with [his] mind...than ten thousand words in a tongue” (1 Cor 14:19). The reason for this preference, surely, goes beyond the merely pragmatic need of the teacher to “instruct others”; it is bound up with our very souls. We are speaking creatures, and our souls are violated when religion (or whatever else) tries go directly to the heart without passing through the ears and the mind. McCourt is right: to be wordless, not to have “the words,” is “the worst thing in the world”; because, precisely as such creatures, we cannot make good our potentiality for fulness of being until our deepest thoughts and experiences are able to find some outlet, however inadequate, in language. The very purpose of the cross, and of the “foolishness” that proclaims it, could be said to be the liberation of our tongues from their bondage to dumbness and to lies, that we might become the speaking animal—*homo loquens*—who in behalf of all the other creatures responds to *Deus loquens* in praise and gratitude for being.

But how shall we appropriate this high biblical valuation of language in an age when all such statements as this sound strange or merely poetic? Commenting on Luther’s theology of the word, James Nestingen writes: “At the root of Luther’s witness is a primitive, simple, and in-the-best-sense radical understanding of how words work. Words in general are power; the Word of God in particular is self-effecting, self-performing power.” Yet, he continues, “The idea that words have a life of their own seems strangely out of place nowadays....[I]n the Western world today, which is awash in talk, most of it electronic, the notion that words are power sounds not only primitive but downright foolish.”⁵

II. THE HUMILIATION OF THE WORD

“No one consciously tried to bring it about,” writes Jacques Ellul, “yet the situation of the word in our society is deplorable.”⁶ He traces the humiliation of language to the beginnings of the modern epoch. “After the sixteenth century, we have an avalanche of talk that is increasingly useless. This development is easily associated with the bourgeoisie: they reduced the word to the schematic needs of business, or to conceal what people wanted to avoid saying.”⁷ George Steiner, whose more philosophic and literary analysis of the subject in many ways parallels Ellul’s, locates what he names the origins of “the crisis of language” more precisely “during the decades from the 1870s to the 1930s.” Until this period, he argues, “even the most astringent scepticism, even the most subversive of anti-rhetorics, remained committed to language.” But (for reasons that he details, but which are

⁵James Arne Nestingen, *Martin Luther: His Life and Teachings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 28.

⁶Ellul, *Humiliation*, 155.

⁷*Ibid.*

too complex to reproduce here) Steiner concludes that the “covenant between word and world” was broken during that epoch, and to such an extent that the break “constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself.”⁸

Both Steiner’s and Ellul’s critiques of language in the contemporary world are powerful; some, of course, find them excessive. Yet they give an honest, well-documented and (especially in Steiner’s case) learned expression to the vague foreboding felt by most of us who labor with words as we contemplate the public state of language today. “While we have a wasteland of empty verbiage,” Ellul writes,

at the same time we suffer from an excess of information broadcast everywhere about everything, so that its quality is utterly destroyed. We are overwhelmed by a jumble of information: on the latest model of ballpoint pens, the pope’s election, the wedding in Monaco, the Iranian revolution, increased taxes, new possibilities for credit, the conversion of the biggest polluter to the cause of nonpollution—ten thousand words of information in an instant. We would go crazy if we really had to listen to all this seriously, so the flood of words continues, and we let it flow by. After all, whether any words are involved, the result is the same: I listen with half an ear and I catch here and there a snatch of a phrase, or a moving tone of voice, but in any case the word no longer matters to me. I have been exposed to too many words and too much information. I must defend myself against these invasions; my mind closes up spontaneously, to keep me from being torn to pieces. I am like Orpheus turned over to the media Maenads; I am blown by every wind of doctrine and words; I am lured into every trap. I have stopped listening. I refuse to hear (without even realizing it).⁹

An American author, James Gleick, in a new book entitled *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, offers what may be thought an “up-date” on this scenario. Perhaps a new type of human being has been in the making, who not only has forgotten how to “refuse to hear,” but is so conditioned by what Ellul would call “logorrhea” that he or she is impatient with even the normal speed of human communication and desirous that everything should be...“faster.” The “fast talker,” Gleick notes, can get out between 150 and 175 words per minute; but people can receive [but one must wonder what “receive” could mean in this context!] at a rate of 500 to 600 words per minute, that is, three or four times faster than the fastest talker—and, Gleick observes, “these days, many *want to*.”¹⁰

While language has been made to serve increasingly banal ends, “the word is also devalued,” Ellul notes, “by the very conditions in which it is spoken in our day. The triumph of thought based on images implies a reduction of the word.”¹¹ I suspect that “the invasion of images” is more overwhelming in North America than in Ellul’s France, or, indeed, any other part of the world. For not only are we moder-

⁸George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989) 92-93.

⁹Ellul, *Humiliation*, 156-157.

¹⁰James Gleick, *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything* (New York: Pantheon, 1999) 178-179 (my italics).

¹¹Ellul, *Humiliation*, 158.

nity's own greatest production, the very center of the technological society Ellul analyzed in his tome of that title, but we have always manifested a suspicion of language and a preference for deeds and pictures: "One picture is better than a thousand words," we have told one another, generation after generation; and you remember how we taunted one another as children with "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me."

This preference for the act and for sight has only increased among us during the present century. I am old enough to remember books for children that contained very few—and therefore precious—illustrations; today, the books that I am obliged to read to my grandchildren tax my skill as a reader very little, because they are full of pictures and sparse—to the point of poverty—in words. The Canadian novelist, Timothy Findlay, in a CBC lecture on literature, reported that he had compared the vocabulary in the first-grade reader he had used as a child with the contemporary equivalent and had discovered to his astonishment that, while the old reader contained something like 600 different words, the present-day reader contained only 60. Images, most of them replicating as closely as possible the television or comic-book genre, had apparently rendered words obsolete, except for a few of the most rudimentary action words. One thinks in this connection, too, of the impoverished state of blasphemy and invective in our culture. What a rich array of curses we had back in the 1930s by comparison with today's ubiquitous and monotonous F-word!

The victory of seeing over hearing, image over word, technique, speed, and immediacy of reception over the evocation of sustained thought is linked, Ellul insists, with "our tendency to live only in the present."

An image-oriented person is a person with no past. He lives only on the basis of what images can supply. Each image contains all he needs to know; he has no need to remember or retain what he learns today. Images and the transmission of knowledge through association of images convey all one needs immediately. The uselessness of history as the study of the past coincides with this.¹²

Words are not dispensed with, of course, though few of our contemporaries have access to more than a tiny fraction of the immense and wonderfully nuanced vocabulary of the English language; but the tendency that the "technicalization of everything" induces in language is such that the words that are retained are reduced, as Ellul puts it, to the servant class. Steiner says the same thing in nearly the same way: "Used (misused) as some kind of representational grid or facsimile of 'the real,' language has indeed withered to inert routine and cliché. Made to stand for inaccessible phenomenality, words have been reduced to corrupt servitude."¹³ Robbed of their long-evolved and suggestive meanings, words become signifiers of rudimentary actions and commands, or simply of other words. They do not have the power to describe and conjure up the real world, as they did for Luther, for "the

¹²Ibid., 159.

¹³Steiner, *Real Presences*, 97.

covenant between word and world” has been broken: the world, as Steiner puts it, is no longer “sayable.”¹⁴ Thus, according to Ellul,

The Word can find a modest place for itself only if it is utterly subordinated to the efficiency and the imperative of technique. The word [itself] has become image: the word made for computers, dominated by writing, inscription, and printing, and changed into a thing, into space and something visible. Now it must be seen to be believed, and we think we have finally fathomed all of language when we can apply a semiotic diagram to it.¹⁵

Perhaps the most bizarre spinoff from this corrupt servitude of the word is analyzed by a University of Freiburg professor, Uwe Pörksen.¹⁶ “Plastic words,” he tells us, are ordinary words that are taken out of the stream of colloquial language, usually under the auspices of the social sciences, ideological movements, or marketing enterprises, given a pseudo-scientific connotation through their use in these disciplines and movements, and then returned to the realm of public discourse with vague but authoritative, positive, and imperative connotations they did not have before. Pörksen thinks of such words as “development,” “sexuality,” “model,” “trend,” “system,” “values,” “structure,” “identity,” “communications,” and other, similar terms that now color our language. Such words, he says, have an aura of prestige and precision, though in fact, while they connote (that is, conjure up) highly desirable and powerful associations, they denote nothing specific; because they are in fact a-historical, abstract, non-particular, and infinitely interchangeable, like plastic Lego blocks. For instance, the word *Entwicklung* (development) acquired in the former German Democratic Republic such an important symbolic connotation that it was used in every sort of discipline, publicity, and public address indiscriminately; and not to use it was to invite the suspicion that one might be an enemy of the state.

George Steiner summarizes the situation in this way:

Sprachkritik, which I take to be the central “motor” and motion of spirit in our present condition, elucidates, accompanies a general retreat from the word. The sciences and technologies which govern twentieth-century Western civilization have become “modern” and dominant in exact proportion to their mathematical formalization. Larger and larger domains of discovery, of scientific theory, of productive technological appliance have passed out of reach of verbal articulation and of alphabetic notation. Modern biology, genetics, physics, chemistry, modern engineering and cosmological conjectures can no longer be put forward or debated in non-mathematical language.... What matters more: the atomic and sub-atomic states of experienced reality—this chair, this table, the dynamics of molecular biology, the spatio-temporal conditions of galactic structures and singularities, are accessible not to the literate, but only to the numerate. Common speech is ptolemaic, alchemical, opaquely metaphoric in respect to the ex-

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁵Ellul, *Humiliation*, 160.

¹⁶Uwe Pörksen, *Plastikwörter: Die Sprache einer internationalen Diktatur* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1988). *Plastic Words: The Tyranny of a Modular Language* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1995).

istential matter of the world as science and engineering perceive it.

The existentially expanding use of computers...has, to an unforeseen degree, deepened, accelerated and made ubiquitous the numerization of our professional, social and, before long, private lives.¹⁷

One could go on in this vein. One could ask, for instance, about much (fortunately not all, but much!) of our so-called creative literature today, which, by comparison with the nineteenth-century novels that many of us still prefer to read (Dostoevsky, Dickens, Hawthorne, the Brontes, for instance), is so predetermined by the search for style and novelty that story—not to mention truth—is secondary at best, and often, apparently, of little interest to the author. But the point has been made, I think: language—and particularly language as the bearer of meaning—has been brought low in our historical moment. Words fail us. We do not have “the words”—words that have the power to convey our deepest longings, and we do not trust the words that we have.

And for us who are Christians this is certainly “the worst thing in the world”; because, while our tradition has always known the limits of language, we are also a people under necessity to speak the faith. And how shall we do so, when we ourselves seem to suffer from the same linguistic malaise that we observe in our culture at large?

III. NEVERTHELESS!

And here the message that I shall want to leave with you is contained more poignantly in a story, one of my favorite stories, than in the more discursive language of theology. Günter Grass, this year’s Nobel laureate, published in 1979 a small novel entitled, *Das Treffen in Telgte*.¹⁸ It is a rather difficult book for those of us whose literary heritage is the world of the Anglo-Saxons, because it is about an imaginary meeting of poets and writers in the German language, living in the seventeenth century, most of whom are little known to us: Buchner, Dach, Greflinger, and von Grimmelhausen, and many others—though, if we ever glance at the names of the authors of some of our best-known hymns, we should certainly have encountered the name of one of Grass’s characters, Paul Gerhard.

In this story, Grass, true to his gadfly reputation, has no intention of amusing his readers with a merely “interesting” tale—though he at least, among contemporary writers, still knows how to tell a tale. But this tale, like his more famous story, *The Tin Drum*, has a highly didactic intention. In the midst of a century that has been filled with wars, political intrigue, and “future shock,” Grass revisits one of the most critical periods in European, and particularly Germanic, history: the first part of the seventeenth century. During this era, there occurred what was later called the Thirty Years’ War. The armies of most of the western European nations ranged back and forth over the landscape for three decades. Germany, comprised

¹⁷Steiner, *Real Presences*, 114.

¹⁸Günter Grass, *The Meeting in Telgte*, trans. Ralph Manheim (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979).

then of numerous little princedoms, was a virtual battlefield. The slaughter was horrendous and almost wholly capricious. By 1642 Germany was exhausted, its population decimated. Peace negotiations between the nations had already begun in 1640, but it was not until 1648 that the famous Peace of Westphalia was signed in the city hall of my adoptive European home, Münster in Westphalia.

This is the setting for Günter Grass's story, *The Meeting in Telgte*. Telgte is a little town, a Catholic pilgrimage site, very near to Münster and Osnabrück, the two larger cities where all the diplomats and princes and military leaders were gathered to see whether life could go on after all these hostilities and devastations. To little Telgte, Günter Grass's poetic licence summons all the poets of the period. While the great political personages are working out the terms of the Peace of Westphalia, the poets (Grass imagines) are required to present their own statement. Can art rise above the clamor of the nations, above revenge and the insatiable, insatiable human quest for power and glory? Can truth transcend the compromises and suspicions of the politicians and the intrigues of the military? Can *words* be found?—words of truth, yet also of hope, which may give humanity a little courage to go on, to begin again at the place where (as Keats put it) all authentic hope must always begin: “on the far side of shipwreck.”

At first, the gathering in Telgte is full of promise. The poets and writers enthrall one another with their brilliant essays and tales. Their expectations for the production of a common statement are high. They are indeed so excited by their own verbal productions that they lose track, almost, of the grim reality of the world around them.

But after days and weeks, it transpires that they find themselves caught up in the complications, the half-truths, and the subterfuge of the general human condition. Their whole enterprise comes to a grinding halt one morning when they are brought to the realization that the wherewithal of the marvellous feast they had enjoyed the night before—an unheard-of, bounteous banquet in a time of dreadful want and starvation—had been procured by one of their own members, a scoundrel who had lied, killed, and plundered in order to acquire the stuff requisite to their merrymaking. And they had all partaken of it, no questions asked, though in their hearts they knew it had been ill-gotten.

Then, Grass shows, in the clear light of the morning after, the poets sank into a deep despair. And into silence. For they knew now that they could not speak from *beyond* the crisis: they were simply part of the crisis. Their half-finished document, they knew, “would not be a protest, but only a statement of the usual helplessness. No need to trumpet that. That's not what they had met for. So why *were* they sitting there?”

Just in this moment of failure, a guest arose: a person of eminence, who had until then said very little. He was not himself a poet but a musician—the famous court musician of the age, Heinrich Schütz. Why had they come? Why were they “sitting there?” “For the sake,” said Heinrich Schütz—“For the sake of the written

words, which poets alone had the power to write in accordance with the dictates of art. And also *to wrest from helplessness*—he knew it well!—a faint ‘and yet.’”

And yet! The German word is *dennoch*: to wrest from helplessness a faint “Nevertheless!”

With this, gradually recovering their courage, the poets were enabled to begin again, “speaking,” as Grass put it with force and poignancy, “*speaking into the... erupting silence.*”

Substitute for Grass’s gathering of seventeenth-century poets, if you will, a gathering of late-twentieth-century ministers or students of theology—any such gathering; this one, for instance. Such a gathering has occurred, surely, because each one, by differing but often similar paths, has found in this faith tradition a core of meaning and hope. Together they are struggling to find the words they need, individually and as a body, to announce this message of life’s renewal in a world of various sorts of warfare, most of them at least as deadly as the Thirty Years’ War, and more widespread. They know, these would-be poets of faith, that their words, even if and when they can find them, can never by themselves convey the wonder and mystery of the thing they have experienced, the divine invitation that has brought them together in the first place. Yet they struggle for a knowledge of those saving words: they produce their little essays, their sermons, their theses—and sometimes they are quite elated about the possibilities of speaking from beyond the crisis, illuminating the context, bringing light to the darkness.

But then they contemplate the plain facts of the matter: how little weight words carry in this image-driven society, “rotten with lifeless clichés” (Steiner), drowning in data, promulgating plastic words, forgetful of the past, ignorant of the sacred texts, postmodernly suspicious of all authority and every system of meaning—especially religious ones. And they contemplate, too, their own pretty obvious and unquestioning participation in that culture: their own existential doubt, their lack of belief in the capacity of language to convey ordinary meaning—to say nothing of salvation—and not least of all their pathetic reliance upon all the shallow consumerist pursuits that they know in their hearts to be dehumanizing and unjust. And so, a kind of despondency is usually discernible beneath the surface of such ecclesiastical gatherings today, especially those sponsored by the once-mainline churches, which in earlier times were as full of bravado as are some of the formerly sectarian groups that today have *become* the main line.

And if I ask myself (as I frequently must) what is the role of the theologian in response to this incipient and sometimes obvious despondency, I should like to be able to answer: it is the role of Heinrich Schütz. Why are we sitting here? For the sake of the words, spoken and written, that Christian preachers and poets are given the power to discern in accordance with the dictates of their faith and their disciplines of learning; so that they may wrest from helplessness—I too know it well!—a faint “and yet.” ⊕

