

EARLHAM COLLEGE

Earlham College
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The Monster and the Riddle

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Thank you, Fatima, Jamie-Rose and Jason; and thank you, Class of 2007, for inviting me to be your Baccalaureate speaker. I feel deeply honored; in a year filled with numerous wonderful moments, this occasion takes pride of place. I would like to be able to congratulate you one by one. If I don't do so, if I don't tell funny stories about experiences in class or recall special events off campus — late dinners in Buenos Aires, for example, street performances in Porto Alegre, sessions at coffee houses in New York City, and workshops at Pendle Hill or in San Francisco — it isn't because these memories aren't engraved deeply in my heart. It is rather that this is the first occasion I have had to speak to your whole class at once. It seems appropriate, under the circumstances, to greet all of you and to acknowledge what we have in common. We are all leaving. We can hardly wait for what comes next. We're a success story. You have survived an intense educational experience at Earlham lasting a fair number of years, and I am still on my feet after more than twenty. We probably share a complex set of emotions as we pack up our things and leave the place we've called home for so long. You may be more excited about it than I am, but I doubt it.

I am aware that certain rites of passage, like this one, can never be repeated. It's important to take it over the top. It seems to me that my best contribution to making this day unforgettable is to offer you a gift. The gift I've chosen is a riddle. If you prove to be the only class in the country with your very own riddle, that in itself will be special. But I hope that the riddle does more than simply distinguish you. I hope it packs a wallop. I'd be pleased if, in the future when you think about the riddle, your hearts give a great thump, causing you to gulp down deep drafts of air.

You may imagine riddles to be easy and frivolous because you have in mind "Why did the chicken cross the road?" or "What is black and white and read all over?" Riddles can be much more than that: Indeed, some are enigmas of immense significance requiring something like what anthropologists call "thick interpretation." I'm about to present an important clue which I believe has been overlooked by other riddle-researchers. When grand riddles penetrate the density of the ordinary, they deploy monsters as signs.

Now I realize that some of you are already determined never to think about the riddle I'm about to give you, much less the monster. You may even intend to plug your ears while I talk about both. Among the rest of you, on the other hand, I bet there are those of you who wish you had a pen with you so that you could scrawl the riddle on your Baccalaureate programs. Whatever your current attitude, I predict that as the years go by first one of you and then another will not only recall the riddle but amaze yourself by thinking of a possible solution. You'll e-mail a classmate who by chance will be thinking along similar lines as she stands over a sink in La Paz, Bolivia, watching the water swirl counter-clockwise down the drain. The topic will come up again at a class reunion in five years, maybe ten. You'll be irresistibly drawn into the discussion. You'll e-mail me with news of monsters and solved riddles. I'll be waiting.

The riddle in question consists of two words and one punctuation mark. It is "Are we?"

Notice that "Are we?" is a peculiar question. It sounds incomplete. We expect an adjective or noun to follow the "we:" "Are we witty and pretty and bright?" Yet "Are we?" is a complete sentence. Those on the stage behind me might say to you, "You are remarkable giggle-bags" and you might reply, "Are we?" This kind of question-and-answer pattern is a common part of our discourse.

Yet the question remains: What do we mean when we ask, "Are we?" And how is this riddle associated with monsters?

To help you along as you begin your investigations, I am going to review with you some riddling situations which seem especially promising. All of them involve monsters. Sometimes the monsters aren't obvious, and sometimes they are. The location of the monster in the riddling situation, I maintain, is a part of the solution; and if we don't see that, the riddle, even if it entertains, stops short of doing its work.

It follows that part of the challenge in figuring out the answer to the riddle, "Are we?" lies in identifying the monster who stands in the liminal space which you must cross in order to reach through the riddle on to the other side. Fortunately, you have had lots of practice at Earlham in discerning and confronting the spectral and symbolic monsters which alert us to the questions which cannot be ignored or wished away. The Earlham faculty has been pitiless in exposing you to dozens of riddles which, according to the dictionary, are questions or puzzles the answers to which require ingenuity. This is dangerous work, and in my view all the Earlham faculty is dangerous because of its steadfastness in undertaking it. Education is a balancing act which requires acknowledging the wisdom handed down by our ancestors and at the same time testing it, demanding it to prove itself adequate for our time and place. No wonder that occasionally a teacher drinks the hemlock or is placed under house arrest. No wonder too that today we are celebrating the particular kind of ingenuity which Earlham fosters, the kind the world is in great need of, and about which you are now expert.

The first riddle is the oldest and no doubt the most famous. You have all heard it: What is it that has one voice and yet becomes four-footed, then two-footed, then three-footed? Oedipus the King, long before he became a royal personage, was able to discern the answer because he grasped its metaphorical nature: A child crawls, then walks, and as an old man he leans on a staff which can be considered a third foot. Sophocles in his play *Oedipus Rex* has Oedipus recount the story in a flashback. It is here that we learn about the monster, the sphinx, who rampaged around the city of Thebes confronting the terrified populace with the riddle and murdering all who couldn't answer it. When the weary traveler, Oedipus, then a teenager, desecrated its meaning, the monster killed herself.

The episode as Sophocles recounts it serves its purpose very well, and I have never heard of anyone objecting to it. I must admit, however — taking into account only the behavior of the monster — I find the ending of the story unpersuasive. I don't think a riddler would commit suicide because someone had discovered the answer. On the contrary: until a riddle has been decoded it hasn't been legitimated. The monster, instead of being frightfully clever and profound, might instead be merely strung out and stoned, a babbling, in short, a fraud.

Thus, while I mean no disrespect to Sophocles, I want to claim that the monster didn't take her own life when Oedipus answered the riddle. On the contrary, after demonstrating to the Thebans in the most compelling manner the importance of language and waiting them out as they learned to deploy it in ingenious ways, the monster disappeared. Perhaps she simply lost her strangeness and the Thebans could no longer discern her presence among the crowds. Perhaps, like other sphinxes in long ago times, she took her place as a sentinel atop a votive column and put her hybrid identity to good use as a guardian to a community for the first time claiming ownership to its linguistic inventiveness.

As a heuristic device for modern times let me acknowledge the limitations of the Theban riddle. The setting may seem alien to you and the monster improbable. Nevertheless, I hope that I have succeeded in persuading you that the riddle was important because it made manifest to an imperiled community its power to solve its problems through discursive deployments, that is, through cultural action. Now I feel compelled to skip through the centuries to a more familiar time and place. I choose Holland. The time is 1641. The riddler is one of the founding fathers of modern thought, Renee Descartes, who had moved to Holland to take advantage of its relatively liberal intellectual atmosphere.

Is there anyone who is unfamiliar with Descartes' extraordinary abilities? Mathematician, scientist and metaphysician, his success in solving riddles can be illustrated by his approach to the "suis-je" question. "Suis-je?" in French means "Am I?" or "Do I exist?" A lesser mind might take his or her own existence for granted, but Descartes, having studied as a youth in a Jesuit school, was acquainted with the assumption that monsters called demons could mislead the unwary. He felt compelled to consider the possibility that his sense of his own existence was simply a devilish delusion. What he wanted and what he ultimately produced was a demonstration of "Je suis" which seemed as unassailable as a geometric proof.

I don't want to give the impression that Descartes was like some twentieth century existential hero preoccupied with himself and his identity. In truth he was intent on constructing a scientific method. He may well have had his eyes closed when, having resolved to doubt everything he saw, heard, tasted, touched or smelled, he realized that even as he doubted he must exist. Someone must exist to do the doubting. Certain knowledge was therefore attainable — he had just attained it. In short order he went on to prove the certainty of other clear and distinct ideas.

Has it occurred to you to follow Descartes' example? The question he posed, "Do I exist?" is similar to "Are we?" Maybe you could attempt to think together and prove that you are or you exist — something of that sort. But would it work? Descartes could sit by the fire, close his eyes, and resolve to think: there was only one of him. Can you find a moment for all of you to think? Frankly, I have my doubts. One of you will be sleeping, one will be busy tasting her hummus sandwich, a third will be humming "Not Ready to Make Nice." It does no good for some of you to say or, more accurately to ask, "We think, therefore are we?" This is a class riddle, after all. The "Are we?" must apply to everyone.

Yet even if Descartes' method won't work for you, I think his reflections provide hints as to how to proceed. He was significant during his time for turning inward, searching for answers to the question, "What is truth?" in the way logic works or, more precisely, in the way humans use what some more recent scholars have called symbolic structures. As the decades wore on, and especially in the twentieth century, theorists became ever more appreciative of language itself as the source of meaning. It follows that people do not discover truth, they invent it, as they invent peace. This morning we are attempting to agree on the truth about a particular problem, that of being or existing. Descartes' "suis-je" question can be seen as a particular instance of the peculiarities of the verb, "to be." It is perhaps the most common of verbs, but what does it signify? "We sleep" "we taste," "we hum" — all of us can identify and imitate those actions: but "I am?" "We are?" How would we act that out?

Is it possible — I raise the point for purposes of discussion — that it doesn't mean anything? Perhaps it is a privative, that is, a marker which expresses privation or negation. In that case "We are" would mean, perhaps, "we not sleeping," "we not tasting," "we not doing anything," "we when the very possibility of action has been exhausted." Let us follow this line of inquiry to its ultimate conclusion and simply omit the "are" from your class riddle, "Are we?" What is left is surely the shortest riddle in the world: "We?"

I must admit feeling dissatisfied with this line of thought. Some of you might misunderstand me and conclude that I mean to imply that you are not. Others might object that removing the "are" from "Are we?" makes the riddle harder to solve, not easier. It's almost impossible for us to think "We" without "are."

It is time for another riddling situation and another monster. This is the only riddle I'm presenting today in which the monster is off-stage. His name is Gabriel Gonzalez Videla. He was president of Chile in the mid-1940s. Having been elected president by a coalition of political parties, he decided to outlaw one of the parties and to imprison its leaders in a concentration camp. One of the leaders was Pablo Neruda, who had been elected to the Chilean senate. Neruda lived underground for many months then escaped by horseback over the Andes, eventually arriving in Europe.

The film, *Il Postino*, (*The Postman*) is a fictional account of what happened to Neruda while living on a small island off the coast of Italy. Some of you have probably seen this notable film and remember the relationship between the renowned poet and political figure, Pablo Neruda, and the self-effacing, barely literate youth who was given the job of delivering Neruda's mail. Mario, the postman, mesmerized by Neruda's lifestyle and certain that poetry and romance go together, contrived to get to know the poet and pressed him for aid: Mario wanted to write poems to his sweetheart. Neruda responded by teaching Mario about metaphors.

One day when the two of them were sitting on the beach, Neruda recited one of his own poems. Mario responded by saying, "I feel like a boat in the sea of your words." Neruda congratulated him for having created a metaphor, and the postman took a child-like pleasure in his accomplishment. Then comes one of the film's most significant moments, when Neruda and the postman exchange roles. We are familiar with this kind of inversion from Sophocles' play, where Oedipus ridicules the wisdom of the city's wisest man and asserts that as stupid and untutored as he was, he, Oedipus — not the wise man — was the one who answered the Sphinx's riddle. In *Il Postino* the situation is similar except that, rather than answering a riddle, the postman poses a question which leaves Neruda speechless: "Is the whole world," Mario asks, "with the sea, sky, rain, etc., Is the whole world a metaphor for something else?" Neruda covers his confusion by saying "We'll talk about it tomorrow" and going for a swim.

What with one thing and another, we are apt to forget that that particular tomorrow never comes. Neruda leaves the island, and the Postman, grieving the absence of his friend and mentor, slowly begins to imitate him, observing the beauty that is near at hand and turning it into poetry. He meets an early, unfortunate death when he is trampled at a political demonstration at which he had expected to read his own poem dedicated to Neruda.

It is only five or six years later, when Neruda visits the island again, that he learns of Mario's fate and of the extraordinary influence he himself had had on the young postman's life. He takes a walk on the beach where Mario had framed his profound riddle. The camera does a back-up, and we spectators see Neruda's image dissolving into the sea, sky and earth. Those of us who are intrigued by Mario's riddle may feel disappointed that it remains unanswered. Or is it? As the film ends the words of one of Neruda's poems appear on the screen. The poem reads:

And it was at that age...that
poetry arrived in search of me
I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or a river
I don't know how or where
no, they were no voices, they were not
words, nor silence
but from a street I was summoned
from the branches of night
abruptly from the others
among violent fires
or returning alone
there I was without a face
and it touched me...

The thematic universe of *Il Postino* is constituted by the playful interchange among types of figurative speech. Neruda's poem is apt to strike us as an appropriate ending to the film because it illustrates what Neruda had taught Mario: people use metaphors all the time, whether or not they are conscious of it; and in doing so they use one word or phrase to refer to another. However simple this observation may seem, it turns out to be enormously significant. Since each metaphor bears a meaning beyond what is literally named, meaning is endlessly in flux, one interpretation giving way to another which in turn yields another. Critics sometimes speak of surplus meaning, the traces from other times and other discourses which words carry as they move to new locations. No one, even the most controlling author, can put a stop to it.

Perhaps it is because we intuitively grasp the possibilities inherent in this infinite combination and recombination of utterances that we follow Neruda when he says that poetry summoned him. Many people have felt that way. A new word, an arresting turn of phrase, and humans are seized by the realization that things don't have to be like this; another world is possible. Picture the man who opens his hand to the breeze as it blows a shower of fresh metaphors in his direction: He stops where he is — in the refugee camp, the squatters' tent, the prison, the war zone: He asks himself, "What is this road that I am on?" And the woman with the infant waiting in line at the food bank or Red Cross tent: She asks herself, "Where is there a highway to somewhere?"

What Neruda showed in his life and verse is that poetry, and by extension the power of language, is emancipatory. It defies what is always already agreed on; fixity; the closed system. Its sheer vastness and infinite variety casts out certainty, leaving people free to dream, revise, ask and ask again. Hence the great riddle, which calls forth the monster as a sign.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that emancipation meets with no resistance. Emancipation is emancipation from something. How should we name it? It has been called the tradition of the dead generations which weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. It has been called oppression, exploitation, patriarchy, racism, compulsory heterosexuality and colonialism. It's known as the war system, violence and coercion, the prison-industrial complex. All of these descriptions refer to the cultural structures which stand on this side of the liminal spaces which monsters occupy, teasing us with their riddles. As subjects we are called to invent strategies for crossing the threshold to reach the other worlds which are possible and which through cultural action we are constructing.

Recall the last time you attended a vigil around The Heart. There you were with your candle, protesting the latest outrage. The day was chilly, the wind blustery. You felt depressed. What good would another demonstration do? You were aware that the automated metaphor-monitoring system had tracked the vigil, as it tracks all signs of resistance, but the typical vigil around The Heart merits only a pale yellow alert. Even if it registered red, what difference would that make? The metaphor-monitoring central control is set up to permit a certain level of dissidence in order to lend credence to the messages of fear it constantly blips. Is the latest outrage even for real? The automated metaphor-outputs programs operate on the principle that fear is productive: Fear builds cities, it marshals power, it constitutes subjectivity, it fuels progress.

Yet even if you could critique the system in which you played your part, standing there on the heart with your lit candle, you couldn't help responding to the pulsing of the relentless rhythm which governs its circuitous spread: TINA, TINA, TINA, there is no alternative, there is no alternative, there is no alternative. Your candle and those of the others gathered there were meant to bear witness to the hundreds of instances in which multitudes respond with INTINA, INTINA, INTINA, invent new alternatives, invent new alternatives, invent new alternatives.

You were blowing out your candle, ready to abandon the vigil, when you felt a nervous alertness encircling The Heart. Someone across from you had cupped her lips and was beginning to shout — what? — Was it “Are?” Perhaps it was “We?” But suddenly the city emergency siren went off, and everyone began to flee. Yet another disaster, and another page of history was written, another contribution to the pile of “wreckage upon wreckage” which can be read as “a chain of events” or as “one single catastrophe.”*

Don't turn your eyes away.

Observe the great plains which stretch before the city gates. Climb to the ramparts where the skittish soldiers steady their bows and wait restlessly. There it stands, the monster, pawing the ground and whipping its tail angrily. “Answer my riddle or I'll kill you,” it roars. A few daredevils, nineteen years old and exuding testosterone, come forward to twist the tiger's tail. Fi fi fo fum. The soldiers let fly their arrows, the monster falls; but from somewhere, I don't know where, from winter or a river, a wisp of smoke appears above the beast's body and forms a question mark that won't go away. Weapons are powerless against riddles.

* Hannah Arendt, ed., Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.