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**“Speaking with authority”:  
Biography and ethical reflection in the work of Raimond Gaita**

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## Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the ethical reflection of the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita and his biography *Romulus, my father*. The dominant picture is one of connectedness: the philosophy argues that ethics must be responsive to human individuality, and that the story of a person's life reveals their individuality; the biography tells the individuality-revealing story of the life of the author's father – whose example shaped the author's philosophy. According to both the philosophy and the biography, individuality is expressed in speech; thus the paper explores the qualities of Romulus Gaita's speech as it is characterised in the biography. This exploration discovers something that displaces the picture of continuity between the philosophy and the biography and destabilises the concepts in terms of which this continuity is articulated. For the honesty that makes Romulus so impressive is tied to an insistence on being true to the meaning of one's words – a kind of meaning that breaks with the context of utterance and hence with speech. And Romulus's emphasis on literal truth seems to entail lack of emphasis on the kind of truth-to-self that is essential to individuality.

**“Speaking with authority”:**

**Biography and ethical reflection in the work of Raimond Gaita**

With the publication of *Romulus, my father* in 1998, Raimond Gaita became one of the few philosophers – perhaps the only Australian philosopher – to have written the type of biography that is a contribution to literature. The event is not altogether surprising. His major philosophical work, *Good and evil: An absolute conception* (1991), had already insisted on the relevance of biography and literature to philosophical ethical reflection. *Romulus, my father* seems to confirm this relevance. For it seems – through a writing to which tone and voice are essential – to confirm Gaita’s statement that the “acceptance and respect he learnt from his father and Hora [his father’s best friend], have, in turn, shaped his adult work as a moral philosopher” (Buchanan 1998, p. 8).<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I seek to explore the ways in which the biography and the philosophy are mutually supporting. But I shall also suggest that in the biography, the dominant picture of proximity and transparency – between the philosophy and the biography, between the father and the son – is predicated on a trait which resists it; and that to this extent the poststructuralist deconstruction of phonocentrism and of the metaphysics of presence may be pertinent to reading Gaita’s work. For this work crucially depends on an appeal to speech, to conversation. On the one hand, this appeal involves an openness to complexity and paradox, to unresolvability and undecidability, to contexts that do not demand convergence towards agreement; thus the work may seem to render superfluous a deconstructive reading. On the other hand, the insistence on presence entailed by this

appeal risks effacing complexity. My focus will be on the biography read with reference to the philosophy, not on the philosophy itself. I begin, however, by considering the appeal to speech in the philosophy.

1.

*Good and evil* locates the subject matter of ethics in the speech and actions of those who “have something to say”, who have “a right to speak because of an authority which stems from the way they have lived their lives” (Gaita 1991, p. 4), and ties ethics to a sense of each human life’s irreplaceability, a matter of its individuality (p. 120). To have such individuality, a being must be able to do what an animal cannot: “stand behind its words and speak out of the life that it must make its own” (p. 284). Doing this, we become “authentically present in speech and deed” (p. 145), “‘present’ in what we say and to those to whom we are speaking” (p. 273). Thus *Good and evil* links ethics to biography – “a story of a life which tries to reveal its meaning, and ... the individuality of its [the story’s] subject” (pp. 120-21) – and articulates this link through speech.

It is also through speech – characterised in terms of the way “poets may lose their voice in exile, or because of a spiritual weariness or certain corruptions of character” (p. 277) – that *Good and evil* connects the deepest moral exploration to literature: both are untranslatable into Esperanto, their locus being natural language which is “resonant with historical and local association” and tied to speech (p. 34).<sup>2</sup> And it defines that which is “living” in a culture as having the power “to invite us into conversation”, as

constraining “how we speak in our everyday lives” even when it is “indirect in its influence”. What we can speak “only on stage, or in church, or ceremonially ... has its echoes in what we say more ordinarily” (p. 125).

The philosophers whom *Good and evil* treats as exemplary affirm and attain speech. Socrates insisted that his interlocutors eschew an enchantment with their own rhetoric in which one “speaks to a crowd and thus to no-one in particular” (p. 278); that they “speak for themselves, say what they seriously believed” (p. 22). His own speech attains authority because he spoke “in an effort of disciplined lucidity out of what [he] had made of [himself]”. That their teacher “was the kind of man he was” is internal to his interlocutors’ understanding of what he teaches them about the nature of good and evil (p. 280). The presence involved in speech entails that what is said is not “extractable from the manner of its disclosure” and so cannot be tested in abstraction from the context of utterance. It “must, at the crux, be taken on trust” (p. 273).

Wittgenstein, in showing the mutual interdependence of “any intelligible conception of the subject (the thinker), the object (what they are thinking about) and the range of critical concepts under which they judge whether they think well or badly”, in effect rejected “the conception of a subject which is fit to draw only blackboard conclusions” (p. 333), a conception of a subject confined as it were to writing. In saying (in the “Lecture on ethics”) that he felt absolutely safe, he intended us to understand, Gaita argues, that it “may be said only in the first person singular”: “each person must find their own words for the expression of gratitude for the gift that has been their life”

(p. 200). And in his deathbed affirmation that his has been a wonderful life, Gaita hears the same gratitude: in contrast to the sentence he spoke, what he said “deflects any invitation to him to reconsider it and for us to assess it” (p. 198). It cannot be extracted and written on a blackboard.

## 2.

Though far from a philosopher – Gaita says that “he did not understand my commitment to the life of the mind” (Gaita 1998, p. 196) – Romulus Gaita too has an ethical outlook to which speech is central. His belief in conversation’s capacity to open up “the possibilities of authentic human disclosure” (p. 173) is tied to his refusal of “prudential justifications”, a refusal that he believes constitutes our humanity, and which in his own conduct extends from his attitudes to work – he accepts responsibility, say, for a fault due to one of his workmen’s carelessness simply because honesty requires it (p. 99) – to his attitudes to religion: “when he begged me to pray”, Gaita recalls, “I did not feel that he was urging me to adopt a supernatural means to a natural or even a supernatural end” (p. 169). His belief in speech is tied, moreover, to his refusal to reduce ethics to rules and propositions. Central to his “religiosity” is not doctrine or the practices of a particular religious institution but the idea of a pure heart that in prayer expresses its responsiveness to those in need (pp. 167-68). In effect, he thinks of the ethical as *sui generis*: though having compassion, responsiveness to the needs of others at its core, it is not a means to an independently definable end.

In the biography, Gaita explicitly adverts to how as a boy he was led by his father's thought to a sense that the "law and other kinds of regulations [were] only rules of thumb, regulative ideals, to be interpreted by individuals according to circumstances and constrained by goodwill and commonsense"; that "only morality was absolute because some of its demands were non-negotiable": "I felt I could do anything provided I was respectful of others" (Gaita 1998, p. 106). At stake here is the genesis of Gaita's mature philosophy which pictures morality as *sui generis*, "irreducible to modes of teleological relation ... to things characterised independently of morality" (Gaita 1991, pp. 90-91), disconnects doctrine – which is propositional – from what is spiritual, from genuine religious sensibility (p. 221), and rejects the compassion-blind notion of morality as obedience to some kind of law, even if the law is the Kantian categorical imperative. A response to having committed murder that obeys the moral law yet does not involve remorse treats the victim's being dead as mattering only "because it brings our action under the moral law"; such a response fails to grasp the seriousness of murder (p. 147).

And Romulus's example could well exemplify what *Good and evil* says about example: that examples – characterised as "what has moved us in the speech and actions of others" – are essential in ethics, that argument cannot "discursively, yield a standard, or set of standards, in the light of which all examples are to be judged" (Gaita 1991, p. 275); "we learn by being moved and we learn, or try to learn, when we may trust what moves us and ourselves in being moved" (Gaita 1991, pp. 141-42). In the biography even more important than Romulus's ethical views is the way he has lived his life (and suffered in living it) such that what he has to say becomes speech, and such that he can

teach through the example of his actions. Realising that no one she knew treated animals more kindly than he, Romulus's granddaughter "learned through his example what it might mean to kill an animal", learned "that there was no serious moral gap between his kindness to animals and his preparedness sometimes to kill them" (Gaita 1998, p. 189). And what Raimond learns through example – from the speech of his father and Hora – concerns the nature of example, concerns speech:

Their individuality was inseparable from their talk – it was revealed in it and made by it, by its honesty. I learnt from them the connection between individuality and character and the connection between these and the possibility of "having something to say", of seeing another person as being fully and distinctively another perspective on the world. Which is to say that I learnt from them the connection between conversation and Otherness.  
(pp. 72-73)

If example is essential in this way, then, as *Good and evil* puts it, "our thought is thought in a tradition" (Gaita 1991, p. 141) – something conveyed by one of the biography's most eloquent utterances:

The philosopher Plato said that those who love and seek wisdom are clinging in recollection to things they once saw. On many occasions in my life I have had the need to say, and thankfully have been able to say: I know what a good workman is; I know what an honest man is; I know what friendship is; I know

because I remember these things in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship. (Gaita 1998, p. 74)

Significantly, this – Gaita’s only explicit reference *in propria persona* to a philosopher in the biography – cites a philosopher whose writing, with its use of dialogical form, defers to speech; who is memorable because he himself remembers, his work being itself a memorial to the life and speech of another – what is recollected in recollecting Plato is recollection itself; and who belongs to the Socratic tradition that allows no wedge between “oneself as an individual human being and oneself as a philosopher” (Gaita 1991, p. 22). It is as if Gaita’s place in this tradition converges with his place in a more familial, personal filiation. In recalling speech with authority – that of Socrates and Plato, that of his father – he too can achieve speech with authority: he finds his own words for the expression of gratitude for the gift that is his life.

This sense of achieving speech with authority – through being moved by example – is nowhere stronger than in the biography’s last few pages, which, in narrating the events of Romulus’s funeral, quote Gaita’s eulogy, in particular what the biography describes as the eulogy’s “concluding words” (in fact they are not quite this (see Gaita 1996, p. 25)), words which thereby become – almost – the concluding words of the biography:

We sometimes express our most severe judgment of other people by saying that we will never again speak to them. I never heard my father say that nor can I imagine him saying it. That, perhaps more than anything else, testifies

to his unqualified sense of common humanity with everyone he met. His severe judgment often caused pain, but the simple honesty of its expression, together with his unhesitating acceptance of those whom he judged so severely, convinces me that he never intentionally caused suffering to anyone. He was truly a man who would rather suffer evil than do it. (Gaita 1998, p. 207)

The biography seems here to dovetail with the spoken eulogy, which itself achieves its authority by recalling, paying tribute to, speech with authority: “the simple honesty of its expression”. And again, the speech recalled, as well as that of Romulus, is that of Socrates, as it has come down to us through the writings of Plato. For the last words of the quoted segment of the eulogy allude to a Socratic idea recorded in a Platonic dialogue, the *Gorgias*, that affirms speech. In various ways, therefore, writing here seems to give way to speech, and thereby to achieve presence and depth.

### 3.

A feature of speech with authority – non-moralism – is exemplified by both father and son. Romulus’s “most severe judgments” are made in many tones but never one “that suggested he would turn his back on you”: “You were always welcome at his table, to eat and more importantly to talk” (Gaita 1998, pp. 172-73). And his severe judgments come slowly. He pities rather than blames Mitru for his affair with Romulus’s wife Christine – he saw it “as an expression of her promiscuous nature”, from which Mitru was likely to

suffer. And he blames her only in seeing her as the affair's "primary cause" (pp. 82-83), not "a free agent" (p. 113). Even when faced with an evil that "his compassionate fatalism ... could not accommodate" (p. 121), he is non-moralistic: the character of his bewilderment at Lydia's mendacity "came from the question, how could she have done it?, which of its nature ruled out any answer, persisting independently of any facts he might accept concerning her motives and circumstances" (p. 120). She undermines the truth of conversation, fails to become "fully and distinctively another perspective on the world" – she becomes someone to whom one cannot speak.

In the biography, Gaita eschews moralism in acknowledging the force and inevitability of the attitudes of his younger self: for example, his remorseful response to Christine's suicide (a tragedy for which no one could blame him) and his refusal to condemn (without wishing to justify) his father's intending to shoot Lydia's husband and perhaps Lydia also, neither of whom he believes deserved to die. Being already familiar with the capacity of sexual love "to humiliate otherwise strong and proud people and to drive them to suicide", he is unsurprised that "it should also drive them to murder" and believes that "anyone who came under its sway should be prepared to be destroyed by it" (Gaita 1998, p. 137).

In the case of *Good and evil*, the non-moralistic emphasis it ascribes to Plato – on "what we ought to love" as opposed to "what we ought to do" (Gaita 1991, p. 238) – seems to inform its contention that someone who acts out of a sense of moral necessity "need not think that anyone in a similar situation must do the same" (p. 69). In thus

repudiating the notion that universalisability is a condition of moral judgment, it disconnects virtuous action from moralistic self-righteousness. With respect to evil, it allows for the possibility that “[p]eople can do evil yet not be blameable for it, or not, at any rate, in a way commensurate with its terribleness” (p. 43), and calls into question preaching to even the worst evildoers. The question “How was it possible for him to do it?” – asked over and over again by a woman who witnessed a young Nazi officer sending trainloads of children to the death camps – does not invite an answer: “It expresses a sense of mystery at that kind of contact with evil, and that sense of mystery is connected with a sense of the reality of evil as something *sui generis*” (p. 5). What *Good and evil* argues elsewhere (see p. 93) implies that it would be fatuous to tell the Nazi officer that he ought not to have done the evil he did – or even to judge that he should not have done it; for such a judgment is beyond the epistemic reach of the one it concerns. The officer perhaps becomes one to whom there is nothing to say.

*Good and evil* argues, moreover, that “the requirements of morality” may be in “deep and irreconcilable” tension with the attachments that condition them, and that the “sufferings which lead us into temptation are often connected with our deepest loves and these determine our self-understanding as human” (Gaita 1991, p. 240). Morality seems on this picture to contain within itself something that makes either praise or blame inadequate. If Romulus’s murderous intentions concerning one who, he believes, has robbed him of his love are an expression of the kind of affections that condition, give rise to morality without being bound by it, then condemnation is here too simple a response.

In effect, we have seen that in its lack of moralism, speech with authority involves a certain silence or silences: the silence of a refusal to blame and to prescribe, and the silence (closely related, I suspect, to the first) in the wake of certain kinds of wrong or moral shallowness. In the biography, the latter is there in Hora's reaction to Raimond, then a university student attracted to radical left-wing politics, singing a song that treats strikebreakers as vermin:

At first I thought ... that he had simply turned his back on me, and I was very hurt. I was mistaken. He knew that I knew how many millions had perished under communism, for he had often told me. Given that I knew, how could I not care? But how could I claim to care if I treated it all so lightly? If I was now such a morally shallow person, what could he say to me? How could he speak to me of anything that mattered?

... Hora did not refuse to speak to me out of anger or indignation. He simply couldn't speak. I became, quite literally, someone to whom he had nothing to say. (Gaita 1998, pp. 158-59)

Hora's silence conveys no sense that anyone in the same situation ought to respond thus.

4.

There are other silences that Gaita's writing broaches. He argues that because, for example, an event after a person's death is potentially part of that person's unhappiness

(see Gaita 1991, p. 132 and Gaita 1998, p. 113), even one who speaks with authority does not have authority concerning their own life's meaning, that the author of the story in which this meaning is at stake must come after, and cannot share it with, the person whose story it is. This raises the possibility that the writing of this story may be part of the story. The writing of, for example, *Romulus, my father* involves a working out of a relationship that constitutes the life narrated; that this life evokes such tribute seems constitutive of it, seems part of what makes it exemplary and Romulus an exemplary subject of a biography. It is not contingent to the meaning of the life of someone like Romulus Gaita that a biography like his son's is written about it.

Silence and something like tradition are also at stake in remorse (on *Good and evil's* account of it), a silence connected to moral depth and hence to speech with authority – albeit that, severing us from potential interlocutors, it is not an aspect of such speech. As knowing that others suffer as I do cannot console me in my remorse (the contrast is with my misfortune), the “‘I’ that answers ... to the recognition of guilt is not the ‘I’ that naturally and properly partners the ‘we’ of fellowship” (Gaita 1991, pp. 47-48). The “‘I’” of remorse seems to be outside conversation, marked by a silence that seems essential to human reality: for Gaita, remorse or at least its possibility structures this reality. Nevertheless, an effort over time that presupposes a culture and a tradition may overcome this silence: “What may heal [the suffering] is as strange as the suffering: repentance, atonement, forgiveness, punishment” (p. 51).

In the biography, this silence, this impossibility of fellowship, marks Raimond's and Romulus's remorse when they hear of Christine's suicide:

We packed up and went to Frogmore, neither speaking to the other, each absorbed in his own grief and remorse. That evening I told my father that I wanted my mother to be buried in Maryborough, so the next day we went to Ballarat to arrange the transport of her body and to collect her personal possessions. My father drove the Sunbeam like a man possessed, and when we skidded wildly in some mud he turned to me on the back pillion and said, "Tomorrow there will be three coffins". (Gaita 1998, p. 111)

Already here – in Raimond's talking about how he wants his mother buried – is the beginning of the healing process which culminates decades later when Romulus and Raimond do their "remorseful work" (p. 113) of erecting a tombstone for Christine: "Working together, our sorrow lightened by the presence of a young girl [Raimond's daughter] representing new life and hope, we came together as son and husband with the woman whose remains lay beneath us" (p. 114). Thus can Romulus and Raimond be collectively true to their love for Christine and partner each other again in the "we" of fellowship with respect to her. Speech is restored; past and future are linked.

5.

One of the biography's most remarkable threads – its evocation of the landscape of the area in western Victoria in which Raimond grew up – may seem remote from this essay's concerns. Yet it is remarkable in part because it is informed by the book's ethic. The beauty of the Australian landscape dawns on the young Raimond for the first time when, conscious of being the only boy in the area who did not kill rabbits, he sets out to shoot them. Hitherto he had shared the attitude of his father, who like many of the immigrants "looked directly to the foliage and always turned away offended" (Gaita 1998, p. 14). Thus Raimond's dawning experience of beauty expresses his individuality: "It was as though God had taken me to the back of his workshop and shown me something really special". In effect he begins to have something to say, to find his own words for the expression of gratitude for the gift that is his life. The author's recourse here to a Wittgensteinian motif is perhaps no accident: "my perception of the landscape changed radically as when one sees the second image in an ambiguous drawing". Moreover, the experience, in contrast to his father's focus on foliage, involves becoming aware of the landscape's more recessive features – features perhaps with a certain kinship to an utterance's context and tone, irreducible as they are to the sentences that are uttered. For Raimond "the key to the beauty of those trees lay in the light which so sharply delineated them against a dark blue sky". A kind of lack – "scraggy shapes", "sparse foliage" – makes possible the beauty. We are perhaps not so far from the silence that marks speech with authority. In the "subtle and refined" beauty of the Australian landscape, there seems to be nothing merely rhetorical. It is no surprise that Raimond's

purpose in setting out is defeated: “It was inconceivable to me that I should now shoot a rabbit” (p. 61). The impossibility seems to have some connection with a respect for the landscape’s silence.

Later in the book, Gaita explicitly links the light and landscape of the area in which he grew up to his sense of his childhood life and the ideas that informed it, contrasting these ideas with those represented by the psychiatric hospital in which his father, threatened by insanity in the wake of Lydia’s betrayal, experiences shock treatment as a humiliating assault (Gaita 1998, p. 125) – perhaps because such treatment violates an integrity of which truth to one’s past is constitutive. Whereas the hospital reduces a concern for the past – as *Good and evil* puts it – “to a prudential concern for the future” (Gaita 1991, p. 131), the description of the landscape embodies a sense of the past as not made to serve our interests, as having the authority of morality itself: “The hills looked as old as the earth, because they were rounded by millennia and also because the grey and equally rounded granite boulders that stood among the long yellow grasses, sharply delineated at all times of day by the summer sun, made them look prehistoric” (Gaita 1998, p. 123). And the evocation of the landscape gathers force as it continues:

More than anything, however, the glorious, tall, burnt-yellow grasses (as a boy they came to my chest and sometimes over my head) moving irregularly against a deep blue sky, dominated the images of my childhood and gave colour to my freedom and also to my understanding of suffering. In the morning they inspired cheerful energy of the kind that made you whistle; at

midday, in partnership with an unforgiving sun and alive with insects and other creatures, they intimidated; but in the late afternoon, towards dusk, everything was softened by a light that graced the area in a melancholy beauty that could pierce one's soul, as it did mine on the day I went in search of rabbits, and many times thereafter.

... Life at Frogmore, in that landscape and under that light, nourished the sense given to me by my father and Hora, of the contrast between the malleable laws and conventions made by human beings to reconcile and suit their many interests, and the uncompromising authority of morality, always the judge, never merely the servant of our interests. (pp. 123-24)

Here again we find something like an expression of gratitude for life (in the morning “the glorious, tall, burnt-yellow grasses ... inspired cheerful energy of the kind that made you whistle”). The sense of freedom is connected with the notion of the law and other kinds of regulations “as only rules of thumb”. As this notion bespeaks a sense that only morality is absolute, the joyousness is a joyousness that is sensitive to and perhaps acknowledges the inevitability of suffering. “The unforgiving sun” at midday figures the authority of morality; the light that in the late afternoon softens and graces in melancholy beauty (a beauty our sense of which is perhaps informed by our sense of the stillness of dusk) reminds us that morality has compassion at its core.

The passage, then, gives sensuous embodiment to Romulus Gaita's values – but with reference to a beauty to which he is blind. In this way, it perhaps figures something

like the idea that no one has authority with respect to the meaning of their own life. Thus a certain silence, connected perhaps to the human subject's deference to "the uncompromising authority of morality", may be evoked here precisely at the same time as is the authority of the man's speech.

6.

What I have said testifies to the force of Gaita's thinking and writing. Indeed, the force is such that we might wonder whether it exceeds the notion that what we are called to become is someone "authentically present in speech and deed". We might wonder, for example, whether even "repentance, atonement, forgiveness, punishment" can fully restore the remorseful to speech, such is the power of Gaita's evocation of the silence of remorse; whether self-presence is attainable where what conditions morality conflicts with it, a conflict involving an irreducible opacity tied to the non-judgmental quality of Gaita's writing; and whether non-moralism, contrary to the impression Gaita creates, resists being characterised in terms of speech. For it is exemplified not only by Romulus, in his most severe judgments, always welcoming you "at his table, to eat and more importantly to talk", but also by Hora being unable to speak to Raimond in the wake of the latter's lack of moral seriousness – conduct not rendered welcoming by its being unwilling, not carried out on principle and not involving any coldness. The tension here perhaps marks the welcome of Romulus's conversation: it excludes what would "of itself – because of its deceit or meanness – foreclose the possibilities of something more serious" (Gaita 1998, p. 173); yet the welcome he extends to Lydia's mother seems to

involve him not raising with her the most serious issue between them – her role in her daughter’s deception.

The biography’s force is nowhere more apparent than in the account of Romulus’s limitations – as is the complexity that is perhaps most problematic for the phonocentrism. Significantly, Romulus’s limitations are often linked to his strengths. Although his work and his attitude to it are exemplary, he did not integrate into his life his recognition that depth and real contentment require “a life governed by necessity” – the necessity provided by work: Gaita believes that he quit his ironwork too early and that doing so was “not good for him” (Gaita 1998, p. 194). Moreover, Romulus’s pleasure in being able to make beautiful objects “was curiously detached from an appreciation of their beauty”. And here the link between limitation and strength seems to be intrinsic. Gaita suggests that Romulus’s relegation of beauty to the realm of the superficial – he “would have found incomprehensible Oscar Wilde’s remark that only superficial people fail to be impressed by appearances” – enabled him to be “as impressive as he was”, to achieve the “fierce purity [that] made him transparent to the reality of the values he professed”, to live “with the kind of integrity with which [he] lived his values”. In short, he argues that his father’s “Old Testament integrity was partly a function of his blindness” (pp. 175-76).

This “fierce purity”, this “Old Testament integrity”, informs Romulus’s attitudes in general and his attitudes to language in particular. Such is his belief that promises bind no matter what, that even if he discovered that Lydia’s mother had encouraged her daughter’s mendacity, he would still believe himself obliged to fulfil his promise –

extracted when he was deceived – to pay for her to come to Australia (Gaita 1998, pp. 149-50). His “profound regard for the spoken word”, for being “true to the words you had spoken”, can make him “literal minded and tone-deaf to context”: deaf to what distinguishes kinds of utterance that may have the same verbal expression – to what distinguishes, for example, statements of intention from promises. Hence he would charge the maker of such a statement who does not manage to act on it with promise breaking – with “a failure to have your character integrated by a commitment to your words”: “He seemed to believe that only a self in that way integrated had risen to the humanising potential of speech” (p. 197). And his single-minded focus on speaking literal truth possibly involves a corresponding lack of focus on truth-to-self, and so seems to be connected to his entirely lacking the concept of self-deception – a lack that it took some years for Gaita, amazed “that anyone might simply not possess” a “concept that goes so deep in our culture”, to understand: “When once I told him that there were other ways of being untruthful than by lying, that one might be untruthful to oneself, he clearly had no idea what I was talking about and could find no familiar conceptual path to doing so”. Again we see, I think, how limiting the “fierce purity” is. Gaita does not explain his father’s sometimes deceiving himself in terms of his lack of the concept of self-deception – he thinks that the lack makes the self-deception more puzzling (and more pathetic). But it would seem to do this because it renders the self-deception more pure, stripping it of any element of calculation, of dishonesty. He also thinks that it renders the self-deception more frustrating, making him (Gaita) “powerless in the face of it”. The “curious untruthfulness of a scrupulously honest man” seems in a strange way to be connected to his honesty (p. 147).

The qualities at stake in Romulus's "fierce purity" are in tension with those that Gaita elsewhere admires in his father. The belief that promises always bind seems moralistic – it emphasises what we ought to do rather than what we ought to love – and at odds with the ethic, developed by the teenage Gaita under his father's influence, of individuals interpreting the law and other kinds of regulations "according to circumstances and constrained by ... commonsense". Neither commonsense nor the respectfulness towards others that the young Gaita believes to be the only absolute would seem to require fulfilling a promise extracted in violation of the conditions that give point to the institution of promising. And the purity is at odds too with the ascription of authoritative speech to Romulus. Indeed, it may indicate incoherence within the notion of authoritative speech. Romulus's conflation of promises and statements of intention results from a profound regard for speech, a regard which paradoxically relegates to the realm of the superficial the tone of his interlocutor's voice and focuses not on what the other says but merely on the sentence used in saying it – a sentence that can be extracted and written on a blackboard. Such insensitivity to the features – context and tone – that distinguish speech (in the sense that Gaita uses the term) from propositions and sentences would seem to assimilate speech to writing and impede the realisation of the humanising potential of speech that Gaita believes his father realised. Moreover, as Romulus lacks the concept of truth-to-self, the speech for which he has such profound regard must differ radically from that which Gaita affirms and seems to ascribe to him – remember how Gaita evokes Socrates speaking "in an effort of disciplined lucidity out of what [he] had made of [himself]". In itself the lack of the concept of truth-to-self may not prevent

Romulus attaining authentic speech that displays such truth (albeit that it may be as surprising as the self-deception uninformed by a concept of self-deception which surprises Gaita). But he must do so blindly; and the attainment becomes less likely to the extent that his Old Testament integrity renders him literal-minded and deaf to tone.

Contrary to the impression Gaita gives, for Romulus “authentic human disclosure” risks being simply a matter of human beings saying what is true. For he construes integrity of character – the character disclosed by speech – merely or at least primarily in terms of commitment to the literal truth of the words one speaks. In the speech that the “Old Testament” Romulus admires, what is said *is* extractable from the manner of its disclosure; or at least the truth of this speech is thus extractable. It seems paradoxical that his insistence on language so construed – language opaque with respect to the utterer and to context – renders him “transparent to the reality of the values he professed”.

Significantly, the text tends to characterise Romulus’s Old Testament integrity by evoking various failed conversations (albeit an imaginary conversation in the case of his attitudes to beauty), conversations that fall short of the humanising potential that Gaita ascribes to speech. The realisation of this potential may not require agreement amongst interlocutors: in *Good and evil* Gaita seems to follow Iris Murdoch in characterising “ethical contexts” as not requiring that “opinion converge towards agreement” (Gaita 1991, p. 213). But the difference, say, between Romulus and Raimond on whether there are “other ways of being untruthful than by lying”, does not instantiate the way in which conversation is tied to Otherness: it does not contribute to Raimond seeing his father as

“fully and distinctively another perspective on the world”. For conversational Otherness is a matter not of differing on matters of propositional belief but of achieving truthfulness to self, a truthfulness that is not literal truthfulness. Moreover, it seems to be tied to a capacity to see the other person as such a perspective on the world. Yet Romulus’s responses in these conversations – to Raimond’s articulation of the concept of self-deception, to those who defend themselves against the charge of breaking their word, to the Wildean affirmation of what usually is denigrated as appearance – together with his literal-mindedness and inability to grasp the concept of truthfulness to self, seem to bespeak an inability to do this, a puzzlement at the very idea of thinking of others in this way.

The fierce purity then would seem to impede Romulus’s realisation of the individuality, the Otherness that Gaita affirms. Yet it seems essential to Romulus – as he appears in the biography – being so memorable, so individual. That its impressiveness depends on what resists it, would seem to destabilise the concept of Otherness that informs Gaita’s biography.

And the instability would seem to extend to the other concepts Gaita affirms. Inasmuch as he is unresponsive to individuality, Romulus must lack a sense of the meaning and irreplaceability that Gaita ascribes to human life. Hence his compassion – so essential to Gaita’s characterisation of him and to his influence upon Gaita – would seem not truly to fit Gaita’s notion that compassion for humans must differ radically from compassion for animals, whose lives have no meaning. Indeed, the text of the biography

provides some (slight) evidence of such a lack of fit, stating that although Romulus's practice never blurred "the radical difference in kind between human beings and animals", his conversation sometimes did so (Gaita 1998, p. 188). *Good and evil* implies such blurring involves sentimentality towards animals and renders compassion for humans counterfeit (see Gaita 1991, p. 73). But if it is tied to what makes Romulus such an impressive example, it cannot be so easily dismissed.

The instability in the text's account of Romulus also marks its picture of Raimond's relationship with him, rendering problematic, for instance, the claim that Romulus's example enables Raimond to learn the connection between conversation and Otherness. And the example of Romulus is such as to problematise the text's appeal to the idea of example, an idea informing its characterisation of the relationship between father and son. For Romulus's literal-mindedness and deafness to tone and context call into question his capacity to be moved by the speech of others and thus his ability to learn from example and tradition. His belief that promises always bind is in effect an appeal "to a standard ... in the light of which all examples are to be judged" – an appeal that annuls the power of example. His lacking the concept of self-deception – a concept that "goes so deep in our culture" – bespeaks a certain isolation with respect to the conversation that constitutes society and tradition.

It is perhaps significant that the instances the text provides – and they are not many – of Romulus being moved by example involve ceremonial or written language: "his grandfather's pious attitude to singing in the local choir and writing church and municipal

records” instilled in him “reverence for the solemnity of church ritual and artefacts” (Gaita 1998, p. 3); the “accents of sorrow and pity [of the “Prayer for the Dead” in *The book of common prayer*] determined his sense of all other human beings as his fellow mortals, victims of fate and destined for suffering” (pp. 121-22). These instances provide evidence of Romulus’s aliveness to tradition – although were he more sensitive to tone in ceremonial language than in “ordinary” language, at stake for Gaita would perhaps be an unhealthy relationship between ritual and life. What they are not evidence of is Romulus being moved by speech that expresses truth-to-self, in which one stands behind one’s words and speaks out of the life that one must make one’s own. And any such evidence would seem to be unrelated to what makes for Romulus’s “Old Testament integrity”. Thus the biography’s affirmation of learning by example is articulated in terms of the speech and actions of a man who is such a potent example partly in so far as he is unresponsive to the power of example.

The status of the text itself is at stake here. For Gaita, the value of biography is tied to its recounting the kind of examples that are essential to ethical reflection, and to its revealing individuality – individuality which, though pertaining to any being answerable to the demands of speech, is in a sense only realised by one who fulfils these demands and thereby becomes exemplary. *Romulus, my father* presents itself as the biography of such a one and thus as a biography with a special necessity: one who is exemplary is the exemplary subject matter of biographical narrative. Yet what we have witnessed is that the writing of the biography is in part motivated by the aspect of Romulus Gaita that resists exemplarity and individuality, the aspect of him that is so impressive.

The dominant impression the biography creates is of continuity – continuity between father and son and between text and subject matter: the subject of the biography, the father, shaped the mind of the son who writes the text; the son’s text is a tribute to the father who enabled the thinking that underpins the text. This continuity is predicated on the integrity of the father’s character, the transparency of his words to his values and to his self. The father’s example enables the son too to achieve integrity, an integrity that involves truth to himself and to his father, an integrity and a truth that is expressed in the text, the words of which thereby achieve transparency to values and self. To the extent that the dominant picture the biography creates hinges on transparency of words to self, it hinges on speech, on language in which we are “‘present’ in what we say and to those to whom we are speaking”. Yet such transparency – as it is unfolded in the biography – turns out to be predicated on what “speech” excludes: on the aspect of language that breaks with the context of utterance, with tone, and hence with the speaker. It is predicated on a structural non-presence. Although privileging spirit over letter, Gaita’s writing – or at least his biography – testifies in spite of itself to the insistence of the letter, an insistence which displaces the repression of writing, displaces phonocentrism. And this displacement undoes the picture of continuity between father and son. For at stake is the crucial way in which the Romulus Gaita described in the biography could not have understood his son’s work: neither the philosophy nor the biography written in tribute to him. Hence, in what is perhaps the most radical of the silences that marks the text, Romulus, the object of the tribute and gratitude, could not have received them – and this precisely because he is so worthy, so impressive an example. The conversational

relationship that the text posits between the author of the text and the subject of the text turns out to be constituted by irreducible non-presence.

And more than the thematic aspect of the text is at issue here. Earlier I suggested that the power of the writing of the biography is tied to a sense of its becoming speech – in, for example, the way the ending dovetails with Gaita’s spoken eulogy, a eulogy which itself recalls the speech of Socrates. Yet the passage of the eulogy quoted in the biography seems epitaphic: indeed its last words, the allusion to Socrates – “better to suffer evil than to do it” – are those chosen by Gaita as the epitaph for Romulus’s grave (see Manne 1998, p. 10). And the wisdom of an epitaph seems not to be that which is occasioned by words “said to particular individuals at particular times” (Gaita 1991, p. 226), not to be the wisdom – which for Gaita is wisdom itself – that is specific to speech. Though Gaita’s philosophy might characterise such epitaphic wisdom in terms of its capacity to constrain the way we speak in our everyday lives, the example of his eulogy suggests that the wisdom of speech may in turn be characterised in terms of its capacity to break with the original context of utterance – a break which, if one thinks of speech as Gaita does, seems more a trait of writing than speech. Moreover, a break with original context is also at stake in that, in the biography, the words of the eulogy are quoted: they exemplify a more indirect – more “written” – use of language than that of the surrounding text. That the passage that perhaps most fully conveys the author’s sense of what is essential about his father is a quotation contributes to its being so moving. For, as Derrida (1982) argues, the written aspect of language – an aspect of language essential to language – is tied to death:

All writing ... in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence, “death”, or the possibility of the “death” of the addressee, inscribed in the structure of the mark. ...

What holds for the addressee holds also ... for the sender or the producer.

(pp. 315-16)

The words of the eulogy register death: in them Gaita avows to never having heard his father say of others that he would “never again speak to them” – an avowal the more poignant for being in tribute to one to whom its utterer will never again speak. At stake in the power of the ending is an irreducible becoming-writing.

7.

I have not set out to challenge directly the phonocentrism developed in Gaita’s philosophical writing. To reveal tensions within the biography and between it and *Good and evil* is not to reveal tensions within *Good and evil*. Nevertheless, the philosophy – in so far as it claims a proximity to speech for itself – seems to demand the kind of confirmation that the biography and the response it elicits could have given;<sup>3</sup> and what I have said does, I think, undercut such confirmation. It is as if Gaita’s own speech – in so far as it is expressed in the biography – fails to accord with what his philosophy claims

speech should be. Like the relation between the father and son and the relation between the biography and its subject matter, the relation between the philosophy and the biography is not what it first appears to be.

None of this undermines Gaita's achievement. Speaking personally, I find the dominant picture of continuity and transparency – edifying though it is – less interesting than the picture of irreducible complexity that emerges against the text's intention; thus to read the writings against this intention is I think to unleash some of their power. Had the writings thematised such complexity more clearly, their achievement no doubt would have been different. Yet the complexity is there nevertheless; and for that – and much else – we can be grateful.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The continuity between Gaita's philosophy and his biography was quickly noted. In launching *Romulus, my father*, Robert Manne (1998) said: "this is a book of filial love and tribute, not a work of philosophy. But because it is written by Raimond Gaita, and because he is who he is, it is also marked by the conceptual clarity and moral depth that so distinguishes his philosophical writing" (p. 10). In reviewing Gaita's most recent book, *A common humanity*, the philosopher Jean Curthoys (1999) suggested that *Romulus, my father* provides "the biographical source of much of his [Gaita's] philosophy" (p. 15).

<sup>2</sup> The contrast is with "science and the kind of reflection which philosophers think will be perfected by theory" (Gaita 1991, p. 277). Following F. R. Leavis, Gaita sees philosophy as insufficiently alive "to the importance of a language, such as English, being a natural language" (Gaita 1991, p. 16). It is significant that *Good and evil* treats Leavis – a critic who values poetry that demands "the kind of analysis where the pen is peculiarly at a disadvantage as compared to the voice" (Leavis 1975, p. 116) – as emblematic of literary culture.

<sup>3</sup> Gaita (1999) cites response to his biography as supporting his philosophy: "the way people have been moved" by the biography and its portrayal of Romulus's "utterly non-judgmental moral severity", "convinces me that whatever we may say reflectively under the influence of a moralistic conception of morality, ... our practice is thankfully more lucid" (p. 96).

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