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Book Review

When Words Fail

A review of
Wittgenstein and Lacan at the Limit: Meaning and Astonishment
Maria Balaska
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

Reviewed by Dany Nobus

In his 1955-'56 seminar on psychosis, which was primarily devoted to an intricate analysis of Freud's case-study of the memoirs of Daniel Paul Schreber, Lacan at one point invited his listeners to contemplate the possibility of their being suddenly overcome, at the end of a stormy and tiring day, by a peculiar subjective experience which expresses itself in the thought of "the peace of the evening [*la paix du soir*]". What is the relation, Lacan asked, between this symbolic expression and the experiential condition associated with it? What does "the peace of the evening" mean to the subject who is unexpectedly and quite involuntarily overcome by the thought? What exactly does the thought capture? What, if anything, does it point towards?

For Maria Balaska, Lacan's lyrical example of the problematic relationship between words and things, between thinking and being, between essence and existence, constitutes a paradigmatic instance of what she terms 'astonishment' – an affective state of mind in which the subject experiences words as fundamentally falling short of the reality in which the subject is embedded and which the words are meant to convey. In a similar vein, she identifies its occurrence in Wittgenstein's famous 1929 'Lecture on Ethics' before the Cambridge 'Heretics Society', notably at the point where the philosopher highlighted the disparity between ethics (as the realm of 'supernatural' value

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judgments) and language (as the container of 'natural', factual meaning), which would render it impossible for human beings to express absolute value judgments with a symbolic tool that is only suitable for rendering absolute facts. Lacan's example was distinctly different from Wittgenstein's insistence on the intrinsic inadequacy of language, if only because Lacan was not at all concerned (just yet) with the question of ethics, yet for Balaska they represent comparable moments of 'astonishment', because the meaning relayed by the linguistic statements or thought processes does not *de facto* match the quality of the experience that it is intended to invoke.

Why should we call this insuperable gap between thinking and being 'astonishment', especially since neither Wittgenstein nor Lacan designated it as such? In an endnote to her first chapter, Balaska concedes that she could have decided to refer to it as 'experiences of absolute value', yet that 'absolute value' carries unwanted "conceptual baggage" and "fails to address the affective element of the experience" (p. 12, note 2). It is a valid point, but it does not justify her choice for 'astonishment' rather than 'despair', 'frustration', 'exasperation', 'dismay' or 'surprise'. In his 1804-'05 'Lectures on the Study of Science' (*Vorlesungen zur Wissenschaftslehre*), Fichte referred to this irreducible void between the particular and the universal, between the empirical and the transcendental, between the *quid facti* and the *quid juris*, as the '*hiatus irrationalis*', and he did not hesitate to call the typical sentiment of this 'transcendental abyss' in which human existence is thrown as a state of anguish. Of course, the choice of terminology and the fervent search for other, presumably better and more precise alternatives, is in itself an illustration of the problem that is being exposed: words invariably carry meaning, but the meaning they carry is never – nor can it be – a completely accurate representation of the subject's lived experience or the concrete experiential reality it is trying to domesticate and make sense of. When Lacan conjured up the image of "the peace of the evening", he mainly intended to exemplify how psychotic patients experience the antinomy between meaning and being in a radically different way, up to the point where for them meaning becomes being in itself. When Wittgenstein entered the philosophical quagmire of ethics (value judgements), he mainly wanted to argue that something in the nature of language makes it next to impossible for human beings to formulate statements about the difference between good and bad in an absolute, factual way, so that it may be better not to talk about ethics at all. Whereas Lacan's psychoanalytic conception of language (the symbolic order, the Other) during the 1950s was radically different from Wittgenstein's analytical outlook on the logical structure of propositions in the *Tractatus*, both men emphasized the limits of representation and the limitations of its semantic spectrum for making sense of issues, events and experiences that fundamentally reside outside its direct sphere of influence.

Contrary to what its title may suggest, or what some readers might expect, Balaska's book does not offer a Lacanian reading of Wittgenstein's philosophical position with regard to 'astonishment'. Nor is it an attempt to recuperate Wittgenstein's outlook on language and the ineffable within a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. As one of the most philosophically minded psychoanalysts of his generation, Lacan was definitely familiar with Wittgenstein's work, at least with the *Tractatus*, even at a time when Wittgenstein's reception in France was still in its infancy, and long before the first French translation of the *Tractatus* would see the light of day. On at least two occasions, Lacan even recommended to his audience that they read Wittgenstein's seminal treatise, and it would be worthwhile to examine how and why Lacan felt that he could elevate

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Wittgenstein above the "insipid and mediocre considerations" of logical-positivism, but this is not where Balaska's interest lies. In a sense, this is one of the many strengths of this book, because it effectively allows the author to stage an original cross-fertilisation between the two thinkers, whereby the one is never reduced to or criticized in light of the other, but both are valued equally in their singular, ostensibly contradictory, yet ultimately reconcilable attempts at addressing the experience of 'astonishment'. Truth be told, amongst all the scholars who have dealt with the 'transcendental abyss' over the past four hundred years or so, Wittgenstein and Lacan do not particularly stand out for their detailed, in-depth consideration of the problem, especially not in their published works. However, this gives Balaska another reason for trying to articulate a new way out of the deadlock, which exceeds the boundaries of the two classic responses to it, and which is significant philosophically as well as psychoanalytically, theoretically as well as clinically.

Rephrasing the question of 'astonishment' as the "groundlessness of meaning" (p. 18), she cogently explains how the '*hiatus irrationalis*' has traditionally been superseded in one of two, fundamentally incompatible, philosophical and epistemological 'deflections', the latter term having been borrowed from Cora Diamond in order to indicate how each approach entails a radical refusal to engage directly with the 'abyss'. On the one hand, philosophers have routinely had recourse to metaphysical speculations, often derived from German idealism, about the pre-existence of a ground 'beyond meaning and reality', not dissimilar to how Descartes, in his *Metaphysical Meditations*, would reintroduce God as the final guarantee for the veracity of his expositions on the relationship between thinking and being. On the other hand, within a strictly empiricist framework, analytical philosophers and those underscoring the crucial significance of the logical structure of linguistic propositions, such as Wittgenstein himself, have argued that the gap between thinking and being can be narrowed, and that the truth-value of statements can be legitimised, if absolute priority is given to a rational-scientific investigation of external reality. By contrast with the metaphysicians, the correspondence between the concept and the thing (the famous *adaequatio rei et intellectus*) is guaranteed, here, on the basis of a carefully designed scientific method and the employment of language as a natural, factual tool of description.

For Balaska, neither of these two conventional approaches to 'astonishment' are particularly adequate, because in all their differences they both constitute no more than a spurious refusal to ascertain the potentially creative force that lies within the abyss itself, irrespective of the fact that, in the empiricist deflection, evidence is but a false name for probability, and that so-called facts can never re-emerge outside the fictional structures of meaning. Instead of adhering to the metaphysical or the empiricist deflection, Balaska argues persuasively that 'astonishment' should be embraced as a generative source of 'reflection', which does require the subject to take responsibility for the inadequacy of his or her own words, but which opens a space for creative (self-)enrichment. Drawing on a highly original, combined reading of Wittgenstein and Lacan, Balaska calls this subjective stance of reflection an ethical experience, which she defines as a creative involvement with meaning, against the abstract metaphysical ruminations of the German idealists and the equally sterile, formalistic propositions of analytic philosophy.

At this point, I was somehow expecting the author to return to Nietzsche, yet to my own 'astonishment', she prefers to elaborate on the subject's creative exploration of the

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abyss with what I can only describe as a certain humanistic philosophy of individuation, harmonisation and self-integration. At this point, we have left Wittgenstein behind and are firmly into Lacanian clinical-psychoanalytic terrain, even though the author tends to make abstraction of the difference between Lacan's general theory of the (split, divided) subject, and his yearlong explorations of the direction (aims, goals, objectives) and the ethics of a psychoanalytic treatment process. From the vantage point of the latter, it is patently true that for the early Lacan, who delivered his seminar at Sainte-Anne Hospital in Paris to psychoanalytic trainees between 1953 and 1963, psychoanalytic interpretation entails an act of deciphering, and that clinical practice must be geared towards a reintegration of the patient's history and a re-calibration of the symbolic in favour of the emergence of new, less problematic meanings. Hence, the early Lacan tends to perform a delicate balancing act between hermeneutics and humanism. However, during the early 1960s Lacan came to realise that this perspective on the analytic act may merely replace one pathological meaning with another, equally symptomatic meaning, with the added complication that the latter is derived from the analytic process itself and may thus newly condemn the patient to another, iatro- or analytico-genic cage. In other words, I am not convinced that Balaska's reading of the ethical response to the abyss as an act of self-becoming, which constitutes an "individuated involvement with meaning" and a "more integrated existence through the appropriation of those signifiers (and the reality they carry) that are closed up" (p. 147), is as emancipatory as she would like it to be. Apart from the fact that it is quite irreconcilable with the late Lacan (and maybe also, to some extent, with the late Wittgenstein), I am not at all sure this way of dealing with the experience of 'astonishment' would be less illusory, more liberating, less 'deflective', more ethical than the conventional responses which, by way of shorthand, we might also designate as 'a belief in God' or 'a reliance on science'. Lacan himself gradually acknowledged that the good life is not at all tantamount to a creative involvement with meaning, with a view to self-becoming. If anything, it slowly dawned upon him that it was exactly the opposite, notably that the subject's capacity for living well is directly proportional to his or her ability to abandon the islands of meaningful knowledge and venture out onto the oceans of absolute nonsense.

My own reservations as to Balaska's conclusions aside, this is a carefully crafted, well-written and altogether fascinating book, which is deserving of a wide readership. It may seem paradoxical, given the subject matter, but the author's language is remarkably clear and precise, and the ideas are invariably presented in a transparent, systematic and logical series of arguments, which are consistently reader-friendly. Neither the Wittgenstein nor the Lacan in the book's title should stop anyone from engaging with the text, because no extensive prior knowledge of both authors is presumed and each of the chapters contains just the right amount of recapitulation for the reader to find his or her bearings and follow the author on her intellectual journey. I am already looking forward to seeing where it will take her next.

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