

Keith Tester

Visiting Professor at the Bauman Institute¹

THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

*„When I use a word”, Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, „it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”
„The question is”, said Alice, „whether you can make words mean so many different things.”
„The question is”, said Humpty Dumpty, „which is to be master – that’s all.”*

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

*

This page or two seeks to do nothing more than draw inspiration from Bauman’s work in order to raise some questions. I am not going to answer the questions because they are too important for me to pretend to be able to answer them. In any case this is not the time for answers. I have very deliberately kept this document very short in order to make the questions sharper. They need to be sharp because they need to be able to cut us out of the warm and soft belly of the whale in which academics write without however smelling the stench from the poisoned corpse.

*

Zygmunt Bauman wondered whether the world was hospitable to writers. He decided it was almost certainly not. However, for Bauman this was not a counsel of despair. Quite the contrary, the inhospitality makes the writer’s assumption of responsibility for the world all the more urgent and pressing. The writer might not be able to change the course of events but, for Bauman, this is no reason to give up.

Bauman was a writer because he was firmly convinced of the ability of the work of writing to make a difference. It makes a difference because it

¹ E-mail: keith.tester@me.com

can enable men and women to make clearer choices about how to live in the circumstances not of their own choosing. As a writer Bauman was engaging in the *praxis* of a distinctly human being in the world. He took his readers seriously as fellow humans and, furthermore, he took writing and words seriously as the media of a conversation between equals. Bauman's writing was ethical, existential and democratic. It was the intimation of a world not-yet and *utopian*. His writing was a knife into the future.

But all of this is built on a predicate logically refuted by Bauman's sociology of liquid modernity. The work of writing presumes words to have continuous and pragmatically agreed meaning. Dictionaries exist to consolidate the meaning. Writing relies on the deployment of words to stimulate a humanizing and human conversation. *Words and what they mean matter*. However if liquid modernity is the circumstance in which everything is drifting and contingent, if it is the circumstance in which there is only reliability and durability until further notice (and the notice will likely be issued sooner rather than later), then it is impossible to have any confidence in the continuity of the meaning of words. Once a dictionary stood the test of time; nowadays dictionaries have annual amendments. There is no reason to assume the immunity of the words about liquid modernity from the very processes of liquidification they describe. In the circumstances Bauman described, the meaning of words might well be transformed or destroyed in the short gap between the completion of the manuscript – or indeed the finishing of the digital text – and the moment of its appearance.

This would be problematic enough for any conversation and, by extension, for the work of writing in the humanization of the world. But these times, our times, are *looking glass times* in which power has spotted the possibilities of the liquidification of the meaning of words, and exploits them ruthlessly. A formerly hermeneutic problem is now the basis of a politics willing the liquidification of the tools of the writer's work, the better to enable power to do what it will. The writer cannot by definition respond to what power wills. This is because words matter for the writer and they do not matter for power. It is no longer possible to tell truth to power because power will simply ask what does 'truth' mean in any case? After all, these times, our times, are the times of 'alternative truths'.

The regimes currently reigning in the United States, Britain, Poland, Hungary, Russia, Turkey and elsewhere are immune to any challenge writers may make. This is because they simply refuse to treat the meanings of words as anything more than tactical. These regimes are indifferent towards the establishment of any politics based on words with continuities of meaning

(words such as freedom, solidarity, morality, respect), because such words indeed no longer have any meaning incapable of being overturned, turned around or simply laughed at in the circumstances of liquidification. (This is a reason why critical politics taking words like freedom and solidarity seriously, and if they still have a fixed meaning, are in disarray and often seemingly anachronistic). These regimes are instead only concerned with who is to be the master, and words are weapons in the battle for mastery. This is the secret of Trump's smile. What he says means what he says when he says it, but it might well mean something completely different if there is a tactical advantage to be gained. It is also worth recalling how the case to leave the European Union in the British 'Brexit' referendum deliberately mocked 'experts' (who used words to make truth-claims) and was based on what everyone knew to be tactical statements alone (or to be more precise: lies). Where writers are terrorized it is almost certainly out of whimsical nostalgia rather than because they offer any compelling threat to power. Writers are terrorized because they *can be* rather than *need to be* from the point of view of power.

Bauman witnessed the emergence of the sociological circumstances of what has now become a dispensation of power reinforced by the means of coercion and pure indifference. But he shall not be its critic. In this respect he was too soon. It is our responsibility to take the torch from him and to be the critics ourselves. But the question is: *how can we?*

*

Bauman's response to such a situation is easy to deduce. He would enjoin us to continue the work of writing and to carry on doing what has to be done. Circumstances might be uncongenial but this does not release us from our responsibility as writers. Beckett: 'You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on'

But *with what* shall we *go on*? With words even though their meaning is liquid? With the critique of power even though power is utterly immune to critique? With academia even though academia is a harpooned whale?

Shall we then *go on* with something else? What else?

This, ultimately, is the significance of Zygmunt Bauman's work of writing. It forces questions and, in so doing, pushes us to *go on*. Yet the circumstances of Bauman's writing, the world he used words to describe, themselves radically question what *going on* might possibly mean and involve. Maybe this *aporia* contains the seeds of hope – but what does hope mean?