

AMBER'S QUESTION

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Three travelers in their 20s: Molly, my student in 10th-grade poetry some years back; Shaina, friend of m'lady Jazmin; and Amber, of whom I knew nothing. On their cross-country drive they stopped for an overnight (not the first traveling threesome to share my spare room). Dinner was on me at Rockfish (best restaurant in Lubbock, in case you're passing through). We sat in a booth and entertained one another. The old coot told stories. The young travelers were appreciative and sharp.

Then Amber, sitting to my left, asked a question:

"What is your favorite word?"

I was not only puzzled; I was puzzled to be as puzzled as I was. The question had a strange power for me.

If I were 40 or even 30 years younger, the natural answer to Amber's "What's your favorite word?" would be "Amber" – followed (with eye contact) by, "Molly, Shaina, Amber – what words could be better?"

Well, 30 years younger, anyway. At 40 years younger I was neither so quick nor so bold and would no doubt have looked down, raised my eyes, and darkly pronounced "anarchy" – followed, almost certainly, with words Bartolomeo Vanzetti engraved on my heart: "Anarchy is my beloved."

But, being 40 years older, I listened to Amber's question, as young men often do not, and I took it seriously, as young men very often do not. (The young man I was and those I knew were too busy taking ourselves seriously for anything to intrude on that preoccupation.)

"What is your favorite word?"

I can't remember my answer because of my response. My answer was an improvisation, but my response baffled me – a strong, mute recognition of I did not know what.

The three travelers, exhausted and now fed, bedded down in my spare room. In the morning we breakfasted at what may be the last eatery in Lubbock that remains what I call "old Lubbock": Pancake House on Avenue Q. It opens early and closes after lunch, its clientele the geezers whose town this was long ago, in another Texas. The waitress knows their names and what they'll order, and she calls strangers "honey."

Breakfast done, we took photos of each other in the parking lot, then off to Austin went my new friends. I was left with the afterimage of their qualities and with Amber's vexing question.

What first came to me is the answer to a different question: What is the most important word?

That transported me to a 45-page volume: *The Chinese Written Character As a Medium for Poetry*, by Ernest Fenellosa, edited by Ezra Pound. Fenellosa wrote it sometime between 1899 and 1908 (the year he died), Pound edited and published it in 1918, City Lights Books put out my edition in 1968, and I first read it (I date my books) on Oct. 4, 1968, when I was about to turn 23, then read it often until October, 1975. Rereading it now, thanks to Amber's question, I see why for me it was seminal.

Often Fenellosa's insights read like poems: "'Is' comes from the Aryan root *as*, to breathe. 'Be' is from *bhu*, to grow. In Chinese the chief verb for 'is' means not only actively 'to have,' but shows by its derivation that it expresses something even more concrete, namely 'to snatch from the moon with the hand.'"

I remember reading a sentence on a subway, reading it over and over from the 86th Street stop in Manhattan to Burnside Avenue in the Bronx: "A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature."

That paragraph goes on: "Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things."

Oh, my mind was blown. I don't know how many times I reread that book during that October of '68.

"The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. And though we may string ever so many clauses into a single compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire. All processes in nature are interrelated; and thus there could be no complete sentence ... save one which it would take all time to pronounce."

(The last part wasn't entirely new to me. When I was 19 and Antonia was 16, her letter read: "I have learned that no one can write fast enough to write a true story.")

In Western language, thought, and civilization, the most important word is "the." "The" assumes a singularity that, as Fenellosa says, "does not exist in nature." Western thought bases itself on the delineation of states of separateness. Every species of flora and fauna, of stone and star, is studied for the properties that distinguish its separateness – an effective method that created science, but that ignores as much as it sees. In the West we had to evolve relativity and quantum physics to begin a science of relations, a science still in its beginnings. (There would be no environmental movement without the study of relations.)

Fenellosa: "Relations are more real and important than the things which they relate."

And: "The verb must be the primary truth of nature, since motion and change are all we can recognize in her. ... Green is only a certain rapidity of vibration, hardness a degree of tenseness in cohering."

"The true formula for thought is: The cherry tree is all that it does."

Six decades later Buckminster Fuller would declare: "I seem to be a verb."

And, reconsidering all this, I pondered over an email sent by my cousin, the writer Rocco LoBosco: "Paradox, incompleteness, difference, and illusion run through language like a vascular system."

"What is your favorite word?"

Rereading Fenellosa, remembering Bucky Fuller and the words of Antonia and Rocco – it all refreshed my spirit but moved me no closer to my favorite word.

Then I detoured through the moral deterioration of American usage.

One example suffices: the shift from the hospitality of "You're welcome" to the impersonality of "No problem."

"You're welcome": You are welcome to what I give you. You are welcome to what I have done for you. You are welcome here.

“No problem”: You’ve created no problem for me. An implication: See to it that you don’t.

Finally, in this roundabout way, after weeks of intermittent wandering through ideas of language, Amber’s question taught me my favorite word.

I wasn’t trying to think of it at that moment, I just suddenly knew.

It is a new word, as words go -- according to the Oxford English Dictionary, its present usage can’t be confirmed in England until 1864, and not in America until 1883. It is a humble word, yet audacious, underestimated for its active power. Its loveliness is taken for granted (a silken blend of consonant and vowel). Also taken for granted is its friendly practicality – so friendly, that when said in an unfriendly tone it punches a straight jab. Common as dirt, mellow as a swallow of good beer.

Amber, Shaina, Molly, my favorite word is “hello.”

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