

## PREFACE

**T**HIS BOOK IS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS when authority becomes the subject of conscious thought and argument. For the most part we go through life yielding to the demands made upon us by the world, without thinking much about them: we stop at red lights, pay our taxes, show up on time for appointments, speak more or less grammatically, and so on. But sometimes a person will challenge the claims made upon him, either by interpreting them (or the facts) in his favor or, more deeply, by rejecting the authority of a regime entirely. This moment can be highly dramatic (as when Socrates' friend Crito tells him to escape from prison) but it is not always so. The management of the competing claims of the world on the self, the self on the world, is a primary human process; sometimes it is carried on instinctively, sometimes as the subject of conscious art. It is with performances of this art that this book is concerned.

FROM CHILDHOOD ON we are surrounded by directions to our conduct, or claims upon our lives, made by parents, friends, and children; by schools, churches, and synagogues; by policemen, judges, and legislators—by all the people and institutions that make up our private and public worlds. On the other side we have the exigencies or wishes of the self—our needs, or whims, or considered judgments—which sometimes harmonize, sometimes conflict, with these external demands. Thus it is across our lives that we face the question of the proper authority of particular people or institutions.

But the problem is deeper even than this, reaching every action of the

mind, for even our languages are systems of authority. Think of learning one's native language, for example, as we all have done: to be understood at all we must speak it as it is spoken by other people, employing its terms and categories and gestures; yet our experience is never exactly the same as that of others, we have our own thoughts and feelings, and the question naturally arises, How adequate is our language to what we know, to what we have become? How far are we free, and able, to transform it? Huckleberry Finn, to take a clear and familiar example, grew up in a world in which the most important fact about any person was his or her race, and in which "nigger" was a standard term of description and address; then he found himself the friend of a runaway slave, without a language in which to describe that relation, which in turn meant without a way of imagining his life in his world. There was nothing to do at the end but "light out for the territories," which is not a possibility for any of us.

While the experience of Huck Finn might be thought extreme, we all have something like it. An ordinary part of growing up, for example, is that the young person finds the language she has inherited from her parents, with all its commitments to particular social practices and attitudes, most unsatisfactory; she feels she has to struggle, sometimes unsuccessfully, to find a language in which to express what she thinks and is, a language with which to make her future. What makes it even harder is that she has to do this as one who is partly made by what she wants to criticize, for we are all to a large degree shaped by the very institutions and practices whose authority we question. There is no clear line between inner and outer reality.

Sometimes a person experiences a similar collapse of confidence in the language of the larger culture too, suddenly seeing that it cannot say or do what he dimly feels it should. Such moments can be the occasion for great art or politics: Homer, in the *Iliad*, presents Achilles as coming to see as alien the language of honor upon which he has built his life, and in so doing makes a poem that is a great act of cultural and political criticism; Plato, in his dialogues, subverts and transforms the language of value by which his culture lived; Lincoln, in his public speeches, redefines our Constitution as rooted in the equality of all people. One aim of certain texts—in American literature the works of Emerson, Melville, and Dickinson stand out—is to induce such a collapse of language in the reader and by doing so to open up new possibilities for thought and life.

To say that the choice is either to resist or submit to the authorities we find in the world is too simple, partly because the authorities to which

we respond often have a purchase in our own minds, partly because as we grow we find ourselves making authorities of our own: in reworking the languages we have inherited, from early childhood on, in making claims for the rightness of our conduct, or in arguing for the cogency of our reasons. Every speech act is a way of being and acting in the world that makes a claim for its own rightness, which we ask others to respect. Our life with language and each other involves the perpetual creation of authorities, good and bad, successful and unsuccessful.

IN THIS BOOK MY OBJECT IS to explore the way authority is thought about and constituted in a series of texts, chosen from different cultural contexts and different generic types. Each of them contains arguments that assert, or deny, that a person should submit to the authority of an institution or a set of social practices. In Plato's *Crito* the institution in question is the law of Athens, by which Socrates has been sentenced to death; in *Richard II*, it is the crown, which Richard claims by divine right and inheritance, but which Henry Bolingbroke takes from him on the grounds of misfeasance; in Hooker's *Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie*, it is the English church, which Hooker supports and the Puritans resist; in Hale's "Considerations Touching the Amendment or Alteration of Lawes" and in the modern Supreme Court case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), it is the existing state of the law, poised against desire for change; in Austen's *Mansfield Park*, it is the manners, and the master, of the family into which Fanny Price has been adopted; in Emily Dickinson's poems, it is the conventions that establish the forms of expression in which the poet, and especially the "poetess," must speak in order to be heard; in Mandela's speech from the dock, it is the law of South Africa that defines his conduct as criminal; in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, it is the Union, invoked to justify the awful war fought for its preservation.

In each case a speaker, or more than one, is confronted with claims that the institution in question has an authority that overrides his own wishes, judgment, or experience; he responds by acquiescing or by resisting, and in doing so, defines both himself and the institution in new ways. In doing this he participates in the creation of the very authorities he accepts or resists. In one sense at least his ultimate authority becomes the way of thinking and talking by which he does these things, the language by which he defines and adjudicates these competing claims. My

interest is in the way this moment of conflict and tension—and creativity, too—is addressed in these texts, and in the possibilities for life they thus define.

ONE QUESTION FOR US AS READERS is whether we can understand and describe a text's claims to authority, including for the authority of its own performances. In this book I shall try to do that with the texts I read. But there is an evaluative question as well: What are we to think of the way of thinking and talking that a particular text performs and holds out as authoritative? How are we to judge it? The possible range of performances is after all enormous, from the worst to the best forms of thought and expression. This requires us to ask what those forms are. This is also a way of asking, To what modes of thinking and talking should authority be accorded?

This is not merely an intellectual but a political and ethical question. A claim for—or against—the authority of an institution or a set of practices is always, among other things, an invitation to create a community, both with one's interlocutor and with those others one speaks about, a community for which authority is claimed; and like other efforts to create community it can be analyzed and evaluated in political and ethical terms. Who are the actors here and how are they defined? What relation, of equality or subordination, exists among them? By what understandings or procedures is it regulated, by what aspirations motivated? What is this living tissue for which authority is claimed?

When we turn from reading texts such as these to our own lives as citizens and speakers we face a related set of questions: When and why should we grant authority to particular institutions or social practices, and when, by contrast, should we insist instead upon our own sense of what is right, or good, or necessary? If we are in doubt, how long should we defer making up our minds, with the aim of educating ourselves into what we are at first inclined to resist? Some such deferral is essential to all growing up, some such education a good thing; yet one ought not give up the right and duty to decide things for oneself in the end, and even a partial submission to an evil culture may have serious and enduring consequences. And as speakers ourselves: What kinds of authorities should we create in our own acts of thought and speech?

Every time we speak to an occasion at which the world makes claims

upon the self, whether we do so in public or private, in the classroom, or on the pages of journals, with friends or with enemies, we respond to these questions and others like them. How are we to do this well? In a matter like this we need all the education we can get, and it is with the aim of learning from the performances of others, situated in other times and cultures, that I turn to the texts that follow.

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*After reading this Preface and one of the chapters that follows, a friend wrote to ask: "I don't quite understand. Is authority in your view something to be combatted, or claimed (or both)?" She wrote from the world of literary criticism, where "authority" is usually not used in a good sense. There "subversion" or "transgression" are more common objects of praise; indeed they are sometimes seen as the central functions of literary art. Even in the law, which is built upon authority, there is a mistrust of this term, and of the idea that any person or institution has authority over another. I find helpful the distinction reflected in the title of my colleague Joseph Vining's book, *The Authoritative and the Authoritarian* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986). This is of course just to say that there are good and bad forms of this phenomenon and it raises the question, How are they to be distinguished? How can claims to authority be appropriately recognized and resisted, claimed and created? The art that this question defines is my subject here.*