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The Therapy of Symbols

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Walker Percy, *Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2019).

Elon Musk recently predicted that language would become obsolete. He envisions a "neurolink device" directly inserted in the brain allowing people to share thoughts without the mediation of speaking and listening.

Tech reporters gleefully shared this as a bold prophecy of progress, but consider Musk's strange assumptions about language, consciousness, meaning, and human nature. On Musk's account *language* is not essential to *communication*. Musk even described "eloquence" (in strikingly poetic language) as merely "clever compression of content": taking concepts and feelings, encoding them in a foreign medium, and transmitting them for someone else to decode. Forming and interpreting "mouth noises," he said, is an inefficient way to share understanding; so much can be lost in the "compression" and "decompression." Technology will render this step unnecessary, and one day traditional speech will have gone the way of campfires, utilized only "for sentimental reasons."

These intriguing ideas were shared on a podcast in which Musk and his interviewer, and their listeners, had no trouble arriving at understanding. But note that by Musk's reasoning, in addition to "mouth noises," we should also be able to dispose of ink shapes, tone of voice, and even facial expressions. From Musk's pristine Cartesian perspective, we aren't essentially embodied creatures, but more like angels, capable of purely spiritual apprehension, once freed from the awkward and purely accidental constraints of beastly biology.

Invoking Descartes highlights the fact that Musk envisions only a new technological path to an old dream of mind-body separation. But it is precisely this unoriginal Cartesianism that is most strange about Musk's vision. Technologically, Musk may very well be correct (at least up to a point, sophisticated devices could facilitate some forms of intersubjective translation). More

unsettling is how he thinks neuro-engineering confirms a very peculiar theory of how language works, and what human beings are.

For diagnostic perspective, nobody could be more helpful than Walker Percy (1916–1990). If you know a little about Percy, you know he was a novelist. If you know a bit more, you probably know that he was a student of human nature, first as a scientific practitioner—a medical doctor—and all along as a philosopher. The broad scope of Percy's theorizing has been widely appreciated. Peter Augustine Lawler, for instance, made Percy the centerpiece of his analysis of "postmodern" politics and the capstone of his exploration of Americans as spiritual "aliens." But in both he recognized the centrality of Percy's attention to language.

In whatever manner we experience Percy's insight into the human condition—as novelist, as cultural critic, as therapist of the soul—it was the philosophical puzzle of language that got Percy started and remained the unifying thread of his whole career. Percy wrote essays on philosophy of language, and he considered language the key to understanding human nature, a theme treated throughout his life, up to and including in his 1989 Jefferson Lecture (delivered a year and a week before he died). Thirty years later we have, posthumously published, Percy's planned philosophical treatise, *Symbol and Existence*, penned originally in the 1950's.

Percy's first publication was a review of a book about the role of symbols in understanding the human condition (in *Thought,* 1954). This led to academic articles on the same topic in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (1956) and *The New Scholasticism* (1958), which became the substance of the first half of the drafted book. The second half, elaborating further the connections between semiotics, epistemology, and metaphysics, was mostly written by 1960, with Percy piecing out and repurposing parts in *The Modern Schoolman* (1957), *Journal of Philosophy* (1958), and *The Personalist* (1960). A more literary chapter ("Metaphor as a Mistake") appeared in *Sewanee Review* (1958).

Percy may have worked on revisions in the 1960's (when his first two novels were published) but by the 1970's he seems to have given up on the scholarly monograph. His ideas probably found wider exposure anyway when packaged haphazardly as a collection of essays, *The Message in the Bottle* (1975). In 1977, Percy was especially coy about his reflections on language, even as he summarized them, in a brilliant postmodern self-interview for *Esquire*, "Questions They Never Asked Me."

Certainly by 1980, the scholarly project was displaced by a more ambitious and playful work-in-progress on science, language, and self-knowledge with the working title "*Novum Organum.*" (Noting the troubling rise of television-watching, Percy also hoped the new book would be more culturally relevant.) In 1983 it was published as *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, in which Percy practically dares his readers to tackle the central forty-page philosophical "intermezzo" on semiotic theory. The same year, he consigned two drafts of *Symbol and Existence* to the archives at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Diligent editors have finally brought Percy's abandoned philosophical monograph to light. There aren't exactly new ideas here; technically, a bit more than half of the volume is "previously unpublished," but Percy, creative and persistent, found a way to get his central ideas and arguments out in other forms. The advantage of this posthumous volume lies in seeing Percy's most philosophical reflections handled in a more systematic and organized format. What previously had to be reconstituted from piecemeal fragments, scattered articles, and oddly personal cultural criticism we have re-collected in an original expository context.

What did Percy think he could achieve by presenting his ideas in the format of a scholarly

book? Here I outline his own summary of the work, with generous quotation from genuinely new material at the end.

Percy considers his book less than a full "study of language" but a "modest excursion into semantics." He has offered a "phenomenology" and a "lay reflection on the nature of language," in order to "make a beginning toward a radical anthropology," capable of uniting our life as both an organism responding to stimuli and as an assertion-making being. Only a "hybrid discipline like semiotics" brings out both the "behavioristic and assertory" dimensions of human life, so it is a path into "an objective science of man as an asserting organism," man as "*animal symbolicum*, as the organism who uses symbols."

For Percy, this suggests "a radical therapy of the disease that has afflicted the vision of Western man for three hundred years: Cartesian dualism," which cannot take account of man's "basic symbolic orientation in the world." To deal with "the normative and polar realities of human life, religion/myth, worship/idolatry, truth/error, true/that-which-is," we need an alternative, non-Cartesian anthropology. This will take our experience of language seriously:

> The fundamental act of symbolization is an affirming of the thing to be what it is through the auspices of the symbol. Each symbolic form, whether it be a name-giving, a proposition, a scientific hypothesis, a work of art, an act of worship, is an affirming of what is. The existence of things, of relations, of laws, of concrete forms, of God, is known and affirmed through the mediation of the symbol.

Recognizing the role of the symbol helps overcome "the observer-data split," manifest in private or subjective consciousness versus public or objective reality. All of these are not only personally alienating but theoretically and empirically inadequate to actual experience. "We may express the authentic term of man's symbolic orientation as *a communion that affirms what-is through the mediation of the symbol*."

Communion as intersubjective-consciousness is also why "the symbol has a fundamentally sacramental function" as "a sensuous thing that mediates a higher operation." "The symbolic orientation achieves its actuality when it affirms being or, in other words, is a communion." Both scientistic behaviorism and subjectivist existentialism get human experience wrong:

> Man is neither a pure consciousness marooned in a world of objects, nor a pure organism, an object among objects. He is instead spirit-in-organism, besouled body, a complex in which spirit achieves itself not in spite of organism, words, and the world, but because of them and through them.

Percy's approach to language is often credited to C.S. Peirce, but more important influences seem to be Susanne Langer and Ernst Cassirer (for semiotic theory) and Henry Veatch (for semantic realism); and the ambition of renewing metaphysical anthropology through language draws on Husserl, Heidegger, and Marcel. For the unification of existentialism and semantics, the Thomist Jacques Maritain may be Percy's most signficant inspiration; it is from Maritain—including his promotion of John of St. Thomas's (a.k.a. John Poinsot's) "material logic"—that Percy seems to have learned to connect scholastic logic, metaphysics, and philosophical psychology in defense of a non-Cartesian, spiritually embodied conception of man's nature and destiny.

Whatever the philosophical lineage, we find in the final two pages a still-relevant rebuke to the trendy Cartesian transhumanism of today's tech wizards, who see "man as a sort of angelic calculator":

> The idealist is scandalized because the 'error' [of knowing a thing in and through a name] decrees that man may not forsake the incarnate, the concrete, the particular, for the ideal and the universal. He can never get away from the sensuous symbol, the word, the rite, the art form.... [T]his 'error' is nothing else than the means by which an incarnate spirit knows the world.... Man is in the world, not merely as an adapting organism but as the creature whose vocation it is to know the truth of being and give testimony of it.

We are not surprised that an old-soul Aristotelian poet sees this easier than a scientistic neophile engineer. The poet is most conscious of knowing things in and through words. The word—"which is after all only a mouthy little sound," Percy admits—is what "the poet salvages... from its utility context and holds" so that in it we see "the thing in the word in another mode of existing, *in alio esse*."

Percy the philosopher helps us understand the perversity of imagining human life without language. The same insights may also help explain why his scholarly philosophy book didn't find a publisher, and why podcasts are more popular than philosophy classes. Even if you could mainline meaning and argument, they are more natural, significant, and joyfully fulfilling shared by the storyteller or poet. Percy the poet knew that communion isn't "sentimental"; it is our distinctive mode of being. The lecture-hall and library are more likely to become obsolete than the campfire.

I'm glad to have this book, and Percy needed to write it. Did he need to publish it? It seems reflecting on the mystery, scandal, and joy of naming sufficed for him to find his vocation:

> What I perceive in all its intricate and iridescent reality is the thing itself as it has formed itself within the web of sound. No wonder the poet is seduced. Once he has savored this dangerous delight, it is enough to set him fondling words for life, turning them this way and that in the hope that one will catch this holy fire.

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