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Correspondences Three

Broadside opinions and conversations al fresco

Dear Reader,

In this third issue of *Correspondences*, we turn to metaphor—a refreshing look at a refreshing study: Eugene Green commenting on Walker Percy's "Metaphor as Mistake," which first appeared in *The Sewanee Review* in 1958. (It is reprinted in Percy's collected essays on language, *The Message in the Bottle*, and I have included it in *Reclaiming the Imagination*, along with passages from Cassirer's *Language and Myth* and Susanne K. Langer's early essay on Cassirer's theory of language and myth.) Eugene Green is a student of medieval homiletics and a practitioner of modern preaching. He also directs the Office of Academic Skills at Stonehill College.

Our schedule has changed a bit since we decided to save *Correspondences Three* for this fall. The next issue will feature an essay by Neal Bruss, "Writing Without Confidence," and will include responses to Susan Wells and Warren Herendeen on Vygotsky *(Correspondences Two)*. In addition, we invite your comment on *method*: when people say—as they often do—that there can be no method for teaching composition, what do they mean? Did Descartes have in mind what the educationists mean when they talk about Method? What are your thoughts on method?

Your queries, elucidations, explications, puzzlements, and counterstatements are what we need to set this year's series in motion. Send them to me at the address below.

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The Making of Metaphor

Eugene Green

Walker Percy's "Metaphor as Mistake" brings to mind Saint Auweline, perhaps more the patron of our generation than she was of thirteenth century Arras where her cult began. Let me explain.

Saint Auweline—her name is the feminine diminutive of "oison" = "goose"—became an overnight sensation among the bourgeois and literate of her age. Her charms—hers was a literary cult, I should add—attracted believers to her in droves (or gaggles) beyond counting. The litany prayed daily in her honor repeatedly invoked her by her most popular epithet: "qui ens el mares maint," Medieval French for "she who leads us into the swamp."

According to pious legend, Saint Auweline suffered an untimely but spectacular martyrdom when a shiftless and disgruntled class of students buried her under a mound of parchment. Although her cult once seemed destined for the medieval curiosity shop, her heavenly intercessions, clearly efficacious, have revived her popularity. Her present-day followers, though many are ignorant of the celestial guide who leads them, trudge from swamp to swamp, from shrine to shrine. Because Auweline wrote ceaselessly on metaphor, the Swamp of Metaphor has become more sacred to her memory than all her other shrines. At the Swamp of Metaphor, where a giant and marble question mark has been raised in her honor, devotees now gather in ever-gathering numbers. Here they fall prostrate and mumble into the mud. Here they ululate and try to light candles in the driving wind. A recent survey of this awesome cult has predicted that in the year 2039, given the present rate of growth, "there will be more students of metaphor than there are people." The great pilgrimage routes of old—the shrines at Canterbury and Compostello—can hardly support an ice cream stand these days, while the shrine of St. Auweline-in-the-Swamp grows grander every season.

Occasionally, however, either because we have a nonconformist or a patent disbeliever on our hands, a voice will be heard from the crowd. From the land beyond the swamp, a voice will be raised up—one that rings with uncommon sounds of good sense and clarity. Walker Percy's is such a voice. Percy takes us directly and at once

to "the question on which everything depends and which is too often assumed to be settled without ever having been asked: . . . is it the function of metaphor merely to diminish tension, or is it a discoverer of being?"

Percy will argue that metaphor does indeed "diminish tension"; it chiefly serves, however, as "a discoverer of being." This dual emphasis will lead—and this is perhaps of greatest importance to those of us who teach writing—to a theory of those conditions which allow metaphor either to relieve tension or to make discoveries. Two such conditions come to mind: curiosity and boredom. Whatever we know (know, that is, in a manageable and usable way), we can account to our curiosity. Why we are curious in the first place seems linked to the very nature of man. That we are curious is daily borne out in our experience: from a high-minded concern for truth to our ordinary bent for solving the most mundane problems, everything from changing tires to working crossword puzzles. No matter whether the object of our curiosity is an abstraction (like "truth") or a better way to make lasagna, our curiosity will be satisfied only by language. The solution to every problem, the satisfaction to every curiosity lies in our ability to make language, to create images, to see relationships. In the perception of a relationship—one word brought within another word's field of energy—we create an image. If, however, the object of our curiosity continues to command our attention, we will shortly find ourselves bored with the language by which we know the thing in question. Our boredom, then, will give rise to renewed inquiry and new language, "leaving one still," as T.S. Eliot reminds us, "with the intolerable wrestle with words and meanings."

Curiosity and boredom, we must remind our students, are crucial to the process of revising their writing. Our students will be aided by being told that the way in which they are talking in an essay reflects inadequate curiosity about their subject or that it reflects boredom or that what they've said does not stir our curiosity or leaves us bored. There is no issue of any abiding human significance which is not better served by a recursive pattern of curiosity, boredom, and curiosity renewed.

To return to Percy, what's wanted beyond any either-or proposition (metaphor as *either* reliever of tension *or* discoverer of being) is the realization that boredom, as much as necessity, is the mother of metaphor. In addition to the boredom that may derive from our own way of talking about an object, boredom may derive as well from traditional ways of talking. What we call cliché or dead metaphors or non-metaphors are re-categorized uses of once lively language. Today's prize-winning image is tomorrow's cliché precisely because we are eventually struck by the mortality of language in any configuration and by the inevitable inadequacy of earlier images or discussions to represent the object fully or freshly. To speak of representing what we know, however, involves some profound assumptions. Chiefly it assumes that we "know" anything at all. On this question Percy does battle with the mighty.

Percy chides both the semioticists and the behaviorists: the semioticists for saying that we know "without mediation" and the behaviorists for saying that "we do not know at all but only respond." In Percy's summary view: "we do know, not as the angels know and not as dogs know but as men, who must know one thing through the mirror of another."

We are dealing here with large issues: not with metaphor merely as the tool of poets nor as the ornament of orators. Metaphor is here examined as central to "man's fundamental symbolic orientation in the world": metaphor is here understood as a defining characteristic of man the *animal symbolicum*, one of Cassirer's favorite terms. In the words of Hazard Adams, "Rather than inhabiting a world of things, man inhabits a world of symbolic reality. There is no hope of escaping symbolization." To examine our assumptions about the making of meaning (the chief purpose of writing and the motive force behind our pedagogy), we must examine our assumptions about the making of metaphor because, as I.A. Richards says, metaphor is "the omnipresent principle of language."

Percy's challenge to the behaviorists reminds us that, though we often act otherwise, we are free *not* to salivate when the bell rings; we are free *not* to be victimized by "automatic fluency, turning on the tap and letting a lot of platudinous bumble emerge." But if the behaviorists are wrong in saying that there is only response and no meaning, the semioticists are equally wrong in suggesting that we know *im*mediately (without mediation) and can name our experience. Percy's challenge to the semioticists reminds us that meaning cannot be forced upon us; no one else can make it for us. Meaning does not reside in the configurations of our experience but only in our imaginative re-configuration—in a process of shaping which is wholly symbolic. Teaching the composing process as an exercise in creative boredom allows us to encourage a use of language (certainly in the earlier stages of the composing process) that is playful and tentative—the writer as *homo symoblicum* and *homo ludens*.

When we encounter something new, our response is not predetermined nor do we *im*mediately know what to call it. The meaning of our encounter is not like a label in the folds of a garment, just waiting to be discovered. The name for our experience is hard won; the garment may be the creation of someone else but the label is our own making. We will arrive at a name only by laying alongside our experience a whole host of other things already perceived and conceptualized and named. We look at the new in light of the old. We establish an identity between the familiar

and the unfamiliar. We create a metaphor. At last, by establishing a relationship, we make meaning. The process of creating metaphor and of making meaning by means of metaphor is among the highest acts of human consciousness: consciousness, as Coleridge defines it, equals "the perception of identity and contrariety." We know, as Percy would say, "one thing through the mirror of another." But here lies the crux of the issue: the simultaneous perception of identity *and* contrariety. As a result of that perception, so Coleridge and others argue, consciousness is energized and shaped. Poets, however, seem capable of tolerating a kind of creative ambiguity that unsettles philosophers.

"Metaphor," says Percy, "has scandalized philosophers, including both scholastics and semioticists, because it seems to be wrong: it asserts an identity between two different things. And it is wrongest when it is most beautiful." Sometimes the "wrongness" is earned by a writer's midnight labor; sometimes it comes freely and takes you by surprise. In his "Epithalamion," Gerard Manley Hopkins clearly worked hard for his metaphors and our thoughtful reading is repaid by one delightful shock after another.

Hark, hearer, hear what I do; lend a
thought now, make
  believe
We are leafwhelmed somewhere with
the hood
Of some branchy bunchy bushybowered
wood,
Southern dene or Lancashire clough
or Devon cleave
That leans along the loins of hill,
where a candycoloured, where
  a gluegold-brown
Marbled river, boisterously
beautiful, between
Roots and rocks is danced and
dandled, all in froth and water—
  blowballs, down.

We would not expect the poet to have us think of hills, their line and structure, as the "loins" of a man's body; yet if he had merely given us "ridge" or "rim," we would surely have been disappointed. Likewise, we are agreeably surprised at being made to imagine a river, like a child on its mother's lap, "dandled." A kindred spirit to Crashaw and Bernini, Hopkins pictures the wild turnings of a lively river as so much marble in motion. Marbled waters, a river dandled, and the loins of a hill: these metaphors are "mistakes" akin to Percy's "blue-dollar hawk." Here, however, it is useful to distinguish between art metaphors (of the sort a poet struggles to conceive) and folk metaphors, "those cases where one stumbles into beauty without deserving it or working for it." Percy's "blue-dollar hawk" is a folk metaphor.

> Blue darter tells us something about the bird, what it does, what its color is; blue-dollar tells, or the boy hopes it will tell, what the bird *is*. *For this ontological pairing, or, if you prefer, "error" of identification of word and thing, is the only possible way in which the apprehended nature of the bird, its inscape, can be validated as being what it is.* This inscape is, after all, otherwise ineffable. I can describe it, make crude approximations by such words as *darting, oaring, speed, dive*, but none of these will suffice to affirm this so distinctive something which I have seen. This is why, as Marcel has observed, when I ask what something is, I am more satisfied to be given a name even if the name means nothing to me (especially if?), than to be given a scientific classification.

Because it recently passed through my hands, let me offer a local example of folk metaphor. In a paper riddled with errors and flying with as much grace as a one-winged sparrow, the author was trying to talk about solving problems. Often the solution of one problem, he allowed, merely generated another problem to be solved. At this point, he said, you had to put on "your thing king cap." Given his relentless abuse of language throughout the essay, I initially thought that "thing king cap" simply represented one more lapse. I asked. The student asked in return, "But don't they call it a 'thing king cap' because when you're wearing it, you're in charge of everything?" Our troubled writer had stumbled into the kind of metaphor around which whole legends are built.

> It is the cognitive dimension of metaphor which is usually overlooked, because cognition is apt to be identified with conceptual and discursive knowing. Likeness and difference are canons of discursive thought, but analogy, the mode of poetic knowing, is also cognitive. Failure to recognize the discovering power of analogy can only eventuate in a noncognitive psychologistic theory of metaphor. There is no knowing, there is no Namer and Hearer, there is no world beheld in common; there is only an interior "transaction of contexts" in which psychological processes interact to the reader's titillation.

Those of us who teach writing have all gotten used in recent years to talking about process rather than product. We still need, however, to remind ourselves that writing is a process precisely because the relation of thought to word is a process, one that operates by fits and starts and often moves very slowly. To keep faith and patience with ourselves and with our students, we need to make room for analogy, enough room so that it can begin (as with all

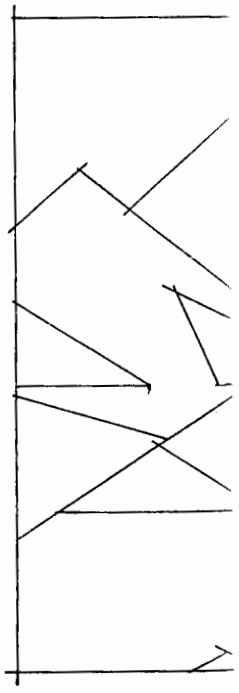
writing) in chaos: the wild and crazy analogue must be tolerated at least until it can be tested. Lev Vygotsky says (and herein lies further encouragement) that "...the relation of thought to word undergoes changes which themselves may be regarded as developments in the functional sense." In the act of creating language to describe experience, no one gets it right the first time around: if, that is, by getting it "right" we mean getting it "wrong" in Percy's sense—getting it fresh and vital and deeply one's own.

> We can only *con*ceive being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside. We approach the thing not directly but by pairing, by apposing symbol and thing.

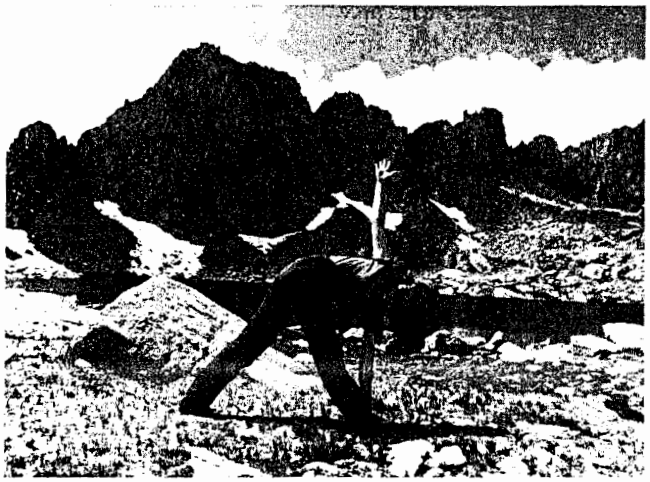
The relationship of thought to an object of perception (of concept to percept) is usually not exhausted nor even adequately represented by the first symbol that comes to mind. "An idea, in the highest sense of that word, cannot be conveyed but by a symbol": so says Coleridge. In order to symbolize an idea in the highest sense we usually need to work our way through a mountain of words before we emerge with the symbol we need. If the object of our investigation is important enough, we will (as Vygotsky suggests) move repeatedly back and forth between concept and word, thought and symbol. Coleridge provides us the image for this recursiveness; he calls it "an arc of oscillation." The richer and more playful the process of relating thought to word and word to thought, the more apt and authentic are our analogies likely to become. We cannot, in any case, judge the adequacy of a given symbol without regarding it carefully in the context of other symbols. We will want to see the symbol for our concept set forth in a list or in a proposition or in a circle of other words; this playpen of symbols may eventually become a sentence, a paragraph, a book. At this stage in the process, the *animal symbolicum* and the *homo ludens* are one and the same.

Perhaps man, at once *symbolicum* and *ludens*, is most harmoniously at work in the creation of Percy's "wrongest" metaphors. We would surely be happy to have more such metaphors in our culture and in our classrooms. In what he calls an "immense thesis," Wayne Booth proposes: "the quality of any culture will in part be measured both by the quality of the metaphors it induces or allows and the quality of the judges of metaphor that it educates and rewards." The evocation of such metaphors will require the proper climate: an environment that encourages imagination and the quest for analogies.

Because so much rides on our determination as teachers to induce and reward the making of metaphor among our students and because, as Percy has taught us, the most beautiful and most civilizing metaphors seem wrongest, we will need constantly to re-view our own assumptions about the relationship between metaphor and meaning. We may never talk very far about metaphor without walking into a swamp. But since we can ill afford to avoid the topic, we need some small piece of solid ground on which to stand. Percy provides some valuable real estate.

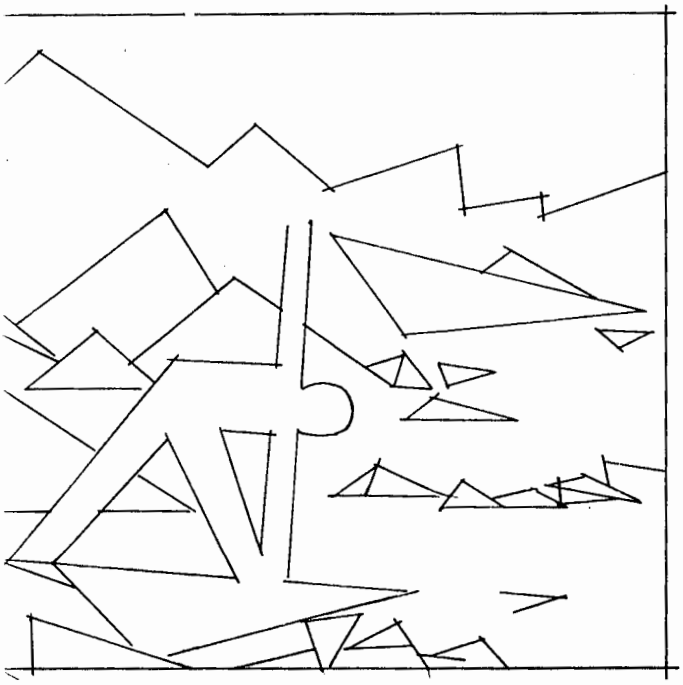


Triangles Again



On the way to inventing a new kind of journal, we've made some mistakes which, let's hope, will have some heuristic value. What was intended as a break with convention—not listing academic affiliation—has been taken as elitism, as if we were saying, "Everybody who's anybody will know everybody in this colloquy!" Reporting a conversation as a way of inviting readers to kibbitz has been offputting to some who wondered how they could be expected to come in on a conversation in progress. (But we do just that at conferences!) Others thought that they should understand everything right away and were perplexed and annoyed when they didn't. One correspondent was kind enought to put it this way: "I look forward to the *second* issue of *Correspondences*."

René Watkins, a Renaissance historian at U. Mass/ Boston, had this to say: "I enjoyed *Correspnodences* and longed for an example of a referent—an idea we think with. In fact, examples of a sign and an object would be nice too....You must, as I see it, present ideas in such a way that they stand clear of their context in other writing....I did start thinking about history as story (myth-like) and about its being understood primarily (and, in a way, never understood at all) by comparison with analogous stories, by 'complex' rather than by concept. The conceptual interpretation, if given explicit form, is usually either banal or untrue or both. And yet a conceptual interpretation is exactly what one wishes to arrive at."



This friendly criticism is crucially important: how can philosophically complex ideas be made accessible without depending on specialized language? My own opinion is that teachers of reading and writing must be continually alert to whatever language—or "meta-language," in the current jargon—they use. It won't do simply to take over expressions and terms like *internalize, problem-solving, processing information, problematizing, monitor, holistic, transactional,* etc. without critical assessment. If we are to have a philosophy of rhetoric—at last—we will need the help of semiotics, and that means that we will be deploying the *language* of one or another kind of semiotics, the science of signs. But it also means that we must conduct "a continuing audit of meaning," in I.A. Richards' phrase. One of the purposes of *Correspondences* is to help carry out that audit.

I once read about a conference which was to be called to regularize the sizes of screws and bolts, to establish an international scale which would make adaptation easier. Was it successful? Musicians agree periodically on the pitch

of "A" and ornithologists decide to change the Marsh Hawk's name to *Northern Harrier* and henceforth that's the way it is, but somehow semioticists prefer to proliferate terminologies. The result is that you have to know who's talking before you know what certain terms mean. *Referent* generally means what the symbol points to, identifies, names, substitutes for, indicates—and all those verbs represent different modes of symbolization and thus define different kinds of signs. Ogden and Richards used *Referent* to name the object symbolized, and they called the mediating idea the *Reference*. Peirce called the top of the triangle the *Interpretant*. Writing as an old man, he noted that there wasn't time to explain yet again why it is an idea, and not a person, and that as "a sop to Cerberus" he was willing to say "Interpreter." But he never gave up the argument that interpretation is a constituent element of the sign; that it is a logical, not a psychological, concept. Most of the absurd misconceptions of "subjectivist criticism" and "affective stylistics" can be traced to a failure to appreciate this point about Triadicity. *Correspondences One* addressed this issue obliquely.

I asked Louise Dunlap to expand on comments she'd made on a postcard which depicted her in a yoga stance—all very triadic. She was willing to set down the following, in between her West Coast work (Univ. of California/Berkeley) and her East Coast work (M.I.T., in the Department of Urban Planning).

"Ann Berthoff wants 150 words about what I said on my yoga triangles postcard from California—even though I hadn't yet read *Correspondences*, which crossed my card in the mail. But she doesn't understand: these notes and cards I write her from time to time don't come from the accessible flow of daily thought. All I can recall of that note was its moment of creation; it was one of those insights that spring up when you ponder unusual sets of ideas long and vigorously enough that they connect, and you simultaneously light on someone to express them to. With these two connections in place, the sentences come and go without your ever fully possessing them. Because Ann's such a high-energy muse, she gets a lot of these from me, but this one I thought might be a little too wild, even for her.

"The card showed me in front of a triangular granite peak in the Sierra Nevada doing a yoga pose called the "Revolved Triangle" (*Parivritta Trikonasana*). In this pose, the legs are separated to form an equilateral triangle as a base from which the hips twist to allow the spine to lengthen horizontally and turn such that the right hand comes to the ground next to the left foot as the left arm stretches upward. The pose thus looks like two adjacent triangles with the upward arm inviting a third. Ann must have seen "triadicity" immediately.

"But here's what I was thinking about when I wrote whatever it was I wrote: the difficult ongoing process of REVOLUTION—especially William Hinton's *fanshen*, which means literally "to turn the body." I was mulling over Wilhelm Reich's early (Marxist) ideas about repression—that the structures of production set the structures of family morality and personal morality, which in turn set structures of defense and resistance to feeling that are incarnated in our individual bodies. And of course I was thinking how difficult unstructuring or restructuring is, and of how important it is to keep working at it perpetually, on all levels, because they reinforce one another.

"In yoga, for instance, *Parivittra Trikonasana* causes one to turn the body in such an intense way that some of Reich's deep structuring is undone, and an energy is liberated which I can feel now in my political work and in my teaching. More briefly, as a friend says, "Stretching is revolutionary." In this pose, the triangle—the most stable of structures—becomes the base of the most revolutionary activity that can take place in the human body, the *fanshen* of the spine. And this is more than a metaphor for what we must do to change bourgeois society and ourselves, who are part of it."

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Correspondences Three

Correspondences, a broadsheet of continuing dialogue on the concerns of writing teachers seen in a philosophical perspective, will appear three times a year.

Leading essays will be assigned. Your response to them and to other comment is invited. We will print what seems pertinent in whatever space is available. No letters will be returned.

Forthcoming issues will be devoted to a discussion of method, metaphysics and metaphor, dialectical notebooks, the core curriculum, listening and note-taking, Peirce, and Freire's pedagogy.

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