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Dear Reader:

We invite your support in a new venture, an occasional publication featuring in each issue a short essay, with a response, and correspondence about pieces which have previously appeared. Our aim is to develop philosophical perspectives on reading and writing, to facilitate the exchange of ideas and second thoughts, speculations and analyses that could make a difference in what we're all trying to do in our classes and in our professional lives. Theory and Practice will keep one another company: one out of three annual issues will feature a piece on course design, curriculum reform, or writing in the disciplines—contributions to a pedagogy of knowing, ways of coming to see the English classroom as a philosophic laboratory.

To invite your support in this case is to invite your participation. This is a publication that will enable you to talk to others in response to their ideas and in the interest of formulating and presenting your own. Half the broadsheet will be constituted by letters from subscribers: we invite *correspondence*.

In the years preceding the American Revolution, Sam Adams thought of a scheme whereby patriots in one town could learn what was going on in another: the Committees of Correspondence were formed "to concert measures in defense of colonial liberty," as S. E. Morison puts it. We take the Committees of Correspondence as our model, circulating a broadsheet that will put people in touch with one another—those in schools, colleges, and universities who are committed to finding ways to assure the survival of literacy itself.

We will not offer formal papers; rather, we hope to get the dialogue/dialectic going by inventing a new genre, something between a monograph and a journal article, a

form which can accommodate work-in-progress, partial formulations, writing as heuristic, as well as more nearly finished pieces, work that already exists, awaiting an attentive, tolerant audience. The comment and correspondence appearing in successive issues will build up a Thick Description of the philosophic perspectives we are trying out: *Correspondences* in its helical, dialectical plan of publication will itself represent the dynamic activity of critical and creative inquiry. And we intend the ambiguity of the title: we want to encourage the representation of all conceptions of "correspondence" in the service of progressive, pragmatic, and unpedantic dialogue.

Letters in response to the discussion of interpretation in this issue are welcome. Please send them to me at the following address:

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P.S. [from Bob Boynton] Most of us are not ready correspondents but are ready to listen in on other people's public musings. In a sense, we prefer to correspond with ourselves or close colleagues, and others' airings give us occasions to do so in personally productive and satisfying ways. These broadsheets are for us (you) too, and we encourage you to subscribe to future issues. The yearly subscription fee of \$5.00 will help pay for production and printing, handling and mailing, and occasional posting in public places alongside glossy posters inviting teachers to up their income by shepherding students on such diversions as an extended tour of Uzbek, Turkmen, Tadjik, Kazakh, and Ubednikhov.

### ***A conversation about the logic and psychologic of interpretation***

The essay featured in this first issue grew from a dialogue at breakfast on the third day of a recent conference which featured cognitive psychologists discussing "developmental" models of learning. Here's one version of how the conversation went.

Ann Berthoff (AB) and Gary Lindberg (GL) were discussing the curious consequence of a joke told to illustrate the egocentricity of the child. (A little boy tells his mother that he is clipping the hooves of his toy cows so that there will be calves. He listens attentively as his mother explains how in fact calves come to be, but when she's through he says: "Not on *my* farm.") GL noted that for the rest of the day he'd heard conversations explode in laughter as somebody would say "Not on *MY* farm!" That had

become the conference slogan, a way to express, to characterize, to dismiss a great many different situations and attitudes, not by any means all of the same sort. AB remarked that it was certainly a good story but that "stretching" it in this way illustrated Susanne K. Langer's point that positivists fail to form concepts, generalizing instead about particular cases and depending chiefly on metaphor in doing so. GL suggested that stretching might be inevitable in all interpretation, reminding AB that in her own talk to the conference, she had alluded to C. S. Peirce's theory that any sign is constituted by three elements—a representamen (symbol), an object, and an interpretant, the idea we think *with*—and that it is this triadic structure which allows the symbol to represent its object.

Sure enough, it focuses on different matters. But insofar as I can see no reason to grant either interpretation privileged status, I have decided to look at NB's as a case study in the role of intention in interpretation, a reminder that, in Peirce's phrase, a sign always "addresses somebody." This, after all, is what NB is talking about in shifting the focus from a "totalist" vision to a phenomenological vision of the process.

NB's divergence from GL and from my reading of GL can be readily localized. The passage I'm about to examine summarizes GL's "concerns" from NB's point of view. I will argue that NB is stretching things a bit to describe these matters as "concerns" and that he does so primarily to get himself where he wants to go, which is Freud's "working through" notion—it's NB's version of "Not on my farm!" But I will in turn defend him against possible charges of misreading on the grounds that his "category mistakes" are in the service of suggestive truths much in the way of metaphors. That is, applying William James's corrective to the matter, I find his use of "concerns" significant only insofar as it suggests something about his intentions, while I find his use of "working through" significant as a realization of these intentions.

The problematic passage is as follows: "To re-view the metaphors as successions of acts will remove GL's two concerns, the possibility of infinite regress and the assumption that only when culture changes does the problem of myth interpretation arise." In the second case NB commits a simple act of equivocation: a "concern" is not an "assumption." Indeed, GL's not concerned at all, apparently, to prove or qualify the statement. It is, however, a concern for NB who sees interpretation as a continuous need for the individual. The first case is slightly more complex. Infinite regress is initially a concern for GL, but he himself removes that problem, fairly convincingly it seems to me, by other means than those proposed by NB. Indeed, one can find support for GL's solution in Gödel, Sartre, Rorty and Derrida. One simply can't step outside a system to prove the assumptions of the system and that's that.

But that's not to say that a hastily constructed bridge can't take us to an interesting place. Where we arrive is the second of Peirce's realms of semiotics, that of pure rhetoric (the first being logic and the third, grammar). Here we examine the laws by which "one thought brings forth another," as Peirce has it. On this point, it seems to me, NB has much to offer. He uses "working through" less as a concept than as a metaphor, a device for disclosing a subject, illuminating it without forcing closure. "Working through" isn't what interpretation is; it's what it's *like*. and the unlikeness (Oppenheimer's disanalogies) aren't hidden but announced; the phrase is being transferred from one realm to another, challenging us to test it for appropriateness. Certainly it brings with it some "accidental" qualities (e.g. the sense of psychic tension being relieved, the awareness of the double entendres that inevitably accompany terms out of the Freudian twilight) which no pure concept would invoke. In short, we resist this term in ways that we might not resist a more natural one, like Peirce's "development." The phrase "working through" creates a tension in those it addresses, the sort of tension Richards

talks about in likening the effect of figurative language to a bow being drawn taut by the opposing pressure and foreignness of its two terms. Before we can pass judgment on "Not on my farm!" type phrases we have to know the context in which they are used, how they are taken and where they lead. So much for consecutive, or at least contiguous, thoughts. What follows is a collection of related thoughts.

What happened, I wonder, to Peirce's "ground," the relationship between representamen and object? In limiting possible interpretants it seems to be particularly crucial, insofar as the ground is the particular idea of the object being represented. It's also vital to any discussion of metaphoric signification. Walker Percy, in "Metaphor as Mistake," for example, takes the ground relationship as his starting point. The ground of metaphors, for Percy, is the "inscape" of the sign-maker's experience with the object rather than an essential quality or class designation of the object. Because that ground is as much in the sign-maker as in the object, the resulting sign must transcend the object, must name another object of equal ontic status. Hence the heightened pressure for interpretation.

Apropos of GL's remarks about the ubiquity of complex thinking and the impossibility of neutral discourse:

1. The more we really look at how we think when we do science or writing or whatever it is we do, the more difficult it gets to say where complex thinking leaves off and conceptualization begins. It's one thing to look at children manipulating Vygotsky blocks, students wrestling with proportional reasoning problems, or bemused members of non-literate cultures verbalizing their thinking processes for earnest outsiders, and quite another to watch highly trained people do their daily work. Reading protocols of professional writers or the self-reflections of people like Polanyi and Geertz, I'm struck by the inadequacy of our terms to catch what's going on.

2. So long as language and thought are bed partners, immaculate conceptualization is impossible. Words, like suspect persons, have pasts. Have metaphoric skeletons in the closet. Are, in a Heidegger pun, etym-illogical. Take, for example, the *quark*. It's a symbol for which there's not yet an object. Most elemental of elements. Offspring of the purest theoretical physics. And it's handed a name out of James Joyce's Gladstone bag.

3. When Levi-Strauss distinguishes mythic from scientific language, he notes that science moves from structures (composed of natural and artificial languages) to events. (E.g. in the 19th century the table of elements is set and one by one the corresponding objects are called to the table.) Myth, on the other hand, is seen to move from events ("first things") to structures which organize and humanize those events. But in the twentieth century we find this distinction challenged and muddled. According to Oscar Wilde, Turner creates brown fog as surely as Whitaker creates a cloud chamber. And Jorge Borges discovers *hronir* and *ur*, secondary objects brought about by absent-mindedness, suggestion, hope and magical realist fiction. Not even functional distinctions can survive, it seems.

be said to entail an infinite regress. The application of the term infinite regress to interpretation seems to derive from three sources: the power of the image of the ladder, taken as literal truth (i.e., as a model); transfer of the negative values attached by AB to metaphorical stretching; and the contextual debate about the subjectivity and relativity of interpretation, which appears to create a vicious circle rather than a ladder, which is actually progressive as an image.

All these metaphors are attractive and have a value in initiating thought; but, according to the very critique that AB brings to bear, they are not enough in themselves to constitute a development of concepts about interpretation. On the contrary, they entangle the conversation in unnecessary problems created by the icon itself; and they do not provide the kinds of suggestive terms and negotiable concepts that GL needs to solve the problems he is concerned with—for example, what could constrain interpretation or (ironically) the dangers of abstraction. He does arrive at solutions, but the hard way. NB helps him go further, but even he is still trying to express his point by modifying the metaphor.

NB points out the absurdity of infinite regress through the important, and far more negotiable, concept of “working it through.” I eventually connected this idea with my own efforts to solve the formidable puzzle of Peirce’s concept of interpretant, more broadly triadicity. The idea of Thirdness is illuminating. Peirce puts it in this way in “The Architecture of Theories”:

“First is the conception of being or existing independent of anything else. Second is the conception of being relative to, the conception of reaction with, something else. Third is the conception of mediation, whereby a first and second are brought into relation.” Objects can be interpreted (mediated) by signs; signs by other signs; signs by contexts; and so on. Triadicity by definition (as a relation of threeness which includes both object and idea) cannot be an infinite regress, which implies that because you must go on generating new triads you never get to reality or meaning. Triadicity is successful interpretation, by which symbols make possible the relation of mind to object-world, and mind makes possible the relation of symbols to object-world or to an idea in another mind. Understanding is not postponed by interpretation but deepened, extended, sharpened, corrected by its infinite but not regressive continuity.

This leads me finally to a distinction suggested by NB’s “working through,” between an individual’s interpretation and a community of interpretation. The individual who wishes to interpret the world through signs, or signs through more signs (and note the crucial difference), must produce signs and refer to many others. Further, understanding is not the reduction of a single sign-complex to a single meaning; I’ve pulled out many strands here, with perhaps some effect but no ultimate resolutions, interpretations always producing more puzzles. The ladder misleadingly, and the porcupine too vaguely, represent these linear and nonlinear relations. Similarly, the community as a whole may be seen as jointly interpreting, parasitically (as the ladder suggests), but not limited in its interpretive links to that end on end image.

With the concept of community I return to the joke, the laughter whenever anyone at the conference said “Not on MY farm!” I can’t agree with AB’s (hasty?) comment that the joke illustrates illegitimate metaphorical stretching. The criticism doesn’t apply because the story, its use, and the laughter are all presentational and not propositional and truth-claiming. (It *does* apply if used to generalize a principle of children’s egocentricity—a concept.) And it is a joke: people are not dismissing one another’s “farms,” but recognizing and laughing at their own tendency to do so as childish, unrealistic, and egocentric. This seems to me a perfect example of how common understandings operate on the basis of images which do not need conceptual elaboration because everyone there shares the context and the experience to immediately grasp the point. Such an image would be a far more viable basis for developing a concept—say, of community, or of egocentricity, or of communication (in some specific aspects) than schematic sketches of ladders and porcupines that do not spring from experience (more models than metaphors, and with a certain instructional value) whose elements cannot be distinguished, manipulated, or elaborated.

### *John Ramage responds to GL and NB*

My point of departure is the assumption that the format or methodology for this enterprise illuminates the substance of the discussion: the doing is a gloss for the saying. Thus Lindberg interprets Peirce talking about interpretation; Bruss works through GL interpreting Peirce as much to work out Freud’s concept (or is it a complex?) of “working through” as to answer GL; and now I come along to do whatever one does here on the third flight of the spiral stairs. (After all of this and all of that/Who can tell *signifié* from *signifiant*?)

The seeds of the exchange lie in AB’s and GL’s concern that the phrase “Not on my farm,” the punchline to an illustrative anecdote used by a conference speaker, was being “stretched” illicitly by fellow participants into a bogus concept; that social scientists make these leaps all the time, turning “clever metaphors” into shaky generalizations. This discussion led to the saw-toothed adumbration of Peirce’s sign and GL’s central conclusion that concepts are like roses rooted in and nourished by the dunghill of mythic complexes.

I designate that the central conclusion partly because it is the logical outcome of the discussion, but also because I believe that the importance of complex thinking [i.e. thinking in terms of complexes, not of well-formed concepts. See Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, Chapter 5. AB] is often overlooked in developmental schemes. Though, to be sure, lip service is paid to it by composition theorists, it too often gets treated as an atavism! Why walk when you can run? Why think in complexes when you can think in concepts? Complex thinking has grown to be associated with “writer-based” prose and unsuccessful solutions to the frog puzzle. So, for GL to reaffirm the ubiquity of complex thinking strikes a respondent chord in me. Which suggests that my interpretation might in turn be idiosyncratic, potentially “off the mark.” So, I turn to Bruss’s response as a sort of “control” against which I might check my response.

work, and the descent long; there are only a few stitches in the sock.

Our tendency to take the Jovian perspective on interpretation, to forget the work of learning anything, derives in part from the sentential form of much of our knowledge. Regardless of how many qualifiers we use, our sentences generally do not reflect the state of our understanding, or the use we have made of the concept, or the route and pains we took to acquire it, or its relation to the rest of our knowledge. Thus, a fine student of a fine teacher can learn the teacher's method, can learn to think and write with the authority of the master. But the difference will tell. The student must work through an idea or approach to hold it, and having been worked through, the idea will not stay the same. Myths are creative products, and the fact that they are comprised of signs which at some point are subject to reference has nothing to do with the paths that their elaboration will take. If we think of knowing as an action of working through, we will understand that the mountaineer cannot see the whole vast rock face at once but only that part of it which engages him for the moment. And we will see that it is not possible to be stabbed by the same quill twice.

### *Louise Wetherbee Phelps responds to AB, GL, and NB*

The ladder and GL's subsequent porcupine are dynamic images of the community of interpretation that *Correspondences* invites us to join. Sticking with the ladder: I (who suffer from vertigo) feel myself teetering at this height. Don't ladders, especially long ladders, usually lean up against something? What the ladder image lacks is the wall or supporting structure—what I'd call the context of situation and signs—that might enable me and our readers to understand what's going on in this dialogue. It's missing in the texts too. Both the attraction and the peril in these short, allusive, suggestive notes is the degree to which they expect us to provide that context ourselves, as in the face to face dialogue they start from and imitate. Each correspondent's remarks not only assume acquaintance with the polarities and arguments of the day, professionally, but betray subtly the taken-for-granted context of his or her own previous concerns, positions, thought, reading, writing. If I am to construct my own understanding, not just of what is said here, but of the questions, concepts, and issues addressed, I must go back down the ladder of interpretation—to the original situation, to the thinkers whose seminal ideas sparked AB's and GL's interpretation of that situation—Susanne Langer, Charles Peirce.

In interpreting that situation AB and GL have set an agenda which puzzles me in many particulars. The more I think about it the more tangled up I get. What can AB mean by metaphorical stretching? How did they get from there to the interpretive ladder, and where did the idea of infinite regression come from? What's an interpretant, anyway, or rather what is it not? Why did the people at the conference laugh when someone said "Not on MY farm?" What is bothering AB, and is it the same thing that's

bothering GL? (I think not.) It seems to be true that to understand this sort of discourse, certainly to respond, is not just a translating exercise (one story for another), but requires a substantive critical effort to formulate concepts and make one's own judgments of the situation under discussion. Hence the following struggles to untie knots, bridge leaps, smooth out tangles, and explain puzzlements.

I am struck enormously by the irony that a conversation beginning with an emphatic condemnation of metaphorical stretching is conducted almost entirely in terms of metaphor. I look over my own notes for this response and see that they are almost entirely unmetaphorical. I am trying to pin down the meaning of terms (metaphorical stretching, interpretant, triadicity, infinite regress); seeking concrete referents for vague abstractions; asking what the primary issue is for each correspondent and what the relationship is between their abstractions, their problems, and any real situation; wondering how their remarks are connected. If the ladder may be taken as a symbol of the metaphoricity of this conversation, I have jumped off onto the solid ground of sober, literal discourse.

AB begins with an opposition between metaphorical stretching (of which she disapproves) and conceptual analysis. I cannot believe she means this! Her own writing says otherwise, and her immediate second thoughts do also. I go back to Susanne Langer (*Mind, I*) and read about images and metaphors and their relationship to the proper philosophical development of concepts (for science or any other systematic study). "Analogies are essential to thought, but they cannot be automatically used to pass from known to unknown domains of nature" (46). "Unless [the data] are objectively seen and intimately known we cannot formulate scientific questions and hypotheses about them" (65). "Our first acquaintance with the material of any research has to be negotiated by images which organize and present the phenomena as such, for it is always phenomena that we ultimately wish to explain, and this requires detailed empirical knowledge" (68). She repeatedly suggests that conceptual thinking derives from prescientific thinking that is metaphorical, analogical, initially general and vague, presentational rather than discursive.

In the light of these remarks I consider the function of metaphor in the remarks of AB, GL, and NB. Is the image—the ladder first, then the porcupine and their modifications and extensions—adequate to represent the concrete experience, as felt, of interpretation? Did it lead to the systematic development of concepts? I think the answer to both questions is no. I think GL is entrapped by the metaphor of the ladder, and knows it, but instead of attempting to take up its implications concretely (as NB does later), he tries to switch metaphors and then play out the implications of each comparatively. It is entrapping because neither metaphor is an adequate image of any concrete interpretive situation (though each captures a small part of the general, vague character of interpretation), and because the play of imagery distracts him from systematically analyzing the concepts he has deployed, in particular infinite regress. I am not sure what GL means by this (indeterminacy of meaning?), or why triadicity should

appeals instead to all the shared coziness of the storytelling community, the tacitly assumed agreement as to what human nature is and how we go about making sense of it. Their popular success at carrying off this pretense may reveal a more widespread longing for a language and a means of interpretation less neutralized and inhuman than the discourses proliferating in the name of science. Perhaps we all prefer our porcupines warm, bristly, and a bit mysterious.

### *Neal Bruss responds to GL*

Gary Lindberg gives us two metaphors for interpretation: the porcupine myth "abristle with signs," and the ladder of interpretation in which the interpretant of one moment becomes the representamen of the next. For me, the porcupine represents the ladder as an aggregate of separate acts of interpretation emanating from one point "going off every which way." The ladder is the dialectical, progressive version of the porcupine, the interpretive moments stacked end on end, getting us from here to there.

These are extreme metaphors, presupposing vast points of view in, respectively, interpretive time and space. I would suggest, however, that when we think of interpretation from the point of view of the ordinary human interpreter engaged constantly in the activity, what can be seen is the individual acts of interpretation, one at a time, one after another, and not the totalities that the porcupine and ladder represent. Hence it might be useful to re-view these two static metaphors as time-lapse photographs. The porcupine would resemble the action of darning a sock; the ladder, the path of a person climbing it, or, to capture the shape of its triangles, a climber rappelling down a cliff.

To re-view the metaphors as successions of acts will remove GL's two concerns, the possibility of infinite regress and the assumption that only when culture changes does the problem of myth interpretation arise. These two concerns only arise if we have sufficient distance from the activity of interpretation to speak of it as a totality—as a porcupine or a ladder. They do not arise when we observe interpretation as a series of actions, one after another. From the point of view of the human interpreter, interpreting, learning, discovering and knowing are daily work, constant but ordinary effort, for which any judgments about infinite regress or certainty of interpretation are premature.

A porcupine would not look much different than a time-lapse photograph of a sock being darned, the needle moving in and out from many different angles. Each of the porcupine's quills would resemble the trajectory of the needle and darning thread in any one stitch. For the human interpreter each thrust of the needle into the sock is like a rereading of a text: the myth must be interpreted, turned, re-interpreted again and again, before it is "known." As a re-reading of a well-loved poem can show us, the next move may yield something that seems entirely new.

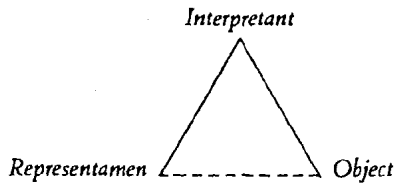
In "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (*Standard Edition*, XII) Freud states that only by "working through" an insight in this way can a patient find relief from his symptoms. In earlier work, Freud felt that the

patient is cured when repressed thoughts are returned to memory with their full emotional force. But Freud found that his patients' cures did not last after such breakthroughs, or even a few of them. Rather, Freud found, the patient had to work each discovery through every detail and trajectory, through every implication and application, before he understood it well enough to be relieved.

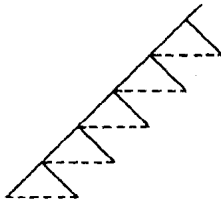
We must remember that it is grindingly difficult for a reasonably intelligent person to adequately learn any substantial idea, and that the work of learning never is free from the possibility of discovering something new which will change the configuration of the whole in our understanding. We see this in the 6,000 pages of Freud's psychoanalytic writing: constant restatement of key ideas, sometimes as metapsychology, sometimes as case study, sometimes for elementary textbooks. Occasionally a key concept will be revised—the structure of the psyche, the explanation of anxiety dreams, or the cause or form of neurosis. And more often than not, the revision will be a sudden emphasis of a point made many years earlier. It is Freud working through his understanding, day by day, and year by year.

In the face of something barely known, weakly understood, the danger of infinite regress is almost laughable. Working through, re-interpretation, is holding on to understanding. This would remind us that the third corner of the interpretive triangle is the human understanding which gives meaning to a representamen. In that light, the line formed by bases of interpretive triangles placed end on end is like a sheer cliff, and the jagged pattern formed by the triangles' faces is like the tracery of the mountain climber's rope as she swings out from the sheer face, rappelling downward. At each swing, the previous landing becomes a new point at which to kick away from the cliff, into space to see a new footfall below. When we interpret, we can only push off from where we have just landed, and where we land determines where we can start from next. For the person rappelling downward, the mountain face may be sheer or jagged, and the experience exhilarating or terrifying, but there is only the changing view of the face, seen close or from motion in space. It is only the observer on the ground who can see the aggregate of triangles in motion which define this interpretive ladder. And thus we must remember that our knowledge is not our students'.

Teachers often act as though for a student to learn is for the student to acquire the teacher's state of knowing. But this is not realistic. The teacher's hold on his or her knowledge is the product of years of teaching it, not to mention teaching allied material, conducting research, or being a student once oneself. Moreover, at the very moment that the teacher is teaching the poem for the umpteenth time, that understanding is changing. In any case, it is safe to say that a seasoned teacher has worked through what for the student is new knowledge—for the student, easily forgotten or misremembered. This must be true both for flashes of student understanding and the happy results of pedagogical excellence: if the knowledge has not been worked through it probably will not stay knowledge for long. For the student, rappelling is uncertain, slow



When Peirce declares that each sign can only be interpreted by another, the prospect of an infinite regression opens up. AB represented it this way:



Wasn't this right-branching barbed structure, in which the Interpretant of one sign becomes the Representamen of the succeeding sign, a version of "stretching"? AB tentatively agreed, noting that after all SKL had also declared that one myth could only be interpreted by another. GL said that "regression" in any case wasn't infinite and that there were always many, many such "quills" and that we might, as it were, have a porcupine on our hands!

So we finished our bacon and oatmeal with this seeming contradiction: it is surely unsound to let metaphor do the work of conceptualizing and yet "stretching"—by metaphor and other forms of analogy—might be central to all interpretation, as it certainly is to the interpretation of myth.

Back in New Hampshire, GL wrote AB the following letter (another version of the breakfast colloquy) which he sent along with his further observations.

Dear Ann,

I meant to write you very shortly after returning from Chicago, so that I could capture that porcupine we came upon at breakfast. But I returned to some 400 job applications for our Americanist position, and philosophy had, as always, to wait upon contingency. The advantage in my delay was that you sent me your two articles on Richards and triadicty, and I now feel considerably more in control of my subject. Thank you for the help.

I'm enclosing a sketch of the porcupine argument, but you'll see that it grew in the meantime. When I fished the creature out of the den of my memory I found it had attached itself to other odd bits and pieces, and I couldn't strip it clean again. On the other hand, since your suggestion of Correspondences depended on avoiding early closure, it seems appropriate to let the metaphors mix with their ideas and have the porcupine turn to a pincushion and then to a piece of velcro.

Here's a summary of the context in which the porcupine first emerged: We were talking about two subjects from the previous two days of presentations—triadicty and developmental psychologists. You explained (on a napkin) how mediation works for Peirce through the succession of triangles in which the old Interpretant becomes the new Representamen, and you clarified that this is in fact how one explores the meaning of a concept. Then we turned to Kegan's not-on-MY-farm story as an instance of using a single case as a metaphor to generalize instead of analyzing the situation through precise concepts. The result is that the meanings of such metaphors can wander freely with each new interpreter, which I saw as like a religious parable. That led you to bring up Susanne Langer's contention that a myth can only be interpreted through another myth. You then asked if that contention had something to do with Peirce's ladder of interpretation...

The enclosed sketch I send as a memory of what is probably the most interesting breakfast I've had.

Gary

## Dismantling a Porcupine

Gary Lindberg

One way of understanding Langer's contention that a myth can only be interpreted by another myth is to regard the core as a story. To interpret a story, one retells the story in other terms, terms more interesting or significant to the interpreter than the original language of the story. Freud retells the Oedipus myth in the language of sexual development within the family, thereby creating another myth.

But that approach takes us away from Peirce's interpretive ladder and away from conceptual interpretation itself. When we ask what a myth *means*, practically speaking we are not after an alternative story but after a concept, a statement, a "higher truth." In Peirce's terms, we are regarding the myth itself as a representamen and we need an interpretant, which in turn might require a further interpretant and so on. The fallacy in expectation here is that the myth is not a representamen or a sign. It is a bristle with signs. Every gesture, every object, every relationship in it is potentially a focus for our acts of knowing. Each could be regarded as a representamen and could be mediated by the triangle in which the apex (interpretant) becomes the base of still another triangle of interpretation ad infinitum. Conceived in this fashion, the myth itself becomes a porcupine with interpretive regressions going off every which way, and we'd probably be wiser and more honest to leave it lumbering off where it wants to go than to risk coming away from it with a few prominent quills stuck in our noses. This may be why Langer suggested offering another myth, which is perhaps what I've just done.

When I first proposed this metaphor, however, I didn't understand Peirce or triadicity very well. Now I think I see why the potentiality of infinite regression need not lead to despair. First, as Vygotsky points out, when we have reached a level of understanding concepts, we find that any concept can be expressed through other concepts from other vantage points, which gives us the assurance that we are not *regressing from* the original representamen and object but gradually *approximating* them by other terms. Second, our practical experience and our cultural experience both enclose an area within which the acts of mediation occur. Infinite regression is only a theoretical possibility. In practice, after a while we "get it" or we stop interpreting because we have other things to do. In the case of concepts which are genuinely important in our practical experience, if we misunderstand them we are corrected, and little by little our meanings approximate their objects, as is particularly evident in the experience of children growing with language. The only real danger of regression occurs when the concepts themselves are so obscure, so removed from practical matters and so neutralized from any cultural charge that they become the exclusive property of endlessly quarreling experts. In that situation, William James's corrective still seems appropriate—what practical difference will it make if we interpret this as X or Y?

Now I want to return to the porcupine. I've already suggested why the quills aren't infinitely long and why there aren't infinitely many of them. If we think of the cultural and practical constraints on mediation, we can see that the porcupine too has its integrity. The myth itself offers a more or less coherent field within which questions and interpretations occur to us. And that field, like the myth itself, is culturally grounded. From within the cultural state of mind where the myth originated, it doesn't even *need* interpretation because it *is* interpretation. Only when the culture changes or comes up against a different culture does the problem of myth interpretation arise (as when the porcupine learns to his surprise that not all animals have barbed fur). The necessity of translation produces the idea of a neutral discourse, one in which the terms are freed of *all* cultural baggage. And that yearning produces one of the central illusions of *our* time and culture, the belief that in scientific analysis we have reached the neutral discourse.

To understand the pathology of this belief, we need to go back to Vygotsky. As he interprets the development of language and of thought, one of his major distinctions is between thinking in complexes and thinking in concepts. The "complex" groups things by experience and by concrete bonds—things occur together, they look like each other, they produce the same feelings, they follow after each other, they are in some way associated. The "concept," in contrast, abstracts from various objects some special quality and then recombines objects that possess that quality. It both analyzes and synthesizes, and it frees one from concrete experience by allowing the imagination of

other possible members of the class. It depends upon and produces abstraction. Vygotsky further distinguishes everyday concepts (brother, cooperation) from scientific concepts (bourgeoisie, gravity). The former emerge by processes of generalization from concrete experience; the latter are grounded in a *system* of interpretation and work back *toward* the concrete realm of experience.

It should be apparent that myths (like storytelling more generally) proceed in terms of complexes. And concepts themselves, as Vygotsky describes them, emerge from complexes in a very gradual fashion. What is important for us to remember is that although the concept may be freed from concrete bonds, it is not freed from cultural determination. If the mind finds new, more precise, more flexible ways to name and refine its groupings, the groupings are still disposed by the ways of seeing and sorting that came with the complexes. In other words, the very ways in which we practice analysis and synthesis are shaped by cultural values and cultural habits. American schoolchildren growing up with playground separation of "eggheads" from "normal guys" (a clear example of thinking in complexes) may later learn a more scientific language, but as grown-up scientists or politicians or suburbanites they continue to practice the sorting and gathering and valuing associated with those old complexes. Bruno Bettelheim traces one consequence in his brilliant *New Yorker* essay on Freud. He shows how the translation from Freud's *Ich, Es, Ueber Ich* to *ego, id, superego* instead of *I, it, above-I* characterizes the American impersonal "scientific" practice of psychotherapy in contrast to the more personal and self-reflective practice that has continued as Freud's Austrian legacy.

What I am suggesting is that we don't really grow out of our thinking in complexes as we develop scientific concepts. And if we hope to understand the ways in which we actually *use* our concepts, we had better try to understand the kind of thinking that works with complexes. One way of regarding the difference between myth or storytelling as a mode of thought and scientific analysis is to say that the former proceeds by complexes, the latter by concepts. Another is to say that myth frankly presupposes community, whereas science disavows community (except in the perfectly abstract sense) in its bias toward neutrality and objectivity. The language of the two enterprises differs not only in its meanings but in the way it even *has* meanings, for the affective overtones and the rich associations of mythic language are replaced for science by a language self-consciously stripped of exactly those qualities.

This finally gives us a point of re-entry to the original subject—the problem of developmental (and other) psychologists turning a single case into a clever metaphor and thus generalizing without a precise concept. From the perspective I have been describing, their technique could be seen as myth pretending to be science. It does not rest on clarity of understanding through conceptual analysis. It





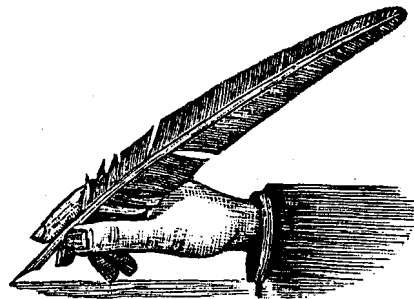
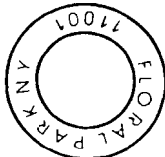
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