Enriched by the Thousand Darknesses

Of Deathbringing Speech:

A Response to Carolyn Culbertson’s

*Words Underway[[1]](#footnote-1)*

**I.**

1. Culbertson argues, “As linguistic beings, language is our natural habitat. It is our primary way of making sense of the world, including ourselves. Because of this, we struggle mightily – even existentially – when our habitual way of dwelling in language is upset” (3).

On the role of linguistic alienation in the elaboration of Culbertson’s broader philosophy of language, note the three aims the project seeks to achieve (below), which flow together on account of the intermediary, the analysis of which thus forms the beating heart of the project:

1. To provide a narrative of the development of Continental philosophy over the last century that demonstrates not only how it happened but why
2. To examine the role that linguistic alienation plays in this developmental narrative
3. To clarify the role that understanding plays in this tradition, in part in response to the phenomenon of linguistic alienation (5).

**II.**

2. “…Although emphasizing…both can create confusion at times, both forms of alienation are important to consider and indeed…*must even be considered in relation to one another*. It is important, after all, to resist oppressive forms of social organization that leave people alienated from language…[but] if we think that the ultimate goal of such resistance should be to restore for people a relationship to language that is fully immediate, without the possibility of ever having their linguistically embedded habits of thinking challenged in dialogue with another… [this goal] would be ethically and politically problematic in that it would mean shutting people off from other voices that have yet to speak and be understood, that await participation in the living system of language. More primordially, it would be problematic in that our openness to dialogue with the other and the critical self-relation that such openness entails are intrinsic parts of our linguistic being. *Without this openness, we become creatures of a different kind*” (8-9, emphases mine).

3. Culbertson wants to ground the normative critique of alienation2 in its interference with the function and flow of alienation1, *not* to argue that alienation2is a lesser species of alienation1, a hierarchical inferior..  As such, (2) *does* emerge from (1), but only insofar as it, by definition, frustrates or obstructs the function of (1). As linguistic beings, we need the space of estrangement. It is like a breath of possibility, an open…likely silent… interval that enables our very presence to/with our interlocutors, an interval we *must*  preserve in order to breathe, and in order to speak and be heard (which puts me in mind of a potentially ontological justification for Dotson’s open conceptual frameworks). This is a need that all too often goes unmet, however, a need all too often frustrated by the secondary alienations of suffocation (silencing) and co-optation (instrumentalization of the voice), to name but a few.

**III.**

4. Butler writes, “One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life is ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

5. “Our gift of speech, of situating ourselves in time for an other could exist nowhere except beyond an abyss. Speaking beings, from their ability to endure in time up to their enthusiastic, learned, or simply amusing constructions, demand a break, a renunciation, an unease at their foundations.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

6. Three key insights, explored through a parallel reading of Walker Percy and the phenomenological Heidegger of *Being and Time* (Chapter One):

1. what is distinctive about human linguistic activity (*emergence into language is a transformation of world*)[[4]](#footnote-4)
2. what is essential about the role of language for our existence (*it is the medium through which our understanding takes place*); and
3. what it is that keeps us from recognizing these things today (*our equation of reality with the explanandum of the empirical sciences*).

7. It is notable that Culbertson slips between world in the singular and worlds in the plural,[[5]](#footnote-5) and I wonder if there’s an ontological distinction in play here between them. Given that I want to hear more about this, my **first question** goes to whether an ontologically singular conception of world aligns with the enabling conditions of language acquisition (and thus our vulnerable openness to a closed future), while the ontically plural conception of worlds aligns with the variety of ways we live our immersion (some more plurally than others, recalling Anzaldúa’s *mestiza*). Accordingly, is there a distinction in play here between something like worldhood [*Weltlichkeit*] and world [*Welt*] that might allow the latter to be pluralized?

8. **My second question:** is our (potentially distinctive) relation to mortality what, on the one hand, conditions our openness to language and, on the other, furnishes the closure that frustrates our efforts at total transparency? Or do you want to maintain that the primordial alienation in/of language exists independently of mortality, since our deeply politicized relationships to death/dying (consider, for example, social death or the disparity in value between lives) give the lie to the claim that death is the originary condition of distinction? Especially in light of the role death plays in your reading of Blanchot (as the originary condition of fleetingness to be transformed/negated into meaning by the word), as well as in the study of Celan (to which I alluded in the title of my response, and in terms of the ruinous remains of what has passed through deathbringing speech), why is there no discussion of being-towards-death in your treatment of linguistic alienation?

1. Carolyn Culbertson, *Words Underway: Continental Philosophy of Language* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The reference here is to “What is Critique?: An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (London: Blackwell, 2002), 2015, 215 (Culbertson, 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, Columbia University Press, 1989), 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “To talk about development of language as the entrance into a new world…[means that] there is a fundamental transformation not only in how we think about the world, but even more fundamentally in what appears to us and how it appears. Language’s function becomes ontological rather than instrumental” (Culbertson, Chapter One, 17). See also, “When one has a linguistic world, one pushes for everything to have a place and meaning in language. In children, this is manifest as the desire to know the name for all things. In adults, it is the desire to expand one’s understanding of this world through language” (18). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. for example, “In these ways, the worlds I am immersed in shape not only what I care about, but even shape the basic way in which things appear to me” (22). Also, “These examples go to show that, when we interpret language – verbal or nonverbal – we do so always in the context of shared worlds of practical concern” (23, see also 24). Interestingly, the latter instance follows upon an excellent discussion of the empiricist claim that the only way in which beings appear to us as they really are is when we set aside our practical interests (23). Heidegger, Culbertson rightly points out, counters that “beings appear to us, proximally and for the most part, through such pre-reflective acts” and in this way, understanding [*Verstehen*] is most basically constituted. Moreover, she continues in the next paragraph, this is characterized by thrownness, i.e., by the effect of factors beyond our control on our horizons of interpretation, and she speaks here to ways of interpreting as plural possibilities in response to a singular world (23, cf. also 31, the opening lines of Chapter Two). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)