

## The Wild Child and the Voice of the Other

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**Abstract:** The 1970 discovery in Los Angeles of a thirteen-year-old girl so isolated by her parents that she never learned to speak coincided with the opening of Francois Truffaut's *The Wild Child* about the 1798 discovery of an apparently mute twelve-year-old boy living in the Aveyron woods. Professionals responsible for "Genie" were inspired by the tale of Jean Marc Gaspard Itard's living and working with "Victor," but in neither case was the reality as rosy as the film depicts. Our bodies learn language only by hearing it and only by a certain age. We respond to the voices of others, which call us out of ourselves and into ourselves, into conversation and community. There is a gratitude we owe to those who would bestow upon us the gift of speech, a mutuality among us, a reciprocity residing at the roots of our being, befittingly obliging our regard, our grateful response, to those who would call us into dialogue and our distinctive consciousness.

**Keywords:** Aristotle; Burke, Kenneth; body; attentiveness; hearing; tameness; pointing

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For Ron Arnett

### Introduction

In the winter of 1970, French screenwriter and director Francois Truffaut released *L'enfant sauvage* (*The Wild Child*), a film in which he also starred as Dr. Jean Marc Gaspard Itard. Personally concerned with problems of child neglect and abuse, Truffaut had been inspired by Lucien Malson's 1964 book, *Les enfants sauvages: Mythe et réalité* (*Wild Children: Myth and Reality*), which cites the case of a young boy hunted down with dogs after being spotted naked in the woods of Aveyron in the summer of 1798 and brought to the National Institute for the Deaf, a school for the deaf and mute outside Paris. Christened "Victor" by the staff and estimated to be twelve years old, the boy was examined by Itard who found that he might not speak but did hear. Some colleagues believed the boy to be retarded or insane and advocated his committal to a mental institution. But Itard theorized that the boy's behavior could be explained by his having been isolated in the woods at an early age and volunteered to take him in, with the aid of his housekeeper, to be

civilized. The film *The Wild Child* was based on Itard's *Memoire et rapport sur Victor de L'Aveyron* published in 1806.<sup>4</sup> Because of Itard's diary, Victor's case is one of the most documented of wild children in history.

The film was beautifully photographed in black and white, its composition obviously influenced by Truffaut's extensive screening of silent films (e.g., a recurring "closing iris" technique reminiscent of the era). The dialogue was minimalist, the film hardly needing subtitles as so much was communicated visually. Solo recorder music written by Vivaldi complemented the visuals superbly.

Only one problem—the real story was not quite as romantic as Truffaut would have us believe. Victor flourished at first under Itard's tutelage, but his progress eventually slowed. He learned to read simple words but never really learned to talk. Itard ended the experiment, asking his housekeeper to take in the boy at her house down the street from the school. There he lived a rather forlorn existence until his death in 1828 (Garmon 1994).

## A Potential Called Forth

In the fall of 1970, an English subtitled version of *The Wild Child* premiered at the Los Feliz theatre in Hollywood—one week after social workers in the suburb of Arcadia charged a pair of elderly parents with child abuse and took into custody their thirteen-year-old daughter, who had been locked in a room tied to a potty chair and forced to sit, day after day and often through the night, with little to look at and no one to talk to for most of her life. Like Victor, she had never learned to speak, having been beaten whenever she made noise. The father shot himself shortly after authorities discovered the girl; the mother, herself weak and nearly blind, claimed to have also been a victim of her domineering husband.

The girl was taken to Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, where she won the hearts of doctors and scientists. She became known as "Genie," named for a creature that emerges from a bottle into human society past childhood (Garmon 1994; see also the *extensive* Wikipedia entry on "Genie (Feral Child)").

A team was quickly assembled to rehabilitate Genie, and funding was obtained from the National Institute of Mental Health. Consultants from across the country were invited to a special conference that involved a private screening of Truffaut's film, which awed and inspired the attendees (Garmon 1994).

Like Victor, Genie seemed to thrive at first, then her progress slowed, and funds dried up. Genie had a personal quality that early on elicited rescue fantasies. Team members vied to be foster parents, but not all of them could separate her care from their ambition to be the next Annie Sullivan (Helen Keller's teacher) or Itard (who had been criticized for his ambition vis-à-vis Victor, ironically enough even by members of Genie's own team). Genie's mother eventually sought to

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<sup>4</sup>The book is available for free from Google Books as *An Historical Account of the Discovery and Education of a Savage Man: Or, the First Developments, Physical and Moral, of the Young Savage Caught in the Woods Near Aveyron in the Year 1798*.

resume care but quickly found it too difficult. Genie suffered a series of placements in foster homes, in some of which she was abused for her unsocialized behaviors. She regressed. Then her mother sued the team and Children's Hospital for excessive and outrageous treatment. Genie now lives in an adult foster care home, the sixth since the project ended, her care supported by a private foundation (Garmon 1994).

## **“Bodies that are genetically endowed with the ability to learn language”**

What has any of this to do with Kenneth Burke? Burke defines us as “bodies that are genetically endowed with the ability to learn language.”<sup>5</sup> We usually rush to the definition's last term, language, passing over the fact that we are *bodies* genetically endowed with a capacity and that the capacity must be developed, the potential must be actualized. What does it mean to be a *body* that learns language, and what is involved in that body's *learning* it?

Burke touches on these issues early on, though he may not yet have had answers. In his 1925 essay “The Poetic Process,” he argued that “just as there is inborn in the germ-plasm of a dog the potentiality of barking, so there is inborn in the germ-plasm of man the *potentiality of speech*” (Burke 1968, 48, emphasis added)—a position consistent with the Aristotelian “naturalism” (a.k.a. “realism”).<sup>6</sup> Burke's “bodies that learn language” is sometimes supposed to be a redefinition of his earlier, more familiar “symbol-using animals” (Burke 1984, 303). Seeking in the 1930s and 40s to counterbalance a period impressed with behaviorism, Burke did define us as *symbol-using* animals, stressing the *difference* between the human organism and others. Seeking in the 1980s to counterbalance a period increasingly impressed with language (due to his own influence?), he apparently redefined us as “*bodies that learn language*,” stressing the *similarity* (Burke 1984, 295; Brock et al. 1985, 27–28). Whatever his stress, the two definitions are essentially one—a traditional *per genus* (animal) *et differentiam* (symbolic) (Burke 1969a). In defining us specifically as symbol-using, Burke insists that descriptions of our behavior stress symbolic motives that prove to be more than

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<sup>5</sup> Burke used this phrase in a dinner conversation with the author and Barbara Biesecker on November 5, 1987, at the Speech Communication Association (now National Communication Association) convention in Boston. See Burke's (1985) essay “In Haste”: “our bodies being physiologically in the realm of nonsymbolic motion, but genetically endowed with the ability to learn a kind of verbal behavior I call symbolic action” (330).

<sup>6</sup> Frank Macke (2016) found over 4,000 articles on “embodiment,” only thirty of which mention Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The figures might be worse for Burke. The issues of embodiment that arise in the work of the great French phenomenologist also arise in the forgotten American tradition of naturalism (also known as realism—Burke's preferred term—the new realism, critical realism, American realism, and combinations of these terms) to which Burke was introduced at Columbia—a tradition of which pragmatism was but a part, though somehow the larger tradition has vanished and the smaller has become more than it initially was. There is common ground aplenty to be profitably explored between Burke and Merleau-Ponty, between the French and American approaches.

mere projections of our animal nature—his audience being materialists who reduce action to motion. In defining us as generically animal, Burke (1984) insists that descriptions of our symbolic behavior be rooted in, though not reduced to, biological conditions—his audience being idealists who make of the distinction between motion and action a functional dualism between motion and action-minus-motion, thereby assuming a body-mind split, which Burke himself repeatedly denied. Burke's supposed redefinition might be better characterized as a reemphasis of the biological, Aristotelian roots of his system. His more complete definition—"bodies that are genetically endowed with the ability to learn language"—clearly returns him to his 1925 claim.

For both Aristotle and Burke, language is a capacity that must be developed, a *potentiality* that must be *actualized*. That potential exists *within* each of us but is actualized only *among* us. We differ from all other animals. We *speak* only because we have been *spoken to*. We are called into consciousness and conversation and community. We are called out of *physis* into a potential actualized in *nomos*. As such animal bodies, we learn language only from other animal bodies who already use it.

For Aristotle, the efficient cause of an oak is another oak. But once fallen, the acorn develops on its own. The efficient cause of a chicken is other chickens. But animals are more complex, requiring nurture after birth. The body that learns language is a completely different kind of animal. A chicken or a fox is a chicken or a fox no matter what. Its course from chick or pup to adult is biological. The efficient cause of a human being is other human beings. But our course from infant to adult is not only *biological* but also *linguistic, cultural, and historical*. Unless we are called into language, that course is arrested. We become "the wild child," the "feral" child, Victor of Aveyron or Genie of Los Angeles. Brain development is arrested; some parts never grow, others atrophy. There is an optimal time for learning language—even for the limited learning of our primate relatives in labs (Kenneally 2007).

The manner in which language is acquired and the manner by which its acquisition is manifested imply much about language and human nature. In addition, study of pre-linguistic traits in other animals and surmise concerning the evolution of language represent significant supplements to the study of language's acquisition and manifestation.

The first sign of language is usually a *gesture*. Gesture always intrigued Burke. In the 1930s, he was taken with Sir Richard Paget's gesture theory of speech not so much because it was a good theory but because gesture exists at the juncture between body and mind. From that juncture we can look backward into the body and organic development (or evolution) and forward into the mind and linguistic development.

Gesture is not uniquely human; it plays a large part in primate communication. But human gesture is unique: we are the only animals that truly *point*. Indeed, our first communication is usually a gesture and our second a word combined with it—pointing to a cup and saying "milk," reaching out and saying "ball." Apes point too but, significantly, with the whole hand rather than a finger because they lack the dexterity of humans (Kenneally 2007).

Pointing is a matter of manual dexterity that paleontologists correlate with brain capacity (Ritter and Haschke 2015). The fine motor skills involved in pointing with the index finger require a larger, more highly developed brain than apes or our common ancestors possess. Such is also the case with vocal production.

For example, an inherited speech disorder associated with two genes dubbed FOXP2 results in immobility in the lower portion of the face, including the lips, tongue, and mouth, impairing articulation. In simple repetition tests, “reproducing sounds and words in the correct sequence, selecting the right sounds for words and maintaining an appropriate rhythm” proves troublesome—more so with multi-syllabic words, especially unfamiliar ones. In brain scans, regions typically active appear inactive and vice versa (Kenneally 2007, 192–93).

FOXP2 was the first, and so far the only, gene linked to an inherited speech disorder. It is a gene that manages other genes, a high-order gene “often connected with changes at the level of the whole organism” (Keannelly 2007, 197). In the brain, “its pattern of expression appears to be specific to regions involved with the development of motor control,” but it also expresses itself in the development of the heart, lungs, and other tissues (317n6). We share 98% of our genes with chimps; the 2% unique to human beings would appear to include high-order genes. Speaking is clearly associated with one such gene—FOXP2. Pointing quite reasonably can be associated with such a gene, as well.

My point is that the human being is not simply an animal with *logos*, a body that learns language; language is not simply an add-on, a top-off, nor is its emergence mostly a matter of more brains. The human being is a different kind of animal, not the third chimpanzee. A fish is made to swim; a bird is made to fly. The whole human organism is made to learn and use language. To learn and use language is to exercise our being, language being embodied not just in our brains but in our very core.

My point implies many things we have no time to explore here. For example, how do we account for the importance of rhythm or rhyme? Burke relates form to natural body rhythms (e.g., the heart’s systole and diastole, its filling and contracting). As for rhyme, Grimm’s laws of language change suggest that words produced in a similar fashion may be related and even stored in the same locations in our brains, explaining why rhyme may have power or suggesting layers of private meaning. Burke argues that the pleasing quality of a line from Samuel Taylor Coleridge—“bathed by the mist”—is due to the subtlety of its alteration (Burke 1974, 369–70). His explanation draws on Grimm’s laws (i.e., the close relationship of “b” to “m” and of “th” (voiced and unvoiced) to “d” and “t”). The explanation holds even more with rhyme and half rhyme than with alteration.

Along the same lines, I. A. Richards (1936) observes that the association of sound- and therefore spoken-alikes—not strictly homonyms (e.g., malapropisms, spoonerisms) but what he dubs the “interinanimation” of words—explains the peculiar force of certain words and the impossibility of their complete translation (47–65). How does one translate a pun? W. H. Auden claims that good poets (à la Shakespeare) have a weakness for bad puns. The plot of *Much Ado about Nothing* involves accidental and deliberate eavesdropping (appropriately, “nothing” was

at the time pronounced more like “noting”). One might translate the words “light” and “night” but not their spoken/heard association. Burke points to the association between “Marie” (the mother of God), “mer” (the sea), and “merde” (“fecal matter”) in French, then notes that T. S. Eliot, who knew French, may well have associated “merde” with *Murder in the Cathedral*. Arguing that continual sexual intimacy with a woman begets pet names, Burke wonders if the name of Augustine’s mistress is related to his constant reference to her as his “toy.” Burke often referred to his second wife as his “better half”; her maiden name (like her sister’s and his first wife’s) was Batterham. Hermeneutic issues are manifold.

When we first speak, language arises from within us— but not just any language, rather the language first spoken to us, the language first heard. That specific language calls us out of ourselves and into ourselves—into our specific humanity, into our moment and place. We are called into our own historically situated bodies by listening and responding to the voice of the other, be it antique Latin, Middle English, or Modern French.

It has been said that no great poet is found in a language other than the one in which she or he first said “mother.” The saying bespeaks a physical intimacy with our mother tongue that is belied by our tendency to speak and think abstractly about language in general rather than the particular one we speak. Burke himself seeks to articulate the meta-biological laws of all language. But his discussion of the particulars I have mentioned tend to be the more controversial and least appreciated elements of his system.

Returning to gesture and looking forward into the mind and linguistic development, apes point but only in captivity and only for humans, not for other apes. Unlike humans, apes do not attend to one another’s gestures. Apes encouraged to use sign-language with other apes have sign-language “shouting contests” rather than conversations (Kenneally 2007).

How do we explain human attentiveness genetically? Perhaps by the emergence of mirror neurons—neurons that fire both when an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action performed by another, thus “mirroring” the behavior of the other, as though the observer were her or himself acting. There may be mirror neurons associated with listening that are particularly human. Such neurons may in turn be due to another higher order gene—a gene that manages other genes.

For example, when Siberian fur enterprises began selectively breeding tamer captive animals, they were surprised by the emergence of characteristics other than tameness, such as changes in coat color and even morphology.<sup>7</sup> Domesticated dogs may have emerged from wild wolf populations through self-selection. Tamer wolves lurking around garbage dumps on the edges of human settlements may have been adopted and bred, with changes also emerging in coat color and even morphology—all the differences we see between wild and domesticated populations emerging over generations. Tameness appears to be

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<sup>7</sup> This has been widely reported on. See Wikipedia’s entry on “Domesticated Silver Fox.” Of late, some have challenged these findings. See Jake Buehler (2019).

associated with higher order genes. Attentiveness may quite reasonably be so associated, as well. Thus, a characteristic essential to learning and using language may be associated with more than attentiveness and therefore may be more deeply embodied than one would suppose.

Mike Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig believes humans are particularly cooperative in the way they communicate (Kenneally 2007). Chimpanzees (unlike domesticated dogs) do not respond to an experimenter's pointing helpfully to one barrel that contains food as opposed to another that is empty, but they do respond to his reaching as if to grab that barrel—suggesting a difference in the balance of cooperation and competition within species. Tomasello believes human beings have evolved into “a species for whom an experience means little unless it is shared,” whereas chimpanzees have evolved along a different path (Kenneally 2007, 128–29). We are not the most *competitive* of animals but rather the most *cooperative*.

## A Dialogic Ethic?

Human beings are not so much animals that *speak* as they are animals that *listen*. There is something within us prior to language or at its very root that makes us different. There are no Hobbesian pre-political humans. We do not become what we are in *solitude*.

We are Aristotelian *political* animals—that which is *apolis* being either a beast or a god. We learn linguistic *communication* only within linguistic *communities*. We *speak* only because we have been *spoken to*. More exactly, we *speak* because we *listen*. And there must be a particular language that we hear—be it English, German, Spanish, Italian, French, or any of the more than 7,000 languages spoken today, as well as others deemed “dead.”

We respond to the *voice of the other*, calling us out of ourselves and into ourselves. When we speak, language arises from *within*, but language itself resides *among* us. In a sense, each of us resides among us. Inside and out, internal and external, within and among are not as easily distinguished as we would suppose.

There is a gratitude we owe to those who would bestow upon us the gift of speech. There is a mutuality among us, a reciprocity residing at the roots of our being, befittingly obliging our regard, our grateful response, to those who would call us out of and into ourselves, who would call us into our very humanity—the *voices of others*.

Hobbes and his contemporaries sought a naturalistic base upon which to build a new morality, but that base exists not outside of but rather within the polis in the acquisition of speech (Thames and Mancino 2018; Thames 2023).

## Conclusion and Extrapolations

Each of us is initially called into our finished nature (our *entelechia*) by *the voice of the other*. But is there something that calls us out of Nature Itself, calls us into our *genus* and further into our *specific* life, calls us out of Nature into our potential for

creating a *second nature* in imitation of Nature Itself, calls us out of *phusis* into our potential for *nomos*?

In the distant past, writes Burke ([1974] 2003), “our anthropoid ancestors underwent a momentous mutation. In their bodies (as physiological organisms in the realm of motion) there developed the ability to learn the kind of tribal idiom” he refers to as “symbolic action” (142). And that mutation that “makes speech possible is itself inherited in our nature as physical bodies” (142).

But Burke suggests elsewhere that we emerge not merely by mutation, not just by chance. In a passage shamefully neglected by Burke scholars, at the end of Part II of the *Rhetoric* (always pay close attention to Burke’s endings and beginnings), Burke (1969b) asks what the ground of speech would be. His answer: There is

mystery in the “infancy” of the “unconscious,” nonverbal, postverbal, and superverb. By the nonverbal we mean the visceral; by postverbal the unutterable complexities to which the implications of words themselves give rise. . . . And if we go through the verbal to the outer limits of the verbal, the superverb would comprise whatever might be the jumping-off place. It would be not nature minus speech, but nature as the ground of speech, hence *nature as itself containing the principle of speech*. Such an inclusive nature would be more-than-verbal rather than less-than-verbal. (180, emphasis original)

And in the *Rhetoric*’s concluding (and likewise shamefully neglected!) passage, he coyly suggests even more. There he calls upon us to

observe all about us, forever goading us, though it be in fragments, the motive that attains its ultimate identification in the thought, not of the universal holocaust, but of the universal order—as with the rhetorical and dialectical symmetry of the Aristotelian metaphysics, whereby all classes of beings are hierarchically arranged in a chain or ladder or pyramid of mounting worth, each kind striving towards the *perfection* of its kind, and so towards the kind next above it, while the strivings of the entire series head in God as the *beloved* cynosure and sinecure, the end of all desire. (333, emphasis added)

We are animals with *logos*, housed and hidden within Nature<sup>8</sup> until we are called forth by *eros*,<sup>9</sup> until we are drawn forth by Love.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ernesto Grassi argues (perhaps like Burke) that as animals with *logos* we are called forth out of Nature, though not having read much Grassi since 1986 (when I read a lot!), I have searched in vain for the citation.

<sup>9</sup> See Plato’s *Symposium*.

<sup>10</sup> There is an interesting allusion to Aristotle toward the end of Christopher Nolan’s (2014) film *Interstellar*, where Anne Hathaway’s character argues, “Love isn’t something we invented, it’s observable, powerful. It has to mean something. . . . Something we can’t yet understand. Maybe it’s some evidence, some artifact of a higher dimension that we can’t consciously perceive. . . . Love is the one thing we’re capable of perceiving that transcends dimensions of time and space. Maybe we should trust that even if we can’t understand it yet.”



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