Terminal Talk:
Reflections on Thinking and Saying in the Digital World

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**Introduction**

This essay is divided into two parts. Part One contains my initial reflections on
my first ever webinar talk. Encouraged by my colleagues to whom I had sent these
remarks to continue to amplify them and invited by Bonnie Bright to shape them into an
essay for a book she was publishing on technology, I explored other aspects of the
experience of thinking and saying in the digital world. Part Two contains these additional
reflections.

**Part One**

As I settled into my post webinar moment, I had the uncanny experience of not feeling
quite at home in that space. The uncanny quality of that time was also colored by a mood
of sorrow, bathed in an atmosphere of sadness for what seemed to have been lost, left
behind or forgotten.

From the work I have been doing regarding technology and its shadows as well as the
relation between the technological mind and its style of discourse that creates and
sustains its reality, I am familiar with the Gap between that world and its ways of saying
and thinking and the quotidian world of embodied life recovered by the tradition of
phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1968). Working within that
Gap I have become aware that in the Gap when it shows itself as itself Orpheus appears.
Orpheus is the eponymous poet, the poet of the gap according to Baudelaire, the only poet
whom Plato welcomed back into the Polis, and, as I have argued (2004) the mythic-
archetypal figure who is the ground of Jung's psychology. In the age of technology
Orpheus is also the shadow figure who, lingering on the Margins of the cyber world,
reminds us of what has been forgotten. His songs awaken us, as they were said to do in
Plato's time, to the Gap between the human and the divine and call to us to cultivate the
human world beneath earth and sky and to dwell poetically in the world. In the uncanny
mood of the Gap, Orpheus is near. The eponymous poet enters through loss.

So, after this webinar experience, I waited and tried to listen to what the poet might be
asking us to remember in the polis of digital space.

Where is the sky in the digital world? Where is the earth, the flesh of nature? Where is the
depth of this space? Its vertically has been usurped by the horizontality of an infinite
expanse that eclipses or nearly so the human scale of time and space. And where is the
other, the community of others when we meet at and through the terminal, where each
and all of us now have a terminal identity, an image presence on a screen that has no
haptic sense, a space where we are quite specifically out of touch with each other, a
disembodied image, which not weighted with flesh can float free and be anywhere in the
digital world, a spectacle of a disembodied self? Can I kiss you in the terminal world?

> (While you and I have lips and voices which
>   are for kissing and to sing with
>   who cares if some oneeyed son of a bitch
>   invents an instrument to measure Spring with...)
>                (e.e.cummings, 1959)

Are we as Gods in this space, creators of ourselves, makers of a new kind of being that makes a spectacle of itself, a being which has sundered the erotic bonds of the sensual flesh and the sensuous world with all its appeals and seductions, its temptations to linger and to find in the moment the splendor of the simple, the miracle in the mundane?

Are we as Gods who, now floating free outside the envelope of time, an enveloping, a cradling of the present within a past that lingers, haunts, and casts its presence in the present, and a future that bewitches and beguiles the present moment and companions it forward, tempted to imagine, to dream that we are immortal beings, eternal and beyond death?

How do I think, say, teach in this new world where without the sheltering canopy of time each instant on the screen feels like a command to keep moving, to keep the illusion of self creation in place, a tyranny of immediacy in which the next moment is but what follows this moment, where any and every tomorrow is but what follows today, an endless loop of repetition?

And how do I teach, say and think in this new world where there is no flesh, where the erotic field of fleshy engagement between self and other, a fleshy entanglement with all its ambiguities and mess, with all its spoken and unspoken gestured desires and appeals, where all the follies and absurdities of trying to say what one means and to mean what one says is nakedly there impregnating the other, where the lies of a hidden mind betray themselves on the face? What are words spoken at the terminal when they are no longer inscribed within the gestures of the flesh? Words of mind unhinged from flesh are tricky, but the body never lies. Did Descartes tell the first lie of this new world: 'I think therefore I am'? What is truth in the digital world, when even the images on the screen can be photo shopped?

I am in new territory here, perhaps not unlike but certainly amplified, as were those like Galileo who was drawn into the Gap between the medieval world and its ways of thinking, saying and teaching and the modern world of science:


Galileo's Telescope

> He pointed his telescope at the stars inviting the assembled schoolmen to look.
> The moon, he said, had craters on it.
> Too shocked by such blasphemy that corrupted its perfection,
> they refused his invitation.
> With their beliefs held firmly in place,
> they retreated to their books and plotted their revenge
> as their world crumbled into oblivion. (Romanyshyn, 2014)

Did those Aristotelian schoolmen experience Galileo's new world as uncanny? How could he proclaim that all objects fall equally fast when the evidence of their senses told them differently? Were there some who in the face of what was approaching chanted repeatedly their mantras while they sought the old ways and tumbled with their world into oblivion? And were there others who with a sense of sorrow tried to preserve while transforming what they once knew? Freud reminds us that the repetition compulsion is an organic rhythm of soul, one of its pulsations in the face of trauma and change, a beat of soul trying to master its anxiety.

The new territory that we now inhabit comes toward us and announces itself as uncanny and in the mood of sorrow that colors the uncanny we are obliged to remember what is passing away in order to imagine another possibility. We are called to imagine a tomorrow

that is not just the repetition of today, a tomorrow that re-collects what was and carries it forward into what might be, a creative engagement with time, a gathering up and carrying forward of a living history.

To return then to the question: how do we think, say and teach in the digital world? Attending to the uncanny, being a witness for it, having the courage to stay with the mood of sorrow, we cross over an abyss and linger on a bridge that spans the gap between what was and what might be. We move forward by moving backward. We begin to think, say and teach by remembering not to forget. And we begin to think, say and teach out of the mood of sorrow by being in the mood for *what might be*, the subjunctive mood of thinking, saying and teaching that is contrary to facts regarded as fixed and inevitable and open to what is a wish, a hope, a regret, a possibility and perhaps even a dream. A subjunctive mode of existence, which is a primary feature for me of a poetic sensibility!

In this mood then I try to begin to find my way into thinking, saying and teaching in the space-time of the webinar. I begin *to try on* thinking, saying and teaching *as if* I were a self in space-less space and timeless time, *as if* I were experiencing for a moment floating in digital space without the weight of flesh, an astronaut in this new landscape of weightless existence, *as if* I were immortal--a glimpse of what it might be like to be eternal--, like a god.

And yet, and yet, perhaps to give the power of the illusion that this digital world holds its due, all of that above is tempered by the awareness that I am not such a being. And, with that realization that this possibility is a dream of soul comes also the acknowledgement of what is lost and being lost is found again. Strange as it then might be, if one is in the mood for it then might the power of the illusion become an awakened Eros for what was lost and has been found?

> 'We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.'
> (Eliot, 1943)

**A Momentary Pause Between Reflections**

I have lived in the world of the academy for fifty-one years first as a graduate student and then as a professor and writer. In that long span of time I have deeply appreciated that world as a space to pause and reflect on the tradition of one's discipline and through one's thinking and writing and teaching be in service to the ancestors and the unfinished business of their work. Seminars conducted in that space were fleshy affairs, a back and forth, give and take embodied thinking and saying where a gesture of emphasis, for example, had blood in it and sometimes even fury. One was impregnated as it were by the animated presence of the others, and inspired by the anima of embodied words, by the word being made flesh among us. In the digital world a seminar becomes a webinar and the space-time of thinking and saying are radically changed.

In Part Two I add some further reflections on that change. Before I begin, however, a word of caution. My reflections are not in service to nostalgia. We cannot dis-invent the digital world. But we can, and I would add must, not forget that the erotic bond between the sensual-sensuous flesh of embodiment and the sensuous-sensual flesh of the world is the signature that makes us most fully human. From that first moment when our species rose up on two legs and casts its eyes toward the horizon we have been born to see and bound to behold. How do we make a stand within the digital world? The continuing challenge is how to take up and preserve that bond between flesh and world while transforming it.

**Part Two**

Reflecting back upon my first webinar moment and re-collecting those first reflections I was drawn deeper into the experience. Being in that landscape I felt as if I had crossed a border into a new country, an unfamiliar place with its own customs and rituals with which I was unfamiliar. It is not the case that I am unpracticed in crossing borders, having spent more than forty years working in the landscape of dreams, learning ways to navigate in that place and most importantly learning how to respect the ways of thinking and saying of the dream world when crossing back into the world of being awake. This work has taught me that the primary challenge in this border crossing is not one of translation but of learning to value differences and avoid judging one world by the ways of thinking and saying that are native to the other world. I have also learned, especially from my work with actors, that building the dream back into the body is another way of working the dream that differs from interpreting its meanings. Indeed, I have come to prefer dream enactment to dream interpretation. The wisdom of the body seems to me a better guide than the ideas of mind. Regardless of what a dream might mean, regardless of whether one approaches a dream as a Freudian, Jungian, Existential-Phenomenologist or otherwise, every dream is a nightly humiliation of the ego mind. As such the dreaming soul humbles the ego mind, bringing it down to flesh, soaking and nourishing it in the humus or soil of nature.

As I am writing these reflections, I become aware that the webinar that has inspired them, *Conversations Between a Psychologist and a Poet,* is guiding them toward these remarks about the poet and the dream, which is the topic of the second seminar. It forces me to wonder who is the writer here? Am I writing these remarks or are they being written through me? Or, are the terms of either/or inadequate to the issue, and is it closer to the experience of writing that would keep soul in mind to say that in the creative moment one is neither the writer as author nor the writer as agent in service to something other, to that which asks to be said and not left unsaid. This is in fact the key theme of how I have attempted to frame the issue of research from soul's point of view. The work that one does is as much a work that has chosen one as it is a work that one chooses, a chiasm between being an active author of a work and the receptive agent for the unfinished business in the work (Romanyshyn, 2007). In the digital world does this issue arise?

Be that as it may, in this descent of the spirited mind soaring high with its ideas, the dream makes sense of the dreamer before the dreamer even tries to make sense of the dream. If one knows even a bit of alchemy and is somewhat familiar with its images, then one knows that alchemy was an attempt to understand the spirit–matter tension without splitting it. Might we say, then, that the dreamer is an alchemist of the night, an alchemist who is worked upon in darkness and who in the dark light of soul seeks to free the gold from it leadenness, that is to dissolve the fixed and coagulated beliefs of the ego mind? Moreover, Jung has suggested that quantum physics is a contemporary version of alchemy, a way of knowing that also is seated within that a same tension of spirit-matter (1967, 1968). I would also add here that Rilke is an Orphic poet and as such his poetry is a dreaming alchemy. As with the dream, then, might we ask who writes the poem?

In addition to the border crossings I have done between the dreaming soul and the waking mind, I am not a virgin in the digital world of technology. Eighteen months ago I bought a cell phone and at this moment I am typing these words on my computer and will e-mail this essay to a colleague. But, about 15 years ago when I began to sit at the computer I discovered that the pace of my thinking quickened and its directionality moved less like a spiral curling back upon itself and more like a straight line. The arrows on the page that went this way and that way from one idea to another, the messy inserts squeezed between words, and the margins outside of which the strange ideas that seemed at first glance unrelated to one's thinking had their place were now erased from the computer screen.

The digital world was not only less messy it was also very efficient. The seduction of efficiency and the way it 'saved' time, a phrase that I find to be quite strange and which makes me wonder where we might deposit the time we save, was overwhelming. It slowly eroded the virtues of patience and slowness while writing on paper with a pencil and the pleasures I had taken for granted of chewing on a pencil waiting upon the right word, attending to the full engagement of the hand holding the pencil and making its marks upon the page. The webinar experience awakened the sense of sorrow over these lost virtues and pleasures.

Every experience one has is always layered with a complex history through which the sense of an experience first reveals—and conceals--itself. So my first webinar experience was filtered through the question of technology, which is the work that has been central to me as a psychologist. Working on the margins between phenomenology and Jungian-Archetypal psychology, I have approached technology as a cultural-historical symptom and dream (Romanyshyn,1989/2006). Tracing the origins of our technological world view back to the 15th c. development of linear perspective art, I showed how that cultural-historical invention became a convention, a habit of mind, that laid the foundations for the Cartesian split between mind and body and mind and nature. In establishing the procedures for portraying the three dimensional world on a two dimensional canvas, an artist becomes a Spectator who in looking at the world through a window was to focus his fixed gaze upon and take the measure of the world as Spectacle and the body as a Specimen. It is no accident that in that way of configuring subjectivity, embodiment and world the first modern text book in anatomy was written, or that the sound of time announced by the peal of church bells was soon to be watch-ed, or that the world was to be gridded and mapped for exploration and exploitation. We are the inheritors of that way of mapping the world. Has that window, which early on was actually a geometric grid, become the computer screen?

The webinar begins and I see my two colleagues on the screen. Seeing them I am initially reminded of a recent Skype session with my two-year old grandson. Because he lives so far away this technology is welcomed and yet what is absent in this kind of presence lingers as a longing and a loss. I see and hear him and he sees and hears me but we are out of touch. There is, as I suggested in Part One, no haptic sense on the screen and in this recent Skype session I saw how for the first time he seemed to recognize this absence. As 'he' withdrew his hand, which he had just extended toward 'me' to offer a taste of what 'he' was eating, 'he' looked puzzled that 'I' had not taken a small bite of what 'he' had offered. The puzzled look on his face was an expression of a metaphysical question: 'where was grand-pa?'

Very early on children learn the difference between engaging with persons in the flesh and the images on a TV screen, which are not persons with whom one can be in touch. But there I was in Skype space, a strange presence who is neither there with him in the flesh nor like his friend Thomas Train on the TV screen. In this liminal space between flesh and TV images I am a conundrum, grandpa present in his absence and absent in his presence. Recalling this event I realized that in this gap there was for me (and for him?) a mood of longing and loss.

In addition to my two colleagues, I also see an image of myself on the screen and this experience unsettles me. Sitting in my study speaking with my two colleagues I feel myself centered in my body, my subjectivity anchored in this space. At the same time, over there on the screen I see an image of myself who also is speaking with my two colleagues. But I do not feel myself centered there in my body. That image is not a photograph of me because it is 'I' who is speaking. It is also not a film of me that I am watching. The puzzle lies in the experience that the image of me who is speaking over there on the screen and the 'I' who is speaking over here while in my study are speaking simultaneously.

This experience opens another metaphysical conundrum like it did for my grandson, which makes me wonder if pre-digital people like myself and post-digital people like my grandson are two species of our genus. It also makes me wonder if the meeting of two such species might be as 'philosophers' drawn together across thresholds of puzzlement. A long time ago the two remaining species of our genus, Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon, encountered each other and we know the sad outcome of that meeting. Only one species survived!

But I digress so to return to the reflection, the experience of an 'I' who speaks over there and over here simultaneously is uncanny. It does not qualify as an experience of splitting because I am not an object over there in the digital world for a subject over here in the world of my study. Nor am I, in the words of Merleau-Ponty (Romanyshyn, 2001) quite like what he means by flesh, his term for human embodiment, by which he means one who sees because he is seeable. Between, for example, the hand that touches the hand that is touched, the touching hand and the touched hand cross back and forth. Each slips into the other and only with a focused intention does one sense which is which before the slippage between them eludes the grasping mind. Flesh, then, describes an embodied subjectivity that can be for itself also an object. As such, we are neither just free floating minds that are pure subjectivity nor objects reducible to complicated mechanisms. The grammar of language captures this paradox. Embodied human subjectivity is a first person perspective that can take a third person perspective on itself: The 'I' who can speak about observing the eye is not the eye being observed.

So, in this digital world of terminal talk are we perhaps a bit closer but not quite flesh in Merleau-Ponty's terms? Neither subject nor object, nor subject-object chiasm, who am 'I' in this digital world? And where is the 'I' who 'I' am? Is that image over there that disconnects me from my subjectivity over here, a kind of spooky double of myself, a ghostly *doppelganger* who haunts that space over there, a figure of myth and fairy tale of whom it is said that when one encounters such a figure it can be a harbinger of one's death. These thoughts lead me to wonder about the issue of life and death in the digital world. What does it mean to live and what does it mean that we all owe life a death in this digital space and time? There are those like Ray Kurzweil (2006) who predicts that with our current abilities in genetic and computer technologies we are fast approaching a singularity where the constraints of our embodiment will be transcended. In short, according to Kurzweil, one day soon we will shed our biological lives for an existence in the digital cloud. Of, course the consequence is clear. Death will be erased. In this regard, as I suggest in *The Frankenstein Prophecies*, an unfinished manuscript and a play in process, Ray Kurweil is a symptomatic appearance of Victor Frankenstein, and a prophetic amplification of the Spectator Mind on steroids. But will death be eclipsed? And for whom? Are we as beings of flesh destined to go the way of the Neanderthals? Is the transcendence of death the death of who we are? Are we perhaps the last or penultimate generation?

As I continue to linger with the webinar moment, I am also aware that the presence of the audience is also uncanny. They are invisible. Their presence registers as an absence and in their absence they haunt the digital space as a presence. Live theater is like that. The audience is, at least in traditional forms of theater, invisible as the actors play their parts on the other side of an invisible fourth wall. Might we wonder then if the digital space of a webinar is a kind of theater? This, for me, is one of the intriguing questions raised by the webinar experience.

As I reflect on this question, I recall that there are forms of post-modern theater in which that fourth wall is deliberately broken. Are these forms of theater inspired by a desire to break the window that has separated the Spectator Mind from the world, and to make the play an embodied engagement of the characters with the audience? Perhaps such experiments open a space where the characters are real but subtle presences who as such

stretch our boundaries of the real and its empirical identification with what can be measured. Beyond our addiction to an empirical sensibility, which equates the real with what is sensible and/or can be inferred from the sensible and can be measured, these experiments move us in the direction of a poetic realism and the cultivation of a poetic sensibility, which recalls the Aristotelian idea of the *nous poietikos* that Von Franz (1980) describes as the creative intelligence that dwells in nature and the cosmos. Indeed, the webinar, "Conversations between a Psychologist and a Poet," is one of series of experiments I have been attempting regarding a language for psychology that would be responsive to the shadows of the technological world. They are experiments to recover ways of thinking and speaking that cultivate a poetic sensibility and the flesh of embodied and enacted words. Indeed, in transforming *The Frankenstein Prophecies* into a play the theater group with which I am working breaks the fourth wall. The play begins in the entrance to the theater. It begins before the play itself begins on the stage. The people in the audience become visible participants with the characters of the play. The walls between the fictional and the factual become permeable membranes.

If we might regard the digital space of webinar as a kind of theater, then perhaps the experiments with breaking the invisible fourth wall that separates the visible fictional domain of characters from the invisible domain of the audience are attempts to remind us of what has been forgotten: thinking and saying as the embodiment and enactment of the living word. In my many years as a psychotherapist I have come to appreciate how the symptom is a tension between reminding us of something that is too vital to forget and forgetting it because it is too painful to remember. In this context perhaps the digital world is a symptomatic expression of what has been marginalized and exiled to the shadows of the technological mind. Taken up as such perhaps this might be a collective therapeutic response to the digital world, a new world where grandparents who remember what is too vital to forget can meet grandchildren who imagine what still might be.


**Postscript:**

As I was reading over these musings on webinar work, three more came to mind. I note them here in the spirit of inviting conversation.

The first one is the theme of the Gap about which I spoke above. The Gap is the core of the therapy relationship. It is a pregnant void that is also the container for the embodied complex gestural field. Patient and therapist are drawn into the gap between what is and what might be regarding the patient's suffering. When the field is not embodied—like it is not at the computer terminal—; when the field is structured by the therapist's intentions to be useful, meaningful, or helpful, he/she distances him/her self from the immediacy of the encounter between two embodied beings whose gestures carry a complex history, whose symptomatic incarnations are the locus of a loss, the habitat where the figures of soul dwell waiting to tell their tales. Then the relational dynamic between the two is one of power. But when those intentions are let go of then the relation becomes one of being with and in the presence of the other in a field of possibilities. Eros not Power! Eros with all its chaos, ambiguities and fluidity! Can deep psychotherapy be done on Skype?

Second, if the digital landscape is disembodied, and if it is the embodied gestural field that holds the emotional, affective and feeling dimension of human encounters, then where is a place for a mood of sorrow in the digital world? Is the manic pace of the digital world where one can be on call 24/7 a defense against loss, a screen against sorrow? Moreover if the soul's way of finding something is by losing it, if loss is the alchemy that dissolves the ego's literal attachments to others/things and transforms them into their symbolic gold, does the digital world contribute to the soul's exile by the disembodied technological mind, and does it do so by fostering a kind of thinking that erodes the capacity for symbolic

thinking? As a psychotherapist I wonder then if the ubiquitous borderline patient is the symptomatic reminder of that loss, for one of the primary features of the borderline personality is the lack for symbolic thinking.

Regarding Eros, we might also wonder if pornography, as one of the largest money-makers on the World Wide Web, is also a symptomatic cry of wounded Eros in the digital world.

Third, fascination, the glitter of the new and the expectations engendered by what is even on the way as newer, distract us from the call of the uncanny. Technological civilization married to capitalist greed would keep us busy and entertained, and would fill the gap with appetites that remain unsatisfied, with a hunger that starves the capacities of memory and imagination.

In a recent conversation with my good friend and colleague Michael Sipiora, he posed this question: ' Why is the media full of stories about Bill Cosby's admittedly horrible exploits while Ebola spreads and ISIS beheads?'

In reply, I suggested that the technological world knows the value and necessity of margins and monsters and uses it to distract us from reflection about the uncanny character of the technological world. As distraction it says to us, "the monster on the margins is not us." We are in the center (or depending on the issue could be. We could be one of the next rich ones for example). Distracted the center is strengthened. Distracted we never begin to ask what the monster on the margins might say to us. We become deaf to the possibility that the voice from the margins might carry what is hidden in the uncanny. We go on texting and typing, tweeting and skypeing, linking and facebooking, becoming zombiefied, stupefied and hypnotized. Indeed, this motif lies at the heart of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Her story is a primer at the early stages of the technological world for how to create a monster. Madison Ave has amplified that primer!

**Closing Time**

As I read over these remarks one final time before I hit the send button, I realize that the term reflections feels premature. The remarks are more like explorations of a wanderer in the digital ocean, ruminations of a kind of ancient mariner whose only compass has been the port from which he has set sail as a guide to where he might be going. In this context, the voyage is not finished.

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception
2 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and The Invisible
3 Robert D. Romanyshyn, "'Anyway why did it have to be the Death of the Poet?'
4 e. e. Cummings, 100 selected poems
5 Romanyshyn, Leaning Toward the Poet: Eavesdropping on the Poetry of Everyday Life
6 T. S. Eliot, "Four Quartets"
7 Online series produced by Depth Insights, Depth Psychology Alliance, April 2015
8 Romanyshyn, The Wounded Researcher
9 Jung, "Alchemical Studies"
10 Jung, "Psychology and Alchemy"
11 Romanyshyn, Technology as Symptom and Dream
12 Romanyshyn, "The Body in Psychotherapy"
13 Ray Kurzweil, The Singularity Is Near
14 Marie-Louise von Franz, Alchemy

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