Book Review

Lawrence J. Hatab’s, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy:*

*Dwelling in Speech, Vol. II*. Roman and Littlefield International. 2020.

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*Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy: Dwelling in Speech, Vol. II* is the second installation of Lawerence J. Hatab’s two-volume tome that challenges a number of theoretical assumptions about human language by carrying out a rigorous phenomenological treatment of the topic. Taken together, the volumes make a strong case that, at the most fundamental level, language is not that product of a disengaged cognition but of a human existence that is always already embedded in shared forms of understanding that emerge from practical and embodied ways of engaging the world. Reflecting on the nature of language, then, means reflecting on the nature of such an existence and on the shared social world of understanding within which we are immersed prior to theoretical reflection and skeptical doubts. To this end, Hatab’s two volumes engage relevant findings from a diverse set of disciplines that shed some light on these forms of social understanding within which we are immersed, including cognitive and developmental psychology, neuroscience, linguistic anthropology, and the literary analysis of oral traditions. Hatab’s commitment to engaging these bodies of literature does them a great service by demonstrating their relevance for a broader theory of human existence. An examination of empirical discoveries about language acquisition or about oral cultures, it turns out, can be quite illuminating to philosophers seeking to better understand the nature of language and of human existence. As such, Hatab’s two-volume set should be considered indispensable reading for scholars who work not only in the philosophy of language, phenomenology, and social epistemology, but also in developmental psychology, linguistic anthropology, literary history, and classics.

As the first chapter of the second volume begins with a lengthy review of the argument in the first, one can begin with *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy: Dwelling in Speech, Vol. II*. That said, it is helpful to recall a couple features of the earlier volume. In *Proto-Phenomenology and the Nature of Language: Dwelling in Speech, Vol. I*, Hatab had introduced the concept of proto-phenomenology: a theoretical tool he uses to illuminate the immersive, ecstatic, embodied dwelling that, proximally and for the most part, characterizes the human mode of being-in-the-world and to correct those theoretical assumptions that neglect the importance of this dwelling for understanding human language and cognition. While, in that volume, Hatab had introduced his own set of indicative concepts (e.g., *immersion, exposition, contravention, differential fitness*) to carry out this task, those familiar with the work of Martin Heidegger will recognize the influence of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* on Hatab’s concepts. Even Hatab’s term *proto-phenomenology* is a way of reinforcing the importance of the specifically *existential* phenomenology that characterized Heidegger’s work in the 1920’s.

In the new volume, Hatab explores the process of language acquisition in early childhood and the historical transition from oral to literate culture and aims to show how an appreciation of each can shed light on the human mode of dwelling described in the first volume. For Hatab, the significance of each of these early phases of human existence has been largely neglected by philosophers. Hatab cites two reasons for this. First, common theoretical assumptions about language have routinely led theorists away from these potential topics of research. If language is a formal system of meaning resulting from a detached cognition, then the phenomenon is not fully actualized in the gestural, mimetic, ecstatic speech of the toddler or the oral poet and it makes no sense to view them as representative figures of human language. What’s more, neither the experiences of young children learning to speak nor the experiences of our pre-literate ancestors are simply immediately present for philosophical inspection. To investigate either requires a proto-phenomenological approach that can reconstruct these ways of dwelling in speech.

Hatab’s exploration of “Language Acquisition,” the title of the book’s third chapter builds off of the analysis in Chapter Two, “The Child’s World.” Chapter Two impresses upon the reader just how powerfully a careful proto-phenomenological reflection upon childhood experience demonstrates what is mistaken about conceiving of cognition as something separate from the world in which it is embedded. While we are accustomed to thinking about cognition as an operation independent of the world, Hatab reminds us of the many ways in which childhood experience is characterized by an ecstatic immersion in a world shared by others. As Hatab writes:

Childhood “knowledge” is much less an interior process and more the development of tacit habits, intimations, and situated know-how. Children learn in behavioral and instructional formats into which they are projected and in which they are immersed. Contrary to the typical model of internal processing, child development is primarily an outside-in dynamic with an ecstatic structure that later gets “internalized” only after language acquisition (62).

Hatab discusses characteristic features of early childhood like the child’s natural openness, which can make their world both anxiety-provoking and alluring, and their lack of an individuated self-consciousness prior to language acquisition. Regarding the latter, Hatab explains: “At early stages, infants are not aware of their own agency as such. The attention, reaction, and prompting of caregivers provide the first occasions of quasi-selfhood in being the ‘focal center’ of attention from others in the midst of shared embodiment” (71). Hatab is particularly detailed in his explanation of the child’s natural capacities, first, for imitation and, later, for joint attention – the latter capacity being that which allows young children to quickly clue into the specific intentional, meaning-laden actions of adults in their environment. By going carefully through these milestones in early childhood development, Hatab fleshes out further the claim made in the first volume about the fundamentally immersive character of human understanding.

Hatab’s account of early human development in “The Child’s World” also serves to bring into view those capacities and forms of social and cognitive development that are preconditions for the acquisition of language. In several ways, the child’s ecstatic immersion in their social environment paves the way for language acquisition. For example, Hatab explains how it is in the context of socially significant, practical activities that children first start to clue into the meaning of speech acts. This projection into a world where language is continually at use occurs well before any explicit attempt to learn words or letters through books. Indeed, the child must first be projected into the practical, social usage of language before they become able to recognize the meaning of the words indicated in such books. The child eventually comes to recognize that these figures on the page, *c-a-t*, point to the lovely fluffy creatures that they have seen and occasionally petted on their walks through the neighborhood. Even the act of reading itself, Hatab points out, is a behavior that they observe in others and clue into well before they attempt to do it themselves. Similarly, the child’s ability to achieve joint attention with one’s caregiver is a necessary condition for learning language. What begins as their ability to follow a gaze or a pointing finger eventually enables them to focus on what is indicated by their caretaker’s words. In these ways, Hatab suggests, “language for young children is generally a mode of passive projection, of non-voluntary exposure to the formative powers of speech,” adding that the infant’s pre-linguistic capacities (e.g., joint attention) and natural interest in human speech make the projection not, strictly speaking, simply passive (131).

It is not common for philosophers to give such attention to the pre-linguistic (or, I would suggest, *proto-linguistic*) capacities that Hatab treats so extensively in the second and third chapters of this book. Instead, philosophers have been eager to focus on what is distinct about the *zōon logon echon*, the being for whom language has already become second nature. A proto-phenomenological analysis of the proto-linguistic phase of human life, though, makes clear how immersive human understanding is in the early years and the ways in which our relationship to language even as adults retains, in large part, this character of immersion.

Hatab does not deny that, with later developments, the interpretive and differential capacities of language become exponentially more complex. For Hatab, however, although adult language makes extensive use of expositional reflection and is significantly transformed by it, it is not simply a substitution of the child’s mode of dwelling in speech but, rather, the development of new capacities that are “nested” in the earlier capacities. As Hatab puts it, the development of adult language is “a nesting effect that builds hybrid skills in an assimilating process through earlier abilities, not a linear passage that leaves prior stages behind” (64).

In Chapters 4-6, Hatab turns to examine a parallel nesting effect evident in the development in human history from oral culture to literate culture. The examination in these chapters thus has two parts: first, a presentation of the distinctive features of oral culture that differentiate it in substantial ways from literate culture and, second, a consideration of how forms of disclosure and understanding characteristic of oral cultures remain “nested” as enabling preconditions for the distinctive forms of disclosure and understanding that characterize human life in literate cultures. For the first of these ideas, Hatab draws extensively from the scholarship on oral traditions pioneered by Milman Parry and Walter Ong. Aided in large part by their vivid reconstructions of oral culture in ancient Greece, Hatab takes his readers on a journey into the *Dasein* of oral culture and on the role of language in it. In oral cultures, Hatab explains, language is not yet conceived of as a set of spatialized word-objects that bear meanings separate and independent of practical, social contexts. As Hatab puts it:

Since speech in the lived world is correlated with practical tasks and performative contexts, an oral culture sees language as a mode of action rather than a referential relation to “things” or “thoughts.” Such a dynamic perspective accounts for the notion in oral societies that words can evince power over things or persons. In that respect, language has not yet been isolated from ways of being in the world; it displays speech-acts in the strictest sense and cannot be objectified as reified tokens that attach to experience (165).

This is why, for example, it is difficult to find an equivalent for the Greek term *logos* in the English language. Hatab argues that *logos* in the ancient Greek world meant first and foremost speech that brings something to light, that discloses something. *Logos* had, in other words, an irreducibly presentational character. It is not until the emergence of literate culture that language would come to be thought of as a system independent from this disclosive event. Accordingly, in oral cultures, the truth of *logos* is not a matter of propositional truth. It is a matter of bringing something to presentation for all of those present to behold. In turn, to understand poetry in the ancient world, one did not sit down privately, read, and interpret lines on a page penned by an absent author. Instead, one would witness a performance that made use of speech but also typically gesture and music to disclose something there and then to all present.

One of the highlights of Hatab’s second volume is the way that he brings this analysis to bear on the difficult question of Plato’s relationship to writing. While Plato’s Socrates often targets poetry and myth as obstacles to philosophical knowledge, he also frequently uses myth and narrative in the dialogues. For Hatab, one can make sense of this tension in Plato by understanding the way that Plato’s philosophical activity is part of a historical transformation initiated by Socrates in some sense away from oral modes of disclosure and understanding even while these earlier modes retain serious disclosive power in the culture. As adverse as Plato is to the idea of putting the education of the Athenians in the hands of the poets and the myth makers, he also clearly has concerns with leaving it all to the written text detached from any person who would embody its performance and speak for it. This is nowhere more evident than in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, where a detached text is taken to be as significant of an obstacle to philosophical knowledge as a recitation of Homeric poetry.

The dialogue raises the problem of the detachability of written words from the milieu of lived conversation. But this does not amount to a defense of “orality,” given the persistent criticisms in several dialogues of the power of poetic speech and political rhetoric to overwhelm the mind . . . . Rather, the critique of writing amounts to a defense of the literate soul against (1) the stand-alone character of a written text set apart from the living reality of knowledge, and (2) the sterility of writing when not originating from, or addressed to, those selected souls who are capable of possessing knowledge (*Phaedrus* 275e). So, the *pharmakon* of writing can be associated with both the remedy of literacy overcoming mimetic orality and the poison threatening philosophy, when writing circulates to the wrong audience (208).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Plato’s relationship to orality and literacy thus exemplifies the broader story that Hatab offers of the transition in human history from oral culture to literate culture. This transition does not simply leave orality behind but builds upon forms of disclosure and understanding that first took shape in oral cultures. Whereas Ong offers a similar account of language through human history,[[2]](#endnote-2) Hatab’s recent volume is unique in drawing out the strong parallel between this historical account and the developmental account of language acquisition in childhood. In both cases, Hatab presents a nesting effect at work where forms of disclosure and understanding take shape in an early oral phase and continue to play a vital role in later linguistic practices. Thus, even in contemporary cultures with high levels of literacy, there are abundant traces of oral culture – for instance, in the way that we “hear” speech when we read.

Another remnant of oral culture alive and well in the twenty-first century is the power of rhetoric as a mode of persuasion. Indeed, nobody would deny that rhetoric is just as powerful a tool for persuading the *dēmos* today in the hands of Jair Bolsonaro or Donald Trump as it was in the hands of Pericles or Gorgias. Hatab’s discussion of rhetoric is quite brief (p. 225-226) and includes no normative assessment. Instead, Hatab argues that rhetoric is an irreducible dimension of political persuasion that is in itself neither good nor bad.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Philosophical complaints about rhetorical speech are not unfounded, but our analysis calls for a measured critique because natural language is an embodied, social, practical, addressive, and captivating phenomenon, and political speech does require “moving” an audience – so that a political ideal of strictly “logical” adjudication and governance would be unrealistic and naïve . . . . For every Adolph Hitler, there is a Martin Luther King. The “content” of a King speech cannot be separated from his character and oratorical gifts (p. 226).

Given today’s widespread concerns, however, about the ability of political rhetoricians to persuade millions to adopt outrageous and dangerous beliefs that would surely crumble if submitted to any serious examination, one might have wanted Hatab to break from his proto-phenomenological enterprise at this moment and to offer a normative argument on this issue. Indeed, this may be an example of where a more expositional relationship to speech is required. That said, there is certainly value in being able to recognize the extent to which, still to this day, we remain open to and, yes, vulnerable to rhetorical modes of persuasion. It is, after all, a common and dangerous assumption in the United States today that when we hear political speech, we each interpret and assess it for ourselves with the means of independent cognition.[[4]](#endnote-4) Hatab’s entire phenomenological exposition of language offers a helpful corrective to this misguided notion.

In sum, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy* is a deeply valuable contribution to a number of fields, including, the philosophy of language, phenomenology, and social epistemology. It offers a fascinating account of two parallel developments – the development from childhood dwelling in speech to adult dwelling in speech and from oral culture to literate culture– that brings together two bodies of research rarely connected by scholars. More importantly, it serves to remind readers of the ways that even the sophisticated thought of highly literate people today remains bound to forms of linguistic disclosure that are rooted in earlier, more ecstatic stages of human life.

1. Hatab’s analysis of Plato’s *Phaedrus* as reflective of the transition from oral to literate culture could be extended to shed light on the history of the university lecture, which has a similarly complex relationship to orality and literacy. Ong describes the university lecturer as straddling “both the audile’s discourse world and the visile’s object world.” “Instead of carrying on a dialogue in the give-and-take Socratic form,” Ong explains, “the university don had largely reduced the oral component by converting it into his own classroom monologue, which he produced not as the spirit moved him but on schedule at fixed places and hours. At the same time, his interest in both logic and explicitness . . . had driven him further still toward the visile pole with its typical ideals of ‘clarity,’ ‘precision,’ ‘distinctness,’ and ‘explanation’ itself – all best conceivable in terms of some analogy with vision and the spatial field.” Walter Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 155. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The claim that rhetoric is a neutral instrument is also a claim made by the rhetorician, Gorgias, in Plato’s dialogue of that name (*Gorgias* 456d-457b). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Greater acknowledgement of our ecstatic immersion in oral modes of persuasion would carry interesting implications for the current argument about the power of speech to stir a mob to hate and violence. Free speech protections in the United States are premised on the assumption that a speaker presents a content to the audience that they, with their independent means of cognition and interpretation, can then evaluate. This, however, mistakenly presents speech as a present-at-hand “content” happened upon by independent consumers freely evaluating the available content in the “marketplace of ideas.” [↑](#endnote-ref-4)