Anthropodology¹: Man A-foot

By Richard M. Griffith

1 Cor. 12 "... For the body is not one member but many ... And if they were one member, where were the body? ... If the foot should say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body ...”

In what low estate the foot is held! I adorn my fingers with diamonds and rubies and imprison my toes in leather. The foot, we are told, just makes possible the upright posture², the noble posture of man, which orients head and mind toward heaven, which frees the clever hand. Indentured to serve the heavy labor of stance and carriage for the Cinderella-sisters of eye, mouth and hand, what does the foot receive in recompense? Abuse. The burden of body and shoe rewards with puffing and pain; corns, broken arches and ingrown nails. Yet let us see which we can do without more readily, the foot or the hand. Here is the footless man:

Slide showing detail from Pieter Breugel the Elder: The Fight between Carnival and Lent. A cripple pulls herself through the dirt, sliding along on a plate-like sled, her useless legs bent up against the back. Each hand grasps artificial “feet” whose stick-legs give her the traction to pull. Her back is severely arched, head thrown back, her mouth opened in the effort and her agony. She is unkempt. Pictorially, she is “degraded” – as she literally is, i.e., “de-stepped.”

And here is one with no hands:

Slide of a teen-aged girl, the empty arms of her shirt turned inside. She sits upright on a couch, writing on a pad with pencil held by toes. Not deprived of dignity, she finds ways to groom herself.

Such an indispensable thing treated so “shod-dily”. Each step it is pressed against the dirt and grovels in the dust from which we rose. The foot needs a champion. Would that I could fill the shoe. This paper is an humble tribute to the lowly foot. But if the psychologist will turn his gaze downward from the genitalia and majestic things, with a sight open to revelation, the world will be opened to him; the human condition, no less, is what he will see, as never seen before.

W. von Baeyer et al. (eds.), Conditio Humana
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Man is at one with his body, his psychology inseparable from the structure of his several parts and the harmony which is between them. The body is at once what man has and what he is. The Cartesian chasm is not bridged by that simple sentence; no, not bridged over but closed, by the earthquake of it. For man is a synthesis: he is not spirit, mind and matter glued together, but a synthesis of these things so tragically ripped apart. Study of the mind must be extended from mind to man; psychology must seek its true base in an anthropology.

The parts have a doubly directed relationship to the whole. Together they constitute the whole; yet, the intent of the whole in some way permeates — thus, constitutes — each. Each part plays out its part in the overall, each unit diversely bespeaks that unity. Because of the reflection of the unity in the parts which the whole comprises, we could, if detective enough, perceive in each all the others. The foot “sub-stantiates” man; upright, man is a-foot.

In our task, and joy, of placing the foot, at long last, on a pedestal, we will also elevate man; if the foot is accorded its rightful respect, we need not neglect the hand. We set out, then, to see man in his foot-ness. Even in our lowliest part shall we find ourself.

Bone and Muscle

Let us treat lightly of muscle, bone and tendon. The cartoon shows the professor lecturing the young medical students on the anatomy of the foot; the caption reads, “I realize that those of you who are planning to go into psychiatry may find this dull.” The intent of my paper, as you will realize from what has gone before, is to turn the humor of that cartoon into irony. The Head Doctor should know the foot; the student of the mind should begin as Professor of the Foot. But we cannot afford much time on the anatomy of the foot, it’s a course I’ve not completed; we would launch Anthropodology, not podology as such; and the one way in which the foot has been lauded, I’m tempted to say in that alone, is as specialized physical structure admirably evolved for the job it has to do.

Ponder a bit on transportation. Bones, of course, support weight by remaining rigid under pressure. Before bones developed, the organism had of necessity to reside in water, in a medium with minimal mechanical stresses; it would flatten out like a jellyfish on land. Emerging onto marsh land a fin-like foot could first push it along, as with the turtle, on its stomach. This was all right for the half-swim-half-walk through slime and mud; to move on higher ground it had to lift itself to walk — locomotion became transportation, it had to carry it-