

David Abram.
fr. The Spell of the Sensuous.
New York: Vintage, 1996.

The Flesh of Language

The rain surrounded the cabin . . . with a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside. . . . Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, the rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen.

—THOMAS MERTON

EVERY ATTEMPT TO DEFINITELY SAY WHAT LANGUAGE IS is subject to a curious limitation. For the only medium with which we can define language is language itself. We are therefore unable to circumscribe the whole of language within our definition. It may be best, then, to leave language undefined, and to thus acknowledge its open-endedness, its mysteriousness. Nevertheless, by paying attention to this mystery we may develop a conscious familiarity with it, a sense of its texture, its habits, its sources of sustenance.

Merleau-Ponty, as we have seen, spent much of his life demonstrating that the event of perception unfolds as a reciprocal exchange between the living body and the animate world that surrounds it. He showed, as well, that this exchange, for all its openness and indeter-

minacy, is nevertheless highly articulate. (Although it confounds the causal logic that we attempt to impose upon it, perceptual experience has its own coherent structure; it seems to embody an open-ended logos that we enact from within rather than the abstract logic we deploy from without.) The disclosure that preverbal perception is already an exchange, and the recognition that this exchange has its own coherence and articulation, together suggested that perception, this ongoing reciprocity, is the very soil and support of that more conscious exchange we call language.

Already in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty had begun to work out a notion of human language as a profoundly carnal phenomenon, rooted in our sensorial experience of each other and of the world. In a famous chapter entitled "The Body as Expression, and Speech," he wrote at length of the gestural genesis of language, the way that communicative meaning is first incarnate in the gestures by which the body spontaneously expresses feelings and responds to changes in its affective environment. The gesture is spontaneous and immediate. It is not an arbitrary sign that we mentally attach to a particular emotion or feeling; rather, the gesture is the bodying-forth of that emotion into the world, it is that feeling of delight or of anguish in its tangible, visible aspect. When we encounter such a spontaneous gesture, we do not first see it as a blank behavior, which we then mentally associate with a particular content or significance; rather, the bodily gesture speaks directly to our own body, and is thereby understood without any interior reflection:

Faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I have no need, in order to understand it, to [mentally] recall the feelings which I myself experienced when I used these gestures on my own account. . . . I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.¹

Active, living speech is just such a gesture, a vocal gesticulation wherein the meaning is inseparable from the sound, the shape, and the rhythm of the words. Communicative meaning is always, in its depths, affective; it remains rooted in the sensual dimension of ex-

perience, born of the body's native capacity to resonate with other bodies and with the landscape as a whole. Linguistic meaning is not some ideal and bodiless essence that we arbitrarily assign to a physical sound or word and then toss out into the "external" world. Rather, meaning sprouts in the very depths of the sensory world, in the heat of meeting, encounter, participation.

We do not, as children, first enter into language by consciously studying the formalities of syntax and grammar or by memorizing the dictionary definitions of words, but rather by actively making sounds—by crying in pain and laughing in joy, by squealing and babbling and playfully mimicking the surrounding soundscape, gradually entering through such mimicry into the specific melodies of the local language, our resonant bodies slowly coming to echo the inflections and accents common to our locale and community.

We thus learn our native language not mentally but bodily. We appropriate new words and phrases first through their expressive tonality and texture, through the way they feel in the mouth or roll off the tongue, and it is this direct, felt significance—the *taste* of a word or phrase, the way it influences or modulates the body—that provides the fertile, polyvalent source for all the more refined and rarefied meanings which that term may come to have for us.

. . . the meaning of words must be finally induced by the words themselves, or more exactly, their conceptual meaning must be formed by a kind of subtraction from a *gestural meaning*, which is immanent in speech.²

Language, then, cannot be genuinely studied or understood in isolation from the sensuous reverberation and resonance of active speech. James M. Edie attempts to summarize this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's thought in this manner:

. . . Merleau-Ponty's first point is that words, even when they finally achieve the ability to carry referential and, eventually, conceptual levels of meaning, never completely lose that primitive, strictly phonemic, level of 'affective' meaning which is not translatable into their conceptual definitions. There is, he argues, an affective tonality, a mode of conveying meaning beneath the level

of thought, beneath the level of the words themselves . . . which is contained in the words *just insofar as they are patterned sounds*, as just the sounds which this particular historical language uniquely uses, and which are much more like a melody—a 'singing of the world'—than fully translatable, conceptual thought. Merleau-Ponty is almost alone among philosophers of language in his sensitivity to this level of meaning. . . .³

Ede here emphasizes Merleau-Ponty's originality with regard to language, and asserts that Merleau-Ponty gave special attention to "what no philosopher from Plato on down ever had any interest in" (namely, the gestural significance of spoken sounds). Yet this assertion is true only if one holds a very restricted view of the philosophical tradition. The expressive, gestural basis of language had already been emphasized in the first half of the eighteenth century by the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), who in his *New Science* wrote of language as arising from expressive gestures, and suggested that the earliest and most basic words had taken shape from expletives uttered in startled response to powerful natural events, or from the frightened, stuttering mimesis of such events—like the crack and rumble of thunder across the sky.⁴ Shortly thereafter, in France, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) wrote of gestures and spontaneous expressions of feeling as the earliest forms of language, while in Germany, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) argued that language originates in our sensuous receptivity to the sounds and shapes of the natural environment.⁵

In his embodied philosophy of language, then, Merleau-Ponty is the heir of a long-standing, if somewhat heretical, lineage. Linguistic meaning, for him, is rooted in the felt experience induced by specific sounds and sound-shapes as they echo and contrast with one another, each language a kind of song, a particular way of "singing the world."

Toward an Ecology of Language

The more prevalent view of language, at least since the scientific revolution, and still assumed in some manner by most linguists today, considers any language to be a set of arbitrary but conventionally agreed upon words, or "signs," linked by a purely formal system of syntactic and grammatical rules. Language, in this view, is rather like a *code*; it is a way of *representing* actual things and events in the perceived world, but it has no internal, nonarbitrary connections to that world, and hence is readily separable from it.

If we agree with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that active speech is the generative core of all language, how can we possibly account for the overwhelming prevalence of a view that considers language to be an ideal or formal system readily detachable from the material act of speaking? Merleau-Ponty suggests that such a view of language could arise only at a time when the fresh creation of meaning has become a rare occurrence, a time when people commonly speak in conventional, ready-made ways "which demand from us no real effort of expression and . . . demand from our listeners no real effort of comprehension"—at a time, in short, when meaning has become impoverished.⁶

Yet there is another, more overt reason for the dominance of the idea that language is an arbitrary, or strictly conventional, set of signs: As we noted earlier, European philosophy has consistently occupied itself with the question of human specialness. Ever since Aristotle, philosophers have been concerned to demonstrate, in the most convincing manner possible, that human beings are significantly different from all other forms of life. It was not enough to demonstrate that human beings were unique, for each species is evidently unique in its way; rather, it was necessary to show that the human form was *uniquely* unique, that our noble gifts set us definitively apart from, and above, the rest of the animate world. Such demonstrations were, we may suspect, needed to justify the increasing manipulation and exploitation of nonhuman nature by, and for, (civilized) humankind. The necessity for such philosophical justification became especially urgent in the wake of the scientific revolu-

tion, when our capacity to manipulate other organisms increased a hundredfold. Descartes's radical separation of the immaterial human mind from the wholly mechanical world of nature did much to fill this need, providing a splendid rationalization for the vivisection experiments that soon began to proliferate, as well as for the steady plundering and despoilment of nonhuman nature in the New World and the other European colonies.

But in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* introduced a profound tension into the anthropocentric trajectory of European philosophy and science. If humans are animals evolved like other animals, if in truth we are descended by "natural selection" from primates, if indeed fish are our distant ancestors and mice are our cousins, then our own traits and capacities must be, to some degree, continuous with those found in the rest of the earthly environment.

Most scientists, however, while accepting Darwin's theories, were reluctant to relinquish the assumption of human specialness—the assumption that alone justifies so many of the cultural and research practices to which we have now become accustomed. In earlier centuries we could ascribe our superiority to the dispensation of God, who had "created" us as his representatives on earth, or who had bequeathed to humans alone the divine capacity for awareness and intelligence. After Darwin, however, we no longer had such easy recourse to extrawordly dispensation; it became necessary to find new, more naturalistic evidence for the superiority of humankind.

In our own time it is *language*, conceived as an exclusively human property, that is most often used to demonstrate the excellence of humankind relative to all other species. Other animals have been shown to build complex dwellings, even to use tools. But language, it is widely asserted, remains the special provenance of the human species. To be sure, most other animals manage to communicate with each other, often employing a repertoire of gestures, from "marking" territory with chemical secretions, to the facial expressions of many mammal species, to the host of rattles, cries, howls, and growls that sound across the fields and forests—to say nothing of the complex melodic songs employed, most obviously by birds, as well as by various marine-dwelling mammals like orcas and humpback whales. One of the founding events of the science of ethology,

earlier in this century, was the discovery of the intricate "waggle-dance" whereby individual bees communicate the precise direction and distance of a newfound food source to the rest of the hive. Yet each of these communicative arrays—these "dances," "songs," and gestures, both vocal and visual—may be said to remain within the sphere of felt, bodily expression. The meanings here, it is assumed, are tied to the expressive nature of the gestures themselves, and to the direct sensations induced by these movements—to the immediacy of instinct and bodily urge.

In everyday human discourse, on the other hand, we readily locate a dimension of significance beyond the merely expressive power of the words, a layer of abstract meanings fixed solely, it would seem, by convention. Thus, the term "Wow!" may at first be a simple expression of wonder, but it may also come to designate, if we so choose, a particular type of hairdo, or a shade of blue, or a specific tactic to be used when debating with fishermen. It is this second layer of agreed-upon meanings that is identified with "language in the proper sense" by most philosophers and scientists since the Enlightenment. Only by isolating this secondary layer of conventional meanings from the felt significance carried by the tone, rhythm, and resonance of spoken expressions can we conceive of language as a code—as a determinate and mappable structure composed of arbitrary signs linked by purely formal rules. And only thus, by conceiving language as a purely abstract phenomenon, can we claim it as an exclusively human attribute. Only by overlooking the sensuous, evocative dimension of human discourse, and attending solely to the denotative and conventional aspect of verbal communication, can we hold ourselves apart from, and outside of, the rest of animate nature.

If Merleau-Ponty is right, however, then the denotative, conventional dimension of language can never be truly severed from the sensorial dimension of direct, affective meaning. If we are not, in truth, immaterial minds merely housed in earthly bodies, but are from the first material, corporeal beings, then it is the sensuous, gestural significance of spoken sounds—their direct bodily resonance—that makes verbal communication possible at all. It is this expressive potency—the soundful influence of spoken words upon the sensing body—that supports all the more abstract and conventional mean-

ings that we assign to those words.⁷ Although we may be oblivious to the gestural, somatic dimension of language, having repressed it in favor of strict dictionary definitions and the abstract precision of specialized terminologies, this dimension remains subtly operative in all our speaking and writing—if, that is, our words have any significance whatsoever. For meaning, as we have said, remains rooted in the sensory life of the body—it cannot be completely cut off from the soil of direct, perceptual experience without withering and dying.⁸

Yet to affirm that linguistic meaning is primarily expressive, gestural, and poetic, and that conventional and denotative meanings are inherently secondary and derivative, is to renounce the claim that “language” is an exclusively human property. If language is always, in its depths, physically and sensorially resonant, then it can never be definitively separated from the evident expressiveness of bird-song, or the evocative howl of a wolf late at night. The chorus of frogs gurgling in unison at the edge of a pond, the snarl of a wildcat as it springs upon its prey, or the distant honking of Canadian geese veering south for the winter, all reverberate with affective, gestural significance, the same significance that vibrates through our own conversations and soliloquies, moving us at times to tears, or to anger, or to intellectual insights we could never have anticipated. Language as a bodily phenomenon accrues to *all* expressive bodies, not just to the human. Our own speaking, then, does not set us outside of the animate landscape but—whether or not we are aware of it—inscribes us more fully in its chattering, whispering, soundful depths.

If, for instance, one comes upon two human friends unexpectedly meeting for the first time in many months, and one chances to hear their initial words of surprise, greeting, and pleasure, one may readily notice, if one pays close enough attention, a tonal, melodic layer of communication beneath the explicit denotative meaning of the words—a rippling rise and fall of the voices in a sort of musical duet, rather like two birds singing to each other. Each voice, each side of the duet, mimes a bit of the other’s melody while adding its own inflection and style, and then is echoed by the other in turn—the two singing bodies thus tuning and attuning to one another, rediscovering a common register, *remembering* each other. It requires only a slight shift in focus to realize that this melodic singing is carrying the

bulk of communication in this encounter, and that the explicit meanings of the actual words ride on the surface of this depth like waves on the surface of the sea.

It is by a complementary shift of attention that one may suddenly come to hear the familiar song of a blackbird or a thrush in a surprisingly new manner—not just as a pleasant melody repeated mechanically, as on a tape player in the background, but as active, meaningful speech. Suddenly, subtle variations in the tone and rhythm of that whistling phrase seem laden with expressive intention, and the two birds singing to each other across the field appear for the first time as attentive, conscious beings, earnestly engaged in the same world that we ourselves engage, yet from an astonishingly different angle and perspective.

Moreover, if we allow that spoken meaning remains rooted in gesture and bodily expressiveness, we will be unable to restrict our renewed experience of language solely to animals. As we have already recognized, in the untamed world of direct sensory experience *no* phenomenon presents itself as utterly passive or inert. To the sensing body *all* phenomena are animate, actively soliciting the participation of our senses, or else withdrawing from our focus and repelling our involvement. Things disclose themselves to our immediate perception as vectors, as styles of unfolding—not as finished chunks of matter given once and for all, but as dynamic ways of engaging the senses and modulating the body. Each thing, each phenomenon, has the power to reach us and to influence us. Every phenomenon, in other words, is potentially expressive. At the end of his chapter “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” Merleau-Ponty writes:

It is the body which points out, and which speaks. . . . This disclosure [of the body’s immanent expressiveness] . . . extends, as we shall see, to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other “objects” the miracle of expression.⁹

Thus, at the most primordial level of sensuous, bodily experience, we find ourselves in an expressive, gesturing landscape, in a world that *speaks*.

We regularly talk of howling winds, and of chattering brooks. Yet these are more than mere metaphors. Our own languages are continually nourished by these other voices—by the roar of waterfalls and the thrumming of crickets. It is not by chance that, when hiking in the mountains, the English terms we spontaneously use to describe the surging waters of the nearby river are words like “rush,” “splash,” “gush,” “wash.” For the sound that unites all these words is that which the water itself chants as it flows between the banks. If language is not a purely mental phenomenon but a sensuous, bodily activity born of carnal reciprocity and participation, then our discourse has surely been influenced by many gestures, sounds, and rhythms besides those of our single species. Indeed, if human language arises from the perceptual interplay between the body and the world, then this language “belongs” to the animate landscape as much as it “belongs” to ourselves.

IN 1945, MERLEAU-PONTY BEGAN READING THE WORK OF THE SWISS linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), whose posthumously published *Course in General Linguistics* signaled the emergence of scientific linguistics in the twentieth century.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty was intrigued by Saussure’s theoretical distinction between *la langue*—language considered as a system of terminological, syntactic, and semantic rules, and *la parole*—the concrete act of speech itself.

Language considered as a formal system of rules and conventions is that aspect of language which, alone, is susceptible to objective, scientific study. By isolating this aspect of language, Saussure effectively cleared the way for the rigorous, scientific analysis of language systems. Yet the proper way to understand the relation *between* the formal structure of language and the expressive act of speaking (between *la langue* and *la parole*) remained enigmatic, and it was this enigma that most fascinated Merleau-Ponty.

For Saussure, *la langue*—language considered as a purely structural system—was not a mechanical structure that could readily be taken apart into its separable components, but more an organic, living system, each of whose parts is internally related to all the others. Saussure described the structure of any language as a thoroughly interdependent matrix, a webwork wherein each term has meaning

only by virtue of its relation to other terms within the system. In English, for instance, the sounded word “red” draws its precise meaning from its situation in a network of like-sounding terms, including, for instance, “read,” “rod,” “reed,” and “raid,” and in a whole complex of color terms, such as “orange,” “yellow,” “purple,” “brown”; as well as from its participation in a still wider nexus of related terms like “blood,” “rose,” “sunset,” “fire,” “blush,” “angry,” “hot,” each of which holds significance only in relation to a constellation of still other words, expanding thus outward to every term within the language. By describing any particular language as a *system of differences*, Saussure indicated that meaning is found not in the words themselves but in the intervals, the contrasts, the participations *between* the terms. As Merleau-Ponty states:

What we have learned from Saussure is that, taken singly, signs do not signify anything, and that each one of them does not so much express a meaning as mark a divergence of meaning between itself and other signs.¹¹

This does not mean that it is necessary to know, explicitly, the whole of a language in order to speak it. Rather, the weblike nature of language ensures that the whole of the system is implicitly present in every sentence, in every phrase. In order to learn a community’s language, suggests Merleau-Ponty, it is necessary simply to begin speaking, to enter the language with one’s body, to begin to move within it. The language in its entirety is invoked by the child in his first attempts at speech. “[Then] the whole of the spoken language surrounding the child snaps him up like a whirlwind, tempts him by its internal articulations. . . .”¹²

The enigma that is language, constituted as much by silence as by sounds, is not an inert or static structure, but an evolving bodily field. It is like a vast, living fabric continually being woven by those who speak. Merleau-Ponty here distinguishes sharply between genuine, expressive speech and speech that merely repeats established formulas. The latter is hardly “speech” at all; it does not really carry meaning in the weave of its words but relies solely upon the memory of meanings that once lived there. It does not alter the already existing structures of the language, but rather treats the language as a fin-

ished institution. Nevertheless, those preexisting structures must at some moment have been created, and this can only have been effected by active, expressive speech. Indeed, all truly meaningful speech is inherently creative, using established words in ways they have never quite been used before, and thus altering, ever so slightly, the whole webwork of the language. Wild, living speech takes up, from within, the interconnected matrix of the language and *gestures* with it, subjecting the whole structure to a "coherent deformation."

At the heart of any language, then, is the poetic productivity of expressive speech. A living language is continually being made and remade, woven out of the silence by those who speak. . . . And this silence is that of our wordless participations, of our perceptual immersion in the depths of an animate, expressive world.

Thus, Saussure's distinction between the structure of language and the activity of speech is ultimately undermined by Merleau-Ponty, the two dimensions blended back together into a single, ever-evolving matrix. While individual speech acts are surely guided by the structured lattice of the language, that lattice is nothing other than the sedimented result of all previous acts of speech, and will itself be altered by the very expressive activity it now guides. Language is not a fixed or ideal form, but an evolving medium we collectively inhabit, a vast topological matrix in which the speaking bodies are generative sites, vortices where the matrix itself is continually being spun out of the silence of sensorial experience.

What Merleau-Ponty retains from Saussure is Saussure's notion of any language as an interdependent, weblike system of relations. But since our expressive, speaking bodies are for Merleau-Ponty necessary parts of this system—since the web of language is for him a carnal medium woven in the depths of our perceptual participation with the things and beings around us—Merleau-Ponty comes in his final writings to affirm that it is first the sensuous, perceptual world that is relational and weblike in character, and hence that the organic, interconnected structure of any language is an extension or echo of the deeply interconnected matrix of sensorial reality itself.¹³ Ultimately, it is not human language that is primary, but rather the sensuous, perceptual life-world, whose wild, participatory logic ramifies and elaborates itself in language.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, the study of our earthly envi-

ronment has increasingly yielded a view of nature as a realm of complexly interwoven relationships, a field of subtle interdependencies from which, in John Muir's words, no single phenomenon can be picked out without "finding it hitched to everything else." The character of an individual fruit tree simply cannot be understood without reference to the others of its species, to the insects that fertilize it and to the animals that consume its fruit and so disperse its seeds. Yet a single one of those animals can hardly be comprehended without learning of the *other* plants or animals that it eats throughout the year, and of the predators that prey upon *it*—without, in other words, acknowledging the host of other organisms upon which that animal depends, and which depend upon it. We have at last come to realize that neither the soils, the oceans, nor the atmosphere can be comprehended without taking into account the participation of innumerable organisms, from the lichens that crumble rocks, and the bacterial entities that decompose organic detritus, to all the respiring plants and animals exchanging vital gases with the air. The notion of earthly nature as a densely interconnected organic network—a "biospheric web" wherein each entity draws its specific character from its relations, direct and indirect, to all the others—has today become commonplace, and it converges neatly with Merleau-Ponty's late description of sensuous reality, "the Flesh," as an intertwined, and actively intertwining, lattice of mutually dependent phenomena, both sensorial and sentient, of which our own sensing bodies are a part.

It is this dynamic, interconnected reality that provokes and sustains all our speaking, lending something of its structure to all our various languages. The enigmatic nature of language echoes and "prolongs unto the invisible" the wild, interpenetrating, interdependent nature of the sensible landscape itself.

Ultimately, then, it is not the human body alone but rather the whole of the sensuous world that provides the deep structure of language. As we ourselves dwell and move within language, so, ultimately, do the other animals and animate things of the world; if we do not notice them there, it is only because language has forgotten its expressive depths. "Language is a life, is our life and the life of the things. . . ."¹⁴ It is no more true that *we* speak than that the things, and the animate world itself, *speak within us*:

That the things have us and that it is not we who have the things. . . . That it is being that speaks within us and not we who speak of being.¹⁵

From such reflections we may begin to suspect that the complexity of human language is related to the complexity of the earthly ecology—not to any complexity of our species considered apart from that matrix. Language, writes Merleau-Ponty, “is the very voice of the trees, the waves, and the forests.”¹⁶

As technological civilization diminishes the biotic diversity of the earth, language itself is diminished. As there are fewer and fewer songbirds in the air, due to the destruction of their forests and wetlands, human speech loses more and more of its evocative power. For when we no longer hear the voices of warbler and wren, our own speaking can no longer be nourished by their cadences. As the splashing speech of the rivers is silenced by more and more dams, as we drive more and more of the land’s wild voices into the oblivion of extinction, our own languages become increasingly impoverished and weightless, progressively emptied of their earthly resonance.¹⁷

Word Magic

Merleau-Ponty’s work on language is admittedly fragmentary and unfinished, cut short by his sudden death. Yet it provides the most extensive investigation we have, as yet, into the living *experience* of language—the way the expressive medium discloses itself to us when we do not pretend to stand outside it, but rather accept our inherence *within* it, as speaking animals. When we attend to our experience not as intangible minds but as sounding, speaking bodies, we begin to sense that we are heard, even listened to, by the numerous other bodies that surround us. Our sensing bodies respond to the eloquence of certain buildings and boulders, to the articulate motions of dragonflies. We find ourselves alive in a listening, speaking world.

Here (as we saw earlier with regard to perception) Merleau-Ponty’s work resonates, and brings us close to, the spoken beliefs of many indigenous, oral peoples.

In such indigenous cultures the solidarity between language and the animate landscape is palpable and evident. According to Ogotemmêli, an elder of the Dogon tribe of Mali, spoken language was originally a swirling garment of vapour and breath worn by the encompassing earth itself. Later this undulating garment was stolen by the jackal, an animal whose movements, ever since, have disclosed the prophetic speech of the world to seers and diviners.¹⁸ Many tribes, like the Swampy Cree of Manitoba, hold that they were given spoken language by the animals.¹⁹ For the Inuit (Eskimo), as for numerous other peoples, humans and animals all originally spoke the same language. According to Nalungiaq, an Inuit woman interviewed by ethnologist Knud Rasmussen early in the twentieth century:

*In the very earliest time
when both people and animals lived on earth,
a person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.
Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen—
all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That’s the way it was.²⁰*

Despite this originary language common to both people and animals, the various animals and other natural forms today speak their own unique dialects. But nevertheless *all speak*, all have the power of

language. Moreover, traces of the primordial common language remain, and just as a human may suddenly understand the subtle gestures of a deer, or the guttural speech of a raven, so the other entities hear, and may understand, our own talking.

Owls often make it difficult to speak Cree with them. They can cause stuttering, and when stuttering is going on they are attracted to it. It is said that stuttering is laughable to owls. Yet this can work to the Cree's advantage as well, for if you think an owl is causing trouble in your village, then go stutter in the woods. There's a good chance an owl will arrive. Then you can confront this owl, question it, argue with it, perhaps solve the problem.²¹

Most indigenous hunting peoples carefully avoid speaking about the hunt beforehand, or referring directly to the species that they are hunting, lest they offend the listening animals themselves. After the kill, however, they will speak directly to the dying animal, praising it, promising respect, and thanking it for offering itself to them.²²

Yet it is those who are recognized as shamans, or medicine persons, who most fully remember the primordial sacred language, and who are thus able to slip, at will, out of the purely human discourse in order to converse directly with the other powers. As Mircea Eliade writes:

The existence of a specific secret language has been verified among the Lapps, the Ostyak, the Chukchee, the Yakut, and the Tungus. During his trance the Tungus shaman is believed to understand the language of all nature. . . .

Very often this secret language is actually the "animal language" or originates in animal cries. In South America the neophyte must learn, during his initiation period, to imitate the voices of animals. The same is true of North America. The Pomo and the Menomini shamans, among others, imitate bird songs. During séances among the Yakut, the Yukagir, the Chukchee, the Goldi, the Eskimo, and others, wild animal cries and bird calls are heard. . . .

Many words used during the séance have their origin in the cries of birds or other animals. . . . "Magic" and "song"—espe-

cially song like that of birds—are frequently expressed by the same term. The Germanic word for magic formula is *galdr*, derived from the verb *galan*, "to sing," a term applied especially to bird calls.²³

We will later explore at length specific instances of this affinity between language and the animate landscape as it is embodied not only in myths and magical practices but in the everyday discourse of several contemporary indigenous tribes. Here it is enough to mention that Merleau-Ponty's view of language as a thoroughly incarnate medium, of speech as rhythm and expressive gesture, and hence of spoken words and phrases as active sensuous presences afoot in the material landscape (rather than as ideal forms that represent, but are not a part of, the sensuous world)—goes a long way toward helping us understand the primacy of language and word magic in native rituals of transformation, metamorphosis, and healing. *Only if words are felt, bodily presences, like echoes or waterfalls, can we understand the power of spoken language to influence, alter, and transform the perceptual world.* As this is expressed in a Modoc song:

I
the song
I walk here²⁴

To neglect this dimension—to overlook the power that words or spoken phrases have to influence the body, and hence to modulate our sensory experience of the world around us—is to render even the most mundane, communicative capacity of language incomprehensible.