

*The Spell of the
Sensuous*



PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE
IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

David Abram

VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC. • NEW YORK

FIRST VINTAGE BOOKS EDITION, FEBRUARY 1997

Copyright © 1996 by David Abram

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States by Vintage Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto. Originally published in hardcover by Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, in 1996.

Permissions acknowledgments are on page 313.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the Pantheon edition as follows:

Abram, David.

The spell of the sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world / David Abram.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-679-43819-X

1. Philosophy of nature. 2. Body, Human (Philosophy).

3. Sense (Philosophy). 4. Perception (Philosophy).

5. Human ecology. I. Title.

BD581.A25 1996 95-31466

128—dc20

CIP

Vintage ISBN: 0-679-77639-7

Book design by Chris Welch

Random House Web address: <http://www.randomhouse.com/>

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

to the endangered and vanishing ones

Contents



<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1. <i>The Ecology of Magic</i>	3
A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION TO THE INQUIRY	
2. <i>Philosophy on the Way to Ecology</i>	31
A TECHNICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE INQUIRY	
PART I: <i>Edmund Husserl and Phenomenology</i>	
PART II: <i>Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the Participatory Nature of Perception</i>	
3. <i>The Flesh of Language</i>	73
4. <i>Animism and the Alphabet</i>	93
5. <i>In the Landscape of Language</i>	137
6. <i>Time, Space, and the Eclipse of the Earth</i>	181
PART I: <i>Abstraction</i>	
PART II: <i>The Living Present</i>	
7. <i>The Forgetting and Remembering of the Air</i>	225
<i>Coda: Turning Inside Out</i>	261
<i>Notes</i>	275
<i>Bibliography</i>	305
<i>Index</i>	315

Philosophy on the Way to Ecology

A TECHNICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE INQUIRY

PART I: EDMUND HUSSERL AND PHENOMENOLOGY

IT IS NATURAL THAT WE TURN TO THE TRADITION OF PHENOMENOLOGY in order to understand the strange difference between the experienced world, or worlds, of indigenous, vernacular cultures and the world of modern European and North American civilization. For phenomenology is the Western philosophical tradition that has most forcefully called into question the modern assumption of a single, wholly determinable, objective reality.

This assumption has its source in René Descartes's well-known separation of the thinking mind, or subject, from the material world

of things, or objects. Actually, Galileo had already asserted that only those properties of matter that are directly amenable to mathematical measurement (such as size, shape, and weight) are real; the other, more "subjective" qualities such as sound, taste, and color are merely illusory impressions, since the "book of nature" is written in the language of mathematics alone. In his words:

This grand book the universe . . . is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.¹

Yet it was only after the publication of Descartes's *Meditations*, in 1641, that material reality came to be commonly spoken of as a strictly mechanical realm, as a determinate structure whose laws of operation could be discerned only via mathematical analysis. By apparently purging material reality of subjective experience, Galileo cleared the ground and Descartes laid the foundation for the construction of the objective or "disinterested" sciences, which by their feverish and forceful investigations have yielded so much of the knowledge and so many of the technologies that have today become commonplace in the West. The chemical table of the elements, automobiles, smallpox vaccines, "close-up" images of the outer planets—so much that we have come to assume and depend upon has emerged from the bold experimentalization of the world by the objective sciences.

Yet these sciences consistently overlook our ordinary, everyday experience of the world around us. Our direct experience is necessarily subjective, necessarily relative to our own position or place in the midst of things, to our particular desires, tastes, and concerns. The everyday world in which we hunger and make love is hardly the mathematically determined "object" toward which the sciences direct themselves. Despite all the mechanical artifacts that now surround us, the world in which we find ourselves before we set out to calculate and measure it is not an inert or mechanical object but a living field, an open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses.

My life and the world's life are deeply intertwined; when I wake up one morning to find that a week-long illness has subsided and that my strength has returned, the world, when I step outside, fairly sparkles with energy and activity: swallows are swooping by in vivid flight; waves of heat rise from the newly paved road smelling strongly of tar; the old red barn across the field juts into the sky at an intense angle. Likewise, when a haze descends upon the valley in which I dwell, it descends upon my awareness as well, muddling my thoughts, making my muscles yearn for sleep. The world and I reciprocate one another. The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object; it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn. Even the most detached scientist must begin and end her study in this indeterminate field of experience, where shifts of climate or mood may alter his experiment or her interpretation of "the data": the scientist, too, must take time off from his measurements and analyses to eat, to defecate, to converse with friends, to interact straightforwardly with a familiar world that is never explicitly thematized and defined. Indeed, it is precisely from his experience in this preconceptual and hence ambiguous world that an individual is first drawn to become a scientist, to adopt the ways of speaking and seeing that are acknowledged as appropriate by the scientific community, to affect the proper disinterested or objective attitude with regard to a certain range of natural events. The scientist does not randomly choose a specific discipline or specialty, but is drawn to a particular field by a complex of subjective experiences and encounters, many of which unfold far from the laboratory and its rarefied atmosphere. Further, the scientist never completely succeeds in making himself into a pure spectator of the world, for he cannot cease to live in the world as a human among other humans, or as a creature among other creatures, and his scientific concepts and theories necessarily borrow aspects of their character and texture from his untheorized, spontaneously lived experience.

Indeed, the ostensibly "value-free" results of our culture's investigations into biology, physics, and chemistry ultimately come to display themselves in the open and uncertain field of everyday life, whether embedded in social policies with which we must come to terms or embodied in new technologies with which we all must grap-

ple. Thus, the living world—this ambiguous realm that we experience in anger and joy, in grief and in love—is both the soil in which all our sciences are rooted and the rich humus into which their results ultimately return, whether as nutrients or as poisons. Our spontaneous experience of the world, charged with subjective, emotional, and intuitive content, remains the vital and dark ground of all our objectivity.

And yet this ground goes largely unnoticed or unacknowledged in scientific culture. In a society that accords priority to that which is predictable and places a premium on certainty, our spontaneous, preconceptual experience, when acknowledged at all, is referred to as “merely subjective.” The fluid realm of direct experience has come to be seen as a secondary, derivative dimension, a mere consequence of events unfolding in the “realer” world of quantifiable and measurable scientific “facts.” It is a curious inversion of the actual, demonstrable state of affairs. Subatomic quanta are now taken to be more primordial and “real” than the world we experience with our unaided senses. The living, feeling, and thinking organism is assumed to derive, somehow, from the mechanical body whose reflexes and “systems” have been measured and mapped, the living person now an epiphenomenon of the anatomized corpse. That it takes living, sensing subjects, complete with their enigmatic emotions and unpredictable passions, to conceive of those subatomic fields, or to dissect and anatomize the body, is readily overlooked, or brushed aside as inconsequential.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity of experience is already a part of any phenomenon that draws our attention. For whatever we perceive is necessarily entwined with our own subjectivity, already blended with the dynamism of life and sentience. The living pulse of subjective experience cannot finally be stripped from the things that we study (in order to expose the pure unadulterated “objects”) without the things themselves losing all existence for us. Such conundrums are commonly consigned to psychology, to that science that studies subjective awareness and perception. And so perhaps by turning to psychology we can expect to find a recognition and avowal of the pre-objective dimension that permeates and sustains every reality that we know, and hence an understanding of the manner in which subjective experience both supports and sets limits to the positive sciences.

In psychology, however, we discover nothing of the sort. Instead, we find a discipline that is itself modeled on the positivism of the “hard” sciences, a science wherein the psyche has itself been reified into an “object,” a thing to be studied like any other thing in the determinate, objective world. Much of cognitive science strives to model the computational processes that ostensibly underlie mental experience. While for Galileo and Descartes perceptual qualities like color and taste were illusory, unreal properties because of their ambiguous and indeterminate character, mathematical indices have at last been found for *these* qualities as well, or rather such qualities are now studied only to the extent that they can be rendered, by whatever process of translation, into *quantities*. Here as elsewhere, the everyday world—the world of our direct, spontaneous experience—is still assumed to derive from an impersonal, objective dimension of pure “facts” that we glimpse only through our instruments and equations.

IT WAS HIS FRUSTRATION WITH SUCH ASSUMPTIONS, AND WITH THE early discipline of psychology—which, far from directing attention toward the fluid region of direct experience, was already at the start of the twentieth century solidifying the “mind” into another “object” in the mathematized and mechanical universe—that led Edmund Husserl to inaugurate the philosophical discipline of phenomenology. Phenomenology, as he articulated it in the early 1900s, would turn toward “the things themselves,” toward the world as it is experienced in its felt immediacy. Unlike the mathematics-based sciences, phenomenology would seek not to explain the world, but to describe as closely as possible the way the world makes itself evident to awareness, the way things first arise in our direct, sensorial experience.² By thus returning to the taken-for-granted realm of subjective experience, not to explain it but simply to pay attention to its rhythms and textures, not to capture or control it but simply to become familiar with its diverse modes of appearance—and ultimately to give voice to its enigmatic and ever-shifting patterns—phenomenology would articulate the ground of the other sciences. It was Husserl’s hope that phenomenology, as a rigorous “science of experience,” would establish the other sciences at last upon a firm foot-

ing—not, perhaps, as solid as the fixed and finished “object” upon which those sciences *pretend* to stand, but the only basis possible for a knowledge that necessarily emerges from our lived experience of the things around us. In the words of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced, and if we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world, of which science is the second-order expression. . . . To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.³

Intersubjectivity

In the early stages of his project, Husserl spoke of the world of experience (the “phenomenal” world) as a thoroughly subjective realm. In order to explore this realm philosophically, he insisted that it be viewed as a wholly mental dimension, an immaterial field of appearances. That which experiences this dimension—the experiencing self, or subject—was similarly described by Husserl as a pure consciousness, a “transcendental” mind or ego.

Perhaps by designating subjective reality as a nonmaterial, transcendental realm, Husserl hoped to isolate this qualitative dimension from the apparently mechanical world of material “facts” that was then being constructed by the objective sciences (and thus to protect this realm from being colonized by those technological

methods of inquiry). Yet his insistence upon the mental character of phenomenal reality led critics to attack Husserl’s method as being inherently solipsistic—an approach that seals the philosopher inside his own solitary experience, rendering him ultimately unable to recognize anyone or anything outside of his own mind.

Husserl struggled long and hard to answer this important criticism. How does our subjective experience enable us to recognize the reality of other selves, other experiencing beings? The solution seemed to implicate the body—one’s own as well as that of the other—as a singularly important structure within the phenomenal field. The body is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one’s awareness, and indeed to be the very location of one’s awareness within the field of appearances. Yet the phenomenal field also contains many *other* bodies, other forms that move and gesture in a fashion similar to one’s own. While one’s own body is experienced, as it were, only from within, these other bodies are experienced from outside; one can vary one’s distance from these bodies and can move around them, while this is impossible in relation to one’s own body.

Despite this difference, Husserl discerned that there was an inescapable affinity, or affiliation, between these other bodies and one’s own. The gestures and expressions of these other bodies, viewed from without, echo and resonate one’s own bodily movements and gestures, experienced from within. By an associative “empathy,” the embodied subject comes to recognize these other bodies as other centers of experience, other subjects.⁴

In this manner, carefully describing the ways in which the subjective field of experience, mediated by the body, opens onto other subjectivities—other selves besides one’s own self—Husserl sought to counter the charge of solipsism that had been directed against his phenomenology. The field of appearances, while still a thoroughly subjective realm, was now seen to be inhabited by *multiple* subjectivities; the phenomenal field was no longer the isolate haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself.

There remain, however, many phenomena in the experiential field that are not collective or commonly shared. When daydreaming, for example, my attention is carried by phenomena whose

contours and movements I am able to alter at will, a whole phantasmagoria of images that nevertheless lack the solidity of bodies. Such forms offer very little resistance to my gaze. They are not, that is, held in place by gazes other than my own—these are entirely *my* images, *my* phantasies and fears, *my* dreamings. And so I am brought, like Husserl, to recognize at least two regions of the experiential or phenomenal field: one of phenomena that unfold entirely for me—images that arise, as it were, on this side of my body—and another region of phenomena that are, evidently, responded to and experienced by other embodied subjects as well as by myself. These latter phenomena are still subjective—they appear to me within a field of experience colored by my mood and my current concerns—and yet I cannot alter or dissipate them at will, for they seem to be buttressed by many involvements besides my own. That tree bending in the wind, this cliff wall, the cloud drifting overhead: these are not merely subjective; they are *intersubjective* phenomena—phenomena experienced by a multiplicity of sensing subjects.

HUSSERL'S NOTION OF *INTERSUBJECTIVITY* SUGGESTED A REMARKABLE new interpretation of the so-called "objective world." For the conventional contrast between "subjective" and "objective" realities could now be reframed as a contrast within the subjective field of experience itself—as the felt contrast between subjective and intersubjective phenomena.

The sciences are commonly thought to aim at clear knowledge of an objective world utterly independent of awareness or subjectivity. Considered experientially, however, the scientific method enables the achievement of greater intersubjectivity, greater knowledge of that which is or can be experienced by many different selves or subjects. The striving for objectivity is thus understood, phenomenologically, as a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects, rather than as an attempt to avoid subjectivity altogether. The pure "objective reality" commonly assumed by modern science, far from being the concrete basis underlying all experience, was, according to Husserl, a theoretical construction, an unwarranted idealization of intersubjective experience.⁵

The "real world" in which we find ourselves, then—the very world our sciences strive to fathom—is not a sheer "object," not a fixed and finished "datum" from which all subjects and subjective qualities could be pared away, but is rather an intertwined matrix of sensations and perceptions, a collective field of experience lived through from many different angles. The mutual inscription of others in my experience, and (as I must assume) of myself in their experiences, effects the interweaving of our individual phenomenal fields into a single, ever-shifting fabric, a single phenomenal world or "reality."

And yet, as we know from our everyday experience, the phenomenal world is remarkably stable and solid; we are able to count on it in so many ways, and we take for granted much of its structure and character. This experienced solidity is precisely sustained by the continual encounter with others, with other embodied subjects, other centers of experience. The encounter with other perceivers continually assures me that there is more to any thing, or to the world, than I myself can perceive at any moment. Besides that which I directly see of a particular oak tree or building, I know or intuit that there are also those facets of the oak or building that are visible to the other perceivers that I see. I sense that that tree is much more than what I directly see of it, since it is also what the others whom I see perceive of it; I sense that as a perceivable presence it already existed before I came to look at it, and indeed that it will not dissipate when I turn away from it, since it remains an experience for others—not just for other persons, but (as we shall see later in this chapter) for other sentient organisms, for the birds that nest in its branches and for the insects that move along its bark, and even, finally, for the sensitive cells and tissues of the oak itself, quietly drinking sunlight through its leaves. It is this informing of my perceptions by the evident perceptions and sensations of other bodily entities that establishes, for me, the relative solidity and stability of the world.

The Life-world

Although Husserl at first wrote of the nonmaterial, mental character of experienced reality, his growing recognition of intersubjective experience, and of the body's importance for such experience, ultimately led him to recognize a more primary, corporeal dimension, midway between the transcendental "consciousness" of his earlier analyses and the utterly objective "matter" assumed by the natural sciences. This was the intersubjective world of life, the *Lebenswelt*, or "life-world."

The life-world is the world of our immediately lived experience, as we live it, prior to all our thoughts about it. It is that which is present to us in our everyday tasks and enjoyments—reality as it engages us before being analyzed by our theories and our science. The life-world is the world that we count on without necessarily paying it much attention, the world of the clouds overhead and the ground underfoot, of getting out of bed and preparing food and turning on the tap for water. Easily overlooked, this primordial world is always already there when we begin to reflect or philosophize. It is not a private, but a collective, dimension—the common field of our lives and the other lives with which ours are entwined—and yet it is profoundly ambiguous and indeterminate, since our experience of this field is always relative to our situation within it. The life-world is thus the world as we organically experience it in its enigmatic multiplicity and open-endedness, prior to conceptually freezing it into a static space of "facts"—prior, indeed, to conceptualizing it in any complete fashion. All of our concepts and representations, scientific and otherwise, necessarily draw nourishment from this indeterminate realm, as the physicist analyzing data is still nourished by the air that she is breathing, by the feel of the chair that supports her and the light flooding in through the window, without her being particularly conscious of these participations.

The life-world is thus peripherally present in any thought or activity we undertake. Yet whenever we attempt to *explain* this world conceptually, we seem to forget our active participation within it. Striving to represent the world, we inevitably forfeit its direct pres-

ence. It was Husserl's genius to realize that the assumption of objectivity had led to an almost total eclipse of the life-world in the modern era, to a nearly complete forgetting of this living dimension in which all of our endeavors are rooted. In their striving to attain a finished blueprint of the world, the sciences had become frightfully estranged from our direct human experience. Their many specialized and technical discourses had lost any obvious relevance to the sensuous world of our ordinary engagements. The consequent impoverishment of language, the loss of a common discourse tuned to the qualitative nuances of living experience, was leading, Husserl felt, to a clear crisis in European civilization. Oblivious to the quality-laden life-world upon which they themselves depend for their own meaning and existence, the Western sciences, and the technologies that accompany them, were beginning to blindly overrun the experiential world—even, in their errancy, threatening to obliterate the world-of-life entirely.⁶

IT SHOULD BE EVIDENT THAT THE LIFE-WORLD MAY BE QUITE different for different cultures. The world that a people experiences and comes to count on is deeply influenced by the ways they live and engage that world. The members of any given culture necessarily inhabit an experienced world very different from that of another culture with a very different language and way of life. Even the scientifically disclosed "objective universe" of contemporary Western civilization cannot genuinely be separated from the particular institutions, technologies, and ways of life endemic to this society since the seventeenth century.

If the worlds experienced by humans are so diverse, how much more diverse, still, must be the life-worlds of other animals—of wolves, or owls, or a community of bees! And yet, despite this multiplicity, it would seem that there are basic structures of the life-world that are shared, elements that are common to different cultures and even, we may suspect, to different species. Husserl's writings seem to suggest that the life-world has various layers, that underneath the layer of the diverse cultural life-worlds there reposes a deeper, more unitary life-world, always already there beneath all our cultural acquisitions, a vast and continually overlooked dimen-

sion of experience that nevertheless supports and sustains all our diverse and discontinuous worldviews.

Husserl sheds light on this most primordial, most deeply inter-subjective dimension of the life-world in a series of notes written in 1934. The notes describe a set of phenomenological investigations into the contemporary understanding of *space*. Underneath the modern, scientific conception of space as a mathematically infinite and homogenous void, Husserl discloses the experienced spatiality of the *earth* itself. The encompassing earth, he suggests, provides the most immediate, bodily awareness of space, from which all later *conceptions* of space are derived.⁷ While according to contemporary physics the earth is but one celestial body among many others "in" space, phenomenologically considered *all* bodies (including our own) are first located relative to the ground of the earth, whereas the earth itself is not "in" space, since it is earth that, from the first, *provides* space. To our most immediate sensorial experience, "bodies are given as having the sense of being earthly bodies, and space is given as having the sense of being earth-space."⁸ Further, while contemporary science maintains that "in reality" the earth is in motion (around its own axis, and around the sun), Husserl maintains that the very concepts of "motion" and "rest" derive all their meaning from our primary, bodily experience of being in motion or at rest relative to the "absolute" rest of the "earth-basis."

Husserl's notes on these matters were found in an envelope on which he had written a few summary words: "*Overthrow of the Copernican Theory . . . The original ark, earth, does not move.*"⁹ Such a remarkable assertion illustrates well the radical nature of Husserl's thought. He suggests in these notes that there is a profound instability in the scientific worldview, resulting from the continual clash between our scientific convictions and our spontaneous experience. After the investigations of Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo, the sun came to be conceived as the center of the phenomenal world. Yet this conception simply did not agree with our spontaneous sensory *perception*, which remained the experience of a radiant orb traversing the sky of a stable earth. A profound schism was thus brought about between our intellectual convictions and the most basic conviction of our senses, between our mental *concepts* and our bodily *percepts*. (Descartes's philosophical disjunction of

the mind from the body was surely prompted by this already existing state of affairs—it was necessary, for the maintenance of the new, Copernican worldview, that the rational intellect hold itself apart from the experiencing body.) Nevertheless, our very words have continued to betray the intellect and to prevent the clean ascendancy of the Copernican system: we still say "the sun rises" and "the sun sets" whether we are farmers or physicists. It is in this sense, writing from the perspective of the experiencing body, that Husserl is able to claim that *earth*, "the original ark," *does not move*.

Finally, Husserl seems to suggest that the earth lies at the heart of our notions of time as well as of space. He writes of the earth as our "primitive home" and our "primitive history." Every unique cultural history is but an episode in this larger story; every culturally constructed notion of time presupposes our deep history as carnal beings present to a single earth.¹⁰

The earth is thus, for Husserl, the secret depth of the life-world. It is the most unfathomable region of experience, an enigma that exceeds the structurations of any particular culture or language. In his words, the earth is the encompassing "ark of the world," the common "root basis" of all relative life-worlds. Husserl's late insights into the importance of the earth for all human cognition were, as we shall see, to have profound implications for the subsequent unfolding of phenomenological philosophy.

EDMUND HUSSERL'S WORK WAS IN NO SENSE A REJECTION OF SCIENCE. It was a plea that science, for its own integrity and meaningfulness, must acknowledge that it is rooted in the same world that we all engage in our everyday lives and with our unaided senses—that, for all its technological refinements, quantitative science remains an expression of, and hence must be guided by, the qualitative world of our common experience. The true task of phenomenology, as Husserl saw it at the end of his career, lay in the careful demonstration of the manner in which every theoretical and scientific practice grows out of and remains supported by the forgotten ground of our directly felt and lived experience, and has value and meaning only in reference to this primordial and open realm.

Originally an attempt to certify theoretical awareness by placing

it on a firm footing, Husserl's project culminated in the still ongoing attempt to rejuvenate the full-blooded world of our sensorial experience, and, consequently, in the dawning recognition of Earth as the forgotten basis of all our awareness.

I now turn to the work of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in order to show how Husserl's legacy was taken up and transformed in a manner that endowed this philosophy with a particular power and relevance for the ecological questions that now confront us.

PART II: MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY AND THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION

Maurice Merleau-Ponty set out to radicalize Husserl's phenomenology, both by clarifying the inconsistencies lodged in this philosophy by Husserl's own ambivalences, and further, by disclosing a more eloquent way of speaking, a style of language which, by virtue of its fluidity, its carnal resonance, and its careful avoidance of abstract terms, might itself draw us into the sensuous depths of the life-world.

The Mindful Life of the Body

We have seen, for instance, that the physical body came to play an increasingly important role in Husserl's philosophy. Only by acknowledging the embodied nature of the experiencing self was Husserl able to avoid the pitfalls of solipsism. It is as visible, animate bodies that other selves or subjects make themselves evident in my subjective experience, and it is only as a body that I am visible and sensible to others. The body is precisely my insertion in the common, or intersubjective, field of experience.

Nevertheless, the body remained a mere appearance, albeit a

unique and pivotal one, in Husserl's thought. The body was, to be sure, the very locus of the experiencing subject, or self, in the phenomenal world—in the manifold of appearances—but the self was still affirmed, by Husserl, as a transcendental ego, ultimately separable from the phenomena (including the body) that it posits and ponders. Despite his growing recognition of the living body's centrality in all experience, and despite his disclosure of the thoroughly incarnate, intersubjective realm of our preconceptual life, Husserl was unable to drop the transcendental, idealist aspirations of his early philosophy.

It is precisely this lingering assumption of a self-subsistent, disembodied, transcendental ego that Merleau-Ponty rejects. If this body is my very presence in the world, if it is the body that alone enables me to enter into relations with other presences, if without these eyes, this voice, or these hands I would be unable to see, to taste, and to touch things, or to be touched by them—if without this body, in other words, there would be no possibility of experience—then the body itself is the true subject of experience. Merleau-Ponty begins, then, by identifying the subject—the experiencing “self”—with the bodily organism.

It is indeed a radical move. Most of us are accustomed to consider the self, our innermost essence, as something incorporeal. Yet consider: Without this body, without this tongue or these ears, you could neither speak nor hear another's voice. Nor could you have anything to speak about, or even to reflect on, or to think, since without any contact, any encounter, without any glimmer of sensory experience, there could be nothing to question or to know. The living body is thus the very possibility of contact, not just with others but with oneself—the very possibility of reflection, of thought, of knowledge. The common notion of the experiencing self, or mind, as an immaterial phantom ultimately independent of the body can only be a mirage: Merleau-Ponty invites us to recognize, at the heart of even our most abstract cogitations, the sensuous and sentient life of the body itself.

This breathing body, as it experiences and inhabits the world, is very different from that objectified body diagrammed in physiology textbooks, with its separable “systems” (the circulatory system, the digestive system, the respiratory system, etc.) laid bare on each page.

The body I here speak of is very different from the body we have been taught to see and even to feel, very different, finally, from that complex machine whose broken parts or stuck systems are diagnosed by our medical doctors and "repaired" by our medical technologies. Underneath the anatomized and mechanical body that we have learned to conceive, prior indeed to all our conceptions, dwells the body as it actually experiences things, this poised and animate power that initiates all our projects and suffers all our passions.

The living, attentive body—which Merleau-Ponty called the "body subject"—is this very being that, pondering a moment ago, suddenly took up this pen and scribbled these thoughts. It is the very power I have to look and to see things, or to turn away and look elsewhere, the ability to cry and to laugh, or to howl at night with the wolves, to find and gather food whether in a forest or a market, the power to walk upon the ground and to imbibe the swirling air. Yet "I" do not deploy these powers like a commander piloting a ship, for I am, in my depths, indistinguishable from them, as my sadness is indistinguishable from a certain heaviness of my bodily limbs, or as my delight is only artificially separable from the widening of my eyes, from the bounce in my step and the heightened sensitivity of my skin. Indeed, facial expressions, gestures, and spontaneous utterances like sighs and cries seem to immediately incarnate feelings, moods, and desires without "my" being able to say which came first—the corporeal gesture or its purportedly "immaterial" counterpart.

To acknowledge that "I am this body" is not to reduce the mystery of my yearnings and fluid thoughts to a set of mechanisms, or my "self" to a determinate robot. Rather it is to affirm the uncanniness of this physical form. It is not to lock up awareness within the density of a closed and bounded object, for as we shall see, the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membranes than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air, to the composting earth, to the nourishment of insects and oak trees and squirrels, ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is very difficult to discern, at any moment,

precisely where this living body begins and where it ends. Considered phenomenologically—that is, as we actually experience and *live* it—the body is a creative, shape-shifting entity. Certainly, it has its finite character and style, its unique textures and temperaments that distinguish it from other bodies; yet these mortal limits in no way close me off from the things around me or render my relations to them wholly predictable and determinate. On the contrary, my finite bodily presence alone is what enables me to freely engage the things around me, to choose to affiliate with certain persons or places, to insinuate myself in other lives. Far from restricting my access to things and to the world, the body is my very means of entering into relation with all things.

To be sure, by disclosing the body itself as the very subject of awareness, Merleau-Ponty demolishes any hope that philosophy might eventually provide a complete picture of reality (for any such total account of "what is" requires a mind or consciousness that stands somehow *outside* of existence, whether to compile the account or, finally, to receive and comprehend it). Yet by this same move he opens, at last, the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation *within* it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder at the fathomless things, events and powers that surround us on every hand.¹¹

ULTIMATELY, TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE LIFE OF THE BODY, AND TO affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence. According to the central current of the Western philosophical tradition, from its source in ancient Athens up until the present moment, human beings alone are possessed of an incorporeal intellect, a "rational soul" or mind which, by virtue of its affinity with an eternal or divine dimension outside the bodily world, sets us radically apart from, or above, all other forms of life. In Aristotle's writings, for instance, while plants are endowed with a *vegetal soul* (which enables nourishment, growth, and reproduction), and while animals possess,

in addition to the vegetal soul, an *animal soul* (which provides sensation and locomotion), these souls remain inseparable from the earthly world of generation and decay. Humans, however, possess along with these other souls a *rational soul*, or intellect, which alone provides access to the less corruptible spheres and has affinities with the divine "Unmoved Mover" himself. In Descartes's hands, two thousand years later, this hierarchical continuum of living forms, commonly called "the Great Chain of Being," was polarized into a thorough dichotomy between mechanical, unthinking matter (including all minerals, plants, and animals, as well as the human body) and pure, thinking mind (the exclusive province of humans and God). Since humans alone are a mixture of extended matter and thinking mind, we alone are able to feel and to experience our body's mechanical sensations. Meanwhile, all other organisms, consisting solely of extended matter, are in truth nothing more than automata, incapable of actual experience, unable to feel pleasure or suffer pain. Hence, we humans need have no scruples about manipulating, exploiting, or experimenting upon other animals in any manner we see fit.

Curiously, such arguments for human specialness have regularly been utilized by human groups to justify the exploitation not just of other organisms, but of other *humans* as well (other nations, other races, or simply the "other" sex); armed with such arguments, one had only to demonstrate that these others were not *fully* human, or were "closer to the animals," in order to establish one's right of dominion. According to Aristotle, for example, women are deficient in the rational soul, and hence "the relation of male to female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior—of the ruling to the ruled."¹² Such justifications for social exploitation draw their force from the prior hierarchicalization of the natural landscape, from that hierarchical ordering that locates "humans," by virtue of our incorporeal intellect, above and apart from all other, "merely corporeal," entities.

Such hierarchies are wrecked by any phenomenology that takes seriously our immediate sensory experience. For our senses disclose to us a wild-flowering proliferation of entities and elements, in which humans are thoroughly immersed. While this diversity of sensuous forms certainly displays some sort of reckless order, we

find ourselves in the midst of, rather than on top of, this order. We may cast our gaze downward to watch the field mice and the insects that creep along the bending grasses, or to glimpse the snakes that slither into hollows deep underfoot, yet, at the same moment, hawks soaring on great winds gaze down upon *our* endeavors. Melodious feathered beings flit like phantoms among the high branches of the trees, while other animate powers, known only by their traces, move within the hidden depths of the forest. In the waters that surge in waves against the distant edge of the land, still stranger powers, multihued and silent, move in crowds among alien forests of coral and stone. . . . Does the human intellect, or "reason," really spring us free from our inherence in the depths of this wild proliferation of forms? *Or on the contrary, is the human intellect rooted in, and secretly borne by, our forgotten contact with the multiple nonhuman shapes that surround us?*

The Body's Silent Conversation with Things

For Merleau-Ponty, all of the creativity and free-ranging mobility that we have come to associate with the human intellect is, in truth, an elaboration, or recapitulation, of a profound creativity already underway at the most immediate level of sensory perception. The sensing body is not a programmed machine but an active and open form, continually improvising its relation to things and to the world. The body's actions and engagements are never wholly determinate, since they must ceaselessly adjust themselves to a world and a terrain that is itself continually shifting. If the body were truly a set of closed or predetermined mechanisms, it could never come into genuine contact with anything outside of itself, could never perceive anything really new, could never be genuinely startled or surprised. All of its experiences, and all its responses, would already have been anticipated from the beginning, already programmed, as it were, into the machine. But could we even, then, call them experiences? For is not experience, or more precisely, *perception*, the constant thwarting of such closure?

Consider a spider weaving its web, for instance, and the assumption still held by many scientists that the behavior of such a diminutive creature is thoroughly "programmed in its genes." Certainly, the spider has received a rich genetic inheritance from its parents and its predecessors. Whatever "instructions," however, are enfolded within the living genome, they can hardly predict the specifics of the microterrain within which the spider may find itself at any particular moment. They could hardly have determined in advance the exact distances between the cave wall and the branch that the spider is now employing as an anchorage point for her current web, or the exact strength of the monsoon rains that make web-spinning a bit more difficult on this evening. And so the genome could not explicitly have commanded the order of every flexion and extension of her various limbs as she weaves this web into its place. However complex are the inherited "programs," patterns, or predispositions, they must still be adapted to the immediate situation in which the spider finds itself. However determinate one's genetic inheritance, it must still, as it were, be woven into the present, an activity that necessarily involves both a receptivity to the specific shapes and textures of that present and a spontaneous creativity in adjusting oneself (and one's inheritance) to those contours. It is this open activity, this dynamic blend of receptivity and creativity by which every animate organism necessarily orients itself to the world (and orients the world around itself), that we speak of by the term "perception."

BUT LET US NOW PONDER THE EVENT OF PERCEPTION AS WE OURSELVES EXPERIENCE AND LIVE IT. The human body with its various predilections is, to be sure, our *own* inheritance, our own rootedness in an evolutionary history and a particular ancestry. Yet it is also our insertion in a world that exceeds our grasp in every direction, our means of contact with things and lives that are still unfolding, open and indeterminate, all around us. Indeed, from the perspective of my bodily senses, there is no thing that appears as a completely determinate or finished object. Each thing, each entity that my body sees, presents some face or facet of itself to my gaze while withholding other aspects from view.

The clay bowl resting on the table in front of me meets my eyes with its curved and grainy surface. Yet I can only see one side of that surface—the other side of the bowl is invisible, hidden by the side that faces me. In order to view that other side, I must pick up the bowl and turn it around in my hands, or else walk around the wooden table. Yet, having done so, I can no longer see the first side of the bowl. Surely I know that it still exists; I can even *feel* the presence of that aspect which the bowl now presents to the lamp on the far side of the table. Yet I myself am simply unable to see the whole of this bowl all at once.

Moreover, while examining its outer surface I have caught only a glimpse of the smooth and finely glazed *inside* of the bowl. When I stand up to look down into that interior, which gleams with curved reflections from the skylight overhead, I can no longer see the unglazed outer surface. This earthen vessel thus reveals aspects of its presence to me only by withholding other aspects of itself for further exploration. There can be no question of ever totally exhausting the presence of the bowl with my perception; its very existence as a bowl ensures that there are dimensions wholly inaccessible to me—most obviously the patterns hidden *between* its glazed and unglazed surfaces, the interior density of its clay body. If I break it into pieces, in hopes of discovering these interior patterns or the delicate structure of its molecular dimensions, I will have destroyed its integrity as a bowl; far from coming to know it completely, I will simply have wrecked any possibility of coming to know it further, having traded the relation between myself and the bowl for a relation to a collection of fragments.

Even a single facet of this bowl resists being plumbed by my gaze once and for all. For, like myself, the bowl is a temporal being, an entity shifting and changing in time, although the rhythm of its changes may be far slower than my own. Each time that I return to gaze at the outward surface of the bowl, my eyes and my mood have shifted, however slightly; informed by my previous encounters with the bowl, my senses now more attuned to its substance, I continually discover new and unexpected aspects. But this is in part because the bowl has changed as well, as a result perhaps of shifts in the light pouring through the window, of dust and of wear—as a result, even, of my own earlier explorations. When I look now at its unglazed

outer surface, where before I had seen a homogeneous expanse of bright grey, I now see various faint smudges, some of them ancient and some of them recent—the record of the many hands that have held it through the seasons. Each spot invites me to peer at it more closely, to distinguish that smudge from the others, to try to discern which are the traces of my own hands, and which are of hands larger, or more delicate, and which may be the trace even of those hands that first threw this fine and useful bowl on some potter's wheel years ago.

As this bowl awaits the further involvement of my eyes and my hands, so also every other object in this room invites the participation of my senses—the wooden dresser with its stuffed drawers, the plants on the windowsill quietly turning toward the sun, the individual glasses and dishes stashed above the old sink with its hidden and clattering pipes, and the ancient pinewood table that I now write upon, its coffee stains and countless knife scratches cutting across the curving grain of the wood, and those pens and pencils that beckon to my fingers, and the books that call to me from the shelves, one always asking to be read more deeply, another chanting to me of my childhood, another merely waiting, coldly it seems, to be returned to the library. Like the bowl, each presence presents some facet that catches my eye while the rest of it lies hidden behind the horizon of my current position, each one inviting me to focus my senses upon it, to let the other objects fall into the background as I enter into its particular depth. When my body thus responds to the mute solicitation of another being, that being responds in turn, disclosing to my senses some new aspect or dimension that in turn invites further exploration. By this process my sensing body gradually attunes itself to the style of this other presence—to the *way* of this stone, or tree, or table—as the other seems to adjust itself to my own style and sensitivity. In this manner the simplest thing may become a world for me, as, conversely, the thing or being comes to take its place more deeply in *my* world.

Perception, in Merleau-Ponty's work, is precisely this reciprocity, the ongoing interchange between my body and the entities that surround it. It is a sort of silent conversation that I carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below my verbal awareness—and often, even, *independent* of my verbal awareness, as when my

hand readily navigates the space between these scribed pages and the coffee cup across the table without my having to think about it, or when my legs, hiking, continually attune and adjust themselves to the varying steepness of the mountain slopes behind this house without my verbal consciousness needing to direct those adjustments. Whenever I quiet the persistent chatter of words within my head, I find this silent or wordless dance always already going on—this improvised duet between my animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape that it inhabits.

The Animateness of the Perceptual World

Where does perception originate? I cannot say truthfully that my perception of a particular wildflower, with its color and its fragrance, is determined or “caused” entirely by the flower—since other persons may experience a somewhat different fragrance, as even I, in a different moment or mood, may see the color differently, and indeed since any bumblebee that alights on that blossom will surely have a very different perception of it than I do. But neither can I say truthfully that my perception is “caused” solely by myself—by my physiological or neural organization—or that it exists entirely “in my head.” For without the actual existence of this other entity, of this flower rooted not in my brain but in the soil of the earth, there would be no fragrant and colorful perception at all, neither for myself nor for any others, whether human or insect.

Neither the perceiver nor the perceived, then, is wholly passive in the event of perception:

[M]y gaze pairs off with colour, and my hand with hardness and softness, and in this transaction between the subject of sensation and the sensible it cannot be held that one acts while the other suffers the action, or that one confers significance on the other. Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning.¹³

There is thus a solicitation of my body by the sensible, and a questioning of the sensible by my body, a reciprocal encroachment:

... [a sensible quality, like the color blue,] which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which will provide it with the means of becoming determinate, of showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it; my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky . . . I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue. . . .¹⁴

In the act of perception, in other words, I enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived, which is possible only because neither my body nor the sensible exists outside the flux of time, and so each has its own dynamism, its own pulsation and style. Perception, in this sense, is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures:

... in so far as my hand knows hardness and softness, and my gaze knows the moon's light, it is as a certain way of linking up with the phenomenon and communicating with it. Hardness and softness, roughness and smoothness, moonlight and sunlight, present themselves in our recollection not pre-eminently as sensory contents but as certain kinds of symbioses, certain ways the outside has of invading us and certain ways we have of meeting this invasion. . . .¹⁵

In this ceaseless dance between the carnal subject and its world, at one moment the body leads, at another the things. In one luminous passage, which suggests the profound intimacy of the body's

preconceptual relation to the sensible things or powers that surround it, Merleau-Ponty writes of perception in terms of an almost magical invocation enacted by the body, and the body's subsequent "possession" by the perceived:

The relations of sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep suddenly comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at . . . , suddenly becomes my situation. In the same way I give ear, or look, in the expectation of a sensation, and suddenly the sensible takes possession of my ear or my gaze, and I surrender a part of my body, even my whole body, to this particular manner of vibrating and filling space known as blue or red. . . .¹⁶

What are we to make of these strange ways of speaking? In these and other passages throughout Merleau-Ponty's major work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, the sensible thing, commonly considered by our philosophical tradition to be passive and inert, is consistently described in the active voice: the sensible "beckons to me," "sets a problem for my body to solve," "responds" to my summons and "takes possession of my senses," and even "thinks itself within me." The sensible world, in other words, is described as active, animate, and, in some curious manner, alive: it is not I, when asleep, who breathes, but "some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath"; a color is "a manner of vibrating and filling space"; a thing is an "entity," an "Other" which at one moment "holds itself aloof from us" and at another moment actively "expresses itself" directly to our senses, so that we may ultimately describe perception as a mutual interaction, an intercourse, "a coition, so to speak, of my body with things."¹⁷

Are such animistic turns of phrase to be attributed simply to some sort of poetic license that Merleau-Ponty has introduced into

his philosophy? Are they evidence, that is, merely of an idiosyncratic style of writing, as some critics have asserted? I think not. Merleau-Ponty writes of the perceived things as entities, of sensible qualities as powers, and of the sensible itself as a field of animate presences, in order to acknowledge and underscore their active, dynamic contribution to perceptual experience. To describe the animate life of particular things is simply the most precise and parsimonious way to articulate the things *as we spontaneously experience them*, prior to all our conceptualizations and definitions.

Our most immediate experience of things, according to Merleau-Ponty, is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter—of tension, communication, and commingling. From within the depths of this encounter, we know the thing or phenomenon only as our interlocutor—as a dynamic presence that confronts us and draws us into relation. We conceptually immobilize or objectify the phenomenon only by mentally absenting ourselves from this relation, by forgetting or repressing our sensuous involvement. To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and to provoke our senses; *we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being*. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our consciousness, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies.

If, on the other hand, we wish to describe a particular phenomenon without repressing our direct experience, then we cannot avoid speaking of the phenomenon as an active, animate entity with which we find ourselves engaged. It is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty so consistently uses the active voice to describe things, qualities, and even the enveloping world itself. To the sensing body, *no thing presents itself as utterly passive or inert. Only by affirming the animateness of perceived things do we allow our words to emerge directly from the depths of our ongoing reciprocity with the world.*

Perception as Participation

If we wish to choose a single term to characterize the event of perception, as it is disclosed by phenomenological attention, we may borrow the term “participation,” used by the early French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. The brilliant forerunner of today’s “cognitive” and “symbolic” schools of anthropology, Lévy-Bruhl used the word “participation” to characterize the animistic logic of indigenous, oral peoples—for whom ostensibly “inanimate” objects like stones or mountains are often thought to be alive, for whom certain names, spoken aloud, may be felt to influence at a distance the things or beings that they name, for whom particular plants, particular animals, particular places and persons and powers may all be felt to *participate* in one another’s existence, influencing each other and being influenced in turn.¹⁸

For Lévy-Bruhl participation was thus a perceived relation between diverse phenomena; Merleau-Ponty’s work, however, suggests that participation is a defining attribute of perception itself. By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered, is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are *all* animists.

SOME INSIGHT INTO THE PARTICIPATORY NATURE OF PERCEPTION may be gleaned by considering the craft of the sleight-of-hand magician. For the conjuror depends upon this active participation between the body and the world for the creation of his magic. Working, for instance, with a silver dollar, he uses his sleights to enhance the animation of the object, generating ambiguous gaps and lacunae in the visible trajectory of the coin. The spectators’ eyes, already drawn by the coin’s fluid dance across the magician’s fingers, spontaneously fill in those gaps with impossible events, and it is this spontaneous involvement of the spectators’ own senses that enables the

coin to vanish and reappear, or to pass through the magician's hand.

After flourishing a silver dollar in my right hand, for example, spinning it a few times to catch the audience's attention, I may suddenly hide that coin behind the hand, clipping it between two fingers so that it is no longer visible to their gaze. If, an instant later, I reach into the air on the other side of my body with my left hand, and bring into view *another* silver dollar that had been clipped behind *that* hand, the audience will commonly perceive something quite wondrous. They will *not* perceive that one coin has been momentarily hidden while a wholly different coin, in another place, has been brought out of hiding, although this would surely be the most obvious and rational interpretation. Rather, they will perceive that a single coin, having vanished from my right hand, has traveled invisibly through the air and reappeared in my left hand! For the perceiving body does not calculate logical probabilities; it gregariously participates in the activity of the world, lending its imagination to things in order to see them more fully. The invisible journey of the coin is contributed, quite spontaneously, by the promiscuous creativity of the senses. The magician induces us to assist in the metamorphosis of his objects, and then startles us with what we ourselves have created!

From the magician's, or the phenomenologist's, perspective, that which we call *imagination* is from the first an attribute of the senses themselves; imagination is not a separate mental faculty (as we so often assume) but is rather the way the senses themselves have of throwing themselves beyond what is immediately given, in order to make tentative contact with the other sides of things that we do not sense directly, with the hidden or invisible aspects of the sensible. And yet such sensory anticipations and projections are not arbitrary; they regularly respond to suggestions offered by the sensible itself. The magician, for instance, may make the magic palpable for the audience by following the invisible coin's journey with the focus of his own eyes, and by imaginatively "feeling" the coin depart from the one hand and arrive in the palm of the other; the audience's senses, responding to subtle shifts in the magician's body as well as to the coin, will then find the effect irresistible. In other words, it is when the magician lets *himself* be captured by the magic that his audience will be most willing to join him.

Of course, there are those few who simply will not see any magic,

either at a performance or in the world at large; armored with countless explanations and analyses, they "see" only how the trick must have been accomplished. Commonly, they will claim to have "caught sight of the wires," or to have seen me clandestinely "throw the coin into the other hand" although I myself have done no such thing. Encouraged by a cultural discourse that disdains the unpredictable and puts a premium on detached objectivity, such persons attempt to halt the participation of their senses in the phenomenon. Yet they can do so only by imaginatively projecting other phenomena (wires, or threads, or mirrors), or by looking away.

In truth, since the act of perception is always open-ended and unfinished, we are never wholly locked into any particular instance of participation. As the spectator can turn away from the magician's magic, we are always somewhat free to break our participation with any particular phenomenon. It is thus that, caught up in contemplation of a blade of grass, I may nevertheless shift my attention to the grove of trees nearby, or my focus may suddenly be usurped by a fly that lands upon my nose. Similarly, we may readily break our fascination with a television commercial in order to notice how it plays upon our emotions and our desires. But we suspend this participation only on behalf of other participations already going on—with the other persons in the room, with the hard and uncomfortable chair on which we sit, with our own thoughts and analyses. We always retain the ability to alter or suspend any particular instance of participation. Yet we can never suspend the flux of participation itself.

Synaesthesia—The Fusion of the Senses

Until now we have spoken of perception in primarily visual terms. Yet perception involves touching as well, and hearing and smelling and tasting. By the term "perception" we mean the concerted activity of *all* the body's senses as they function and flourish together. Indeed, if I attend closely to my nonverbal experience of the shifting

landscape that surrounds me, I must acknowledge that the so-called separate senses are thoroughly blended with one another, and it is only after the fact that I am able to step back and isolate the specific contributions of my eyes, my ears, and my skin. As soon as I attempt to distinguish the share of any one sense from that of the others, I inevitably sever the full participation of my sensing body with the sensuous terrain.

When, for instance, I perceive the wind surging through the branches of an aspen tree, I am unable, at first, to distinguish the sight of those trembling leaves from their delicate whispering. My muscles, too, feel the torsion as those branches bend, ever so slightly, in the surge, and this imbues the encounter with a certain tactile tension. The encounter is influenced, as well, by the fresh smell of the autumn wind, and even by the taste of an apple that still lingers on my tongue.

Yet already, in this brief attempt to acknowledge the contribution of the various senses, I have had to remove myself from that "primary layer of sense experience that precedes its division among the separate senses."¹⁹ Although contemporary neuroscientists study "synaesthesia"—the overlap and blending of the senses—as though it were a rare or pathological experience to which only certain persons are prone (those who report "seeing sounds," "hearing colors," and the like), our primordial, preconceptual experience, as Merleau-Ponty makes evident, is *inherently* synaesthetic. The intertwining of sensory modalities seems unusual to us only to the extent that we have become estranged from our direct experience (and hence from our primordial contact with the entities and elements that surround us):

... Synaesthetic perception is the rule, and we are unaware of it only because scientific knowledge shifts the center of gravity of experience, so that we have unlearned how to see, hear, and generally speaking, feel, in order to deduce, from our bodily organization and the world as the *physicist* conceives it, what we are to see, hear, and feel.²⁰

Nevertheless, we still speak of "cool" or "warm" colors, of "loud" clothing, of "hard" or "brittle" sounds. The speaking body readily

transposes qualities from one sensory domain into another, according to a logic we easily understand but cannot easily explain.

Many Westerners become conscious of this overlapping of the senses only when their allegiance to the presumably impartial, analytic logic of their culture temporarily breaks down. Merleau-Ponty discusses the effect upon European researchers of mescaline, the psychoactive component of the peyote cactus, a plant traditionally used in ceremonial practice by indigenous tribes in Mexico and North America:

The influence of mescaline, by weakening the attitude of impartiality and surrendering the subject to his vitality, should [if we are correct] favor forms of synaesthetic experience. And indeed, under mescaline, the sound of a flute gives a bluish-green colour, [and] the tick of a metronome, in darkness, is translated as grey patches, the spatial intervals between them corresponding to the intervals of time between the ticks, the size of the patch to the loudness of the tick, and its height to the pitch of the sound. A subject under mescaline finds a piece of iron, strikes the window-sill with it and exclaims: "This is magic"; the trees are growing greener. . . . Seen in the perspective of the objective [Cartesian] world, with its opaque qualities, the phenomenon of synaesthetic experience is paradoxical. . . .²¹

Seen, however, from the perspective of the life-world—from the perspective, that is, of our pretheoretical awareness—such experiences are recognized as amplifications or intensifications of quite ordinary phenomena that are always going on.

This is not to deny that the senses are distinct modalities. It is to assert that they are divergent modalities of a single and unitary living body, that they are complementary powers evolved in complex interdependence with one another. Each sense is a unique modality of this body's existence, yet in the activity of perception these divergent modalities necessarily intercommunicate and overlap. It is thus that a raven soaring in the distance is not, for me, a mere visual image; as I follow it with my eyes, I inevitably feel the stretch and flex of its wings with my own muscles, and its sudden swoop toward the nearby trees is a visceral as well as a visual experience for me.

The raven's loud, guttural cry, as it swerves overhead, is not circumscribed within a strictly audible field—it echoes *through* the visible, immediately animating the visible landscape with the reckless style or mood proper to that jet black shape. My various senses, diverging as they do from a single, coherent body, coherently *converge*, as well, in the perceived thing, just as the separate perspectives of my two eyes converge upon the raven and convene there into a single focus. My senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other.

Hence, just as we have described perception as a dynamic participation between my body and things, so we now discern, within the act of perception, a participation between the various sensory systems of the body itself. Indeed, these events are not separable, for the intertwining of my body with the things it perceives is effected only through the interweaving of my senses, and vice versa. The relative divergence of my bodily senses (eyes in the front of the head, ears toward the back, etc.) and their curious bifurcation (not one but *two* eyes, one on each side, and similarly two ears, two nostrils, etc.), indicates that this body is a form destined to the world; it ensures that my body is a sort of open circuit that completes itself only in things, in others, in the encompassing earth.

The Recuperation of the Sensuous Is the Rediscovery of the Earth

In the autumn of 1985, a strong hurricane ripped across suburban Long Island, where I was then living as a student. For several days afterward much of the populace was without electricity; power lines were down, telephone lines broken, and the roads were strewn with toppled trees. People had to walk to their jobs, and to whatever shops were still open. We began encountering each other on the streets, "in person" instead of by telephone. In the absence of automobiles and their loud engines, the rhythms of crickets and birdsong became clearly audible. Flocks were migrating south for the winter, and

many of us found ourselves simply listening, with new and childlike curiosity, to the ripples of song in the still-standing trees and the fields. And at night the sky was studded with stars! Many children, their eyes no longer blocked by the glare of houselights and street-lamps, saw the Milky Way for the first time, and were astonished. For those few days and nights our town became a community aware of its place in an encompassing cosmos. Even our noses seemed to come awake, the fresh smells from the ocean somehow more vibrant and salty. The breakdown of our technologies had forced a return to our senses, and hence to the natural landscape in which those senses are so profoundly embedded. We suddenly found ourselves inhabiting a sensuous world that had been waiting, for years, at the very fringe of our awareness, an intimate terrain infused by birdsong, salt spray, and the light of stars.

AS WE REACQUAINT OURSELVES WITH OUR BREATHING BODIES, then the perceived world itself begins to shift and transform. When we begin to consciously frequent the wordless dimension of our sensory participations, certain phenomena that have habitually commanded our focus begin to lose their distinctive fascination and to slip toward the background, while hitherto unnoticed or overlooked presences begin to stand forth from the periphery and to engage our awareness. The countless human artifacts with which we are commonly involved—the asphalt roads, chain-link fences, telephone wires, buildings, lightbulbs, ballpoint pens, automobiles, street signs, plastic containers, newspapers, radios, television screens—all begin to exhibit a common style, and so to lose some of their distinctiveness; meanwhile, organic entities—crows, squirrels, the trees and wild weeds that surround our house, humming insects, streambeds, clouds and rainfalls—all these begin to display a new vitality, each coaxing the breathing body into a unique dance. Even boulders and rocks seem to speak their own uncanny languages of gesture and shadow, inviting the body and its bones into silent communication. In contact with the native forms of the earth, one's senses are slowly energized and awakened, combining and recombining in ever-shifting patterns.

For these other shapes and species have coevolved, like ourselves,

with the rest of the shifting earth; their rhythms and forms are composed of layers upon layers of earlier rhythms, and in engaging them our senses are led into an inexhaustible depth that echoes that of our own flesh. The patterns on the stream's surface as it ripples over the rocks, or on the bark of an elm tree, or in a cluster of weeds, are all composed of repetitive figures that *never exactly repeat themselves*, of iterated shapes to which our senses may attune themselves even while the gradual drift and metamorphosis of those shapes draws our awareness in unexpected and unpredictable directions.

In contrast, the mass-produced artifacts of civilization, from milk cartons to washing machines to computers, draw our senses into a dance that endlessly reiterates itself *without variation*. To the sensing body these artifacts are, like all phenomena, animate and even alive, but their life is profoundly constrained by the specific "functions" for which they were built. Once our bodies master these functions, the machine-made objects commonly teach our senses nothing further; they are unable to surprise us, and so we must continually acquire *new* built objects, new technologies, the latest model of this or that if we wish to stimulate ourselves.

Of course, our human-made artifacts inevitably retain an element of more-than-human otherness. This unknowability, this otherness, resides most often in the materials from which the object is made. The tree trunk of the telephone pole, the clay of the bricks from which the building is fashioned, the smooth metal alloy of the car door we lean against—all these still carry, like our bodies, the textures and rhythms of a pattern that we ourselves did not devise, and their quiet dynamism responds directly to our senses. Too often, however, this dynamism is stifled within mass-produced structures closed off from the rest of the earth, imprisoned within technologies that plunder the living land. The superstraight lines and right angles of our office architecture, for instance, make our animal senses wither even as they support the abstract intellect; the wild, earth-born nature of the materials—the woods, clays, metals, and stones that went into the building—are readily forgotten behind the abstract and calculable form.²²

It is thus that so much of our built environment, and so many of the artifacts that populate it, seem sadly superfluous and dull when we identify with our bodies and taste the world with our animal

senses. (Of course, this is not to say that these artifacts are innocuous: many of them are exceedingly loud, even blaring, for what they lack in variation and nuance they must make up in clamorous insistence, monopolizing the perceptual field.) Whenever we assume the position and poise of the human animal—Merleau-Ponty's body-subject—then the entire material world itself seems to come awake and to speak, yet organic, earth-born entities speak far more eloquently than the rest. Like suburbanites after a hurricane, we find ourselves alive in a living field of powers far more expressive and diverse than the strictly human sphere to which we are accustomed.

SO THE RECUPERATION OF THE INCARNATE, SENSORIAL DIMENSION OF experience brings with it a recuperation of the living landscape in which we are corporeally embedded. As we return to our senses, we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply our part of a vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies—supported, that is, not just by ourselves, but by icy streams tumbling down granitic slopes, by owl wings and lichens, and by the unseen, imperturbable wind.

This intertwined web of experience is, of course, the "life-world" to which Husserl alluded in his final writings, yet now the life-world has been disclosed as a profoundly *carnal* field, as this very dimension of smells and tastes and chirping rhythms warmed by the sun and shivering with seeds. It is, indeed, nothing other than the biosphere—the matrix of earthly life in which we ourselves are embedded. Yet this is not the biosphere as it is conceived by an abstract and objectifying science, not that complex assemblage of planetary mechanisms presumably being mapped and measured by our remote-sensing satellites; it is, rather, the biosphere as it is experienced and *lived from within* by the intelligent body—by the attentive human animal who is entirely a part of the world that he, or she, experiences.

Matter as Flesh

In his final work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (a work interrupted by his sudden death in 1961), Merleau-Ponty was striving for a new way of speaking that would express this consanguinity of the human animal and the world it inhabits. Here he writes less about "the body" (which in his earlier work had signified primarily the *human* body) and begins to write instead of the collective "Flesh," which signifies both *our* flesh and "the flesh of the world."²³ By "the Flesh" Merleau-Ponty means to indicate an elemental power that has had no name in the entire history of Western philosophy. The Flesh is the mysterious tissue or matrix that underlies and gives rise to both the perceiver and the perceived as interdependent aspects of its own spontaneous activity. It is the reciprocal presence of the sentient in the sensible and of the sensible in the sentient, a mystery of which we have always, at least tacitly, been aware, since we have never been able to affirm one of these phenomena, the perceivable world or the perceiving self, without implicitly affirming the existence of the other. We are unable even to *imagine* a sensible landscape that would not at the same time be sensed (since in imagining any landscape we inevitably envisage it from a particular perspective, and thus implicate our own senses, and indeed our own sentience, in that landscape), and are similarly unable to fully imagine a sensing self, or sentience, that would not be situated in some field of sensed phenomena.

Nevertheless, conventional scientific discourse privileges the sensible field in abstraction from sensory experience, and commonly maintains that subjective experience is "caused" by an objectifiable set of processes in the mechanically determined field of the sensible. Meanwhile, New Age spiritualism regularly privileges pure sentience, or subjectivity, in abstraction from sensible matter, and often maintains that material reality is itself an illusory effect caused by an immaterial mind or spirit. Although commonly seen as opposed world-views, both of these positions assume a qualitative difference between the sentient and the sensed; by prioritizing one or the other, both of these views perpetuate the distinction between human

"subjects" and natural "objects," and hence neither threatens the common conception of sensible nature as a purely passive dimension suitable for human manipulation and use. While both of these views are unstable, each bolsters the other; by bouncing from one to the other—from scientific determinism to spiritual idealism and back again—contemporary discourse easily avoids the possibility that both the perceiving being and the perceived being are *of the same stuff*, that the perceiver and the perceived are interdependent and in some sense even reversible aspects of a common animate element, or Flesh, that is *at once both sensible and sensitive*.

We readily experience this paradox in relation to other persons; this stranger who stands before me and is an object for my gaze suddenly opens his mouth and speaks to me, forcing me to acknowledge that he is a sentient subject like myself, and that I, too, am an object for his gaze. Each of us, in relation to the other, is both subject and object, sensible and sentient. Why, then, might this not also be the case in relation to another, nonhuman entity—a mountain lion, for instance, that I unexpectedly encounter in the northern forest? Indeed, such a meeting brings home to me even more forcefully that I am not just a sentient subject but also a sensible object, even an *edible* object, in the eyes (and nose) of the other. Even an ant crawling along my arm, visible to my eyes and tactile to my skin, displays at the same time its own sentience, responding immediately to my movements, even to the chemical changes of my mood. In relation to the ant I feel myself as a dense and material object, as capricious in my actions as the undulating earth itself. Finally, then, why might not this "reversibility" of subject and object extend to every entity that I experience? Once I acknowledge that my own sentience, or subjectivity, does not preclude my visible, tactile, objective existence for others, I find myself forced to acknowledge that *any* visible, tangible form that meets my gaze may also be an experiencing subject, sensitive and responsive to the beings around it, and to me.

Touching and Being Touched: The Reciprocity of the Sensuous

In order to demonstrate, empirically, his notion of the Flesh, Merleau-Ponty provides what may be the most direct illustration of that which we have termed "participation." He calls attention to the obvious but easily overlooked fact that my hand is able to touch things only because my hand is itself a touchable thing, and thus is entirely a part of the tactile world that it explores. Similarly, the eyes, with which I see things, are themselves visible. With their gleaming surfaces, their colors and hues, they are included *within* the visible field that they see—they are themselves part of the visible, like the bark of a cedar, or a piece of sandstone, or the blue sky.

To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one's own tactility, to feel oneself touched *by* the tree. And to see the world is also, at the same time, to experience oneself as visible, to feel oneself *seen*. Clearly, a wholly immaterial mind could neither see things nor touch things—indeed, could not experience anything at all. *We* can experience things—can touch, hear, and taste things—only because, as bodies, we are ourselves included in the sensible field, and have our own textures, sounds, and tastes. We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world that we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that the world is perceiving itself *through* us.

Walking in a forest, we peer into its green and shadowed depths, listening to the silence of the leaves, tasting the cool and fragrant air. Yet such is the transitivity of perception, the reversibility of the flesh, that we may suddenly feel that the trees are looking at us—we feel ourselves exposed, watched, observed from all sides. If we dwell in this forest for many months, or years, then our experience may shift yet again—we may come to feel that we are a part of this forest, consanguineous with it, and that our experience of the forest is nothing other than the forest experiencing itself.

Such are the exchanges and metamorphoses that arise from the simple fact that our sentient bodies are entirely continuous with the

vast body of the land, that "the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh."²⁴

MERLEAU-PONTY'S NOTION OF THE FLESH OF THE WORLD, ALONG with his related discoveries regarding the reciprocity of perception, bring his work into startling consonance with the worldviews of many indigenous, oral cultures. According to cultural anthropologist Richard Nelson, in his exhaustive study of the ecology of the Koyukon Indians of north central Alaska:

[t]raditional Koyukon people live in a world that watches, in a forest of eyes. A person moving through nature—however wild, remote, even desolate the place may be—is never truly alone. The surroundings are aware, sensate, personified. They feel. They can be offended. And they must, at every moment, be treated with the proper respect.²⁵

Such a mode of experience, which seems so strange and confused to our civilized ways of thinking, becomes understandable as soon as we acknowledge, underneath our conventional assumptions, the reciprocal nature of direct perception—the fact that to touch is also to feel oneself being touched, that to see is also to feel oneself seen. Nelson's description suggests, as well, that such perceptual reciprocity, when consciously acknowledged, may profoundly influence one's behavior. If the surroundings are experienced as sensate, attentive, and watchful, then I must take care that my actions are mindful and respectful, even when I am far from other humans, lest I offend the watchful land itself.

It may be that the new "environmental ethic" toward which so many environmental philosophers aspire—an ethic that would lead us to respect and heed not only the lives of our fellow humans but also the life and well-being of the rest of nature—will come into existence not primarily through the logical elucidation of new philosophical principles and legislative strictures, but through a renewed attentiveness to this perceptual dimension that underlies all our logics, through a rejuvenation of our carnal, sensorial empathy with the living land that sustains us.

Such a recuperation is, perhaps, already underway. Many individuals today experience a profound anguish that only deepens with each report of more ancient forests cleared, of new oil spills, of the ever-accelerating loss of species. It is an anguish that seems to come from the earth itself, from this vast Flesh in which our own sentient flesh is embedded. In the words of a Koyukon elder: "The country knows. If you do wrong things to it, the whole country knows. It feels what's happening to it."²⁶

THE INFLUENCE OF A KIND OF PERCEPTUAL RECIPROCITY UPON oneself and one's actions is evident as well in these words spoken by Old Torlino, a Navajo elder, before telling part of the creation story:

*I am ashamed before the earth;
I am ashamed before the heavens;
I am ashamed before the dawn;
I am ashamed before the evening twilight;
I am ashamed before the blue sky;
I am ashamed before the sun.
I am ashamed before that standing within me which speaks with me.
Some of these things are always looking at me.
I am never out of sight.
Therefore I must tell the truth.
I hold my word tight to my breast.²⁷*

The final lines of this prayer/incantation call our attention to speaking itself as a form of behavior that can be mindful or callous, truthful or dishonest, in the face of a sentient cosmos. Spoken words here are real presences, entities that may be cherished—"held tight to my breast"—or flung carelessly into the world. These phrases from the Navajo, like the Koyukon words before them, provide evidence not only of a different way of seeing, but also of a way of speaking very different from that to which so many of us are accustomed. The practice of language among indigenous peoples would seem to carry a very different significance than it does in the modern West. Enacted primarily in song, prayer, and story, among oral peoples language functions not simply to dialogue with other humans but also

to converse with the more-than-human cosmos, to renew reciprocity with the surrounding powers of earth and sky, to invoke kinship even with those entities which, to the civilized mind, are utterly insentient and inert. Hence, a Lakota medicine person may address a stone as "Tunkashila"—"Grandfather." Likewise, among the Omaha, a rock may be addressed with the respect and reverence that one pays to an ancient elder:

unmoved
from time without
end
you rest
there in the midst of the paths
in the midst of the winds
you rest
covered with the droppings of birds
grass growing from your feet
your head decked with the down of birds
you rest
in the midst of the winds
you wait
Aged one.²⁸

Here words do not speak *about* the world; rather they speak *to* the world, and to the expressive presences that, with us, inhabit the world. In multiple and diverse ways, taking (as we shall see) a unique form in each indigenous culture, spoken language seems to give voice to, and thus to enhance and accentuate, the sensorial affinity between humans and the environing earth.

This would appear, at least at first, to be in direct contradiction to the character of linguistic discourse in the "developed" or "civilized" world, where language functions largely to *deny* reciprocity with nature—by defining the rest of nature as inert, mechanical, and determinate—and where, in consequence, our sensorial participation with the land around us must remain mute, inchoate, and in most cases wholly unconscious. In indigenous, oral cultures, in other words, language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses, while in Western civilization language seems to

deny or deaden that life, promoting a massive distrust of sensorial experience while valorizing an abstract realm of ideas hidden behind or beyond the sensory appearances.

How can we account for this divergence? In what manner can we make sense of this difference in the character of language, and in the relation between language and perception? Before attempting a precise answer to this question, we must come to a clearer understanding of just what is meant, in this context, by "language."

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

Edie 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.

WE MAY VERY BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE THE GENERAL RESULTS OF Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological investigations, or at least our own interpretation of those results, as follows: (1) The event of perception, experientially considered, is an inherently interactive, *participatory* event, a reciprocal interplay between the perceiver and the perceived. (2) Perceived things are encountered by the perceiving

body as animate, living powers that actively draw us into relation. Our spontaneous, pre-conceptual experience yields no evidence for a dualistic division between animate and "inanimate" phenomena, only for relative distinctions between diverse forms of animateness. (3) The perceptual reciprocity between our sensing bodies and the animate, expressive landscape both engenders and supports our more conscious, linguistic reciprocity with others. The complex interchange that we call "language" is rooted in the non-verbal exchange always already going on between our own flesh and the flesh of the world. (4) Human languages, then, are informed not only by the structures of the human body and the human community, but by the evocative shapes and patterns of the more-than-human terrain. Experientially considered, language is no more the special property of the human organism than it is an expression of the animate earth that enfolds us.

Such, at any rate, are the sort of descriptions at which we arrive when we carefully attend to perception and to language as we directly experience them.

Here, however, this philosophy encounters an impasse that threatens to dissipate its conclusions and to invalidate all its efforts. Specifically, if sensory perception is inherently participatory, and if, as Merleau-Ponty has maintained, perception (broadly considered) is the inescapable source of all experience, how can we possibly account for the apparent absence of participation in the modern world? "What right have I," asks Merleau-Ponty, "to call 'immediate' this original that can be forgotten to such an extent?"²⁵ If our primordial experience is inherently animistic, if our "immediate" awareness discloses a field of phenomena that are all potentially animate and expressive, how can we ever account for the *loss* of such animateness from the world around us? How can we account for our culture's experience of other animals as senseless automata, or of trees as purely passive fodder for lumber mills? If perception, in its depths, is wholly participatory, how could we ever have broken out of those depths into the inert and determinate world we now commonly perceive?

We may suspect, at first, that the apparent loss of participation has something to do with language. For language, although it is rooted in perception, nevertheless has a profound capacity to turn

back upon, and influence, our sensorial experience. While the reciprocity of perception engenders the more explicit reciprocity of speech and language, perception always remains vulnerable to the decisive influence of language, as a mother remains especially sensitive to the actions of her child. It was this influence that led the American linguist Edward Sapir to formulate his hypothesis of linguistic determination, suggesting that one's perception is largely determined by the language that one speaks:

We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.²⁶

Certainly, the perceptual style of any community is both reflected in, and profoundly shaped by, the common language of the community. Yet the influence of language alone can hardly explain the shift from a participatory to a nonparticipatory world. Indeed, if we accept the phenomenological position sketched at length in this chapter, then the turn toward language for a solution can only confront us with a problem analogous to that which meets us with regard to perception. If human discourse is experienced by indigenous, oral peoples to be participant with the speech of birds, of wolves, and even of the wind, how could it ever have become severed from that vaster life? How could we ever have become so *deaf* to these other voices that nonhuman nature now seems to stand mute and dumb, devoid of any meaning besides that which we choose to give it?

If perception, in its depths, is truly participatory, why do we not experience the rest of the world as animate and alive? If our own language is truly dependent upon the existence of other, nonhuman voices, why do we now experience language as an exclusively human property or possession? These two questions are in fact the same query asked from two different angles. Moreover, this query is the very same that arose at the end of the first chapter, the same that I there posed with regard to the felt shift in my own experience of nonhuman nature upon returning to the West from my sojourn in rural Asia. The question, however, is now set in a more methodic context; it is backed up by a whole tradition of philosophical inquiry. It should now be evident, as well, that the question has more

than a purely personal relevance. Nonhuman nature seems to have withdrawn from both our speaking and our senses. What event could have precipitated this double withdrawal, constricting our ways of speaking even as it muffled our ears and set a veil before our eyes?

Animism and the Alphabet

Lifting a brush, a burin, a pen, or a stylus
is like releasing a bite or lifting a claw.

—GARY SNYDER

THE QUESTION REGARDING THE ORIGINS OF THE ECOLOGICAL crisis, or of modern civilization's evident disregard for the needs of the natural world, has already provoked various responses from philosophers. There are those who suggest that a generally exploitative relation to the rest of nature is part and parcel of being human, and hence that the human species has from the start been at war with other organisms and the earth. Others, however, have come to recognize that long-established indigenous cultures often display a remarkable solidarity with the lands that they inhabit, as well as a basic respect, or even reverence, for the other species that inhabit those lands. Such cultures, much smaller in scale (and far less centralized) than modern Western civilization, seem to have maintained a relatively homeostatic or equilibrial relation with

their local ecologies for vast periods of time, deriving their necessary sustenance from the land without seriously disrupting the ability of the earth to replenish itself. The fecundity and flourishing diversity of the North American continent led the earliest European explorers to speak of this terrain as a primeval and unsettled wilderness—yet this continent had been continuously inhabited by human cultures for at least ten thousand years. That indigenous peoples can have gathered, hunted, fished, and settled these lands for such a tremendous span of time without severely degrading the continent's wild integrity readily confounds the notion that humans are innately bound to ravage their earthly surroundings. In a few centuries of European settlement, however, much of the native abundance of this continent has been lost—its broad animal populations decimated, its many-voiced forests overcut and its prairies overgrazed, its rich soils depleted, its tumbling clear waters now undrinkable.

European civilization's neglect of the natural world and its needs has clearly been encouraged by a style of awareness that disparages sensorial reality, denigrating the visible and tangible order of things on behalf of some absolute source assumed to exist entirely beyond, or outside of, the bodily world. Some historians and philosophers have concluded that the Jewish and Christian traditions, with their otherworldly God, are primarily responsible for civilization's negligent attitude toward the environing earth. They cite, as evidence, the Hebraic God's injunction to humankind in Genesis: "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth."¹

Other thinkers, however, have turned toward the Greek origins of our philosophical tradition, in the Athens of Socrates and Plato, in their quest for the roots of our nature-disdain. A long line of recent philosophers, stretching from Friedrich Nietzsche down to the present, have attempted to demonstrate that Plato's philosophical derogation of the sensible and changing forms of the world—his claim that these are mere simulacra of eternal and pure ideas existing in a nonsensorial realm beyond the apparent world—contributed profoundly to civilization's distrust of bodily and sensorial experience, and to our consequent estrangement from the earthly world around us.

So the ancient Hebrews, on the one hand, and the ancient Greeks

on the other, are variously taken to task for providing the mental context that would foster civilization's mistreatment of nonhuman nature. Each of these two ancient cultures seems to have sown the seeds of our contemporary estrangement—one seeming to establish the spiritual or religious ascendancy of humankind over nature, the other effecting a more philosophical or rational dissociation of the human intellect from the organic world. Long before the historical amalgamation of Hebraic religion and Hellenistic philosophy in the Christian New Testament, these two bodies of belief already shared—or seem to have shared—a similar intellectual distance from the nonhuman environment.

In every other respect these two traditions, each one originating out of its own specific antecedents, and in its own terrain and time, were vastly different. In every other respect, that is, but one: they were both, from the start, profoundly informed by writing. Indeed, they both made use of the strange and potent technology which we have come to call "the alphabet."

WRITING, LIKE HUMAN LANGUAGE, IS ENGENDERED NOT ONLY within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the interplay and contact between the human and the more-than-human world. The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm. The swooping flight of birds is a kind of cursive script written on the wind; it is this script that was studied by the ancient "augurs," who could read therein the course of the future. Leaf-miner insects make strange hieroglyphic tabloids of the leaves they consume. Wolves urinate on specific stumps and stones to mark off their territory. And today you read these printed words as tribal hunters once read the tracks of deer, moose, and bear printed in the soil of the forest floor. Archaeological evidence suggests that for more than a million years the subsistence of humankind has depended upon the acuity of such hunters, upon their ability to read the traces—a bit of scat

here, a broken twig there—of these animal Others. These letters I print across the page, the scratches and scrawls you now focus upon, trailing off across the white surface, are hardly different from the footprints of prey left in the snow. We read these traces with organs honed over millennia by our tribal ancestors, moving instinctively from one track to the next, picking up the trail afresh whenever it leaves off, hunting the *meaning*, which would be the *meeting* with the Other.²

The multiform meanings of the Chinese word for writing, *wen*, illustrate well this interpenetration of human and nonhuman scripts:

The word *wen* signifies a conglomeration of marks, the simple symbol in writing. It applies to the veins in stones and wood, to constellations, represented by the strokes connecting the stars, to the tracks of birds and quadrupeds on the ground (Chinese tradition would have it that the observation of these tracks suggested the invention of writing), to tattoos and even, for example, to the designs that decorate the turtle's shell ("The turtle is wise," an ancient text says—gifted with magico-religious powers—"for it carries designs on its back"). The term *wen* has designated, by extension, literature. . . .³

Our first writing, clearly, was our own tracks, our footprints, our handprints in mud or ash pressed upon the rock. Later, perhaps, we found that by copying the distinctive prints and scratches made by other animals we could gain a new power; here was a method of identifying with the other animal, taking on its expressive magic in order to learn of its whereabouts, to draw it near, to make it appear. Tracing the impression left by a deer's body in the snow, or transferring that outline onto the wall of the cave: these are ways of placing oneself in distant contact with the Other, whether to invoke its influence or to exert one's own. Perhaps by multiplying its images on the cavern wall we sought to ensure that the deer itself would multiply, be bountiful in the coming season. . . .

All of the early writing systems of our species remain tied to the mysteries of a more-than-human world. The petroglyphs of pre-Columbian North America abound with images of prey animals, of rain clouds and lightning, of eagle and snake, of the paw prints of

bear. On rocks, canyon walls, and caves these figures mingle with human shapes, or shapes part human and part Other (part insect, or owl, or elk.)

Some researchers assert that the picture writing of native North America is not yet "true" writing, even where the pictures are strung together sequentially—as they are, obviously, in many of the rock inscriptions (as well as in the calendrical "winter counts" of the Plains tribes). For there seems, as yet, no strict relation between image and utterance.

In a much more conventionalized pictographic system, like the Egyptian hieroglyphics (which first appeared during the First Dynasty, around 3000 B.C.E. and remained in use until the second century C.E.),⁴ stylized images of humans and human implements are still interspersed with those of plants, of various kinds of birds, as well as of serpents, felines, and other animals. Such pictographic systems, which were to be found as well in China as early as the fifteenth century B.C.E., and in Mesoamerica by the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., typically include characters that scholars have come to call "ideograms." An ideogram is often a pictorial character that refers not to the visible entity that it explicitly pictures but to some quality or other phenomenon readily associated with that entity. Thus—to invent a simple example—a stylized image of a jaguar with its feet off the ground might come to signify "speed." For the Chinese, even today, a stylized image of the sun and moon together signifies "brightness"; similarly, the word for "east" is invoked by a stylized image of the sun rising behind a tree.⁵

The efficacy of these pictorially derived systems necessarily entails a shift of sensory participation away from the voices and gestures of the surrounding landscape toward our own human-made images. However, the glyphs which constitute the bulk of these ancient scripts continually remind the reading body of its inherence in a more-than-human field of meanings. As signatures not only of the human form but of other animals, trees, sun, moon, and landforms, they continually refer our senses beyond the strictly human sphere.⁶

Yet even a host of pictograms and related ideograms will not suffice for certain terms that exist in the local discourse. Such terms may refer to phenomena that lack any precise visual association. Consider, for example, the English word "belief." How might we

signify this term in a pictographic, or ideographic, manner? An image of a phantasmagorical monster, perhaps, or one of a person in prayer. Yet no such ideogram would communicate the term as readily and precisely as the simple image of a bumblebee, followed by the figure of a leaf. We could, that is, resort to a visual pun, to images of things that have nothing overtly to do with belief but which, when named in sequence, carry the same *sound* as the spoken term "belief" ("bee-leaf"). And indeed, such pictographic puns, or *rebuses*, came to be employed early on by scribes in ancient China and in Mesoamerica as well as in the Middle East, to record certain terms that were especially amorphous or resistant to visual representation. Thus, for instance, the Sumerian word *ti*, which means "life," was written in cuneiform with the pictorial sign for "arrow," which in Sumerian is also called *ti*.⁷

An important step has been taken here. With the rebus, a pictorial sign is used to directly invoke a particular sound of the human voice, rather than the outward reference of that sound. The rebus, with its focus upon the sound of a name rather than the thing named, inaugurated the distant possibility of a *phonetic* script (from the Greek *phonein*: "to sound"), one that would directly transcribe the sound of the speaking voice rather than its outward intent or meaning.⁸

However, many factors impeded the generalization of the rebus principle, and thus prevented the development of a fully phonetic writing system. For example, a largely pictographic script can easily be utilized, for communicative purposes, by persons who speak very different dialects (and hence cannot understand one another's speech). The same image or ideogram, readily understood, would simply invoke a different sound in each dialect. Thus a pictographic script allows for commerce between neighboring and even distant linguistic communities—an advance that would be lost if rebuslike signs alone were employed to transcribe the spoken sounds of one community. (This factor helps explain why China, a vast society comprised of a multitude of distinct dialects, has never developed a fully phonetic script.)⁹

Another factor inhibiting the development of a fully phonetic script was the often elite status of the scribes. Ideographic scripts must make use of a vast number of stylized glyphs or characters,

since every term in the language must, at least in principle, have its own written character. (In 1716 a dictionary of Chinese—admittedly an extreme example—listed 40,545 written characters! Today a mere 8,000 characters are in use.)¹⁰ Complete knowledge of the pictographic system, therefore, could only be the province of a few highly trained individuals. Literacy, within such cultures, was in fact the literacy of a caste, or cult, whose sacred knowledge was often held in great esteem by the rest of society. It is unlikely that the scribes would willingly develop innovations that could simplify the new technology and so render literacy more accessible to the rest of the society, for this would surely lessen their own importance and status.

... it is clear that ancient writing was in the hands of a small literate elite, the scribes, who manifested great conservatism in the practice of their craft, and, so far from being interested in its simplification, often chose to demonstrate their virtuosity by a proliferation of signs and values. . . .¹¹

Nevertheless, in the ancient Middle East the rebus principle was eventually generalized—probably by scribes working at a distance from the affluent and established centers of civilization—to cover all the common sounds of a given language. Thus, "syllabaries" appeared, wherein every basic sound-syllable of the language had its own conventional notation or written character (often rebuslike in origin). Such writing systems employed far fewer signs than the pictographic scripts from which they were derived, although the number of signs was still very much larger than the alphabetic script we now take for granted.

The innovation which gave rise to the alphabet was itself developed by Semitic scribes around 1500 B.C.E.¹² It consisted in recognizing that almost every syllable of their language was composed of one or more silent consonantal elements plus an element of sounded breath—that which we would today call a vowel. The silent consonants provided, as it were, the bodily framework or shape through which the sounded breath must flow. The original Semitic *aleph-beth*, then, established a character, or letter, for each of the consonants of the language. The vowels, the sounded breath that must be

added to the written consonants in order to make them come alive and to speak, had to be chosen by the reader, who would vary the sounded breath according to the written context.

By this innovation, the *aleph-beth* was able to greatly reduce the necessary number of characters for a written script to just twenty-two—a simple set of signs that could be readily practiced and learned in a brief period by anyone who had the chance, even by a young child. The utter simplicity of this technical innovation was such that the early Semitic *aleph-beth*, in which were written down the various stories and histories that were later gathered into the Hebrew Bible, was adopted not only by the Hebrews but by the Phoenicians (who presumably carried the new technology across the Mediterranean to Greece), the Aramaeans, the Greeks, the Romans, and indeed eventually gave rise (directly or indirectly) to virtually every alphabet known, including that which I am currently using to scribe these words.

With the advent of the *aleph-beth*, a new distance opens between human culture and the rest of nature. To be sure, pictographic and ideographic writing already involved a displacement of our sensory participation from the depths of the animate environment to the flat surface of our walls, of clay tablets, of the sheet of papyrus. However, as we noted above, the written images themselves often related us back to the other animals and the environing earth. The pictographic glyph or character still referred, implicitly, to the animate phenomenon of which it was the static image; it was that worldly phenomenon, in turn, that provoked from us the sound of its name. *The sensible phenomenon and its spoken name were, in a sense, still participant with one another*—the name a sort of emanation of the sensible entity. With the phonetic *aleph-beth*, however, the written character no longer refers us to any sensible phenomenon out in the world, or even to the name of such a phenomenon (as with the rebus), but solely to a gesture to be made by the human mouth. There is a concerted shift of attention away from any outward or worldly reference of the pictorial image, away from the sensible phenomenon that had previously called forth the spoken utterance, to the shape of the utterance itself, now invoked directly by the written character. *A direct association is established between the pictorial sign and the vocal gesture, for the first time completely bypassing the thing*

pictured. The evocative phenomena—the entities imaged—are no longer a necessary part of the equation. Human utterances are now elicited, directly, by human-made signs; *the larger, more-than-human life-world is no longer a part of the semiotic, no longer a necessary part of the system*.

Or is it? When we ponder the early Semitic *aleph-beth*, we readily recognize its pictographic inheritance. *Aleph*, the first letter, is written thus:  *Aleph* is also the ancient Hebrew word for “ox.” The shape of the letter, we can see, was that of an ox’s head with horns; turned over, it became our own letter *A*.¹³ The name of the Semitic letter *mem* is also the Hebrew word for “water”; the letter, which later became our own letter *M*, was drawn as a series of waves: . The letter *ayin*, which also means “eye” in Hebrew, was drawn as a simple circle, the picture of an eye; it is this letter, made over into a vowel by the Greek scribes, that eventually became our letter *O*. The Hebrew letter *qoph*, which is also the Hebrew term for “monkey,” was drawn as a circle intersected by a long, dangling, tail . Our letter *Q* retains a sense of this simple picture.¹⁴

These are a few examples. By thus comparing the names of the letters with their various shapes, we discern that the letters of the early *aleph-beth* are still implicitly tied to the more-than-human field of phenomena. But these ties to other animals, to natural elements like water and waves, and even to the body itself, are far more tenuous than in the earlier, predominantly nonphonetic scripts. These traces of sensible nature linger in the new script only as vestigial holdovers from the old—they are no longer necessary participants in the transfer of linguistic knowledge. The other animals, the plants, and the natural elements—sun, moon, stars, waves—are beginning to lose their own voices. In the Hebrew Genesis, the animals do not speak their own names to Adam; rather, they are *given* their names by this first man. Language, for the Hebrews, was becoming a purely *human* gift, a human power.

IT WAS ONLY, HOWEVER, WITH THE TRANSFER OF PHONETIC WRITING to Greece, and the consequent transformation of the Semitic *aleph-beth* into the Greek “alphabet,” that the progressive abstraction of linguistic meaning from the enveloping life-world reached a

type of completion. The Greek scribes took on, with slight modifications, both the shapes of the Semitic letters and their Semitic names. Thus *aleph*—the name of the first letter, and the Hebrew word for “ox”—became *alpha*; *beth*—the name of the second letter, as well as the word for “house”—became *beta*; *gimel*—the third letter, and the word for “camel,” became *gamma*, etc. But while the Semitic names had older, nongrammatological meanings for those who spoke a Semitic tongue, the Greek versions of those names had no nongrammatological meaning whatsoever for the Greeks. That is, while the Semitic name for the letter was also the name of the sensorial entity commonly imaged by or associated with the letter, the Greek name had no sensorial reference at all.¹⁵ While the Semitic name had served as a reminder of the worldly origin of the letter, the Greek name served only to designate the human-made letter itself. The pictorial (or iconic) significance of many of the Semitic letters, which was memorialized in their spoken names, was now readily lost. The indebtedness of human language to the more-than-human perceptual field, an indebtedness preserved in the names and shapes of the Semitic letters, could now be entirely forgotten.

The Rapper's Rhythm

“... I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do.” These words are pronounced by Socrates, the wise and legendary father of Western philosophy, early in the course of the *Phaedrus*—surely one of the most eloquent and lyrical of the Platonic dialogues.¹⁶ Written by Socrates' most illustrious student, Plato, these words inscribe a new and curious assumption at the very beginning of the European philosophical tradition.

It is difficult to reconcile Socrates' assertion—that trees and the untamed country have nothing to teach—with the Greece that we have come to know through Homer's epic ballads. In the Homeric songs the natural landscape itself bears the omens and signs that instruct human beings in their endeavors; the gods speak directly

through the patterns of clouds, waves, and the flight of birds. Zeus rouses storms, sends thunderclaps, dispatches eagles to swoop low over the heads of men, disrupting their gatherings. Athena herself may take the shape of a seahawk, or may stir a wind to fill a ship's sails. Proteus, “the ancient of the salt sea, who serves under Poseidon,” can readily transform into any beast, or into a flaming fire, or into water itself. Indeed, the gods seem indistinguishable at times from the natural elements that display their power: Poseidon, “the blue-maned god who makes the islands tremble,” is the very life and fury of the sea itself; Helios, “lord of high noon,” is not distinct from the sun (the fiery sun here a willful intelligence able even to father children: Circe, the sorceress, is his daughter). Even “fair Dawn, with her spreading fingertips of rose,” is a living power. Human events and emotions are not yet distinct from the shifting moods of the animate earth—an army's sense of relief is made palpable in a description of thick clouds dispersing from the land; Nestor's anguish is likened to the darkening of the sea before a gale; the inward release of Penelope's feelings on listening to news of her husband is described as the thawing of the high mountain snows by the warm spring winds, melting the frozen water into streams that cascade down the slopes—as though the natural landscape was the proper home of those emotions, or as though a common psyche moved between humans and clouds and trees. When Odysseus, half-drowned by Poseidon's wrath and nearly dashed to pieces on the rocky coast of Phaiákia, spies the mouth of a calm river between the cliffs, he prays directly to the spirit of that river to have mercy and offer him shelter—and straightaway the tide shifts, and the river draws him into safety. Here, then, is a land that is everywhere alive and awake, animated by a multitude of capricious but willful forces, at times vengeful and at other times tender, yet always in some sense responsive to human situations. The diverse forms of the earth still speak and offer guidance to humankind, albeit in gestures that we cannot always directly understand.¹⁷

This participatory and animate earth contrasts vividly with the dismissive view of nature espoused by Socrates in the *Phaedrus*. To make sense of this contrast, it is necessary to realize that the Homeric epics, probably written down in the seventh century B.C.E., are essentially orally evolved creations, oral poems that had been sung

and resung, shifting and complexifying, long before they were written down and thus frozen in the precise form in which we now know them.¹⁸ The Platonic dialogues, on the other hand, written in the first half of the fourth century B.C.E., are thoroughly lettered constructions, composed in a literate context by a manifestly literate author. And indeed they inscribe for the first time many of the mental patterns or thought styles that today we of literate culture take for granted.

The Greek alphabet was first invented—or, rather, adapted from the Semitic *aleph-beth*—several centuries before Plato, probably during the eighth century B.C.E.¹⁹ The new technology did not spread rapidly through Greece; rather, it encountered remarkable resistance in the form of a highly developed and ritualized oral culture.²⁰ That is, the traditions of prealphabetic Greece were actively preserved in numerous oral stories regularly recited and passed along from generation to generation by the Greek bards, or “rhapsodes.” The chanted tales carried within their nested narratives much of the accumulated knowledge of the culture. Since they were not written down, they were never wholly fixed, but would shift incrementally with each telling to fit the circumstances or needs of a particular audience, gradually incorporating new practical knowledge while letting that which was obsolete fall away. The sung stories, along with the numerous ceremonies to which they were linked, were in a sense the living encyclopedias of the culture—carrying and preserving the collected knowledge and established customs of the community—and they themselves were preserved through constant repetition and ritual reenactment. There was thus little overt need for the new technology of reading and writing. According to literary historian Eric Havelock, for the first two or three centuries after its appearance in Greece, “[t]he alphabet was an interloper, lacking social standing and achieved use. The elite of society were all reciters and performers.”²¹

The alphabet, after all, had not here developed gradually, as it had across the Mediterranean, out of a series of earlier scripts, and there was thus no already existing context of related inscriptions and scribal practices for it to latch onto. Moreover, the oral techniques for preserving and transmitting knowledge, and the sensorial habits associated with those techniques, were, as we shall see, largely in-

compatible with the sensorial patterns demanded by alphabetic literacy.

In a culture as thoroughly and complexly oral as Greek culture in this period, the alphabet could take root only by allying itself, at first, with the oral tradition. Thus, the first large written texts to appear in Greece—namely, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*—are, paradoxically, “oral texts.” That is, they are not written compositions, as had long been supposed, but rather alphabetic transcriptions of orally chanted poems. Homer, as an oral bard, or rhapsode (from the Greek *rhapsodein*, which meant “to stitch song together”), improvised the precise form of the poems by “stitching together” an oral tapestry from a vast fund of memorized epithets and formulaic phrases, embellishing and elaborating a cycle of stories that had already been variously improvised or “stitched together” by earlier bards since the Trojan War itself.²²

We owe our recognition of the oral nature of the Homeric epics to the pioneering research undertaken by the Harvard classicist Milman Parry and his assistant Albert Lord, in the 1930s.²³ Parry had noticed the existence of certain stock phrases—such as “the wine-dark sea,” “there spoke clever Odysseus,” or “when Dawn spread out her fingertips of rose”—that are continually repeated throughout the poems. Careful study revealed that the poems were composed almost entirely of such expressions (in the twenty-seven thousand hexameters there are twenty-nine thousand repetitions of phrases with two or more words).²⁴ Moreover, Homer’s choice of one particular epithet or formula rather than another seemed at times to be governed less by the exact meaning of the phrase than by the metrical exigencies of the line; the bard apparently called upon one specific formula after another in order to fit the driving meter of the chant, in a trance of rhythmic improvisation. This is not at all to minimize Homer’s genius, but simply to indicate that his poetic brilliance was performative as much as creative—less the genius of an author writing a great novel than that of an inspired and eloquent rap artist.

The reliance of the Homeric texts upon repeated verbal formulas and stock epithets—this massive dependence upon that which we today refer to, disparagingly, as “clichés”—offered Parry and subsequent researchers a first insight into the very different world of a

European culture without writing. In a literate society, like our own, any verbal discovery or realization can be preserved simply by being written down. Whenever we wish to know how to accomplish a certain task, we need only find the book wherein that knowledge is inscribed. When we wish to ponder a particular historical encounter, we simply locate the text wherein that encounter is recorded. Oral cultures, however, lacking the fixed and permanent record that we have come to count on, can preserve verbal knowledge only by constantly repeating it. Practical knowledge must be embedded in spoken formulas that can be easily recalled—in prayers and proverbs, in continually recited legends and mythic stories. The rhythmic nature of many such spoken formulas is a function of their mnemonic value; such pulsed phrases are much easier for the pulsing, breathing body to assimilate and later recall than the strictly prosaic statements that appear only after the advent of literacy. (For example, the phrase “an apple a day keeps the doctor away” is vastly easier to remember than the phrase “one should always eat fruit in order to stay healthy”). The discourse of nonwriting cultures is, of necessity, largely comprised of such formulaic and rhythmic phrases, which readily spring to the tongue in appropriate situations.²⁵

Parry's insights regarding the orally composed nature of the Homeric epics remained somewhat speculative until he was able to meet and observe representatives of an actual bardic tradition still in existence in Eastern Europe. In the 1930s, Parry and his student Albert Lord traveled to Serbia, where they befriended a number of nonliterate Slavic singers whose craft was still rooted in the ancient oral traditions of the Balkans. These singers (or *guslars*) chanted their long stories—for which there existed no written texts—in coffeehouses and at weddings, accompanying themselves on a simple stringed instrument called a *gusla*. Parry and Lord recorded many of these epic songs on early phonographic disks,²⁶ and so were later able to compare the metrical structure of these chanted stories with the structure and phrasing of the Homeric poems. The parallels were clear and remarkable.²⁷

When one hears the Southern Slavs sing their tales he has the overwhelming feeling that, in some way, he is hearing Homer. This is no mere sentimental feeling that comes from his seeing a

way of life and a cast of thought that are strange to him. . . . When the hearer looks closely to see why he should seem to be hearing Homer he finds precise reasons: he is ever hearing the same ideas that Homer expresses, and is hearing them expressed in phrases which are rhythmically the same, and which are grouped in the same order.²⁸

Parry carefully documented these strong parallels, and after his early death his research into oral modes of composition was carried on by Albert Lord. Among other things, Lord's research indicated that learning to read and write thoroughly disabled the oral poet, ruining his capacity for oral improvisation.²⁹

WHEN THE HOMERIC EPICS WERE RECORDED IN WRITING, THEN THE art of the rhapsodes began to lose its preservative and instructive function. The knowledge embedded in the epic stories and myths was now captured for the first time in a visible and fixed form, which could be returned to, examined, and even questioned. Indeed, it was only then, under the slowly spreading influence of alphabetic technology, that “language” was beginning to separate itself from the animate flux of the world, and so becoming a ponderable presence in its own right.

It is only as language is written down that it becomes possible to think about it. The acoustic medium, being incapable of visualization, did not achieve recognition as a phenomenon wholly separable from the person who used it. But in the alphabetized document the medium became objectified. There it was, reproduced perfectly in the alphabet . . . no longer just a function of “me” the speaker but a document with an independent existence.³⁰

The scribe, or author, could now begin to dialogue with his own visible inscriptions, viewing and responding to his own words even as he wrote them down. *A new power of reflexivity was thus coming into existence, borne by the relation between the scribe and his scripted text.*

We can witness the gradual spread of this new power in the writ-

ten fragments of the pre-Socratic philosophers of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. These thinkers are still under the sway of the oral-poetic mode of discourse—their teachings are commonly couched in an aphoristic or poetic form, and their attention is still turned toward the sensuous terrain that surrounds them. Nevertheless, they seem to stand at a new distance from the natural order, their thoughts inhabiting a different mode of temporality from the flux of nature, which they now question and strive to understand. The written fragments of Heraclitus or of Empedocles give evidence of a radically new, literate reflection combined with a more traditional, oral preoccupation with a sensuous nature still felt to be mysteriously animate and alive, filled with immanent powers. In the words of the pre-Socratic philosopher Thales, “all things are full of gods.”³¹

It was not until the early fourth century B.C.E. that such numinous powers, or gods, were largely expelled from the natural surroundings. For it was only at this time that alphabetic literacy became a collective reality in Greece. Indeed, it was only during Plato’s lifetime (428–348 B.C.E.) that the alphabet was incorporated within Athenian life to the extent that we might truthfully speak of Athenian Greece as a “literate” culture:

Plato, in the early fourth century B.C., stands on the threshold between the oral and written cultures of Greece. The earliest epigraphic and iconographic indications of young boys being taught to write date from Plato’s childhood. In his day, people had already been reciting Homer from the text for centuries. But the art of writing was still primarily a handicraft. . . . In the fifth century B.C., craftsmen began to acquire the art of carving or engraving letters of the alphabet. But writing was still not a part of recognized instruction: the most a person was expected to be able to write and spell was his own name. . . .³²

Plato was teaching, then, precisely at the moment when the new technology of reading and writing was shedding its specialized “craft” status and finally spreading, by means of the Greek curriculum, into the culture at large. The significance of this conjunction has not been well recognized by Western philosophers, all of whom stand—to a greater or lesser extent—within Plato’s lineage. Plato, or

rather the association between the literate Plato and his mostly non-literate teacher Socrates (469?–399 B.C.E.), may be recognized as the hinge on which the sensuous, mimetic, profoundly embodied style of consciousness proper to orality gave way to the more detached, abstract mode of thinking engendered by alphabetic literacy. Indeed, it was Plato who carefully developed and brought to term the collective thought-structures appropriate to the new technology.

An Eternity of Unchanging Ideas

Although Socrates himself may have been able to write little more than his own name, he made brilliant use of the new reflexive capacity introduced by the alphabet. Eric Havelock has suggested that the famed “Socratic dialectic”—which, in its simplest form, consisted in asking a speaker to explain what he has said—was primarily a method for disrupting the mimetic thought patterns of oral culture. The speaker’s original statement, if it concerned important matters of morality and social custom, would necessarily have been a memorized formula, a poetic or proverbial phrase, which presented a vivid example of the matter being discussed. By asking the speaker to explain himself or to repeat his statement in different terms, Socrates forced his interlocutors to separate themselves, for the first time, from their own words—to separate themselves, that is, from the phrases and formulas that had become habitual through the constant repetition of traditional teaching stories. Prior to this moment, spoken discourse was inseparable from the endlessly repeated stories, legends, and myths that provided many of the spoken phrases one needed in one’s daily actions and interactions. To speak was to live within a storied universe, and thus to feel one’s closeness to those protagonists and ancestral heroes whose words often seemed to speak through one’s own mouth. Such, as we have said, is the way culture preserves itself in the absence of written records. But Socrates interrupted all this. By continually asking his interlocutors to repeat and explain what they had said in other words, by getting them thus to listen to and ponder their own speaking, Socrates

stunned his listeners out of the mnemonic trance demanded by orality, and hence out of the sensuous, storied realm to which they were accustomed. Small wonder that some Athenians complained that Socrates' conversation had the numbing effect of a stingray's electric shock.

Prior to the spread of writing, ethical qualities like "virtue," "justice," and "temperance" were thoroughly entwined with the specific situations in which those qualities were exhibited. The terms for such qualities were oral utterances called forth by particular social situations; they had no apparent existence independent of those situations. As utterances, they slipped back into the silence immediately after they were spoken; they had no permanent presence to the senses. "Justice" and "temperance" were thus experienced as living occurrences, as *events*. Arising in specific situations, they were inseparable from the particular persons or actions that momentarily embodied them.

Yet as soon as such utterances were recorded in writing, they acquired an autonomy and a permanence hitherto unknown. Once written down, "virtue" was seen to have an unchanging, visible form independent of the speaker—and independent as well of the corporeal situations and individuals that exhibited it.

Socrates clearly aligned his method with this shift in the perceptual field. Whenever, in Plato's dialogues, Socrates asks his interlocutor to give an account of what "virtue," or "justice," or "courage" actually is, questioning them regarding the real meaning of the qualitative terms they unthinkingly employ in their speaking, they confidently reply by recounting particular instances of the quality under consideration, enumerating specific examples of "justice," yet never defining "justice" itself. When Socrates invites Meno to say what "virtue" is, Meno readily enumerates so many different instances or embodiments of virtue that Socrates retorts sardonically: "I seem to be in luck. I only asked you for one thing, virtue, but you have given me a whole swarm of virtues."³³ In keeping with older, oral modes of discourse, Socrates' fellow Athenians cannot abstract these spoken qualities from the lived situations that seem to exemplify these terms and call them forth. Socrates, however, has little interest in these multiple embodiments of "virtue," except in so far as they all partake of some common, unchanging element,

which he would like to abstract and ponder on its own. In every case Socrates attempts to induce a reflection upon the quality as it exists in itself, independent of particular circumstances. The specific embodiments of "justice" that we may encounter in the material world are necessarily variable and fleeting; genuine knowledge, claims Socrates, must be of what is eternal and unchanging.

Socrates, then, is clearly convinced that there is a fixed, unchanging essence of "justice" that unites all the just instances, as there is an eternal essence of "virtue," of "beauty," of "goodness," "courage," and all the rest. Yet Socrates' conviction would not be possible without the alphabet. For only when a qualitative term is written down does it become ponderable as a fixed form independent of both the speakers and of situations.³⁴

Not all writing systems foster this thorough abstraction of a spoken quality from its embeddedness in corporeal situations. The ideographic script of China, as we have seen, still retains pictorial ties to the phenomenal world of sensory experience. Thus, the Chinese ideograph for "red" is itself a juxtaposition of lived examples; it is composed of abbreviated pictorial images of a rose, a cherry, iron rust, and a flamingo. And indeed, according to some observers, if one asks a cultured person in China to explain a general quality like "red," or "loyalty," or "happiness," she will likely reply by describing various instances or examples of that quality, much like Socrates' interlocutors.³⁵ It was not writing per se, but phonetic writing, and the Greek alphabet in particular, that enabled the abstraction of previously ephemeral qualities like "goodness" and "justice" from their inherence in situations, promoting them to a new realm independent of the flux of ordinary experience. For the Greek alphabet had effectively severed all ties between the written letters and the sensible world from which they were derived; it was the first writing system able to render almost any human utterance in a fixed and lasting form.

While Socrates focused his teaching on the moral qualities, his disciple Plato recognized that not just ephemeral qualities but *all* general terms, from "table" to "cloud," could now be pondered as eternal, unchanging forms. In retrospect, we can see that the alphabet had indeed granted a new autonomy and permanence to all such terms. Besides the various meandering rivers, for instance, that one

could view, or wade through, in the sensible world, there was also the singular notion "river," which now had its own visibility; "river" itself could now be pondered apart from all those material rivers that were liable to change their course or to dry up from one season to the next. For Plato, as for his teacher, genuine knowledge must be of what is unchanging and eternal—there can be no "true" knowledge of a particular river, but only of the pure Idea (or *eidos*) "river." That Plato often used the Greek term *eidos* (which meant "visible shape or form") to refer to such unchanging essences is itself, I believe, an indication of the affinity between these eternal essences and the unchanging, visible shapes of the alphabet.

For the letters of the alphabet, like the Platonic Ideas, do not exist in the world of ordinary vision. The letters, and the written words that they present, are not subject to the flux of growth and decay, to the perturbations and cyclical changes common to other visible things; they seem to hover, as it were, in another, strangely timeless dimension. Further, the letters defer and dissimulate their common visibility, each one dissolving into sound even as we look at it, trading our eyes for our ears, so that we seem not to be *seeing* so much as *hearing* something. Alphabetic writing deflects our attention from its visible aspect, effectively vanishing behind the current of human speech that it provokes.³⁶

As we have already seen, the process of learning to read and to write with the alphabet engenders a new, profoundly reflexive, sense of self. The capacity to view and even to dialogue with one's own words after writing them down, or even in the process of writing them down, enables a new sense of autonomy and independence from others, and even from the sensuous surroundings that had earlier been one's constant interlocutor. The fact that one's scripted words can be returned to and pondered at any time that one chooses, regardless of when, or in what situation, they were first recorded, grants a timeless quality to this new reflective self, a sense of the relative independence of one's verbal, speaking self from the breathing body with its shifting needs. The literate self cannot help but feel its own transcendence and timelessness relative to the fleeting world of corporeal experience.

This new, seemingly autonomous, reflective awareness is called, by Socrates, the *psychê*, a term he thus twists from its earlier,

Homeric significance as the invisible breath that animates the living body and that remains, as kind of wraith or ghost, after the body's death. (The term *psychê* was derived from an older Greek term, *psychein*, which meant "to breathe" or "to blow".) For Plato, as for Socrates, the *psychê* is now that aspect of oneself that is refined and strengthened by turning away from the ordinary sensory world in order to contemplate the intelligible Ideas, the pure and eternal forms that, alone, truly exist. The Socratic-Platonic *psychê*, in other words, is none other than the literate intellect, that part of the self that is born and strengthened in relation to the written letters.³⁷

PLATO HIMSELF EFFECTS A POWERFUL CRITIQUE OF THE INFLUENCE of writing in the *Phaedrus*, that dialogue from which I quoted earlier in this chapter. In the course of that dialogue, Socrates relates to the young Phaedrus a curious legend regarding the Egyptian king Thamus. According to this story, Thamus was approached directly by the god Thoth—the divine inventor of geometry, mathematics, astronomy, and writing—who offers writing as a gift to the king so that Thamus may offer it, in turn, to the Egyptian people. But Thamus, after considering both the beneficent and the baneful aspects of the god's inventions, concludes that his people will be much better off *without* writing, and so he refuses the gift. Against Thoth's claim that writing will make people wiser and improve their memory, the king asserts that the very opposite is the case:

If men learn this, it will implant forgetfulness in their souls; they will cease to exercise memory because they rely on that which is written, calling things to remembrance no longer from within themselves, but by means of external marks.³⁸

Moreover—according to the king—spoken teachings, once written down, easily find their way into the hands of those who will misunderstand those teachings while nevertheless thinking that they understand them. Thus, the written letters bring not wisdom but only "the conceit of wisdom," making men seem to know much when in fact they know little.³⁹

Plato's Socrates clearly agrees with the king's judgment, and it is

evident that Plato wishes the reader to take these criticisms of writing quite seriously. Later in the same dialogue we read that "a written discourse on any subject is bound to contain much that is fanciful," and that in any case "nothing that has ever been written whether in verse or prose merits much serious attention."⁴⁰ Certainly, it is strange to read such strong remarks against writing from a thinker whose numerous written texts are among the most widely distributed and worshipfully read in the Western world. Here is Plato, from whom virtually all Western philosophers draw their literary ancestry, disparaging writing as nothing more than a pastime! What are we to make of these statements?

Such doubts about the alphabet, and such assertions regarding its potentially debilitating effects, must have been legion in Athens just before or during the time that Plato was writing. It is remarkable that Plato held to such criticisms despite the fact that he was an inveterate participant in the alphabetic universe. Given his multiple and diverse writings, which constitute what is probably the first large corpus of prose by a single author in the history of the alphabet, it seems clear that Plato did not intend his own criticisms to dissuade his students and readers from writing, or from reading him further. Rather, it is as though he meant to build into the very body of his writings a caution that they not be given too much weight. Not because he was uncertain about the genuine and serious worth of his philosophy, but simply because he had strong reservations about the written word and its ability to convey the full meaning of a philosophy that was as much a practice—involving direct, personal interaction and instruction—as it was a set of static formulations and reflections. Writing, according to Socrates, can at best serve as a *reminder* to a reader who already knows those things that have been written.⁴¹ It is possible that Plato wrote his various dialogues to serve just such a restricted function; to act as reminders, for the students of his academy, of the methods and insights that they first learned in direct, face-to-face dialogue with their teacher.

Nevertheless Plato, despite his cautions, did not recognize the extent to which the very content of his teaching—with its dependence upon the twin notions of a purely rational *psychê* and a realm of eternal, unchanging Ideas—was already deeply under the influence of alphabetic writing. In the early fourth century B.C.E., when literacy

was gradually spreading throughout Athenian society, it was certainly possible to witness the impact that writing was having upon the dissemination of particular teachings. An astute observer might discern as well the debilitating effects of writing upon the collective practice of memory, as what had previously been accomplished through the memorized repetition of ritual poems, songs, and stories was transferred to an external and fixed artifact. But it was hardly possible to discern the pervasive influence of letters upon patterns of perception and contemplation in general. Similarly, today we are simply unable to discern with any clarity the manner in which our own perceptions and thoughts are being shifted by our sensory involvement with electronic technologies, since any thinking that seeks to discern such a shift is itself subject to the very effect that it strives to thematize. Nevertheless, we may be sure that the shapes of our consciousness *are* shifting in tandem with the technologies that engage our senses—much as we can now begin to discern, in retrospect, how the distinctive shape of Western philosophy was born of the meeting between the human senses and the alphabet in ancient Greece.

Of Tongues in Trees

Socrates' critique of writing, in the *Phaedrus*, is occasioned by a written text carried by the young Phaedrus at the very beginning of the dialogue, when Socrates encounters him on his way out of the city. Phaedrus has just heard a friend of his, Lysias, declaiming a newly written speech on the topic of love; impressed by Lysias's speech, Phaedrus has obtained a copy of the speech and is going for a walk outside the city walls to ponder the text at his leisure. Socrates, always eager for philosophical discourse, agrees to accompany Phaedrus into the open country where they may together consider Lysias's text and discuss its merits. It is summer; the two men walk along the Ilissus River, wade across it, then settle on the grass in the shade of a tall, spreading plane tree. Socrates compliments Phaedrus for leading them to this pleasant glen, and Phaedrus

replies, with some incredulity, that Socrates seems wholly a stranger to the country, like one who had hardly ever set foot outside the city walls. It is then that Socrates explains himself: "You must forgive me, dear friend. I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do."⁴²

We have already seen how peculiar this statement seems in relation to the world of the Homeric poems. How much more bizarre Socrates' words would seem to the members of an oral society still less exposed to the influence of literate traders than was Homeric Greece—to a culture, in other words, whose gods were not yet as anthropomorphic as even frothy-haired Poseidon and eruptive Hephaestus. The claim that "trees and open country won't teach anything" would have scant coherence within an indigenous hunting community, for the simple reason that such communities necessarily take their most profound teachings or instructions directly from the more-than-human earth. Whether among the Plains Indians of North America, the bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, or the Pintupi of the Australian outback, the elders and "persons of high degree" within such hunting communities continually defer to the animate powers of the surrounding landscape—to those nonhuman powers from which they themselves draw their deepest inspiration.

When a young person within such a culture is chosen, by whatever circumstance, to become a seer or shaman for the community, he or she may be trained by an elder seer within the tribe. Yet the most learned and powerful shaman will be one who has first learned his or her skills directly from the land itself—from a specific animal or plant, from a river or a storm—during a prolonged sojourn out beyond the boundaries of the human society. Indeed, among many of the tribes once indigenous to North America, a boy could gain the insight necessary to enter the society of grown men only by undertaking a solitary quest for vision—only by rendering himself vulnerable to the wild forces of the land and, if need be, crying to those forces for a vision.⁴³ The initiatory "Walkabout" undertaken by Aboriginal Australians is again just such an act whereby oral peoples turn toward the more-than-human earth for the teachings that must vitalize and sustain the human community.

In indigenous, oral cultures, nature itself is articulate; it *speaks*. The human voice in an oral culture is always to some extent partici-

pant with the voices of wolves, wind, and waves—participant, that is, with the encompassing discourse of an animate earth. There is no element of the landscape that is definitively void of expressive resonance and power: any movement may be a gesture, any sound may be a voice, a meaningful utterance.

Socrates' claim that trees have nothing to teach is a vivid indicator of the extent to which the human senses in Athens had already withdrawn from direct participation with the natural landscape. To directly perceive any phenomenon is to enter into relation with it, to feel oneself in a living interaction with another being. To define the phenomenon as an inert object, to deny the ability of a tree to inform and even instruct one's awareness, is to have turned one's senses away from that phenomenon. It is to ponder the tree from outside of its world, or, rather, from outside of the world in which both oneself and the tree are active participants.

Yet even here Plato seems to waver and vacillate. Indeed, just as the *Phaedrus* is the prime locus of Plato's apparent ambivalence with regard to his own practice of writing, so it is also the locus of a profound ambivalence with regard to nature, or to the expressive power of the natural world. Although the dialogue opens with Socrates' disparagement of trees and the open countryside, it is significant that the dialogue itself takes place in the midst of that very countryside. Unlike the other Platonic dialogues, the *Phaedrus* alone occurs outside the walls of the city, out beyond the laws and formalities that enclose and isolate the human community from the more-than-human earth. Socrates and Phaedrus have themselves embarked, as it were, on a kind of vision quest, stepping outside the city norms in order to test their citified knowledge against the older knowings embedded in the land. Plato is here, in a sense, putting philosophy itself to the test, by opening and exposing it to the nonhuman powers that for so long had compelled the awe and attention of humankind. In direct contrast to *The Republic*, in which Plato vilifies the ancient gods and effectively banishes the oral poets and storytellers from the utopian city that he envisions, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato brings philosophy itself outside the city, there to confront and come to terms with the older, oral ways of knowing which, although they may be banished from the city, nevertheless still dwell in the surrounding countryside. It is only outside the city walls that Plato

will allow himself to question and critique the practice of writing to which he (and all later philosophy) is indissolubly tied. And it is only outside those walls that he will allow himself to fully acknowledge and offer respect to the oral, animistic universe that is on the wane.

Thus, shortly after his assertion that trees can teach him nothing, Socrates allows himself to be goaded into making an impromptu speech by an oath that Phaedrus swears upon the spirit of the very tree beneath which they sit!⁴⁴ Trees, it would seem, still retain a modicum of efficacious power. Later in the dialogue Socrates himself will remind Phaedrus that, according to tradition, "the first prophetic utterances came from an oak tree."⁴⁵

Not just trees but animals, too, have—in the *Phaedrus*—magical powers. Socrates initiates the discussion of writing by speculating that the cicadas chirping and "conversing with one another" in the tree overhead are probably observing the two of them as well; he maintains that the cicadas will intercede with the Muses on their behalf if he and Phaedrus continue to converse on philosophical matters.⁴⁶ And he proceeds to recount a story that describes how the cicadas, who were originally persons, were transformed into their present form:

The story is that once upon a time these creatures were men—men of an age before there were any Muses—and that when the latter came into the world, and music made its appearance, some of the people of those days were so thrilled with pleasure that they went on singing and quite forgot to eat and drink until they actually died without noticing it. From them in due course sprang the race of cicadas, to which the Muses have granted the boon of needing no sustenance right from their birth, but of singing from the very first, without food or drink, until the day of their death, after which they go and report to the Muses how they severally are paid honor among mankind and by whom. . . .⁴⁷

Any student of indigenous, oral cultures will hear a ring of familiarity in this tale. The story of the cicadas is identical in its character to the stories of the "Distant Time" told today by the Koyukon Indians of Alaska, identical to stories from that mysterious realm

"long ago, in the future" which are told by the Inuit (or eastern Eskimo), or to the "Dreamtime" stories told by Aboriginal Australians. We may recall, in this context, these Inuit words quoted toward the end of the last chapter: "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. . . ." Here is a typical Distant Time story told by the Koyukon:

When the burbot [ling cod] was human, he decided to leave the land and become a water animal. So he started down the bank, taking a piece of bear fat with him. But the other animal people wanted him to stay and tried to hold him back, stretching him all out of shape in the process. This is why the burbot has such a long, stretched-out body, and why its liver is rich and oily like the bear fat its ancestor carried to the water long ago.⁴⁸

Like all oral stories of the Distant Time or Dreamtime, Socrates' myth of the cicadas is a functional myth; it serves to explain certain observed characteristics of the cicadas, like their endless humming and buzzing, and their apparent lack of any need for nourishment ("when music appeared, some of the people of those days were so thrilled with pleasure that they went on singing, and quite forgot to eat and drink"). Anthropologists have tended to view such stories from the Dreamtime or Distant Time as confused attempts at causal explanation by the primitive mind. Here, however, in the light of our discussion regarding orality and literacy, such stories can be seen to serve a far more practical function.

Without a versatile writing system, there is simply no way to preserve, in any fixed, external medium, the accumulated knowledge regarding particular plants (including where to find them, which parts of them are edible, which poisonous, how they are best prepared, what ailments they may cure or exacerbate), and regarding specific animals (how to recognize them, what they eat, how best to track or hunt them), or even regarding the land itself (how best to orient oneself in the surrounding terrain, what landforms to avoid, where to find water or fuel). Such practical knowledge must be preserved, then, in spoken formulations that can be easily remembered, modi-

fied when new facts are learned, and retold from generation to generation. Yet not all verbal formulations are amenable to simple recall—most verbal forms that we are conversant with today are dependent upon a context of writing. To us, for instance, a simple mental list of the known characteristics of a particular plant or animal would seem the easiest and most obvious formulation. Yet such lists have no value in an oral culture; without a visible counterpart that can be brought to mind and scanned by the mind's eye, spoken lists cannot be readily recalled and repeated.⁴⁹ Without writing, knowledge of the diverse properties of particular animals, plants, and places can be preserved only by being woven into *stories*, into vital tales wherein the specific characteristics of the plant are made evident through a narrated series of events and interactions. Stories, like rhymed poems or songs, readily incorporate themselves into our felt experience; the shifts of action echo and resonate our own encounters—in hearing or telling the story we vicariously *live* it, and the travails of its characters embed themselves into our own flesh. The sensuous, breathing body is, as we have seen, a dynamic, ever-unfolding form, more a process than a fixed or unchanging object. As such, it cannot readily appropriate inert “facts” or “data” (static nuggets of “information” abstracted from the lived situations in which they arise). Yet the living body can easily assimilate other dynamic or eventful processes, like the unfolding of a story, appropriating each episode or event as a variation of its own unfolding.

And the more lively the story—the more vital or stirring the encounters within it—the more readily it will be incorporated.⁵⁰ Oral memorization calls for lively, dynamic, often violent, characters and encounters. If the story carries knowledge about a particular plant or natural element, then that entity will often be cast, like all of the other characters, in a fully animate form, capable of personlike adventures and experiences, susceptible to the kinds of setbacks or difficulties that we know from our own lives. In this manner the character or personality of a medicinal plant will be easily remembered, its poisonous attributes will be readily avoided, and the precise steps in its preparation will be evident from the sequence of events in the very legend that one chants while preparing it. One has only to recite the appropriate story, from the Distant Time, about a particular plant, animal, or element in order to recall the accumu-

lated cultural knowledge regarding that entity and its relation to the human community.

In this light, that which we literates misconstrue as a naïve attempt at causal explanation may be recognized as a sophisticated mnemonic method whereby precise knowledge is preserved and passed along from generation to generation. The only causality proper to such stories is a kind of cyclical causality alien to modern thought, according to which persons may influence events in the enveloping natural order and yet are themselves continually under the influence of those very events. By invoking a dimension or a time when all entities were in human form, or when humans were in the shape of other animals and plants, these stories affirm human kinship with the multiple forms of the surrounding terrain. They thus indicate the respectful, mutual relations that must be maintained with natural phenomena, the reciprocity that must be practiced in relation to other animals, plants, and the land itself, in order to ensure one's own health and to preserve the well-being of the human community.

This facet of respectful consideration, and its attendant circular causality, is also present in Socrates' tale of the cicadas. By relating the tale to Phaedrus, Socrates indicates, although not without a sense of irony, the respect that is properly due to such insects, who might confer a boon upon the two of them in return. Later, indeed, Socrates will attribute his own loquacious eloquence in this dialogue to the inspiration of the cicadas, “those mouthpieces of the Muses.”⁵¹

It seems clear that in the *Phaedrus*, Plato accords much more consideration to the oral-poetic universe, with its surplus of irrational, sensuous, and animistic powers, than he does in other dialogues. The *Phaedrus* seems to attempt a reconciliation of the transcendent, bodiless world of eternal Ideas proposed in this and other dialogues with the passionate, feeling-toned world of natural magic that still lingered in the common language of his day. But this conciliatory affirmation of the animistic, sensuous universe is effected only within the context of a more subtle devaluation. This is most obviously evident in the allegory at the heart of the dialogue, wherein Socrates gives his own account of love, or “eros.” According to Socrates, the divine madness of love is to be honored and praised, for it is love

that can most powerfully awaken the soul from its slumber in the bodily world. The lover's soul is stirred by the sensuous beauty of the beloved into remembering, however faintly, the more pure, genuine beauty of the eternal, bodiless Ideas which it once knew. Thus reminded of its own transcendent nature, the previously dormant soul begins to sprout wings, and soon aspires to rise beyond this world of ceaseless "becoming" toward that changeless eternal realm beyond the stars:

It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched; reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it, and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof.⁵²

In this dialogue, then, the bodily desire for sensuous contact and communion with other bodies and with the bodily earth is honored, but only as an incitement or spur toward the more genuine union of the reasoning soul with the eternal forms of "justice," "temperance," "virtue," and the like, which—according to Plato—lie beyond the sensory world entirely.

We have seen that this affinity between the reasoning soul or *psyché* and the changeless Ideas is inseparable from the relation between the new, literate intellect and the visible letters of the alphabet (which, although not outside of the sensory world, do present an entirely new and stable order of phenomena, relative to which all other phenomenal forms may come to seem remarkably fleeting, ambiguous, and derivative). Just as Plato's apparent criticisms of alphabetic writing in the *Phaedrus* take place within the context of a much broader espousal of the detached (or disembodied) reflection that writing engenders, so in the same dialogue his apparent affirmation of oral-animistic modes of experience is accomplished only in the context of a broader disparagement. The erotic, participatory world of the sensing body is conjured forth only to be subordinated to the incorporeal world toward which, according to Plato, it points. The literate intellect here certifies its dominion by claiming the sensuous life of the body-in-nature as its subordinate ally. What was previously a threat to the literate mind's clean ascendance is now disarmed by being given a place within the grand project of transcendence. Hence, even and especially in this most pastoral of dia-

logues, in which the rational intellect seems almost balanced by the desiring body, and in which trees that "can teach nothing" seem balanced by watchful cicadas, we may still discern the seeds of nature's eventual eclipse behind a world of letters, numbers, and texts.

Synaesthesia and the Encounter with the Other

It is remarkable that none of the major twentieth-century scholars who have directed their attention to the changes wrought by literacy have seriously considered the impact of writing—and, in particular, phonetic writing—upon the human experience of the wider natural world. Their focus has generally centered upon the influence of phonetic writing on the structure and deployment of human language,⁵³ on patterns of cognition and thought,⁵⁴ or upon the internal organization of human societies.⁵⁵ Most of the major research, in other words, has focused upon the alphabet's impact on processes either internal to human society or presumably "internal" to the human mind. Yet the limitation of such research—its restriction within the bounds of human social interaction and personal interiority—itself reflects an anthropocentric bias wholly endemic to alphabetic culture. In the absence of phonetic literacy, neither society, nor language, nor even the experience of "thought" or consciousness, can be pondered in isolation from the multiple nonhuman shapes and powers that lend their influence to all our activities (we need think only of our ceaseless involvement with the ground underfoot, with the air that swirls around us, with the plants and animals that we consume, with the daily warmth of the sun and the cyclic pull of the moon). Indeed, in the absence of formal writing systems, human communities come to know themselves primarily as they are reflected back by the animals and the animate landscapes with which they are directly engaged. This epistemological dependence is readily evidenced, on every continent, by the diverse modes of identification commonly categorized under the single term "totemism."

It is exceedingly difficult for us literates to experience anything

approaching the vividness and intensity with which surrounding nature spontaneously presents itself to the members of an indigenous, oral community. Yet as we saw in the previous chapters, Merleau-Ponty's careful phenomenology of perceptual experience had begun to disclose, underneath all of our literate abstractions, a deeply participatory relation to things and to the earth, a felt reciprocity curiously analogous to the animistic awareness of indigenous, oral persons. If we wish to better comprehend the remarkable shift in the human experience of nature that was occasioned by the advent and spread of phonetic literacy, we would do well to return to the intimate analysis of sensory perception inaugurated by Merleau-Ponty. For without a clear awareness of what reading and writing amounts to when considered at the level of our most immediate, bodily experience, any "theory" regarding the impact of literacy can only be provisional and speculative.

Although Merleau-Ponty himself never attempted a phenomenology of reading or writing, his recognition of the importance of synaesthesia—the overlap and intertwining of the senses—resulted in a number of experiential analyses directly pertinent to the phenomenon of reading. For reading, as soon as we attend to its sensorial texture, discloses itself as a profoundly synaesthetic encounter. Our eyes converge upon a visible mark, or a series of marks, yet what they find there is a sequence not of images but of sounds, something heard; the visible letters, as we have said, trade our eyes for our ears. Or, rather, the eye and the ear are brought together at the surface of the text—a new linkage has been forged between seeing and hearing which ensures that a phenomenon apprehended by one sense is instantly transposed into the other. Further, we should note that this sensory transposition is mediated by the human mouth and tongue; it is not just any kind of sound that is experienced in the act of reading, but specifically human, vocal sounds—those which issue from the human mouth. It is important to realize that the now common experience of "silent" reading is a late development in the story of the alphabet, emerging only during the Middle Ages, when spaces were first inserted between the words in a written manuscript (along with various forms of punctuation), enabling readers to distinguish the words of a written sentence without necessarily sounding them out audibly. Before this innovation, to read was necessarily to read

aloud, or at the very least to mumble quietly; after the twelfth century it became increasingly possible to internalize the sounds, to listen inwardly to phantom words (or the inward echo of words once uttered).⁵⁶

Alphabetic reading, then, proceeds by way of a new synaesthetic collaboration between the eye and the ear, between seeing and hearing. To discern the consequences of this new synaesthesia, we need to examine the centrality of synaesthesia in our perception of others and of the earth.

The experiencing body (as we saw in chapter 2) is not a self-enclosed object, but an open, incomplete entity. This openness is evident in the arrangement of the senses: I have these multiple ways of encountering and exploring the world—listening with my ears, touching with my skin, seeing with my eyes, tasting with my tongue, smelling with my nose—and all of these various powers or pathways continually open outward from the perceiving body, like different paths diverging from a forest. Yet my experience of the world is not fragmented; I do not commonly experience the visible appearance of the world as in any way separable from its audible aspect, or from the myriad textures that offer themselves to my touch. When the local tomcat comes to visit, I do not have distinctive experiences of a visible cat, an audible cat, and an olfactory cat; rather, the tomcat is precisely the place where these separate sensory modalities join and dissolve into one another, blending as well with a certain furry tactility. Thus, my divergent senses meet up with each other in the surrounding world, converging and commingling in the things I perceive. We may think of the sensing body as a kind of open circuit that completes itself only in things, and in the world. The differentiation of my senses, as well as their spontaneous convergence in the world at large, ensures that I am a being destined for relationship: it is primarily through my engagement with what is *not* me that I effect the integration of my senses, and thereby experience my own unity and coherence.⁵⁷

Indeed, the synaesthetic flowing together of different senses into a dynamic and unified experience is already operative within the single system of vision itself. For ordinary vision is a blending of two unique vistas, two perspectives, *two eyes*. Even here, within a single sensory system, we discern an originary openness or divergence—

between, in this case, the two sides of my body, each with its own access to the visible—and it is only via the convergence and meeting of these two perspectives at some point out in front of my body that the visible world becomes present to me in all its depth. The double images common to unfocused vision have only a flimsy reality: if I let my eyes focus upon a shelf across the room, and meanwhile hold my index finger up in front of my face, I find that two images of my finger float before me like insubstantial phantoms and that the shelf, despite its greater distance, is much more substantial and present to my awareness than is my finger. Only when I break my focus upon the shelf and let my eyes reunite at the finger does this appendage with its delicate hairs and gnarly knuckles become fully present.

Ordinary seeing, then, involves the convergence of two views into a single dynamic vision; divergent parts of myself are drawn together by the object, and I thus meet up with myself *over there*, at that tree or that spider upon which I focus. Vision itself, in other words, is already a kind of synaesthesia, a collaboration of different sensory channels or organs.⁵⁸

When we attend carefully to our perceptual experience, we discover that the convergence of the eyes often prompts the added collaboration of the other senses. When, for instance, I gaze through the window toward a blackbird in a nearby bush—my two eyes drawn together by the bird's jerking body as it plucks red berries from the branches—other senses are quite naturally drawn into that same focus. Certain tactile sensations, for instance, may accompany the blackbird's movements, and if I have been watching carefully I may notice, as it squoones each new berry in its beak, a slightly acidic taste burst within my mouth. Or rather, strangely, I seem to feel this burst of taste over there, in *its* mouth, yet I feel its mouth only with my own.

Similarly, when I watch a stranger learning to ride a bicycle for the first time, my own body, although it is standing solidly on the ground, inadvertently experiences the uncertain equilibrium of the rider, and when that bicycle teeters and falls I feel the harsh impact of the asphalt against my own leg and shoulder. My tactile and proprioceptive senses are, it would seem, caught up over there where my eyes have been focused; the momentary shock and subsequent

throbbing in my limbs make me wince. My hearing, as well, had been focused by the crash; the other ambient sounds to which I'd been listening just before (birds, children playing) have no existence for me now, only this stranger's pained breathing as he slowly shoves the bicycle aside and accepts the hand I am offering, pulling himself to his feet. He shakes his head, laughs a bit, then grins—all in a manner that readily communicates to my body that he's okay—and then turns to inspect the bicycle.

The diversity of my sensory systems, and their spontaneous convergence in the things that I encounter, ensures this interpenetration or interweaving between my body and other bodies—this magical participation that permits me, at times, to feel what others feel. The gestures of another being, the rhythm of its voice, and the stiffness or bounce in its spine all gradually draw my senses into a unique relation with one another, into a coherent, if shifting, organization. And the more I linger with this other entity, the more coherent the relation becomes, and hence the more completely I find myself face-to-face with another intelligence, another center of experience.

In the encounter with the cyclist, as in my experience of the blackbird, the visual focus induced and made possible the participation of the other senses. In different situations, other senses may initiate the synaesthesia: our ears, when we are at an orchestral concert; or our nostrils, when a faint whiff of burning leaves suddenly brings images of childhood autumns; our skin, when we are touching or being touched by a lover. Nonetheless, the dynamic conjunction of the eyes has a particularly ubiquitous magic, opening a quivering depth in whatever we focus upon, ceaselessly inviting the other senses into a concentrated exchange with stones, squirrels, parked cars, persons, snow-capped peaks, clouds, and termite-ridden logs. This power—the synaesthetic magnetism of the visual focus—will prove crucial for our understanding of literacy and its perceptual effects.

The most important chapter of Merleau-Ponty's last, unfinished work is entitled "The Intertwining—The Chiasm." The word "chiasm," derived from an ancient Greek term meaning "crisscross," is in common use today only in the field of neurobiology: the "optic chiasm" is that anatomical region, between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, where neuronal fibers from the right eye and

the left eye cross and interweave. As there is a chiasm between the two eyes, whose different perspectives continually conjoin into a single vision, so—according to Merleau-Ponty—there is a chiasm between the various sense modalities, such that they continually couple and collaborate with one another. Finally, this interplay of the different senses is what enables the chiasm between the body and the earth, the reciprocal participation—between one's own flesh and the encompassing flesh of the world—that we commonly call perception.⁵⁹

Phonetic reading, of course, makes use of a *particular* sensory conjunction—that between seeing and hearing. And indeed, among the various synaesthesias that are common to the human body, the confluence (or chiasm) between seeing and hearing is particularly acute. For vision and hearing are the two “distance” senses of the human organism. In contrast to touch and proprioception (inner-body sensations), and unlike the chemical senses of taste and smell, seeing and hearing regularly place us in contact with things and events unfolding at a substantial distance from our own visible, audible body.

My visual gaze explores the reflective surfaces of things, their outward color and contour. By following the play of light and shadow, the dance of colors, and the gradients of repetitive patterns, the eyes—themselves gleaming surfaces—keep me in contact with the multiple outward facets, or faces, of the things arrayed about me. The ears, meanwhile, are more inward organs; they emerge from the depths of my skull like blossoms or funnels, and their participation tells me less about the outer surface than the interior substance of things. For the audible resonance of beings varies with their material makeup, as the vocal calls of different animals vary with the size and shape of their interior cavities and hollows. I feel their expressive cries resound in my skull or my chest, echoing their sonorous qualities with my own materiality, and thus learn of their inward difference from myself. Looking and listening bring me into contact, respectively, with the outward surfaces and with the interior voluminosity of things, and hence where these senses come together, I experience, over there, the complex interplay of inside and outside that is characteristic of my own self-experience. It is thus at those junctures in the surrounding landscape where my eyes and my ears

are drawn together that I most readily feel myself confronted by another power like myself, another life.

If a native hunter is tracking, alone, in the forest, and a whooping cry reaches his ears from the leafy canopy, he will likely halt in his steps, silencing his breathing in order to hear that sound, when it comes again, more precisely. His eyes scan the cacophony of branches overhead with an unfocused gaze, attentive to minute movements on the periphery of the perceptual field. A slight rustle of branches draws his eyes into a more precise focus, his attention now restricted to a small patch of the canopy, yet still open, questioning, listening. When the cry comes again, the eyes, led by the ears, swiftly converge upon the source of that sound, and suddenly a monkey's form becomes evident, half-hidden from the leaves, its tail twirled around a limb, its body poised, watching. As the tribesman's searching eyes are drawn into a common focus with his listening ears, this conjunction, this chiasm, rebounds upon his own tactile and proprioceptive sensations—he feels himself suddenly confronted, caught up in a dynamic exchange with another entity, another carnal intelligence.

Indeed, the synaesthesia between the human eyes and ears is especially concentrated in our relation to other animals, since for a million years these “distance” senses were most tightly coupled at such moments of extreme excitement, when closing in on prey, or when escaping from predators. When backing slowly away from a mother grizzly protecting her cubs, or when watching intently the movements of an aroused rattlenake in order to avoid its numbing strike—these are moments when visual and auditory foci are virtually indistinguishable. For these senses are functioning here as a single, hyperattentive organ; we feel ourselves listening with our eyes and watching with our ears, ready to respond with our whole body to any change in the Other's behavior.

Yet our ears and our eyes are drawn together not only by animals, but by numerous other phenomena within the landscape. And, strangely, *wherever* these two senses converge, we may suddenly feel ourselves in relation with another expressive power, another center of experience. Trees, for instance, can seem to speak to us when they are jostled by the wind. Different forms of foliage lend each tree a distinctive voice, and a person who has lived among them will easily

distinguish the various dialects of pine trees from the speech of spruce needles or Douglas fir. Anyone who has walked through cornfields knows the uncanny experience of being scrutinized and spoken to by whispering stalks. Certain rock faces and boulders request from us a kind of auditory attentiveness, and so draw our ears into relation with our eyes as we gaze at them, or with our hands as we touch them—for it is only through a mode of listening that we can begin to sense the interior voluminosity of the boulder, its particular density and depth. There is an expectancy to the ears, a kind of patient receptivity that they lend to the other senses whenever we place ourselves in a mode of listening—whether to a stone, or a river, or an abandoned house. That so many indigenous people allude to the articulate speech of trees or of mountains suggests the ease with which, in an oral culture, one's auditory attention may be joined with the visual focus in order to enter into a living relation with the expressive character of things.

Far from presenting a distortion of their factual relation to the world, the animistic discourse of indigenous, oral peoples is an inevitable counterpart of their immediate, synaesthetic engagement with the land that they inhabit. The animistic proclivity to perceive the angular shape of a boulder (while shadows shift across its surface) as a kind of meaningful gesture, or to enter into felt conversations with clouds and owls—all of this could be brushed aside as imaginary distortion or hallucinatory fantasy if such active participation were not the very structure of perception, if the creative interplay of the senses in the things they encounter was not our sole way of linking ourselves to those things and letting the things weave themselves into our experience. Direct, prereflective perception is inherently synaesthetic, participatory, and animistic, disclosing the things and elements that surround us not as inert objects but as expressive subjects, entities, powers, potencies.

And yet most of us seem, today, very far from such experience. Trees rarely, if ever, speak to us; animals no longer approach us as emissaries from alien zones of intelligence; the sun and the moon no longer draw prayers from us but seem to arc blindly across the sky. How is it that these phenomena *no longer address us*, no longer compel our involvement or reciprocate our attention? If participation is the very structure of perception, how could it ever have been

brought to a halt? To freeze the ongoing animation, to block the wild exchange between the senses and the things that engage them, would be tantamount to freezing the body itself, stopping it short in its tracks. And yet our bodies still move, still live, still breathe. If we no longer experience the enveloping earth as expressive and alive, this can only mean that the animating interplay of the senses has been transferred to another medium, another locus of participation.

IT IS THE WRITTEN TEXT THAT PROVIDES THIS NEW LOCUS. FOR TO read is to enter into a profound participation, or chiasm, with the inked marks upon the page. In learning to read we must break the spontaneous participation of our eyes and our ears in the surrounding terrain (where they had ceaselessly converged in the synaesthetic encounter with animals, plants, and streams) in order to recouple those senses upon the flat surface of the page. As a Zuni elder focuses her eyes upon a cactus and hears the cactus begin to speak, so we focus our eyes upon these printed marks and immediately hear voices. We hear spoken words, witness strange scenes or visions, even experience other lives. As nonhuman animals, plants, and even "inanimate" rivers once spoke to our tribal ancestors, so the "inert" letters on the page now speak to us! *This is a form of animism that we take for granted, but it is animism nonetheless—as mysterious as a talking stone.*

And indeed, it is only when a culture shifts its participation to these printed letters that the stones fall silent. Only as our senses transfer their animating magic to the written word do the trees become mute, the other animals dumb.

But let us be more precise, recalling the distinction between different forms of writing discussed at the start of this chapter. As we saw there, pictographic, ideographic, and even rebuslike writing still makes use of, or depends upon, our sensorial participation with the natural world. As the tracks of moose and bear refer beyond themselves to those entities of whom they are the trace, so the images in early writing systems draw their significance not just from ourselves but from sun, moon, vulture, jaguar, serpent, lightning—from all those sensorial, never strictly human powers, of which the written

images were a kind of track or tracing. To be sure, these signs were now inscribed by human hands, not by the hooves of deer or the clawed paws of bear; yet as long as they presented images of paw prints  and of clouds , of sun  and of serpent , these characters still held us in relation to a more-than-human field of discourse. Only when the written characters lost all explicit reference to visible, natural phenomena did we move into a new order of participation. Only when those images came to be associated, alphabetically, with purely human-made sounds, and even the names of the letters lost all worldly, extrahuman significance, could speech or language come to be experienced as an exclusively human power. For only then did civilization enter into the wholly self-reflexive mode of animism, or magic, that still holds us in its spell:

We know what the animals do, what are the needs of the beaver, the bear, the salmon, and other creatures, because long ago men married them and acquired this knowledge from their animal wives. Today the priests say we lie, but we know better. The white man has been only a short time in this country and knows very little about the animals; we have lived here thousands of years and were taught long ago by the animals themselves. The white man *writes everything down in a book* so that it will not be forgotten; but our ancestors *married* animals, learned all their ways, and passed on this knowledge from one generation to another.⁶⁰

THAT ALPHABETIC READING AND WRITING WAS ITSELF EXPERIENCED as a form of magic is evident from the reactions of cultures suddenly coming into contact with phonetic writing. Anthropological accounts from entirely different continents report that members of indigenous, oral tribes, after seeing the European reading from a book or from his own notes, came to speak of the written pages as "talking leaves," for the black marks on the flat, leaflike pages seemed to talk directly to the one who knew their secret.

The Hebrew scribes never lost this sense of the letters as living,

animate powers. Much of the Kabbalah, the esoteric body of Jewish mysticism, is centered around the conviction that each of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew *aleph-beth* is a magic gateway or guide into an entire sphere of existence. Indeed, according to some kabbalistic accounts, it was by combining the letters that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, created the ongoing universe. The Jewish kabbalists found that the letters, when meditated upon, would continually reveal new secrets; through the process of *tzeref*, the magical permutation of the letters, the Jewish scribe could bring himself into successively greater states of ecstatic union with the divine. Here, in other words, was an intensely concentrated form of animism—a participation conducted no longer with the sculpted idols and images worshiped by other tribes but solely with the visible letters of the *aleph-beth*.

Perhaps the most succinct evidence for the potent magic of written letters is to be found in the ambiguous meaning of our common English word "spell." As the roman alphabet spread through oral Europe, the Old English word "spell," which had meant simply to recite a story or tale, took on the new double meaning: on the one hand, it now meant to arrange, in the proper order, the written letters that constitute the name of a thing or a person; on the other, it signified a magic formula or charm. Yet these two meanings were not nearly as distinct as they have come to seem to us today. For to assemble the letters that make up the name of a thing, in the correct order, was precisely to effect a magic, to establish a new kind of influence over that entity, to summon it forth! To spell, to correctly arrange the letters to form a name or a phrase, seemed thus at the same time to *cast a spell*, to exert a new and lasting power over the things spelled. Yet we can now realize that to learn to spell was also, and more profoundly, to step under the influence of the written letters ourselves, to cast a spell upon our own senses. It was to exchange the wild and multiplicitous magic of an intelligent natural world for the more concentrated and refined magic of the written word.

THE BULGARIAN SCHOLAR TZVETAN TODOROV HAS WRITTEN AN illuminating study of the Spanish conquest of the Americas, based

on extensive study of documents from the first months and years of contact between European culture and the native cultures of the American continent.⁶¹ The lightning-swift conquest of Mexico by Cortéz has remained a puzzle for historians, since Cortéz, leading only a few hundred men, managed to seize the entire kingdom of Montezuma, who commanded *several hundred thousand*. Todorov concludes that Cortéz's astonishing and rapid success was largely a result of the discrepancy between the different forms of participation engaged in by the two societies. The Aztecs, whose writing was highly pictorial, necessarily felt themselves in direct communication with an animate, more-than-human environment. "Everything happens as if, for the Aztecs, [written] signs automatically and necessarily proceed from the world they designate . . ."; the Aztecs are unable to use their spoken words, or their written characters, to hide their true intentions, since these signs belong to the world around them as much as to themselves.⁶² To be duplicitous with signs would be, for the Aztecs, to go against the order of nature, against the encompassing speech or logos of an animate world, in which their own tribal discourse was embedded.

The Spaniards, however, suffer no such limitation. Possessed of an *alphabetic* writing system, they experience themselves not in communication with the sensuous forms of the world, but solely with one another. The Aztecs must answer, in their actions as in their speech, to the whole sensuous, natural world that surrounds them; the Spanish need answer only to themselves.

In contact with this potent new magic, with these men who participate solely with their own self-generated signs, whose speech thus seems to float free of the surrounding landscape, and who could therefore be duplicitous and *lie* even in the presence of the sun, the moon, and the forest, the Indians felt their own rapport with those sensuous powers, or gods, beginning to falter:

The testimony of the Indian accounts, which is a description rather than an explanation, asserts that everything happened because the Mayas and the Aztecs lost control of communication. The language of the gods has become unintelligible, or else these gods fell silent. "Understanding is lost, wisdom is lost" [from the Mayan account of the Spanish invasion]. . . . As for the Aztecs,

they describe the beginning of their own end as a silence that falls: the gods no longer speak to them.⁶³

In the face of aggression from this new, entirely self-reflexive form of magic, the native peoples of the Americas—like those of Africa and, later, of Australia—felt their own magics wither and become useless, unable to protect them.