

The Sides of a Turtle

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LANGUAGE

As the "voice over" I have a special interest in Herman Melville's language in his story, *Las Encantadas*. It strikes me as ponderous, pompous, convoluted and wordy, far more than *Moby Dick* for example or not as successful.

However, I am fascinated by the relationship between this language and its

* being read out loud, and

*above all by its relation to the human body in **elegant, contorted, estranging motion and stillness.**

This fascination is because I cannot resist the temptation, indeed the seduction, to discern a link or correlation, a bond, between language and the body, between *langue* and *corps*.

I feel this seduction viscerally. My own body feels it, aches or shakes or writes or sinuously stretches, twist and turns in empathy with the yoga performer AND with Melville's phrases and sentences, his tone, and voice, the two combined, the yoga performer and his language.

In his book on jokes in 1905 Freud called this, or something like it, "ideational mimetics, referring to minute movements we make in our bodies in sympathy with another body acting on a stage as a comic performer, and also with ideas. It is a strange and wonderful notion.

As for bodily mimesis with language the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure would laugh at this as some sort of joke, it being in his eyes the common fallacy of taking the signifier as existing in some sort of natural relationship with the signified. His argument, which became the underpinning of "Structuralism," was that signs are "not motivated," that signifiers relate to each other, not the signifieds, and form a system he called *langue* or language.

However, my own understanding is that when we come to *parole*, or speech, when we speak as in my voice-over to this film, we implicitly do assume such a relationship between signifier and signified and it is this illusion that unconsciously allows language to work. And speech to flow.

If we were to consciously question this alliance of words to things as we were speaking or writing or reading, we would falter or linguistically collapse.

However, the power of what Nietzsche called "knowing what not to know" kicks in and we keep talking, listening, writing, and reading.

So it is—or was—with global warming and the body's system of homeostasis or what I call the wisdom of the body and the bodily unconscious.

If we were to proceed a la Saussure as if the sign was not "motivated," we could not speak.

Thus we flip between these two registers—the sign as unmotivated and the sign as natural—and it is this flip-flop, this phenomenology, that we experience, I believe, in watching *The Sides of a Turtle*.

MIMESIS

Attempting to establish a materialist, non-Structuralist, theory of language, Walter Benjmain wrote his essay "On the Mimetic Faculty" in 1932, claiming that human beings have an innate faculty of mimicry and indeed that all of nature has this. But humans are specially gifted and one result of this is language itself.

At its core, such a faculty is based on the desire or need to Become Other, as we see in

*children's games, and in

*rituals and myths involving metamorphoses in pre-modern or non-Western societies, including divination as in reading the entrails of guinea pigs and the stars in the sky.

We might note that many yoga positions are mimetic with animals whose names that assume such as Cobra, Camel, Butterfly, Scorpion, Peacock and so on.

Shamans in the Amazon are said to transform into Jaguars and this is but the tip of the iceberg of what is the world-view of "reverse evolution," not from animals to humans a la Darwin and Wallace, but the reverse. We were all human once but animals then evolved from the human into their present animal outward appearance and behaviors.

What we see in the film, *Two Sides of a Tortoise*, is exactly that wherein the mimesis of language and the mimesis of human and animal come together.

Among many societies, such as the Naskapi of Newfoundland, animals were once human. Now that they are animals, they are therefore supernatural. Take the beaver, as an anthropologist put it in 1922

the Naskapi "bear witness with all the fidelity of worshippers to its miraculous powers of magic and its sage intellect." The beaver can transform into other animal forms, that of geese and other birds are mentioned. The beaver can disappear by penetrating the ground, by rising aloft into the air, or by diving into the depths of lake or stream and remaining any length of time desired.¹

Is there anything more beautiful than this, I ask myself? The Naskapi, continues the anthropologist S, are "blessed with a feeling that they owe a debt to the animal world for its sacrifice of life in their behalf." Indeed, sacrifice captures what is here at stake as much as in Melville's story.

But then does not this film go a long way to restoring the debt?

¹ Speck, 110, 113