ESSAY

When Dogs Could Talk: Among Words in a State of Grace

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by N. Scott Momaday

Illustration by Marla Johnson

"When Dogs Could Talk" appeared in WLT*'s landmark 2007 issue devoted to endangered languages, guest-edited by Sydneyann Binion and David Shook, who were linguistics majors at the University of Oklahoma at the time. We reprint it here in Dr. Momaday's memory.*

My friend, the late Vine Deloria Jr., once chided me for remarking too often a time when dogs could talk. I had to admit that he was probably right. I had discovered that Kiowa elders used this formula to indicate something that had happened far back in time. This or that happened a long time ago *when dogs could talk*. It seems to me a charming and appropriate expression. It is the kind of thing that reveals more and more of itself in the fullness of time. *That*, by the way, is a mystery which distinguishes the oral tradition, and it is a foundation of language itself. Language seems always to exceed itself, and certainly it exceeds our grasp of it. We know that a certain province of experience is ineffable, that there are limits to what language can express. But the fact is, we have no inkling of what those limits might be. Lewis Thomas has told us that we are at the beginning of language. I suspect that to be true.

One evening some years ago, when my eldest daughter was two or three years old, she came to me and asked, "Daddy, is it tomorrow yet?" The question still haunts me. All these years later, I do not have the answer. But what I do have is the awareness that my daughter had come upon a very great moment in the development of her mind and curiosity. And she had shared it with me. The answer that I did not have at hand would come to her eventually in the maze of language and experience, as it had come to me. The struggle for meaning is for all of us to live with—and it is a lifelong struggle—and it is won or lost on a field of words. Language is an element, like the air, in which we live our daily lives.

I have a wonderful German shepherd. He is descended from the wolf, like every other dog in the world, but his descent is a single step. Even to his yellow eyes he resembles his wild forebear. When I look into his eyes I see the fabric of the primordial, the very face of origin. I talk to him. He seems to talk back, but not exactly in my language, not in that artificial system of sounds and symbols that my species fashioned into a superlative invention that, more than any other thing, defines the human being. He talks in the oral tradition, with silences, body language, eye contact, facial expressions, moans and growls and yelps—and of course the great semaphore of his tail.

It is no wonder that dogs should figure in the long story of man's presence on the planet. Their tenure is the same, or it is so closely alike as to be indistinguishable. There might have been a dog in the Garden of Eden, and if the serpent could talk, so could the dog. And it is no wonder that the blood memory of man should extend to a time when dogs could talk.

My first encounter with language was in an oral tradition. I have been a student of oral tradition a longer time than I can tell, and I have taught oral tradition in the classroom for nearly forty years. As a writer and, especially, a poet, language, down to the conceptual symbol of the word, fascinates me. The oral tradition is the most vital, yet the most neglected, dimension of language that I know.

What *is* the oral tradition? In the simplest sense it is language at the level of the human voice, language in the absence of writing. Most of us cannot conceive of that dimension because we inhabit a written tradition and cannot exceed its bounds. I am speaking of this society and this preeminent language community of English speakers, readers, and writers. In my teaching career, all of my students have been literate. That is, all of them could read and write in one or more languages, and none of them belonged exclusively to an oral tradition. In this context one might assume that the oral tradition is dead or dying. And yet the late Peter Farb, whose book *Word Play* is a useful introduction to oral tradition, tells us that more than half the population of the world does without writing at this moment in

time. The oral tradition, then, is a universal expression of language, commensurate with the origin and development of language itself.

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What are the origins of oral tradition? I suppose that we must consider that moment in which the human brain and the human vocal mechanism coincided on the scale of evolution, and man was first able to utter the sounds of intelligible speech. The formula became speak, listen, and remember. That formula, by the way, remains the cornerstone of oral tradition. It is not so with writing, in which the component of the memory, especially, is greatly diminished.

We can say, I think, that the oral tradition is as old as language itself, for the one cannot exist without the other. This symbiotic relationship enables us to name ourselves and the things around us, to tell stories, to compose poems. We are told that writing is about six thousand years old. As compared to the oral tradition, that is a mere moment in time. Thus we know something about the origins of writing, and we have the record of the printed word in the great books of the world. One cannot exaggerate the importance of that record. There is no such record of the spoken word, of course, and we can only guess at the magnitude of that loss. Nevertheless, we have something like a fossil record of the oral tradition in English, say, as we have in other languages, and we have the evidence of its persistent life in literature, even in our own time.

The place of oral tradition in literature is secure and timeless. In large measure this observation is obvious, but let me point to three works that encompass the greater range of English literary experience. *Beowulf* is the oldest extant epic poem in the English language. It is generally considered

to be a distinguished model of oral tradition in almost every respect. As story, as poetry, as drama, and as a statement of the human condition, not only of its own time but also of all times, it rises to universal significance:

> The Geat people built a pyre for Beowulf, stacked and decked it until it stood four-square, hung with helmets, heavy war-shields and shining armour, just as he had ordered. Then his warriors laid him in the middle of it, mourning a lord far-famed and beloved. On a height they kindled the hugest of all funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke billowed darkly up, the blaze roared and drowned out their weeping, wind died down and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house burning it to the core. They were disconsolate and wailed aloud for their lord's decease. A Geat woman too sang out in grief; with hair bound up she unburdened herself of her worst fears, a wild litany of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded, enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles, slavery and abasement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.

Hamlet hardly requires justification here. Of all the plays of Shakespeare, it is arguably the most accomplished and the most imaginative. In no other work do we see ourselves, our history and possibility, our audacious bid for immortality, more clearly. It is no wonder that the greatest writer in the English language should be a playwright. Shakespeare's language is the language of speech. The instrument of his genius is that of the human voice. It is on the stage that we see the oral tradition fully realized in our own time. Every performance is unique. Every movement of the actors, every intonation, every nuance, every silence carries the weight of meaning:

> HAMLET: Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass, and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me

> what instrument you will, though you fret me, you cannot play upon me.

The Gettysburg Address, like *Hamlet*, was written before it was spoken, but its vitality too is that of speech. In the deepest sense, it must be heard to be believed. Those fortunate enough to be in Gettysburg on that November day in 1863 were present at one of the truly profound performances of oral tradition in human history. For it was not less than revolutionary, what Garry Wills has called "the intellectual revolution contained in those fateful 272 words":

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

If we can imagine a time when dogs could talk, we must imagine a time when language was intensely creative, full of power and magic. To the extent that the deepest belief in the efficacy of language survives, it survives in the oral tradition. In *Beowulf*, or in the Book of Job, or in the Navajo Prayer from the Night Chant, the language of story is the language of poetry, plain, exalted, and oral. It is the language of surfaces rather than symbols, faceted like the bright prisms of the dragon's hoard.

Apollo—not the god but the dog—twitches in his sleep, and in his dreams he talks to me. He tells me of wonderful things, of a grandmother who suckled the founders of Rome, of a grandfather who conversed with Francis in the olive groves of Umbria, of one in whose dying eyes Aldo Leopold beheld a fierce green fire. I listen, and I am enchanted. I am returned to a time when dogs could talk, and I dwell among words in a state of grace.

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Photo courtesy of Oklahoma Hall of Fame

N. Scott Momaday (1934–2024) was a Kiowa novelist, short-story writer, essayist, and poet. His novel *House Made of Dawn* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969 and is considered the first major work of the Native American Renaissance. Momaday received the National Medal of Arts in 2007 and held twenty honorary degrees from colleges and universities. He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. (Source: Wikipedia)

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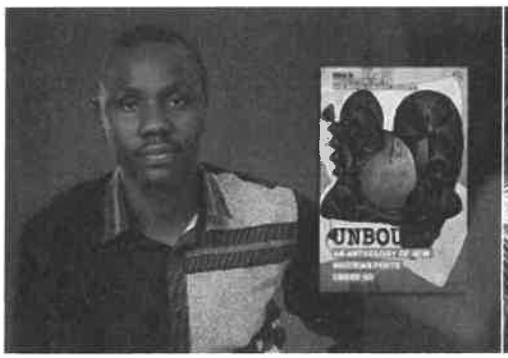

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