

Seal Discourse / Discorso foca

Michael Marder

Dear discursive animals, plants, fungi, bacteria, hybrids and symbionts! I address you as myself and not-myself, Michael Marder and words on a page or the sounds they correspond to when spoken. When I present you as myself, I am already not-myself, because I can neither name nor describe myself except in words. If I were an artist, I could show you my self-portrait, but this would have been an altogether different self-presentation without an address, its lines expressing certain physical features, or at least my own vision and interpretation of these features.

So, to repeat, I am Michael Marder and I am presumably a human being, which seems to make perfect sense because I am addressing you in what we conventionally recognize as human discourse. As for me, I am not so certain about all this. Those who are "in" on the secret of shared soul-work performed during a 2024 seminar in Northern Italy, in an enchanted and enchanting place called Topolò (or, in Slovene, Topolove) know, I might be an intermediate life form, part human and part plant, moving toward another incarnation as moss. Keep this in mind, be it your animal, plant, fungal, bacterial, human or hybrid-symbiotic mind.

Moss is a terrestrial plant, often literally preparing the ground for the growth of other plants. Most varieties of moss, however, have a very close connection to water, which they need for their reproduction, because otherwise their sperm would not flow toward the eggs. Diminutive as they are in size, bryophytes question our received opinions about differences between plants and animals. Assuming that I could enjoy an even closer relation to water, living on the seabed as algae for instance, I would keep thinking and reading—reading to the best of my ability my environment and whoever visits it. But also reading books. I cannot imagine my life (and, indeed, my after-life) without them. What books would I take with me to the bottom of the sea? The books of life, of course: life itself as an infinite-finite scroll and books that graft their discourses onto trees of life in mystical Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in the Indian traditions, in ancient Greece and in Nordic epics.

Reading is contemplation. Like a dream, it lets you dive into yourself, even as you stay in the world. Breathing is a deeper contemplation, especially breathing with plants and the damp earth. Breathing under water is different: not holding your breath while diving, but breathing otherwise. It is another sort of contemplation, which is largely foreign to me.

Contemplative reading, separate yet connected. I am eight years old, living with my younger brother, parents and grandparents in a tiny two-bedroom apartment. Everyone is gathered in the living room in front of a TV set. But the sofa, propped against a back wall is half-hidden with a door that, when open, creates a cozy corner at a triangle with this piece of furniture. Lit by a wall light, it is my space for reading-dreaming-contemplating, a micro-room within an already small room that partly closes when the door is open, one that allows me to feel togetherness and apartness all at once.

The closed openness or open closure of my rudimentary shell for reading and thinking hints at the dynamics of the discursive (human, plant, crustacean...) body that is at home in it despite (or because of) not being at home in a mutilated, dumped, devastated world. My self-presentation before you, my fellow discursive living beings, is maximal exposure but, to reiterate my opening remarks, it does not abandon altogether the shell of language, of the words spoken or written here.

The secret is on the surface: there is nothing beyond the shell, or, better put, there is nothing beyond the liminal difference between the inside and the outside the shell marks each time anew. The rhythmic movements of peeking out and retreating back into it dictate the flows and disruptions of time itself, the time-space of thinking and being. Other discursive animals, plants, bacteria and fungi will have the equivalents of their shells: for instance, plants, germinating aboveground to the light of day, maintain themselves concealed in the earth with their roots. In this manner, nature that loves to hide coincides with languages that reveal only by way of concealing many other dimensions of existence.

For my part, I welcome all in the shell that only provisionally and accidentally or coincidentally is mine. Crustacean or not, you are free to dwell in or on my words, my texts, my discourses, my thoughts and to render them more comfortable for the discursive beings you are. Even after I am long "gone."

prelude

Words are alive. They bristle with sounds. They move through the bending, extending and contracting lines that define the shapes of their written characters. They breathe with a throng of meanings. Finite, they are ready to die the moment they are born.

Where do words live and perish, though? In which worlds? Is there a milieu (an environment, a medium) that is wholly appropriate to their vivacity, nourishing them for the time being and receiving their decomposing flesh into itself in what amounts to the metabolism of sense? To assert that they live only on a page, on a screen, or in our heads is to bury these questions alive and, maybe, to bury the words themselves. They live between us, of course, and do so all the more intensely the more they are shared: written and read, quickly scanned or slowly accompanied by the gaze, spoken, sung, heard. In turn, we do not live in a vacuum. The space "between us" belongs to the terrestrial fold, to marine depths and expanses, to the atmosphere, to the heat and the light of a fire illuminating and warming up the surfaces of elemental milieus.

Before letters and syllables, the elementality of words is claimed by their dwelling places, from which they partially emerge and into which they submerge themselves, getting reinvigorated or altogether dissolving there. Preceding sounds is the breath drawn and expired. It is a breath that is not without its moisture and that becomes resonant in various bodily cavities it fills, as well as in the air outside. Externalized on tablets (clay or stone, for instance) or on a vegetal support, on iridescent screens or on scrolls made of animal skin, written words are a matter of

another tact, of proximity and contact, involving the earth. The body of words, the feigned ideality of their meaning, their articulations and disarticulations, the sweeping power with which they grasp us before we grasp (understand, but also seize) them—all this unfolds *in* an ecology, itself virtually indistinguishable from the metamorphosing ensemble of these and many other ingredients.

milieus

...in the middle, there were words. Always in the plural, shorn of beginnings and ends: having neither a certain genesis nor a genetic program responsible for their replication, neither points of termination nor exact purposes. They thrived in the middle of a thought, a sentence (whether said or unsaid, whether written or not), in the middle of a place that was what it was only through them. And they themselves were the middles: decentered, distracted and attracted, focused and unfocused. These words moved like water in water, like airflows in the air, and, in a somewhat heavier manner, like soil dug up and thrown back into the earth. (You see, burying questions and words achieves the opposite of what it aims to do: it is akin to releasing them into one of their elemental milieus).

A discourse articulating mid-words and mid-worlds could not be confined to a single milieu, to just one elemental habitat. Whoever inhabited it, and whomever it inhabited, would thread in and out of watery indistinction and the provisionally stable dry land, in and out of the dark moistness of the soil and the sunlit expanses above. An amphibian is the one who lives in at least two milieus: the one distributed among two. Land plants are simultaneously amphibious, living both in the earth with their roots and on earth, in the air, with their branches, leaves, and flowers. Most amphibious animals are serially so. They are in the water for a stretch of time; then they come to the shore, to a river bank, or to the edge of a brook, only to dip back into the water, where many of them can breathe and hear otherwise as well, for another period. The life of an amphibian passes in the middle between two middles, in transitions from one milieu to another: neither in the one nor in the other, both in the other and in the one.

The amphibology of words is not limited to *this* word's connotations of irreducible ambiguity. Words, too, thrive in at least two milieus: speech and writing, the air and an earthy support. And let's not forget water, the small droplets of moisture pulverized around the speaking lips or the fluid nature of ink leaving its traces on paper. Written and said—at times concurrently, at other times separately—words are amphibious. Which means that the discourses, stringing them together, live, decay, and metamorphose like plants or like amphibian animals, be they frogs, salamanders, or caecilians.

Systems of biological nomenclature notwithstanding, amphibia are irreducible to a class of ectothermic, anamniotic vertebrates, as distinguished from semiaquatic mammals. *Amphibious* shifts the spotlight from the living being to the surroundings of life, the rounding off of the environment *not* closed off, precisely because there is more than one such circle for the one spanning elemental realms, milieus, worlds, as though in a Venn diagram grafted onto the world. There, semantic

spotlight softly scatters; after all, the milieu cannot become an illuminated object, totally accessible to the sense and to the mind, without ceasing to be a milieu.

seal amphibology

You swim in an ocean of words. Which is not so different from the oceans covering more than two thirds of our planet. (Let's agree already: this is not an allegory!) H₂O is mixed there with salt, but also with heavy metals, like mercury and lead, with cadmium and plastic debris, with petroleum hydrocarbons and coliform bacteria. These newly widespread words combine to form lethal messages, dispersing, breaking through limits, reaching virtually everywhere. Impossible to ignore, they impregnate your elements, The ocean of words is all around you *and* it is in you—so much so that it is *you*.

The movements of your undulating body do not resist the immense elemental power of water. You follow the currents, trusting the waves. Sense comes easy because you do not resist what presents itself as nonsense—the unchosen, the pre-given, whence sense arises and whither it retreats. On land, gravity renders your movements more awkward and jerky, unless you glide on ice. It is a hard effort, a fight even, to move along, to chart the desired direction, to win over morsels of sense from the heavy nonsense subtending it. Wherever you are, though, you are completely in touch with the element, be it aquatic or terrestrial, touching and being touched by it throughout the surface of your body.

The sense of words warms you up. It is your lifeline, Fluid, it is all around you; you bathe in it. On dry ground, it caresses you with the many hands of sunrays. You know all too well how precious this word-warmth is: a thin layer of water at the surface, it mingles, just a little deeper, with the mortiferous chill emanating from nonsense. Nor is the sun always there to gift you with heat, So, you develop large blubber deposits to keep you warm, to be able to spin sense out of yourself in case you encounter none in your milieus. While it cannot substitute for the missing sense of the world (quite quickly, semantic blubber turns into blabber), it does the trick as a protective buffer guaranteeing your survival.

Then, again, global warming means that meaning can be lost in another way, inverted or perverted, the sense of sense itself melting into nonsense. Your habitats are rapidly growing *too* warm for your existence, the excess of sense abutting its opposite. Too much information, into which words have been converted, crushes through the fragile and agile structures of meaning. The diminishing ice cover, the rising sea levels, the weakening and variously changing currents, landslides and eroding beaches undermine by overwhelming—the senses and sense. The amphibology of your existence implodes into the unbearable unity of the one un-world.

So long as life is winding on, however, you keep straddling two milieus. There are still words, written and uttered, the words in the midst of which you live. You seek protection behind them, feeble as it may be. Maybe you don't realize that they are imbued with the very thing (if a thing it is) you are so desperately trying to protect yourself from.

seal body / the body of discourse

What is a well-structured body: of a biological organism, of speech, of a text, or a world? It is impossible to give a general answer to this question, raised more than once in the history of philosophy, because the articulation of bodies depends on the worlds they inhabit. Fittingness is the paramount non-principled principle, according to which the dynamic edges of a living body, with a range of its capacities, of and its milieu need to fit together, like pieces of a puzzle, albeit a puzzle that is always in motion. This is even more so the case when a body befits two worlds. Rather than "survival of the fittest," it is "survival as fittingness" that rules the day and the night in the evolutionary game.

If I were to imagine a discourse structured like myself, I would conclude that it must have a head, a central trunk and the extremities; that it must stand on its own two feet; that it is not entirely open-ended, its body plan by and large pre-determined at the moment of its conception. If a discourse is vegetal, it will be intelligent in the absence of a central nervous system; it will grow more there where the conditions are auspicious, branching out, ramifying, leafing and flowering all the more, defying the notion of proportionality; it will decay in some of its parts that will nourish the proliferation of its other limbs; and it will develop opportunistically, without an overarching preconceived idea. A fish discourse will be wholly aquatic, with a sleek shape and a flexible skeleton; it will be at home in the fluidity of meaning, in the currents of sense traversing the ocean of nonsense. And in silence. Slick in its own way, a snake discourse will slither in the undergrowth of words or in a desert, where very little is otherwise written or said, constantly in touch with the ground of enunciation, which it rehashes in a singular path across. A bird discourse will glide on the airflows of language, embracing them with open wings; it will alight on a particularly felicitous sentence, turn of phrase, word, or even sound and find its material support there; unable to contain itself, overflowing with the pure happiness of expression, it will burst into song, returning resonant vibrations to the air that carried it.

In this image, on this page, a plant discourse, a snake discourse, a bird discourse, a fish discourse commune. There is perhaps nothing more human than refashioning oneself into the other—into another human being and into an other-than-human being. We are most human, if this term is still appropriate (*fitting* and meaningful), when we do not coincide with ourselves, when we exist by exiting from the suffocating confines of an identity and vacillate between self and other. An amphibology taken to the nth degree...

For years now, I have been vegetalizing myself, cultivating my plant-thinking and plant-writing in what can only be a life-long apprenticeship. In a plant discourse, I am at home and I am ceaselessly surprised, filled with wonder, the common root of philosophizing and poetizing. But what to do with our mammalian, vertebrate bodies? Are they the absolute limits to vegetalization? Not so, considering that an amphibious life is the crux of a yearning to return to the middles of words, existences, and worlds. And there are mammals who are, broadly speaking, amphibious, like seals.

A seal discourse is attuned to how a text reads and how speech sounds. Four flipper-limbs: to cruise through meaning without grasping it, without laying a claim, appropriating, possessing. The beginning and the end, a round head and a set of hind-flippers, sometimes resembling a tail, are there, endowing a seal story with the recognizable outlines of a classical "good structure." There is no hierarchy in it, though; largely horizontal on dry land and in the water, the end and the beginning are just extensions of the middle, in the middle of a milieu, in the middle of milieus. Big round eyes adapted to seeing in the water and in the air: to appreciate literal and metaphorical senses, seamlessly traversing their boundaries. Whiskers: exquisitely sentient, to forage and navigate, to pick up minute vibrations of the voice, be it inner or outer, to detect what is coming. No external ears, but sharp hearing in both worlds. Last but not least: the gliding joints of the backbone, allowing the bones to glide past one another in any direction: adept at articulating and disarticulating, articulating by disarticulating and disarticulating by articulating.

These are not ways of receiving a discourse, but features of discourse as a seal. If they resemble the work or the play of interpretation, that is because discourse and its practices thrive in the possibilities of interpretation that form the flesh of the word. The crafting of words and sounds, gathered into unique sequences, depends on receptivity to language, which speaks-writes-expresses-communicates us before we do any of these things with or to it. Words are alive in this sense: they live through us and we live through them. We—the seal and the human, the sea and air, worlds and the spreading unworld.