



Hermeneutics and the Wild Language of the World

Brian Treanor

Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA

ABSTRACT

Some years ago, Richard Kearney suggested that the power of narrative imagination is capable of transporting us into the skin of a non-rational animal. However, imaginative projections regarding the lives and experiences of non-human animals are notoriously skewed by cultural prejudices, unjustified assumptions, and ignorance about the actual lives of animals. Far from providing us with solid ground for understanding and empathy with the natural world, narrative imagination is much more likely to misrepresent and distort things. This is because the otherness of the non-human world is, precisely, a non-linguistic otherness. Plants and animals do communicate, they do think and pursue goals in their own ways, some have complex emotional and social lives, and they are intrinsically valuable; but non-human beings do not view the world through the lens of human language, which is *poiesis*. However, developments in hermeneutics, particularly carnal hermeneutics, offer non-linguistic ways of framing our empathy and understanding. Kearney's own recent work, exemplified by *Touch* (Columbia 2021), is one example. While language (*poiesis*) is not widely-shared by diverse life-forms, touch is, offering us an alternative route to engaging our non-human kin.

KEYWORDS

hermeneutics,
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communication,
Richard Kearney,
J.M. Coetzee

I want to tell what the forests
were like

I will have to speak
in a forgotten language

—W.S. Merwin, “Witness”¹

Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;
Our meddling intellect
Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:—
We murder to dissect.

—William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned”²

1. Thinking Like a Jaguar

In *On Stories*, Richard Kearney writes that “the narrated action of a drama... solicits a mode of sympathy more extensive and resonant than that experienced in ordinary life. And it does so not simply because it enjoys the poetic license to suspend our normal protective reflexes . . . but also because it amplifies the range of those we might empathize with—reaching beyond family, friends and familiars to all kinds of foreigners.”³ He goes on to offer specific examples from fiction including Oedipus, Anna Karenina, and Julien Sorel; but then, in a remarkable leap, citing J.M. Coetzee, he extends the claim to include the eponymous jaguar of Ted Hughes’s poem: “His stride is wildernesses of freedom: / The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel. / Over the cage floor the horizons come.”⁴ Building on a claim made by Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello—“there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination”⁵—Kearney goes so far as to venture that “we can even transport ourselves into the skin of a ‘non-rational’ animal. What is impossible in reality is made possible in fiction.”⁶

¹ W.S. Merwin, *The Essential W.S. Merwin*, ed. Michael Wieggers (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2017), 208.

² William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 56.

³ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 138.

⁴ Ted Hughes, “The Jaguar” in *The Hawk in the Rain* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 4. Of course, Hughes was aware of, and perhaps responding to, Rilke’s “The Panther” in *The Poetry of Rilke*, trans. Edward Snow (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014). J.M. Coetzee has his character Elizabeth Costello reference this poem favorably in *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 50 ff. Hughes’s “The Jaguar” also factors into essays by Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

⁵ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 35. *The Lives of Animals* and *Elizabeth Costello* are commonly thought of as metafictional works that use the eponymous character as a kind of stand-in for Coetzee himself, through which he can make various philosophical and ethical arguments. As I cannot consider the complexities of metafiction or pseudonymous authorship here, in what follows I will not make a strong distinction between the opinions of J.M. Coetzee and those of the fictional Elizabeth Costello.

⁶ Kearney, *On Stories*, 139. Erazim Kohák makes a similarly bold claim, and in a book committed to a careful phenomenological account of the human relation to the natural world: “The miracle of verbal communication virtually abolishes all limits on the range of empathy” (Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 100).

Kearney is in good company when suggesting narrative and metaphor can span the gap between species and connect us with our non-human kin. In addition to Hughes and Coetzee, we might look to figures like Jack Turner, Annie Dillard, or Doug Peacock.⁷ Others extend our imaginative sympathy further still, suggesting that we can transport ourselves into the “experience” or being of abiotic entities, or that we can hear the “speech” of more-than-human world. For example, Thomas Merton writes of rain as “a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody...”⁸ And Aldo Leopold’s call to “think like a mountain” is one of the more famous aspirations in anglophone environmental literature.⁹

Nevertheless, claims like these—let’s keep Coetzee’s admiration for Hughes’s “The Jaguar” as our guiding example—seem questionable given the profound difficulties we have in sympathizing and empathizing with even human others.¹⁰ Seen in this light, the aspiration to imaginative or narrative empathy with the more-than-human world seems incredibly ambitious, and the claim that there are “no bounds” to the sympathetic imagination warrants further reflection. In what follows, I aim to show that traditional forms of hermeneutics are limited by their commitment to “the metaphor of the text”—rooted as it is in narrative, metaphor, language, and the like—and that lived and embodied forms of hermeneutics offer an alternative, supplementary route to understanding.¹¹

2. Thinking Like a Human Thinking Like a Jaguar

Those of us with highly developed powers of imagination are likely to find the claim that there is no limit to narrative rapport both attractive and plausible. But while there may well be no

⁷ For example, Jack Turner: “I don’t think we can say why [certain animals do what they do] without using analogies and metaphors from human emotional life” (Turner, *The Abstract Wild* [Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996], 78). Doug Peacock makes a similar observation: “Humans are so strongly discouraged from comparing their lives with those of other animals. Yet everything I had experienced taught me that metaphor is the fundamental path of imagining, a first line of inquiry into the lives of other creatures that sheds light on our own” (Doug Peacock, *Grizzly Years: In Search of the American Wilderness* [New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1996], 143). This is no doubt true in some sense. Nevertheless, hermeneutic encounters with the more-than-human world must be especially aware of the “double betrayal” that Ricoeur sees at the heart of all translation. See Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁸ Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing*, ed. Kathleen Deignan (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003), 139-140.

⁹ Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949).

¹⁰ The attentive reader will note the slippage between “empathy” and “sympathy” in the matter under consideration. Kearney says “it amplifies the range of those we might *empathize* with” (*On Stories*, 138), but Costello claims “there are no bounds to the *sympathetic* imagination” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 35). This slippage is the result of the fact that empathy and sympathy are used in a variety of overlapping ways in the English language. I will use sympathy to indicate “shared” or “parallel” feelings with another. Thus, we may sympathize with another who experiences a loss, and can do so even if we have not experienced a similar loss ourselves, even if we cannot imagine experiencing such a loss very well. Empathy, however, implies a more powerful identification with the other; and it is more philosophically and hermeneutically significant, because it suggests the power to feel “as if” one were another, which is at the very heart of what Kearney and others have in mind when thinking of narrative imagination.

¹¹ Obviously, there are many other thinkers who have not been so “forgetful” of the body or materiality: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Michel Foucault, Michel Serres, Judith Butler, Timothy Morton, and others. However, this essay is concerned with a lacuna in *hermeneutics*, and takes Kearney’s work as particularly illustrative, insofar as Kearney’s early work strongly emphasized the narrative and imaginative, while his most recent work takes up themes related to the carnal and somatic, especially touch.

bounds to imagination, I suspect that there are indeed bounds to imaginative understanding, as well as to sympathy and empathy. This is especially true with regard to empathy for the more-than-human world when that empathy is rooted in an all-too-human faculty like reason, language, or imagination. This, however, is a distinction that Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello seems to ignore:

Despite Thomas Nagel, who is probably a good man, despite Thomas Aquinas and René Descartes, with whom I have more difficulty in sympathizing, there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination. If you want proof, consider the following. Some years ago I wrote a book called *The House on Eccles Street*. To write that book I had to think my way into the existence of Marion Bloom. Either I succeeded or I did not. If I did not, I cannot imagine why you invited me here today. In any event, the point is, *Marion Bloom never existed*. Marion Bloom was a figment of James Joyce's imagination. If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life.¹²

The problems with this “proof” are readily apparent. First, given that Molly Bloom is indeed a fiction, there is no sense to an assertion that one has, or has not, “thought oneself into her mind” accurately. I can say anything I want to about the mind of Molly Bloom; but what would it mean to be “right” or “wrong” about what was going on there? Second—bracketing the fictionality of the characters—the ability of Elizabeth Costello to think herself into the existence of another white, Western, English-speaking, heterosexual woman is hardly a strong reason to suppose that she can think herself into the existence of bivalve mollusk, a being with which she shares membership in the taxonomic kingdom *animalia*, but with which she does not share a phylum, class, order, family, genus, or species—much less a history, culture, or language.

Given how difficult it is for humans to empathize with each other, we might well be skeptical as to whether the horizons of Hughes's caged jaguar can ever be ours. Can we actually empathize with (feel *as if*), not just sympathize with (feel *with* or *alongside*), the jaguar? What about the curlew? The salmon? The redwood tree? And, when we empathize, how accurate or appropriate is the “as if” of our *pathos*? The power and scope of imagination virtually guarantee that the vast majority of our projections will be very far from the mark. After all, one might imagine Hughes's jaguar or Coetzee's oyster engaging in all sorts of behaviors, directed at all sorts of ends, consumed by all kinds of thoughts and emotions; but that does not mean these imaginings are in fact faithful representations of the inner life of either animal, or that empathy rooted in those imaginings is well-(in)formed. If the “power of empathy with living things other than ourselves—the stranger the better—is a major test not just of poetic imagination but of ethical sensitivity,” it is arguably a test that we fail with alarming regularity, perhaps a test we are doomed to fail in the case of “stranger” beings.¹³

¹² Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 35.

¹³ Kearney, *On Stories*, 139. On our inability to “know what it is to be like” non-human animals, consider Thomas Nagel's famous essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” in *The Philosophical Review*, 83 (4): 435-450. On “thinking like a mountain,” see Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 129-133. David Allen Sibley's, *What's It Like to Be a Bird?* (New York: Knopf, 2020) and Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone, 2016) and *The Inner Life of Animals* (Vancouver, BC: Greystone, 2017) are recent, more popular engagements with similar themes.

Hughes is, after all, projecting when he imagines that the jaguar, unlike the other animals in the zoo, looks beyond the bars of his prison to imagine wider and wilder horizons; and his projections are full of cultural anthropocentrism of the most obvious sort. What makes the jaguar distinctively wild or mysterious in that English menagerie? Are the apes—who Hughes says, “yawn and adore their fleas in the sun”—any less out-of-place in the London Zoo simply because their behavior does not appear restless to Hughes’s gaze? What about the parrots he compares to “cheap tarts”? Or the tiger and lion he finds “indolent”? Speaking more broadly of our tendency to project, what makes the spotted hyena craven and vicious?¹⁴ The doe peaceful and innocent? The snake sinister? It should come as no surprise that characterizations like these are almost entirely the result of biased cultural narratives.¹⁵ Especially in the modern idiom—increasingly detached and alienated from nature—our casual application of human characteristics to the non-human world often has little to do with reality and everything to do with skewed cultural judgments. For example, people speak casually about sharks as “devils” or “killing machines” and dogs as “man’s best friend”; but dogs kill many more people each year in the United States.¹⁶

* * *

These issues present real problems for hermeneutics as traditionally conceived, which is why we need a hermeneutics “beyond the metaphor of the text.”¹⁷ Although it has been some time since hermeneutics has been restricted to literal texts, the vast majority of hermeneutics remains captivated by the metaphor of the text, the idea that “reading a text” is somehow *the* fundamental model for interpretation. But if hermeneutics has taught us anything it is that every “seeing” is always already a “seeing as,” an engagement with the world from a particular perspective that reveals some things and conceals others. So, we must acknowledge that the view that hermeneutics is somehow essentially reading—even when the “reading” and the “text” are metaphorical—will reveal and highlight certain truths while missing or occluding others. This, I

¹⁴ Along with sharks and snakes, the spotted hyena is one of the animals most consistently misrepresented by cultural prejudices—both in the West and in their native Africa. For an account of this, see Stephen E. Glickman, “The Spotted Hyena from Aristotle to the Lion King: Reputation is Everything” in *Social Research* (Fall 1995), vol. 62, No. 3, 501-537. Or, consider the corvids, the subject of another famous collection of poems by Hughes: *Crow* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001). The crow symbolizes everything from death, discord, and strife (many European stories) to creation (the Tlingit), from vanity and credulousness (La Fontaine’s *Le corbeau et le renard*) to wisdom (the ravens the ravens Huginn and Muninn in Norse mythology).

¹⁵ See Marcia Muelder Eaton, “Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 56, no.2 (Spring 1998), 152. These kinds of projections and misrepresentations are ubiquitous, and run in both directions, from the human to the non-human and from the non-human to the human. The ant is industrious, the owl wise, the cat disdainful, and the peacock a dandy. A brave person has the heart of a lion, a duplicitous one is a snake in the grass. These metaphors may get at something meaningful, but they are at least as dangerous as they are useful, because the tendency to take either the anthropomorphism or zoomorphism literally is almost irresistible.

¹⁶ Obviously, there are many more dogs in the United States than sharks. Nevertheless, for one comparison of data, compiled by the Florida Museum of Natural History, see: <https://www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/shark-attacks/odds/compare-risk/dog-attack/>. Accessed June 19, 2020.

¹⁷ On the metaphor of the text, see my “Thinking After Michel Serres” in *SubStance*, vol.48. no.3 (2019), “Lateralization and Leaning: Somatic Desire as a Model for Supple Wisdom” in *Somatic Desire*, eds. Sarah Horton, Stephen Mendelsohn, Christine Rojcewicz, and Richard Kearney (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019), and “Earthy Hermeneutics: Beyond the Metaphor of the Text” in *Continental Philosophy and the Environment*, ed. Jonathan Maskit (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield International, forthcoming).

think, is particularly evident when we think about more-than-human nature, the otherness of which is significantly more profound than that of human-to-human encounters.

Language is a curious thing. In the hands of skilled wordsmiths it *can* get us closer to, deeper into, the natural world. Rich poetic description opens up reality, as does rich scientific description. But at some point the proximity brought about by imagination doubles back on itself, crosses an event horizon in which the near suddenly becomes the far, and we find that poetic fancy has actually placed authentic animal experience even further out of reach. The strangeness of the non-human world eludes us in part *precisely because of its non-linguistic otherness*. And while we love poetic description, and ought to value the things it can and does accomplish, many of us come to feel that the otherness of nature, of Hughes's jaguar, is done justice not by our description or imagination, but rather by our silence, our witness, our appreciation, and our being-with.

3. Carnal Hermeneutics and the Limits of Language

While I've framed these concerns in the context of Kearney's work on narrative, they are broadly applicable to all human engagement with the non-human world. As "speaking apes," all of us are caught up in anthropomorphic and anthropocentric engagement with nature to one degree or another. Indeed, one might argue that language itself is structured by anthropocentric bias; and to use it, even skillfully, to describe the lives of animals is to engage in anthropomorphism. In one sense, human language exists on a continuum with other forms of animal—and, indeed, plant—communication.¹⁸ After all, we all evolved on the same planet, from the same common ancestral pool. Human languages are as natural as whale songs or plant mycorrhizal networks. However, sometimes a difference in degree is so extreme as to constitute a difference in kind; and this seems to be the case with human language.¹⁹ Language, in the hermeneutically relevant sense, is not mere communication; it is *poesis*—that is, *creation*, the making of something. Animals clearly communicate; they do not, so far as we can tell, poeticize, fantasize, fictionalize, or dramatize.²⁰ And these latter metaphorical uses are, arguably, the heart of human language. Certainly they are at the heart of the hermeneutic "seeing as."

The difference between human language and animal experience should make us question the degree to which the linguistic paradigm can help us actually empathize with a jaguar or "think" like a mountain.²¹ Fortunately, over the last decade, environmental hermeneutics has

¹⁸ See Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (London: William Collins, 2017) and Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree* (New York: Knopf 2021). Kearney briefly mentions the kingdom *plantae* in his account of haptic virtual reality.

¹⁹ See, for example, Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

²⁰ At least, we have no reason to suspect that any do. This is why Yuval Noah Harari, whatever other criticism is leveled against him, is correct to point out the importance of fiction in human communication (*Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* [New York: Harper, 2015]). In this essay I will often use "language" to mean "human language," that is, "language as *poesis*." I cannot emphasize strongly enough that this is not meant to imply that non-human entities—animals *and* plants—do not communicate. They obviously do. They obviously have a "language" of sorts; and we can obviously decode or 'translate' aspects of it. Nevertheless, non-human communication does not, as far as we can see, poeticize or fictionalize; and this difference is significant.

²¹ Kearney writes that "perception operates like language in that it does not confront an object head on, but senses things which speak to it laterally, on the side, provoking one's 'complicity'" (Kearney, "What is Diacritical Hermeneutics," *Journal of Applied Hermeneutics* [2011], 7 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11575/jah.v0i0.53187>).

begun to reassess how philosophy might engage the more-than-human world.²² And carnal hermeneutics, including Kearney's work on touch, can make significant contributions to this work.²³

3.1 *Kearney's Hermeneutic Arc*

Kearney is a prolific writer, and his work touches on a great many topics. However, he has not, as yet, taken up the environment or non-human nature in a sustained way. There are many ways in which one might summarize his philosophical itinerary; but we would not be far off if we located the pole star of his thinking in something like hospitality, which plays a role in his thinking from his earliest work on imagination to his most recent work on, well, hospitality.²⁴ Nevertheless, in his most recent work, there are intriguing gestures toward thinking about the non-human world and important resources for those who want to push his hermeneutic thinking even further. To see how, let's begin with Kearney's account of hospitality.

Kearney argues that there are (at least) two modes of hospitality: linguistic and carnal; and claims both are necessary for genuine hospitality.²⁵ I want push that observation a bit further and suggest that what he says explicitly of hospitality we can infer regarding hermeneutics itself. In the linguistic mode, translation is the paradigm because it serves a mediating function between two dialects while attempting to remain faithful to both. This comes, of course, with the risk of a double betrayal in which the "guest" language is forced to conform to words, grammar, and syntax of the "host" language, and the "host" language receives the original meaning of the "guest" language only imperfectly. It has been observed that all translation is interpretation; but perhaps we should add that every translation is both a murder and a rebirth. Because of this tension between hospitality and hostility, every guest language calls out both "translate me" (i.e., understand me) and, at the same time, "don't translate me" (i.e., don't change what I am, which would be to misunderstand me). As Kearney says, "take me, incorporate me, but leave something of me to myself."²⁶ And because language (as *poesis*) is distinctive to humans, when we apply the linguistic paradigm to "capture" and "translate" the meaning of the more-than-human world, the danger of distortion is particularly acute. Here we must remain especially respectful of otherness, must remain keenly aware of the gap between what we encounter and how we speak of it. "Commune with me! Communicate with me! But do not domesticate me; do not reduce my wild essence to your human language." In the case of nature, we must remain attentive to both our kinship with it and its profound otherness and wildness, its irreducible mystery.²⁷

²² *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, eds. Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, Martin Drenthen, and David Utsler (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

²³ *Carnal Hermeneutics*, eds. Richard Kearney and Brian Treanor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) and Richard Kearney, *Touch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

²⁴ Among other examples, see Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998); *The Poetics of Imagining* (New York: Fordham, 1998); *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2001); *Anatheism* (New York: Columbia, 2011); with Melissa Fitzpatrick, *Radical Hospitality* (New York: Fordham, 2021). In addition to these publications, see Kearney's development of the Guestbook Project, which is aimed a peacemaking and reconciliation through narrative exchange (<http://guestbookproject.org/>).

²⁵ Richard Kearney, "Double Hospitality: Between Word and Touch" in *The Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 1 (2019), 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷ Kearney notes that there is an ethical element to translation and to narrative hospitality: "one nation's narrative of glory is often another's narrative of suffering and defeat" (Kearney, "Double Hospitality," 77). That is no doubt true in innumerable cases of historical memory; but if this narrative mismatch is a problem in the history of Ireland, the

Carnal hermeneutics, however, makes a useful foil for the more popular linguistic mode. The linguistic mode asserts that “to be human is to interpret and to interpret is to translate”; but the development of carnal hermeneutics calls this identification into question.²⁸ While translation remains a paradigmatic example of hermeneutics, hermeneutics is about more than translation; it includes perception, orientation, directionality, and similar non-linguistic modes. “Before words, we are flesh, flesh becoming words for the rest of our lives.”²⁹ Kearney observes that Merleau-Ponty argues that meaning is given as a “mobile interaction of signs involving intervals, absences, folds and gaps (*écarts*),” and, further, that “this is not just a function of language... but the very structure of perception itself.”³⁰ This indicates that hermeneutics is not, in the broadest sense, reducible to metaphor, narrative, language, or even interpretation. There are multifarious ways to “[sense] another sense beyond or beneath apparent sense,” which means hermeneutics is concerned with the “polysemy of language *and life*.”³¹ The *savoir* of hermeneutics is linked to and expressive of all three connotations of the French *sens*: “sensation, direction, meaning,” which is why Kearney speaks not only of interpretation or translation, but also of “body mapping, orientation and negotiation.”³² How might this help us to empathize with the jaguar or think like the mountain?

3.2 Touch

Kearney’s own work in carnal hermeneutics is closely tied to his interest in touch, which he develops in two senses: the narrow and more literal sense of tactile contact with things, and the broader and more metaphorical sense of tactful relationships. Indeed, in *Touch*, he demonstrates persuasively that touch is, in one way or another, operative in all our engagement with the world. Here and elsewhere, he explores the ways in which touch and animal savvy might help to bridge the gaps between humans and our fellow creatures.

First, he argues that *tact*—“the ability to detect subtle differences” in things and in others—is, in the broadest sense, an essential element of all our senses.³³ Tact is found in the “savviness” of good taste, the carnal know-how that allows us to understand what is required, and what is appropriate, in a given situation. The “flair” of “good nose” helps us to distinguish between the helpful and the harmful, the ripe or comestible and the spoiled; it is tied to arousal, and to memory. Here Kearney draws our attention to the dog Argos, who is one of only two compatriots to recognize Odysseus on his return to Ithaca after his twenty-year absence.³⁴ Insight, foresight, and hindsight are manifestations of tact that contribute to having good “vision,” the ability to see what others cannot, including that which is invisible to the physical

United States, or the Balkans, how much more would it be the case in the history of human interaction with the non-human world? How does the Enlightenment narrative of progress and the “advancement of humankind”—or, even more anthropocentrically, “the world”—square with the Anthropocene and the advent of the Sixth Mass Extinction?

²⁸ Kearney, “Double Hospitality,” 73.

²⁹ Richard Kearney, “The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics” in *New Literary History*, 46 (2015), 99. Note that “language” comes to us from the Latin *lingua*, or tongue, via the French *langage*; but the “wild language of the world” speaks with the “first tongue” of taste rather than the “second tongue” of poetry. See Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. Margret Sanky and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008). Kearney similarly asserts that the buccal mouth of taste precedes the oral mouth of speech (Kearney, *Touch*, 18).

³⁰ Kearney, “What is Diacritical Hermeneutics,” 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1. Emphasis mine.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ Kearney, *Touch*, 10 and, for the subsequent account of tact in the senses, 17-31.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 and 62.

eye. And tact allows those with a “good ear” to perceive the resonance and rhythmic musicality at the heart of things (including, I would argue, nature).

Tact’s skill in discrimination is also at play in ethics, helping us to discern differences and to understand which ones are relevant and which are not. In this sense it is not unlike a kind of carnal *phronesis*, the wisdom that helps us to understand what matters in a given situation. It is therefore involved in how we choose to expose ourselves to others, helping us to differentiate between danger and sanctuary, friend and foe. More importantly, however, it is a crucial in helping to inform our treatment of others. Tact is what helps us to understand when to touch, and how, as well as when not to touch.³⁵

Moving beyond this broader account of tactfulness, Kearney is interested in touch itself, that is, our tactile engagement with others and with the world. Historically, touch was often framed as one of the “lower” or more “animal” senses, concerned with the material world and, therefore, subject to its pressures and distortions. In contrast, sight, removed from its objects, became the model for the disinterested intellection that would help us to grasp truth. However, following Aristotle in the *De Anima*, Kearney maintains that touch is mediated by the membrane of flesh (*sarx*). Therefore, to touch is not to have direct, unmediated experience of things; rather, touch is a mediated engagement with the world that is always-already a “seeing [or in this case feeling] as.”³⁶ Moreover,

precisely because it mediates between a self carnally located “here” and an other located “there,” touch is what enables empathy. *Em-pathein*—feeling oneself as one with the other. Which is why touching finds its social beginnings in the handshake: open hand to open hand—the origin of community. War and peace are skin deep in this sense.³⁷

Here Kearney makes a claim that will have direct bearing on the question of empathy with the more-than-human world, suggesting that in liminal experiences of otherness—experiences where language, stretched beyond even the expansive range and powers of *poiesis*, begins to fail us—there is the possibility of turning to an alternative hermeneutic mode. More on this in a moment.

Note, however, that moving from the book to the body does not, on its own, get us beyond anthropocentrism. “Civilization,” Kearney observes, “begins with the handshake.”³⁸ It’s only once we shake hands, rather than draw swords, that we stop to ask how someone else understands the world: “it is in touch [not translation] that the most basic act of exposure to others occurs.”³⁹ All well and good; and illustrative of the significance of carnality. But note how talk of handshakes risks giving carnal hermeneutics a subtle anthropocentric spin. Kearney’s account of Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela and Eugene de Kock is one of his more powerful examples of carnal connection; but it is described in terms of their “common *humanity*” and the things that are “common among us fellow *human* beings.”⁴⁰ If we are to avoid transcending the

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 144n3 and 184n16.

³⁶ In showing that “interpretation (*hermeneuon*) is at work in our most elementary experiences, Aristotle anticipates the insights of contemporary hermeneutics” (Kearney, *Touch*, 39).

³⁷ Kearney, *Touch*, 42.

³⁸ Kearney, “Double Hospitality,” 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83. Emphases mine. Dr. Gobodo-Madikizela served on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and, in her book recounts a chilling, but exceptional, encounter with de Kock, a former South African police officer, torturer, and assassin. Gobodo-Madikizela recounts how she reached out and grasped de Kock’s hand as he

anthropocentrism of language for the anthropocentrism of the distinctively human body, we must supplement examples centered on handshakes and the breaking of bread with something more.

Kearney does take up animals or animal bodies in various places—drawing on authors including Louv, De Wall, Van der Kolk, and others—and, given his interests in hospitality and healing, he is particularly interested in the topic of human-animal somatic therapy.⁴¹ In such therapeutic relationships, dogs, horses, or other animals work with humans experiencing the effects of PTSD, autism, and other conditions. Critically, Kearney notes, research also shows that in many of these relationships, the benefit is *reciprocal*; that is, the non-human animal also experiences observable benefits from the embodied interaction. In other words, the tactile contact between human and non-human establishes a relationship that allows each being to feel, and help ameliorate, the woundedness of the other. A kind of embodied empathy made possible by tactful contact; not one that allows us to “say” or “name” what the other feels, but which goes some way toward meaningful experiencing-with the other.

4. Not Thinking, Like a Jaguar

Can hermeneutics get beyond human biases? In what sense is it possible, or even desirable, to do so? At the outset, we must acknowledge that empathy—the problem with which we began—is something that exists on a spectrum. Consider: if the criteria for empathy was feeling *precisely* what an afflicted person feels, then no one is empathetic. Empathy is feeling “as if” the other, and it is felt on a hermeneutic register that admits of degrees. The lower bound of empathy is clear: someone who does not identify at all with the other, her situation, her experience, or her feelings, whether that is the result of inattention, disregard, or full-blown callousness. The upper bound of empathy, communion with another person bordering on identification, is not achievable. Actual empathy falls between these two poles, but the goal is obviously to emphasize well or accurately, to get as close as possible to feeling *what the other feels* rather than feeling *what I imagine the other feels*, all the while respecting the gap that will always remain between the self and the other.

Thus, returning to our guiding example, the questions are whether we can feel “like” a jaguar, how close that “like” or “as if” can get, and what criteria we might use to know whether our “as if” feelings and experiences are closer to or farther from the truth. How can hermeneutics get us to identify more readily and more accurately with non-human animals? Or with the being of the non-human world more broadly? If we hope to get closer to empathy with our non-human kin, we must bracket, as much as possible, our all-too-human linguistic engagement with the world. More-than-human nature does not experience the world through the filter of language. Whatever it means to “empathize with a jaguar” or “think like a mountain,” it is going to require that we deemphasize the role of language. For it is language (in the sense of *poesis*) that distinguishes us and separates us from the non-human world.

expressed remorse for one of his many crimes. Kearney reflects on the power of touch and empathy in the clasping of hands, exploring the possibility of “impossible” forgiveness.

⁴¹ Kearney, *Touch*, 109-111. For example, Kearney cites Richard Louv, *Our Wild Calling* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2019). He also draws on the work of primatologist Franz de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* (New York: Norton, 2016) and *Mama’s Last Hug* (New York: Norton, 2019), as well as Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Penguin, 2015). See Kearney, *Touch*, 180n64 and 181n65.

4.1 *Silence*

Any effective listening to the earth is going to have to begin with silence. This should come as no surprise. Kearney observes that “learning to be silent in order to listen more keenly to the call of others—human, animal or divine—is a first principle of almost every wisdom tradition.”⁴² This will require a literal silence, of course, a willingness to stop talking and stop making noise, a willingness to be in the world in a quieter way. But the silence I have in mind is more profound than simply the absence of speech and human noise; we need to efface or disrupt the very tendency to engage the world linguistically, to impose our categories upon it.

Narrative imagination, at least commonly, is so busy describing things that it often fails to adequately listen to them. When it comes to the natural world, we must strive, as Thoreau says, to hear “the language in which all things and events speak without metaphor”—that is, directly, in their own ways and on their own terms, not “as” or according to some human measure.⁴³ Or, as Michel Serres puts it, “to listen to the things freed of [words], the way they presented themselves before finding themselves named.”⁴⁴ We must give up our natural—and in other circumstances salutary and even blessed—tendency to narrate and poeticize. The Genesis story of creation, in which God gave Adam the opportunity to name the animals (Genesis 2:19-20), testifies to our obsession with describing the world, which too often has been closely associated with dominion over it (Genesis 1:28). But what were the Leviathan or the Behemoth before Adam named them? What was the jaguar before it became image for Hughes’s own feelings of confinement, or a metaphor for the limited scope of modern, urban life, in which we are separated from the earth, the sky, and our wild origins?

How much of the world do we misunderstand, or miss entirely, because “nature loves to hide” (Heraclitus), and how much do we miss simply because we are just too loud, too presumptuous, too self-absorbed? When ordinary language fails us, we rightly fall back on poetry; but, eventually, we reach the limits of language itself, a point at which words are not just inadequate, they are inappropriate.⁴⁵ Hermeneutics, writes Kearney, “invigilates the limits of the sayable and the tangible.”⁴⁶ Hear! Hear! But if this applies, as it does, to hospitality and matters of interpersonal boundaries (e.g., social relations, sexual relations) and faith (e.g., Christ’s *noli me tangere*), I want to insist that it applies with equal or greater force to our encounters with the more than human world.⁴⁷ Don’t speak; don’t grasp. Be quiet. Be still. Observe rather than classifying or judging or ordering. Watch, listen, smell, feel. *Be*.

⁴² Kearney, *Touch*, 28.

⁴³ Thoreau, *Walden*, 111.

⁴⁴ Michel Serres, *Biogea*, trans. Randolph Burkes (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2012), 38.

⁴⁵ Just when and why language fails us is a complex question. I suspect that in some instances the supposed ineffability of experience is not the result of the gap between language and life, but rather a stunted vocabulary (see Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge* [Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997], 72). In other cases, the issue is not lack of facility with language, but rather that language itself is becoming more homogenized, less attentive to particularity (see, for example, Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* [New York: Penguin, 2016], and Barry Lopez, *Home Ground* [San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2013]). Both these trends can be resisted; and it might be that we can still recover a language that does justice to hard, inhuman reality. However, even if skilled poets and wordsmiths extend the reach of language, there will be limits. I don’t mean to suggest we should abandon or disparage language or minimize the enormous good it does for us. I merely want to mind the gap between words and things.

⁴⁶ Kearney, “Double Hospitality,” 86.

⁴⁷ Tact helps us to both close gaps and respect them, and to understand which is appropriate in a given situation. Thus, tact includes knowing when not to speak or touch. For example, the present defense of carnal hermeneutics is

Of course, silencing language does not mean silencing the world, which is full of its own particular forms of expression. To hear these voices, it is not enough to stop our chatter and silence our machines. Listening to what the world has to say, on its terms, requires that we become receptive to meaning that is expressed in ways other than the natural languages. Poet Denise Levertov reminds us that the world is awash with meaning, but that we are too self-absorbed to recognize it: “how naïve, / to keep wanting words we could speak ourselves, / English, Urdu, Tagalog, the French of Tours...”⁴⁸ Rather than listening to (and *feeling*) what the more-than-human world has to “say” for itself and to us—which it does constantly in its own *inhuman* ways—we run down blind alleys trying to teach chimpanzees sign language and dolphins Morse code.⁴⁹

Indeed, becoming receptive to what nature is expressing—a necessary first step in trying to understand or empathize with it—requires more than just attending to its sounds. Here is where carnal hermeneutics, including Kearney’s rich account of *touch*, offers another option. The more-than-human world first expresses itself to us not through words, sentences, metaphors, or stories, but through sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures.

4.2 *Bodying Forth*

To empathize well with the jaguar—indeed, even to sympathize with it—we are going to need more than the standard tropes of narrative imagination. First, we’ll need to supplement narrative with other modes of knowing: empirical, scientific, and so on. However, even these supplements leave us narrowly confined to (exclusively, distinctively) human categories and ways of understanding. Thus, second, we are going to need to supplement narrative and other linguistic modes with alternative hermeneutic schemes that reveal some of what is concealed by the metaphor of the text. These alternative approaches should try to get us beyond, behind, or under language—which is the distinctive human trait *par excellence*—to explore other forms of expression that are shared more widely with more-than-human nature. We need tools that are more *zoon* and less *logon*, experiences that reconnect us with bodies and with the earth.

When evolution allowed us to assume an upright, bipedal perspective on the world, everything changed. Our hands became free for tool-making, which, it seems, may have influenced the development of language in turn.⁵⁰ In standing upright, we distanced our nose and mouth and hands from the earth—where they remain for our quadruped kin—leading us to disparage the “animal senses” of taste and touch. “The word *anthropos* implies that man not only sees but looks up at that which he sees [and, I’d add, ‘looks down’ on the rest of nature], and hence he alone of all animals is rightly called *anthropos* because he looks up at (*anthropei*) what

not to suggest that literal touch would be appropriate with the jaguar. The tragic case of Timothy Treadwell—eaten alive by a grizzly bear after what many people believe to be a history of inappropriate behavior anthropomorphizing the bears in Katmai—is an illustrative cautionary tale.

⁴⁸ Denise Levertov, “Immersion” in *This Great Unknowing: Last Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1999), 53. As Thoreau says of meaning in the natural world, “much is published, but little printed” (Thoreau, *Walden*, 111).

⁴⁹ Coetzee’s Costello mocks the anthropocentrism and abstraction of many animal experiments: “If I as a human being were told that the standards by which animals are being measured in these experiments are human standards, I would be insulted. It is the experiments themselves that are imbecile. The behaviorists who design them claim that we understand only by a process of creating abstract models and then testing those models against reality. What nonsense. We understand by immersing ourselves and our intelligence in complexity. There is something self-stultified in the way in which scientific behaviorism recoils from the complexity of life” (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 62–63).

⁵⁰ See Thomas White, *In Defense of Dolphins* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007).

he has seen.”⁵¹ As Kearney notes, Western philosophy instituted a dichotomy between the “intellectual,” which since Plato has operated on a visual metaphor, and the “animal,” which remains rooted in touch, taste, and smell.⁵²

Perhaps, then, it is time to un-yoke the body, our beast of burden, to give it a sabbath from toiling in the fields (or, better, at the scribe’s desk), and to let it run wild. We will, of course, remain human, marked by both the *logos* and the *polis* that characterize our species; but we will cease to live as if being fully human means rejecting our animality. Cease to think that the only way of understanding something requires that we name it, classify it, domesticate it, and control it. Cease to think of the body or the earth as a prison, remembering it as our natal home.

Returning to the example with which we began, Hughes’s jaguar, we should note that Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello contends that humans can “think” their way into animal experience through narrative and poetic imagination. She points to Hughes, Rilke, and others who, in their poetry, provide sufficiently rich accounts to induce something like sympathy, perhaps even empathy. But the language Costello employs is revealing. She speaks of “*bodying* forth the jaguar” and observes that Hughes shows us that we can “*embody* animals” by a process of poetic imagination that “mingles *breath* and *sense* in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will.”⁵³ Here, I think, we have an implicit recognition that the way to get closer to the jaguar is not quite the same as the imaginative leap that helps us identify with Molly Bloom.

Kearney writes that “carnal hermeneutics may be said to have two patron saints—the god Hermes and the dog Argos. For if Hermes discloses hermetic cyphers from above, Argos brings animal savvy from below.”⁵⁴ Of course, these two modes—imaginative and embodied—can work in parallel. Indeed, for us they always will. We have a share of both *zoe* and *logos* and are immersed in both nature and culture.⁵⁵ The point is not to become a non-human animal, but to better understand and empathize with them. And, taking a cue from Argos, we might recognize

⁵¹ Plato, *Cratylus*, 229c. Taken up by Kearney in *Touch*, 33.

⁵² “For Plato the eye is sovereign. The tactile body is a beast of burden and contagion to be kept in its place” (Kearney, *Touch*, 33). There are, of course, notable exceptions to the disembodied tendencies of Western philosophy (Kearney, *Touch*, 34).

⁵³ Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, 53. Emphases mine. Costello associated the spirit of Hughes’s poem with a kind of “primitivism.” Another intriguing perspective here would be the account offered in Eduardo Kohn’s *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (University of California Press, 2013). Kohn’s work is a sustained engagement with Peirce’s semiotic theory and the worldview of the Runa people of the upper Amazon basin. Coincidentally, the jaguar plays a central role in Runa experience of the world; they speak of shape-shifting “were-jaguars” (Kohn’s translation of *runa puma*) that traverse human-jaguar boundaries and can experience something of both perspectives. Kohn’s account argues that selfhood, communication, thinking, signifying, and the like are not distinctive to human beings, but are widely distributed among living beings. He argues that life, per se, is “constitutively semiotic” (9), though his account focuses a bit more on animals than plants. And he raises the intriguing possibility of “trans-species” pidgin communication. Of course, much hinges on what one means by “thinking,” “language,” and the like; and Kohn’s work deserves its own in-depth study. However, for the present essay I’ll stick with Coetzee, because that is interlocutor Kearney himself has chosen in his earlier work.

⁵⁴ Richard Kearney, “Carnal Hermeneutics,” in *Imagination Now*, ed. M.E. Littlejohn (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), 101. Argos, of course, was Odysseus’s dog. Other than Euryclea—who also recognized Odysseus by a carnal mark—Argos was the only one to recognize Odysseus when he returned to Ithaca twenty years after leaving to wage war on Troy. Another classical reference in *Touch* is to Chiron, the centaur tutor to Peleus, Achilles, Perseus, and others. As a hybrid of human and animal, Chiron represents, and reminds us of, a connection to both culture and nature. Thoreau recognized this ideal: “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both” (Thoreau, *Walden*, 210).

⁵⁵ Different authors attach different meanings to *zoe* and *bios*. For clarity: here, by *zoe*, I mean animal life.

that empathy with a jaguar or dog is better served by emphasizing the carnal experiences we share rather than the linguistic experiences we do not.

One might well object that many animal senses are either so different (e.g., the echolocation of bats, octopi “smelling” or “tasting” via their tactile tentacles) or so much more powerful (e.g., the canine sense of smell) as to constitute a difference in kind. I have suggested that human language exists on a continuum with animal forms of communication, but that the difference in degree is so large as to constitute a difference in kind; and perhaps the same should be said of certain animal senses. Fair enough. However, while many animal species have some particular trait that is so alien to human experience as to present an insurmountable barrier to imaginative empathy, they often have other attributes that are less foreign. I might have difficulty imagining accurately what it is like to experience the environment like a dolphin, in part because I lack a sophisticated sense of echolocation; however, I share many other characteristics with the dolphin: being air-breathing, and warm-blooded; being part of a social species; and being disposed to play. So, rather than imposing human *logos* or *poiesis* on the dolphin, and rather than assuming I can accurately imagine the dolphin’s experience of echolocation, perhaps the thing to do is to start with what we share more broadly. If I want to understand something of what it is to be like a dolphin, perhaps I will do better to reflect less on our divergent vocalizations and more on our common experience of non-purposive play in the surf.

Will there be errors in such an approach? Absolutely. Just as there are errors and misjudgments and infelicities when I try to empathize with another human. But the carnal route to empathy with the more-than-human world is significantly more promising than the linguistic route. As Kearney observes, there are myriad examples of mutual human-animal healing via carnal being-with; and he offers a personal anecdote about his own experience of depression and the role of the landscape and non-human animals in recovery:

I ultimately discovered modes of ‘embodied’ healing to be more effective, profound and long-lasting. In my case, these included... planting trees and shrubs in the garden and spending as much time as possible with animals (especially horses and dogs). The more I walked the Wicklow hills with my retriever, Bella, the more the Black dog slipped away. In all this I followed the advice of a wise friend: “Enough talk, back to the body.”⁵⁶

This is a moving personal account. Could we expand these reflections on human-animal interactions (and those of Haraway, Oliver, and others), which are largely focused on companionship or therapy with domesticated animals, to consider the wider, and wilder, more-than-human world? I think so, although at this point such an account must be deferred.

“Back to the body” is, perhaps, one alternative way to pursue the phenomenological commitment “to the things themselves.”⁵⁷ And, again, Kearney is in excellent company here. Thoreau writes of seeking “thoughts which the body thought” and of “returning” to his senses “like a bird or beast,” during his daily treks. Nan Shepherd is even more direct. Of her life among the elemental realities of her beloved Cairngorms, she writes:

⁵⁶ Kearney, *Touch*, 106.

⁵⁷ “Go, run, faith will come to you, the body will sort things out” (Serres, *Variations on the Body*, 78). And, to “back to the body,” I would add “back to the earth.” We need to reconnect to the elemental materiality of our natal home—humus, soil, is related to *homo*, human.

Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode of apprehension but their own, that the body must be said to think . . . Walking thus, hour after hour, the senses keyed, one walks the flesh transparent. But no metaphor, *transparent*, or *light as air*, is adequate. The body is not made negligible, but paramount. Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled. One is not bodiless, but essential body. It is therefore when the body is keyed to its highest potential and controlled to a profound harmony deepening into something that resembles trance, that I discover most nearly what it is *to be*. I have walked out of the body and into the mountain.⁵⁸

I am unsure if Shepherd was aware of Leopold; but I know of no better account of how to “think like a mountain.” If the inhuman world “speaks” to us, its “language” is material, and we “hear” it bodily: touching, tasting, walking, swimming, climbing, being.

⁵⁸ Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*, 105-106. Note that it is walking—not reading or writing—that connects Shepherd to the mountain. The involvement of the body is essential. Additionally, we should note that escaping an all-too-human perception of *time* is surely part of what it is to “think like a mountain.” Thus, for example, on seeing an entire generation of seed rotting on the branch, Thoreau first perceives it as a “glaring imperfection in Nature”; however, he later came to understand that “what made no sense on a human scale could be understood by lengthening the measure of time to the scale of the planet” (Laura Dassow Walls, *Thoreau: A Life* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017], 474-477).