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The Mother Tongue: Acquiring Language and Being Human

REBECCA THOMAS ANKENY

One of my favorite Far Sides shows a spider on an analyst's couch, saying, "It's the same dream night after night...I walk out on my web, and suddenly a foot sticks—and then another foot sticks, and another, and another, and another..." Gary Larsen's spider expresses the impression that people who are fascinated by language have: language is like a web. I spin it out thinking that I have it under control, and suddenly it seems I am caught in the system of words. I open my mouth to speak, and suddenly words appear or disappear, the wrong words come, or unintentional double meanings embarrass me like slipping on a banana peel. Or I get entangled in what I'm trying to express or in the associations of words with each other. Language helps us get what we want. However, we are caught in it also, tantalized by and yet separated from what we most deeply desire.

Jacques Lacan, French psychoanalyst, has thought and written about the relationship of language to the human being. I will tell this as if it were a story about Lacan himself.¹

The infant Jacques began without any defined center of self, no sense of difference between himself and other, and direct access to reality, particularly the body of his mother.² This pre-Oedipal stage Lacan later came to

1. This information on Lacan comes out of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minn Press, 1983). See also *Jacques Lacan* by Anika Lemaire, translated by David Macey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

2. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minn Press, 1983), p. 164.

call “the imaginary” state of being. In this state of being, baby Jacques knew really only two terms, himself and the other, his mother, who represented external reality for him.³ Within this “imaginary” state of being, little Jacques first began to develop an ego, an integrated self-image, as his mother and the mirror reflected back to him a unified image of himself.⁴ Lacan later came to call this the “mirror” stage, and it is basically narcissistic. In this reflected image, the child Jacques saw a self which was himself but at the same time unified in a way alien from his experience of himself and the world.⁵ The small child before the mirror was “a kind of ‘signifier’—something capable of bestowing meaning—and...the image the child [saw was] a kind of ‘signified,’ or the meaning of the child.”⁶ Jacques perceived no gap “between signifier and signified, subject and world,” between himself and his image.⁷

The dyadic relationship with his mother and his residence in the imaginary state of being were disrupted for little Jacques by the entrance of his father into his perception. His father did not allow Jacques unlimited access to his mother,⁸ and therefore Father signified the arrival of Law, first understood as the social taboo on incest with the mother and then as the representative of “the wider familial and social network” of which Jacques was a part.⁹ Jacques’ desire for his mother was driven underground and became the unconscious.¹⁰

Jacques’ new perception of his father forced him into awareness that “one term or subject is what it is only by excluding another.”¹¹ The father signified Jacques’ first awareness of sexual distinctions.¹² This first discovery of sexual difference occurred at about the same time (around three years old) that Jacques was discovering language itself, discovering that “a sign has meaning only by dint of its difference from other signs, and...that a sign presupposes the *absence* of the object it signifies. ...[A]ll language...substitutes itself for some direct, wordless possession of the object itself.”¹³ The child Jacques learned that his own identity was “constituted by [his] relations of difference and similarity to the other subjects [his mother and father] around [him].”¹⁴

3. Eagleton, p. 165.

4. Eagleton, p. 164.

5. Eagleton, p. 165.

6. Eagleton, p. 166.

7. Eagleton, p. 166.

8. Oddly enough, the implication is that the mother would allow such access if not prohibited by the father. This seems to place the mother in a position of entire passivity.

9. Eagleton, p. 165.

10. Eagleton, p. 165.

11. Eagleton, p. 166.

12. Eagleton, p. 165.

13. Eagleton, p. 166.

Little Jacques then moved from the imaginary state of being into what Lacan later came to call “the symbolic order.” Unfortunately, Jacques was permanently split between the conscious ego and the unconscious, which was the desire his father’s presence forced him to repress. Jacques learned to substitute the empty world of language for direct access to reality, particularly to the now prohibited body of the mother. He found language to be empty because it was “just an endless process of difference and absence: instead of being able to possess anything in its fullness, the child...now simply [moved] from one signifier to another, along a linguistic chain which is potentially infinite.”¹⁵ His entry into language meant that he was severed from what Lacan came to call the “real.”¹⁶ The loss of access to the mother’s body left “a gap at the very center of his being” which little Jacques tried to fill with other objects. However, he was “never able to recover the pure (if fictive) self-identity and self-completion which he [had known] in the imaginary.”¹⁷ In order to use language, little Jacques worked hard to contain its sliding and evasiveness, “provisionally nailing down words onto meanings.”¹⁸

When he grew up Jacques Lacan came to write the following: Language is never entirely under our control, but instead is what internally divides us.¹⁹ Language, parents, and the symbolic order are not synonymous, but they are intimately allied: they pre-exist us, they assign us *our* places, they bring us into being and then outrun our grasp. These, together with the unconscious, are the Other, the object of our desire which at the same time generates our desire because we “are caught up in linguistic, sexual and social relations.”²⁰ Lacan implies that language is a sign of our initiation into the symbolic order which includes culture and family, but he emphasizes that it also divides us from ourselves, others, and the world, and that it is ultimately unable to fulfill our desire for connectedness.

A very different picture of what it means when a child acquires language emerges in the writings of neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks. Sacks became interested in deafness and the deaf with especial focus on the place language plays in the development of the human being. In his 1989 book *Seeing Voices*, Dr. Sacks describes his understanding of the relationship between the human being and language. Again, here is the story of that relationship as if it were his own.

14. Eagleton, p. 167.

15. Eagleton, p. 167.

16. Eagleton, p. 168.

17. Eagleton, p. 168.

18. “[F]or Lacan all our discourse is in a sense a slip of the tongue; if the process of language is as slippery and ambiguous as he suggests, we can never mean precisely what we say and never say precisely what we mean” (Eagleton, p. 169).

19. Eagleton, p. 169.

20. Eagleton, p. 174.

The infant Oliver began with his own independent experience of the world arrived at through the senses,²¹ all of which worked normally. As a hearing infant, Oliver's first language use, first communication, was between his mother and himself.²² Little Oliver was able to acquire language at all because "grammatical potential is present...in every child's brain" (47, note).²³ However, he could never have acquired language in isolation, as is evidenced by the plight of the prelingually deaf who are not exposed to language of any kind in the crucial period from birth until five years.²⁴ The child Oliver's innate ability to use language was activated by many transactions with other people, though at first mostly his mother, who already possessed linguistic power and competence.²⁵ Oliver's mother, and most of the others who talked with him, were a step ahead; the infant Oliver could not "move into, or conceive of, the next stage ahead except through its being occupied and communicated to him by his mother."²⁶ The child's independent sensory experience of the world correlated with and confirmed the mother's language and in turn, was given meaning by it. It was his mother's language, internalized by Oliver, that allowed him "to move from sensation into 'sense,' to ascend from a perceptual into a conceptual world."²⁷

The ability to name gave the child Oliver the feeling of a kind of ownership.²⁸ He gained the ability to question and developed "an active and questing disposition in the mind," not "spontaneously...or directly from the impact of experience," but from the communicative exchange; it required *dialogue*, in particular the complex dialogue of mother and child.²⁹ Oliver's mother had "[a] terrible power...to communicate with her child properly or not; ...[she could] introduce a 'generalized reflection of reality,' a conceptual world that [would] give coherence and meaning to life, and challenge the mind and emotions of the child, or [she could] leave everything at the level of the ungeneralized, the unquestioned, at something almost below the

21. Oliver Sacks, *Seeing Voices* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club Edition, 1990), p. 62.

22. Sacks does not exclude fathers or other persons who are caregivers during infancy from performing this function.

23. Sacks, p. 47, note.

24. Sacks, p. 83. Dr. Kathleen Kleiner, a colleague of mine in psychology specializing in infant development, tells me that children have significant pre-natal exposure to language, also.

25. Sacks, 25.

26. Sacks, p. 63.

27. Sacks, p. 63. Noam Chomsky writes: "We cannot avoid being struck by the enormous disparity between knowledge and experience, in the case of language, between the generative grammar that expresses the linguistic competence of the native speaker and the meager and degenerate data [to which he is exposed] on the basis of which he has constructed this grammar for himself" (quoted in Sacks, p. 83).

28. Sacks, p. 49.

29. Sacks, p. 66.

animal level of the perceptual.”³⁰ Furthermore, from dialogue, external and social, Oliver moved to monologue, inner speech, in order to become himself, to think. “[O]ur real language, our real identity, lies in inner speech, in that ceaseless stream and generation of meaning that constitutes the individual mind.”³¹ Because Oliver learned language at the appropriate time,³² he was able to “enter fully into [the] human estate and culture, communicate freely with [his] fellows, acquire and share information.”³³

When Oliver grew up, he studied the phenomenon of deafness and wrote the following:

The study of the deaf shows us that much of what is distinctively human in us—our capacities for language, for thought, for communication, and culture—do not develop automatically in us, are not just biological functions, but are, equally, social and historical in origin; that they are a *gift*—the most wonderful of gifts—from one generation to another. We see that Culture is as crucial as Nature.³⁴

His understanding of the function of language for human beings became this: The human being without language is alienated from self, from others, from culture; without questions, without metaphors, without propositions, without past or future, without imagination. Language connects us to ourselves, to others, to culture. He writes:

Language arises—biologically—from below, from the irrepressible need of the human individual to think and communicate. But it is also generated, and transmitted—culturally—from above, a living and urgent embodiment of the history, the world-views, the images and passions of a people.³⁵

But he still longed for a primal language, like that envisioned by the eighteenth-century Romantic Jean Jacques Rousseau:

a primordial or original human language, in which everything has its true and natural name; a language so concrete, so particular, that it can catch the

30. Sacks, p. 67.

31. Sacks, p. 74.

32. Sacks adds: “But then, suddenly, and in the most dramatic way, the developing child becomes open to language, becomes able to construct a grammar from the utterances of his parents. He shows a spectacular ability, a genius for language, between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-six months..., and then a diminishing capacity, which ends at childhood’s end (roughly at the age of twelve or thirteen)” (Sacks, pp. 83-84).

33. Sacks, pp. 8-9. He continues: “[T]o be defective in language, for a human being, is one of the most desperate of calamities, for it is only through language that we enter fully into our human estate and culture, communicate freely with our fellows, acquire and share information.”

34. Sacks, p. xiii.

35. Sacks, p. 125.

essence, the "itness," of everything; so spontaneous that it expresses all emotion directly; and so transparent that it is incapable of any evasion or deception. Such a language would be without (and indeed would have no need for) logic, grammar, metaphor, or abstractions—it would be a language not mediate, a symbolic expression of thought and feeling, but, almost magically, an *immediate* one. Perhaps the thought of such a language—a language of the heart, a language of perfect transparency and lucidity, a language that can say everything, without ever deceiving or entangling us (Wittgenstein often spoke of the bewitchment of language), a language as pure and profound as music—is a universal fantasy.³⁶

Sacks explored the language of Sign perhaps in the hope that this would be that universal language, but it was not. Even though he emphasizes the way language connects us and helps us express ourselves, his desires for direct communion and absolute clarity remained frustrated by language.

These modern writers articulate the double nature of language that philosophers and writers have discussed since the Enlightenment—the perceptions that language is how we put ourselves together and connect with others, and that language divides us from ourselves and keeps us from connecting with others. George MacDonald, among many others, thought about how language both conveys and evades meaning and connection, and gave his thinking fictional representation in his novel *Sir Gibbie* (1879) and non-fictional expression in an essay "A Sketch of Individual Development." The novel emphasizes the need we have for language in order to be connected to ourselves, others, and the world. The essay explores the emptiness of language and recognizes what deconstructionists in our century have pointed out: if we assume that language has any real meaning, we are also making the assumption, whether we are aware of it or not, that God exists.

Gibbie is a poverty-stricken orphan; MacDonald also makes him mute, thereby placing his acquisition of language in the foreground.³⁷ Gibbie's mother died soon after his birth, so he never had that simultaneous exposure to love and language Sacks points to as typical. Gibbie's only parent was an alcoholic cobbler called Sir George Galbraith, who had inherited a baronetcy but no property, and who provided nothing like Lacan's "Law" for his son. Little Gibbie spent his early childhood destitute, uneducated, and very rarely spoken to. When his father died, Gibbie inherited the title, but it meant nothing to him or to anyone around him. Gibbie's muteness caused others to consider him half-witted, especially because he combined muteness with entire innocence, a lack of curiosity, and a non-discriminating love for humanity. He could communicate only through facial expression, and he

36. Sacks, p. 16, note.

37. For my earlier discussion of MacDonald, see "*That Rare Thing, A True Reader: Authors, Readers, and Texts in the Fiction of George MacDonald*" (Diss. U of Oregon, 1986. Ann Arbor: UMI, 1986. 8622480).

was always smiling. Though MacDonald says that Gibbie was in "the kingdom of heaven," he also says that "Gibbie by no means belonged to the higher order, was as yet, indeed, not much better than a very blessed little animal."³⁸ Though his moment to moment existence satisfied him, his fragmentary and incoherent areas of knowledge left him at the mercy of the moment and with no way to make himself understood. Gibbie witnessed the murder of a sailor friend, and all at once became aware of evil. He began to question and doubt what he had always taken for granted, and his fragmentary existence no longer satisfied him. At the age of eight, Gibbie understood language when its referent was before his eyes. His understanding, however, was like that of a dog to whom the word "sit" refers always to its performing the action, but who never will know when it is "sitting pretty." Language was literal for Gibbie. He misinterpreted three of the four texts he heard, all of which were metaphorical or ideal, and he had no idea that he could associate any of them with words in a book.

Because Gibbie had only his face with which to express himself, he could express only present feeling and that inexactly.³⁹ Gibbie's speechlessness confined him to the small world of the present and visible. He could not make known his invisible world. He could communicate neither his history nor his thoughts, and consequently was mostly unaware that he had a history or thoughts. The fear and doubt Gibbie experienced after witnessing violence made him aware of loneliness and of his speechlessness. He could respond to violence only by running away, and one cannot run away forever. Furthermore, his inability to exert the power of language invited others to abuse their power, and he discovered this unfortunate human tendency wherever there are humans.

Alone in the country, he hid in the barn at the Mains farm. He played brownie to the housekeeper there by doing her chores before she woke, and he helped Donal Grant herd the cows. Donal read poetry to him in the fields. The laird whipped Gibbie for vagrancy and impersonating a brownie. Gibbie was, of course, unable to explain himself. He ran away again, this

38. George MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie* (New York: A.L. Burt, n.d.), p. 6.

39. MacDonald writes in "The Imagination: Its Function and Culture" in *The Imagination and Other Essays* (Boston: Lothrop, n.d.): "[F]or how shall two agree together what name they shall give to a thought or a feeling? How shall the one show the other that which is invisible? True, he can unveil the mind's construction in the face—that living, eternally changeful symbol which God has hung in front of the unseen spirit—but that without words reaches only to the expression of present feeling. To attempt to employ it alone for the conveyance of the intellectual or the historical would constantly mislead; while the expression of feeling itself would be misinterpreted, especially with regard to cause and object: the dumb show would be worse than dumb.

But let a man become aware of some new movement within him. Loneliness comes with it, for he would share his mind with his friend, and he cannot; he is shut up in speechlessness" (p. 7).

time to the mountain, and there found Janet Grant, Donal's mother. Janet taught Gibbie to read and write. One of his first literate acts was to identify himself as Sir Gibbie Galbraith. When some years later a wealthy relative of his died, the minister of Gibbie's parish traced him and took him back to the city to inherit. The minister hoped that Gibbie would be unable to assert himself, leaving the minister in charge of Gibbie's money. However, because Gibbie was able to write to make his wishes known, he took control of his fortune when he turned twenty-one, set up a center for reclaiming destitute and fallen women, bought the estate of the laird who whipped him, and married the laird's daughter. Participating in language by means of literacy made it possible for Gibbie to take his place in society and to turn the tables on those who ignored, oppressed, or exploited him.

Like the deaf children studied by Oliver Sacks, Gibbie dramatizes the extent to which language works to bridge the gulf isolating one human from another. He also shows how necessary it is to participate in language to one's survival in human society as an acknowledged human being. MacDonald identifies the patterns of language that communicate the past and the ideal with narrative and metaphor, respectively. Gibbie lacks the ability to perceive that fragments can relate to each other in such a way as to make a meaningful whole as they do in narrative; he also lacks the ability to abstract a quality from two unlike things so that they can be compared in metaphor. He does not think and cannot express himself in the ways MacDonald considers the work of the imagination. Oliver Sacks writes about similar limitations in children who were prelingually deaf, though Gibbie is not deaf, only mute. Gibbie's learning the metaphoric ability to see resemblances between apparently unlike things, for instance, between flowers and humans, signals the waking of Gibbie's imagination. MacDonald sees this waking as a necessary occurrence if Gibbie is to participate fully in language and to take his place as a complete human. MacDonald elsewhere represents the ability to see "some form, aspect, or movement of nature, some relation between its forms, or between such and himself which resembles the state or motion within" a person as prerequisite to the ability to use language at all.⁴⁰

When he runs away, Gibbie finds he is not at home in the natural universe. For Gibbie the city is "friendliness, comfort, home"! Nature is "emptiness—the abode of the things, not beings."⁴¹ Gibbie is a materialist, and the material universe gives him no welcome. He needs metaphor before he can turn the material world into his home. The light of the sunrise reminds him of the dead sailor's eyes and teeth and "the red burst from his throat."⁴² Although he makes a dreadful comparison between sunrise and a

40. MacDonald, "The Imagination: Its Function and Culture," p. 8.

41. MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie*, p. 57.

42. MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie*, p. 56.

slit throat, as Gibbie abstracts the quality of red from both sunrise and blood he begins to think in terms of metaphor. A few weeks later Gibbie has become “greatly reconciled to the loneliness of nature and no more afraid of her solitary presence.”⁴³ The word “presence” signifies a distinct change in Gibbie’s relationship to nature, from finding nature impersonal to thinking of nature as a presence. In part this arises from his desperate longing for people, and it moves Gibbie to discover analogies between nature and the human being. This awareness of emptiness in Nature at first sounds similar to Jacques Lacan’s idea that the world of language is empty, but the order is backwards. Lacan suggests that being denied direct access to reality precipitates the child into the empty world of language; MacDonald suggests that being denied access to language places a child in the empty world of nature. Gibbie’s new ability to use metaphor begins to turn what is into what it is not in order to relate nature to himself. This story suggests that an essential step toward participating in language is understanding that language does not always mean what it says. The connecting of Gibbie’s literal-mindedness with his illiteracy suggests that one must be aware of the artificiality of language before one can use it effectively. To recognize artifice is to recognize conventional patterns.

Let’s return to that early point in the story when Gibbie comes from the city to the Mains’ farm, before he learns to read. His acquaintance with the herd-boy Donal Grant is significant because it is his first friendship with a reader. Gibbie has never heard a narrative, and has as yet no concept of literature at all, but that is about to change, as Donal opens to Gibbie the possibility of connections between spoken words and the miracle of narrative, and between spoken words and words written in books.

“Can ye read, cratur?” asked Donal.

Gibbie shook his head.

“Canna ye speyk, man?”

Again Gibbie shook his head.

“Can ye hear?”

Gibbie burst out laughing. He knew that he heard better than other people.

“Hearken till this, than,” said Donal.

He took his book from the grass and read, in a chant, or rather in a lilt, the Danish ballad of Chyld Dyring, as translated by Sir Walter Scott. Gibbie’s eyes grew wider and wider as he listened; their pupils dilated, and his lips parted: it seemed as if his soul were looking out of doors and windows at once—but a puzzled soul that understood nothing of what it saw. Yet plainly, either the sounds, or the thought-matter vaguely operative beyond the line where intelligence begins, or, it may be, the sparkle of individual word or phrase islanded in a chaos of rhythmic motion, wrought somehow

43. MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie*, p. 65.

upon him, for his attention was fixed as by a spell. When Donal ceased, he remained open-mouthed and motionless for a time; then, drawing himself slidingly over the grass to Donal's feet, he raised his head and peeped above his knees at the book. A moment only he gazed, and drew back with a hungry sigh: he had seen nothing in the book like what Donal had been drawing from it—as if one should look into the well of which he had just drunk and see there nothing but dry pebbles and sand! The wind blew gentle, the sun shone bright, all nature closed softly round the two, and the soul whose bright children they were, was nearer than the one to the other, nearer than the sun or wind or daisy or Chyld Dyring. To his amazement, Donal saw the tears gathering in Gibbie's eyes. ... The child in whom neither cold nor hunger nor nakedness nor loneliness could move a throb of self-pity, was moved to tears that a loveliness, to him strange and unintelligible, had passed away, and he had no power to call it back.

"Wad ye like to hear't again?" asked Donal, more than half-understanding him instinctively.

Gibbie's face answered with a flash, and Donal read the poem again, and Gibbie's delight returned greater than before, for now something like a dawn began to appear among the cloudy words. Donal read it a third time, and closed the book, for it was almost the hour for driving the cattle home. He had never yet seen, and perhaps never again did see, such a look of thankful devotion on human countenance as met his lifted eyes.⁴⁴

Perhaps it is the concept of completeness as well as the story itself that Gibbie seeks to grasp as he hears the ballad a second and third time. His apparent enchantment—note the connection of magic and song—is also a coming awake to the possibilities of language, reversing the usual connotations of "enchantment." Language itself reverses our ordinary differentiation of its uses when we realize that the etymological root of "spell" is a word meaning both discourse and tale, and "spell" is associated both with magic and with the way letters combine to form words as well. Gibbie has never come under the spell of language until this moment, and has therefore not yet become fully human.

Shortly after this passage, the narrator states that "it is impossible for me to say" how much of the ballad Gibbie understands, yet he pinpoints this moment as the beginning of Gibbie's awakening to the knowledge of himself as a self. This move towards self-consciousness is neither an unfortunate necessity nor a fortunate fall, but instead it signifies Gibbie's transition into a higher life without loss of his goodness. When he can recognize narrative, Gibbie gains a way to comprehend his own history as well, which means that he begins to know himself as a self.⁴⁵

It is no accident that MacDonald chooses poetry for Gibbie to hear; MacDonald considers poetry to be essential language. "[P]oetry is the

44. MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie*, pp. 96-97.

source of all the language that belongs to the inner world, whether it be of passion or of metaphysics, of psychology or of aspiration," MacDonald writes in "The Imagination."⁴⁶ Gibbie is nearing his entry into the kingdom of imagination that perceives an invisible and inner world and describes it in narrative and metaphor. MacDonald dramatizes a further necessary move toward literacy in the associating of words with books. This may be why Donal does not simply sing Gibbie a Scots ballad from memory. As incredible as it seems to Gibbie, Donal draws the lovely succession of sounds, words, images, and events that make up the ballad he hears out of a book filled with what are to Gibbie arbitrarily shaped and meaninglessly grouped black marks. The phenomenon seems nothing short of miraculous. This scene suggests that the narrative and the book which we often consider ordinary parts of our lives are in fact near-miracles.

Gibbie has never before heard the whole of any text and has therefore not known that such a miracle as a complete story exists. The ballad alerts him to the possibility that a beautiful whole can be constructed out of fragments; a belief in that possibility provides a necessary hope to those who are learning to read and to those who are learning to live. Perhaps this hope for wholeness is again similar to Jacques Lacan's idea of desire for the Other. However, the explicit difference between the two is that MacDonald links the possibility of wholeness to the existence of a Soul imminent in the world, nearer than nature or the ballad to Donal and Gibbie, nearer to each of them than they are to each other. In other words, MacDonald finds the beautiful whole made possible by the existence of God. He presents the reading of the ballad—standing in for the entire use of language—as a sacrament, because it is evidence to him of the nearness of God.

45. Immediately following the incident related above, the narrator remarks:

"Certainly it was the beginning of much. But the waking up of a human soul to know itself in the mirror of its thoughts and feelings, its loves and delights, oppresses me with so heavy a sense of marvel and inexplicable mystery that when I imagine myself such as Gibbie then was, I cannot imagine myself coming awake. . . . When, by slow filmy unveilings, life grew clearer to Gibbie and he not only knew, but knew that he knew, his thoughts always went back to that day in the meadow with Donal Grant as the beginning of his knowledge of beautiful things in the world of man. . . . But when or how the change in him began, the turn of the balance, the first push toward life of the evermore invisible germ—of that he remained, much as he wondered, often as he searched his consciousness, as ignorant to the last as I am now" (pp. 97-98).

MacDonald calls this the second birth in his essay, "A Sketch of Individual Development," this change from a simple awareness to a consciousness that includes awareness of self and other. Now, in the terms MacDonald uses in the "Sketch" (p. 45), Gibbie begins "a higher life" and the possibility of "real life...life with a share in its own existence" opens to him. It takes place for Gibbie much later in his life than is normal.

46. MacDonald, "The Imagination: Its Function and Culture," p. 9.

I want to give George MacDonald the last word in this discussion for several reasons. First, his awareness of the duplicity of language predates moderns by a century or so. (Of course, other writers noted this as well even earlier.) Second, though he differs from many modern theoreticians by believing in a Creator, he shares with them the assumption that any meaningfulness in the universe depends absolutely on the existence of that Creator.

In his essay, "A Sketch of Individual Development" (written sometime prior to 1883), MacDonald outlines his ideas of how a person changes in understanding of both nature and poetry. This essay has even greater applicability if we see that nature stands in for objective reality, and poetry stands in for the symbolic system of which language is a part.

Though this sketch may be based on MacDonald's personal experiences—both as a child and as a parent—it labels itself as a work of the imagination, necessarily so, since part of what it describes lies outside the memory. The essay also includes awareness that it describes only one of several types of human beings and that it leaves out some details of the development of that one type (48, 68).⁴⁷ Following our method used for Sacks and Lacan, we will tell the story as if George MacDonald were the central character in it.

The infant George's first awareness of the world encompassed only himself and his mother as an extension of himself. In this first consciousness, every need was met by a loving minister. As little George grew, he became conscious of a wider world apart from him which did not concern itself with him as its center. This movement from consciousness to self-consciousness, an awareness of the difference between self and other, MacDonald later came to call a "second birth." Little George based his relationship to this external world on his "fancies, desires, preferences," and he began to see objects outside himself as "lovely, desirable, good, or ugly, hateful, bad."⁴⁸ When he acted on his emotions toward and thoughts about this separate world, George on occasion met with opposition from his mother.⁴⁹ This brought about what he came later to call a third birth, the birth of his desire and also of his conscience, which he found sided with his mother. George then knew that the self he was conscious of was capable of action, that it could be divided between desire and conscience, and that he had to choose what to do.

Later on, when George went to school, he encountered the force of public opinion. He discovered that public opinion could be at odds with his

47. MacDonald, "A Sketch of Individual Development," in *The Imagination and Other Essays* (Boston: Lothrop, n.d.), pp. 48, 68.

48. MacDonald, "A Sketch of Individual Development," pp. 45-46.

49. This contrasts with Lacan's idea that it is the Father who brings Law, or opposition to desire, into the child's awareness.

conscience. The choice to do what is right regardless of desire as well as consequence MacDonald later came to call a fourth birth, the development of the real Will. This birth took years as an adult to complete, perhaps a whole lifetime.

Because MacDonald was a poet, he discussed the relationship of the human to language in terms of the relationship of the human to poetry. To return to our narrative, the adult George went through several phases in evaluating the meaningfulness of language. First, as an idealist, he thought that meaning is inherent in nature and in words. His encounter with the scientific world view shocked him into materialism, which he called "soulless Law." He then believed that nature and words had only the meanings he read into them. His falling in love gave him an intuitive sense of the grand unity of nature, of which he was a part, but he saw that nature itself was in conflict between a "rush for death, a panic flight into the moveless silence... the tumultuous conflict of forces rushing, and fighting as they rush, into the arms of eternal negation" and "vitality, revealed in growth, itself an unending resurrection."⁵⁰ As he began to see correspondences between apparently unrelated natural laws, he renewed his vision of the oneness of the universe and began to hope that this oneness was evidence of a Creator God. He also began to understand that in order for a poem or any other written text to mean anything, it must have behind it an author; and in order for that human author to mean anything, the human must have behind him or her a greater Author. George could not believe that the products of human thought mean anything when he was not sure that the human being means anything.

At this point, George heard the gospel story. His skepticism about words made it difficult to believe this story. But he noticed that the central character Jesus said that if a person would understand the words, that person would first need to obey them. The existence of God may be suggested by the universe, as the existence of an author is suggested by the presence of a text. But God can be known not through language or nature, but only by doing, by experiment, by experience. So George tried to obey what he thought the texts said, and he came to define truth not as a statement but as a person, the Author of nature and of human beings.

Epilogue

Jacques Lacan presents language as a sign of loss; its acquisition takes place as a result of losing access to the mother because of the intervention of the father. It reminds us always of that loss even while it makes possible our awareness of self and connection to others. Oliver Sacks describes language as a sign of gain; its acquisition takes place in loving exchange between

50. MacDonald, "A Sketch of Individual Development," p. 57.

mother and child and makes possible the child's awareness of self and connection to others. However, he longs also for a more direct, more immediate means of communication. George MacDonald's character Gibbie begins with loss—mother, father, speech, friend. He acquires two substitute mothers: Nature teaches him metaphoric thinking, and Janet Grant teaches him to write and read. He also acquires a substitute father and a friend in Donal Grant, who introduces him to narrative. Metaphor and narrative combined with literacy make it possible for him to identify himself and to connect with other people. However, in his non-fiction, George MacDonald shows that language is only as meaningful as nature or the human being. If they mean nothing, language is also empty of meaning. And nature and the human being can be meaningful only if there is a Creator behind them that makes them so. Whether we recognize it as such or not, the use of language is an act of faith.

All three writers recognize the human condition as one of longing for wholeness, for integrity, for connectedness, for communion. This longing is well expressed in a poem by Walt Whitman, 19th-century American Quaker poet who celebrated connectedness in his *Song of Myself*, but dramatized his ultimate sense of isolation in the final incomplete sentence of his poem, "A Noiseless Patient Spider:"

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect
them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

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