

Foreword

Tim Ingold

One night, a few years ago, I woke from a dream with the following lines in my head:

*Often in the midst of my endeavors
Something ups and says
“Enough of words,
Let’s meet the world.”*

I do not know who put these lines there. Certainly, I did not invent them. But immediately upon waking, and before they had time to evaporate, I rose from my bed to write them down. They remain, pinned to a notice board in my office, and every so often I take a look at them, to remind myself of the message they contain.

They could perhaps be taken as a manifesto for a non-representational way of working. This is not exactly a theory, nor is it a method or technique as commonly understood. **It is not a set of regulated steps to be taken towards the realization of some predetermined end.** It is a means, rather, of carrying on and of being carried—that is, of living a life with others, humans and non-humans all—that is cognizant of the past, finely attuned to the conditions of the present, and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future. I call it *correspondence*, in the sense not of coming up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of *answering* to them with interventions, questions, and responses of our own. It is as though we were involved in an exchange of letters. “Let’s meet the world,” for me, is an invitation—an exhortation or command even—to join in such a correspondence. It is, at the same time, a complaint against the cowardice of scholars who would preferably retreat into a stance that I once heard described as “tangentialism,” in which our meeting is but a glance that shears away from the uncomfortable business of mixing our own endeavors too closely with the lives and times of those with whom our researches have brought us into contact. Indeed, correspondence and tangentialism are precise opposites, and they entail quite different understandings of what is meant by scholarly research. This book sets

out, by precept and example, just what this difference is and how it impacts upon the way we work.

“Enough of words,” my muse declared, and I sympathize. We are suffering, in academic life, from a surfeit of words. It would not be so bad if these words, like good food, were rich in flavor, varied in texture, and lingering in the contemplative feelings they evoke. Carefully selected and well-prepared words are conducive to rumination. They enliven the spirit, which responds in kind. But the fact that word-craft of this kind has been hived off to a restricted domain, known as poetry, is indicative of where the problem lies. If writing had not lost its soul, then what need would we have for poetry? We go there to find what otherwise is lost. Relentlessly bombarded by the formulaic concoctions of academic prose, weighed down with arcane vocabulary, honorific name-calling, and ever-extending lists of citations, my muse had had enough. So have I. But I would not want to go the whole way, and to give up on words altogether. Words are, indeed, our most precious possessions and should be treated as such, like a casket of sparkling jewels. To hold such a jewel is to hold the world in the palm of your hand. We *can* correspond with words, as letter-writers used to do, but only if we allow our words to shine.

The challenge, then, is to find a different way of writing. That’s what this book is about. Every chapter is in the nature of an experiment: it is a matter of trying things out and seeing what happens. These experiments-so-far, however, are necessarily constrained by the conventions of the printed word. These conventions make writing seem like an act of verbal composition, rather than one of inscriptive performance. With a keyboard wired up to a mechanical printer—the typical apparatus of the academic writer—the expressive possibilities of the word, as a concatenation of marks on paper, are sorely limited. To be sure, one can vary the font, and use various means of highlighting, but these are nothing compared with the continuous modulations of feeling and form in a simple calligraphic line—a line that registers every nuance of the hand that draws it. If our words are truly to shine like jewels, must they not be restored to the hand?

Surely, our reflections on ways of working cannot be confined to matters of style and composition. They must also extend to the instruments we use, and their orchestration. How does the keyboard compare with the pen, pencil, and brush? Let’s try them out and see. Perhaps, then, we will find that working with words, the writer can once again become a draughtsman or an artist, or even a musician of sorts. We might cease our endless writing *about* performance, and become performers ourselves. The art of correspondence demands no less. It could be because of our addiction to the keyboard that we academics are so taken with the idea of tacit, embodied knowledge. We think, like my muse, that the only way to join with the world—that is, to participate in its unfolding from the very inside of our being—is by escape from the domain of the word, of representation. It seems to us that words are always on the outside: they articulate, specify,

make explicit. As such, their role is to pin things down, to define them and render them immobile.

Yet behind these tapped-out words of ours, the beating heart of the tacit continues to animate our movements and feelings, and to show its hand in voice and gesture. Why, then, should this voice and gesture be wordless? Only because we start from a notion of the word from which all traces of vocal and manual performance, of expression and affect, have been stripped away. This is the kind of word we academics are used to, and it puts us in league with the professions for which an academic training is deemed essential: statesmen, bureaucrats, lawyers, doctors, and managers. But this is not the word of poets, singers, actors, calligraphers, and craftsmen. For them, the word is performed, often noisily and turbulently, in skilled and sensuous bodily practice—not just in the practice of handwriting, signing, singing, or speaking but also in reading aloud. If this is the domain of the tacit, then the tacit is neither wordless nor silent. It is raucously verbal. It is in the realm of the explicit, not the tacit, that silence reigns. Here alone, adrift upon the printed page, the word has lost its voice. Tacit is to explicit as voiced is to voiceless, not the other way around.

Perhaps, then, we need a new understanding of language, one that brings it back to life as a practice of “*linguaging*.” In a living language—one that is not semantically locked into a categorical frame but endlessly creating itself in the inventive telling of its speakers—words can be as lively and mobile as the practices to which they correspond. They can be declarative, as when the practitioner cries out with the satisfaction of a job well done, inviting others to join in its appreciation, or alternatively, when things go off course, leading to error and mishap. And they can be discursive, as in their use in narrative and storytelling. But in neither case are they joined up, or articulated, in explicit, propositional forms. Does that make them any less verbal? Who, other than those whose lives are confined to the academy, would be so pompous, and so limited in their imaginative horizons, as invariably to put the word “*articulate*” before the word “*speech*” or “*writing*,” in such a way as to relegate to the sublinguistic or non-verbal any utterance or inscription that is not syntactically structured as a joined-up assembly? In truth, it is articulation that has silenced the word, by drawing it out and fixing its coordinates of reference, independently of the vocal-gestural currents of its production.

Let’s not be afraid, then, to meet the world with words. Other creatures do it differently, but verbal intercourse has always been our human way, and our entitlement. But let these be words of greeting, not of confrontation, of questioning, not of interrogation or interview, of response, not of representation, of anticipation, not of prediction. This is not to say that we should all become poets or novelists, let alone that we should seek to emulate philosophers who, when it comes to their worldly involvements, have signally failed to practice what they preach, and for whom neither coherence of thought nor clarity of expression has ever been among their

strongest suits. But it does mean that we should work our words as craftsmen work their materials, in ways that testify, in their inscriptive traces, to the labor of their production, and that offer these inscriptions as things of beauty in themselves.

Aberdeen, March 1, 2014