

## Worth more than Words by Shauna Laurel Jones 2013

What distinguished man from animals was the human capacity for symbolic thought, the capacity which was inseparable from the development of language in which words were not mere signals, but signifiers of something other than themselves. Yet the first symbols were animals. What distinguished men from animals was born of their relationship with them.

—John Berger, ‘Why Look at Animals?’ (1977)

To begin with René Descartes would be a predictable place to begin. In our present-day dealings with nonhuman animals, there is no denying the tremendous influence of that Enlightenment philosopher who asserted so authoritatively that animals are little more than reflex-driven machines, incapable of feelings or conscious thought. Animals’ lack of language, Descartes argued, was proof of their lack of reason and therefore their lack of moral consequence. However, I would prefer to begin with a different legacy—one contrary to the Cartesian but equally persistent in its own way—the inheritance of the Ancient Roman auspices: seers who interpreted divine meaning from the flight or calls of birds. Though earlier civilizations were also known to have observed birds as a form of prophecy, the Romans regarded the practice as a veritable science, classifying every sound and motion of avian species from ravens to chickens as possessing a precise meaning. While it could be argued that the auspices had as much of a mechanistic view of their subjects as Descartes did—after all, their birds were not delivering their own messages but rather those of the gods—their practice resonates with the underlying belief that the actions and vocalizations of birds and other animals are relevant and meaningful, and that their meaning is accessible if we humans can only crack the code.

This spirit of the auspices (from whom the word *auspicious* derives) endures today in countless individuals who live, work, or concern themselves with animals. Many of us treat it as common sense that the creatures around us communicate their feelings and desires as plainly as our own kind does; we speak to our pets believing they understand, and we learn to interpret their yaps and yawps, believing *we* understand. Modern science, which has never given animals the benefit of the doubt, has reduced such common sense to anthropomorphism, the (irrational) attribution of human traits and behaviours to nonhuman animals. The position of the mainstream scientific establishment still seems to be that the sophistication of human communication sets us apart and above other animals thanks to the link between language and cognition: language alone enables us to think, to construct identities, to develop and transmit culture, to gain insight into the subjective minds of others.

Increasingly, scientists are catching up with common sense and recognizing the diverse communicative achievements of a growing litany of species, achievements that are indicative of symbolic language. Biologists have demonstrated that the alarm calls of prairie dogs contain descriptive vocabularies with around one hundred words, such that they can alert others in their colony to the presence of different types and characteristics of predators. Bottlenose dolphins have been shown to identify individuals within their pods with their own signature whistles, the same way we humans identify ourselves with names; recently a similar feat has been recognized in spectacled parrotlets. Even insects such as honeybees possess the gift of language, reporting specific information about food sources through the symbolic movements that comprise their waggle dance.

The more that biologists, ethologists, psychologists, and anthropologists listen to animals on their own terms, the more they (like the average pet owner) are able to decipher. The

linguistic difference will inevitably be accepted as one of degree rather than kind. Thus the Enlightenment view of language as a demonstration of human uniqueness and moral superiority over all other living beings—and with that superiority, justification of the exploitation of animals and their natural habitats—will become harder to defend.

And yet, as ethologist Jonathan Balcombe has noted, pioneering studies of animal communication in recent years tend to reveal less about the true nature of animals' intellect than they reveal our own lingering reluctance to acknowledge animals as thoughtful, communicative beings. He writes, 'It is only because our science has recently begun to allow the once heretical notion that animals think that studies like [these] are being done' (Balcombe 2010: 88). For some of us who have known all along that animals think, feel, and talk, there is something dissatisfying in allowing the last word to go to science: science, which has for so long been called upon to pardon the mistreatment of pigs and chickens confined to battery cages, to justify the culling of elephants and wolves, to promote the abuses of rats and chimps within its own laboratories. And though science may unlock the meaning of the songbird's call, it will never measure the inherent value of the songbird's melodies.

For that, we must turn instead to art, which has a unique capacity to posit the animal not as an object of study but as a subject in its own right. From Albrecht Dürer's sensitively painted portrait of a young screech owl (*Little Owl*, 1508) to video artist Bill Viola's slow zoom into the mysterious depths of an owl's eye (*I Do Not Know What It Is I Am Like*, 1986), artists who turn a compassionate gaze towards animals have the power to honour the presence of their innermost experiences. (And to different ends: Dürer's portrait penetrates his owl's soul, while Viola's video reveals his owl's impenetrability. But both works acknowledge the individual, the sentient, the *inherently valuable* underneath the coat of feathers.) Such engagement in cross-species intersubjectivity—the collaborative construction of meaning by two individuals recognizing each other's consciousness—suggests that a shared language is not necessary for an empathetic relationship.

As John Berger proposes in the epigraph above, the 'uniqueness' of human awareness and human language has always relied upon the animal other. Catherine Clover and Johanna Hällsten, who turn to language to celebrate the continuity between species, likewise honour the reliance of the human community of Bethnal Green upon its avian neighbours in the formation of local identity—and vice versa. While pioneering biologists decode the chirps and caws of chaffinches and crows, perhaps there is something equally pioneering in appreciating the *qualities* of animal communication without understanding the content. Clover and Hällsten's engagement with Bethnal Green's birds speaks to the 'caring, attentive regard, [the] "being with"' animals that anthropologist Tim Ingold sees as necessary for the reversal of a contemporary ecological crisis brought about by self-imposed, scientific distancing from other forms of life. Their work also serves as a reminder that we need not look upon other creatures across an abyss of lonely silence: even without words, we can learn to sing each other's song.