

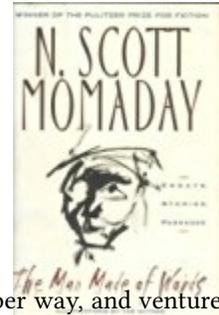
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

N. Scott Momaday. *The Man Made Out of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 213 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-15581-0.

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Considering how much our language is abused in television and on billboards, it is a wonder that we can still use it for poetry at all. While much of our vocabulary is historically new, the structure of our language is archaic, and perhaps that is why language shows such amazing resilience. Poetry is a bit like sewing with a needle. The materials may all be synthetic but the act itself, and the rhythms which accompany it, have been with us since millennia before recorded history.

A lost tongue echoes down through the centuries to us in poetry. N. Scott Momaday, author of *The Man Made Out of Words*, understands this particularly well. In his parental home, Kiowa, an Amerindian language, was spoken. On attending school, he found himself in an all-English environment. The use of Kiowa was forbidden. As a result, his facility in his mother tongue is rudimentary.

Even among American Indian languages, Kiowa is mysterious. Linguists are uncertain what family it came from or when it developed. The writing of Momaday is constructed around the memory of his mother tongue, less efficient in describing the contemporary world, perhaps, yet far more intimate and intense than English. In what are probably the finest chapters of his book, Momaday tells of songs and stories in Kiowa remembered from childhood.

According to Momaday, when language became something written, people no longer valued it as much. "At the heart of the American Indian oral tradition," he writes, is a deep and unconditional belief in the efficacy of language. Words are intrinsically powerful. They are magical. By means of words can one ... quiet the raging weather, bring forth the harvest, ward off evil, rid the body of sickness and pain, subdue an enemy, capture

the heart of a lover, live in the proper way, and venture beyond death." With the invention of writing, and the consequent ability to store words, people felt less obliged to treat words with care. Like so many other resources, from wood to soil, they were regarded as expendable.

Momaday applies a stringent economy not only to words but also to details. Most of book consists of little vignettes, generally of one to four pages. Typically, there is an encounter by the author with another being, an old Navaho woman who mistrusts the camera, an octopus, a hiker met by chance on a remote mountain side. This is described is just enough detail to be suggestive. The stories here are never finished, indeed barely even begun.

Typical are a few literary sketches of the famous outlaw Billy the Kid. That name evokes all the romance of the American West, yet the only surviving photograph of Billy contrasts strangely with the legend. It shows only a young man with wide hips, narrow shoulders and a vacuous expression. "Men like Billy the Kid," Momaday writes, "are finally unknowable, I suspect; they are revealed, if at all, in flashes of insight that bear not at all upon reason, but that illuminate a person in place, and only momentarily."

The author whom Momaday most profoundly reminds me of is the Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges, who also attempted to reduce language and experience to its barest essentials. They differ in that Momaday does not share Borges' love of fantasy and paradox. While Borges constructed preposterously intricate plots, Momaday keeps the action in his stories to a minimum. Furthermore, Momaday seems consistently to chose events which border on being mundane, at least until we stop to ponder them. This is a pragmatic American variety of

magical realism.

For many Americans from immigrant cultures, the Indians now represent less a reproach than a lost opportunity. Perhaps may be overly romantic of me, but I have long thought of Ireland, for all its turbulence, as a model of harmonious cultural development. Despite many violent conflicts the traditions of Celts, Vikings, Anglo-Saxons and others finally blended so harmoniously in that country that it is very hard to know, for example, just where paganism leaves off and Christianity begins. Such a fusion of Native and immigrant heritage in America may, in Colonial times, have been an immanent possibility.

For many people of many ethnic backgrounds, this is once again be emerging as a goal. Momaday, speak-

ing from the perspective of Native American traditions, constantly looks outward, writing with intense appreciation of Gothic cathedrals of Germany and cave paintings of Spain. His sympathy sometimes even extends to such enemies of the Indians as George Armstrong Custer and Buffalo Bill Cody. Part of this is no doubt spontaneous generosity, but it may also be out of a hope that the effort of appreciation will be reciprocated. People of the United States and elsewhere may gain a greater understanding of the American Indians, not as relics of some idealized past but as participants in an ongoing, shared experience.

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