

THE HEALING FORCE OF LANGUAGE

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We see that our words quicken, shock, energize, stun, excite, support, offend, and wound those with whom we speak. Our words also focus, fortify, hearten, embolden, agitate, weary, stupefy, and distress our carnal substance. Friedrich Nietzsche said that value-terms are not first comparative; the meaning of the positive, affirmative terms is inward. In a surge of excess energies we exclaim "How strong I am!" "How healthy I am!" "How happy I am!" "How beautiful I am!" These words do not simply report on an inner surge of force; they consecrate it and intensify it. Saying "how happy I am!" we feel still happier. The powerful words strengthen, healthy words invigorate, joyous words enhance, beautiful words glorify; the feeble words weaken, morbid words sicken, sullen words depress, ugly words disfigure.

And words heal. Words are an essential component of medical practice. Words formulate the diagnosis and prescribe the pharmacology and surgery of the cure; they continually assess and guide the treatment. Psychoanalysis formulated treatment for which language itself is the pharmacology and the surgery. The talking cure. Psychoanalysis sought to make its language as prosaic as that of physical medicine, but also wove in the language of myths.

Claude Lévi-Strauss recognized the psychoanalytic cure to be similar to the shamanist cure and also delineated the differences. The shaman interprets the symptoms not in the language of the psychoanalytic prose but in that of myth. Lévi-Strauss showed how the words, songs, and also gestures of the shaman bring the body of the sufferer into the mythic discourse where meanings are extended. The mythic conflict and resolution is reenacted in the body of the patient—the physical body that is also a psychic and a social body.