

Sorting the Chaos of Thought

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One day, in Humanities class, after my friends and I had made some particularly disparaging remarks about one of our teacher's comments, we received the following lecture: "Words are not to be taken lightly. We know that the ancient Greeks considered a misstatement to be the worst of all sins, because, once you've said something, the sound waves travel on and on into space through all time. You can never take your words back; they live *forever*."

Sound waves require matter to propagate and, as a result, cannot travel through outer space any more than we can travel back in time. Likewise, I've never encountered Greek ideology that expresses this idea of infinite slander. Needless to say, I was as unimpressed by my teacher's reprimand as I was by her teaching. However, I've been amazed to find truth in her words, even if her claims about the Greeks were misinformed. After all, Plato's words might not have trickled out into our solar system, but do they not survive in the browned pages of our beaten *Signet Classics*?

Words are complex and elusive, yet they often seem so thin, so fragile. They sometimes leave us Prufrocks in despair, hurling T. S. Eliot's verse against the wind: "It is impossible to say just what I mean!" (104). Perhaps Virginia Woolf wrote "Craftsmanship" to combat the sense of futility that accompanies our need to express ourselves. In her essay, she remonstrates those of us foolish enough to take words lightly. "Now we know little that is certain about words," she lectures, "but this we do know—words never make anything that is useful; and words are the only things that tell the truth and nothing but truth" (198).

Words, useless? Tell this to the man who sees the word "exit" in the midst of a burning, quickly crumbling building. Well, Woolf would argue that if you take "exit" as a word rather than a sign, you're bound to wind up, as the flames flicker 'round you, absorbed in its etymology. You'll think—logophile that you are—how "exit" wasn't a noun until playwrights converted it from its original Latin to mean "a departure of the player from the stage" (*OED*).

Then, as the heat rises, you'll remember Mercutio shouting, "A plague o' both your houses! / They have made worm's meat of me: / I have it, and soundly too.—Your houses!" as he and Benvolio stumble offstage (3.1.68-70). At least, by the time your clothes have ignited, "exit" will have led you back to Shakespeare. As Woolf would conclude, "This proves, if it needs proving, how very little natural gift words have for being useful" (199).

Though the previous scenario may be far-fetched, that doesn't strip Woolf's hyperbole of truth. We can see that, for the man trapped in the burning building, "exit" has one useful meaning; however, its existence as a door to safety does not sever it from its other, "useless" meanings. For a playwright marking his text, the word will likewise always contain alternate meanings. It is precisely words' flexibility—the nature of their "uselessness"—that lends them their other, shining quality; their capacity for revealing truth. If we accept Woolf's argument that "the only test of truth is length of life," and acknowledge that "words survive the chops and changes of time longer than any substance," we too can conclude that words are remarkably adept vessels for telling the truth (201).

Words—as opposed to signs, which, according to Woolf, have one specific, intended meaning—are not easy to contain. "They hate being useful"; "it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities" (200). So much for the constancy of words that my English teacher professed; so much for the notion of unwavering, transcendent and eternal truth. But let's suppose that sound actually can travel superterrestrially. What would happen to the frivolous jokes I made at my teacher's expense? In space and time, after "ranging hither and thither, falling in love, and mating together" after "they combine unconsciously" (Woolf 205, 203), my words will give birth to new meanings and new expressions for the foreign ears they fly to. When a group of aliens stumbles upon the worthless jokes I made at my poor, misguided English teacher's expense, who's to say they will not take my strange words as a message from a god? If they do, would it do me any good to call corrections after them? When they consider my foolish, hypocritical quips about her mispronunciations as divinely revealed truth coming from the great beyond, will it help if I shout after them, "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant, at all" (Eliot 109-10)?

When Eliot wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," he may well have thought that his feelings were too difficult to be captured in words. But is it because words are shallow that they fall short, or are they simply the wrong tools to use for precise expression? When we limit words "to one

meaning, their useful meaning, the meaning which makes us catch the train, the meaning which makes us pass the examination,” says Woolf, “they fold their wings and die” (206). We cannot even confine words to their intended meaning—alien ears will interpret them however they see fit. And Woolf’s prosopopoeia reminds us that words, if they are to live, must always and forever escape into the world beyond the individual speaker or writer.

When Woolf gives wings to words, she emphasizes what complex creatures they are. She implores us to recognize how their mutability, in the face of the natural erosion of time, allows them to endure. Woolf would argue that it is precisely this mutable quality that endows Eliot’s poem with its longevity. Though his speaker is dismayed at his seeming inability to express the truth, Eliot’s words, because they have survived “the chops and changes of time” demonstrate their durability (Woolf 201). Who can read the poem’s startling crescendo and say otherwise? Eliot, of course, understands that words need not “mean only one thing,” that they need not, indeed must not, be “useful” (Woolf 201). He understands that words must have a necessary *flexibility* to live.

Woolf’s hyperboles about language simultaneously serve to illustrate its transience—we say a word, and then it’s gone, released into the world. But language also preserves—words said thousands of years ago by an ugly Greek are still here for us to read. Considering that Woolf presents her viewpoint (just as Eliot does) with the same imperfect tools—the same lexicon—that she uses to elaborate on words themselves, we can see the depth of a multi-layered paradox at work within her seemingly simple argument. In fact, Woolf changes the title of her essay (originally a radio broadcast) as soon as she’s gotten started. Instead of “Craftsmanship,” which suggests the making of some useful thing, she proposes, “A Ramble round Words” as the heading of the talk (198). But how can one ramble around words when one’s ramble is confined to them? Her words, flighty characters that they are, illustrate her very point. For when Woolf says, “Words are not useful,” she means that words simultaneously are and are not “useful.” As she illustrates, “It is the nature of words to mean many things” (201).

Her argument against the usefulness of words is indeed infuriating; it makes me want to cross time and shout, “Of course words are useful, you bookish, British highbrow!” But, seeing that my words cannot penetrate the wall between present and past, and realizing that her words themselves cannot be taken to have “only one meaning,” I resign myself to being very intrigued by the many-meaning words before me.

Woolf is both controversial and insightful; her logic is aggravating yet accurate. Even as she concludes by telling her readers that her words will have made no difference, we see that they have done just the opposite. By the time we finish reading, we have learned something about the creatures our tongues birth every day, and we understand that Woolf employs her words to act against what one would normally take them to mean. What she has said has indeed affected us, has changed the way we think about words, and, if we accept that “the only test of truth is length of life,” her words must contain some truth after all: we are still reading them (201).

If one day all humans were to drop from the earth—poof—the life of words and language would vanish with us. So, to better understand words and their capacity for truth-telling, we must better understand what it is about human thought that makes words so meaningful. In the end, Woolf’s truth is dependent on our approach to the dialectic within it.

In “Crickets, Bats, Cats, and Chaos,” doctor and scientist Lewis Thomas struggles to solve the riddle of human uniqueness by examining the difference between us and the creatures around us. Simple animals, like crickets, work according to predictable rules: if X happens, then, with a reasonable degree of certainty, a cricket will do Y. As Thomas puts it, a cricket is basic enough “to *seem* predictable,” but, under bizarre circumstances, its system can be “thrown into chaos” (491). When a cricket detects the sonar of a bat about to attack it, the disturbance in the basic cause and effect functioning of the cricket’s mind creates uncertainty, making its specific response unpredictable. For humans, Thomas suggests, this state of chaos “is the norm” (491).

Human actions are often unpredictable; for us, the most menial occurrence can trigger a world of lost or veiled memories. Our chaotic thoughts create chaotic actions and associations, and this is what makes Woolf’s dialectic so important for sorting out the truth. Words are closely linked to our chaotic thoughts—in many ways, our every day thoughts are bound to them. Words retain some of the chaos of their origins. They are a product of our attempts to structure and control the chaos of our everyday existence. But, as Woolf implies when she says that “[words] hate anything that stamps them with one meaning or confines them to one attitude, for it is their nature to change” (206), the chaos of change is inherent in their nature, in our nature. No matter how many ordered poems or essays we write, the words that compose them must be as flexible as the hours, the days, the years that pass through them.

Thought, meaning, and words are precisely linked to experience. As the philosopher Suzanne K. Langer says in “Signs and Symbols,” “All our sense

impressions leave their traces in our memory” (528). And, as we can know, the psyche is layered with an array of accumulated impressions. From these impressions, writers attempt to glean some semblance of truth—aided and inhibited by the language they must use to express it.

Thomas’s idea of chaos helps us understand that memory is like a chamber in the mind that requires two keys: the words, signs, or symbols we associate with the impressions formed by our experience, and the random, chaotic wandering of everyday thought. One sorts through the chamber to understand an image; one tries to pin an experience down by capturing it in a scene, but the words and the giddy yelps of half-forgotten summer days echo and fade into other impressions, other experiences, other thoughts. This “tendency to combine and abstract, mix and extend [ideas] by playing with symbols, is,” according to Langer, “man’s outstanding human achievement” (528).

Our “rambles” with words are ultimately explorations with linguistic symbols. “Words, pictures, and memory images,” Langer instructs, “are symbols that can be combined in a thousand ways” (528). Words do not merely “belong to each other” (Woolf 203)—they belong to memories and to mindsets, and the “outstanding human achievement” of linking them is controlled by the same ebb and flow between chaos and control that pilots our thoughts. This is what makes human behavior so unpredictable, just as it makes our wanderings with words so whimsical. We can start with a sign reading “Passing Russell Square,” and, once affected by its evocations, we end up missing our train because our thoughts have been transported by the word *passing* into ruminations on time and change (Woolf 201). But, as surely as we attempt and fail to control words, they can attempt and fail to control us.

Words are not simple; they are not “useful”; and yet they help us tell *some* of the truth. Words, like thoughts, change their shape; they form and reform, combine and recombine so that ultimately they leave us with new and varied impressions, different perhaps from the word or thought we started with. Truth itself has many sides, and more often than not, we glimpse it fleetingly in a painting or a song, a movie or a poem. But just as we do, our minds go off and running again, into the chaos, into life itself. Words cannot be confined to their intended meanings, and images, memories and experiences cannot be fully captured with words. These unseemly characteristics of truth—paradox and universality—ensure that the chaos within and outside each of us will live on.

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