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A Modernist Distrust of Words: The Exploitation of a World

Obsessed with the Arbitrary Confines of Language

Celebrated Modernist poet William Carlos Williams once stated that there are “no ideas but in things.” His works have baffled many due to their seemingly primitive content, but their apparent plainness instills the significance of “things” as the basis of meaning. Stylistic and thematic experimentation in this “figurative modernist war against” words “was raised to a white-hot pitch of intensity by the literal war . . . in whose aftermath the intrinsic crookedness of language was glaring” (Attridge). This new awareness of the “crookedness of language” instilled authors with a distrust of words. Since Modernism brought on such a massive onslaught of new, complex literature, trying to determine some of the overarching ideas of this literary period seems daunting for any reader. However, by exploring major characters from works by William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald and then examining bits of Wallace Stevens’ poetry, we begin to see that Modern literature as a whole was completely focused on highlighting the isolation and meaninglessness of life that results from the innate arbitrariness of words.

Addie Bundren, dead mother in Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying*, only gets one chapter out of the entirety of the novel, yet the complexity of Addie’s thoughts arguably make it one of the most impactful sections in the book. While she expresses a great deal of negativity towards her husband and children, emphasizing her less-than-wholesome motherly image,

her isolation seems rooted in the fact that she is unable to identify with people and things around her. Since our ability to communicate and understand the world around us is rooted in language—a system of arbitrary signs that signify ideas—words, phrases, grammar rules, and so forth, are completely removed from the physical reality of *things*. Addie states that “words are no good,” and that “words dont ever fit even what they are trying to say at” (Faulkner, *As I Lay* 171), signifying her distrust of language. She even goes so far as to claim that the ideas of love, motherhood, and pride are words just “like the others; just a shape to fill a lack” (172). By leveling out any hierarchy of meaning with these words and stating that even these typically powerful terms mean no more than others, Addie suggests the bleak attempt language makes at connecting people, emotions, things, and so forth. By calling them mere “shapes to fill a lack,” she comments directly on the artificial, symbolic nature of language and the inadequacy of identification that results from using an arbitrary system. In John Attridge’s introductory essay in his book, *Incredible Modernism*, he states that “modernism bore witness to a sundering of the referential bond between words and things” and “that language is rooted in metaphor because there is no real affinity between words and the inaccessible material things they designate,” directly correlating to Addie’s concerns with languages. In fact, Addie claims that we have “to use one another by words like spiders dangling by their mouths from a beam, swinging and twisting and never touching” (Faulkner, *As I Lay* 172). While her image is chilling at best, it directly highlights not only the imperfect nature of communication (in the way that the spiders never make contact with each other), but it also portrays our absolute reliance on this system. In order to connect with something or to understand it, we essentially work through a vocabulary of set traits and ideas in our minds in order to make sense of it.

However, since things exist beyond the incomplete realm of words, it is absolutely impossible to truly convey things perfectly, isolating us from truly connecting with the world around us. While most people would shake off such deep thoughts, Addie is plagued by this Modern crisis, and persists thinking about the nature of language and labels. She remembers lying in bed and thinking, "Anse. Why Anse . . . I would think about his name until after a while I could see the word as a shape, a vessel . . . a significant shape profoundly without life like an empty door frame" (173). While this statement recalls her discussion of language as shapes meant to fill a void, it goes a step further; here, Addie understands that words, like the doorframe that is rendered useless in its emptiness, signify nothing. She shifts her focus and begins calling her husband "not-Anse," knowing that whatever he is labeled has no affect on who or what he is. Things persist in being beyond the scope that is painted by language. Perhaps this is why Addie refers to Anse in the negative, or why she explains that she's got family even though they're "in the cemetery" (171). To some degree, we call things into a kind of existence by our use of words. Since our lexicon is limited but our thoughts extend beyond that scope, things must be contorted into what can be described or explained. The word "chair," for example, has nothing at all to do with a real chair. It is merely the generally accepted term meant to imply the idea of the thing. Even when one thinks of a chair, there are many factors determining our perception of it, such as how large it is, what color it is, or what materials it's made of, yet language has grouped these varieties under a blanket term for the sake of ample expression. In this way, Addie's rejection of typical labels and their associated meaning perhaps allows her to accept her dead family as an active extension of her name. Regardless, Addie finds solace in *things*. The times she felt the most alive and most

connected to her children were when they “faulted, so [she] could whip them. When the switch fell [she] could feel it upon [her] flesh; when it welted and ridged it was [her] blood that ran, and [she] would think with each blow of the switch: Now you are aware of me!” (170). Since words created an impossible distance between Addie and the world around her, physically feeling and seeing the impact that her actions had on her children created a far more sure connection in her eyes. The superficiality of language left her unable to show her children who she was, yet her brutal actions and the resulting scars on her children’s skin left a lasting mark of her existence. While words could be denied and forgotten, deeds and things carry true, unmistakable meaning. Reality, then, rests in things. It is because of this that Addie criticizes other people who substitute “words [for] the deeds, and the other words that are not deeds, that are just gaps in people’s lacks” (174). By removing herself from language and resting in the real power of things, Addie comes to terms with a cynical sense of morality, in which she states that “people to whom sin is just a matter of words, to them salvation is just words too” (176). She escapes language and dreams that she “would be I” (174)—an impression of self that is only created and maintained by her personal actions and things—while others can continue to “be the shape and echo of [his or her] word” (174). Another infamous Faulkner character, *The Sound and the Fury’s* Quentin, likewise searches to free himself from manmade constraints. However, unlike Addie, Quentin finds himself trapped by more than just the emptiness of words.

Frequently throughout his section, June Second 1910, Quentin comments on the essential arbitrariness of language and perception. He understands that concepts such as victory and defeat are “an illusion of philosophers and fools” (Faulkner, *The Sound* 93)—made up terms to express an established set of emotions. Beyond vague and arbitrary

ideas, however, Quentin also believes that the notion of identity suffers from the superficial emptiness that words do. He states that “the best way to take all people, black or white, is to take them for what they think they are . . . a nigger is not a person so much as a form of behavior; a sort of obverse reflection of the white people he lives among” (106). In some ways, Quentin seems to reduce perception to a set of distinguished traits, positing that identity is merely the act of conforming to a persona that is societally ascribed. Perhaps more compelling, however, is the idea that identity is assumed by actions, by taking part of or mimicking “a form of behavior.” Like Addie, who exists beyond the bounds of words and places emphasis on the power of “things,” Quentin understands that actions dictate meaning. However, given that we as individuals cannot help but categorize people and process information with our limited lexicon, these actions and behaviors still trap people in the confines of empty names and personas. Quentin is a perfect example of having to conform to a set type. For example, “as the oldest son, [Quentin] is expected to become the head of the family who will continue the Compson line and preserve the tradition which is central to the Southern experience. His failure to fulfill these obligations reveals not only his own limitations but also the failure of his heritage to provide values by which he can live” (Brown 544). Here, actions, such as going to Harvard, were meant to solidify Quentin’s place in his family and society, yet because he feels no personal connection to the assigned traits he is forced to take on, he is sent into a downward spiral that motivates his suicide. His struggles of identification mirror the confusion of war-torn Modern society in which “modern life had become too complex to be seen ‘steadily and whole’, receding beyond the intellectual grasp of any single observer” (Attridge). Language, traditional societal roles, and life in general seem obsolete given the extreme changes in the surrounding world, and

that complicates life for Quentin. When compared with his absolute obsession with time, Quentin seems governed by inescapable manmade powers. Words and time become obsolete, dismissed for chaos and confusion. The narration shifts into complete stream of consciousness, with severe word disassociation and flashbacks, as when he states, “The displacement of water is equal to the something of something. Reducto absurdum of all human experience, and two six-pound flat-irons weigh more than one tailor’s goose” (Faulkner, *The Sound* 111). Here, we literally see the removal of word meaning, as when Quentin uses “something of something” to fill in a phrase he had probably heard (and probably forgotten) in school. This detracts from any significance the original phrase was intended to convey, and reiterates the idea that words are merely arbitrary. The extreme stream-of-consciousness style of this section of the novel also indicates a lack of boundaries in regards to time. Quentin eventually rejects structure and narrative graces, completely ignoring punctuation. Although this makes the final section of his chapter difficult to follow, it also suggests the arbitrariness of grammar and structure in language. If words mean little, then punctuation indicates even less in the grand scheme of things! Ultimately, Quentin’s analytical understanding of the world, along with his “partial awareness of the emptiness of words and values . . . creates his despair and isolates him in a world of shadows” (Brown 550). He is merely “walking in a shadow world, denying reality. . . . Life, motion, time—all are meaningless, and death for Quentin . . . will end the empty ‘sound and fury’ of existence” (Brown 550). Perhaps it is for these reasons that Quentin seeks suicide, for only in death can he escape the emptiness of existence. In dying, he has committed the ultimate action, the ultimate *thing*. All in all, Quentin’s sad and scattered section negatively

comments on the pressures of conforming to manmade and arbitrary constraints, as in language, essentially forcing his untimely death.

Aside from Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald also utilized characters to signify the arbitrariness of language and identity. In his timeless novel, *The Great Gatsby*, the namesake character, Jay Gatsby, is a man defined mostly by the unknown, with people believing he is everything from an Oxford man to a potential killer and a bootlegger (Fitzgerald 49, 61, etc.). These words attempt to construct an identity for a man who is otherwise unknown, and while there is some truth to the rumors people spread around, Gatsby's core nature and past remain a mystery; words fail to supply the true substance of Gatsby's soul. Nick tries to learn more about his neighbor, thinking "young men didn't—at least in my provincial inexperience I believe they didn't—drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound" (49). To start his investigation, Nick prompts Jordan to provide some information, to which she simply shares some of the basic gossip she's heard. Nick internally comments, "A dim background [of a man] started to take shape behind him, but at [Jordan's] next remark it faded away" (49). Nick, like the many guests and apparent friends of Gatsby, struggles to discover the truth and substance of Gatsby's identity, but he remains unable to really connect with and understand Gatsby due to his enigmatic and title-bound persona. Certainly, the recent transition from poor, unimportant James Gatz into the sparkling, Jay Gatsby has obliterated not only other people's ability to understand whom he is, but it has turned his identity into a complete façade – a "vague contour" and impression that must represent "the substantiality of a man" (101). He "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself," having "invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen-year-old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to

the end” (98). His identity is based solely on words, titles, and supposed actions that give no real substance to the true Gatsby (or Gatz, for that matter), with actions and “things” being mere imitations of what Gatsby thinks he should be. Since Gatsby is essentially just the facsimile of a man, someone created out of ideas and words, he is the inversion of Williams’ notion that true values should be placed in *things*, and, because Gatsby’s identity is a personal construct, he is left completely isolated from his family, his past, and from making any true connections with the world around him. This alienation pervades his life, despite having wild parties and being surrounded by hosts of people on a very regular basis. He is often described by Nick as a figure or a shadow (or both, as on page 20), detracting from the personal aspects of Gatsby and instead focusing on the almost inhuman and solitary suggestion of a man. It is interesting to note that both Gatsby and Faulkner’s Quentin are associated with shadows. “Shadow” particularly bears some negative, even deathly, connotations, perhaps suggesting that Gatsby’s (and perhaps Quentin’s, too) existence is not a true life. Perhaps “shadow” could simply refer to the idea that Gatsby is a self-made man who had to create himself off a pattern of an ideal, essentially shadowing successful examples to create what or who he is. Regardless, the overwhelming sense of near dehumanization and isolation is undeniable, made especially obvious at Gatsby’s funeral in which “Nobody came” (174). The many people who passed through Gatsby’s estate bore no connection to him, just as Gatsby was essentially unable to forge true connections with others by lacking a valid identity, one that was solely created through a flamboyant façade and a host of gossip and inefficient words. Gatsby’s life was by nature very superficial, an artifice—“an unbroken series of successful gestures” (2). These “gestures” assembled to suggest the idea of a man, but, as stated by John Attridge, “words,

like coins, depend for their value not on any intrinsic property but rather on collective confidence in the system itself." Just as a dime suggests nothing to a person not used to American currency, so is society baffled at the ghost of a man, Gatsby. His attempts to mimic the forms and stereotypes of a wealthy, successful man unfortunately isolate him in the sense that even his actions bore no true significance. He is filled with a sort of "sudden emptiness" (Fitzgerald 55), being capable only of imitating ideas and words / titles instead of actively constructing a "self" through *things*. In being a nearly perfect reversal of Williams' comment, Gatsby comes to fully represent the alienation that ensues by relying on arbitrary ideas to define identity.

So far, the struggle with arbitrariness has been shown through characters in long novels, yet many Modern works of poetry, specifically those by Wallace Stevens, likewise focus on the empty nature of words and perception, illuminating a sense of general alienation. Looking first at one of Wallace's most celebrated poems, "The Emperor of Ice Cream," we get the famous line, "Let be be finale of seem" (Stevens l. 7). Linguistically, "be" is a form of the verb "to be," which refers to a person's literal, physical state. "Seem" implies a subjective, personal idea of what is happening, so what may *seem to be* may not actually be reality. Therefore, by stating that "be" should be the "finale," or final stage, of "seem," Stevens seems to be positing that there should be an end to stereotypes, to incorrect perceptions and judgments, and, to return to Williams, there should be "no ideas but in *things*." Remembering this idea while looking at another of Steven's poems, "Anecdote of the Jar," we see the construction of reality through arbitrary signs (such as language or manmade ideas), much like the novels previously discussed. In terms of the poem's progression, the speaker first "placed a jar in Tennessee" which "*made* the slovenly

wilderness / Surround that hill” (ll. 3-4, emphasis added), implying that the jar’s existence has created a power shift. Because the jar is “gray and bare” and does “not give of bird or bush” (ll. 10-11), the juxtaposition of this lifeless, manmade object with the natural environment is startling. The new jar’s presence has disturbed what was previously all one indistinct natural environment, something that existed without the need for a word or idea to describe it. Essentially, the wilderness existed in a perfect state as just a *thing*, but that wholeness has now clearly been disrupted, “[pretending] to assert an already existing identity” (McFadden 266). As the poem continues, “The wilderness rose up to it [the jar], / And sprawled around, no longer wild” (Stevens ll. 5-6), describing a sort of tameness. Essentially, the jar “took dominion every where” (l. 9), bringing a new onslaught of manmade ideas and power through a world of words and hierarchical ideas. Since the jar called the wilderness into a state of apparent existence, it assumes a sort of arbitrary power over the surrounding area. Symbolically, if the jar signifies the limited ability of words, we see how language creates rules and connections that have no inherent value. Just as the jar cannot truly dominate and tame the wilderness, language likewise fails to create the true essence of *things*. These ideas are perfectly reinforced by the structure of the poem, which is forced into a very rigid form of three four-line stanzas, with almost every line adhering to perfect iambic tetrameter. Like the jar, or on a larger Modern scale, like words, this form is an imposed form that serves no definitive meaning in and of itself. Forcing words into such a strict pattern is like the jar (and words), forcing manmade meaning into otherwise natural things, connecting Stevens’ poetry to this Modernist focus on arbitrariness just as strongly as the major novelists of this time.

It is perhaps ironic that these novels and poems comment on the inadequacy of language given their set form as works of literature—forms that, by nature, are completely dependent on words. However, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Stevens, and many other Modern authors manipulated their works to focus on the resulting alienation that ensues from being able to adequately identify with the world around them, maybe due to the social complexities and distrust of language brought on by a horrible war. Whatever the reason, noticing this major theme throughout these very complex works suggests a call to action, voiced by the man who simply wrote of plums and wheelbarrows, but who knew that there are ultimately “no ideas but in things.” Although the world is more confused than ever, perhaps we can strive to live in a world where “things” determine meaning.

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