

That One Time We Were Words

Samantha George

There was once a time when I firmly believed that words were merely the servants of thought. Annoying, inefficient, beautifully inadequate servants whose only purpose was to convey my thoughts to others—that's what I believed words to be. I read them; I wrote them; I spoke them. They were unavoidable. I believed myself to have complete mastery over them, not in the sense that I could masterfully wield words to convey thought and relay meaning, but in the sense that I felt some sense of superiority over them.

Silly words, I thought, you know nothing of what I know. You have no sense of self. But I, I am a conscious, self-aware being who now requires you to come forth from whatever realm you hail from and assist me in my endeavors. Perhaps the words didn't appreciate being addressed in such a manner, for they surely did not assist me in my endeavors.

For I have certainly failed. My failure is not the result of action or inaction on my part. It was inevitable; it was existence. And such an existence automatically induces failure. Sometimes we believe we've accomplished meaning, that we've succeeded in ascribing significance to something, to ourselves, but it's an illusory belief. We circle about significance, attempting to reach out for it, but we can never touch it. I always thought that it would just take time to reach significance and that it would occur eventually, if not as soon as I'd hoped. I'm beginning to wonder, though, if it's even there, this meaning, or if I'm just reaching out for an absent presence.

So, as I pace about, stalking meaning as a predator stalks prey, I can't help but feel that it's futile. I call upon the servants, the words, to make sense of these revelations for me, and I'm struck by the idea that they are my equals, if not my superiors. Just as I circle about an absent significance, they circle about the tenuous centers of thoughts and ideas that tend to deteriorate before they are fully conceived.

We seem to be inextricably bound to language by language. We are words; we are signs, struggling to make sense of failed meaning. We turn to the servants we once thought to be inadequate and find that they may be better off than we are. They have grown accustomed to their condition. They know how to handle the failure; we do not. They have been fashioned in a way that allows them to accept the failure inherent in their design. They are devoid of consciousness. They have no worrying thoughts; they have no minds to worry. They need not concern themselves with the state of their physical forms either. They latch onto the existence of whatever medium is available, be it ink, dirt, paint, voice. They need not worry about the dilapidation of flesh or the deterioration of bone.

We, on the other hand, feel the need to worry about such things. We are at a

disadvantage. We have yet to grow accustomed to the idea that perhaps mankind is not destined for success or perpetually progressive progress. Over the years, humankind has worked itself into a frenzy of failure-defiance. Look at us, the humans say: we can write words, we can think thoughts, we can make progress, we have opposable thumbs. We claim consciousness as a prized possession and are in awe of the machinations of the body that could allow for such a thing. We are amazed by ourselves, by the complexities of mind and body, but there is something we must realize.

In the end, all the external (and to some extent, internal) appurtenances of humans can be whittled away to reveal that we are merely words and signs. As words, we fit quite nicely into the system of signifier and signified.¹ The signifier is the “physical” composition of the word itself, a jumble of letters and phonemes: the “sound-image.” The signified is the meaning, the thing or idea referred to by the signifier. The signifier is fairly stable, but the signified changes constantly; the meaning varies from person to person within different contexts.

Our existence is the signifier; our thoughts, the signified. Existence provides us with a physical frame that allows for the mechanisms of thought. It is the sound-image of ourselves; however, instead of being comprised of a jumble of letters and phonemes, we have a tangle of tissues and tendons to call our own. With our signifier we need a signified—we need meaning—otherwise the jumble of tendons and tissues would make no sense. And so there are thoughts.

Thoughts are meaning; they are airy, insubstantial centers around which we attempt to stabilize our “selves.” The thoughts are always changing; they seem to dismantle themselves before they are fully conceived. Since the thoughts, the signifieds, are so unstable, we cannot define ourselves by them. We must, instead, find definition in a chain of signifiers, a chain of existences that are external to ourselves. We must rely on the presence of others, other words, fellow humans, higher beings, who can perceive our own existence and give us substance. Our thoughts have failed us in this sense; we had to resort to the material, the empirical, for sustenance.

It’s odd. Even though we cannot be comprised of thoughts, even though we cannot exist as pure meaning, even though the thoughts cannot be directly implemented as tools in our plane of existence and our search for meaning, the thoughts are not insignificant. They have their purpose. With their fleeting forms and questionable stability, they occupy and comprise the memory of us small signs. We may believe that such a composition is inefficient, and we may be frustrated by such inefficiency, but such inefficiency is what we need.

We were never meant to be truly efficient beings; we were never meant to possess perfection. As a species, though, we seem to believe that we can reach such efficiency, such perfection, if only we try a bit harder to access the potential of humanity somehow. We make machines that allow us to feel productive and we change our

physical frames to match the fashionable new “perfection” that we’ve collectively agreed to accept for the time being. All the while, our memories remain as reminders of the inefficiency of humankind, the imperfections inherent in the species.

Memories, so rich with thoughts, are tenuous at best. It’s better that way. It would be crushing if we could remember our failures in minute detail. It would depress us to recall every defect and disappointment. If we were able to remember as efficiently as we desired, we wouldn’t be able to move, for the weight of our imperfection would paralyze us. We must keep moving; the nature of our thoughts allows us to do so. The thoughts are substantial enough to give us energy, to make us move, but they usually don’t remain long enough to halt our progression.

Being what we are (that is, human), we are always attempting to manipulate our surroundings and our thoughts as well. We try to hold onto them longer than they were meant to be held. We want to know our thoughts, to understand them in order to understand something of ourselves and perhaps others. It’s dangerous to hold back a thought from its natural deterioration, though. Sometimes we can manage to hold onto a thought without terrible backlash. Our movements slow, but the reduced speed is good. It allows for reflection; it allows for more time.

There are many times, though, that a thought held past its life expectancy causes much pain. We are paralyzed then by “excessive and tortured self-examination” which may denature into solipsism that further stagnates movement.² We become self-referential sentences that are only ever able to comment or notice their own structures, that are “agonizingly self-aware” of their condition,³ but that are unable to do anything because all their energies have been put toward the excessive self-awareness. We must find a balance; we must hold back thoughts in moderation. We don’t want to always be moving at the pace of our thoughts; we don’t want to live the unexamined life. However, in the same turn, we don’t want to remain still or to examine the self to the point where we see no one else but ourselves and perceive no thoughts but our own. The state of our memories creates a buffer of sorts for us. The memories are insubstantial enough that we have a chance to avoid the paralysis caused by dulled mental faculties and repetitive over-exposure to self-created meaning. But they remain with us long enough that our curiosity is aroused; we move to seek answers.

The thoughts provide us with the raw materials necessary to make our “selves” in this day and age. With the attention being directed toward the individual, the thoughts of the individual become so very important. What do *I* think about meaning? What do *I* believe? The world is nothing more or less than what *I* believe it to be. In our search for significance, we’ve narrowed the scope of our vision to our own minds. In the vastness of the world, such illusory self-reliance comforts us. We can’t feel small and insignificant if the world is only comprised of ourselves. While we solve the problem of feeling small by restricting our scope to our own signifieds, we become just

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that—restricted. We are constrained by our own desire for significance, by the freedom that the lack of objectivity seemingly provides us.

We all seem to be screaming, “The world is subjective!” That’s all we seem to be doing, though: screaming. We’ve given up on listening, for listening would require us to go beyond our own realms and interact with others. And so we scream. About everything and anything we scream, hoping that others will listen if we scream loudly enough but realizing that we’re all making too much noise to perceive or be perceived. We believe our screams to be coherent, but they only make sense to ourselves.

If we would remain silent for just a few moments, though, we might come to realize that we need the other words, our fellow formerly-screaming humans, to survive. Words don’t mean much out of context and neither do we. It’s foolish to believe that we can contrive meaning for ourselves when we are merely signs; we need a language to make sense of things. We need syntax and structure, not the self-tortured propagation of our transient signifieds. There is a chance that such structure may be found in the interdependence of us, the signs, the latticework of words that walk on two legs. But that’s only if everyone will cease screaming about themselves and their subjectivity for a moment or two and take the time to perceive the signifiers of those other signs, and in turn be perceived.

Notes

¹ Homer, Sean. *Jacques Lacan*. London: Routledge, 2005, 36-38. Referring to the linguistic sign posited by the structuralist Ferdinand Saussure.

² Moser, David. "A Self-Referential Story." <<http://consc.net/misc/moser.html>>.

³ Ibid.