To Be a Master of Deception

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The relationship between language and reality is indirect; I believe by becoming aware that the power of language is limited, we can have a greater understanding of its role in signifying truths. Much of our knowledge we have derived through the medium of language, and so it is necessary that we note the difference between the sign and the thing after the thing has been mediated, or distorted, by our imperfect means of communication. So, before we can claim that we *know* anything, it is important that we apply this attitude of humility in our perceptions, as our words do not capture the complete essence of things but only vestiges insofar as they relate to human experience. I will argue that we should emphasize the necessity to hone our artistic sensibilities in order to effectively employ, and more clearly comprehend the role of, language.

Near the end of my first semester teaching composition, I, being busy with other projects for other classes and having very little time to come up with an assignment for my students' oral presentations, settled on the first thing that came to mind: Commencement speeches. The idea was to get my students, although freshmen, to think ahead, because the "time really flies by." I was not surprised to see how my lack of effort was reflected in their presentations, as they relied heavily on clichés (such as the one I have just used as an attempt at humor); but what interests me is the correlation between one's communicative laziness and his/her use of clichés. I thought, "Why are we so reluctant to exert the mental effort to think of something *new* to say, or at least a new way to say the same, 'tried-and-true' messages?" Although I was lenient in grading my students in order to compensate for my own error, I did not excuse them from interrogation. They seemed like automatons

just spewing out worn maxims constructed by culture and not their individualized sentiments. Three such clichés I will dwell on in this essay are: "Make the most of time"; "Reality is subjective"; and "Be yourself."

In preparation for their presentations, I had my students read and watch David Foster Wallace's 2005 Kenyon commencement speech "This is Water." Wallace's overall message—to choose to be conscious in adulthood rather than to let yourself drift unconsciously through life on your "default-settings" (7)—coincides with these selected clichés. After one of my student's incredibly vague presentation on why we should cherish the ones we love while we still have the time and not waste our time with people who don't deserve it, I asked her, "Okay, so what is time?" She replied, "I don't know. It's too complex." She probably should have thought that question through before pursuing that route, but alas, the time is lost. "What is time," I said, "but a human construct used to measure our own dying?" It was an 8:00 A.M. class and nobody was in the mood for an existential crisis so early in the day. But as an instructor, I felt it was my duty to break my students from falling into such stale patterns of thought—thoughts that were not their own yet were accepted seemingly without question.

I agree with Wallace's advice to choose to be conscious, as "the world will not discourage you from operating on your default-settings. . .the world of men and money and power hums along quite nicely on the fuel of fear and contempt and frustration and craving and the worship of self" (7). It is necessary that we challenge what we say and write in order to rid our brains of subliminally inculcated propaganda and to avoid unconsciously propelling ideologies that we may not agree with. While I find Wallace's message to be powerful, I do wonder if his celebratory setting and audience of college grads influenced

his high degree of humanist faith in cognition. Here is Nietzsche on the issue of human intellect:

> In some remote corner of the universe, flickering in the light of the countless solar systems into which it had been poured, there was once a planet on which clever animals invented cognition. It was the most arrogant and most mendacious minute in the 'history of the world'; but a minute was all it was. After nature had drawn just a few more breaths the planet froze and the clever animals had to die. Someone could invent a fable like this and they would still not have given a satisfactory illustration of just how pitiful, how insubstantial and transitory, how purposeless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature. (874)

Although Nietzsche's perspective is ostensibly bleak, the humility this passage produces in his readers is, I think, beneficial in regards to their perceptions of the powers and weaknesses of the human mind. The worst attitude we can have is to be content or, even worse, proud of our degree of intellect, to be so enmeshed in the tangles of our seemingly sufficient knowledge that we stop learning.

This is what worries me about our reliance on clichés and, correlatively, our reluctance to admit when we simply do not know. I am not advocating an attitude of ignorance; on the contrary, I believe, by humbly admitting that we do not know and approaching issues with a will to learn, we stand to gain a fresher, more accurate perspective than the one we would arrive at if we were to just assume that the common denominator is true based on its habitual usage by the general population. Nietzsche asserts, "Truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphors which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour, coins which,

having lost their stamp, are now regarded as metal and no longer as coins" (876). Our knowledge, or what we claim to be knowledge, is not at all sufficient. We learn through language but words never quite arrive at what they attempt to represent. We rely on metaphors—literally comparisons of *unlike* things—and claim we understand. And we trust our metaphors because our ancestors used and trusted them, and their ancestors and so on into time immemorial. But repetition does not necessarily indicate validation; yet it surely produces the illusion of truth.

Language, though faulty in its nature, is subject to evolution, and it is our duty to adapt our usage to fit the times. Speaking to this issue, Nietzsche distinguishes between *the man of reason* and *the man of intuition*: "The one fearful of intuition, the other filled with scorn for abstraction, the latter as unreasonable as the former is unartistic" (883). The man of reason relies on already established knowledge, whereas the man of intuition constantly challenges what is "known" and, furthermore, enacts the necessary task of breaking that knowledge down and reconstructing it in various ways:

> That vast assembly of beams and boards to which needy man clings, thereby saving himself on his journey through life, is used by the liberated intellect as a mere climbing frame and plaything on which to perform its most reckless tricks; and when it smashes this framework, jumbles it up and ironically re-assembles it, pairing the most unlike things and dividing those things which are closest to one another, it reveals the fact that it does not require those makeshift aids of neediness, and that it is now guided, not by concepts but by intuition. (883)

The idea is not to passively accept knowledge but to actively challenge it. To recall Nietzsche's metaphor of truths as coins, I will expand upon the image with respect to the artist's role in revealing impressions of "truths."

So let's say a penny is a truth; the piece of paper lying over it is the obscure distance between sign and thing; and the artist's pencil is language. With each mark we see different forms appear, none of which captures the thing in its completion, but with enough marks drawn in a variety of directions, we begin to get an impression of what lies under the piece of paper. Nietzsche's "exuberant hero" (883) would not worry him/herself with the futile task of trying to hold the penny in his/her hand; instead, he/she would be content with the marks themselves . . . only to rip them up and start anew. Nietzsche argues,

> Between two absolutely different spheres, such as subject and object are, there is no causality, no correctness, no expression, but at most an *aesthetic* way of relating, by which I mean an allusive transference, a stammering translation into a quite different language. For which purpose a middle sphere and mediating force is certainly required which can freely invent and freely create poetry. (880)

The power of poetry lies in its ability to defamiliarize that which has become familiar. Culture has a way of naturalizing that which is not natural; for example, any law in a human society did not miraculously sprout from the earth but was made by man. To repeat my point on the power of repetition, the naturalization of a cultural norm becomes naturalized through reinforcement. Therefore, poetry and other forms of art serve to constantly *re*-present that which has been presented to us as truth, thereby unsettling its status as "truth."

In part I of his essay "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche claims that the flaw of mankind is human cognition, as it deceives us into thinking we are

more important than we actually are. In part II, he proposes that if we are aware of the human mind's deceptive nature, we can use the power of deception in an artistic manner so as to create productive and pleasurable fantasies free from the burden of our illusory drive towards "truth." This is why I stress that we hone our artistic sensibilities: so we can understand the difference between direct experience and intentionally indirect representations. When an individual makes the necessary shift from an individual of reason to one of intuition, "The intellect, that master of pretence, is free and absolved of its usual slavery for as long as it can deceive without *doing harm*. . . The intellect has now cast off the mark of servitude" (Nietzsche 882). When spectators are watching a tragedy, for example, they are "free and absolved" of their immediate deception, as they can learn through the characters' mediated deceptions—through catharsis.

A friend of mine recently told me an interesting story about when she attended a burlesque show on a college campus. The audience was composed of an awkward mix of students and their parents. The act my friend described to me was performed by a woman chained to a chair; she did not move, but stared expressionlessly into the crowd, all the while an unsettling frequency hovered in the air, gradually rising in pitch, creating a sense of uncertain anticipation . . . then the woman screamed shrilly and the act was over. What interests me about the story is the difference between the students' experience and their parents'. The entire audience experienced shock, I presume, but it is the nature of that shock that varied. The students, given their liberal arts background, were probably aware (I would hope) that this was an act created to have a certain effect on the spectator; whereas the parents, having little indication of what they were in for, may have experienced that shock immediately and felt disturbed by it because they lacked that sensibility to recognize

how form and function worked together to produce that effect of shock. Our awareness and appreciation of artistic deception—of fiction—attunes and thus restores the power of consciousness.

So yes, "reality is subjective." We can choose to live passively according to the default-settings Wallace discusses, or we can consciously observe both life and art, and moreover, how art comments on, and creates meaning from, life. When the student who employed this cliché was finished with his presentation, I couldn't help but ask, "What other reality do you know of?" If a perceiver is, by his/her nature, subjective, how did we ever come to any conceptualization of an objective reality?

The first part of Nietzsche's essay creates a sense of objectivity, free from the constraints of humanity. In order to understand the function of the piece as a whole, the reader must, obviously, read on to part II: Nietzsche breaks down our faulty process of attaining "knowledge" through language in the first part as a way of presenting the problem so that he may propose in the second part the solution of using the deceptive nature of language to our advantage.

The character of Richard Elster in Don DeLillo's *Point Omega* exemplifies the mistake of prioritizing the fantasy of objectivity over the reality of subjectivity. Elster is a retired war strategist who reveled in the beauty of his strategies but never acknowledged the actual deaths such tactics entailed. His hamartia is his excess of abstraction and lack of practice. Out in the desert in his cabin he pontificates to his interviewer about his theory on the fate of human consciousness: "The omega point. A leap out of our biology. Ask yourself this question. Do we have to be human forever? Consciousness is exhausted. Back now to inorganic matter. This is what we want. We want to be stones in a field"

(DeLillo 53). From this brief snippet of Elster's character, it would be easy to assume that his theory is not dissimilar to Nietzsche's; however, whereas the latter proposes a solution, the former abandons humanity in preference for his philosophy that claims to exceed our species in importance. But the period in which Elster's theory eclipses his concern for human matters is brought to an abrupt end when he receives notice that his daughter has been murdered. The interviewer/narrator reflects,

> I thought of his remarks about matter and being, those long nights on the deck, half smashed, he and I, transcendence, paroxysm, the end of human consciousness. It seemed so much dead echo now. Point omega. A million years away. The omega point has narrowed, here and now, to the point of a knife as it enters a body. All the man's grand themes funneled down to local grief, one body, out there somewhere, or not. (DeLillo 99)

So after all his theorizing, both the relationships among Elster's words and the reality he claimed to know prove to be nonexistent. The tangible act of his daughter being stabbed deflates his balloon of abstraction, filled with nothing but the hot air of his pontification, signifying nothing.

If in our subjective isolation we must rely on the flawed medium of language and suffer the inevitable miscommunications and their implications, the dream of objectivity is the fantasy of escaping a world governed by an incompetent system of signs. There is a scene at the end of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* in which the narrator, Adso, after a long life of interpreting the Bible and struggling to distinguish differences between piety and heresy, is on his deathbed envisioning what heaven might be like:

> I shall soon enter this broad desert, perfectly level and boundless, where the truly pious heart succumbs in bliss. I shall sink into the divine shadow, in a dumb silence and an ineffable union, and in this sinking all equality and all inequality shall be lost, and in that abyss my spirit will lose itself. . . I shall be in the simple foundation, in the silent desert where diversity is never seen. . . I shall fall into the silent and uninhabited divinity where there is no work and no image. (538)

Note Adso's repetition of "silent" and his desire to be free of binaries, such as "equality" and "inequality." This vision of heaven is a realm without language. The desire to eliminate binaries is the wish to deconstruct language. Things are defined in opposition to each other. For example, what would Good mean without Bad? Right without Wrong? Truth without Falsehood? The problem, however, is that this positive-negative relationship sets a precedent of hierarchy that does not accurately reflect all particular binaries set in opposition to each other, such as Man/Woman: Man is elevated over Woman, and as a result we see the hierarchal template translated in societies in the form of patriarchy. Adso's wish to smooth out all binaries can be likened to the function of deconstruction: "[to] upset the hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties. . . By showing that the argument which elevates cause can be used to favor effect, one uncovers and undoes the rhetorical operation responsible for the hierarchization" (Derrida 88). This process of reversal undermines the false implication that whatever is presented first in a set of binaries is greater than its opposite.

Language is fraught with inadequacy, yet to abandon it is to abandon humanity. Although language is imperfect, it is all we have to communicate with each other. Elster's vision, while it is peaceful as it is free of human suffering, is one of negligence and

detachment; nothing progressive can result from such an attitude. It is easy to die; living, however, requires much effort, and a great percentage of which we exert in the throes of communication. Even though sometimes we may wish to give up completely on language and never have to suffer its deficiencies again, we must remember that it, like any other facet of evolution, came about from our drive to survive. Language is a tool that is meant to make life easier, and it can, if only we adapt our perception to its ever-changing nature and continually strive to learn. Despite all the shortcomings of language, the argument that it makes life harder is invalid. "Harder than what?" I would ask. "What pre-language epoch of human life are you so nostalgic for?"

Generalization tends to blur the particulars of a thing out of view. "Language is deficient" is not much of an argument. What motivation is there to exert the effort required to articulate and interpret effectively with this dead-end philosophy? We must adjust our focus in order to see what powers lie in the particulars, and even in the inadequacies.

Earlier I have stated that language does not capture the complete essence of things as it only defines things in relation to humanity. However, anthropomorphism can be beneficial to a degree in certain circumstances. David George Haskell, in his book *The Forest Unseen: A Year's Watch in Nature,* discusses how things found in the natural world can remedy ailments of the body parts they resemble. For instance, kidney beans aid kidney function; walnuts assist brain development; and carrots (when they are sliced they look much like human eyes) improve eyesight. Haskell relates an anecdote about a shoemaker, one Jakob Böhme, who in 1600, after a divine revelation, "believed that God's purpose for His creation was signed into the forms of worldly things. . . The use of external

marks to deduce and remember the medicinal function of chemicals inside plants became known as the Doctrine of Signatures" (2). As Böhme was of the laity, the nobility attempted to discredit and silence him. Nevertheless, the Doctrine of Signatures was circulated among, and used by, medical practitioners because it proved to be effective. Böhme's story illustrates the importance of continually rethinking what authoritative establishments claim is true.

The Doctrine of Signatures is helpful in regards to human health, but its philosophy is limited. Not all things in nature that resemble parts of the body benefit those body parts, and many of them are poisonous. Haskell's argument is well-rounded in that, although he agrees that anthropomorphism can assist mankind, our manner of classifying things only grasps a fraction of their substance: "Utilitarian names can stand in the way of a full experience of nature . . . Our naming imposes tidy categories on nature . . . Like all people, I am culture-bound, so I only partly see the flower; the rest of my field of vision is occupied by centuries of human words" (4-5). Yes, by defining things solely in relation to humanity our system of naming distorts the full realities of things, but what use to us is a nomenclature that does not concern us? What, then, would be the purpose of language?

Haskell's phrase "culture-bound" brings me to the third cliché: "Be yourself." I let the other students ask their questions before I asked the ones I was wondering throughout the whole presentation: "What is the self? Is it not a social construct? An illusion?" If we are abiding by socially constructed norms, how can one individual claim that he/she is different from another? Stanley Fish states, "Once one realizes that the conceptions that fill consciousness, including any conception of its own status, are culturally derived, the very notion of an unconstrained self, of a consciousness wholly and dangerously free,

becomes incomprehensible" (335). From this point of view, people seem less like people and more like automatons routinely uttering their cultures' sentiments and not their own.

So how can we *be ourselves?* Fish believes that particular readers belong to their respective "interpretive communities." The way in which a reader interprets a text depends on his/her context. For example, on a road-trip a few years back I came across a strange sign in a restroom in Arkansas that read "PLEASE DON'T LEAVE BABY"; you see how a potentially negligent mother and a runaway lover/clumsy grammarian might interpret this message differently. The idea of interpretive communities is liberating in that it does not limit the degree of specificity of what constitutes a cultural context. Americans, for instance, may share similar "interpretive strategies" (331), but each individual is part of other subcultures, such as his/her state, county, district, school, family, friend group, etc. We can be ourselves by becoming aware of the particular agglomeration of cultures that comprise our individual identities.

The authoritative ideological state is aware of the deceptive power of language. It is our choice whether or not we wish to become aware as well. Take the blue pill and live under the veil of contrived "truths" and suffer what may come with such ignorance; or take the red pill and consciously employ the deceptive nature of our consciousness to our advantage, namely through art. Nietzsche declares, "Where the man of intuition, as was once the case in ancient Greece, wields his weapons more mightily and victoriously than his contrary, a culture can take shape, given favourable conditions, and the rule of art over life can be established" (883). What distinguishes the master from the victim is that the latter is simply duped whereas the former is aware of the deception at play and, furthermore, can recognize the value that deception entails.

The master of deception is thus the master of comprehension.

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