To Karl – with affectionate regards – John.

AMERICAN STUDIES: WORDS OR THINGS?

By

John A. Kouwenhoven

THE WEMYSS FOUNDATION

Wilmington, Delaware

1963

PREFACE

"Let those pieces of learning which youth learn separately," Plato advised many centuries ago, "be brought before them in *one view*, that they may see relationships among all things." To the long distinguished list of educators who have, over the years, taken this admonition seriously, John A. Kouwenhoven's name belongs. That the Wemyss Foundation has been able to persuade him to launch a new series on theory and methodology in American Studies is cause for rejoicing.

As a teacher, lecturer, editor, and writer, Dr. Kouwenhoven is generally acknowledged to be in the first rank. Trained at Wesleyan and Columbia, he has taught in secondary schools and in colleges. As editor of *Harper's* he won wide acclaim. An early proponent of American Studies, presently teaching at Barnard College, he is on the editorial board of *American Quarterly*. In addition to many articles, he has written five books, the titles of which reveal the scope and originality of the author: *Adventures of America, 1857-1900* (1938); *Made in America: the Arts in Modern Civilization* (1948); *The Columbia Historical Portrait of New York* (1953); *The Beer Can by the Highway; Essays on What's American about America* (1961); and (with Janice Farrar Thaddeus) *When Women Look at Men—An Anthology* (1963). The essay that follows shows the perception, brilliance, and wit which many have come to consider synonymous with John Kouwenhoven. We are grateful that it was our good fortune to publish it.

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The discovery and exploration of America has been going on for roughly five hundred years. That is a long time on any scale except the geological. One would think that by now we would know pretty well what America is, even if we disagreed about its merits and demerits.

Perhaps we do know, but you would never guess it from reading the books its discoverers write about it, or from attending the conferences where they gather to discuss it. Conferences and symposia on American civilization are, I believe, commonly thought of—even by their most enthusiastic promoters—less as ways to settle things than as ways to unsettle them. They are set up to facilitate what is called "an exchange of ideas"—a curious phrase that suggests swapping notions as we might swap cigarette lighters, each of us pocketing and going home with the other fellow's instead of his own. Maybe some are exchanged, but very few are changed, apparently. The symposia and conferences I know about seem, at least, to have contributed very little to any agreement about what American culture is, let alone what it is worth.

In this essay I shall contend that part, at least, of our difficulty results from a fatal imbalance in the techniques we employ as explorers and discoverers in the field of American Studies. I shall suggest, as forcefully as I can, that we have been too ready to accept verbal evidence as if it were the equivalent of the evidence of our senses. I shall argue that we have been so preoccupied with words that we have neglected things; that we have, in fact, based our ideas of America primarily upon ingenious verbal generalizations that are sometimes laughably and sometimes tragically unrelated to actualities.

You may remember reading about Sir John Hawkins, the tough-minded and vigorous Elizabethan seaman who visited the French colony in Florida, at the mouth of the St. John's river, in

the 1560's, in the course of one of his slave-trading voyages in Queen Elizabeth's good—but ironically named—ship *Jesus*. Hawkins reported, on his return to England, that there were unicorns and lions in Florida. The unicorns he knew about because some of his crew got pieces of unicorn horn from the French, who said they got them straight from the Florida Indians. So there was no doubt about the unicorns. As for the lions, Hawkins hadn't actually seen any of them, but there was no doubt about them either. Lions, as everyone knew, are the natural enemies of unicorns. It was therefore obvious, as Hawkins put it, that "whereas the one is, the other cannot be missing."

It is easy enough to see how absurdly funny Hawkins' report on Florida becomes when he accepts—as he does here—his own verbal ingenuity as the equivalent of reality. But I wonder if those of us who report nowadays on America are not as likely as Hawkins to be bewitched by our own verbal ingenuities. At all events, I shall ask you to follow me, along a somewhat circuitous route, through some speculations about the verbal traps we lay for ourselves, and about a possible way to avoid them.

II

A few years ago there was a trial in the New York Court of General Sessions that the newspapers referred to as "The Circus." It was a fantastic affair in which at one point a defense lawyer called the prosecuting attorney as a defense witness; at another the prosecuting attorney cross-examined himself; and everybody on both sides repeatedly lost his temper. Once, when the exhausted and frustrated judge was trying to follow the rapid-fire argument of one of the lawyers, he interrupted with a plaintive comment that has haunted me ever since. "The only thing you say," expostulated the judge, "that I don't understand are your words."

Perhaps the judge's remark is especially haunting because we hear so much these days about the need for greater speed in coping with words. Speed-reading is getting to be the rage. Children in school, suburban matrons, and business men are taking speed-reading courses. One wonders if they are bent on becoming participants in some sort of cosmic Court of General Sessions where, like the plaintive judge, the only thing said to them that they don't understand will be the words.

For words are deceptive enough, even if we take them slowly, as the recent studies in semantics have shown. And is it not curious that the science of semantics—the systematic study of the relation between verbal symbols and what they denote and connote, and of the way these word symbols affect human behavior—should be flourishing at the same moment in our history when we are energetically learning how to hasten over those verbal symbols? The more we are aware that words can be treacherously misleading, the more we want to race through them, lest we be misled. Perhaps we are doing so in justifiable self-defense.

For words are, in fact, deceptive and misleading—not just because they are ambiguous, as we all know they are, but because of an inherent limitation of language itself. That limitation was pointed out a hundred and thirty-four years ago by a banker in Utica, New York, who made a hobby of the study of language. His name was Alexander Bryan Johnson. In 1828 he published a small volume entitled *The Philosophy of Human Knowledge, or A Treatise on Language*, made up of lectures he had given at the local Lyceum. Eight years later he published an expanded version with the title *A Treatise on Language: or The Relation Which Words Bear to Things*, and eighteen years later, in 1854, a third and more fully developed version.

In none of its versions did the book make any impression upon learned circles at the time, since Johnson had no university connections and was unknown to the intelligentsia of Boston, New York, or Philadelphia. He sent copies to eminent men, such as Professor Benjamin Silliman at Yale and August Comte in Paris; but why would such people be interested in the ideas of a banker in Utica? As Comte said, in a curt letter of acknowledgement: "Although the question which you have broached may be one of the most fundamental which we can agitate, I cannot promise to read such an essay. For my part, I read nothing except the great poets ancient and modern . . . in order to maintain the originality of my peculiar meditations." The only serious review any of the three versions received was a long and favorable discussion of the first in Timothy Flint's *Western Review*, published in the frontier city of Cincinnati in 1829. Not

until 1947—more than a century later—was the book rediscovered and republished by Professor David Rynin of the University of California.

Since its rediscovery, Johnson's book has come to be acknowledged as a pioneering study in semantics and one of the most original philosophical works ever written by an American. I take both these evaluations on faith, since I am neither a student of semantics nor a philosopher. All I can say on my own authority is that Alexander Johnson's ideas have profoundly impressed me, and that the objections brought against them by Professor Rynin himself, in his introduction to the reprint, and by other semantics scholars seem to me irrelevant. I mention this only because I intend to use and develop some of Johnson's perceptions, and because I want it to be clear that I know my comments do not find support in current semantic theory.

As Johnson saw it, the radical limitation of words (their radical "defect") is that they are general terms or names, referring to things that are individual and particular. Even though we know, for example, that no two blades of grass are alike, the word *grass* suggests an identity. This suggestion of identity encourages us to disregard the different looks, feels, tastes, and smells of the uncounted blades that comprise the actuality of grass as we experience it.

Since words have this generalizing characteristic it is inevitable, Johnson argues, that if we contemplate the created universe through the medium of words, we will impute to it a generalized unity that our senses cannot discover in it. In our writing, thinking, and speaking, we habitually "disregard the individuality of nature, and substitute for it a generality which belongs to language."

One result of the delusive generality of verbal symbols is that two people can be in verbal agreement without meaning the same thing. You can say to me that television commercials are sometimes revolting, and I may reply "yes, they certainly are revolting sometimes." We are in complete verbal agreement. But the particular commercials you had in mind may not be the ones I was thinking of. Perhaps, indeed, I have never seen commercials like those you were referring to; perhaps if I had seen them, I would not have thought them revolting. I might have

enjoyed them. The less our direct, first hand experience of television commercials coincides, the less chance there is that any verbal agreement—or disagreement—we arrive at in discussing them will have any significance whatever.

III

Verbal symbols, then, are inherently "defective." They are at best a sort of generalized, averaged-out substitute for a complex reality comprising an infinite number of individual particularities. We can say that a pane of glass is square, oblong, round, or a half-dozen other shapes, and that when it is shattered the pieces are fragments or slivers. But for the infinite variety of forms which those slivers in reality assume, we have no words. The multiple reality we generalize as "slivers of glass" can never be known through words. We can know that reality only through our senses, the way we experience blades of grass in lawns or commercials on TV.

This generalizing characteristic of language is, of course, its great value. It is what makes human communication possible. A language consisting of separate words for each of the particularities in the created universe would be bulky beyond reckoning. No one could ever master its vocabulary. We have good reason to be thankful for the ingenious symbol system that averages out reality into the mere ten thousand words that are necessary for ordering meals, writing love-poems, and composing essays on American civilization. And no harm would come of it if we did not fall into the habit of assuming that reality corresponds to the words we have invented to represent it.

More often than not, however, we do fall into that habit. "What is this?" our child asks us, showing us what he has in his hand. "A stone," we reply—or, if we have had Geology I, "a hunk of quartz." Long practice has habituated us to this device for eliminating all those particularities of texture, of color and form, of smell and taste that were the very things that interested the child. The averaged-out concept inherent in the word *stones* is admirably efficient for many purposes of communication, as when we are admonishing people who live in glass houses. But it does not tell your child what he has in his hand.

His senses tell him that. If he has learned anything from your words it is only that he must disregard the evidence of his senses. For the thing he has in his hand is not at all the same shape, or color, or feel as the one he asked about yesterday, which you also said was a stone (or a hunk of quartz). You have begun to teach him to interpret reality by words, instead of interpreting words by the specific realities of which they are the symbols. You have given him an effective lesson in the convenient but deceptive process by which we habitually translate the individual particulars of existence into the generalized abstractions of language. Unless he talks about stones only with people who are familiar with hunks of quartz more or less like the one he has examined, he is on his way, like the rest of us, to the Court of General Sessions.

I have magnified the difficulties he faces in order to emphasize an important point. People who have not experienced similar particularities cannot receive from one another's words the meaning those words were intended to convey. For meaning is not a property of words, a static entity which words somehow embody. Meaning is a process that words sometimes facilitate: a process in which awareness passes from one consciousness to another. Words do not *have* meaning; they *convey* it. But they can convey it only if the receiving consciousness can complete the current of meaning by grounding it in comparable particulars of experience.

A man who has never been out of the American Southwest—who grew up in and has never left Santa Fe, New Mexico, for instance—and a man born and brought up in the Hebrides, off the western coast of Scotland, could not conceivably mean the same thing by the word *sunlight*. The less our cluster of experienced particulars corresponds to that of people by whom our words are heard or read, the less chance there is that those people will understand what we are saying.

What makes language function as satisfactorily as it generally does, despite its limitations, is that we use it chiefly to communicate with those who share the set of experienced particulars we call our common culture. One way and another we acquire some shared familiarity with a tremendous number of things. We get around, vicariously or otherwise. Even in the

Hebrides there are no doubt people who have visited Santa Fe—or Las Vegas, whose sunlight will pass for Santa Fe's except among the finicky. And if our words are heard or read by those with whom we share a significant accumulation of experiences, they *can* convey our meaning well enough for all practical purposes—and even for some impractical ones as well. They can do so, that is, provided neither we nor those to whom we speak abandon our allegiance to the particulars we have experienced.

IV

So far, my argument adds up to something like this: Our words can convey meaning only to those who share with us a community of experienced particulars, and to them only if we and they scrupulously refer the generalized verbal symbols to concrete particulars we are talking about. Your translation of an experience into words can be understood only by someone who can interpret those words by referring them to a similar experience of his own. If he cannot do that, the current of meaning is short-circuited. A Santa Fe experience that might be adequately translated by the words "My wife has a smile like sunlight" cannot be the experience into which those words would be translated by an habitual Hebridean.

It seems obvious, therefore, that we must determine the limits of our community of experienced particulars. This is another way of saying that we need to discover how common our common culture is. Otherwise we will waste a great deal of energy and time in feckless attempts to communicate with people who cannot make sense of what we say.

To some extent our common culture is limited by geography. There are many places in the world where particulars like those we experience in New York, or Wichita, or Walla Walla are simply unavailable. To be sure, it would be naive to assume that geographical or political boundaries are the bounds of our common culture. A turret-lathe operator in Wichita might share a more significant community of experienced particulars with a turret-lathe operator in Bombay than with a professor of American literature who lived two blocks away. An economics student in New York or Walla Walla might share a more significant community of experienced particulars with a

student of economics in Heidelberg than with a fine arts major at his own college. But the particulars that constitute American culture are by and large available in New York and Wichita and Walla Walla, whether or not the professor and machine operator, or the economics major and fine arts major, are aware of them; whereas in many areas of the world those constituent particulars are not available at all.

No doubt it is with some awareness of this problem that those of us concerned with American culture devote our efforts to programs like the international exchange of students and teachers, the encouragement of foreign tourism in this country, and the sending abroad of such cultural emissaries as Peace Corps groups, theatrical troupes, musical performers, and exhibitions of arts and crafts. Unwilling to trust to such routine agencies of international contact as commerce and the armed forces, we are deliberately making available to those in other lands certain particulars of our culture that we hope will serve to ground the current of meaning when we talk to them about ourselves. The only trouble is that we disagree among ourselves about which particulars we should make available. The State Department has its own ideas; some Senate committees have others; and private agencies like the American Legion, the Hollywood film exporters, and the Institute for International Education have others still.

The lack of general agreement about which clusters of particulars constitute the distinctively "American" experience emerged clearly from a symposium entitled *American Perspectives*, published by Harvard University Press in 1961 as one of the Library of Congress's series on twentieth century American civilization. Ten distinguished authorities contributed essays to that symposium, discussing such "clusters of particulars" as American literature, American business, American philosophy, and American popular culture. The volume was edited for the American Studies Association by Professor Robert E. Spiller (a past president of the Association) and Eric Larrabee (then managing editor of *American Heritage*). The auspices were impressive.

But despite a good deal of preliminary consultation and planning, and the best of intentions, the symposium admittedly failed of its purpose. As the editors ruefully acknowledge in their preface, "the hoped-for unity of the book did not mate-

rialize"; the contributors "found themselves in no firm agreement" either in their premises or in their conclusions.

I refer you to this book as one of the particulars I have in mind when I say that, up to now, we have not determined the limits of the community of experienced particulars we call "American culture." To put it bluntly, our verbal attempts to discover America fail because we do not know what we are talking about.

V

It is my conviction that part of our difficulty stems from an excessive preoccupation with verbal evidence. The particulars to which we refer—whether we are talking about politics or mass production, painting or social behavior—are too exclusively literary. Historians and social scientists are almost as bad as the literary critics in this respect. And so are the non-specialists.

I do not mean to suggest that novels, poems, and plays—and other writings—are not significant particulars of our culture. I think they are, and I earn my living as a teacher of courses in literature. But as I have tried to suggest, we have a weakness for mistaking words for things. We tend to forget that a novel about life in the slums of Chicago is not life in the slums of Chicago.

The novel is a cluster of verbal symbols whose arrangement conveys to us, with more or less precision, the emotions and ideas aroused in the writer by those particulars of Chicago slum life that he happened to experience. The writer's emotional responses to Chicago slum life, and his ideas about it, may be in themselves significant facts of American culture—especially if the novel communicates them to many readers, or even to a few who act in response to them. But these emotions and ideas, and the novel that conveys them, are not Chicago slum life. That is something that can be known only by direct sensory experience; and if you or I experienced it, its particulars might arouse in us emotions and ideas very unlike those we acquire from the novel.

If we can accept some such view as this of the significance of literature and other verbal documents (including "case histories" and other data of the social sciences), we will realize how

necessary it is to consider other kinds of evidence in our speculations about American civilization and culture. Verbal evidence is, plainly, not enough—especially if we remember that not all civilizations have found, in literature, the most complete or significant expression of their vital energies. It may be true that the creative genius of England has been most fully expressed in literature, and that we can more or less ignore English music, painting, and architecture, without seriously distorting our image of England's achievement. But other cultures have obviously expressed themselves most significantly in other forms. One thinks, for instance, of Roman building, of Dutch painting, of German music. The fact that we are heirs to much of England's culture, including its language, does not necessarily mean—as Constance Rourke long ago pointed out—that we have, like the English, expressed ourselves most fully in literature.

In all of our studies of the past we probably rely, far more than we should, on verbal evidence, wherever it is available. As Lynn White, Jr. says in the preface to his recent book on *Medieval Technology and Social Change:*

> Voltaire to the contrary, history is a bag of tricks which the dead have played upon historians. The most remarkable of these illusions is the belief that the surviving written records provide us with a reasonably accurate facsimile of past human activity . . . In medieval Europe until the end of the eleventh century we learn of the feudal aristocracy largely from clerical sources which naturally reflect ecclesiastical attitudes: the knights do not speak for themselves . . . If historians are to attempt to write the history of mankind, and not simply the history of mankind as it was viewed by the small and specialized segments of the race which have had the habit of scribbling, they must take a fresh view of the records.

The general pertinence of Lynn White's words to the problem of discussing American culture will, I hope, be clear. But I want to apply them in a special way.

It is important to recognize that, as White indicates, major segments of the population do not speak for themselves. Not everyone has the habit of scribbling (though it sometimes seems so). And I think it is true that in American civilization—and perhaps in what we call modern civilization elsewhere in the world—men and women whose work has most creatively expressed the energies of their times have often been non-scribblers.

All of us, in so far as we rely upon our senses rather than upon verbal preconceptions, would acknowledge that American culture is expressed more adequately in the Brooklyn Bridge than in the poem Hart Crane wrote about it.

VI

I have talked a good deal about words, rather than about things. I have done so in an effort to call attention to the limitations of words as evidence of the realities that constitute our culture, hoping thereby to remove the chief obstacle to the consideration of things. If we can get rid of those verbal lions and unicorns, we may be able to see and hear and touch and smell and taste the things that are really here.

Archaeologists and anthropologists have long known how important things are as testimony. And historians in some areas have learned a good deal from non-verbal evidence. Lynn White's book rescues the non-scribbling knights and other medieval people from oblivion by examining things such as the stirrups that gave the knights unprecedented control over horses and the cranks that gave medieval mechanics new control over power. Similarly, museums of folk art, and museums like the Smithsonian Institution, acknowledge the importance of tangible objects as evidence of the culture of large numbers of people who did not have "the habit of scribbling."

It is chiefly from the archaeologists and anthropologists that we might learn techniques that we can adapt to the recognition, appreciation, and evaluation of the non-verbal elements of American culture. We must, I am convinced, learn to perceive and savor with our five senses the things non-scribbling Americans have made, in somewhat the same way that the archaeologist or anthropologist approaches the artifacts and folk arts of other times and places.

A good deal of attention has been devoted recently to the study of what are called American folk arts; but those engaged in such study can contribute little to our understanding of American civilization for the simple reason that we really do not have any folk arts, properly so called. Those we have are other people's. For the term folk arts is properly applied to artifacts made in traditional forms and patterns that originated,

and survive, among groups cut off, in one way or another, from the main stream of contemporary life. The things we call folk arts are things like Navaho sand-paintings, or Pennsylvania Dutch fraktur.

Surviving remnants of traditional folk arts can still be found in isolated communities of even this highly industrialized and urbanized nation. And many are the collectors and students who cherish them. So many, in fact, that the folk arts will soon be—if they are not already—a big business. But delightful and interesting as these hand-crafted variants of traditional forms and patterns may be, they cannot tell anything much about American culture. The love of them, or the faddish popularity of them, can tell us a good deal. But the objects themselves cannot.

The nearest thing to folk arts that American culture has produced are those artifacts that I once labelled "the vernacular arts." The term has its limitations, but I meant it to serve as a generalized label for non-traditional forms and patterns of many sorts. By it I referred to objects shaped empirically by ordinary people in unselfconscious and uninhibited response to the challenges of an unprecedented cultural environment.

The principal novelties in that environment, in nineteenth century America, were, it seems to me, a technology based upon power-driven machines rather than handcraft, and a social and political system based upon the mobility-oriented institutions of democracy rather than the status-oriented institutions of aristocracy. Specifically the products of the vernacular arts were the tools, toys, buildings, books, machines, and other artifacts whose texture, shape, and so on were evolved in direct, untutored response to the materials, needs, attitudes, and preoccupations of a society being shaped by the twin forces of democracy and technology.

VII

It is my contention that direct sensory awareness of such vernacular objects provides an important kind of knowledge about American culture. Perhaps, indeed, the most necessary kind if we are searching for a community of experienced particulars that embodies the dynamic energies of an emergent American culture.

Up until very recently these important constituents of our culture were entirely overlooked by scholars and critics, and even now they are known chiefly through verbal accounts of them. It is no wonder that our verbal theories about American culture have seemed so irrelevant to people who know its everyday vernacular realities at first hand in factories and filling stations, on farms and in offices. If we are ever going to formulate useful verbal generalizations about our culture, we are going to have to look at, and handle, and contemplate the particulars of this vernacular tradition.

Ideally, of course, we should experience these particulars in the cultural context that produced them, not isolated from that context as displays in museums or World's Fairs or exhibitions. But wherever we encounter them, let us respect the things themselves and test whatever is said about them against our first-hand sensory awareness. It will not be enough to approach these vernacular things as we customarily approach the fine arts and folk arts displayed in museums. Go to any museum and you will observe how ready people are to permit words to usurp the dignity and authority of things. Some unfamiliar object on display catches our eyes, because of its form or color. We go over to examine it more closely, but before we have done more than glance at it we notice the label that the museum's curators have supplied in their ardor to educate us. The label probably provides valuable knowledge *about* the object—what it was made for; when, where, and by whom it was made; and so on—knowledge that might well sharpen our sensory awareness of the object if we returned to the contemplation of its form and color and texture. But more often than not the label replaces the thing as the center of our attention; having mastered the words we are satisfied that we have mastered the thing. So we pass on to the next display and read its label.

As Joyce Cary says, in his little book on *Art and Reality*, there is a good deal of truth in the notion that "when you give a child the name of a bird, it loses the bird. It never *sees* the bird again, but only a sparrow, a thrush, a swan." In all phases of our lives the primitive magic of words still works its spell among us, and we think that we have mastered creation by naming it. Like the child who is attracted by the form and color and feel of a particular stone or bird and asks "What is it?", we ask the

label what it is that caught our eye. And like the child, we have been educated to accept the verbal reply as a substitute for the thing itself.

This is, of course, only one of many ways in which we have taught ourselves to accept translations of reality for the original. Even in non-verbal realms we increasingly encounter reality at one remove. More and more of us know the game of baseball not as a cluster of directly experienced sensations, including the mixed smells of cold beer and hot franks and peanuts and cigars, but as sights and sounds only, as selected and translated by TV cameras and microphones. Fewer and fewer of us know the taste of tobacco on the tongue, or the taste and feel of tobacco smoke, now that cigarettes have filter tips, some with the filters recessed a quarter inch away so you can't even touch your tongue to them. More and more of us experience the arts—literature, painting, sculpture, and music—filtered through some translating device. Many of us know painting and sculpture primarily through two-dimensional photographic translations that either distort the colors or average them out into tones. Most of the music we hear has been translated, with higher or lower fidelity, by microphones and electronic tubes or transistors.

These various forms of translation all differ in an important way from the sort of translation that occurs when we translate the particulars of experience into words. They all alter some aspects of the thing, but they do not generalize it or average-out its uniqueness. A photograph of a scene on some Main Street translates a three-dimensional reality that can be experienced with all five senses into a two-dimensional reality that we experience only with our eyes; but the pictorial image, like the original, is a specific and individual thing, not a generalization. Any verbal description of the scene would, on the other hand, be composed of words that are generalized symbols, each capable of standing for (or referring to) many different particulars of the same general class.

VIII

To discover America, to become aware of American culture as a community of experienced particulars about which we can effectively communicate our perceptions to one another, we must first of all be aware of the limitations of verbal translations

of reality. Then we can set about the job of training our young people and ourselves to think with our senses as well as with words.

At present our educational system is almost exclusively concerned with training our capacity to think verbally. What this means is that we learn to think words such as *bridge* or *beer can*. We then think *about* those words and link them with others to form verbal concepts. These concepts are articulations and juxtapositions of words that have properties we call syntax, logic, and so on. And they can be recorded, memorized, and easily made available to others in identical copies.

The ease with which verbal concepts can be recorded and repeated is a great and powerful advantage. Word-thinking has become the basis of our educational system—except in those areas (notably the exact sciences) where vagueness and generalization are intolerable. In those areas apprenticeship, laboratory or studio work, or some other system of acquiring first-hand familiarity with specific particulars, has necessarily been retained. But so impressive are the properties of language that subjects to which its generalizing properties are appropriate—subjects like philosophy, sociology, theology, and history (including literary history and art history)—dominate the academic curriculum, to say nothing of the American Studies Association.

I do not wish to belittle such subjects, or to depreciate the wonderful powers of language. But we must not permit our admiration of word-thinking, and our respect for its achievements, to blind us to its limitations—limitations that derive from the inescapable limitation of words themselves: that is, their averaging-out tendency.

The danger is not that we will underestimate the importance of word-thinking in education, but that we will overlook the importance of what might be called sensory thinking. I do not know if there is a better word for it. But I know that just as we can think the words *bridge* and *beer can*, we can also think the appearance of a bridge, or the appearance of a beer can. That is sight-thinking. As Alexander Bryan Johnson remarked, the properties and limitations of sight-thinking differ from those of word-thinking. A sight-thought of a bridge is evanescent; it flashes on our consciousness, then fades. Also, it is compre-

hensive, including all visible aspects of the bridge at one and the same instant, whereas a word-thought about a bridge has to be accumulated gradually by adding words together. Finally, and most importantly, the sight-thought of a bridge is specific, not generalized. We can sight-think an individual bridge, or even a group of individual bridges; but we cannot sight-think a generalized abstraction of bridges.

Just as there are sight-thoughts, there are also feel-thoughts, smell-thoughts, taste-thoughts, and sound-thoughts. The terms may sound odd and unfamiliar, but we all know the realities to which they refer. With a little effort we can think the feel of a cold beer can in our hand, and think the taste of the metal as we drink from it. And we know that these other sense-thoughts, like sight-thoughts, are evanescent, comprehensive, and specific.

These sense-thoughts share, then, a significant property that differentiates them from word-thoughts. They are specific, not generalized.

They also share a significant limitation, as compared to word-thoughts. They cannot be arranged in logical or syntactical patterns. The kind of direct and specific awareness we derive from sensory thoughts, unlike the awareness we derive from word-thinking, cannot be communicated symbolically to others in conventional forms that can be easily recorded, memorized, and reproduced in identical copies.

Yet, if we trained our capacities for sensory thinking, instead of discouraging them as our educational system customarily does, it would be clear that this limitation is an asset, rather than a liability, if only because the non-discursive properties of sense-thoughts can serve as a check on the discursive thinking we do with words. The editors of that scholarly symposium on American civilization mentioned earlier concluded their preface with a wistful reference to the possibility that "if there were more unity in modern man's total view of himself and his world," the symposium itself might have produced a more consistent and unified image of our culture as one part of that world. What interests me in that conclusion is the implied assumption that there could be (or should be) a unified total view of the sort described. The very idea of such a unified and consistent view is, I suspect, a verbal illusion. It is an illusion we could not entertain if we had

not become habituated, by our schooling and long practice, to accept words—unhitched from particulars—as the ultimate realities. Such terms as "modern man himself" and "modern man's world" are only remotely affiliated, if at all, with any of the infinitely diverse individual existences to which the terms pretend to refer. Who on earth, the reader should ask, is "modern man himself"? To what, if any, specific reality do the words refer?

But that is the very question we do *not* ask. Because we are educated as we are, we expect to find in actuality the unity and consistency that verbal symbols can be arranged to express, forgetting that the unity and consistency are properties of a system of verbal symbols, not of the multifarious particularities that are averaged-out in our nominative generalizations. Because we are educated as we are, we too readily assume that in the realm of speculative discussion, as in the realm of faith, "in the beginning was the word."

In American Studies, as in the humanities generally, we have been largely preoccupied with records left by those "who had the habit of scribbling" (and more recently, thanks to the "oral history" projects, by those who had the habit of prattling). And it is chiefly from this verbal evidence that we have happily or gloomily deduced the lions and unicorns (as logically demonstrable and as non-existent as Sir John Hawkins') about which we theorize and argue. If there are no unicorns hereabouts, let's stop arguing about them. Our primary allegiance, as sentient creatures, is surely not to the creations of our verbal ingenuity, but to the particular sights, tastes, feels, sounds, and smells that constitute the American world we are trying to discover.

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