

Lexia: Undergraduate Journal in Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication

Volume III

2014–2015

**On Wordsmithing and Chaplin and the
Misplacement of the Soul**

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There are few things more plaguing than misunderstanding, still fewer more tormenting than being misunderstood. If you've no sense of your soul to begin with, your experience with those will always be internal.

I've taken the liberty of cataloguing *fun*, *bored*, and *tired* as dead words. I'm not the only one who keeps a formal inventory. I know a high school English teacher who dons black head-to-toe, and officiates once-monthly funerals for dead words to encourage his students to avoid imprecise, unoriginal, weak language. It's a pity. The three terms that I've omitted from my practical vocab are also college students' go-to terms for self-description. They've lost their impact for me the way Leslie Knope fears the word *butthead* losing its impact.

But for every two or three or ten funeral pyres dedicated to dead words, there's always the occasional word that makes a brash and bowlegged return from the dead. Wordsmiths aren't always the resurrective propagators (and my spellcheck is definitely protesting my use of the word "resurrective." Full disclosure: wordsmiths are almost always responsible for insolent, real-time morphology...hence we almost never make sense, even to ourselves, also a great pity). Sometimes the most unassuming individuals are responsible for the resuscitation. And maybe the grave-drawn contents are more often concepts and sayings—mash-ups of words. Nonetheless, any comeback credits meaning back to its constituent parts.

I know few things so disconcerting as a misplaced soul. How the hell does a soul go about defecting from our custody? What do we do to inspire it thus, to make it feel so estranged and unwelcome? Had I known the harsh and demanding nature of a soul-search, maybe I would've taken a friend of mine more seriously when he informed me of the progress of his own in August 2012.

The locus around which my head and heart are oriented is the same place that issues my driver's license: Park Country, Montana. "Get Lost" is the slogan for Montana's Office of Tourism. Every Montanan (and their dog) has the sticker that reads thus, not because they're un-okay with Montana's sparse occupancy, and want to invite visitation (take it from me, the pathetic population density is among her ten most irresistible qualities). We sport the stickers because we concur. Paradoxically, my most extreme experience of getting lost happened some 30-plus hours from my hometown. This is where I found my outlook on the words *fun*, *bored*, and *tired* to be, I guess, too progressive (or regressive?) to be popular.

Lost. Some cruel jokester thought we might like using the same word for both misplacement and defeat. I'm personally a huge fan. I find this coincidence especially handy since I often occupy the two states simultaneously. When you're at the crossroads of misplacement and defeat, at least the fact of loss is unequivocal. Sometimes, some semblance of certainty is all you want anyway.

Lost. When you have a one-syllable word at your disposal to follow "I have" and "I am" you're apt to be thoroughly, thoroughly, I daresay redundantly thoroughly, confident of where you are, and what you have relative to all other contingent things.

Lost. I'm not sure why the wordsmiths before us thought the dual meaning of the word was a good idea. Maybe they were looking out for us. Perhaps they just wanted to chip away at humanity's inestimable potential for denial. Maybe they wanted us to locate our souls before they could get too far away. I guess it also helps to recognize you're out of place before undertaking a soul-search or making any headway. Headway is all-important in these full-fledged soul-recovery campaigns. I've grown to suspect

(and respect) that the soul search never really ends until we do. And I don't think the soul lingers long enough to answer questions, so where it goes is any man's guess.

Is the search perhaps more like a hunt? Hunting is considered a sport. In the subgenre where we prey on the human soul, our soul—shotgun and blade in hand, Valencia's blood still warm on the ground—I think the target is fixed but in flux. It's a game where you play the ball as it lies, but at the same time, a game of triangles. Perhaps like a motion offense. Geographic information systems (GIS) use triangles too: The smaller the triangle, the more reliable the approximation. Headway can take the form of shrinking triangles. If headway is all-important, bearings are helpful too. Especially since those triangles probably go through several iterations, indeed for most of our early lives they probably have too many outlying points to resemble triangles at all. Otherwise they don't have enough points to eclipse line-segment status. When we have enclosure, we at least feel like we're on the map.

A GIS-based United States dialect survey from the *New York Times* placed my soul-searching friend in Birmingham, Huntsville, and Montgomery—evidence that you can take the boy out of the South, but not vice versa. The same survey gave me coordinates in Boise, Spokane, and Louisville—indicative of a Northwesterner that has adopted the Southern tendency to conveniently eliminate needless syllables from the most commonly used words (case-in-point: “y'all”). I couldn't help but envy how much smaller my friend's range was, even if we are talking Alabama. But how much can a dialectical assessment catch? A little? A lot? I mean, my school would've been paid for if I had just gone to Boise. True story. But I chose debt.

I know I sound awfully bent out of shape about my own soul search. It's not going as poorly as I let on. I have found some fixed points. Namely, a Chaplinesque worldview

and a neurotic fascination with language. For me, the two can't be divorced, though it took me four years to recognize the symptoms of the first:

- A cardboard cut-out of Chaplin's immortal character, the Tramp.
- A MacBook decal that I chose over my favorite Chad Stokes lyrics.
- The Criterion semi-annual half-off sale freak-outs (because nowhere else can you legally get a DVD of *Modern Times* for under \$20 with English intertitles).
- The eternal mishearing of Andrew Bird, and the brute insistence that he always meant to say "I like long walks and *silent* movies"

Maybe you've inferred as much by now, but I'll say it outright: I have a problem (though I prefer the term *muse* in place of *problem* because I think the necessity of creativity allows us to take one as evidence of the other). Just what is a Chaplinesque worldview? I think it is merely the study and practice of approaching life and art with a sense of humor and confidence that the sun will come out tomorrow. I would say *it's that easy*, which is true. But I won't say, *it's that easy* because I think that would be misleading. Yes, it's *that* easy. But we're talking about sentimentality here, and sentimentality is not *easy*.

What ought you to know about the namesake of this primal breeder of hakuna-matata? Only that Charles Spencer Chaplin was born April 16, 1889, that he was an Englishman, that he was an artist, and that motion picture is, still, his medium. You won't find much about him in the Academy Awards database because he was removed from competitive consideration for their first ceremony in 1928. They said *The Circus* put him in a class of his own. Between then and the last time the Academy would recognize Chaplin before his 1977 death, he was denied entry in the United States

(McCarthyism: Indeed, it happens to the best of us. I still don't see what the big deal is. Like democracy, communism is nice in theory).

Our country eked out a ten-day visa for Chaplin so he could personally receive his 1971 Honorary Award—the kind of lifetime achievement award they reserve for the likes of Disney and Redford and Garland and Welles (but oddly, never Hitchcock—I'm sure *Sight and Sound* is still in uproar). To apologize and welcome him back to the States for an extended stay would have first required admitting the reality of culpability for that whole McCarthy episode. He had all license to respond with outrage and decline the invite. But he had the humor to convey his humble gratitude. His career wasn't built on words—not even in the sound era—nor did he employ many when the man of the hour took his final bow. Claiming his statuette, he stammered this emotion-fraught “thank you” in response to the 80-second montage of ovation and bravos:

Words seem so futile, so sepal. I can only say that—thank you for the honor of inviting me here, and—oh, you are wonderful, sweet people. Thank you.

Paradoxically, I haven't found Chaplin's sparse-worded or otherwise silent iconography incompatible with the ethos of wordsmithing. It's a different dimension of literacy—a tonality that suggests that the close-up will never conquer tragedy. Its accompaniment is a ballad that reminds us of the implications of our words. Have we lost or are we lost or both? Is our misplaced soul really such a tragedy? Will the sun come out tomorrow? If so, when will we be able to laugh at ourselves? Do I look like a communist when I bleed? Maybe that last one is just my own unique insecurity—albeit an outdated one (or is it?).

In any case, if you know your basic geometry, you may have noticed I'm still missing a point and two adjacent lines. Chaplin and language are endpoints of one line

segment, which, when conjoined with two others, should offer a reliable approximation of where my soul might turn up.

Did I mention that I don't think the soul search ever really ends until we do?

Originally submitted April 14, 2014 for a lyrical essay assignment in a "Rhetoric of the Personal Narrative Class" with Professor Erin Lambert-Hartman at James Madison University. My readers may notice a pattern wherein I notoriously take "contemplative" or "lyrical" assignments as license to inundate my prose with pop culture references.