

THE POWER OF WORDS

Keynote speech by novelist and scholar Dr. Siri Hustvedt held at the opening ceremony of the 88th International PEN Congress in Uppsala, Sweden on the 27 September 2022. The Congress was arranged by Swedish PEN and PEN International.

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As my friend Salman Rushdie recovers from grievous wounds that have forever changed his life, a life that has already long been shaped by that monster, Ideological Purity, I would like to open with a sentence from his memoir *Joseph Anton*. He is writing about himself, but it serves as an epigraph for my own argument, which is founded on pluralism. “The migrated self became, inevitably, heterogenous rather than homogeneous, multiple rather than singular, responding to more than one way of being, more than averagely mixed up.”

Every day we see the power of the written word to sway, infect, and prod people to belief and action, action that includes murder and attempted murder. Whether it’s a phrase emblazoned on a Tic-Toc video, a political slogan, an advertisement, a news story—real or fake—a conspiracy narrative, a scholarly or scientific paper, a best-selling novel or a sentimental memoir, written words, phrases, and stories are contagious. They are instruments and sometimes weapons for ideas, prejudices, and collective movements of all kinds. They both construct and exploit human feeling to forge explanations for crises—real and imagined.

PEN stands for free expression, but what exactly do these words mean when fictions circulate the globe as truths, when racism, xenophobia, and misogyny are embraced as righteous moral causes, when written threats, intimidation, and cruel mockery of others have become popular online sports? Surely these are all examples of free expression driven by passionate feeling and belief. Although hypocrisy, Machiavellianism, and cynical manipulation also hide beneath the free speech banner, many people who profess ideas I deplore are sincere. Their roiling emotions have found answers in words, often about how bad things are and who is responsible.

Despite the positivist worship of facts, a text that moves its reader is far more persuasive than a cold recitation of data in a policy paper. The incisive, arousing slogan or a well told story that brings the reader close to the particular dramas of particular people in a particular place, real or fictional, will leave an impression no spread sheet can match. To borrow from neuroscience research: Emotion consolidates memory. There is evidence of this even at the molecular level. We

remember what we feel strongly about. Long after the details of a book have faded, we often recall the emotions that accompanied the story. Reading is not a disembodied act. It is not the application of paralyzed dictionary meanings to symbols on the page, an act of computational cognition exercised by the literate. Written works are animated by the living body of a reader in a situation that is uniquely hers. Her language, her country, her position in the social hierarchy, her childhood experiences, education, cultural biases, illnesses, and past and present moods all affect her reading of a given text.

Before a baby can speak, he is caught up in emotionally charged proto-conversations or wordless dialogues with his parent or caretaker, sensual musical exchanges, which are already enveloped in the sounds and gestures of a particular cultural reality. Empirical studies that use microanalyses of films of mothers and infants, referred to as “dyads,” in face-to-face interaction have shown cultural variations in the expressions, voice pitch, gestures, and rhythmic style that take place between them. These encounters acquire a recognizable form for the baby through repetitions that become predictable rituals—feeding, playing games, bathing, going to sleep—each of which has a beginning, a middle, and an end of bodily experienced meanings. The late infant researcher, Daniel Stern, called this arc of affects “the pre-narrative envelope,” story form in the making. Stories are for others; they happen between people. Every culture tells stories, but the stories are as diverse as the languages that bear them, and their meanings are rooted in embodied emotive feeling.

Emotions do not come pre-packaged in categories with convenient labels attached: love, hate, envy, rage. The idea that feeling can be neatly categorized is a legacy of reductionist Western science that has imagined the human being as a machine with discrete parts, including the wheels and gears that produce specific universal emotions, or, conversely, as a floating mind somehow connected to an unknowing material body. Although a continuum from pain to pleasure is part of mammalian life, how we identify feeling is culturally coded. As the scientist, Manos Tsakiris pointed out in an essay for *Aeon*, “Politics is Visceral,” people do not always know what they want in the political realm because they “might not know what they *feel*,” but feelings are nevertheless crucial to thought and action. Our emotions are literally visceral, generated from our heart, lungs, guts, and hormonal systems and human beings must maintain a dynamic equilibrium, homeostasis, to survive.

Is a bad feeling anger, resentment, bitterness, or jealousy? How do we know? What exactly is the relation between the radicalized mass shooter’s manifesto posted online and his murderous act? Is it projection onto the Other? Is it justification through an ideological community? Is it grandiosity or a desperate need to inflate the puny, denigrated self?

Aren't the words chosen to describe a feeling dependent on a language and the wider collective reality used to decipher it? Once we have gained the ability to speak and then become literate, the inchoate feelings of human beings are endlessly seeking explanations in words, but those words gain meaning only in context.

Every writer has struggled with lines, sentences, and paragraphs, and with the form of a poem or novel or essay as a whole to express what evades articulation. Writing is not phenomenology. The immediacy of what Edmund Husserl called *Leib*, the lived body, escapes the written word, although the writer may work hard to represent it in those markings on the page. As writers, we engage in the dynamic rhythms of remembered feelings mediated through the symbols of our languages, cultures, and their power structures. The divisions we make among these strata of experience are convenient, not real. Our work is biological, psychological, and sociological all at once.

Words are learned, but they become biological realities in plastic brain tissue and are part of conscious and unconscious memory. They are psychological entities whose meaning is dependent on our past experience in the world with others, which create expectations that shape our perceptions. Literacy alters the brain and alters perception. A neat example I have cited before is that the habits of literacy affect our views of time as a spatial concept. If your written language moves from left to right on the page, you construct a timeline that imagines the future to the right. The timelines of Arabic and Hebrew readers are exactly reversed. The verticality of Mandarin affects its speakers' image of time. The pre-literate child and the illiterate adult do not understand time as something that can be envisioned as movement in space.

All freedom of expression is constricted by automatic, often unconscious, biases that have cultural meanings. Whether the future is to the right or the left may not have dire consequences in a given society, but it is easy to see how it might lead to misunderstandings in a translation. Gender is also envisioned spatially as hierarchy in many places: masculinity is above, femininity below. Is the girl who censors her own writing, who lives in fear of male authority figures, who has continually belittled her intellect and rewarded docile, polite behavior free to express herself?

In 1970, I was fifteen years old. I bought an anthology, edited by Robin Morgan, called *Sisterhood is Powerful* about the women's liberation movement. The essays in the book gave a shape and voice to a feeling, which I had never identified as anger but rather a form of unarticulated woundedness. Did the words in the book trigger my anger or had I repressed the emotion and then discovered it? My youthful conversion to feminism was surely influenced by the political Zeitgeist,

but the small town where I grew up, my family story, my middle-class status, my whiteness in the United States, my proclivity to severe headaches, my hurt feelings may all have influenced my receptivity to the ideas in a book, which changed my life. I have read many books on feminism since. It is by no means a topic of consensus. From them, I have continued to refine and rethink my position, which has never stopped evolving. The journey of deep reading is inevitably a journey of becoming plural, of becoming a person inhabited by thousands of voices that sing from multiple perspectives—a cacophony.

Without tolerance for perspectival pluralism, there can be no democracy or anything like it, but its power is waning around the world, and the resounding question is: What can we as writers do? The role of the written word is not incidental to the threat of authoritarianism. Although words serve as masks for authoritarian ideologies, they are also vehicles of liberation from them. Words disambiguate bodily affects by naming them and creating stories. All narratives are selective. They make sense of temporal existence by linking events as causal—this happened and, because it happened, that happened. Stories create a rhythmic order from the glut of stimuli we all experience. It is somewhat ironic that the novel, which may be the most democratic literary form of all, with its many voices in continual conflict, a genre which, as M.M. Bakhtin argued, is made of dynamic polyphony, is losing its cultural role as a form of knowledge, certainly in the United States, where it limps along as a feminine, soft, innocuous genre, often celebrated most when it echoes cultural platitudes. Notice that in the massive media coverage of the attack on Salman Rushdie, there has been little if any direct attention to that polyphonic, buoyant, ironic, fiercely intelligent, intermittently hilarious novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

We are bludgeoned by simple slogans and phrases, political, commercial, or just catchy. The most effective ones seem to articulate a shared emotional atmosphere. The metaphor “viral” is apt. Whether the contagious signs signify a collective feeling of hatred, dread, or joyous social unity, they focus the unfocused and answer a need for clarity and predictability. Although the internet has greatly accelerated the spread of pithy phrases, and algorithms are designed to excite people by showing them content of increasing affective force, often violent, the phenomenon is hardly new. History is instructive when it comes to how meaning shifts, according to perspective and context.

The Nazi phrase, *Blut und Boden*, Blood and Soil, was a rallying cry, chanted at rallies and inscribed on propaganda posters. Although admittedly vague, the phrase helped disseminate the racist, masculinist ideology of the Reich, which manufactured fictional enemies and cultivated a fantasy of a static, authentic Aryan identity, which sprouted from the German earth. Constructing

any identity with absolute borders leads to brutality. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said rejects all essential identities: “If at the onset we acknowledge the massively complex histories and of special but nevertheless overlapping experiences—of women, of Westerners, of Blacks, of national states and cultures—there is no particular intellectual reason for granting each and all of them an ideal and essentially separate status.” (31) In other words, inventing a box that holds an essential, pure identity is a fool’s errand that defies the hybrid, shifting reality of human history and the complex evolution of various cultures in and through other cultures.

The Nazis designated Jews, Roma, Sinti, the mentally and physically disabled, homosexuals, and others as NOT-US, as impurity and pollution. “Blood and Soil” reappeared in the anti-Semitic chants at the Unite the Right demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, in the United States in 2017. But Nazi propaganda also influenced Hindu Nationalism in India as it constructed a Hindu majoritarian identity against the Muslim minority by promoting an Aryan connection between National Socialism and Hindutva, which includes a culturally specific reinvention of blood and soil. An imaginary idea of Nordic racial purity metamorphosed into social-religious purity positing another religion as contaminated enemy. The influence went both ways. In her 1958 work, “The Lightning and the Sun,” Savitri Devi, née Maxiamiani Portas, a French writer, devoted National Socialist, vegetarian, and animal rights activist, claimed Hitler was a reincarnation of the god Vishnu. Devi remains an inspiring voice for the far-right around the world.

In my country, many articles have been written about what MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, now shortened to MAGA, and sometimes ULTRA-MAGA, actually means. Just as “*Blut und Boden*” requires an understanding of blood as code for “race,” without the context of white supremacy, the meaning of Make America Great Again is foggy. *Again?* Most commentators do not look beyond the borders of the U.S., but the echo of fascist propaganda, which turned on the eugenic science of fixed racial identities and their concomitant characters lurks under *Again*. The nostalgic longing for a mythical era of lost greatness is far more effective as propaganda than POWER TO WHITE MEN, which is surely one of its meanings. Although some Trump supporters would admit to overt racism and misogyny, many would not. MAGA is an emotionally potent sign of resistance to change and the inclusion of women, non-whites, immigrants, and gender non-conforming people among those who have a right to legitimate power. The slogan is obscure enough to enfold multiple, highly emotional longings that turn feelings once experienced as shame into pride. In light of history, it is no surprise that Trump has a following among Hindu Nationalists or that Narendra Modi’s language resembles the MAGA drumbeat.

“A luta continua; vitoria é certa” means “The struggle continues; victory is certain” in Portuguese. This phrase has also disrupted borders, but as a slogan of resistance, solidarity, and hope. In 1967, after three years of war against colonial Portuguese control, Eduardo Mondlane, leader of the Mozambican Liberation Front, FRELIMO, rallied his followers with these words, using the language of the colonialists. Often shortened to “A luta continua” or just “Aluta,” the phrase has long outlived Mondlane as a call for radical change. The country’s first president, Samora Machel, popularized it in speeches and marches. It became a song performed by the South African singer, Miriam Makeba in 1975 and was adopted as a cry by anti-apartheid protestors. In 1976, Robert von Lierop took the phrase as the title of his film about the Mozambican guerrillas. The son of father from Suriname and a mother from the Virgin Islands, Von Lierop grew up in New York City, became a lawyer, diplomat, activist, and filmmaker. *A luta continua* was used by Nigerian activists protesting the annulment of presidential elections in 1993, and in 2011, LGBTQ activists in Uganda adopted it as a sign of solidarity against persecution. It is now a hashtag for the Nigerian youth movement opposing SARS, the country’s brutal special police. *A luta continua* exploded linguistic and geographical borders to become a phrase for various causes; knowledge of Portuguese not required.

Words are shot through with power relations, social conventions, and long circuitous histories of shifting meanings, which both produce and play on the fluctuating weather of human emotion and its contagions. The media mantra that if facts replace the fictions of misinformation, we will find our path to the truth in a post-truth world is naïve at best. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt argues that propaganda is effective because “what convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part.” For Arendt the seduction of totalitarianism is an imaginary completeness, which thrives on “an escape into fiction, from coincidence into consistency.” To which I add the emotional component. Consistency and predictability make human beings feel safe and give us an illusion of control. This is the pleasure of the fairy tale. We all long for a story with a happy ending we know is coming.

Conspiracy narratives offer both completeness (there is an answer to everything) and clean incisions between good and evil characters, the pure and the impure. The mixed and ambiguous are intolerable. Contrary to common wisdom, not only the ignorant and uneducated fall prey to these stories. They often draw on facts and have a logic, which involve unearthing connections and finding patterns that reveal a larger coherent system. By clinging to a narrative with a predictable

form, the person and the tribe to which he now belongs, can exorcise and project internal malaise, confusion, and bad feeling into malevolent Others—witches, Jews, Muslims, Blacks, apostates, and criminal shadowy elites.

Facts exist, of course. The Flat Earth Society has passionate adherents, but it remains a fact that we live on a globe. Fictions about vaccines have spread in many countries, but their meanings are often linked to local experience. Government-sponsored forced sterilization or brutal medical experiments in the past leave their traces in collective suspicion, which find explication in circulating stories that explain a nameless anxiety. Neo-liberal ideology, which has reduced human experience to a bloated, isolated, consuming ME or the self as brand, has also played its part in undermining vaccine efforts by erasing the truth of our fragile interdependence as a species and our reliance on ecosystems we have been ruthlessly destroying. The lie of absolute individual autonomy, inevitably accompanied by masculine swagger, fed by governments and corporations, can be murderous in its effects. It survives on what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “symbolic violence,” the invisible enforcement of societal structures with the acquiescence of the victims. Words are principle carriers of symbolic violence. Unfortunately, in light of crude discussions in my own country, I need to emphasize that Bourdieu is specific: *symbolic violence is not literal violence*. It does not inflict knife or gunshot wounds. It is an invisible ideological consensus that reifies the status quo. The neo-liberal lie crosses national, class, and ethnic boundaries: With hard work, determination, and faith in me alone, I can triumph over all obstacles and become successful, rich, and famous.

Facts participate in symbolic violence. Factually accurate mainstream journalism is regularly skewed by cultural biases that parade as objectivity or neutrality. I take examples close to home. The *New York Times* reported on the Holocaust in its back pages, only rarely using the word “Jew.” The Jewish-owned newspaper did not deem the liberation of the death camps worthy of its front page. The same newspaper ran more articles on Hillary Clinton’s email non-scandal than on the policies of either candidate, joining the rampant misogyny, which characterized the 2016 U.S. election. In 2014, when a police officer fatally shot an unarmed eighteen-year-old, Michael Brown, six times in Ferguson, Missouri, the paper carried an article about the deceased, which declared him “no angel.” The journalist who wrote the piece is Black, but the ensuing media controversy turned on the racist assumption of Black criminality. In the United States, a white boy’s drinking, dabbling with drugs, and shoplifting are regularly forgiven as adolescent mischief or high spirits. A Black boy gets no such slack. Attention to a female rape victim’s clothing or her degree of inebriation are similar ways of shifting culpability from perpetrator to victim. In a 2019 paper published in *The International*

Journal of Press/Politics, Danielle Brown and Summer Harlow survey the mainstream media landscape: “Scholars have... found that structural and organizational biases built into the norms and routines of traditional journalism have contributed to consistently detected press patterns that marginalize and delegitimize social movements.” Such prejudices are hardly limited to the United States.

How to tell the story is the crucial question. Facts can lie. Facts are useless without context, interpretation, and historical narratives. Media thrive on social stereotypes. Born of essentialist categories and treated as natural kinds, stereotypes are used to illuminate an individual’s or an entire movement’s actions. The convention of the news article also rests on the arrogant presumption that a few conversations and verbatim quotes from the family members of a dead boy can tell the story of a young man’s life or that a brief chat with officials or policemen at a volatile demonstration, perhaps combined with a few comments from a random protester in the street, will provide “balanced” coverage of the scene. These news formulas debase and cheapen the actual complexity, variety, and depth of individual and collective experience.

BELIEVE THE SCIENCE is another slogan of recent coinage used to combat populist hostility toward climate science and anti-vaccine propaganda. While urgent action must be taken to reverse the disastrous course of the planet, and I am deeply impressed with mRNA vaccines and wish them on everyone in the world who can tolerate them, the idea that science is a monolithic entity that harbors truth is a dubious proposition. Eugenics, which reached its zenith in the Holocaust, was not regarded as pseudoscience but as science. It was ascendant in many countries, but the United States led the way. Its sterilization laws were models for Nazi policy. Eugenics was intimately connected to the fledgling discipline of statistics, and many of its ideas, which turned on genetic determinism are alive and well today in disciplines such as behavioral genetics and evolutionary psychology. Countless science papers on the link between genes and intelligence and genes and criminality are published every year, their ideology hidden behind complex statistical maneuvers and quantifications. Despite the fact that I.Q. tests were developed as eugenic tools and years of research have shown the folly of quantifying intelligence, supposedly inborn, to a single number, the papers flourish. A 2019 paper in *Frontiers of Neuroscience* insists IQ predicts life outcomes—class, gender, and race are not mentioned.

Data is never neutral. It is collected by human beings and rests on disciplinary paradigms that often go unexamined. Algorithms are infected with human perceptions, which include racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. My point is not that facts play no role in our understanding of the world or that every media article or all of science is hopelessly flawed, but rather that we are all vulnerable

to the power of words accompanied by impressive numbers and charts, for example, or texts that confirm what we already believe, or words that touch on unconscious stereotypes that skew our perceptions. Nor is emotion or passion, often associated with the low body as distinct from the high mind, the enemy of thought, as it has often been construed in Western philosophy. There is no thought without feeling and attempts to purify language of emotional taint is a legacy of a rationalist tradition that cut human beings in two—mind and body—and also cut the human being from the natural world. The pandemic should have made the truth that we are of nature obvious and that drawing lines between person and environment is false.

I have long felt that literature has shaken up and still shakes up the pre-ordained categories of a given culture. At best, it allows a reader to see anew, to enter the lives of unknown others, listen to foreign melodies, and walk down streets never traveled before, to become not one but many. While reading, we can live in another consciousness, can free ourselves from the limits of our own internal narrators. Books can liberate us from strangling taxonomies into which we were born and replace them with a dynamic pluralism. Poems, novels, essays, philosophies, and histories can be as hackneyed and stupid as any other form of writing, but I suspect that all of us here have been transformed by books. The titles of those books are different, of course, because that intimate encounter between text and reader is an intersubjective one that blooms in the social space between them. Although the words on a page are fixed, their meanings are not. They are made and remade in the embodied realities of particular readers.

In my work as a volunteer writing teacher for psychiatric patients on the locked wards of the Payne Whitney Clinic for four years and now as a lecturer in psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York, where I teach a seminar for young doctors—psychiatric residents—I have witnessed the therapeutic effects of emotionally driven writing on patients and physicians alike. The students are required to read a text, a poem or passage from a larger work, and respond to it in writing. A discussion follows. Both the patients and the doctors have often been surprised by the words that appear, words that become vehicles for understanding what they had not understood before. I have written and lectured about these effects and collaborated with researchers working on reading and writing therapies. The theories for why people get better are diverse and often constrained by narrow models, but the effects have been empirically demonstrated, effects which include improved immune and liver function and a better mood. Writing is not *the* cure for either mental illness or the hardships of psychiatry as a discipline, but it an avenue to be pursued as one therapy among others.

I am not naïve. I recognize that as writers we often watch as market forces drown what we write, that ambiguity, hybrid thought, and complexity of all kinds are jettisoned for the accessible and simplistic. I also know that many of us are haunted by destructive stereotypes that create perceptions of our texts that denigrate them, and that some languages reach much further than others, including my own, the language in which I am delivering this talk. Freedom of expression means fighting for persecuted writers. It means standing up for both *The Satanic Verses* and its author. It also means understanding that right-wing forces scream “free speech” one minute and ban books the next. It means a subtle understanding of the uses of words and how they manipulate emotions. It means distinguishing between symbolic and real violence. It means trying to penetrate how symbolic violence may become real violence.

Because I am living in a country where the threat of authoritarianism is real and close, because, despite my comfortable position in the social hierarchy, its ugly rhetoric poisons my everyday life, because I am afraid of what will happen, I cannot afford naivete. Words have power, both destructive and emancipating. We write. We must continue to write with feeling in the spirit of polyphony and difference and conflicting views and greater democracy against the myriad forces that would prefer that we remain silent. *A luta continua.*

Siri Hustvedt