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This Blessed Language

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I WISH something could be done about the much overworked and misused words "individual" and "individuality." Look for a moment at such a sentence as this: "He was an individual of marked individuality." What does it mean? He was an individual—what? Was he man, dog or shark? To say that he was an individual does not indicate his category. Individual means only that the person or thing could not be divided, except perhaps by violence. An individual man might be divided by decapitation, but that is an unusual method of separation and not in general favor in those countries which we foolishly but wistfully describe as democracies. If we say "individual man" do we add anything to the mere word "man," except in rare circumstances for the sake of emphasis? We might say: "Most men are unworthy of political franchise but an individual man here or there thinks." In such a case "individual" has a positive value—and so has the man. The butt of my feeble attack is use of the word as a synonym for person. It does not mean a person unless the context so restricts it. It is not a noun, and as an adjective it should not be left groping in the air for a substantive to which it may attach itself. Above all, it is often one of those substitutes for the names of simple things or persons to whose use some are addicted. You know—you must know if you are not alone in the world—many men who seem to think that it is more elegant or more indicative of erudition or even more witty to call a man an individual, a woman a bit of femininity, a dog a canine—indeed to call anyone or anything by a long word rather than by its own true name. There is a kind of mind which abhors the accurate. To the owner of such a mind "individual" appeals. It has no meaning, but it is full of sound.

"Individuality" is a derivative which has great merit when correctly employed, but when one says "His individuality is unique" what is the speaker trying to tell us? If it is what I suppose it is, it is naught. Probably the speaker thought he was saying "His personality is unlike that of any other man"; but what has individuality to do with it? Possibly this criticism of "individuality" is too nice. I don't like the word except in its proper environment, but what matter?

There is, however, another derivative which, alas, is almost forgotten: individualism—preferably preceded by "rugged." When we had that attribute it was a better day than is today. Further, be it remembered, "rugged individualism" was an expression conformant to all the laws of grammar and definition. Individualism means entity, oneness, separateness from the multitude. Would to heaven we had it once again.

Now, as we know that one thing leads to another—most inane adage—an expression above reminds me that one of the worst but most often abused words is "unique." It is a good word, its history is obvious to everyone who has acquired the rudiments of classical language, its significance is plain; but its very meaning is destroyed by embellishment. When we say "The story is quite unique" do we convey any meaning whatever to our hearers? I believe not. If something is unique it is the only one. There is no other. If one thing is more unique than another, neither is unique because there is another. If my memory serves me (I am writing these notes in a cabin far out on the great desert called Mojave; and I do not find Gila monsters and an occasional coyote much help in questions of this kind) the old Latin expression "sui generis" was close kin to our "unique." It meant of its own kind, without a fellow. How, then, can there be comparative degrees of uniqueness? A thing must be unique entirely if it be unique at all; yet I heard not long ago a pseudo-savant say: "I never saw anything more unique." Certainly he did not if it was unique. It is as absurd to compare uniqueness as it is to say "fuller" or "fullest." If something is full it can not be more full. To say that it is fuller argues the speaker empty of knowledge.

Let us think about another tortured item in our current vocabulary: the verb "to execute." Strangely enough, this word is subject to worse treatment in its original form than in its by-products. For example, "executive" is found usually in its correct meaning, but "execute" is treated like a stepchild. "The criminal was executed at eleven o'clock." One of the best definitions of "to execute" is "to carry out." Therefore we learn that the criminal was carried out at eleven o'clock. As a dead man can not be a criminal, we may presume that he was carried out alive. And from that it is a short step to the presumption that he was set at liberty—not precisely what the sentence was intended to record. The young reporter who wrote the story meant to tell us that the criminal was put to death, or, better yet, was killed. He could not have been executed because no man can be executed. If the word "execute" was considered indispensable the report should have been: "The sentence of death was executed at eleven o'clock." That would have told the whole tale. If death was the penalty and the sentence was carried out, it is reasonably safe to infer that the criminal passed from this awfully weary world and that the time of his transition was eleven o'clock.

What I have said here brings to mind a verbal bastard which years ago I vowed never to write nor to speak except in damnation of it. It is the vile, misbegotten offspring of ignorance: "electrocute." It is senseless, illegitimate, hideous. I often think that a culprit condemned to death in the electric chair is subject to cruel and unusual punishment, contrary to the law of the land. If our victim be as sensitive and sweet a soul as counsel for the defense declares him to be, it must seem bad enough to hear that he must die, without the superfluous horror of hearing the manner of his going described as "electrocution."