

Laval théologique et philosophique



Words and Whim

Margarita Mary Reidy

Volume 18, Number 2, 1962

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1020027ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020027ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Laval théologique et philosophique, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (print)

1703-8804 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Reidy, M. M. (1962). Words and Whim. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 18(2), 230–238. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1020027ar>

Words and Whim

If, as Cardinal Newman says, thought and speech are inseparable,¹ and if language moves with thought, then perhaps words are not purely conventional signs. Perhaps it is not true that "any convenient collection of letters can be used as a word . . . We could even invent a completely new word or decide to spell and pronounce one of the old words backwards."² We do not seem that free in our selection.

Through sound alone many words preserve reminders of natural signs such as groans and cries. Again, some words echo rhythms of emotional reactions in the body.

But another reason, based on the 'form' of the word, on its business of signifying what is in our mind, can also remove the word from the class of purely arbitrary sign. Words do signify thought ;³ words and thought are linked ; human thought moves and builds on previous thought, and names move with it.⁴ That is, we name things as we know them and we know them by a discourse, by a movement from the more to the less known,⁵ from the sensible to the intellectual,⁶

1. John Henry NEWMAN, "Literature," *The Idea of a University*, edited by O'Connell (Chicago, 1927), p. 293. "Thought and speech are inseparable from each other. Matter and expression are parts of one . . . Call to mind, Gentlemen, the meaning of the Greek word which expresses this special prerogative of man over the feeble intelligence of the inferior animals. It is called Logos : what does Logos mean? It stands both for *reason* and for *speech*, and it is difficult to say which it means more properly. It means both at once : why? because really they cannot be divided, — because they are in a true sense one. When we can separate light and illumination, life and motion, the convex and the concave of a curve, then will it be possible for thought to tread speech under foot, and to hope to do without it — then will it be conceivable that the vigorous and fertile intellect should renounce its own double, its instrument of expression, and the channel of its speculations and emotions." ('Inseparable' is not taken in this paper as 'identical' or 'completely equated.' In the quoted passage, the rhetorical use of 'inseparable' does indicate truth.)

2. John WILSON, *Language and the Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, 1956), p. 16.

3. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Peri Hermeneias*, lect.2, nn.13-16 ; *Ia*, q.13, a.1 ; *Ia IIae*, q.7, a.1 : *Q. D. de Ver.*, q.4, a.1 ; *In V Metaph.*, lect.5, n.824.

4. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Ia IIae*, q.7, a.1 : "... quia nomina, secundum Philosophum, sunt signa intellectuum, necesse est quod secundum processum intellectivae cognitionis, sit etiam nominationis processus. Proceedit autem nostra cognitio intellectualis a notioribus ad minus nota. Et ideo apud nos a notioribus nomina transferuntur ad significandum res minus notas." Cf. *IIa IIae*, q.57, a.1, ad 1 ; *Q. D. de Ver.*, q.4, a.1 ; also Charles DE KONINCK, "Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Names," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, XVII (1961), n° 1, p.32 : "... knowing is progressive, going from the more to less known with dependence upon the former, accompanied by suitable naming."

5. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Phys.*, lect.1, nn.6-11 ; *In V Metaph.*, lect.5, n.824.

6. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *In I Phys.*, lect.1, n.7.

from sense properties to natures,¹ from material to spiritual reality.² And with thought old names move, expand, and rise.

Hence in their later significations many words keep and use earlier meanings which clarify and root the extensions in what is more known. The history of a word, says John Ciardi, tends to remain in the word as "an immediate and intrinsic force."³ And therefore we select names for new meanings not just by whim.

We will examine several kinds of knowing-naming mutual progression and then show how in philosophy and poetry many words need their backgrounds.

When a man makes something new, we might expect him to put together letters and give his invention a free, unrooted name. But our inventors of recent years seem to have done the opposite. 'Telephone,' 'telegram,' 'phonograph,' 'stereo' come ultimately from ancient Greece.⁴ The science about our new artifacts, airplanes, is aeronautics, the science of air-sailing. An airplane has wings, nose, turret, instruments, chassis, propeller, elevator, motor, rudder, fin, and tail,⁵ none of which has an original name. 'Fuselage' comes from 'spindle' which the body of a plane resembles.⁶ The pilot in some planes sits in a cockpit named from the steersman's sunken place on a ship, which place in turn is named from the pit for cock fights.⁷ We have helicopters named from the Greek for 'spiral wing.'⁸ Our stratocruisers, airships, and airliners have captains, pilots, crews, cabins, stewardesses, navigators, and go from port to port.⁹

Or consider the names of new synthetic materials. Among the first was rayon, so named because its rippling sheen resembled light

1. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Ia*, q.18, a.2 ; q.13, a.8 c. and ad 2.

2. *Ibid.*, q.67, a.1 ; q.12, a.8 c. and ad 2.

3. JOHN CIARDI, *How Does a Poem Mean ?* (Boston, 1960), p.765. (Retains pagination of previous collaborative volume). "Languages die but words tend to be immortal . . . Like the stones of an ancient ruin, the words fall out of their original organization but survive to be used again, though they are usually re-shaped in the process. There is hardly a tenement hovel in the old section of modern Rome that was not built in part with stones from ancient ruins. There is hardly a phrase in a modern American's vocabulary that has not been built up from pieces fallen out of other languages . . ."

" . . . the history tends to remain in them as an immediate and intrinsic force . . ."

4. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York, 1956). Hereafter cited as *Webster*.

5. Cf. NILES and NEWELL, *Airplane Structures*, 4th edition (New York, 1954), pp.1-32 ; also ALBERT BLOMQUIST, *Outline of Air Transport Practice* (New York, 1941), pp.66-70.

6. *Webster*.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

9. Cf. LEAVELL and BUNGAY, *Aircraft Production Standards* (New York, 1943), p.8.

rays.¹ Many later synthetics, with arbitrary first syllables, retain the '-on': nylon, orlon, dacron.

Or examine names of man-made space objects. 'Rocket' comes from old words for spools, bobbins, and distaffs.² We have 'missiles.' We 'launch' them. Since 1957, we have a new and proper meaning for the old Latin-rooted 'satellite.' The *nautae* in Virgil now yield their name to astronauts and cosmonauts. A recent brief news story describing a satellite triumph contained more than ten words from ancient languages, each of them with a history of meanings: orbits, satellites, Thor, Able, Star, Transit, nuclear generator, (space) navigation rocket, submarine, capsules, Discoverer, Midas missile.³

Even though we are the inventors and our artifacts are new, we still name the things in such a way that we can ground our knowledge of the new in our knowledge of the old. Here naming accompanying knowledge is not purely arbitrary.

Related to naming an invention is naming a new discovery. When in the seventeenth century J. B. Van Helmont isolated what he called a condition of water brought into a vapor by cold, he wrote that "for want of a name, I have called that vapour, Gas, being not far severed from the Chaos of the Ancients."⁴ The Dutch pronunciation of 'g' as a spirant accounts for its being employed to represent the Greek 'X'. But there is an interesting sidelight: so strong is the inclination to root the new in the old that many who did not know Van Helmont's reason for choosing 'gas' thought the word for the vapor-like substance came from 'geest,' the Dutch word for spirit.⁵

(During the last three centuries 'gas' has acquired new meanings and has become a household word. We now use it for a multitude of expandable vapors, for certain home furnace fuels, for dental anaesthetics, for an explosive mixture in coal mines, for liquid petroleum, and even for the accelerator in a car.⁶ Yet the gas at the service station remains a relative of Chaos in Hesiod.)

Another guided naming process that follows our progressive, sense-dependent knowledge occurs when we choose words to identify plants and animals whose natures remain obscure. We name as we know; we know these plants and animals first by some property or activity that strikes our senses⁷ — some texture, some shape, some

1. Webster.

2. Ibid.

3. *South Bend Tribune*, November 16, 1961, p.1.

4. J. B. VAN HELMONT, *Ortus Medicinae* (1952), translated by J. Chandler, and quoted in the *New English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1901), hereafter cited as *NED*.

5. *NED*.

6. Webster; cf. also Minnesota Petroleum Council publications (Minneapolis).

7. ST. THOMAS, *Ia* q.18, a.2; q.13, a.8 c. and ad 2. Cf. N. H. Tur-Sinai, "The Origin of Language," in ANSCHEN, *Language: an Enquiry into Its Meaning and Function*

smell, some noise, some action. And then we name the less known nature from the more known external property. Once again our selection of a name is not completely arbitrary.

Consider the following names. 'Oat' comes from Greek and Indo-European words for a swelling; 'spinach' from the Latin '*spina*'; 'daisy' from the Anglo-Saxon for day's eye. Lima beans are named from a habitat in tropical America; liverwort from its liver-shaped parts; moss from its habitat in swamp and bog; moss rose from its roughened, mossy stem; ¹ gladiola from its sword-shaped leaves; aster from its radiating petals; hay from the action of cutting down and mowing; flax from plaiting or flaying; bluebell, golden-rod, buttercup from their color and shape.² 'Pumpkin' comes from a pumpkin's edible state — from the Greek '*pepon*' meaning 'cooked by the sun, ripe.'³

As for the animals, we have named the duck from the Anglo-Saxon word for plunging; the squirrel from the Greek for shadow-tail; the crane from the Indo-European base for hoarse cry; ⁴ the hippopotamus from the Greek for river-horse. 'Fox' may be derived from a Pre-Teutonic word based on the Sanskrit for tail.⁵ Because of its habit of burrowing, our gopher gets its name from the French for a honeycomb. The musk ox of the arctic is named from its musklike odor. 'Mouse' may come from a fancied resemblance between a mouse's movement and that of a muscle.

A bloodsucking worm received its name from the blood-letting physicians called leeches. Because of its shape the animal anemone is named from the plant.⁶ The fish called ray resembles rays; the butterfish has a slippery coating; the angelfish shark off the coast of England has pectoral fins like wings.⁷ From the Algonquian word for hand-scratcher we derive our word 'raccoon.'⁸

(New York, 1957), p.49: "If we ask an educated person who has not thoroughly investigated the facts of language what are the first things to which man gave names, he will surely say that they were the concrete things nearest to him. However, an examination of the names of such things shows, surprisingly, that every one of them originally denotes merely a quality of the thing in question.

"In Hebrew (where these facts appear more strikingly than in Indo-European languages), the words for egg, white of egg, moon, poplar tree, frankincense, (Mount) Lebanon, milk, fat, originally only mean: white..."

1. Webster.
2. NED.
3. Webster.
4. Ibid.
5. NED.
6. Webster.
7. NED.
8. Webster.

There is still another situation in which we tend to find for a new meaning, not a new word, not an available one spelled backwards, but some veteran name hung with ancient significations from everyday life. This situation is the one when the human mind rises from material to immaterial and spiritual realities.¹ And here too our experience testifies that both concept and name often keep their indispensable reference to sense.

We are familiar, for instance, with the origin of the English word 'angel' from the Greek for messenger or announcer, such as a bird of augury. 'Aggelos' naturally translated the Hebrew 'mal'āk Yahweh,' messenger of God.² Again, we know that 'virtue' comes from the Latin 'vir' and in its Latin form could denote physical strength or, more often, manly courage.³ English uses the word for moral excellence, for chastity especially on the part of women,⁴ for a 'habit inclining us to choose the relative mean between extremes of excess and defect.'⁵ Each meaning retains an element of 'manly strength and courage.'

Or consider our common word 'grasp.' Coming from Old English and Original Teutonic words for snatching, it is related to the Old Norse 'krafsa,' to paw or scratch with the feet.⁶ And yet more than one university student will use the same word to signify his comprehension of a philosophic text. We tell a boy to get a good grasp on the baseball bat, and we ask if he can grasp arithmetic. From such sense meanings as 'to clutch at,' 'to clasp in the arms,' the word has come to signify 'to lay hold of with the mind,' 'to comprehend.'⁷ For us, 'grasp' can mean a grip on a chunk of meat or the mastery of theology. Yet the meanings are related, and the names manifest the relationship. The later signification depends on the early 'clutch with the hand.' To call mental mastery a 'grasp,' then, is not to name it purely at will.

In considering how we name immaterial and spiritual realities from material things, we would do well to notice that in philosophy, if naming were purely arbitrary, the result would be not merely abnormal and inconvenient, but outright dangerous. "Unless," says Charles De Koninck, "the names employed by the metaphysician can be related to earlier impositions that refer to objects in the order of sense experience, they will be meaningless."⁸

1. Cf. ST. THOMAS, *Ia*, q.67, a.1 ; q.13, a.2 ; a.8, ad 2 ; *Q. D. de Ver.*, q.4, a.1.

2. LIDDELL & SCOTT, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford) ; also, *NED*.

3. ERNOUT & MEILLET, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1959).

4. *NED*.

5. John OESTERLE, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1957), p.59.

6. *NED*.

7. *Ibid*.

8. DE KONINCK, *loc. cit.*, p.22 ; cf. also his "Abstraction from Matter," *Laval théologique et philosophique*, XIII, (1957), n.2, p.154.

For naming follows thought ; thought progresses from the more to the less known, and knows the new with the help of the old. If, then, a name for an immaterial reality in no way referred to something previously and better known and ultimately to sense experience, the new collection of letters might well name next to nothing and the communication of knowledge would be impossible.

Any statement containing, for instance, the word 'soul,' taken in a sense wholly unrelated to sense experience, yet with the assumption that this abstract significance could, or should, be its first imposition, is going to be a word not entirely understood by its author. Aristotle's instance is that of philosophy when taught to the young. The neglect of meanings relating to experience, most especially in metaphysics, opens the way to a philosophical jargon — such as 'essences,' 'quiddities,' 'being' and 'existence' — that all can repeat but few feel any need to explain.¹

One word used in philosophy and applied even to the separated substances still names furniture brands, clothing, and business office equipment. We have forms of cancer, Form-Fit chairs,² and 'forms to fill in for the central office.' And in everyday usage 'form' still can mean the shape of a body, that shape we employ to identify a person or a plant or some animal species. Someone seeing a badger for the first time might say, "That animal I saw in the woods yesterday had the form of a cat but was much bigger." We say, "All I could see in the dark were moving forms." In our newspaper printing rooms 'form' can mean type locked in a frame ;³ in our factories it can mean a mold for liquid metal. We use a 'vacuum-forming' process in making plastic articles.

When a philosopher uses 'form' in his specialized senses, he employs not his own artifact but his inheritance which is valuable precisely because of its sense-grounded meanings. The special meanings of 'form' were arrived at from its sense meanings. By using the familiar word in new senses, the philosopher keeps in communication with his first source of verification.⁴ How well would he understand what he says, and how well would he teach if he arbitrarily spelled the word backwards and introduced the 'principle of specific-

1. DE KONINCK, "Metaphysics and the Interpretation of Words," *loc. cit.*, p.31.

2. *Good Housekeeping* (November, 1961), p.488 : "Revolutionary ! Form-Fit Flexible Chairs . . . Actually *changes* shape to individually 'Form Fit' every person who sits in it." Cf. also "The Fanciful World of Topiary," *House & Garden* (October, 1961), p.163 : "... animals and geometric forms for the topiarist's favor."

3. *Webster* ; cf. *NED*.

4. DE KONINCK, *loc. cit.*, pp. 27f : We must agree with "logical positivists, empiricists, or analytical philosophers when they insist that if a term is to have meaning it must refer to something that, in one way or another, can be verified in sense experience." Cf. ST. THOMAS, *Ia IIae*, q.3, a.6 ; *Q. D. de Ver.*, q.12, a.3, ad 2.

ation of a subject, either in the substantial or accidental order ' ¹ by the name 'mrof' ?

Not only philosophy but poetry as well depends for life on names that span sense and intellectual experience. Poetry requires words with rhythms, sounds, histories, and associations capable of arousing an ordered response of emotion and understanding. Its very work is to select and arrange fragments of man's rational-animal life and to reveal within the fragments some intelligible order. In uncovering the universal in and through the concrete, poetry engages both personal and racial history as well as the legitimate associations men make among similar things that meet their senses and their minds.

Notice, for instance, how Shakespeare, who, as T. S. Eliot remarks, "again and again, in his use of a word . . . will give a new meaning or extract a latent one," ² employs the word 'foul' in *King Lear*. The word, related to the Old Norse for 'rotten,' has stood for over a thousand years for something grossly offensive to the senses, something physically loathsome, with a primary reference to the odor of putrid and corrupting flesh. We use it of soiled things and of unfavorable, wet, and stormy weather. At the same time, relating stench with sin, we have called morally bad men 'foul.' ³ In the following passage, the smell of putrifying flesh, defiling and poisonous matter, the bitter storm and contrary winds all underscore a further meaning when Lear cries out on the heath :

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks ! rage ! blow !

.....
 You sulph'rous and thought-executing fires,
 Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
 Singe my white head ! And thou, all-shaking thunder,
 Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world,
 Crack Nature's moulds, all germins spill at once,
 That make ungrateful man !

.....
 But yet I call you servile ministers,
 That will with two pernicious daughters join
 Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
 So old and white as this ! O ! O ! 'tis foul ! ⁴

Or we may take an example from *Troilus and Cressida* in one of the passages where Shakespeare employs a word with a history of sensible, emotional, and intellectual meanings. When Ulysses urges the proud Achilles to return to battle, he uses the word 'monumental.'

1. Herman REITH, *An Introduction to Philosophical Psychology* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1956), p.286 ; St. THOMAS, *In II Phys.*, lect.2, nn.151-156 ; *In II Metaph.*, lect.4, n.320 ; V, lect.5, n.822 ; VII, lect.9, n.1467.

2. T. S. ELIOT, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London, 1948), p. 146.

3. NED.

4. Act III, Scene 2.

Time, hath, my lord, a wallet at his back
 Wherein he puts alms for oblivion,
 A great-siz'd monster of ingratitudes.
 Those scraps are good deeds past, which are devour'd
 As fast as they are made, forgot as soon
 As done. Perseverance, dear my lord,
 Keeps honour bright. To have done is to hang
 Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
 In monumental mock'ry.¹

Here the word still refers through its Latin root ² to a sepulchre ; an edifice commemorating a great man or a great deed ; a structure of stone or other lasting material erected in memory of the dead ; a carved figure or effigy ; a portent ; something massive and permanent ; something historically prominent, significant, and conspicuous to posterity.³

The mail is the empty casement for a morally dead hero ; it is an effigy of dead honor ; it is a portent to the coward. And the mockery of the rusty mail is massive, permanent, and conspicuous to posterity.⁴

1. Act III, Scene 3.

2. ERNOUT & MEILLET, *op. cit.*

3. *NED.*

4. Cf. I. A. RICHARDS, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York, 1936), pp. 64f.

"Cleopatra, taking up the asp, says to it :

Come, thou mortal wretch,
 With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate
 Of life at once untie ; poor venomous fool,
 Be angry, and despatch !

"Consider how many senses of *mortal*, besides 'death-dealing' come in ; compare : 'I have immortal longings in me.' Consider *knot* : 'This knot intrinsicate of life' : 'Something to be undone,' 'Something that troubles us until it is undone,' 'Something by which all holding-together hangs,' 'The nexus of all meaning.' . . . Shakespeare is bringing together half a dozen meanings from *intrinsic* and *intrinse* : 'Familiar,' 'intimate,' 'secret,' 'private,' 'innermost,' 'essential,' 'that which constitutes the very nature and being of a thing' — all the medical and philosophic meanings of his time as well as 'intricate' and 'involved.' What the word does is exhausted by no one of these meanings and its force comes from all of them and more."

Cf. also Allen TATE, *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York, 1948), pp. 89f, on a passage in Dante's *Inferno* :

"When Francesca's conversation with the poet begins, the wind dies down, and she tells him where she was born, in these lines :

*Siede la terra, dove nata fui,
 Sulla marina dove il Po discende
 Per aver pace co' seguaci sui.*

"Courtney Landon renders the tercet :

The town where I was born sits on the shore,
 Whither the Po descends to be at peace
 Together with the streams that follow him.

"But it misses a good deal ; it misses the force of *seguaci* by rendering it as a verb. Professor Grandgent translates the third line : 'To have peace with its pursuers,' and comments : 'The tributaries are conceived as chasing the Po down to the sea.' Precisely ; for

The backlog of related meanings, kept together in the single naming, have 'immediate and intrinsic force.'¹ When we use 'monumental' to mean massive, permanent, and memorable, we would not choose to spell it backwards.

When, then, we select a set of letters to signify a new invention, a new discovery, a little known nature, an immaterial or spiritual reality, we are often not purely arbitrary in our choices. In a real sense words and thought are inseparable ; one does follow the other ; and together they progress in a way that a house progresses — with firm dependence on the concrete foundation sunk in the earth.

Sister Margarita Mary REIDY, C.H.M.



if the *seguaci* are merely followers, and not pursuers also, the wonderfully ordered density of this simple passage is sacrificed. For although Francesca has told Dante where she lives, in the most directly descriptive language possible, she has told him more than that. Without the least imposition of strain upon the firmly denoted natural setting, she fuses herself with the river Po near which she was born. By a subtle shift of focus we see the pursued river as Francesca in Hell : the pursuing tributaries are a new visual image for the pursuing winds of lust . . . The tributaries of the Po are not only the winds of lust by analogy of visual images ; they become identified by means of sound :

. . . *discende*
Per aver pace co' seguaci sui.

" The sibilants dominate the line ; they are the hissing of the wind. But in the last line of the preceding tercet Francesca has been grateful that the wind has subsided so that she can be heard —

Mentre che il vento, come fa, si tace.

" After the wind has abated, then, we hear in the silence, for the first time, its hiss, in the susurrations to the descending Po. The river is thus both a visual and an auditory image, and since Francesca is her sin and her sin is embodied in this image, we are entitled to say that it is a sin that we can both hear and see."

1. CIARDI, *op. cit.*