

Philolexian Award Remarks
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To my embarrassment, I must confess that, although I have been a faculty member at Columbia for thirty years, I had never heard of the Philolexian Society until your avatar called to tell me that I had been chosen to receive this year's Award for Distinguished Literary Achievement. (My plea in mitigation is that, unlike several previous recipients of the award whose remarks Tom showed me, I am not a Columbia alumna.) I wish I had known about the Philolexian sooner. A society of persons linked by a love of discourse, in all its varied forms, seems just right for the current predicament of our country, in which genuine discourse is in steady retreat before the advance of various simulacra that have body-snatched the originals.

Take *conversation* as an example. The more conversation as art and pastime disappears, the more we hear the word applied to the antithesis of conversation, as in "a national conversation." A national conversation is a contradiction in terms. But politicians and their mouthpieces have seized on the notion in order to substitute talk for thought or action. *National conversation about race* may have been the pioneer, with its implication that talking about race is equivalent to acting against racism. Publicists soon awoke to the potential of *conversation* as an all-purpose evasion. *Conversations* about health care, immigration, environmental standards, online privacy, or genetic engineering allow public figures to blather at will, without courting the risk attached to a definite proposal or action. *Conversation* in its original sense—civil, intelligent, and articulate talk, carried out

by thoughtful persons face to face (or at least ear to ear)—is nearly defunct. Instead, the word has come to stand for a debased public imitation in which bloggers, editorialists, and op-ed writers trade bullet points beyond each other's eye or earshot.

Fake news is another simulacrum that has body-snatched the original. Respectable journalists use the term as though it referred to one of several types of news: local news, international news, sports news, fake news. To adopt the term, even in the act of denouncing it, is to accord it legitimacy. If an item is fake, it is not “news”—just as a half-truth is not a type of truth but a type of lie. Perhaps our prior acceptance of “reality television” as a description of manifest unreality has eased the path to blithe acceptance of the euphemism “fake news.”

Variations on lies are not the only pernicious simulacra from which discourse needs rescuing. “Lies, damn lies, and statistics,” is a formula that Mark Twain popularized (though he never claimed to have originated it). Thanks to the philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt's book *On Bullshit*, whose title and brevity belie its profundity, we might amend that to “lies, damn lies, statistics, and bullshit.” Frankfurt distinguishes the bullshitter from the liar according to what each seeks to misrepresent. The liar misrepresents what he supposes to be the truth. In order to lie, he must know, or think he knows, that the truth is. The bullshitter misrepresents what he is up to, perhaps not knowing and certainly not caring what the truth is. Since lying requires a certain

orientation to the truth, whereas bullshitting is indifferent to it, Frankfurt concludes that bullshit is a greater enemy of the truth than lies are.¹

I don't say that all discourse must be factual. What, then, would become of fiction and fantasy, irony, satire, and farce—surer routes to truth, often, than anything strictly factual? But the storm warnings are surely aloft for a society in which most adults understand that the purpose of most of the language we hear about us is to mislead, starting with the advertising that we learn to discount even as children.

I do say that language is a precious charge. As Grandfather Compson in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* put it, language is "that meager and fragile thread . . . by which the little surface corners and edges of men's secret and solitary lives may be joined for an instant now and then before sinking back into the darkness where the spirit cried for the first time and was not heard and will cry for the last time and will not be heard then either."² The connection of one human being to another is always tenuous, in spite of our most determined efforts. For me, the writing and teaching of history are part of the effort to preserve that fragile connection; and, in that enterprise, the moral and the aesthetic are inseparable. For that reason, I am gratified and humbled to have been accorded this honor by the Philolexian Society.

¹ Harry G. Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54-56, 59-61.

² William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 202.