

WALKING LETTER
by Bror August Vestbø

In my text "Walking Fast," I explore my own and others' difficulty in finding and signifying identity through clothing. While writing the paper, I returned to a broadcast of Virginia Woolf reading her text, "On Craftsmanship." To see my practice and its limitations directly compared to those of writing was illuminating and inspired the following paper. I hope they can shed some light towards what I have explored in the following pages.

"Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations — naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today — that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. The splendid word 'incarnadine', for example — who can use it without remembering also 'multitudinous seas'? In the old days, of course, when English was a new language, writers could invent new words and use them. Nowadays it is easy enough to invent new words — they spring to the lips whenever we see a new sight or feel a new sensation — but we cannot use them because the language is old. You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence. Words belong to each other, although, of course, only a great writer knows that the word 'incarnadine' belongs to 'multitudinous seas'. To combine new words with old words is fatal to the constitution of the sentence. In order to use new words properly you would have to invent a new language; and that, though no doubt we shall come to it, is not at the moment our business. Our business is to see what we can do with the English language as it is. How can we combine the old words in new orders so that they survive, so that they create beauty, so that they tell the truth? That is the question.

And the person who could answer that question would deserve whatever crown of glory the world has to offer. Think what it would mean if you could teach, if you could learn, the art of writing. Why, every book, every newspaper would tell the truth, would create beauty. But there is, it would appear, some obstacle in the way, some hindrance to the teaching of words. For though at this moment at least a hundred professors are lecturing upon the literature of the past, at least a thousand critics are reviewing the literature of the present, and hundreds upon hundreds of young men and women are passing examinations in English literature with the utmost credit, still — do we write better, do we read better than we read and wrote four hundred years ago when we were unlectured, uncriticised, untaught? Is our Georgian literature a patch on the Elizabethan? Where then are we to lay the blame? Not on our professors; not on our reviewers; not on our writers; but on words. It is words that are to blame. They are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind. If you want proof of this, consider how often in moments of emotion when we most need words we find none. Yet there is the dictionary; there at our disposal are some half-a-million words all in alphabetical order. But can we use them? No, because words do not live in dictionaries, they live in the mind. Look again at the dictionary. There beyond a doubt lie plays more splendid than *Antony and Cleopatra*; poems more lovely than the *Ode to a Nightingale*; novels beside which *Pride and Prejudice* or *David Copperfield* are the crude bunglings of amateurs. It is only a question of finding the right words and putting them in the right order. But we cannot do it because they do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind."

Transcript of Virginia Woolf's broadcast, 'On Craftsmanship', 1937, BBC.