

Take, for example, the notorious “like”—as in, “I’m, like, *so* not ready for this whole, like, *gym* thing.” Disapproving adults, dense as posts, blind as bats, think this is a verbal tic, akin to finishing sentences with “you know?” They discourage it the way liberal-minded adults used to discourage swearing when I was growing up—as if limiting one’s vocabulary were the issue. Please.

Today’s “like” has a long history that parallels the rise of mediation and expresses a cultural transvaluation that took place along the way. The expression derives from the beatnik-hippie usage, which was itself a popular manifestation of a high-culture crisis in linguistic philosophy concerning the limits of what can be said as opposed to shown. In that original usage, the phrase “Like, man” or “Like, wow” preceded an attempt to describe some idea or experience, and it implied that you just couldn’t squeeze something so deep into phonic containers, man, like, this is too far out to be brought back to mere words, man, this is really, like—*heavy*.

What was suggested was not limited vocabulary but the inadequacy of language in principle. It conveyed the futility of trying to put into words what could only be known directly, and the constant implication was that one would “get it” only if one were “where it’s at” already—that is, as a function of one’s level of enlightenment, and that was a constant issue in those days, believe me; a lot of harsh judgments were rendered along with all that talk of peace and love, a constant jockeying for position in a hierarchy of relative hipness. It was so important to be *down*, to be the source of gestures and remarks that blew the mind.

“Like” still connotes the inadequacy of language in principle and it still operates in a competitive social field, but now—thanks to the queens of middle school—it is performatively integrated with conventions of that media. Adeptly employed (and only the

queens can do it just right), “like” acts as a kind of quotation mark in conversations that no longer work discursively, but work more like TV commercials or movie trailers. The word introduces a tiny performance rather than a description, a “clip” displaying a message in highly condensed gestural and intonational form. It all depends on the way language is coupled with the ongoing flicker of imitative visuals, as in this girl’s report on an encounter with an ex-friend:

“She was, like, ‘I’m *so* happy for you . . .?’ but she didn’t know that, like, I already *knew* what she said to him . . .?’ So I just played it, like, we *are* the sync sisters . . .?’ Because I wanted her to find out later that she, like, had this booger hanging out of her nose the whole time . . .?’”

Each “like” is followed by a fleeting pose, held for just an instant—the whole performance is a string of “takes”—and the ends of key phrases curl up into questions, seeking audience indications that the visuals have been received: a silent and subliminal call-and-response sort of thing, and woe betide the clunky wannabe who can’t follow the nuances, who can’t improvise a version of her own, and make it seem effortless and natural when her turn comes. Among such girls, the interrogatory incantation takes on a tentative tone, a tone that reaches perpetually for reassurance and permission to go on.

Painful to behold.

Life is one long improv, and only the method-ready thrive. You gotta keep it real, but you gotta be good at it too.