To Acid-Words

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Contents

Parts of "To Acid-Words" were first presented at a meeting of the Berkeley Anarchist Study Group in November, 2011. The rest of it was meditated on (and off) for the following two years, with a last burst of effort in early 2014. This is to say that it has layers, strata. It is an attempt to address the tremendous anxiety anarchists seem to have about language, and each of its sub-sections responds analytically to various attitudes towards language in the milieu. I think of it as a necessarily incomplete piece, in that it addresses a relation the anarchist milieu constantly denies in seeking out a better language (instrumental, operational), a pre-language, or a non-language. This relation is, of course, its relation to what it knows as Society. But the relations to language in the milieu, and our collective anxiety towards it, can never be entirely considered apart from more or less discernible social attitudes. Ultimately, although there is nothing to be said in general *about language from an anarchist perspective, it is sometimes worthwhile to trace the lineaments of some particular anarchist attitudes to language, as I have done here. Two caveats: first, this piece is written from a monolingual point of view, as it addresses a largely monolingual milieu. A vastly different approach to these questions could have begun from multilingualism and translation. Second caveat: what is said here about poesy and poetry is delicately presented in a sideways pedagogy, introducing an idea or three to unfortunate readers who have little experience of these. (That, for example, the term I've used for a certain idea of language,* Language, *is also commonly used for a loose school of poets and writers whose works have contributed to inspiring precisely the approach I've taken here, is only one of the minor ironies of this essay.)*

> *& so you print your poems*
>
> *& no one cares*
>
> *they hate you sometimes*
>
> *tell you to go to work*
>
> *like every one else*
>
> *or they want you to explain*
>
> *in american, in english,*
>
> *in old english, in slang*
>
> *in political, in sexual,*
>
> *in religious, in psychological,*
>
> *in revolutionary terms &*
>
> *language,*
>
> *what you meant*
>
> *& so you hide*
>
> *take acid*
>
> *& write an acid poem*
>
> *or a poem about your city*
>
> *& say its to increase awareness*
>
> *of the environment*

& its words to expand your

head so you don't have

to take acid

and endanger your life

"if it really is dangerous"

— d.a. levy

le militant n'entend pas, ne voit pas le langage et c'est à ce prix qu'il peut militer

[the militant does not hear, does not see language, and this is the price he pays for his militancy]

— Roland Barthes

What I add to these lines—what I place between them—is a kind of enumeration, argumentation through serial juxtaposition: anecdotes and examples, a series of scenes I have been witness to; analysis, thinking through what I heard and saw; references, the things people said, or wrote, and also a way of looking back at what they did not say, or write. And asides for what remained to be noted. I place it all between d.a. levy's positive but dangerous "awareness / of the environment / & its words" and Barthes' two negatives, his thought of a militancy that depends on a denial of language, to show something of the gray space some of us inhabit.

So this is not exactly about anarchists. Nor is it about the society they want to transform, dismantle or destroy. It is about how the society anarchists want to transform, dismantle or destroy transforms, dismantles, or destroys them in the moment of saying what there is to do, of writing what they want or think. And about some ways to resist.

Part 1: Moral

I'm quite serious about the need to resist the tyranny of elemental words… They're words that brook no argument, that are intended to be outside of syntax and thus outside of history. I try to resist this when I write.

— Bob Perelman

How Activists Talk

As I have experienced it, the anarchist milieu (our gray space) is not exclusively or even principally made up of activists. But in the sub-cultural spaces, the social overlaps, and the political neighborhood of the anarchist milieu there is activism, and so there most certainly are activists. It's important to be careful here, because among some anarchists *activist*, like *liberal*, is an epithet. The activists I am talking about are both those picked out and ridiculed with such epithets, and, often enough, some less obvious characters. We will only understand activists (and their talk) if we make them strange again, because sometimes they are our friends. They are also us on some days or in the past; they are us though we are in denial about it. Some anarchists are activists and say so; others are activists in denial. Someone said: "activists without the word."

Others again aren't activists but bear in their speech and action the inertia of activist approaches and tactics, an entire way of life that shapes what it is to be of the Left in North America and probably elsewhere.

Whoever they are, activists talk at meetings. Of course activists also talk in other situations, but it seems to me that to be an activist is tendentially to reform any situation into a meeting. For example, there are people who only socialize by bringing elements of the meeting into the social situation, at the limit by turning social situations into meetings wholesale. There are rallies and protests and so on, but these have much in common with meetings; one sometimes gets the feeling that everything would be over if the people or institution being protested or rallied against would agree to a meeting. Consequently, the activist utopia is a society assembled out of meeting-atoms, a federation of meetings.

The way activists talk at their meetings is primarily in *margarine-words*. These may be *slogans*, phrases whose function is to circulate, not to mean; or they may be certain *oily words* that slip from mouth to ear, person to machine, situation to scene. One way to recognize margarine-words is repetition: they are used a lot, functioning as code words or passwords, their appropriateness assumed, never shown. Ultimately, this is because their circulation is also the usually unquestioned circulation of moral beliefs; but in any given iteration, the repetition may be well-nigh meaningless, just a little index, gentle reminder of the shared morals rather than harsh mnemotechnic. It is never really clear which is primary, which gives form to which: the morality at work, or the compulsion to repeat in its collusion with the most gregarious drives. In any case, the meeting (or the rally, etc.) is the pedagogical site where these morals are usually circulated and sometimes, memorably, inculcated. Another way to recognize margarine-words is that, as repeatable units, they can be coded negatively as well as positively, so that avoiding them or using them only as terms of derision becomes as important as using the ones that are to be circulated, owned, and appreciated. That is how we get, for example, "activists without the word," and moralistic immoralists.

To take this analysis one step further and understand what activism really is, we would have to deepen the discussion of the relation between morality and technology, the primitive technics of repetition and circulation, their ever-larger and more sophisticated technological networks, their absorption of ancient codes and modern laws, and so on; that is, discuss *politics*. It is difficult to explain how these two co-operate, because sometimes morality is just that, moral principles and deliberation and tradition and so on; and sometimes I write morality and realize I am talking more about a certain undeliberated obsessiveness, a sort of neurosis of doing the good that neurotically redefines the good as its own neurotic world-view... how all of these levels of neurosis compose modern political subjects is a question to be set aside for now.

Instead, let's leave matters in the realm of family resemblances and generalize for the productive fun of it about how activists use their margarine-words. Afterwards, we will have to thank the activists for making this all so clear, because they are clearly not the only ones who speak in margarine-words. Margarine-words are all of ours when we aren't paying attention; activists are just those who step forward most flagrantly to show us how we all repeat.

ASIDE 1

Many of the rhetorical effects I designate here as margarine-words are more matters of speech than writing; thus here I concentrate on how some *talk*. The mana-words I

turn to further on are best understood as inventions in writing, though they do have a strange orality in *mutant speech*. It turns out that it's when margarine-words are written down that they are most egregious (though careful listening will find them out); and that mana-words sound strangest when spoken as mutant speech. That said, in this essay I will refer to speech and writing more or less interchangeably, as they occur to me.

Activists use margarine-words primarily in two ways. One is the talk of the bureaucrat, the functionary. Sometimes the speaker is not so good at it, so you have to listen a bit more closely to hear the proto-bureaucrat, the proto-functionary learning her role. Even when it is sophisticated, her talk, which on the face of it is common-sensical and even rational, tends in the long run to the obtuse. *She can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at all the details.* These are the people said to "fetishize process"—but this is usually because what they want can't be said or done in the language of process. To speak in this way is one way to attempt, with varying degrees of success, to instrumentalize language. In part this means to understand and govern the selective circulation of margarine-words. That's the rationality of it, achieved once a critical mass of margarine-words has been circulated, usually re-circulated if those present at the meeting are familiar with or help out in the task. But because it seeks to master people through margarine-words, and not the margarine-words themselves (mastered, they might cease to circulate, or be erased, as one with good taste stops using certain phrases, develops a studied silence with respect to the parlance they wish to abandon), this speech is a calculated violence done to language, ignoring aesthetic considerations as well as ethical ones (supposing every morality is the harsh reduction of what was or could have been an ethics). Stories told with margarine-words are moral stories; the moral is what you have to do, or not.

The other way of speaking is more mysterious. At first, it just seems to be the talk of the leader, or would-be leader, his exhortations, but in its sinews it is a kind of hysterical discourse, which perhaps has its origin in the loss of control over the first (bureaucratic) one as margarine-words begin to circulate beyond anyone's control. The speaker realizes at some level, not necessarily conscious, that an ersatz accumulation of margarine-words is powerful, draws attention, generates or at least concentrates energy, so he goes for it, he overdoes it, he says whatever comes to mind as long as it accelerates the recirculation of margarine-words. It is a way of speaking that to an attentive listener (by definition someone not implicated in the activist project at hand) seems so wrong that it is right. Instrumentally right. Here the instrumentalization of language, which always eventually fails, tips over into something much less rational. The leader, like the bureaucrat, manages desire as best he can, but his management also depends on the ability to unleash what is less than rational in speech. This may be done cynically, with an eye to benefit from the ensuing confusion, or in wide-eyed hopefulness, confidence that desire is desire for the good, is itself good. In either case the details get lost, the instrumentalization gets scrambled, gets noisy. *He can't make eye contact for looking, or pretending to look, at the horizon.*

ASIDE 2

Do activists listen? Not as activists. But they do hear—they hear the exhortations, calls to action.

* * *

I wrote that the details get lost. Suppose, for example, that someone you knew had at some point read a well-known poem, and thought he had found in some of its well-known lines a grand illustration of his sentiments. Suppose that the proof offered was a kind of translation of those lines into margarine-words. Suppose, moreover, that when he explained this to you, it became clear that he had so profoundly misread the lines that, beyond all ordinary questions of interpretation, he could only have arrived at his self-affirming interpretation by unconsciously inverting the traditional and accepted understanding of the lines. It is a kind of wrong that is so patently wrong that it could not subsist without a lengthy justification of reading against the grain, or an absurdist will to reverse all conventional readings. But go on supposing, and suppose that your acquaintance was in no way capable of such experimental reversals. Suppose rather that it were obvious that he thought himself to be in line with the traditional and accepted reading of the lines. How to understand this? He is on one hand so wrong that his illustration by means of the lines simply becomes incoherent. In another, stranger sense, this reading that is so plainly a non-reading shows a peculiar will to instrumentalize the artwork, to seize upon its cultural cachet. Supposing all this, you could have been witness to the ever repeated birth of propaganda. Incidentally, then, a new definition of propaganda: *violent translation of poetry into margarine-words.*

* * *

If we could accede to an impossible situation wherein the instrumental use of language, the circulation of margarine-words, could be paused long enough to examine how morality is at work in it, we would find a collusion in it of moral stories and stories about language itself. As though margarine-words can only circulate on the condition of pushing away any other possibility for speech. Often enough an activist will say something that sounds like

> *what you say is theoretical, abstract. I am without theory; I only speak concretely.*

The proof of this concreteness is orientation to action. Listen, it is the leader, showing the usefulness of his words. Attend to variants of this story long enough and you will eventually discern the moral, which is simple enough. It seems to be:

> *You are bad, you use language to refer to itself; therefore I am good; I use language purposefully, in mind of action.*

At the meeting, an activist is speaking, saying something, but you can't talk about how it is said. What is to be attended to is some content (a plan of action) that is presumably shared. The accusation of abstraction leveled at users of *mutant speech* flows from this situation, since *mana-words* tend to bear the traces of their invention or borrowing more noticeably than the margarine-words preferred by activists. Margarine-words are always ingratiating, seeking to slip by unnoticed. At the meeting sometimes the bureaucrat seems to say:

> *My language is the only good way to refer to these matters; I am using language only in this proper way. You should not use it differently in responding, or suggest that activists might be using it differently in the way they speak.*

Listen, she is preventing deviation from her script.

How is orientation to action—as the criterion of concreteness and propriety—a problem? In two ways: *first*, because *action is usually defined too narrowly*. It is likely to mean a process or event that is interpersonal, public, somehow forceful, often requiring muscular effort, loud, and so on. Which is to say that it is political, and not infrapolitical, micro-political, anti-political, or apolitical. These sorts of processes or events are adequately modeled, "represented", so the activist supposes, in her language. When it is a theoretical language, it is deployed with an eye to application in practice (which means the kind of narrowly construed political action I've just described); when it is a practical language, it is deployed as almost pure instrumentality: "go there," "do this," etc.

If you question the moral of the story that says you are theoretical and the activist is not, you will meet the push to "do something"—to prove the "this-sidedness" of what you have to say with actions the leader or the bureaucrat will recognize as political.

By now it should be clear that our gratitude to the activists is for showing those of us who are listening how this operation works. At the same time it should be clear that, aside from the activists, there are many, many *actionists*, if by that word I may be allowed to refer to those who define action in roughly the way I have above, whether or not they are activists in terms of their tactics or their morality.

And what is the second problem with orientation to action? Simply put, that *action is not the solution to every situation.* At least I clamor for the perspective wherein action has neither priority nor primacy. Inaction, doing nothing, stopping, quitting, and so on, are not secondary or invalid, morally deficient and politically ineffective though they may appear to the *actionists.*

* * *

The word radical, so often used by activists (but not just them), in our milieu generally means very little other than *good.* Most know the etymological story, which is often repeated at meetings or other instructive scenes and teaches that a radical is one who, given a problem, issue, relation, or situation, gets at its root. A radical claims to think, wishes to act, in terms of the root. A simple illustration. Many years ago someone explained radical feminism to me as that feminism which conceives the subordination of women as the root of all oppression and domination—i.e. that all other asymmetries of power are either directly derived or analogically modeled on this root. Despite the undeniable fact of the subordination of women (easier to affirm than to determine *who* in the last instance is a woman) I found and continue to find it painfully naïve to claim that power could ever be exercised so simply (in one primary or root form with its analogues and derivatives). In this case the radicalism would amount to pursuing, or at least believing, such an analysis (and actively not pursuing or believing others); at a deeper level, it has to do with believing in a certain purchase of analysis (in the especially non-analytic way that activists tend to use this term) on realities of social and other kinds.

One could be more generous to the radicals (or just concede more to what they claim is ordinary usage) and suggest that by getting at the root they mean something more like: discovering the true matrix of relations of force underlying whatever problem, issue, relation, or situation is at stake for them. They would then be radical not in the sense that they seek a root or assume that there is one but in a vaguer sense, implying a kind of downward-seeking motion that we could call looking for basic structures, root-like structures. So a radical does not stop until some component

relations of force, the asymmetrical relations of power, have been discovered. It seems to me that this is closer to how *radical* is generally used: those who are habituated to the downward-seeking motion. They speak—by extension: act, move—in characteristic ways. Analysis or theory works for them first as an unveiling, digging up, finding out; then, as a guide to action.

The supposition that what one discovers in the downward-seeking motion is liberatory is perhaps part of what is at stake in the use of radical more as a noun than as an adjective, or its adjectival use in a sloppy, all-purpose manner, indicating another kind of social identity, meaning roughly *the right kind of activist*, equivalent to *activists like us* or *activists who agree with us*. We pass from repetition to gregariousness. In that mode radical, the adjective, may be coupled with countless activities, situations, places, tasks. What does it add?

It adds a morality, or rather it is an index that a moral code is at stake. As I noted, *radical* is just a synonym for *good*, where what is good is delineated in a largely unspoken and thus unquestioned morality. This might explain such otherwise confusing constructions as:

> *radical mommy*
>
> *radical cheerleader*
>
> *radical stripmall*

If we try to understand these constructions according to the first definition I suggested, they are almost incoherent. What is the fundamental or root aspect of being a cheerleader, for example? Whatever it is, a radical cheerleader would be an excellent cheerleader. According to the second sense, what is intended might be something more like this: there are radicals, habitués of the downward-seeking motion, and as such they have earned the right to call themselves and what they do radical. If one of these radicals takes up cheerleading as an activist project, cheerleading, otherwise under suspicion as a practice of mainstream society, becomes radical cheerleading. This means good cheerleading, not as cheerleading but as a suitable activity for a radical. But then radical does not really mean one who goes to the root of cheerleading, but rather one who can make an activity (otherwise under suspicion) good, adjectivally radical, by lending interest and energy to it. It is the valuation associated with the downward-seeking motion. It is also the value that margarine-words bear as passwords or code-words. Cheerleading can in this sense be recuperated, but this changes nothing about it—the routines, contents of chants, etc. is not what one would claim was at the root! What changes is the "message"—it is now margarine-words as enthusiastically repeated cheers.

Can we say anything different about other instances of "radical" politics?

* * *

In 2006 AK Press published a book called *Horizontalism*. It is sub-titled "voices of popular power in Argentina" and has to do with mutual aid networks and forms of neighborhood and workplace autonomy after the financial collapse in 2001. Marina Sitrin, who edited the book and has done the most to popularize the titular word in Anglophone contexts, writes:

> Horizontalidad *is a living word, reflecting an ever-changing experience. While I have translated it as horizontalism, it is more of an anti-ism. Horizontalism is not an ideology, but more of a social relationship, a way of being and relating.*

Indeed, the oral histories and interviews in the book testify to an extreme suspicion about established politics of any sort. This suspicion, which sometimes spills over into hostility, is manifest among other things in the descriptive term used for the organization of meetings, neighborhood assemblies, occupied spaces, and so on: *horizontalidad*.

It was not long after I read this book that I met a number of activist anarchists who regularly used the term *horizontalism*, in obvious reference to the book, to describe their own practices and those of others. In fact, it seemed that these folks used the terms *horizontalism* and *anarchism* almost interchangeably, except that anarchism was for those in the know, what I would call the milieu, and *horizontalism* was for negotiating with other activists, or for "the community"—the latter meaning in this case *those to be organized*. The initial conflation makes some amount of sense, as the organizations these activists are a part of were the kind populated by anarchists who do not advertise their anarchism to "the community." Their emphasis on organizing as such made it easy to refer to what was happening as horizontal organizing. Still, it struck me when I realized that with this crowd *horizontalism* had become a euphemism for *anarchism*, a way to mince words at best, at worst to dissimulate or confuse their convictions.

One could perhaps trace this back to Sitrin's decision to translate the adjectival noun *horizontalidad*, literally *horizontality*, which models a state of affairs or a process, as *horizontalism*, the, as she puts it, anti-ism. But it is also a perfect illustration of how those used to margarine-words comfortably adopted *horizontalism* as a way to purposely make their position more vague when engaging in activism, while, in the doing, adding one more note of imprecision to that position.

* * *

Should we distinguish how militants talk and how activists talk? Only to some extent. I have known many less militants than I have activists. It's possible I've never met a militant, only would-be militants, which drives me to say that these folks were a species of activist, not so much in their political opinions or organizational forms but in their general orientation to action—and their relation to language. Tiqqun wrote some instructive pages on militants in *This Is Not a Program*, wherein they emphasize the militants' separation from their communities (activists seek rather to integrate so as to organize). The world of militants is always tendentially the world of secrecy and clandestinity. As if to escape the bureaucratic deployment of language, militants often turn to a completely operational language, trimming analysis down to a series of simple presuppositions about which no further discussion is necessary. Would-be militants imitate this minimalism in their brief statements claiming actions.

But if, as Barthes suggests, the militant is a limit-point, the one who does not see language, one could see activists, in their exhortatory and managerial modes, as being just a little bit more aware of language, because they must be more integrated into ordinary speech. Integrated into

> *...the most banal of apparatuses, like a boozy Saturday night among suburban petit bourgeois couples [...] it often happens that we experience the characteristic, not request, but possession, and even the extreme possessiveness involved with every apparatus. And it is during the vacuous conversations punctuating the dreadful dinner party that we experience it. One of the Blooms "present" will launch into his tirade against perpetually-on strike-government-workers; once performed (the role being well known), a counter-polarization of the social-democratic type will issue from one of the other Blooms, who*

will play his part more or less convincingly, etc., etc. Throughout, these aren't bodies speaking to each other, but rather an apparatus functioning. Each of the protagonists sets in motion the series of ready-to-use signifying machines, which are always-already inscribed in common language, in grammar, in metaphysics, in the THEY.

THEY = SOCIETY, as anarchists use the word. This constant of political speech that is what the *horizontalism* example suggests: there is a minimum consciousness of the experience of language as a raw material to be rendered instrumental, even as there is a generalized amnesia about how this process works. As a guideline, the demand for ordinary speech is always repeated when people deviate too much from the preferred margarine-words (which, being passwords, get a pass). And this ordinary speech is itself dense with other (older, unknown) margarine-words, the keywords of the society that activists seek to change, that we anarchists want to dismantle, transform or destroy.

Our Operation Margarine

This story is about something that repeats: a loophole, a silent acrobatic maneuver accomplished in the course of political speech.

At an anarchist gathering, I attended a workshop whose stated intent was to question the notions of justice and accountability.[1] *Accountability* is another margarine-word, the use of which that day stretched from the leftist demand for "police accountability" to our own "accountability processes" and their implied moralities—not to mention their interminable slowdowns and failures. The hour or so of discussion went like this: at first, everyone who spoke dared to call police accountability into question, describing it as a reformist slogan, and so on; to a lesser extent, our own use of the word in accountability processes also came into question. For a time it seemed as though no one who spoke wanted any kind of accountability. The word was effectively being crossed out: any positive use began to feel suspect. As the hour wore on, and with no one explicitly recanting their initial statements, a kind of discursive inertia seemed to be doing its slow and even work. (Here we might consider silence: what was not said by the majority of those in the room who did not speak, so the dynamics of the group, the crowd—and the pauses and hesitations of those who did speak up.) Eventually, everyone was talking about accountability again: not their kind, but our kind; not the bad kind that is ours, but the good kind that could be ours; not fake accountability, but true accountability. Perhaps some felt for a time that it was possible to discard accountability, the slogan, the bad word we had crossed out, and gesture towards the true relation, the word we might eventually just use without crossing it out verbally or otherwise. Around then someone spoke up and said something like:

despite all this critique, everyone here has returned to using the word more or less in the way initially questioned and objected to.

My first thought was: that comfortable circle is one of the ways critique works! Which may as well mean: does not work. Even those who continued to speak against accountability treated it as a reality, gave the word traction, importance as that which we might, we could, maybe should,

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[1] For context on the discussion, see the zines *The Broken Teapot*, *Accounting for Ourselves*, and *Burning the Bridges They Are Building*

with great deliberation, refuse, cross out… so that what would replace accountability as a demand or goal needed to be provisionally referred to as… *accountability*.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

The idea of margarine-words occurred to me after that gathering, when I recalled reading an essay by Roland Barthes about a commercial involving a subtle and effective ideological operation. Barthes describes Operation Margarine as a way of "inserting into Order the complacent spectacle of its drawbacks" and suggests that is a "paradoxical but incontrovertible way of exalting" Order.[2] Paradoxically—exalting—order. This is the "schema" he offers of the Operation:

> *take the established value which you want to restore or develop, and first lavishly display its pettiness, the injustices which it produces, the vexations to which it gives rise, and plunge it into its natural imperfection; then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes.*

He calls Operation Margarine a kind of "homeopathy":

> *one cures doubts about the Church or the Army by the very ills of the Church and the Army. One inoculates the public with a contingent evil to prevent or cure an essential one. To rebel against the inhumanity of the Order and its values, according to this way of thinking, is an illness which is common, natural, forgivable; one must not collide with it head-on, but rather exorcise it like a possession: the patient is made to give a representation of his illness, he is made familiar with the very appearance of his revolt, and this revolt disappears all the more surely since, once at a distance and the object of a gaze, Order is no longer anything but a Manichean compound and therefore inevitable, one which wins on both counts, and is therefore beneficial. The immanent evil of enslavement is redeemed by the transcendent good of religion, fatherland, the Church, etc. A little 'confessed' evil saves one from acknowledging a lot of hidden evil.*

The master-stroke of the essay, which takes us from propaganda or ideology to what Barthes called myth, passes from the initial examples about the Army and the Church to an advertisement for Astra margarine:

> *The episode always begins with a cry of indignation against margarine: 'A mousse? Made with margarine? Unthinkable!' 'Margarine? Your uncle will be furious!' And then one's eyes are opened, one's conscience becomes more pliable, and margarine is a delicious food, tasty, digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances. The moral at the end is well known: 'Here you are, rid of a prejudice which cost you dearly!' It is in the same way that the Order relieves you of your progressive prejudices.*

It should be obvious enough how such a schema is at work in the discourse around the Army or the Church (or all the institutions that resemble Armies and Churches). Extending it to Astra margarine was Barthes' way of saying something about how utterly common of an operation

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[2] See "Operation Margarine" in *Mythologies*. I have modified the translation. For example, I thought that Order did not need to be qualified by Established.

is at work here, how natural or naturalized this inverting or turning-inside-out gesture is. That is where Barthes leaves us, in the diffuse world of advertisements, tiny shreds of propaganda. The calque of Operation Margarine I have been discussing here, ours, if it is a myth, is larval or malformed, probably because, like our politics, it belongs to a different kind of order. Our side is, let's assume, the side of the critics of Order; our speech, often enough, bears or formulates critiques of Order. Our stories, our myths, accordingly, are the stories and myths of Order, critical though their form may be.

ASIDE 3

> This is in part because critique in anarchist circles means more speech against what I don't like than undermining-questioning the grounds of claims. This has a lot to do with why we talk so much about Society.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Of necessity our Operation Margarine is more curious. We are, most of us, critics of ideology, of Order as such, perhaps, so our version has less to do with Myth as ideology, as a confusing veil, and more with that kind of myth we secrete as with a gland in the brain. How stories go; how they turn out... In my story, we saved accountability, ultimately by leaving it as the name for what was to replace accountability. This leaves open the possibility of someone who will see fit to extend its range back from our processes (where it seemed to be more acceptable because now under our control) to the police and their allies (Order), because in saying everything bad we could think about the idea in practice, we left unchanged its status as Good. This has less to do, then, with an incontrovertible master narrative (we were indeed able to say we were against accountability) and more about the slow and silent work of gregariousness and repetition on behalf of a morality it is hard to think of, or outside of.
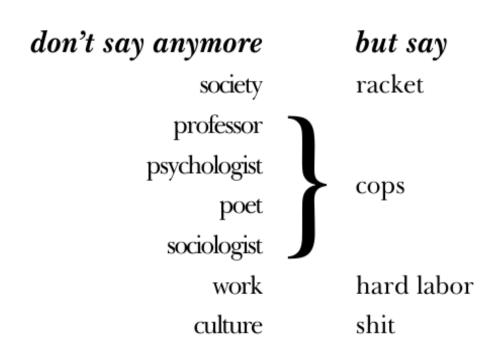
A conclusion about margarine-words: most of the time our speech cannot separate itself from what has been captured by the category of the Good. When we speak in such a way as to repel away from a word associated with the good (crossing out as "critique"), its magnetic force will attract either that same word, or another, to do very similar work (continuing to use the crossed-out word or a euphemistic variant).

One might well ask what a different outcome for the workshop could have been. Maybe none. Maybe we have them just to state problems. One could well consider that many anarchist gatherings happen primarily to make possible a kind of cathartic venting, especially for those who are less than activists or prefer to avoid meetings, which have their own ritual catharsis. But I doubt this would satisfy most. We move on to ask how to shut down Our Operation Margarine. A radical proposal might have been: let us stop using the terms *justice* and *accountability* Moratorium! What would happen if we really could be disciplined enough to abandon these words, or any of our other margarine-words? Not an escape from myth, or from morality, certainly. For a group to choose to eject a word or words from its speech seems more like an experiment for a poetry workshop than a political operation.

The advocates of Order retain an arsenal of terms that we use otherwise for their own purposes. They do not erase the word *anarchy*; they rather use it in a way that we feel is either wrong or has the incorrect moral valuation (i.e. responding either *that's not anarchy!* or *that* is *anarchy,*

and it is good, not bad). To temporarily attempt to erase a word would be to, temporarily, make it powerful, attractive, interesting… To permanently erase a word? First, words do not show up in the dictionary with the dagger-cross next to them because of anyone's conscious action. That is the great work of collectives, one thing you can count on the masses for: anonymous forgetting… Second, it is preposterous to think the milieu's ban on a word could have any lasting effect on anyone not involved. The milieu (our gray space) is porous, characterized by constant entry and exit; the ban would never work, because it would have to be constantly announced. This repetition would amount to graduating the terms to the status of negatively charged margarine-words.

Beyond these practical problems of usage, *accountability*, like all margarine-words, is not just replaceable by euphemisms, but is itself a stand-in for other words we are more likely to avoid (we *and* the police and their allies) for some reason or another—*guilt*, for example. We can continue to play the game of replacing one word with another while the underlying morality changes very little if at all, and do so for the most part beyond anyone's purview. Our Operation Margarine, or something like it, is probably a major aspect of how these margarine-words get circulated in and out of fashion as they do, part of our larger tennis match with Order, which might be more pessimistically described as Order's tennis match with itself. From the point of view of such pessimism, which is to some extent the necessary point of view of the milieu, perhaps the only way out is to play the replacing-game very crudely, to play it backwards instead of forwards, using the wrong word instead of the right one. Recall the Situationist-esque vocabulary that was based on a pretend version of this game:

don't say anymore	but say
society	racket
professor	
psychologist	
poet	} cops
sociologist	
work	hard labor
culture	shit

and so on. If we cannot stop saying *accountability*, we might as well call it *guilt*, mismatching behavior and speech. Later this year we can talk about Evil, because the mismatch, the glaring, and, for many, unpleasant contrast, is what is really at stake. *Guilt* is indeed the relatively true feeling or desideratum hidden behind *accountability*, but saying so is worth our while only to disrupt. Our next step in this game should not be to repeat ourselves, but to pass on to the more absurd place. This is the logic of *détournement* and plagiarism, which sidesteps the supposition that one can speak in earnest in such gatherings, meetings, workshops, and so on. This play can also turn ugly, as described in the pamphlet *Cabal, Argot*:

> *When arguing, it is preferential to argue for the sake of being difficult. Semantics are absolutely worth fighting over.*

Being difficult and other ludic, non-serious activities in our speech, playing the replacing-game but doing so backwards and wrong, touting the bad as the good and making the weaker argument the stronger, are the only means we have so long as we remain in a more or less political space. And often enough, we awaken to the fact that we have been forced into such spaces. Fortunately, there are other spaces.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

As I was in the course of writing this essay, an exchange between Kristian Williams and Crimethinc. appeared addressing topics close to what I've been discussing here.[3] Setting out from Orwell's denunciation of vices in political speech and writing, Williams aptly points out a range of words quite similar to what I have been calling margarine-words. About such vague jargon he notes:

> *People who write this sort of thing may have some general idea of what they are trying to say—but they needn't have.*

I was pleased to see the very word that first triggered some of these thoughts noted in his article:

> *"Accountability," "community," "solidarity," and "freedom" are used, in the overwhelming number of cases, simply as markers to signify things we like or favor.*

Agreed. What I think I am adding to this, what Williams does not discuss, is that the "things we like or favor" are held together not by vague agreement but also by an undiscussed moral fabric. Presenting the problem as a problem of shoddy writing and vague speech is deceptive. He comes closer when he writes of the jargon:

> *The words serve instead to indicate a kind of group loyalty, an ideological border between our side and the other side: we believe this, and they don't. Or rather: we talk in this way and say this sort of thing; they talk in some other way, and say some other sort of thing.*

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[3] See the discussion online, or in the zine *Anarchism and the English Language/ English and the Anarchists' Language*

Again, agreed, but rather than being concerned with a contrast between jargon that says little and a supposedly attainable speech or writing that is both political and communicative, I respond that the jargon is not just a bad choice, but in some important sense a condition (of being a political subject, our neurotic speech as such; of our time, the Spectacle, about which more later). It is also important to note that what Williams is pointing out here is mainly to be noticed in speech, and only derivatively in writing.

I said margarine-words were not just jargon terms, but slogans, compact phrases, sometimes whole fragments of speech. To their ready instrumentality I can now add the trait that reading Williams made me realize was missing: *fear*. Margarine-words mobilize fear; they result from a fearful impression, and their use perpetuates that same fear. The flight away from that fear could result in adopting a different set of margarine-words (and attempting to frighten the fighteners: turf-war as debate), or developing a taste for mutant speech or even acid-words.

I suppose I am more pessimistic than either Williams or Crimethinc., but I will agree with the latter when they write

> *if we stay within the bounds of language that is widely used in this society, we will only be able to reproduce consensus reality, not challenge it*

and (this is of equal importance):

> *those who are convinced that they speak precisely—yet see imprecision virtually everywhere they look—rarely communicate well with others. That's not how communication works. It is a mutual undertaking, for which rulebooks are no more useful than they are for any other kind of voluntary relationship.*

In any case, when Williams repeats Orwell's "principle",

> *Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about*

and his six rules for English prose, adding

> *were there a contemporary anarchist style guide, nearly all of these rules would be reversed,*

it is easy enough to agree. But that is because I take Orwell's rules as an excellent means to dismantle the imagined style guide (of anarchists, of activists, of leftists, of identity politicians, of many others). That, however, is the limit of their usefulness. For it is not really a question of better writing in a space where so few read and even less write. The tensions at work in our speech will not be resolved by codifying written language, or even improving its style.

That is why it is telling that Crimethinc. returns to speech. Questioning the normality that margarine-words depend on and reproduce, and the communication that can only be assumed as given and available by the frightened, the path to mutant speech is another road to what Crimethinc. calls a mutual undertaking; and the challenge to reality is the path to acid-words, speech and writing beyond hope and fear,

> "*if it really is dangerous.*"

17

Part 2: Amoral

Beneath the poetry of the texts,
there is the actual poetry,
without form and without text.

— Antonin Artaud

Mutant Speech

The preceding is mostly a critique of the continued use of words whose significance is exhausted by the context they are caught in. I am now led to an argument in favor of words that function differently, the *mutant speech* I've already had occasion to reference. *Détournement* is sometimes a sign of being trapped, and at other times the operation of those who are capable of entering another space. It depends on whether one regards the overall effect as purely destructive, or whether the new content generated in moments of negation and obfuscation is of any, even temporary, use.

A kind of ludic strategy unfolds in the second case, an idiom characterized not by the oily morality of margarine-words but by the attraction and repulsion of *mana-words*. Mutant speech, the strange constructions formed when mana-words are assembled into talk, is another form the compulsion to repeat may take. It is, on the whole, more conscious and deliberate than the repetition of margarine-words; it appears at the edge of politics, there where it spills over into the anti- and a-political.

Mana-words are the seemingly untranslatable terms that anthropologists, philosophers and other theorists invent or radically repurpose, their clumsy or graceful neologisms, and their redeployment of ordinary words from living and dead languages. Mutant speech is recognizable in that its repetitions are not of the familiar margarine-words, but citations of more or less rare mana-words. Mutant speech is not just the use of mana-words judged competent by experts and specialists, but encompasses an entire range of hesitations, creative mistakes, more or less willful misinterpretations, and qualifications that betray, sometimes, a hyperconsciousness of language, and, at other times, a kind of psychotic break-out from the neurotic repetition of margarine-words. This last phenomenon could be described as a successful but involuntary *détournement* of margarine-words as described earlier.

Our action-oriented milieu tends on the whole to respond badly to mana-words unless they are old and familiar (often in the process of becoming margarine-words). In our gray space many are not comfortable with mutant speech, preferring what they take to be ordinary language, which always includes a set of socially or sub-culturally approved margarine-words. When mutant speech arises in their presence, or when reading presents them with too many mana-words, many immediately hurl the accusation of abstraction, and some also deliver a judgment of complicity with oppressive institutions. As to the accusation, first, mana-words are not necessarily abstract. Abstraction is rare, and that's what is desirable about acceding to it; mana-words are rare as well but only sometimes abstract. At one point *potlatch* was a mana-word, as was mana itself, which gave me the idea (Mauss glosses it as "spiritual force"). Nothing especially abstract about them, just the novelty of their appearance in our language. In the case of truly abstract words, such as *singularity*, no one really knows what abstraction is or does; we have precious

few opportunities to discover what it can do as a linguistic operation. I have already outlined why and how an activist or *actionist* would respond to it with hostility. Part of the way margarine-words operate is such that many reserve the right to declare that their speech (e.g a word like *people* or *community*) is not abstract, while other terms (e.g. *biopower*) are. This is more or less willfully misinterpreting the rarity of the word's appearance (which in many cases signals precisely the novelty or fragile instability of mutant speech) as the only index of its present and future purchase or effects. As for the judgment of institutional complicity, such a reaction is obvious enough to predict: anyone who is trained to read or speak in an academic setting (usually the institution in question) is taken to respond primarily to that social/work space and only secondarily to the milieu. Be that as it may, it seems to me that an individual's allegiances are very important when deciding whether to collaborate with, trust, or befriend them, and not very important at all in appraising their speech or writing in its sheer functioning or manifestation. But then those concerned would have to allow themselves to be drawn (or not) by the mana-words themselves instead of trying to determine what team their user is on. Rather than a lazy dismissal of terms due to their abstraction, one could simply opt out of their circulation and not use them, sparing the rest of their circle their *ressentiment*-in-language. It is not so different to say: *I will not use this term* than to say: *I do not enjoy this poetry*.

The idea that what is said in mutant speech can be always translated into the talk of margarine-words is ultimately a prejudice in favor of the latter that costs us the potentials of the former. Though it is not always activists that do it, its most stereotypical form is the activists' bid to translate other forms of speech and writing into what they deem ordinary language (whatever is meant by this, it is a medium for margarine-words). The accusation of abstraction amounts to preparation for such translation, since margarine-words are equally likely to be abstract, their apparent familiarity coming down to the greater rate of their repetition, their more successful function as passwords or codewords. I would recommend to those that demand translation into common terms that they merely respond to mutant speech with *I don't understand this speech*, which should mean something not too different from *I don't like this music or this poetry*.

Someone who finds they hate all music or all poetry and feels that it can and should be expressed in another form, or not be expressed at all, might in that moment consider the silence they are wishing for, as the best possible form of what otherwise has to be taken to mean *I do not know what music is, or I have no true experience of poetry*. As saying so would usually be taken as a request for acquaintance or explanation, the most I can recommend to one who finds themselves in such a relation is not forced translation but silence. About which more further on.

* * *

The rarity of mana-words, their degree of abstraction, is tied to extraction procedures. It is a rare thing to be able to extract a word from its context and redeploy it. In its extracted form it can become useless in its former context. The function and use of extraction is precisely this newly generated specificity and orientation, which can also be a kind of studied uselessness. The *détournement* of margarine-words takes place when speakers recognize the speech situation into which they have been placed, or into which others are trying to place them, and begin to speak from the perspective of the extraction of terms (sometimes even hinting at a possible extraction will do to destabilize the situation).

When one finally accedes to mutant speech, it is easy enough for another to point out that such speech, what is called its theory, cannot be put into practice. Indeed, that uselessness is precisely

the desired interfering effect that the *détournement* operated. It is more difficult to understand in what sense the circulation of extracted mana-words is itself a practice of language, a different kind of repetition. The mana-words so circulated (cited alongside practices) always generate confusion. If they do not, it is because they are in the process of becoming, or have already become, new margarine-words. So people are right that abstract concepts, and mutant speech generally, cannot be put into practice without a process of interpretation and concretization. This process could render them margarine-words, or it could produce bizarre new practices (but bizarre practices could also appear on their own with no forethought on anyone's part).

One might note, for example, that it is precisely mana-words that never return to us from propaganda machines in spectacular forms. Margarine-words are shared with and to a large extent take their motive power from the mass and its leaders. Some will always be engaged in saying what *freedom*, *justice*, and *hope* really mean, and it will always be a waste of time. These words do too much work for the mass and its leaders in a society like ours. Mana-words are non-recuperable precisely because they have no generalized use. That is why I write mana-words and not theory, placing them besides what is most compelling about poetic speech and argots of every sort, as three instances of linguistic creativity too underdetermined to reliably motivate and parallel power operations. Mana-words are effective situationally, for some people, in some ways. They are repeated, but not on condition of being recognized. They do not always assume contect, but often require context to be established in the real time of speech—mutant speech.

* * *

Everything I've written on mutant speech so far has been an engagement with the imagined (always imagined and imaginary) ordinary speakers of a language, those whose life is a perpetual risk of margarine-words. On the other side, those who have opted for a less ordinary path, familiar with mutant speech, exhibit different relations to mana-words. Mutant speech could also be called *queer speech*, being close to what is discussed in the journal *bædan* as

> *a force which can interrupt the domination of language over life*

Though I would call that language *Language*, the ordinary Language with its margarine-words. In *bædan* we read

> *We engage with language insofar as we can deploy it in service of the body. We speak, we put word to paper in order to send a wink to those with whom we have not yet or cannot at present conspire in a practice of jouissance*

Jouissance, parenthetically, being a perfect example of a mana-word. Some take maximum pleasure in their repetition, enjoying an almost uninterrupted flow of mana-words. Here I will resort to some analogies that are less than analogies, along the bodily lines laid out in *bædan*, to show that mutant speech does not just have to be more or less successful communication. It is first of all attempted *communion*. Play with mana-words is not unlike covering one's body with water or make-up, or fragrances or lotions, or also smearing oneself with a stream of spit, cum, piss, or shit that one wishes were continuous. The criteria at work here are aesthetic or hedonistic. Others are begged, sometimes commanded (if the speaker or writer is a top), to smell, to feel the mana-words. The speaker or writer appears for a second as they cover themselves in

these words-marks, smearing themselves and sometimes smearing others. From the specialized and academic point of view, this is the least competent kind of mutant speech; in the milieu, it is one of the most common forms, the little dance some do when they first become enamored with what we call theory.[4] It is repetition for its own pleasurable sake, repetition discovered as a pleasurable event, the breakdown of the passwords and codewords and joy in that failure.

A second form, more competent from the point of view of the specialists, deploys the mana-words in baroque combinations and ornate arrangements. The speaker or writer shows, not their smeared skin, but their entire body as it approaches escape velocity... no ordinary language can catch up to this theory machine. The repetition becomes communicative to an extent, though the effects of extraction are still felt: this is repetition with a difference. Though the more pedestrian critics cannot distinguish between this spaceflight and the smearing, those who discern the difference are left asking: why these terms and not others? Why these theorists? The recession of this mutant speech from what is most oppressive about margarine-words is clear enough: but who is satisfied with a merely reactive strategy, with one more critique? Is anything really gained by sublimating the pleasure of sloppiness?

A third form of mutant speech would be to generate the mana-words oneself. But that would already be something else, translation or creation. In short, no longer repeating. I call those words, as they are created, or when they are recharged with *mana*, *acid-words*.

Jabberwocky, the language

The language Jabberwocky came up, as I recall, in a conversation some years ago, one among many conversations with anarchists where a discomfort with language was manifest. I later diagnosed this discomfort as an anxiety. I only remember some of the participants, many of whom I had just met that night, and, as usual, I think more people were listening than speaking.

How the discomfort was manifest that night, what repeats in such anxious conversations, is not difficult to outline. First, there seems to be an ambient impatience, some frustration with language as such. This can begin with a few words on the language of an enemy, with the vilification of a politician or a onetime friend, but it eventually extends to anyone's use of language. From bullshit to ideology; from dishonesty or disingenuousness to a generalized paralysis of expression. Here's the second part: someone will make an implicit or explicit reference to a certain primitivist refusal of language, or what some call "symbolic culture" generally, a kind of reference to its existence, without taking it on—for good reason. As these conversations often show, primitivism is something more like a commonplace reference than a stated position... Really, what is there to debate here? For a few engaged interlocutors, it is easy enough to include someone named John Zerzan in the twentieth-century philosophy category in Wikipedia, or to write an article criticizing his "philosophy of language", but this kind of classification and attempted engagement completely misses the affective withdrawal of the not-so-thought-out refusal. The gesture I am writing about is the gesture of the many who feel primitivists are right about *something*, while not wanting to discuss it as a matter of philosophy or theory. The point— the *symptom*—is the feeling, the acceleration of the refusal. That is why, finally, there is some vague sense in the conversation, if it gets this far, that the refusal of language is part of a long list of refusals, and the reference to language is one more way of talking about Everything or The Totality or Capital

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[4] McKenzie Wark calls this "low theory." See his *The Beach Beneath the Street*, and my comments in "Ways in And Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth," *The Anvil Review* 4.

or Civilization, etc. The conversation I recall was an unremarkable example except for one detail. Perhaps in jest, one of the speakers said that he advocates "speaking in Jabberwocky" as a way out of the Language he knows.

I think he meant that Jabberwocky, the language, is not an other to English, but an other to Language—to language as we know it. "Speaking in Jabberwocky" takes the refusal of Language into account; it is in fact a hypothetical practice emerging from this refusal. And in this refusal I imagine a demand that repetition, conscious or unconscious, dull or creative, come to a halt. Language appears to them as part of a Totality that cannot be simply sidestepped, because some urge to speak is inevitable, and Language is precisely the government of those urges, their guidance, standardization, branding, and so on. But since these individuals will not be governed, and since, so desperation says, eventually all speech decays into margarine-words, and perhaps that is all it ever was, they conclude that we should just somehow stop. Without positing an immediate way out (or a way out to immediacy), "speaking in Jabberwocky" intimates something else: what one could do with that inescapable urge is to speak in a way that is nonsensical. What was my interlocutor getting at with this reference to nonsense? A parodic speech, a parody of speaking? Speech in a very different kind of code, in an invented language?

I am not sure. It would have been easy enough to object that he explained the idea using ordinary English and not Jabberwocky. I would rather emphasize—what has made this conversation stick in my memory—that when seeking a way out of Language (as Spectacle, with all of the implied traits of Spectacle—totalizing, mediating, representative, communicative—that speech, in short, that places us on the side of instituted authority and authority to come), he gave it the name of a poem. The name of the language is the title of a poem; and the title of the poem is a nonsense word. He invoked for me, that is to say, the studied play with language that poetry can involve.

To get to *acid-words*, I set out from this insight. It is perhaps a paradox, or maybe just the weird way things go, that the greatest refusal of the urge to repeat becomes the motor of creation, of differentiation. To get to acid-words, I take inspiration from a poetic outlook, not to recommend poetry in one form or another, but rather to speak as one who has been transformed in his relation to language by poetic speech and writing. This is something other than a defense of art, much less of literary institutions or canons. I am less concerned to defend the arts than to acknowledge the fact of their various existences, valued for some, dangerous and despised for others, as one aspect of that inevitability of speech I referred to above. I would now recast it as an inevitability of expression. On the side of writing, this fact is greater than literature, though literature flows from it; on the side of speech, it includes all sorts of symbolic and linguistic creativity, including the anonymous productions of slang, argots, cant, and various other oral joys: the *poesy* that happens as if by accident (though what is accidental is knowing it is poetic, knowing it as poetry).

* * *

"Jabberwocky": the poem, and then the imagined language. The poem first: it was of course the first stanza, identical to the last, that my interlocutor had in mind. You have probably seen it:

> 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
> Did gyre and gimble in the wabe*:*
> All mimsy were the borogoves,

And the mome raths outgrabe.

It appears in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice first encounters it as a mirror-image. Upon reading it, she remarks "it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don't know exactly what they are." The five stanzas between the first and last, though they all include nonsense words, follow a kind of adventure narrative.

> *Beware the Jabberwock, my son!*
> *The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!*
> *Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun*
> *The frumious Bandersnatch!*

And so on. Gillian Beer observes:

> *The syntax in 'Jabberwocky' is stable, although the semantics are odd, so the story is stable though its elements are obscure.*

A little less than twenty years earlier, Carroll had published the first/last stanza as a "curious fragment" under the title "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry." Definitions for the eleven key words followed; in *Through the Looking-Glass*, the anthropomorphic egg Humpty Dumpty offers similar (but not identical) definitions to Alice.

In sum: though an exemplar of nonsense verse, "Jabberwocky" is hardly nonsense in the usual sense of the word. A narrative may be discerned in it, and tone, and feeling; and the words that seem to make that discernment difficult are not beyond explanation—explanation that the author did not even leave to the reader. As Beer writes: stable syntax, strange semantics. Additionally, the prehistory of the first/last stanza as a fake sample of old English shows Carroll's concern, in his construction of portmanteau words for nonsense effects, with real linguistic history and processes of word formation. So what strikes us about "Jabberwocky" is not just the initial shock of nonsense, but also the pleasure of inventiveness, and the related pleasure of commentary on that invention.

Jabberwocky, the language, would then have some or all of these traits: first, speaking and hearing it is pleasurable for most: it is patterned and tuneful, sharing some traits of language as we know it (or whatever dominant Language it exists in initial relation to) and some traits of language as it could have been. Jabberwocky makes enough sense that speakers/readers of Language can follow a story in Jabberwocky, while still feeling the need to call it nonsense. Upon closer examination, speakers/readers of Language will determine that Jabberwocky can't be a complete other to Language. It is not an other Language; it dramatizes something of the coming-into-being of language itself. At the same time, in showing this coming-into-being it is recognized as nonsense and designates sense itself as the precarious factor in speech. Here again I would essay an analogy that is something other than an analogy and say that what is dramatized here is the image of an animal that speaks, as in myth, as in fable, as in reality. In the essay in *bædan* I've already cited, there is a discussion of birds in Edelman's theory and Hitchcock's film, indomitable birds that symbolize "our struggle":

in describing this domestication of the world by meaning, Edelman is borrowing heavily from Hocquenghem's understanding of the body as colonized by language through the process of domestication. Edelman, one last time: "Thus the birds in their coming lay to waste the world because they so hate the world that will not accept them that they, in turn will accept nothing but the destruction of the world."

The writer in *bædan* concludes:

Here we must understand ourselves as the birds or else the text offers us nothing.

We are the birds, the animals that speak. Which is to say that Jabber-wocky, the language, is not only a pastime, but also something corrosive, destructive, the vehicle of a bodily shift, yes, as with mana-words. It is deployed not only conspiratorially with the aim of orgiastic communion, but to destroy the world (though I would write World, as I write Language).

Jabberwocky, the language, mirrors Language, and it recedes from it, carving out another space for itself; it recedes as it mirrors. What is it showing in its reversal? A fact.

* * *

This fact could be stated as follows:

Poesy happens.

Or:

Acid-words are possible.

The inevitability of language, which is experienced as the urge to speak, to sing, to write, to mark—it sometimes manifests as poesy. Gary Snyder wrote

language rises unbidden.

The other ways language manifests are partially relevant here, but what is truly remarkable is that something like poesy happens, not as literature, not as a secondary aesthetic or artistic consideration, but foremost as the unbidden arrival of language—of speech, of the marks that become writing. Showing us our ancestors speaking exclusively in a poesy that preceded the distinction between literature and myth (as though gripped, at the dawn of language, by that indistinct firstness, its fascination), Vico suggested that poesy might be *the* event of language.

people living in the world's childhood were by nature sublime poets

Or more precisely:

in all nations speech in verse preceded speech in prose.

But not necessarily the advent of what, in all those conversations, we felt the need to reject. Not Language. Of course the history that follows the Vician poetic dawn, the history of civilization, more recently of capital and Spectacle, is the history of Language, of the mediating image, of representation. There is indeed a poetry written in and as Language. Poetry in service of the state; surrealism in service of the revolution. (Debord called the Spectacle the epic poem of the commodity's competition with other commodities.) But there is also—there has never ceased being— poetry in the service of nothing, or in the service of itself, new and irresponsible, another image, another speech, and that is what I think the reference to "Jabberwocky" amounted to in my imagination, and that is how this mask came to life. From there I write to acid-words.

Spectacle/Language

Debord wrote of the Spectacle that it is a social relation between persons *mediated* by images. Here *mediated* renders *mediatisé*, which must be both the mediation philosophers speak of, the forceful introduction of a third term into what one would otherwise call an immediate relation, and also the way something or someone is forcefully placed into a medium, into the media. Or, more weirdly, the forceful irruption of a medium in a person or relation between people. In the former case, since *mediation* is often assimilated to *alienation*, a tremendous amount of metaphysical and even moral consequences seem to follow from generalized mediation, as separation from the real, the authentic, or the genuine. In the latter, which could be rendered *mediatization*, we are considering separation itself: separation as a cleavage not only between us but in each of us; as ruined communion and forced communication; as the taxing propagation of detached images.

To dismantle the Spectacle has usually meant to undo mediation, its technological or at least material work of representation, in some way; a good deal has been written about how to do that. Here I would like to consider the undoing, or at least troubling, of mediatization. It is notable that Debord structured *Society of the Spectacle* in a markedly different manner than his earlier Situationist texts. At first, the constructed situation was to be

> *built on the ruins of the spectacle*

holding out the promise (to some, a threat to others) of expressive communion, perhaps of an immediate relation. This construction was up to the individual or group as creator. In *Society of the Spectacle*, as explicated in at the climax of a dense historical narrative, the undoing of the reign of representation is a strictly political affair, the business of the workers' councils. Here I, too, will invoke history: the decades that it has taken some to become unsure that workers' councils could be the unbinding of spectacular mediatization (and so spectacular society) or, more generally, that political solutions will unbind political problems without setting the cycle of recuperation back into motion. We who feel this way are at an impasse.

Debord also wrote of the Spectacle

> *the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of universal separation.*

More recently Giorgio Agamben stepped forward to amplify Debord on this point, adding:

> *Today… it is clear that the spectacle is language, the very communicativity or linguistic being of humans … in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted.*

There are at least two ways to understand this statement. One is that it is a clarification, because the Spectacle has always been Language. The other is that it is written to register a historical shift, in the sense that something has happened in or to the Spectacle in the course of the decades between 1967 and 1989. It could also just be a provocation. In any case, for those committed to talk of Spectacle and disruption of Spectacle to pass over to this interpretation would mean apprehending the political impasse (impossibility of situations, absence of councils) as something that unfolds in our speech.

Indeed, the principal form this impasse takes today is the frustration or anxiety about language, usually in the background of our speech (most apparent in those conversations not governed by margarine-words). The impasse is manifest in the borderline nonsensical primitivist allegation that language is the first ideology, a crude translation of the idea of Spectacle as mediation, both as explicit claim (rare), and reference or implicit awareness (common). In these uses of the idea of Spectacle, what is principally accessed is its aiming-at-the-totality, which is how Language earns its capital L. We come to such an idea, as Debord perhaps did with images, by first aiming at the totality, *all of it*. We come to the anxiety, the primitivists to their refusal, by asking how to *cross it all out*. Here is an example, less hysterical than most, again from *bædan*:

> All discourse consists of nothing but an endless series of affirmations no more insightful
> than remarking that water is wet, phrased in more or less interesting and more or less
> roundabout ways. The rest are lies.

Aiming-at-the-totality, we get what I've denominated Language. The endless series of affirmations (*yes, yes, yes…*) suggests for me a representational language caught in its tautology, as margarine-words wait to be affirmed (code words or slogans to be said yes to) or are offered as ways of being said yes to (passwords), as images are produced in a way completely determined by the medium in which they anticipate circulation. Expressing ourselves with such words or such images may or may not be mediation, but it is certainly mediatization.

As I have noted, the most common attempted escape from margarine-words, *mutant speech* (and the less common one, *acid-words*), leads to a staging of this anxiety (as incomprehension or hostility from readers or listeners, as the speaker or writer's own anxiety before the risk of meaninglessness). From the point of view of Language, these escape attempts are the incorrect way to play the game and will always register as wrong moves, or morally improper gestures (lies). Those who adopt this point of view, bureaucrats or not, would push us back to the stale comforts of small talk or private exchanges with our intimates, those little spaces we suppose we control—and this fantasy of control over private life, true only for a few, is precisely meant to remind us that public or political space is completely covered, altogether occupied, by an impenetrable web of images, representations, or… words. When they arise unbidden we are to recognize, not words, but the web, the medium.

* * *

Suppose resistance is possible. What does the undoing of the Spectacle mean when one considers that the Spectacle "is" language, is Language?

First option: one could hazard decentering an idea and practice of Language tied first of all to nationalism, to a standardized grammar, secondly to a familiar, largely unconscious cultural

conservatism ("the old language is good, the new language is bad"), and third, these two wrapped up in a mediatized dissemination of standard terms and usages. Decentering it, we no longer have Language but *languages*—not just in the sense of the thousands of world languages but also as a congeries of language-games, speech genres, little discourses and narratives within any given language. The idea or representation of Language breaks down into languages, but languages themselves splinter into dialects, slangs, argots, and so on. This is the sense of the project of accelerated fragmentation set up in *Cabal, Argot*: if we are convinced that

> *in-group/out-group dichotomies are the tension that will tear society apart. Disparate groups who do not understand each other are destined to become separate*

then we see that their advocacy of difficult argument is also a kind of test, a test of who understands (gets it, the joke or reference) and who does not—the real-time, in-person formation of the inand out-groups. And so, understandably,

> *we choose to associate with, or support, particular factions, particular groups, or particular persons. By always taking the side of those within our in-group, we repudiate the representation of the social order that maintains capital, the state, and its technics.*

First option, then: the groupuscles and their cant.

Second option: one could save the workers' councils strategy by rendering them as communications councils, working on the premise that language is for communication, and trying to do it right. This is the solution of *Society of the Spectacle*, but also of an article in *Internationale Situationniste* 8, "All the King's Men" (the title, incidentally, being a reference to Caroll):

> *In-group languages—those of informal groupings of young people; those that contemporary avant-garde currents develop for their internal use as they grope to define themselves; those that in previous eras were conveyed by way of objective poetic production, such as trobar clus and dolce stil nuovo—are more or less successful efforts to attain a direct, transparent communication, mutual recognition, mutual accord. But such efforts have been confined to small groups that were isolated in one way or another. The events and celebrations they created had to remain within the most narrow limits. One of the tasks of revolution is to federate such poetic "soviets" or communication councils in order to initiate a direct communication everywhere that will no longer need to resort to the enemy's communication network (that is, to the language of power) and will thus be able to transform the world according to its desire.*

To the question: how do workers' councils undo spectacular representation? the answer is: because they are communications councils, poetic soviets. They federate the very groups that the cabalists want separate and create a kind of communicational dual power. This idea is also legible in Mohammed Khayati's "Captive Words," published in *Internationale Situationniste* 10:

> *It is thus essential that we forge our own language, the language of real life, against the ideological language of power, the terrain of justification of all the categories of the old world. From now on we must prevent the falsification or recuperation of our theories.*

It is not clear how this is is to be done other than through the process of fragmentation-federation suggested by the anonymous author of "All the King's Men." Khayati concludes by calling for a Situationist dictionary, a linguistic federation tool,

> *a sort of code book enabling one to decipher the news and rend the ideological veils that cover reality. We will give possible translations that will enable people to grasp the different aspects of the society of the spectacle, and show how the slightest signs and indications contribute to maintaining it. In a sense it will be a bilingual dictionary, since each word has an "ideological" meaning for power and a real meaning that we think corresponds to real life in the present historical phase.*

Second option: the councils and their dictionary.

Third option: one might consider unmediatized life or activity somehow beyond Language or Language games. The Spectacle is Language, Language is the Spectacle, insofar as our speech and our writing are bound to this representational form. Part of that is being forced to speak, expected to confess, and desiring it ourselves too—endlessly botched silence. Language rises unbidden... at the incitement of a power relation that demands your participation. We are still thinking about a mode of relating here—what is called, and is, *and is not*, representation and communication. But the Spectacle is not Language because language *is* representational and informational; the Spectacle is Language *as* representational and informational. Forced communication, excluded communion, botched, endlessly botched, silence.

Interestingly, some version of this approach is also legible in the two aforementioned Situationist essays. If communications councils are their major theme, this is their minor theme. Khayati discusses *détournement* in a way that anticipates the cabalists:

> *The critique of the dominant language, the détournement of it, is going to become a permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory.*
>
> [...]
>
> Détournement, *which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, that words are insubordinate, that it is impossible for power to* totally *recuperate* created meanings, to fi x an existing meaning once and for all.

And this *détournement* is itself possible because of the "insubordination of words", which Khayati ties to poetry—not poetry as we know it, but an abolished poetry:

> *Modern poetry (experimental, permutational, spatialist, surrealist or neodadaist) is the antithesis of poetry, it is the artistic project recuperated by power. It abolishes poetry without realizing it, living off its own continual self-destruction.*

The author of "All the Kings' Men" proposes the other available meaning of poetry; in fact, the entire piece is in the main about another way to grasp poetry:

> *What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language, inseparable as such from the revolutionary moments of history and from the history of personal life?*
>
> [...]

poetry must be understood as direct communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is liberated language, language recovering its richness, language breaking its rigid significations and simultaneously embracing words and music, cries and gestures, painting and mathematics, facts and acts.

There is, again, the warning against what is known as poetry:

One thing we can be sure of is that fake, officially tolerated poetry is no longer the poetic adventure of its era. Thus, whereas surrealism in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life could appropriately define its arsenal as "poetry without poems if necessary," for the SI it is now a matter of a poetry necessarily without poems.

[…]

Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language.

And how is that to be done? Again, fragmentation-federation… But what concerns me more here is that these texts come close to the position that, not poetry as we know it, but something importantly akin to it, what I called poesy above, what a writer in *bædan* calls lying, is a kind of primordial activity that can be tapped into or unleashed as the creation of

events and their language.

In a society like ours we do this through *détournement*, understood as a critical, destructive engagement with bureaucratic language or the language of power, a

language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference

The other, corrosive, side of acid-words. Not acid as hallucinatory creativity, but as corrosive, destructive nonsense on the way to silence.
Third option: [someone(?)] and their silence.

* * *

What I have written here concerns language, then, but only sometimes as Spectacle, as Language. Sometimes one is bound to spectacular Language:

In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle

wrote Debord. Fortunately there are other things to do than analyze! If I were to remain in the language of Spectacle, I would say that, yes, one can sometimes unbind spectacular representation (and my sense of how that can be done, acid-words, is indeed closer to a constructed situation than to workers' councils). But, unbinding representation, beyond Language, we do not

move beyond language as such. Here we must face our collective anxiety about language. It will still arise unbidden, incited by stranger forces than our human power games. Even in our silence we participate in the semiosis at work in nature. And nature has its own far more ominous silences to which we are not invited. It is possible (which is not to say that it is probable) to use language in a ludic manner; it is also possible to get used by language, to get played by it or be in its play in a way that has nothing to do with being represented or symbolized or representing or symbolizing. Something of that sort was always at work in poesy. And this reciprocal use is related to what the concept of Spectacle intends; in fact, it seems to me to be its sheer possibility (that representation or symbolization presupposes some other kind of language-play, another usage, as work presupposes play or non-work generally).

Read Robert Duncan as he writes about an available shift in attitude,

> *the change from the feeling that poetic form is given to or imposed upon experience—transforming matter into content—to the feeling that poetic form is found in experience—that content is discovered in matter. The line of such poetry is not free in the sense of being arbitrary but free in its search and self-creation, having the care and tension (attention) almost of the ominous...*

Everything I have for the sake of convenience called Language, everything we have (out of what is now almost habit) called Spectacle, corresponds perhaps to the first feeling, which disturbs matter endlessly. It translates the matter of speech (poesy) into a communicable and informational form, botching communion, ruining silence. If it were only a genre, a game to opt into, a dream from which we could still awaken... or turn the page on to see what is next in the anthology... By contrast, the feeling that the form is found in experience, and content in matter, allows for the care and tension that are needed to make and share acid-words. Part of their operation is to destroy Language, but this is not what they are for. They are not *for* anything. This is the freedom of the line sensed by some poets, and also what is also ominous in acid-words: in their play they do not deny or elude silence.

> *For words are not thoughts we have but ideas in things, and the poet must attend not to what he means to say but to what what he says means.*

—To turn away from those who, in a doubly hostile gesture, did not care that levy wrote, and later demanded of him to explain what he meant. So you hide, take acid-words... (It is pleasant to imagine Duncan whispering sweetly in levy's ear, calming him momentarily, a kindly apparition in the course of the trip. To remind him he took acid so as not to have to take acid.)

It remains to ask who is capable of saying they are poets, and why. But as that is something to discuss elsewhere, I will return for the destructive fun of it to talking about anarchists.

* * *

There is no reason to bother with saying you are an anarchist or talking to others if you are not seeking another relation to the world, to life, to thinking, and to language. In this essay I have been especially concerned with the relation to language, but all of these relations are implicated, are at stake. The other relation that we are seeking involves a paradox: we are so concerned with ending the relation we *do* have with world, life, thinking, and language that in the undoing of the

other term we are brought to consider the possibility that the relation itself is impossible. I mean that in some sense we cease to think that there is a World at all, that Life can become a pernicious concept, that Thinking is revealed as not being ours or for us. Following this treacherous path it may turn out that there is simply nothing to be said about language itself, about Language. We are left with this strange idea of crossed-out Language instead of a theory or concept of language.

And yet we find many who speak about language in general, assimilating it to Language. They have not earned the fullness of our attention. They would do better to listen than to speak—to attend, that is, to the speech practices of those around them, and eventually to their own words, just as he who says he hates poetry or music is best invited to read or listen and not to further discussion.

That is to say, if a word or phrase is not taken to the limit where it is (at least in passing) shown to be devoid of sense or purchase, then we will remain beholden to a liberal, or relativist, or pluralist sensibility, the hope for better margarine-words or an unmarked and universal ordinary language that all can share in equally. Mana-words sometimes go to the limit, but usually in cabalistic settings. Acid-words always go to the limit: to discover or invent them is to stop repeating, to repeat with a difference, to risk nonsense; and to arrive at nonsense is to approach silence or, often enough, to become silent.

And silence is beyond difference and repetition.

* * *

A word is not necessarily the unit through which we encounter language. A phrase or an entire discourse could bring us a happy insight as well. However, *word* is the word I've retained for the insight-catalyst through most of this writing; I think of each one as a shard, a fragment of an impossible Totality, the nothingness of Language. After that happy insight dawns, the discourse, the phrases, and, yes, a little word will each remind you of its own plenitude. Fortunately, such memorabilia are all that remains after acid-words do their delicate or grisly work. No hoary nihilist theory of language will appear to conveniently repeat to you what you already silently suspected: that sense is the most fragile matter, a fleeting purchase. However, as a silent accompaniment to the discourse, the phrases, and the little word, maybe there is this nihilist idea of what language is not, *that Language is not*, witness to its dissolution, along with world, life, and thought.