Hiding Behind Words

Language between the world and me

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The process of writing a text can be agonizing. It is almost a test for yourself and the thoughts that inform your daily behaviour. Thoughts that you have come to consider as self-evident, you now have to re-examine. The white sheet demands a structured exposure of your thoughts that have mostly a chaotic flow as they erupt in your mind and get interrupted by other thoughts, impressions, events. So these thoughts, do they still appear valid when put in a more logical sequence? Glueing together scattered thoughts leads more often than not to discarding them all together. And even if the exercise succeeds and there appears a consistent body of thought, the most difficult of questions arises – what do these words actually mean?

Between the thoughts I hold and the words that are supposed to reflect them on paper there is a complex interplay. While a certain distance or separation is always inevitable, sometimes a feeling of alienation sneaks in. It seems as if these words need a permanent re-appropriation. Do they really correspond to my reality? There is the danger that the internal logic of the text takes over. The words are written because they flow with the rhythm of the text,

even if they drift away from the real thoughts and actions of the author. Wordplay can be seductive, but also a lie. In formulating thoughts there are paths that are more easy to take. Commonplace arguments don't need to be reflected upon. Some statements feel almost unavoidable because they will resonate with others. Some are left out because they will be stumbled over.

In my effort to communicate with others – do I prioritize the effect my words have on others or the exposure of my thoughts to others? A reductive dualism, maybe. The idea of correspondence is close to this project. That means that texts are part of an ongoing conversation and are an expression of an anarchist life and the subversive projects it contains. They are laying bare a position and its choices. But a lot of radical speech aims to produce an effect on others rather than assuming a position. The words become tools in shaping a discourse that begins to live a life of its own. Mostly the sought after effect is that of mobilizing people. This can take different forms. For example rhetoric that speaks in statements that are more meant to be felt than understood. Or a myth as a bonding experience on semi-fictional grounds. Or a theory that constructs its own enclosed conceptual framework and historical storyline.

The production of theory has become firmly entrenched in the world of academia from where it dissipates to other institutions. In as far as its members have passed through the most advanced levels of formation in this society it is difficult to apprehend how theory that calls itself radical can emerge from there. The figure of the dissident intellectual untouched by the rat race of this society, a freethinker with no responsibilities but to be critical, is the complete opposite of the reality of academics. Assuring the reproduction and the continual progress of this exploitative society is its role. A sceptical approach to knowledge deducted from the academic world seems a wise option.

Aside from this, although often referring to academical sources, also anarchists have attempted to construct theories in past and present. As many theories have been abandoned or deconstructed

"Comment vivre une vie passée à parler dans une langue autorisée?" (La chute du langage, October 2017) What would it mean to not speak the language of authority?

to get a total makeover while others never managed to stir up anything, the activity itself is questioned (or more often, met with indifference). So there is a need to defend the necessity itself of theory as a specific method of understanding; namely devising a framework of concepts and demonstrating the links between them to explain a phenomenon in its totality. But the arguments in favour of theory often blur the lines between thoughts, ideas, values and theory. Its definition becomes as broad as meaning any form of brain activity. "You can't go downtown without having some idea, or theory, of where downtown is." ("Critical Self-Theory" by Jason McQuinn in Modern Slavery #3) A theory of where a city centre is located would involve a knowledge of processes of urbanization in the past of that specific place, an analysis of the the relation between suburbs and centre, and from there a mental projection of the lay-out of that city. This combined with visual observations and subsequent deduction of the type of neighbourhood where one is, can lead to a theory of where the city centre is and which routes lead there. But generally people have an experience of where it is or just asks someone who has (or rely on a technological applications that gives them directions – mostly not because of a pro-technology theory but because it 'works'). To overcome a lot of problems theoretical activity poses – a split in practice and theory, in value and knowledge and the inherent mystification and alienation – a differentiation could be made between ideological theory and self-critical theory. "Critical self-theory is a continually evolving attempt at the conception of theoretical and practical unity. It is a dynamic totality under construction, always dialectically transcending (abolishing, yet preserving) itself." But theory as a permanent, dynamic activity grounded in practice might better be called thinking. McQuinn's theory about critical thinking (self-theory?) adds seemingly unnecessary confusion and replaces relatable words with abstract concepts. Precisely my point about theory. There are multiple examples of theories promoting confusion (postmodernist academia abounds with it). While theories that

sharpen our view on the world do so at the cost of not questioning fundamentals (about the partial validity of facts, the approximative nature of the methodology, the subjective position of the observer etcetera), if not, the grounds become more shaky again and the theory just another opinion, more or less preferable according to the tastes of the moment. Some basic anarchist ideas, in the sense of principles (few but clear and firmly entrenched), are better guidelines to navigate a repressive society that pushes constantly for 'realistic' strategies (that always come with their own theories as legitimization).

Myths thrive in our contemporary society. Meritocracy (everyone being rewarded based on their own merits) makes us accept capitalist, exploitative relations. Democracy (composed of myths like the will of the people, anti-fascism etc.) makes us swallow oppressive relations. The existence of myths seems inescapable so why not create our own? An example of the attempt to breathe a new, emancipating myth to life can be "The Witch's Child" ("This is your story, child. This is why it seems you have everything, but you feel you have nothing... those feelings of anguish and rage are the same itch the seed feels in the last days of Winter, before it bursts open and sends out its buds into the world."). Centred around Mayday it is actually more convincing than the habitual repetition of the historically anarchist roots of Mayday to give it a radical significance today (which only seems to demonstrate that anarchists missed out on the last one hundred years). Taking apart a mythical story wouldn't in any case do it any justice. But as beautiful as this story can sound, the attraction of a myth lies greatly in its (perceived) power to shape reality. The existing myths of this authoritarian society are hard to compete with on that level. Consciously creating a new myth – which means not only diffusing it, but making it a shared point of reference and attaching it to a practical reality – entails a certain amount of self-delusion. To still echo the myth of the Commune (the most popular in radical milieus the last decade) requires a blindness to all the political games being

played in certain zones of radical activity. If such a myth has its effects nowadays, it is because people want to be mobilized by others and need a (semi-fictional) demonstration of collective power to counterbalance their own sense of powerlessness, to adhere to something that transcends them. And also because some are intentionally painting this mirage with deceiving words and erasing disturbing elements from the story, denying a contradicting reality and imposing a fake unity. Characteristics that deprive this myth (all myths?) of a subversive potential.

Still, our words should be able to appeal to the imagination if we don't want to stay stuck in this dull society. Some of the phrases painted on the walls of European cities during the revolts of the sixties and seventies possessed this quality that subsequently has disappeared from the streets. Partly because of being separated from action in the inner circles of poets and artists, or because ideological recruitment became the overruling theme. Nowadays slogans are more found in manifestos than on walls. Texts that consist mainly of sloganeering language are not as much communicating anything than trying to allure. A part of the seduction is that these coded words seem to give access to the circles of the enlightened. This is a language assembled out of strategies of persuasion. The same tricks are applied in assemblies where organizing means winning over, where fabricating consensus drowns out understanding differences.

What a theory, a myth, a sing-along chorus do provide, is a sort of origin story that gives order to the whole world and/or the feeling of being part of a bigger picture that give sense to small (from the viewpoint of history) acts now and here. They are capable of mobilizing energies. But at the same time they are forms of speech where it is easy to hide behind for to those who master the language of disguises. A language that is similar to the language of PR campaigns which is only effective for a moment till it loses all its artificially added flavour and a new strategy has to be implied before the consumers leave for a more promising product.