Language

Origin and Meaning

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When Winston Smith, in Orwell's *1984*, sits down to begin the diary which he has secretly acquired and which in and of itself is a criminal possession, he is mortified to discover that he has nothing—and everything—to say, that to begin means to start from scratch, to recreate language and meaning, to challenge everything, to make a statement large enough to identify the horror which pervades life and yet which can transcend that horror.

We, too, feel this dilemma. We feel the loss for words, words rendered lifeless by the gibberish of ideology and publicity. Words which overflow upon rage. Words which are already forgotten, uttered by people, now long extinguished, as they fled into the forest to escape the slavecatchers and priests. Words which could summon the smoky spirits to strike down the foundations of the edifice which has come to shadow us and block out the sky.

Yet we also feel a rage at the inadequacy of words, the way they seem to hide what is essential to life, the way they conspire against us, how they join the cacophonic barrage of business-as-usual which denies us. How monstrous they can be, so much like things, like constraints, like an elaborate wall of repression which holds us back. Perhaps that which freedom requires cannot be expressed, finally, with words.

What follows is a series of meditations on this theme. In "Language: Origin and Meaning," John Zerzan argues that the very nature of language is intimately bound up with the emergence of the earliest forms of alienation and domination. Responses from George Bradford and Ratticus follow. In another vein, Lynne Clive's comments on the deepening impoverishment of language in present society expand upon one of the more prescient aspects of Orwell's novel on totalitarianism.

See responses in George Bradford,"Some Words on The Word," and Ratticus, "Some Kind Words about Language" FE #315, Winter 1984

Language: Origin & Meaning

Fairly recent anthropology (e.g. Sahlins, R.B. Lee) has virtually obliterated the long-dominant conception which defined prehistoric humanity in terms of scarcity and brutalization. As if the implications of this are already becoming widely understood, there seems to be a growing sense of that vast epoch as one of wholeness and grace.

Our time on earth, characterized by the very opposite of those qualities, is in the deepest need of a reversal of the dialectic that stripped that wholeness from our life as a species.

Being alive in nature, before our abstraction from it, must have involved a perception and contact that we can scarcely comprehend from our levels of anguish and alienation. The communication with all of existence must have been an exquisite play of all the senses, reflecting the numberless, nameless varieties of pleasure and emotion once accessible within us.

Adorno, in *Minima Moralia*, wrote: "To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it." [2] This could stand as an excellent description of humankind as we existed before the emergence of time and language, before the division and distancing that exhausted authenticity.

To Levy-Bruhl, Durkheim and others, the cardinal and qualitative difference between the "primitive mind" and ours is the primitive's lack of detachment in the moment of experience; "the savage mind totalizes," [1] as Levi-Strauss put it. Of course we have long been instructed that this original unity was destined to crumble, that alienation is the province of being human: consciousness depends on it.

In much the same sense as objectified time has been held to be essential to consciousness—Hegel called it "the necessary alienation"—so has language, and equally falsely. Language may be properly considered the fundamental ideology, perhaps as deep a separation from the natural world as self-existent time. And if timelessness resolves the split between spontaneity and consciousness, languagelessness may be equally necessary.

Language is the subject of this exploration, understood in its virulent sense. A fragment from Nietzsche introduces its central perspective: "words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common." [3]

Although language can still be described by scholars in such phrases as "the most significant and colossal work that the human spirit has evolved," [4] this characterization occurs now in a context of extremity in which we are forced to call the aggregate of the work of the "human spirit" into question. Similarly, if in Coward and Ellis' estimation, the "most significant feature of twentieth-century intellectual development" has been the light shed by linguistics upon social reality, [5] this focus hints at how fundamental our scrutiny must yet become in order to comprehend maimed modern life. It may sound positivist to assert that language must somehow embody all the "advances" of society, but in civilization it seems that all meaning is ultimately linguistic; the question of the meaning of language, considered in its totality, has become the unavoidable next step.

We Must Consider Anew the Nature of Language

Earlier writers could define consciousness in a facile way as that which can be verbalized, or even argue that wordless thought is impossible (despite the counter-examples of chess-playing or composing music). But in our present straits, we have to consider anew the meaning of the birth and character of language rather than assume it to be merely a neutral, if not benign, inevitable presence. The philosophers are now forced to recognize the question with intensified interest; Gadamer, for example: "Admittedly, the nature of language is one of the most mysterious questions that exists for man to ponder on."[6]

Because language is the symbolization of thought, and symbols are the basic units of culture, speech is a cultural phenomenon fundamental to what civilization is. And because at the level of symbols and structure there are neither primitive nor developed languages, it may be justifiable to begin by locating the basic qualities of language, specifically to consider the congruence of language and ideology, in a basic sense.

Ideology, alienation's armored way of seeing, is a domination embedded in systematic false consciousness. It is easier still to begin to locate language in these terms if one takes up another definition common to both ideology and language: namely, that each is a system of distorted communication between two poles and predicated upon symbolization.

Like ideology, language creates false separations and objectifications through its symbolizing power. This falsification is made possible by concealing, and ultimately vitiating, the participation of the subject in the physical world. Modern languages, for example, employ the word "mind" to describe a thing dwelling independently in our bodies, as compared with the Sanskrit word, which means "working within," involving an active embrace of

sensation, perception, and cognition. The logic of ideology, from active to passive, from unity to separation, is similarly reflected in the decay of the verb form in general. It is noteworthy that the much freer and sensuous hunter-gatherer cultures gave way to the Neolithic imposition of civilization, work and property at the same time that verbs declined to approximately half of all words of a language; in modern English, verbs account for less than 10% of words. [7]

Though language, in its definitive features, seems to be complete from its inception, its progress is marked by a steadily debasing process. This carving up of nature, its reduction into concepts and equivalences, occurs along lines laid down by the patterns of language. [8] And the more machinery of language, again paralleling ideology, subjects existence to itself, the more blind its role in reproducing a society of subjugation.

Navajo has been termed an "excessively literal" language, from the characteristic bias of our time for the more general and abstract. In a much earlier time, we are reminded, the direct and concrete held sway; there existed a "plethora of terms for the touched and seen." [9] Toynbee noted the "amazing wealth of inflexions" in early languages and the later tendency toward simplification of language through the abandonment of inflexions. [10] Cassirer saw the "astounding variety of terms for a particular action" among American Indian tribes and understood that such terms bear to each other a relation of juxtaposition rather than of subordination. [11] But it is worth repeating once more that while very early on a sumptuous prodigality of symbols obtained, it was a closure of symbols, of abstract conventions, even at that stage, which might be thought of as adolescent ideology.

Considered as the paradigm of ideology, language must also be recognized as the determinant organizer of cognition. As the pioneer linguist Sapir noted, humans are very much at the mercy of language concerning what constitutes "social reality." Another seminal anthropological linguist, Whorf, took this further to propose that language determines one's entire way of life, including one's thinking and all other forms of mental activity. To use language is to limit oneself to the modes of perception already inherent in that language. The fact that language is only form and yet molds everything goes to the core of what ideology is. [12]

It is reality revealed only ideologically, as a stratum separate from us. In this way language creates, and debases the world. "Human speech conceals far more than it confides; it blurs much more than it defines; it distances more than it connects," [13] was George Steiner's conclusion.

The Unnatural is Imposed

More concretely the essence of learning a language is learning a system, a model, that shapes and controls speaking. It is easier still to see ideology on this level, where due to the essential arbitrariness of the phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules of each, every human language must be learned. The unnatural is imposed, as a necessary moment of reproducing an unnatural world.

Even in the most primitive languages, words rarely bear a recognizable similarity to what they denote; they are purely conventional. [14] Of course this is part of the tendency to see reality symbolically, which Cioran referred to as the "sticky symbolic net" of language, an infinite regression which cuts us off from the world. [15] The arbitrary, self-contained nature of language's symbolic organization creates growing areas of false certainty where wonder, multiplicity and non-equivalence should prevail. Barthes' depiction of language as "absolutely terrorist" is much to the point here; he saw that its systematic nature "in order to be complete needs only to be valid, and not to be true." [16] Language effects the original split between wisdom and method.

Along these lines, in terms of structure, it is evident that "freedom of speech" does not exist; grammar is the invisible "thought control" of our invisible prison. With language we have already accommodated ourselves to a world of unfreedom.

Reification, the tendency to take the conceptual as the perceived and to treat concepts as tangible, is as basic to language as it is to ideology. Language represents the Minds' reification of its experience, that is, an analysis into parts which, as concepts, can be manipulated as if they were objects. Horkheimer pointed out that ideology consists more in what people are like—their mental constrictedness, their complete dependence on associations provided for them—than in what they believe. In a statement that seems as pertinent to language as to ideology, he added that people experience everything only within the conventional framework of concepts. [17]

It has been asserted that reification is necessary to mental functioning, that the formation of concepts which can themselves be mistaken for living properties and relationships does away with the otherwise almost intolerable burden of relating one experience to another.

Cassirer said of this distancing from experience, "physical reality seems to reduce in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances." [18] Representation and uniformity begin with language, reminding us of Heidegger's insistence that something extraordinarily important has been forgotten by civilization.

Civilization is often thought of not as a forgetting but as a remembering, wherein language enables accumulated knowledge to be transmitted forward, allowing us to profit from others' experience as though they were our own. Perhaps what is forgotten is simply that others' experiences are not our own, that the civilizing process is thus a vicarious and inauthentic one. When language, for good reason, is held to be virtually coterminous with life, we are dealing with another way of saying that life has moved progressively farther from directly lived experience.

Language, like ideology, mediates the here and now, attaching direct, spontaneous connections. A descriptive example was provided by a mother objecting to the pressure to learn to read: "Once a child is literate, there is no turning back. Walk through an art museum. Watch the literate adults read the title cards before viewing the paintings to be sure that they know what to see. Or watch them read the cards and ignore the paintings entirely…As the primers point out, reading opens doors. But once those doors are open, it is very difficult to see the world without looking through them." [19]

Language Conceals and Justifies

The process of transforming all direct experience into the supreme symbolic expression, language, monopolizes life. Like ideology, language conceals and justifies, compelling us to suspend our doubts about its claim to validity. It is at the root of civilization, the dynamic code of civilization's alienated nature. As the paradigm of ideology, language stands behind all of the massive legitimation necessary to hold civilization together. It remains for us to clarify what forms of nascent domination engendered this justification, made language necessary as a basic means of repression.

It should be clear, first of all, that the arbitrary and decisive association of a particular sound with a particular thing is hardly inevitable or accidental. Language is an invention for the reason that cognitive processes must precede their expression in language. To assert that humanity is only human because of language generally neglects the corollary that being human is the precondition of inventing language. [20]

The question is how did words first come to be accepted as signs at all? How did the first symbol originate? Contemporary linguists seem to find this "such a serious problem that one may despair of finding a way out of its difficulties." [21] Among the more than ten thousand works on the origin of language, even the most recent admit that the theoretical discrepancies are staggering. The question of when language began has also brought forth extremely diverse opinions. [22] There is no cultural phenomenon that is more momentous, but no other development offers fewer facts as to its beginnings. Not surprisingly, Bernard Campbell is far from alone in his judgment that "We simply do not know, and never will, how or when language began." [23]

Many of the theories that have been put forth as to the origin of language are trivial: they explain nothing about the qualitative, intentional changes introduced by language. The "ding-dong" theory maintains that there is somehow an innate connection between sound and meaning; the "pooh-pooh" theory holds that language at first consisted of ejaculations of surprise, fear, pleasure, pain etc.; the "ta-ta" theory posits the imitation of bodily movements as the genesis of language, and so on among "explanations" that only beg the question. The hypothesis that the requirements of hunting made language necessary, on the other hand, is easily refuted; animals hunt together without language, and it is often necessary for humans to remain silent in order to hunt.

Somewhat closer to the mark, I believe, is the approach of contemporary linguist E. H. Sturtevant: since all intentions and emotions are involuntarily expressed by gesture, look or sound, voluntary communication, such as language, must have been invented for the purpose of lying or deceiving. [24] In a more circumspect vein, the philosopher Caws insisted that "truth…is a comparative latecomer on the linguistic scene, and it is certainly a mistake to suppose that language was invented for the purpose of telling it." [25]

But it is in the specific social context of our exploration, the terms and choices of concrete activities and relationships, that more understanding of the genesis of language must be sought. Olivia Vlahos judged that the "power of words" must have appeared very early; "Surely…not long after man had begun to fashion tools shaped to a special pattern." [26] The flaking or chipping of stone tools, during the million or two years of Paleolithic life, however, seems much more apt to have been shared by direct, intimate demonstration than by spoken directions.

Language Arose With the Beginnings of Technology

Nevertheless, the proposition that language arose with the beginnings of technology—that is, in the sense of division of labor and its concomitants, such as a standardizing of things and events and the effective power of specialists over others—is at the heart of the matter, in my view. It would seem very difficult to disengage the division of labor—"the source of civilization," [27] in Durkheim's phrase—from language at any stage, perhaps least of all the beginning. Division of labor necessitates a relatively complex control of group action: in effect it demands that the whole community be organized and directed. This happens through the breakdown of functions previously performed by everybody, into a progressively greater differentiation of tasks, and hence of roles and distinctions.

Whereas Vlahos felt that speech arose quite early, in relation to simple stone tools and their reproduction, Julian Jaynes has raised perhaps a more interesting question which is assumed in his contrary opinion that language showed up much later. He asks, how it is, if humanity had speech for a couple of million years, that there was virtually no development of technology? [28] Jaynes's question implies a utilitarian value inhering in language, a supposed release of latent potentialities of a positive nature. [29] But given the destructive dynamic of the division of labor, referred to above, it may be that while language and technology are indeed linked, they were both successfully resisted for thousands of generations.

At its origins, language had to meet the requirements of a problem that existed outside language. In light of the congruence of language and ideology, it is also evident that as soon as a human spoke, he or she was separated. This rupture is the moment of dissolution of the original unity between humanity and nature; it coincides with the initiation of the division of labor. Marx recognized that the rise of ideological consciousness was established by the division of labor; language was for him the primary paradigm of "productive labor." Every step in the advancement of civilization has meant added labor, however, and the fundamentally alien reality of productive labor/work is realized and advanced via language. Ideology receives its substance from division of labor, and, inseparably, its form from language.

Engels, valorizing labor even more explicitly than Marx, explained the origin of language from and with labor, the "mastery of nature." He expressed the essential connection by the phrase, "first labor, after it and then with it, speech." [30] To put it more critically, the artificial communication which is language was and is the voice of the artificial separation which is (division of) labor. [31] (In the usual, repressive parlance, this is phrased positively, of course, in terms of the invaluable nature of language in organizing "individual responsibilities.")

Language was elaborated for the suppression of feelings; as the code of civilization it expresses the sublimation of Eros, the repression of instinct, which is the core of civilization. Freud, in the one paragraph he devoted to the origin of language, connected original speech to sexual bonding as the instrumentality by which work was made acceptable as "an equivalence and substitute for sexual activity." [32] This transference from a free sexuality to work is original sublimation, and Freud saw language constituted in the establishing of the link between mating calls and work processes.

The neo-Freudian Lacan carries this analysis further, asserting that the unconscious is formed by the primary repression of acquisition of language. For Lacan the unconscious is thus "structured like a language" and functions linguistically, not instinctively or symbolically in the traditional Freudian sense. [33]

The Fall Is Into Language

To look at the problem of origin on a figurative plane, it is interesting to consider the myth of the Tower of Babel. The story of the confounding of language, like that other story in Genesis, the Fall from the grace of the Garden, is an attempt to come to terms with the origin of evil. The splintering of an "original language" into mutually unintelligible tongues may best be understood as the emergence of symbolic language, the eclipse of an earlier state of more total and authentic communication. In numerous traditions of paradise, for example, animals can talk and humans can understand them. [34]

I have argued elsewhere [35] that the Fall can be understood as a fall into time. Likewise, the failure of the Tower of Babel suggests, as Russell Fraser put it, "the isolation of man in historical time." [36] But the Fall also has a meaning in terms of the origin of language. Benjamin found in it the mediation which is language and the "origin of abstraction, too, as a faculty of language-mind." [37] "The fall is into language," [38] according to Norman O. Brown.

Another part of Genesis provides Biblical commentary on an essential of language, names, [39] and on the notion that naming is an act of domination. I refer to the creation myth, which includes "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." This bears directly on the necessary linguistic component of the domination of nature: man became master of things only because he first named them, in the formulation of Dufrenne. [40] As Spengler had it, "To name anything by a name is to win power over it." [41]

The beginning of humankind's separation from and conquest of the world is thus located in the naming of the world. Logos itself as god is involved in the first naming, which represents the domination of the deity. The well-known passage is contained in the Gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Returning to the question of the origin of language in real terms, we also come back to the notion that the problem of language is the problem of civilization. The anthropologist Lizot noted that the hunter-gatherer mode exhibited that lack of technology and division of labor that Jaynes felt must have bespoken an absence of language: "(Primitive people's) contempt for work and their disinterest in technological progress per se are beyond question." [42] Furthermore, "the bulk of recent studies," in Lee's words of 1981, shows the hunter-gatherers to have been "well nourished and to have (had) abundant leisure time." [43]

Early humanity was not deterred from language by the pressures of constant worries about survival; the time for reflection and linguistic development was available but this path was apparently refused for many thousands of years. Nor did the conclusive victory of agriculture, civilization's cornerstone, take place (in the form of the Neolithic revolution) because of food shortage or population pressures. In fact, as Lewis Binford has concluded, "The question to be asked is not why agriculture and food-storage techniques were not developed everywhere, but why they were developed at all." [44]

The dominance of agriculture, including property ownership, law, cities, mathematics, surplus, permanent hierarchy and specialization, and writing, to mention a few of its elements, was no inevitable step in human "progress"; neither was language itself. The reality of pre-Neolithic life demonstrates the degradation or defeat involved in what has been generally seen as an enormous step forward, an admirable transcending of nature, etc. In this light, many of the insights of Horkheimer and Adorno in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (such as the linking of progress in instrumental control with regression in affecting experience) are made equivocal by their false conclusion that "Men have always had to choose between their subjugation to nature or the subjugation of nature to the Self." [45]

Language and Civilization

"Nowhere is civilization so perfectly mirrored as in speech," [46] as Pei commented, and in some very significant ways language has not only reflected but determined shifts in human life. The deep, powerful break that was announced by the birth of language prefigured and overshadowed the arrival of civilization and history a mere

10,000 years ago. In the reach of language, "the whole of History stands unified and complete in the manner of a Natural Order," [47] says Barthes.

Mythology, which, as Cassirer noted, "is from its very beginning potential religion," [48] can be understood as a function of language, subject to its requirements like any ideological product. The nineteenth-century linguist Muller described mythology as a "disease of language" in just this sense; language deforms thought by its inability to describe things directly. "Mythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language…(It is) the dark shadow which language throws upon thought, and which can never disappear till language becomes entirely commensurate with thought, which it never will." [49]

It is little wonder, then, that the old dream of a lingua Adamica, a "real" language consisting not of conventional signs but expressing the direct, unmediated meaning of things, has been an integral part of humanity's longing for a lost primeval state. As remarked upon above, the Tower of Babel is one of the enduring significations of this yearning to truly commune with each other and nature.

In that earlier (but long enduring) condition nature and society formed a coherent whole, interconnected by the closest bonds. The step from participation in the totality of nature to religion involved a detaching of forces and beings into outward, inverted existences. This separation took the form of deities, and the religious practitioner, the shaman, was the first specialist.

The decisive mediations of mythology and religion are not, however, the only profound cultural developments underlying our modern estrangement. Also in the Upper Paleolithic era, as the species Neanderthal gave way to Cro-Magnon (and the brain actually shrank in size), art was born. In the celebrated cave paintings of roughly 30,000 years ago is found a wide assortment of abstract signs; the symbolism of late Paleolithic art slowly stiffens into the much more stylized forms of the Neolithic agriculturalists. During this period, which is either synonymous with the beginnings of language or registers its first real dominance, a mounting unrest surfaced. John Pfeiffer described this in terms of the erosion of the egalitarian hunter-gatherer traditions, as Cro-Magnon established its hegemony. [50] Whereas there was "no trace of rank" until the Upper Paleolithic, the emerging division of labor and its immediate social consequences demanded a-disciplining of those resisting the gradual approach of civilization. As a formalizing; indoctrinating device, the dramatic power of art fulfilled this need for cultural coherence and the continuity of authority. Language, myth, religion and art thus advanced as deeply "political" conditions of social life, by which the artificial media of symbolic forms replaced the directly-lived quality of life before division of labor. From this point on, humanity could no longer see reality face to face; the logic of domination drew a veil over play, freedom, affluence.

Language Itself Is A Repression

At the close of the Paleolithic Age, as a decreased proportion of verbs in the language reflected the decline of unique and freely chosen acts in consequence of division of labor, language still possessed no tenses. [51] Although the creation of a symbolic world was the condition for the existence of time, no fixed differentiations had developed before hunter-gatherer life was displaced by Neolithic farming. But when every verb form shows a tense, language is "demanding lip service to time even when time is furthest from our thoughts." [52] (Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*). From this point one can ask whether time exists apart from grammar. Once the structure of speech incorporates time and is thereby animated by it at every expression, division of labor has conclusively destroyed an earlier reality. With Derrida, one can accurately refer to "language as the origin of history." [53] Language itself is a repression, and along its progress repression gathers—as ideology, as work—so as to generate historical time. Without language all of history would disappear.

Pre-history is pre-writing; writing of some sort is the signal that civilization has begun. "One gets the impression," Freud wrote in The Future of an Illusion, "that civilization is something which was imposed on a resisting majority by a minority which understood how to obtain possession of the means of power and coercion." [54] If the matter of time and language can seem problematic, writing as a stage of language makes its appearance contributing to subjugation in rather naked fashion. Freud could have legitimately pointed to written language as the lever by which civilization was imposed and consolidated.

By about 10,000 B.C. extensive division of labor had produced the kind of social control reflected by cities and temples. The earliest writings are records of taxes, laws, terms of labor servitude. This objectified domination thus originated from the practical needs of political economy. An increased use of letters and tablets soon enabled those in charge to reach new heights of power and conquest, as exemplified in the new form of government commanded by Hammurabi of Babylon. As Levi-Strauss put it, writing "seems to favor rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind…Writing, on this its first appearance in our midst, had allied itself with falsehood." [55]

The Representation of Representation

Language at this juncture becomes the representation of representation, in hieroglyphic and ideographic writing and then in phonetic-alphabetic writing. The progress of symbolization, from the symbolizing of words, to that of syllables, and finally to letters in an alphabet, imposed an increasingly irresistible sense of order and control. And in the reification that writing permits, language is no longer tied to a speaking subject or community of discourse, but creates an autonomous field from which every subject can be absent. [56]

In the contemporary world, the avant-garde of art has, most noticeably, performed at least the gestures of refusal of the prison of language. Since Mallarme, a good deal of modernist poetry and prose has moved against the taken-for-grantedness of normal speech. To the question "Who is speaking?" Mallarme answered, "Language is speaking." [57] After this reply, and especially since the explosive period around World War I when Joyce, Stein and others attempted a new syntax as well as a new vocabulary, the restraints and distortions of language have been assaulted wholesale in literature. Russian futurists, Dada (e.g. Hugo Ball's effort in the 1920s to create "poetry without words"), Artaud, the Surrealists and lettristes were among the more exotic elements of a general resistance to language. [58]

The Symbolist poets, and many who could be called their descendants, held that defiance of society also includes defiance of its language. But inadequacy in the former arena precluded success in the latter, bringing one to ask whether avant-garde strivings can be anything more than abstract, hermetic gestures. Language, which at any given moment embodies the ideology of a particular culture, must be ended in order to abolish both categories of estrangement; a project of some considerable social dimensions, let us say. That literary texts (e.g. Finnegan's Wake, the poetry of e.e. cummings) break the rules of language seems mainly to have the paradoxical effect of evoking the rules themselves. By permitting the free play of ideas about language, society treats these ideas as mere play.

The massive amount of lies—official, commercial and otherwise—is perhaps in itself sufficient to explain why Johnny Can't Read or Write, why illiteracy is increasing in the metropole. In any case, it is not only that "the pressure on language has gotten very great," [59] according to Canetti, but that "unlearning" has come "to be a force in almost every field of thought," [60] in Robert Harbison's estimation.

Today "incredible" and "awesome" are applied to the most commonly trivial and boring, and it is no accident that powerful or shocking words barely exist anymore. The deterioration of language mirrors a more general estrangement; it has become almost totally external to us. From Kafka to Pinter silence itself is a fitting voice of our times. "Few books are forgivable. Black on the canvas, silence on the screen, an empty white sheet of paper, are perhaps feasible," [61] as R.D. Laing put it so well. Meanwhile, the structuralists—Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Derrida—have been almost entirely occupied with the duplicity of language in their exegetical burrowings into it. They have virtually renounced the project of extracting meaning from language.

I am writing (obviously) enclosed in language, aware that language reifies the resistance to reification. As T.S. Eliot's Sweeny explains, "I've gotta use words when I talk to you." One can imagine replacing symbolic language with real communication—as one can imagine replacing the imprisonment of time with a brilliant present—only by imagining a world without division of labor, without that divorce from nature which all ideology and authority accrue. We couldn't live in this world without language and that is just how profoundly we must transform this world.

Words bespeak a sadness; they are used to soak up the emptiness of unbridled time. We have all had the desire to go further, deeper than words, the feeling of wanting only to be done with all the talk, knowing that being allowed to live coherently erases the need to formulate coherence.

There is a profound truth to the notion that "lovers need no words." The point is that we must have a world of lovers, a world of the face-to-face, in which even names can be forgotten, a world which knows that enchantment is the opposite of ignorance. Only a politics that undoes language and time and is thus visionary to the point of voluptuousness has any meaning.

Note for Web edition: The print version of this article did not include notes. The notes added here are from Elements of Refusal: Essays by John Zerzan (Left Bank Books, Seattle: Anticopyright 1988.)

Endnotes

1. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), p. 245.

2. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London, 1974), p. 72.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York, 1967), p. 428.

4. Paul A. Gaeng, *Introduction to the Principles of Language* (New York, 1971, p. 1.

5. Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject* (London, 1977), p. 1.

6. Hans-George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York, 1982), p. 340. Also, Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 103: "Language is, without a doubt, the most momentous and at the same time mysterious product of the human mind."

7. A.S. Diamond, *The History and Origin of Language* (New York, 1959), p. 6. The physicist-philosopher David Bohm has proposed a new model of language called the "rheomode," aimed at reversing this development by re-establishing the primacy of the verb. His aim is to reduce the subject-object split, so pronounced in the West since Descartes and increasingly an area of contestation by other such "holistic" scientists as well, such as Fritjof Capra and David Dossey.

8. Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Science and Linguistics," S.I. Hayakawa, ed., *Language in Action* (New York, 1941), pp. 311–313.

9. H.E.L. Mellersh, *The Story of Early Man* (New York, 1960), pp. 106–107.

10. Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of Early Man* (New York, 1947), p. 198.

11. Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (New Haven, 1944), p. 135.

12. It may be worth referring here to the hermaneutic motto that "Man is language," expressive of the drift toward a "linguistic" phenomenology with Heidegger and Ricoeur. In *Being and Time* Heidegger specifically maintains that perception becomes what it is only with respect to the fundamental context of language, and Ricoeur finds that all experience is already mediated via a world of symbols. See Don Ihde, Existential Technics (Albany, 1983), p. 145.

13. George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (New York, 1975), p. 229.

14. "...words, symbolic and wholly unlike their objects." George Santayana, *Dominations and Powers* (New York, 1951), p. 143.

15. E.M. Cioran, *The Fall Into Time* (Chicago, 1970), p. 12.

16. Roland Barthes, "Literature and Signification," *Cultural Essays* (Evanston, 1972), p. 278.

17. Max Horkheimer, "The End of Reason," Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfort School Reader* (New York, 1978), p. 47.

18. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 25.

19. Mayra Bloom, "Don't Teach Your Baby to Read" (letter to editor), *Co-Evolution Quarterly* (Winter 1981), p. 102.

20. The fairly extensive literature on the supposed ability of animals to learn language is not relevant here; the efficacy of training primates or others only demonstrates that it is possible to domesticate them. The nature and origin of language as domestication is not thereby addressed.

21. Noam Ziv and Jagdish N. Hattiangad, "Essence vs. Evolution in Language," *Word: Journal of the International Linguistics Association* (August 1982), p. 86.

22. "The beginning of communication by symbolic languages in mankind cannot be dated, even approximately." Vanne Goodall, *The Quest for Man* (New York, 1975), p. 203.

23. Bernard Campbell, *Mankind Emerging* (Boston, 1976), p. 193.

24. "Speech was given to man to disguise his thoughts." Appropriately, this quote is attributed to Tallyrand, diplomat and statesman (1754–1838).

25. Peter Caws, "The Structure of Discovery," *Science* No. 166 (1969), p. 1380.

26. Olivia Vlahos, *Human Beginnings* (New York, 1966), p. 140.

27. Emile Durkheim, *Division of Labor in Society* (Glencoe, 1960), p. 50.

28. Julian Jaynes, *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston, 1976), p. 130.

29. Jaynes sees language emerging no sooner than the Upper Paleolithic age (c. 40,000 B.C.), when stone tool technology experienced an accelerated development. But even among those whose conception of language puts its emergence at a vastly earlier epoch, the late Stone Age is understood as pivotal; e.g. "whatever the state of language before the Upper Paleolithic, it must have undergone spectacular changes afterwards." John E. Pfeiffer, The Creative Explosion (New York, 1982), p. 71.

30. Frederick Engels, *The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man* (Peking, 1975), pp. 4–6.

31. This is not to deny there is some division based on sexual differentiation. But ascribing too great a role to the sexual division of labor would also be a mistake, one which seems to be routinely made. Consider the apparently contradictory two sentences by which a leading anthropologist sums up the matter: "The division of labor by sex is virtually universal. Men hunt and gather; women primarily gather and hunt small game; both sexes fish and gather shellfish." Richard B. Lee, "Is there a Foraging Mode of Production?" California Journal of Anthropology, (Spring 1981), p. 15.

32. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, 1953–1974), Vol. 15, p. 167.

33. Jacques Lacan, *The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Baltimore, 1968).

34. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton, 1964), p. 99.

35. John Zerzan, "Beginning of Time, End of Time", *Fifth Estate*, (Summer 1983).

36. Russell Fraser, *The Language of Adam* (New York, 1977), p. 1.

37. Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," *Reflections* (New York, 1978), p. 328.

38. Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York, 1966), p. 257.

39. "...a name is the vastest generative idea that was ever conceived." Langer, op. cit., p. 142.

40. Mikel Dufrenne, *Language & Philosophy* 7 (Bloomington, 1963), p. 101.

41. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* Vol. I. (New York, 1929), p. 123. "Animals do not realize that we name them. Or else they do realize it, and that may be why they fear us." Elias Canetti, *The Human Province* (New York, 1978), p. 14.

42. Quoted by Pierre Clastres, *Society Against the State* (New York, 1977), p. 166.

43. R.B. Lee, op. cit., p. 14.

44. Quoted by David R. Harris, "Alternative Pathways Toward Agriculture," Charles A. Reed, ed., *Origins of Agriculture* (The Hague, 1977), pp. 180–181.

45. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Nature* (New York, 1972), p. 32.

46. Mario Pei, *The Story of Language* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 199.

47. Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York, 1968), p. 10.

48. Cassirer, op. cit., p. 87.

49. Max Muller, "The Philosophy of Mythology," addendum to *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (London, 1873), p. 353.

50. Pfeiffer, op. cit., chapters 8, 9.

51. A.S. Diamond, *The History and Origins of Language* (New York, 1959), p. 267.

52. Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object* (New York, 1960), p. 170.

53. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, 1978), p. 4.

54. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York, 1955), p. 10.

55. Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques* (New York, 1961), pp. 292, 293.

56. Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry* (Stony Brook, New York, 1978), pp. 87–88.

57. Eugenio Trias, *Philosophy and its Shadow* (New York, 1983) p. 74.

58. It is noteworthy that this literary revolt against language has coincided with a very significant resistance to time as well. Proust, Joyce, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Gide, Virginia Woolf, Borges, among others, have all tried to challenge the given dimension of time.

59. Elias Canetti, *The Conscience of Words* (New York, 1979), p. 142.

60. Robert Harbison, *Deliberate Regression* (New York, 1980), p. xvi.

61. R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York, 1967), p. 11. Special thanks to Alice Carnes for assistance throughout.

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