

Some Kind Words about Language

Ratticus

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In response to John Zerzan, "Language: Origin & Meaning" FE #315, Winter 1984.

If Shakespeare was right when he said "brevity is the soul of wit" then this piece from Zerzan must be its carcass. The fellow doth protest (language) too much. What?! Quote the Raven nevermore?

One gets the impression from Zerzan that not only is it by breaking from Capitalism and from Civilization will we only be ourselves—authentic and free—but when we once again attain the grandeur of precellular compounds. A timeless pool of protean soup freed from the constraints of definition.

It is possible to trace the beginnings of our domination to the moment when by accident or otherwise, strands of this slop attained hegemony incorporating as the first algae.

In fairness though there is a valid point in Zerzan's complaint against the utilitarian debasement of language, which indeed debases the spirit. But this is the middle of a dialectical process which proceeds not from language but from the psyche. If we could erase the word language from every one of John's quotes and insert ideology in its place, it would start to make more sense.

Indeed, apart from being a self-critique (John never speaks, he recites), the "essay" (actually it's a collage) never really says what language is. He has three basic and fundamental flaws that pull the rest of the arguments apart.

First, and probably most elementary, he limits his conception of language to the human, verbal sort, the kind that we read about in the papers. This conception sees language as only the organization of symbols, in systems. Whereas even the dictionary generously describes language as "meaning expressed in any way." (I) Have some soup, John.

The essay describes the goal of the DaDaists and Surrealists as trying to destroy language. The opposite is true. They want to free language, see it as vibratory, liberating, capable of providing access to the unconscious.

The Alchemy of the Word

Dreams are also language spoken to us from beyond the strictures of ideology. Birds speak, any empirical observation whatsoever demonstrates each morning and each evening the roofs and the trees full of them. Whales, plants, wolves speak; the DNA code is language, the structure of crystals, layers of minerals in patterns, indeed any kind of pattern is language if it expresses meaning. The degree of meaning obtained is obviously relative to the observer. By the way, language always existed, even silence is the language of nothingness, or if not, then of something else.

Secondly, a pedestrian notion of reality would seem to be a weak point in the argument against language. It is a little bizarre to attack myth-making and assert that language is a fairly recent phenomenon and then use stories from the Bible to support the thesis, stories, which are part of a long oral tradition.

This is not important so much as the misapplication and blandishing of reality. Time and again Zerzan complains that language keeps getting in the way of reality, prevents us from really seeing it. Really seeing what? The

real gripe is with the mind itself; for the very process of cognition requires the distinguishing of one object from another and hence, separation. In George Bradford's critique of Zerzan's article on Time in the last issue of the FE, Bradford poignantly identified Zerzan's syndrome as a desire to return back to the womb, or in other words, live in nirvana to the exclusion of other phenomena. I would not disparage such a wish but agree with Bradford that the next phase of the dialectic is to see the unity of oneness and multiplicity.

One gets the impression from Zerzan's critique of language that he visualizes a sort of universal ESP to replace verbal and other forms of communication. However, he will find, much to his chagrin, that language is not the paradigm of ideology, as he thought. IDEAS ARE THE BASIS OF IDEOLOGY. Watch for John's new piece: "Ideas—The Chains Holding Back Thought."

Sublimation and the Unconscious

The third and final lump in Zerzan's soup about language is his misunderstanding of the concept of Sublimation and the Unconscious. John holds the position on sublimation common to all the neo-Freudians, except for one thing: he has a difficult time even grasping their oversimplifications. Sublimation is not the repression of instincts. It is the response of the body to repression, an attempt to find another way of expressing itself, should a desire be stopped.

The primary instinct that is repressed to maintain civilization is not fornication. It is spontaneity. Language is not a substitute for fucking, it is another form of sexuality, an oral kind in fact. (In the course of constructing his collage, Zerzan cut out pieces from pages without reading the books.) Norman Brown: "It takes no psychoanalytical finesse, but only simple observation of childhood to recognize that in the history of every human being language originates in the infantile life of play, pleasure, and love which centers around the mother; over this primary function is built the secondary function of organizing human energy in socially productive work."

It is in the secondary phase which is socialization/ education that language finds itself debased, even as the spirit of the child is flattened. No one has to teach a child to speak; every parent knows that kids talk because it is fun! When the spelling tests, and corrected papers happen though, the grim world that Zerzan sees begins its process of alienation: Eliminate language?

There are more problems I have with the anti-language piece but they aren't necessary to the argument. Though I disagree with his words I concede they are provocative. While I criticize his methodology, I see a surreal quality to it, a playfulness of illogic that would be poignant if it weren't for the fact that he probably takes it seriously.

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