

Some Words on The Word

A response

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

Despite his acute desire to break with all of the fictions of the modern world, John Zerzan makes the unfortunate mistake of taking its ideological justifications at their (false) face value; thus, the radical refusal which he posits tends to be an almost formalistic, inverted image of the society which he analyzes. There are no gray areas, no ambivalence in his critique, only absolutes. But these absolutes come ready-made, provided by modern civilization's legitimation of its existence.

An example of this is his approving use of Mario Pei's declaration, "Nowhere is civilization so perfectly mirrored as in speech." The defenders of civilization unambiguously claim language as their own, and John accepts such a claim without question. Civilization is evil, language is linked to civilization, so language is bad news, too. Of course language is older and more universal than civilization, so for Zerzan it must be speech which is mirrored in civilization. The repression and alienation of civilization were actually "prefigured and overshadowed" by the "deep, powerful break" which was the birth of language. Nowhere is this relationship between language and the structures of domination (be they affirmative or negative values) ever challenged.

Worse is his treatment of the technophile prejudice which links language to utility, to tools and ultimately to the totalitarian technics of the ancient state mega-machines. Again, despite his inverted conclusions, he accepts the simplistic observations of Julian Jaynes (who cannot understand how human beings could have language for millions of years without developing sophisticated tools) and even the nineteenth century positivism of Engels who links language to labor and finally to the domination of nature. Such prejudices were common in the last century; primitive peoples such as the Yahgans of Tierra del Fuego were considered subhuman even by Darwin because their technics were little more sophisticated than those of beavers. Yet their language proved to be remarkably subtle and complex. John would like to make use of this repressive, progressivist scientism in order to subvert it (so that what is "progress" to Engels becomes a counterrevolution to Zerzan). But what if this utilitarian schema is altogether wrong?

Problem of Origins

Language is a mystery; its origins are just as mysterious. John would like to clear up this mystery by assigning it the blame for humanity's Fall, our original separation, and for the appearance of domination. At one point he is even willing to imply that the supersession by Cro-Magnon humanoids of the Neanderthals was part of this break with primordial unity. (Here another scientific error: he tosses out the larger brain size of the Neanderthals as circumstantial evidence of...something—presumably bigger is better. But at the same time he undermines his notion of unity, since such an evolutionary process suggests a complex process of becoming, a fundamental instability rather than a simple harmony.)

The emergence of the state is also more or less a mystery, certainly not to be explained by the mechanistic marxist notion of a “progress” initiated by the appearance of a surplus, nor by any cynical rationalization of an evil human nature. No one should disparage John for his attempt to make bold syntheses, but his assertion that these problems can be reduced to a single line of development should be taken with the utmost skepticism, particularly when he links these events to what appears to be an ontological problem, our uniqueness as animals, our special relationship with the rest of creation, our consciousness.

“As soon as a human spoke, he or she was separated,” he writes. “This rupture is the moment of dissolution of the original unity between humanity and nature.” But I would venture that human beings, restless, voracious animals with brains too big for their bodies, never experienced this “original unity,” that with the emergence of consciousness, of self-awareness, a sense of separation was irrevocable. This doesn’t mean to say that from this Fall onward it is straight to alienation and domination. There are different manners of facing this separation, this solitude, some which reconcile us with nature, others which express destructive impulses, but none of which is inevitable.

Could it not be that this realization of separation, of otherness, existed long before human speech, and that human beings were long anxious to express it to their fellows? After all, consider the long eons of biological preparation alone, the evolution of the organs of speech, the emergence of an awareness of correspondences which had to be manifested in dream before any means existed to communicate them. And what of the possibility that language is shared by other animals—not simply that some translation, some Esperanto can be taught to them by scientists, but that they have complex languages of their own—such as porpoises and whales?

If we look at the long period of preparation for that language to which John refers as a “closure of symbols,” an “abstract convention,” we see the much more closed code of symbolic interaction—a form of communication based on repetition and abstraction which we share with most animals including all mammals, birds and bees. It is this symbolic interaction, rooted in instinct, which seems to evolve in the human being (and perhaps other mammals, we cannot be sure) as the form of its sensuous practice with nature. As Lewis Mumford has written (in *Technics and Human Development*, which I would recommend as extremely helpful in this discussion and from which I will quote more further on), “Meaningful behavior anticipated meaningful speech, and made it possible.” Symbols—expressed in ritual, ritual which can also be seen in the nocturnal dances of elephants, the courting rituals of many animals, and the howling of wolves—are much older than language. And human beings, long before they were capable of arguing over the origins of language, probably sang in unison like our cousins the gibbons. But for us the meaning which emerged tended towards a higher level of abstraction than mere signals. And “that higher level of abstraction freed meaning, in time, from the here and now,” as Mumford observes.

But why didn’t human beings remain with the other animals in what E.M. Cioran has described darkly (in *The Temptation to Exist*) as “that primordial stupidity of which, through the fault of history, we have lost even the memory,” what Mumford calls the “frozen vocabulary of instinct?” Why did they go on to create complex language and speech? Zerzan replies with another absolute: to lie, to deceive. (Here he repeats the judeo-christian denunciation of language and the flesh: as theologian L. Charbonneau-Lassay has written, christian symbolists think of the tongue as the Evil Spirit, showing it as “forked like that of a serpent, or arrow—or harpoon headed, a shape they attribute to the tongues of dragons.” Consider James, 3:6: “The tongue is a...world of iniquity.”)

But again he is repeating the utilitarian error, attributing some original (evil) instrumental purpose to language. If for progress-worshippers it was a tool to create the wonders of civilization, for Zerzan it is a tool used by a kind of rebel to destroy Paradise. (One wonders where this rebel’s malaise originated if language was merely the technique for disseminating it.)

Again, Zerzan is making use of the positivism which he wishes to oppose. As Mumford argues, “In evaluating the function and purpose of language, our generation tends to begin at the wrong end: we take its most precious specialized characteristics, the property of forming abstract concepts, translating exact observations, and communicating definite messages as if they supplied the original motive for using words. But language was a life-reflecting, life-enhancing instrument long before it could be shaped for the restricted purposes of intelligent communication. The very qualities in language that offend the logical positivists—its vagueness, its indeterminateness, its ambiguity, its emotional coloring, its reference to unseen objects or unverifiable events, in short its ‘subjectivity’—only indicate that from the beginning it was an instrument for embracing the living body of human experience, not just

the bleached articulated skeleton of definable ideas. Voluminous oral expression must have preceded continent, intelligible speech by untold years.”

It seems clear that despite the inevitable appearance of certain instrumental qualities, language began as a form of play, of reciprocity, a parallel sexuality, a joyful—though also restless, longing—expression of essences and experiences which had no exact signals. The role of dream had to have been great in this process of growth, and suggests that myth—or metaphor—also must have come before language. As Mumford observes, human beings must have been dreaming animals from the very beginning, since “the existence of dreams, visions, hallucinations, projections, is well attested in all peoples at all times; and since dreams, unlike other components of human culture, are involuntary reactions, over which the dreamer has little or no effective control, it would be absurd to assume that they are a late intrusion...Creativity begins in the unconscious; and its first human manifestation is the dream.”

The questioning, the anxiety that must have been caused by dreams—both visionary, and destructive and even murderous dreams, must have compelled human beings to express their otherworldly experiences to their companions. Perhaps this desire to communicate what is essentially uncommunicable underlies the problem of language. After all, “others’ experiences are not our own,” as Zerzan notes. But if we were to penetrate the silence which shields the vision, the anguish, the restlessness of our minds, we were compelled to enter into metaphor to communicate those untranslatable essences. * That those symbols are not essences but rather intuitive correspondences, does not make them false or inauthentic. They are simply not true in every way.

But nor are “direct, spontaneous connections” true in every way, or so direct. They represent codes, also; they represent mediations between two essences, two human animals, mediated by instinct. In fact perception itself could be described along the lines of John’s erroneous comparison of language and ideology, as a “distorted communication” of an essence. Our very perception of the world is in a sense as “imperialistic” as our linguistic description of it: its essence is forced to conform to the limitations of our organs, of our specificity.

We change the world, upset its harmony by participating in it, we reconstitute it in our mind. Mumford: “The world that was symbolically organized, mainly in language, became more significant, more essential to all specifically human activities, than the raw ‘outer’ world mutely taken in by the senses, or the private inner world beheld in dreams...Language...established human identity.” Until we had learned to speak, the human mind “had no direct organ of expression.”

Condemned to Language

This innate human yearning rooted in human minding, which grows within us and is only triggered by parental nurture and participation in human culture, seems closer to what language is than a learned behavior imposed on the animal by the external, alienated structure which Zerzan’s thesis suggests. Yet who can deny or fail to be moved by his distressed cry when he writes “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...”

As E.M. Cioran, who has expressed this desire better than any of our contemporaries, has written (in *The Fall Into Time*), “Conventional by definition, alien to our imperious needs, speech is empty, extenuated, devoid of contact with our depths; not one word emanates from or ventures into them...The blood’s mode of expression, screaming, on the other hand arouses us, fortifies us, and sometimes cures us. When we are lucky enough to give ourselves up to it, we immediately feel close to our distant ancestors who must have howled incessantly in their caves, including those who daubed the walls. At the antipodes of those happy days, we are reduced to living in a society so badly organized that the only place where we can scream with impunity is the lunatic asylum...If we seek a minimum of equilibrium, let us return to the scream, let us lose no opportunity to throw ourselves upon it, and to proclaim its urgency. Rage will help us, moreover, rage which proceeds from the very core of life.” What is appealing about Zerzan’s essay is that it is the articulation of such a scream.

But Cioran, who is referring to an ontological problem, knows that we are condemned to language, “forbidden to regain our primordial innocence,” driven to “pursue the Insoluble with an attention to detail which binds us to every illusion and every reality alike,” condemned to “a methodical fall into the abyss.” For Cioran, “to perceive

essences—nothing is more hostile to the conduct of our thought.” For him the nothingness of words “proceeds from our own.” Yet the very nature of Cioran’s ironic, crepuscular lucidity reveals the underlying ambivalence in words. The solitude and horror are deeper than language; the discomfort we suffer from language “does not differ from the kind reality inspires; the void we glimpse at the bottom of words evokes the one we grasp in things.” Like the poet, Cioran “takes language seriously...All his singularities proceed from his intolerance of words as they are. Unfit to endure their banality and erosion, he is predestined to suffer from them and for them; yet it is by them that he tries to save himself, from their regeneration that he seeks his salvation.”

Zerzan faces that solitude, that agony with another absolute: if thy tongue offend thee, pluck it out. But I would answer, after Cioran, that the erosion and banality of words reflects our own. If it is true that nowhere is civilization—the eclipse of the human spirit—so mirrored as in speech, it is perhaps also true that nowhere is the possibility of freedom and renewal more proximate and promising. Never has language as a free discourse, an autonomous communication between conscious essences, been more threatened. Equally, never have human beings, in all of our physical and cultural dimensions, been more threatened with extinction.

I believe that language is not a separation, but an organ which connects us to the world. The human world has been undermined; hence that organ is atrophied, gangrenous. But the language that human beings used in speaking to animals, that language, as Cioran would say, “faithful to the reflexes, linked to instinct, not disincarnate,” is capable of renewal. The interplay of unutterable essences and the shadow play of words reflects the same sadness—and joy—of the unspoken ecstasy and the inevitable separation of sexual love. But love is always capable of renewal, of new life. So it is with language—that is, if such renewal is possible for us.

*Here it could be argued that I am also ascribing an instrumental quality to language, as a vehicle to transmit meaning. Perhaps the relationship between instrumentality and noninstrumentality is not clear. Yet I would suggest that in language, meaning was not exactly transmitted but created. Hence it is not accurate to think of language simply as form. Secondly, such linguistic play could have no specific, material utility other than the expression of feeling and the reaffirmation of human bonding—a value free of and transcending the constraints of simple survival.

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