Situationist International

All The King's Men

1963

The problem of language is at the heart of all the struggles between the forces striving to abolish the present alienation and those striving to maintain it. We live within language as within polluted air. Despite what humorists think, words do not play. Nor do they make love, as Breton thought, except in dreams. Words *work* — on behalf of the dominant organizations of life. Yet they are not copletely automated: unfortunately for the theoreticians of information, words are not in themselves "informationist"; they contain forces that can upset the most careful calculations. Words coexist with power in a relation analogous to that which proletarians (in the modern as well as the classical sense of the term) have with power. Employed by it *almost* full time, exploited for every sense and nonsense that can be squeezed out of them, they still remain in some sense fundamentally alien to it.

Power[1] presents only the falsified, official sense of words. In a manner of speaking it forces them to carry a pass, determines their place in the production process (where some of them conspicuously work overtime) and gives them their paycheck. Regarding the use of words, Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty correctly observes: "The question is which is to be master — that's all."[2] He adds that he himself (a socially responsible employer in this respect) pays overtime to those he employs excessively. We should also understand the phenomenon of the *insubordination of words*, their desertion or open resistance (manifested in all modern writing from Baudelaire to the dadaists and Joyce), as a symptom of the general revolutionary crisis of this society. Under the control of power, language always designates something other than authentic experience. It is precisely for this reason that a total contestation is possible. The organization of language has fallen into such confusion that the communication imposed by power is exposing itself as an imposture and dupery. An embryonic cybernetic power is vainly trying to put language under the control of the machines it controls, in such a way that information would henceforth be the only possible communication. Even on this terrain resistances are being manifested; electronic music could be seen as an attempt (obviously limited and ambiguous) to reverse the domination by detourning machines to the benefit of language. But there is a much more general and radical opposition that is denouncing all unilateral "communication," in the old form of art as well as in the modern form of informationism. It calls for a communication that undermines all separate power. Real communication dissolves the state.

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1 The French word *pouvoir* can mean power in general, but it can also refer to the ruling powers, the ruling classes, the ruling system, or the particular regime in power. *(Translator's note)*

2 *Through the Looking Glass* (Chapter 6) *(Translator's note)*

Power lives off stolen goods. It creates nothing; it coopts. If it determined the meaning of words, there would be no poetry but only useful "information." Opposition would be unable to express itself in language; any refusal would be nonverbal, purely lettristic. 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?

Power's stranglehold over language is connected to its stranglehold over the totality. Only a language that has been deprived of all immediate reference to the totality can serve as the basis for information. News[3] is the poetry of power, the counterpoetry of law and order, the mediated falsification of what exists. Conversely, 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. Poetry thus depends on the richest possibilities for living *and changing* life at a given stage of socioeconomic structure. Needless to say, this relationship of poetry to its material base is not a subordination of one to the other, but an interaction.

Rediscovering poetry may merge with reinventing revolution, as has been demonstrated by certain phases of the Mexican, Cuban and Congolese revolutions. Outside the revolutionary periods when the masses become poets in action, small circles of poetic adventure could be considered the only places where the totality of revolution subsists, as an unrealized but close-at-hand potentiality, like the shadow of an absent personage. What we are calling poetic adventure is difficult, dangerous and *never guaranteed* (it is, in fact, the aggregate of behaviors that are *almost impossible* in a given era). 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. What we say about poetry has nothing to do with the retarded reactionaries of some neoversification, even one based on the least antiquated modernistic forms. Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language.

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

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[3] The French word *information* also means "news." *(Translator's note)*

objective poetic production, such as *trobar clus and dolce stil nuovo*[4] — 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.

The point is not to put poetry at the service of revolution, but to put revolution at the service of poetry. It is only in this way that revolution does not betray its own project. We don't intend to repeat the mistake of the surrealists, who put themselves at the service of the revolution right when it had ceased to exist. Bound to the memory of a partial and rapidly crushed revolution, surrealism rapidly turned into a reformism of the spectacle, a critique of a certain form of the reigning spectacle that was carried out from within the dominant organization of that spectacle. The surrealists seem to have overlooked the fact that every internal improvement or modernization of the spectacle is translated by power into its own encoded language, to which it alone holds the key.

Every revolution has been born in poetry, has first of all been made with the force of poetry. This phenomenon continues to escape theorists of revolution — indeed, it cannot be understood if one still clings to the old conception of revolution or of poetry — but it has generally been sensed by counterrevolutionaries. Poetry terrifies them. Whenever it appears they do their best to get rid of it by every kind of exorcism, from auto-da-fé to pure stylistic research. Real poetry, which has "world enough and time," seeks to reorient the entire world and the entire future to its own ends. As long as it lasts, its demands admit of no compromise. It brings back into play all the unsettled debts of history. Fourier and Pancho Villa, Lautréamont and the *dinamiteros* of the Asturias (whose successors are now inventing new forms of strikes),[5] the sailors of Kronstadt and Kiel, and all those around the world who, with us or without us, are preparing to fight for the long revolution are equally the emissaries of the new poetry.

Poetry is becoming more and more clearly the empty space, the antimatter, of consumer society, since it is not consumable (in terms of the modern criteria

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[4] *Trobar clus*: hermetic troubadour style. *Dolce stil nouvo*: 13th-century Italian poetic school culminating in Dante. *(Translator's note)*

[5] *Asturias*: mountainous region in northwest Spain where workers (primarily miners) carried out an extremely radical and violent insurrection in October 1934. They were referred to as *dinamiteros* because they often used sticks of dynamite for lack of other weapons. *(Translator's note)*

for a consumable object: an object that is of equivalent value for each of a mass of isolated passive consumers). Poetry is nothing when it is quoted; it needs to be *detourned*, brought back into play. Otherwise the study of the poetry of the past is nothing but an academic exercise. The history of poetry is only a way of running away from the poetry of history, if we understand by that phrase not the spectacular history of the rulers but the history of everyday life and its possible liberation; the history of each individual life and its realization.

We must leave no question as to the role of the "conservers" of old poetry, who increase its dissemination while the state, for quite different reasons, is eliminating illiteracy. These people are only a particular type of museum curator. A mass of poetry is naturally preserved around the world, but nowhere are there the places, the moments or the people to revive it, communicate it, use it. And there never can be except by way of détournement, because the understanding of past poetry has changed through losses as well as gains of knowledge; and because any time past poetry is actually rediscovered, its being placed in the context of particular events gives it a largely new meaning. In any case, a situation in which poetry is possible must not get sidetracked into trying to restore poetic failures of the past (such failures being the inverted remains of the history of poetry, transformed into successes and poetic monuments). Such a situation naturally seeks the communication and possible triumph of *itn poetry*.

At the same time that poetic archeology is restoring selections of past poetry, recited by specialists on LPs for the neoilliterate public created by the modern spectacle, the informationists are striving to do away with all the "redundancies" of freedom in order to *simply transmit orders*. The theorists of automation are explicitly aiming at producing an automatic theoretical thought by clamping down on and eliminating the variables in life as well as in language. But bones keep turning up in their cheese! Translating machines, for example, which are beginning to ensure the planetary standardization of information along with the informationist revision of previous culture, are victims of their own preestablished programming, which inevitably misses any new meaning taken on by a word, as well as its past dialectical ambivalences. Thus the life of language — which is bound up with every advance of theoretical understanding ("Ideas improve; the meaning of words participates in the improvement") — is expelled from the mechanical field of official information. But this also means that free thought can organize itself with a secrecy that is beyond the reach of informationist police techniques. A similar point could be made about the quest for unambiguous signals and instantaneous binary classification, which is clearly linked with the existing power structure. Even in their most delirious formulations, the informationist theorists are no more than clumsy precursors of the future they have chosen, which is the same brave new world that the dominant forces of the present society are

working toward — the reinforcement of the cybernetic state. They are the vassals of the lords of the technocratic feudalism that is now constituting itself. There is no innocence in their buffoonery; they are the king's jesters.

The choice between informationism and poetry no longer has anything to do with the poetry of the past, just as no variant of what the classical revolutionary movement has become can anymore, anywhere, be considered as part of a real alternative to the prevailing organization of life. The same judgment leads us to announce the total disappearance of poetry in the old forms in which it was produced and consumed and to announce its return in effective and unexpected forms. Our era no longer has to *write poetic directives*; it has to carry them out.

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