

# POETS, ROBOTS AND LANGUAGE MACHINES

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## NOTHING AS IT SEEMS

Philosopher Jacques Derrida didn't believe in the traditional notion according to which the reading of a text should unveil an alleged "right" interpretation, a unique sense derived from the author's intentions while writing it. According to him, this idea could only come from a metaphysical illusion searching for an alleged meaning "behind" or "beyond" the text. Human understanding is multiple and contingent and is made possible in the relation of signs with other signs, in an endless network of evanescence. So, our relationship to the words of others (as happens for example, in reading), is always based on misunderstanding and the dissemination of senses.

Such hermeneutical reflections from philosophy also occur as well in other fields (for example, in the visual arts). In the tragic myth of Millet's *Angelus*, his famous article from 1938 appearing in the Surrealist magazine *Minotaur*, Salvador Dalí writes about his paranoiac-critical method. This article aroused the interest of young psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. Lacan immediately understood that Dalí's position regarding the paranoia was closely related to his own theories (opposed to the accepted psychiatric theories in those years). For both Dalí and Lacan, paranoia was an active process, with a particular phenomenological dimension. Every moment of the performance was already an hallucinatory act. For both of them there was a clear parallel between interpretation and hallucination.

This concept is clearly present, for example, in the work of another painter: René Magritte. The study of this fact comes from another philosopher: Michel Foucault. In analyzing the painting *This is not a pipe* he notes how language likes to become what it represents. Magritte tries to break the illusion by underlining two aspects of the painting: regarding the representation of the world, words and images are not exchangeable and, more important yet; neither behind words nor behind images will we find any pipe because reality always escapes behind signs.

You can note that such reflections from the visual arts are also to be found in literature, in the poetic line that goes from Raymond Roussel to Marcel Duchamp. Strategies such as the use of homophones and formal language games are presented as the linguistic equivalent to the application, in the visual field, of the paranoiac-critical method posed by Dalí. Puns, riddles, cryptographies, "double entries" are used by these artists and writers to question meaning, interpretation and the scope of the signs.

## SO WHO PUTS THE NAME ON THE THINGS?

In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault refers to the Chinese Encyclopedia cited by Jorge Luis Borges in *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins: The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. There, Borges claims that animals are divided into: those that belong to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous ones, stray dogs, those included in the present classification, those that tremble as if they were mad, innumerable ones, those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, others, those that have just broken a flower vase, those that from a long way off look like flies, and so on.

From this quote, Foucault comes to question the space of identities or differences in which we distribute, recognize and name our world. He concludes that this system posed by Borges is as legal as any other because in order to establish the sense of a word, the only thing that matters is who the Master is.

This concept is shared with yet another philosopher (this one in the form of an egg: Humpty Dumpty). This character, appearing in Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking-Glass* (1872), discusses semantics and pragmatics with Alice and tries to explain to her the meaning of the poem Jabberwocky.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master that's all."

## **WORD ORDER OR WORLD ORDER**

The structure of a language (the way its vocabulary individualizes the different entities and how the grammatical structure combines them to construct meaningful units) determines the world view of the men who use it. In this sense, the ability of language to shape the men's thoughts has been noted by theorists and intellectuals from different contexts. The way in which alternative languages can generate alternative worlds has been noted as well (in a wide range from utopian to dystopian thinkers). To change language laws is to change the laws of the world. The concept has adopted different nuances throughout history: the romantic tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Karl Marx of The German ideology, the orwellian linguistics and the novlingua, the utopian language of Thomas Moore, and many others from Jonathan Swift to Charles Fourier.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Ludwig Wittgenstein sustained that "The limits of language were the limits of the world". Foucault talked about the human brain as being prisoner in the cell of language. William Burroughs said that human beings were sick with the word virus. Issues such as mind control through language, language as programming code, human beings programmed as an army of robots are too far away from the speech conceived as the means for free expression of free will, like it was conceived by Modernity.

Throughout his numerous texts, William Burroughs has pointed certain control apparatuses such as drugs, money, bureaucracy, school, medicine. The most important of all: language.

He uses an analogy: language functions as a virus that penetrates our bodies and begins to reproduce itself. This reproduction begins to gain our consciousness in order to pursue its own goal: the goal of language. We are not those who use words in order to express ourselves. For the contrary, the words use us in order to reproduce themselves.

In 1970, William Burroughs wrote a particular text: "The Electronic Revolution". There, he writes: "I have frequently spoken of word and image as viruses and this is not an allegorical comparison. We will see that western languages have in fact actual virus mechanisms.

So what can we do in order to avoid being infected by this virus? We must resist.

## **CAN POETRY REALLY CHANGE THE WORLD?**

How can we resist? By constructing contra-information machines.

But is it even possible to step outside language? How can we understand language outside the bounds of power?

This is the place where literature appears: literature should become a disobedience act against public language. Or, to quote Roland Barthes, literature should be "the permanent revolution of language."

Far from being a way in which sensitive human beings express themselves, literature should be understood as a discipline that deals, as Marjorie Perloff states, "with the most pressing philosophical and cultural issues of the day".

While humans have been considered a sort of alienated robot, programmed by a language whose master "the power" determines both their actions, their beliefs, their ideas, another very different kind of robot is presented throughout the 20th century, standing as a mechanic entity whose goal is to break with the subjectivism of modern man, with the Cartesian notion of a self, with nineteenth-century cultural heritage which sustained that language is based on the ideas of reason and free will.

The motive of the robot (in fact, the cybernetic organism) can be found, for example, in Futurism where artists and writers, in the search of a new representational system in order to express the new modern experience, see them as beings much more suited to modern life than man. For its part, the linguistic atomism posed by FT Marinetti in texts as *Futurist Manifesto tecnico della letteratura* or *Distruzione senza fili della sintassi Immaginazione, Parole in libertà* are clear attempts to break with the boundaries of the traditional linguistic representational space.

The destruction of language was a central premise for avant-garde writers and poets. Dadaists, Futurists (both Russian and Italian), Surrealists, Artaud and, as the century went by, Oulipo, Concret poets, Language poets, Fluxus poets, Oulipo writers and a lot of other experimental pieces that remain outside any recognizable group. Strategies were varied: collages, remixes, cut-ups, détournements, the use of aleatoric devices, the incorporation of nonsense and even silence, the incorporation of the notion of "mistake" and failure (this last one, specially from Code poetry and Glitch art).

## **POETRY AS CONTRAINFORMATION WRITING MACHINE**

Public language is formulaic and cliché-ridden. Literature must resist its reification by blowing apart its phraseology and syntax. All literature should be understood as an act of resistance to a discourse that seeks to discipline and dominate. Literature should be understood as a weapon

against the different stereotypes and clichés that circulate regularly in everyday language and imagery, which play such a significant role in our becoming social subjects. Literature should stand in the place of semiotic conflict and should underline the capacity of signs to affect social beliefs. It should search the way to sensitize society to the modes of representation that are given and received mostly in an unconscious way. First of all, literature should denounce the alleged right to property of sense and the claims of completeness and truthfulness of the established public statements.

So how can literature use language beyond the limits set by the power? By becoming a contra-information machine.

To become a writer, to become a poet, should be breaking automation and giving visibility to the invisible and silenced sides of language.

Literature should avoid being infected by the "virus control" by creating imaginary weapons to resist the established linguistic powers.

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