02 2007

Language Running Wild. Liberation of the Expression.

On the Project of a "Degenerate Language" with Ernst Jandl

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Men and women of letters are often suspected of dealing with language in a manner that is not wild, but rather one that shapes, disciplines it. Occasionally a kind of ultimate authority in matters of rules and standards is even attributed to them.[1] Certain literary works even have the reputation of having initiated or at least essentially influenced the development of national languages.[2] Central elements of bourgeois ideology are easily recognized in this: “language” is regarded as a cultural good, the maintenance, preservation and cultivation of which is left to the responsibility of a class of initiated priests; this class functions as both the guardian of the “treasure” and judge of its legitimate use. In addition, the emergence of language, culture and tradition can thus be reduced to the heroic accents of a few significant men. Like mythical heroes they appear as tamers of language and founders of culture,

leaving a legacy with which future generations can reverently grapple.

On the other hand, in consolidating, if not, in fact, rigidifying societies, literature gradually begins to assume a contrary activity that is, from the perspective of representative cultural administration, wholly unheroic. It increasingly specializes in experimentation, questioning what has solidified into "officious language"[3] in the formations of the public sphere. In a process of this kind, however, literature must find not only the inherently dubious totality of a culture/language, but ultimately even its "own" singularity uncanny. Otherwise it would once again form merely a prophetic, untouchable moral outside.

The emergence of so-called "wild languages" in literary work is to be investigated here with an example that embodies a quiet, ephemeral implosion, but at the same time also a significant societal change of paradigm. For this we journey back to the seventies, an era of radical criticism, an outmoded juxtaposition of collective utopias and programmatic individualization. We enter into the mind of a marginal figure in voluntary self-limitation within a socio-political setting of extreme stability: Kreisky's Austria. The goal of our experimental arrangement: to find out something about the unheroic connections of freedom and coercion, of language and identity, of becoming and failure.

In the mid-seventies Ernst Jandl (1925 – 2000) was what he had long resisted becoming: an independent writer, in fact a successful one, both in terms of the realization of his radical aesthetics program and of his public acceptance. Until he was forty years old, sheltered in his secure position as an English teacher at a college preparatory school in Vienna, he had produced almost exclusively for the desk drawer; his uncompromising, playfully anarchist poetic

experiments would have hindered his prospects for public recognition in narrow-mindedly conservative post-war Austria, just like his poet friends from the Vienna Group or the writers Friederike Mayröcker and Elfriede Gerstl, who worked in a similarly innovative way.

As much as Jandl suffered from this lack of recognition, it spared him the decision to take up the uncertain existence of an independent artist. In an essay on the "Problems of the Independent Author" he explained why he still persisted in a bourgeois existence in the early seventies with his socialization: "The fact that the question of what I wanted to become one day assumed a central position in my thinking as a child is certainly rooted in the kind of petty bourgeois family in constrained circumstances that I grew up in, and is probably typical for this kind of family. There was neither the carelessness of drifting from day to day, nor the carefree manner of living from hand to mouth as was possible farther down in society, nor was there the confidence of those on a socially higher level in one's own substance, in one's own stock and in the stability of one's own social foundation, hence there was also no equanimity with regards to the future."[4] Considering that the creation of many of his meanwhile proverbial word plays (such as "bist eulen", "lichtung", "wien: heldenplatz" or "ottos mops"), which consistently violated linguistic and social taboos, occurred in the period of clandestine production, a contradiction becomes evident: living and writing do not represent a unity, but instead diverge inexorably. And they do so in the most unheroic way imaginable.

In this essay Jandl faces the contradictoriness of his existence, not merely to comfort himself with a little self-pity, but on the contrary, to formulate his double-life as *conditio sine qua non*: it is only through the existence-securing economic independence of his

profession that it is possible for the content and aesthetics of his writing to remain independent. Jandl consequently sees the only other possible alternative in the so-called “free market”, in writing genre literature like the crime novel, which he appreciated as a reader far more than many others long before the recent crime novel boom.[5]

In conjunction with “wild languages”, let us pursue the question of the relationships between form of existence and manner of writing on the basis of a transformation in aesthetics. At the moment of its popularization, and especially against the background of his “involuntary” acceptance of becoming an independent writer, Jandl’s work underwent a programmatic change, which transformed the tension between independence and production into a radically poetic reflection.

First of all, however, there was the experience of the complete collapse of this same production, which had to affect an author with such high demands on the permanent innovation of language through poetry[6] with particular force. A brief irruption occurred in March 1976 with a cycle of fourteen poems entitled “tagenglas”[7], the principle tendencies of which were unsettling in a way similar to his early experiments: regression, infantilization and an embarrassing display of linguistic and mental incontinence nearly resulted in the failure of a first publication of the cycle in the literary magazine *Merkur*[8]. What made/makes “tagenglas” offensive is that these seemingly delirious miniatures fundamentally question the difference between writing and non-writing, between literature and nonsense. Even today, the simultaneity of quasi improvised immediacy and rigorous virtuosity that is manifested in them is still astonishing. Writing has taken the place of the author, taken over the “lyrical first-person”, whose problem is no longer the loss of his sovereignty, but rather the discovery of a horrifying

multitude of literally not-good states inside himself. Obsession, indifference bordering on stupidity, loss of control over the most elementary bodily functions, sexual ambivalence: the poems of "tagenglas" create a mode of writing the non-identitary by articulating subject matter on which no representable identity can be founded.

This mode of writing is "militant" in the sense that Roland Barthes argues for in his analysis of revolutionary writing practices: it "abounds with nuances"[9]. However, the specific militancy of "tagenglas", and especially the poems in "degenerate language" that followed in another surge of writing in 1977[10], is directed not so much against external circumstances, as against inner states: "seinen mistigen / leben er nun nehmen auf den schaufeln von worten / und es demonstrieren als einen den stinkigen haufen / denen es seien"[11], it says for instance in "von einen sprachen". What is manifested here is a constellation of double ambivalence, which represents a completely new quality in terms of Jandl's writing: on the one hand, in poetic self-observation he deconstructs independent existence as the sometimes unbearable compulsion to productive self-assurance; on the other, the zero point of "degenerate language" turns out to be a radical emancipatory coup, in which a perspective of aesthetic innovation becomes perceptible again: "wenn du haben verloren / den worten überhaupten, sämtlichen worten, du haben / nicht einen einzigen worten mehr; dann du vielleicht / werden anfangen leuchten, zeigen den pfaden / denen hyänenen, du fosforeszierenen aasen!"[12] Thus ends the poem "von leuchten", and it is not only here that the pleasure in the breakdown of language seems to triumph over the content.

"Degenerate language" engenders a kind of deviance that superficially imitates the manner of so-called "*Gastarbeiterdeutsch*",

the fragmented German associated with foreign "guest workers"; in this it expresses a bond – its solidarity, so to speak – with the verbal situations of people who, as Jandl himself wrote, "are forced to speak German without ever having learned it systematically"[13]. In this sense, "degenerate language" appears as a speaking under pressure, under coercion, from a elementary need. On the other hand, words, phases and verbal images emerge in the poems, which come, so to speak, "from above": idiomatic phrases, foreign words, poetic rhetorical figures, which seem to suggest that someone who formerly had a "command of the language" is stuttering here. Hence it appears that part of the wit of this language is that a nameless *multitude*[14] speaks in it. The way in which linguistic patterns are broken up, interlaced with one another and newly composed in the poems reveals in "degenerate language" the "becoming" that Gilles Deleuze claims for writing as a whole: "Writing is a question of becoming, always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experienced. [...] Writing is inseparable from becoming: in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible."[15]

In this point Jandl's "degenerate language" ties into the codes of subcultures and minoritary societies external to literature, not only linguistically, but also politically: these are also exposed to an enormous fluctuation between the poles of deviation and conforming; in their playful strategies of temporary, intermittent compression they inevitably confront their own alienation. Alienation also characterizes Ernst Jandl's existential fundamental experience in the seventies: right in the midst of a flourishing society of full employment and prosperity, in his "new freedom" he sees himself exposed to a failure, in which one cannot be other

than not-one with onesef. This is not bolstered, however, in the utopia of a language of self-experience, much less self-healing, which would rejoin what was rent asunder in it. Especially in the poetic confrontation with what the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman calls “ambivalence”[16] and in which he situates the repressed dimension of modernism, “degenerate language” remains strange and subversive. It is indeed a wild language.

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[1] At the height of the confusion about the new spelling reform in German, in a radio interview with Deutschlandfunk the Austrian journalist Heinz Sichrowsky asserted that the field for such a large-scale reform should be left entirely to authors as the language experts.

[2] For instance, the tremendous reportage novel *Os sertoes* (English translation: *Rebellion in the Backlands*) by the journalist Euclides da Cunha is said to have had a lasting impact on modern Brazilian Portuguese; older examples of literary texts, to which similar influence is attributed, include Martin Luther’s bible translation or Dante’s treatise on the “volgare”. A closer inspection, however, shows that these epochal literary achievements are the result of a complex work of condensing collective linguistic behaviors.

[3] Cf. Niklas Luhmann’s remarks on self-description in organizations, in: N. Luhmann, *Organisation und Entscheidung*, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, p. 417ff.

[4] Ernst Jandl, “Problematik des freien Schriftstellers”, in: *Autor in Gesellschaft - Aufsätze und Reden*, München: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 1999, p. 88.

[5] Cf. op.cit., p. 90.

[6] “There are many ways of making a poem, and everyone who makes a poem must continuously discover new possibilities for doing it; then this work will be something new for him again and again, and the result of this work, the poem, will always be an adventure for the reader”, stated Jandl in a small programmatic text entitled “Aufgaben” [“Tasks”] in 1970. In: op.cit., p. 61.

[7] Ernst Jandl, *Poetische Werke*, Ed. by Klaus Siblewski, Vol. 7, Munich: Luchterhand, p. 125-139.

[8] The poems were finally printed, but only under the condition of an “introductory commentary” by the proponent Peter Horst Neumann.

[9] Roland Barthes, *Am Nullpunkt der Literatur*, Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 2006, p. 26.

[10] Ernst Jandl, *Poetische Werke*, Vol. 7, Munich: Luchterhand, p. 181-208.

[11] “his shitty / life he pins down with the pitchfork of words / and demonstrates it as one of the stinking piles / that it is”

[12] “when you have lose / the words over all, all of the words you have / not one word left; then you maybe /will starting to shine, showing the path / to those hyenas, you phosphorizing carrions!”

[13] Ernst Jandl, *Poetische Werke*, Vol. 8, München: Luchterhand, p. 17.

[14] In this sense, everything comes into play in degenerate language that Paolo Virno explained in his analysis of a “Grammar of the Multitude”. Cf. Paolo Virno: A Grammar of the Multitude.

For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life, Los Angeles / New York: Semiotexte(e), 2004.

[15] Gilles Deleuze: Essays. Critical and Clincal, transl. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 1.

[16] Cf. Bauman's analyses in: *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, or *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.