The insubordination of words
Poetry, insurgency and the situationists

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ABSTRACT

Situationist formulations on art remain crucial to contemporary anarchist thinking on aesthetics, creativity and insurgency in general. This paper explores situationist conceptions of art and critically interrogates the politics of the key situationist thesis: namely, that the oblation – or supersession and realisation – of art constitutes the crucial procedure in effecting radical social transformation. The paper concludes that the relatively marginalised notion of poetry in situationist discourse points the way toward a vital postsituationist praxis.

I. ART

Situationist formulations on art provide the starting point for much contemporary anarchist thinking on aesthetics. But these formulations, so often taken for granted by writers on this topic, can themselves be subject to critical interrogation. Such a project remains important if anarchist practice in this crucial area is to undergo regeneration and renewal.

Various situationist methods and modes of activity were identified during the 1950s, including principally détournement (or ‘diversion’ or ‘plagiarism’, ‘Short for: détournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements. The integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu’) and the dérive (or ‘drifting’, ‘A mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’). Some attention will be given to the latter, but in the present context it is the former that remains of primary importance.

Like the dadaists and the surrealists before them, the situationists cite Lautrémont as their inspiration for the practice of détournement, and in particular continually quote the famous passages from the poet’s Poésies which assert that plagiarism is necessary, progress implies it, and that poetry must be made, not by one, but by all. In a pre-situationist essay of 1956 significantly entitled ‘Methods of Détournement’, Debord and Wolman admiringly quote these very slogans and indicate that Lautrémont’s use of détournement is ‘far ahead of its time’ and
consequently his advances ‘in this direction [are] still partly misunderstood even by his most ostentatious admirers’. In *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Vanegem also affirms the significance of Lautréamont’s practice of plundering the cultural storehouses of the past and détournant the materials found there: ‘I have never claimed to have anything new to say … Ever since men [*sic*] grew up and learned to read Lautréamont, everything has been said and yet few have taken advantage of it’. But the ultimate, exemplary tribute to the French poet occurs in section 207 of Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, which consists entirely of a condensed and détourned appropriation of the key passages from *Poésies*: ‘Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author’s phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea’.

In the following section, Debord explains the significance of Lautréamont’s *détournement*/plagiarism/diversion for situationist practice:

Diversion is the opposite of quotation, of the theoretical authority which is always falsified by the mere fate of having become a quotation – a fragment torn from its context, from its movement, and ultimately from the global framework of its epoch and from the precise choice, whether exactly recognised or erroneous, which it was in this framework. Diversion is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication which knows it cannot pretend to guarantee anything definitively and in itself. At its peak, it is language which cannot be confirmed by any former or supra-critical reference. On the contrary, its own coherence, in itself and with the applicable facts, can confirm the former core of truth which it brings out. Diversion has grounded its cause on nothing external to its own truth as present critique.

*Détournement* emerges as a technique which simultaneously negates theoretical authority and falsification and affirms a counter-language of anti-ideology. Negating the foundational textual authority of prior utterances, it rewrites those utterances but can only justify its rewriting on the grounds of its own self-defined critical truth. Exemplifying its own procedures, the closing assertion of the passage clinches the argument by détournant the opening (and closing) line of Stirner’s *The Ego and Its Own*, in turn a *détournement* of the first line of Goethe’s poem ‘Vanitas, Vanitatum Vanitas!’, a poem with a title which in turn is a *détournement* of the scriptural ‘Vanity! All is vanity!’ If such a vertiginous procedure seems reminiscent of the endless deferrals of meaning characteristic of Derridean *differénce* or the Kristevan web of intertextuality, this is not coincidental. Like the deconstructionists, the situationists, far from escaping from the trap of postmodernity, in many ways become definitive and characteristic of it.

Like many postmodernists, the situationists maintain a problematic but generally hostile attitude toward modernism and modernity, largely seeking to differentiate and dissociate themselves from it. By claiming that he has nothing
new to say and that everything has already been said, Vaneigem distances himself from the modernist emphasis on newness and innovation. As the entire technique of détournement suggests, Debord and Wolman are similarly uninterested in creating the new, suggesting merely that ‘The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propaganda purposes’. At the same time, however, they stress the need to go beyond the (modernist) practice of scandal: ‘Since the negation of the bourgeois conception of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Duchamp’s] drawing of a moustache on the Mona Lisa is no more interesting than the original version of that painting’. Modernist techniques of negation have become ‘old hat’, even when they involve a ‘primitive’ form of détournement: ‘In a more primitive sense, détournement within the old cultural spheres is a method of propaganda, a method which testifies to the wearing out and loss of importance of those spheres’, and as a result, ‘We must now push this process to the point of negating the negation’.

Paradoxically, however, this negation of the modernist negation of the pre-modern comprises, at another level, a reassertion of the modernist emphasis on the new: ‘Only extremist innovation is historically justified’. But the innovation occurs only at the level of technique: the material to be worked upon is the already existing ‘literary and artistic’ – to which should be added philosophical and political – ‘heritage of humanity’. (And even here claims to technical innovation are dubious: can a technique pioneered in 1870 and subsequently utilised, albeit in ‘primitive’ forms, by dadaists, surrealists and others throughout the modernist period really be described as innovative, let alone as an instance of ‘extremist innovation’?)

As might be expected, the initial result of détournement remains parodic, and here another point of congruence might be drawn between the situationist emphasis on parody and the postmodernist valorisation of pastiche. The situationists, however, see parody as merely a preliminary stage in the deployment of détournement techniques, rather than as an end in itself: ‘It is therefore necessary to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of détourned elements, far from arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity’. Ultimately, the original text is to be transcended, forgotten, effaced, rather than merely written over as in the typical postmodern palimpsest. The envisaged effect is a rather incongruous Romantic sublime, but this loose formulation is considerably tightened in the anonymous 1959 essay ‘Détournement as Negation and Prelude’:

The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each détourned autonomous element – which may go so far as to lose its original sense completely – and at the same time the organisation of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect … Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous
As the essay’s title indicates, *détournement* is conceived as both negation and prelude – not, it should be noted, as negation and affirmation. Existing structures of meaning are to be dismantled, and through the collision, juxtaposition and collocation of the liberated autonomous elements, a new ensemble of meanings is assembled which confers fresh significance on the resulting semantic permutations. *Détournement* thus provides a model for artistic expressivity, but also for social transformation, and in this respect it remains merely a prelude to vaster acts of reconstruction, to the ‘new genre of creation’ that is the liberation and free construction of daily life.

In this process, however, art itself is to be suppressed and realised. *Détournement* displaces, effaces and supplants previous organisations of meaning: this constitutes its negatory aspect. But these transformations of meaning are only a prelude, they merely point the way to and enable social transformation. They are a means, not an end in themselves. But further, in the course of social transformation, art itself is superseded. In his Preface to the fourth Italian edition of *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord charts the origins of situationist practice and recalls that in 1952 four or five people from Paris decided to search for the supersession of art. It appeared then, by a fortunate consequence of a daring advance on this path, that the previous defence lines which had smashed the previous offensives of the social revolution found themselves outflanked and overturned. The chance to launch another one was then discovered. The supersession of art is the ‘North West Passage’ of the geography of real life which had so often been sought for more than a century.

The supersession, or suppression and realisation, of art is thus accorded a pivotal position within situationist intervention: it constitutes the one and only route to contemporary social revolution. Through the suppression and realisation of art, radical social transformation and the free reconstruction of daily life become possible.

The quest to effect the supersession of art as part of a project for social renewal is not, however, original to the situationists. In *The Rebel*, a study of Western rebellion from Romanticism onward, Albert Camus locates the rejection of art as part of the process of deformation through which authentic rebellion degenerates into authoritarian revolutionism. Camus recognises this impulse in figures as diverse as Rousseau, Saint-Just, Saint-Simon, the Russian nihilists, and (most importantly in the present context) Hegel and the Left Hegelians, including Marx.

Debord’s biographer, Len Bracken, characterises Hegel as ‘one of Debord’s
leading lights’.

If anything, this is an understatement: Debord’s work is permeated with Hegelian thought and in particular Hegelian notions of history. Hegel conceives of history as a realm of alienation characterised by the disjunctions of the subject-object duality. But history is also dynamic, a process embodied in the historical dialectic in which clashes between contradictory forces result in historical development. The dialectical process results in a series of moments of supersession (or aufhebung). These moments are not occasions of pure transcendence, but moments in which a previous condition is overcome and yet simultaneously preserved, but taken to a higher level – in short, suppressed and realised.

In Hegel’s thought, this process continues until the lower, physical elements of life are superseded and humanity reaches the historical/spiritual goal of Absolute Mind. At this juncture, all oppositions are resolved, including the alienations resulting from the subject-object split, and history comes to an end. As might be anticipated, the achievement of such a goal renders disciplines such as religion, philosophy and (most importantly in the current context) art superfluous. As Bracken explains:

For Hegel, once Absolute Mind is attained, art is no longer necessary. When historical time invades the artistic sphere, historical time introduces the principle of the necessary dissolution of art. At this stage art loses its place in life as a means to authentic truth, and is no longer satisfying. Real needs and interests displace art in the sphere of representation because in order to satisfy these needs and interests, an individual’s reflective capacity is full of thought and abstract representations far removed from art.17

Or, as Camus more succinctly phrases it: ‘According to the revolutionary interpreters of [Hegel’s] *Phenomenology* there will be no art in reconciled society. Beauty will be lived and no longer only imagined. Reality, become entirely rational, will satisfy, completely on its own, every form of desire’.18

Suitably inflected and modified in the light of the young Marx, this is the philosophical basis of the situationist demand for the supersession of art. In this schema, art is consigned to a secondary realm, the realm of mere representation or the imaginary, and rendered subordinate to supposedly ‘real needs’. This surrender of the pleasure principle to the reality principle, cast in the guise of resolving the duality through supersession, is criticised by Camus when he suggests that the conflict over the status of art expresses:

on the aesthetic level, the struggle, already described, between revolution and rebellion. In every rebellion is to be found the metaphysical demand for unity, the impossibility of capturing it and the construction of a substitute universe. Rebellion, from this point of view, is a fabricator of universes. This also defines art. The demands of rebellion are really, in part, aesthetic demands.19
Rebellion and art, for Camus, converge on the common project of fabricating universes. But détournement, the central situationist technique for aesthetic and social supersession, is not about fabrication, but prefabrication – the reuse of pre-existing, prefabricated artistic elements in a new ensemble. Everything has already been said and there is nothing new left to say, as Vaneigem makes plain: ‘The only true new thing here is the direction of the stream carrying commonplaces along’. The situationists do not escape the banality of the world which they rightly criticise. Like Maxwell’s Demon, eternally sorting molecules, situationist post-artistic practice resolves itself merely to generating new configurations of the detritus of existing socio-aesthetic practice.

Détournement, as the situationists readily admit, is a technique of negation, and as such is insufficient, all too liable to recuperation as postmodern nihilism. But their Hegelian philosophical underpinnings will not allow them to pose an affirmative role for any kind of creative art, even one which attempts to avoid spectacular commodification and participates in the oppositional movement. Détournement can only be a prelude – a prelude to a time in which the free reconstruction of daily life subsumes and supplants artistic creativity.

In the 1961 essay ‘For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art’, Debord avers that ‘Revolution is not “showing” life to people, but making them live’. On one level, this sentiment contains some truth: it is true (as Debord points out elsewhere in the essay) that art is based on a division of labour and casts the spectator in a relatively passive role, and thus that art as it is currently practised is not revolutionary. But the statement contains further implications. First, Debord is implying that revolution does not involve any degree of reflection, but is purely a matter of action (and the use of the active verb ‘making’ in the phrase ‘making them live’, with its overtones of coercion, reinforces this sense). Second, the statement implies that if revolution is not about “showing” life to people’, then art certainly is. This implication betrays a tacit belief that art is essentially mimetic, as if all art is mere realism – a belief which is disingenuous and which Debord himself knew to be untrue.

Why then this ‘hostility to art’ and imaginative creativity, which Camus sees as characteristic of ‘all revolutionary reformers’ (as opposed to authentic rebels), on the part of the situationists? As the remainder of this essay will indicate, this hostility can be traced to a psychological anxiety – partly an anxiety of influence but largely an anxiety regarding the threats to rationality and rational control posed by the irrational and which art on occasion evoke.

Committed to rationality and ‘the real’ through their Hegelianism and Marxist materialism, situationist discourses are cast in the familiar sorcerer’s apprentice role of invoking dangerous forces to effect certain ends and then attempting to master them through the imposition of rational controls. Hence, perhaps, the contrast between détournement and the dérive. The former seeks the supersession of art in favour of ‘the real’ and in doing so negates not merely the aesthetic but also those irrational forces which threaten the fetishised realm of ‘the real’. The
latter evokes psychological responses through its use of psychogeographic techniques to explore the intersections between individual sensibility and urban spaces, but once again the imaginary is banished and subordinated to the world of ‘the real’. ‘The spectacle’, Debord asserts, ‘inverts the real’. But in situationist discourse the fetishised, reified notion of ‘the real’ becomes merely a subset of the spectacle.

The fact remains that those explosions of free creativity, in whatever form they may take, that are characteristic of rebellion, are limited and rendered subordinate by demands for the supersession of the creative arts. The point here is not to reinscribe discredited bourgeois notions of the creative genius, nor to reinvigorate the exhausted projects of modernism, nor to suggest that art as it is currently practised is in any way redeemable. But neither is it to reaffirm with blind faith the strictures of the situationist creed. The aim is to expose the psychology underlying the situationist project and indicate ways in which anarchist practice might benefit from a post-situationist trajectory. Further investigation indicates, however, that situationist ideology is itself a site for contestation, and that out of its contradictions can be discerned a possibility for creative practice which is both negatory and affirmative.

2. POETRY

At the heart of the situationist repudiation of art – even as a means of social transformation – can be discerned a renunciation of individual subjectivity and creativity. In his 1959 film On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief period of time, Debord has one of the film’s voices launch an attack on the notion of director as auteur:

There are now people who flatter themselves that they are authors of films, as others were authors of novels. They are even more backward than the novelists because they are ignorant of the decomposition and exhaustion of individual expression in our time, ignorant of the end of the arts of passivity … The only interesting venture is the liberation of everyday life, not only in the perspectives of history but for us and right away. This entails the withering away of alienated forms of communication.

The ‘decomposition and exhaustion of individual expression’ is not only taken for granted, but unproblematically equated with ‘the arts of passivity’ and ‘alienated forms of communication’. The assertion of the failure of individual expressivity is unproven but also un lamented. The necessity of overcoming passivity and alienation remains indisputable, but the notion that individual expressivity might have a role in achieving these ends remains foreign to Debord. The liberation of everyday life remains a crucial goal, but as this phrase implies, it is not individuals but the abstraction ‘everyday life’ that is to be liberated, and the participation of individual
creativity is not required in such a collectivist project.

Debord repudiates individual creativity because of his belief in ‘the scandalous poverty of the subject’. As the narrator of his 1961 film _Critique of Separation_ indicates:

The events that happen in individual existence as it is organised, the events that really concern us and require our participation, are generally precisely those that merit nothing more than our being distant, bored, indifferent spectators. In contrast, the situation that is seen in some artistic transposition is rather often attractive, something that would merit our participating in it. This is a paradox to reverse, to put back on its feet. This is what must be realised in acts.29

Life in spectacularised society remains so impoverished that everyday events seem dull and meaningless, whereas the lives represented in some works of art seem more inviting, interesting and engaging in comparison. It is as if the magic of daily life has been siphoned off and contained in the specialised realm of art.30 Debord proposes reversing this state of affairs. This seems a sensible project, but he does not envisage any role for art in achieving this end. Rather, he fetishises action at the expense of art, as if the two were necessarily incompatible and not complementary – or integral – modes of practice. It is true that art – in order to participate in the revolution of everyday life – would need to devise ways to avoid spectacularisation and commodification and to fend off alienation and passivity in order to achieve genuine communication. But Debord does not envisage such a possibility because for him art is tied to the ‘miserable subjectivity’31 of the spectacularised individual, whose immiseration and emptiness render her imaginatively and creatively impoverished. For a collectivist such as Debord, only the abstraction of the collectivity (the masses, the proletariat) – not the individual – remains capable of effecting social transformation, and only then through action, not free creativity.

For Debord, the wellsprings of individual creativity have dried-up in the drought that is spectacularisation. In _Critique of Separation_, the narrator talks about dreams:

What cannot be forgotten reappears in dreams. At the end of this type of dream, half asleep, the events are still for a brief moment taken as real. And the reactions they give rise to become clearer, more distinct, more reasonable; like so many mornings, the memory of what one drank the night before. Then comes the awareness that it’s all false, that ‘it was only a dream’, that there are no new realities and no going back to it. Nothing you can hold on to. These dreams are flashes from the unresolved past. They unilaterally illuminate moments previously lived in confusion and doubt. They strikingly publicise those of our needs that have not been answered. Here is daylight, and here are perspectives that no longer mean anything.32

While it is true that Debord recognises that there are other types of dream apart
from ‘this type of dream’, this is the only kind that he considers. The dream has both a subjective effect in that it conjures up images from the past and a politicised element as it reveals ‘those of our needs that have not been answered’. But the overall response is one of sadness and disgust: the dream is unreal, false, an illusion. There are no ‘new realities’: the dream of a transfigured world is just a mirage, and the dreamer is left with a sense of loss and of being swindled.

The unconscious is not regarded as a fund of creativity full of subjective and social significance, and replete with materials of use for the transformation of everyday life. On the contrary, the products of the unconscious are regarded as banal and illusory. This is the basis of Debord’s critique of surrealism. In his 1957 ‘Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organisation and Action’, he admits that ‘The surrealist program, asserting the sovereignty of desire and surprise, proposing a new use of life, is much richer in constructive possibilities than is generally thought’. However, he proceeds to remark:

The error that is at the root of surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination. The cause of the ideological failure of surrealism was its belief that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life, and its having revised the history of ideas accordingly and stopped it there. We know now that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole genre of ostentatious surrealist ‘weirdness’ has ceased to be very surprising.

Instead of richness in the unconscious, Debord finds poverty – an impoverishment that matches ‘the scandalous poverty of the subject’ identified in Critique of Separation. Subjectivity and imagination are dull, empty, poor, and therefore the irrational forces at the root of both are inappropriate to the project of social transformation. On the contrary, ‘It is necessary to go further and rationalise the world more – the first condition for impassioning it’.

The contradictions of this paradox are never resolved, but further, given the perceived impoverishment and immiseration of the subject, it remains difficult to see from where such impassionment might arise.

One answer, both to this specific problem and to the more general issue of art and the revolution of everyday life, emerges in situationist considerations of language. The situationists are aware of the centrality of language to the project of social transformation. The 1963 essay ‘All the King’s Men’ opens with the statement: ‘The problem of language is at the heart of all struggles between the forces striving to abolish present alienation and those striving to maintain it; it is inseparable from the entire terrain of those struggles’. Language, for the situationists, is a site for contestation and a struggle over meaning. But, as this passage indicates, the binarist mode of perception characteristic of situationist thought leads to a simplistic distinction between authentic and inauthentic,
superficiality and profundity.

For example, in the 1963 essay ‘Basic Banalities’, Vaneigem locates the situationist ‘position on the ill-defined and shifting frontier where language captured by power (conditioning) and free language (poetry) fight out their infinitely complex war’. Mustapha Khayati, in the significantly titled 1966 essay ‘Captive Words’, similarly considers the necessity of liberating those words which have been captured by power. These captive words form a deceptive web of lies which overlays the underlying truths of lived experience: ‘It is impossible to get rid of a world without getting rid of the language that conceals and protects it, without laying bare its true nature’. Hence, although articulated in the words of ‘the dominant organisation of life’, the critique of that world develops into ‘a different language’: ‘Every revolutionary theory has had to invent its own terms, to destroy the dominant sense of other terms and establish new meanings in the “world of meanings” corresponding to the new embryonic reality needing to be liberated from the dominant trash heap’.

Détournement makes its appearance in situationist theory at this juncture because it becomes the primary means of destroying old meanings and establishing new ones in their place. ‘Détournement, which Lautréamont called plagiarism, confirms the thesis, long demonstrated by modern art, of the insubordination of words, of the impossibility for power to totally recuperate created meanings, to fix an existing meaning once and for all’. This is a crucial moment in situationist theory because it opens up a vertiginous perspective, but one that aids in discerning a post-situationist trajectory. Khayati identifies détournement as a confirmation of the insubordination of words – of the impossibility of attributing fixed definitions to words, but also of the refusal of words to remain obedient and controlled. But another possibility opens up here: the possibility that détournement, rather than a confirmation, is in actuality a form of managing the insurgency of words to the benefit of a post-capitalist ideological regime.

From this perspective, détournement can be characterised as a form of crisis management: acknowledging the instability and historical relativity of meanings, it does not attempt the impossible task of establishing fixed definitions; rather, under the guise of unleashing subversive meanings, it actually controls words by ordering them in rationalist configurations. ‘All the King’s Men’ points out: ‘Regarding the use of words, Lewis Carroll’s Humpty Dumpty quite correctly observes, “The question is which is to be master – that’s all.”’ Words – which ‘coexist with power in a relationship analogous to that which proletarians … have with power’ need to be mastered in some fashion. Not surprisingly, then, the essay ends with the statement: ‘Our era no longer has to write out poetic orders; it has to carry them out’. The reification and mystification of the phrase ‘our era’ aside, the imagery of issuing and executing orders clearly indicates the situationist failure to escape the ideology of power.

‘All the King’s Men’ refers to ‘the phenomenon of the insubordination of words, their desertion, their open resistance, which is manifested in all modern
JOHN MOORE

writing’ and is ‘a symptom of the general revolutionary crisis’. The situationists, having failed to move fully beyond leftism, attempt to manage this crisis and channel it toward a discredited councilist regime. But in doing so they risk words (like the proletarians to whom words are compared) engaging in insubordination, desertion and open resistance against them. And it is this, quite rightly, that they fear. Words ‘embody forces that can upset the most careful calculations’ – including those of the situationists themselves. Calculations are, of course, rational procedures and as such can be named. But the ‘forces’ embodied in words are non-rational and thus cannot be named, cannot even be allowed to make a fleeting appearance, in the discourse of rationality.

‘All the King’s Men’ notes that ‘The quest for unambiguous signals … is … clearly linked with existing power’. But the situationists themselves remain hostile toward semiotic ambiguity and particularly ambiguity in language. In doing so, they reveal their rationalist commitments and come perilously close to aligning themselves with power. Considering the illusion of social unity created by myth, ‘Basic Banalities’ asserts:

This universally dominant factitious unity attains its most tangible and concrete representation in communication, particularly in language. Ambiguity is most manifest at this level, it leads to an absence of real communication, it puts the analyst at the mercy of ridiculous phantoms, at the mercy of words – eternal and unchanging instants – whose content varies according to who pronounces them, as does the notion of sacrifice. When language is put to the test, it can no longer dissimulate the misrepresentation and thus it provokes the crisis of participation. In the language of the era one can follow the traces of total revolution, unfulfilled but always imminent. They are the exalting and terrifying signs of the upheavals they foreshadow, but who takes them seriously? The discredit striking language is as deeply rooted and instinctive as the suspicion with which myths are viewed by people who at the same time remain firmly attached to them. How can key words be defined by other words? How can phrases be used to point out the signs that refute the phraseological organisation of appearance? The best texts still await their justification. When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity. To await and prepare for this moment is to manipulate information not as the last shock wave whose significance escapes everyone, but as the first repercussion of an act still to come.

Ambiguity is assailed because it impedes ‘real’ communication and places the individual at the mercy of words. By implication, according to the situationists, words – and hence meanings too – should be subject to mastery, in part because only mastery of words makes ‘real’ communication possible. The clarity and stability of meanings characteristic of French classicism are key values here. But
words and meanings, it seems, remain slippery, uncontrollable, insubordinate. Language has to be ‘put to the test’ in order to resolve its troubling ambiguities, which for the situationists remains tantamount to exposing the traces of total revolution that remain veiled in the ambiguities of language. Due to their ambiguity, words have fallen into general discredit and this results in a semantic collapse wherein issues of definition become problematic if not impossible, language becomes inadequate to the task of creating clarity about the sociohistorical situation, and the signs of the forthcoming social upheaval are not perceived or taken seriously.

As a result of this line of argument, the situationists maintain that words – and more particularly the words of art – need to justify and hence redeem themselves by casting off and resolving their ambiguity in the crucible of revolutionary activity: ‘When a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity’. The notion of a Mallarmé text acting as impetus and explanation for an act of revolt is a fine one because it locates a fundamental role for words and the discourses of art in the creation of radical social transformation – indeed in a gesture of scandalous gratuitousness it assigns the poem as a self-sufficient cause of such transformation. However, the subsequent assertion that poetry needs to overcome the ambiguity of its meanings and requires justification in terms of revolutionary activism, relegates the discourse of art to a purely utilitarian function. The rationalist project of control through stabilising and containing meanings, and through banishing ambiguity or multiple levels of meaning, becomes all too apparent at this juncture. All language – and not just the language of power or captive words – is regarded as discredited and suspicious unless it has a unitary meaning and remains directly useful to the project of social transformation. Khayati maintains in ‘Captive Words’ that ‘We propose the real liberation of language because we propose to put it in a practice free of all constraints’. Unfortunately, however, the constraints from which language is to be liberated appear to include those very elements which provide the discourses of art with their subversive potential, notably the capacity to generate meanings which elude containment and control. Perhaps Khayati should have heeded the warning from history by which situationists habitually set so much store: ‘The insubordination of words, during the experimental phase from Rimbaud to the surrealists, has shown that the theoretical critique of the world of power is inseparable from a practice that destroys it’. The situationists are not exempt from this entropic process: their ‘theoretical critique of the world of power’ is recuperated as soon as they attempt to manage the insubordination of words, even though they do so in the name of liberating language.

The phenomenon of linguistic insubordination reveals two important issues. First it indicates that the language of ideology, and this includes ‘the fluid language of anti-ideology’, is rent with contradictions. Meanings refuse containment and cohesion. Derrida has pointed to the presence of aporia, moments of contradiction which expose the failure of ideological coherence, in every text. Such a debunking process seems less important than the presence of rogue meanings within texts:
those moments when words refuse the semantic order within which they are located, when in an excess of energy meanings overflow their boundaries and take us with them into new and perhaps unknown territories, first in the realm of the imaginary but then in the world of everyday life. (Vaneigem acknowledges the significance of such moments for revolutionary practice when he notes that ‘… those who reject all hierarchical power can use any word as a weapon to punctuate their action. Lautréamont and the illegalist anarchists were already aware of this; so were the dadaists’.48) Second, it indicates the presence of the unconscious in texts. The situationists deny the significance of the unconscious, in part because of their commitment to rationalism and unitary meanings, both of which are threatened by irruptions of the irrational, or what the surrealists call ‘the marvellous’. But the phenomenon of the insubordination of words renders this denial futile: their attempt to manage the liberation of language merely casts them in the role of King Canute, impotently trying to quell the floodtide of unconscious meanings which threaten to drown their would-be master.

This failure to halt the rising tide of contradictions and rogue or unconscious meanings remains in the long term, however, a fortunate one, because it allows us post-situationists to redeem the situationists from their worst excesses, to negate their negation in a way that one would hope they might appreciate. The route to this redemption lies through the relatively marginalised notion of poetry in situationist discourse.49

‘All the King’s Men’ draws a rough distinction between ‘old poetry’ or ‘the poetry of the past’ and ‘the new poetry’.50 The former terms denote the conventional understanding of poetry. The latter constitutes what Vaneigem will later refer to in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* as ‘lived poetry’.51 Détournement is refreshingly restricted to the ancillary role of revivifying poetry in the conventional sense of the term (or what Vaneigem calls ‘poetry (in the narrow sense)’52). Such a move opens the possibility for poetry – i.e., the new poetry – to assume a new, post-artistic role, but one which nevertheless preserves a role for creative practice in the process of the revolution of everyday life. ‘All the King’s Men’ defines poetry in this new sense of the term as ‘the revolutionary moment of language’ and maintains that ‘It is a matter not of putting poetry at the service of the revolution, but rather of putting revolution at the service of poetry’.53

Art and poetry are thus positioned as antagonistic forces, a point confirmed in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* when Vaneigem avers: ‘Most art works betray poetry. How could it be otherwise, when poetry and power are irreconcilable?’54 Art and power are pitted over and against poetry and revolution. The supersession of art is to result in the realisation of poetry. But poetry in this sense ‘must be understood as immediate communication within reality and as real alteration of this reality. It is nothing other than liberated language, language recovering its richness, language which breaks its rigid significations and *simultaneously* embraces words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, facts, acts’.55 Poetry in the situationist sense, then, encompasses forms of practice that are artistic (e.g.,
music, painting) or expressive (cries, gestures) as well as words and forms of revolutionary action. At first glance such a conception of poetry might seem reminiscent of the Wagnerian gesamtkunstwerk or the Artaudian theatre of cruelty, but as The Revolution of Everyday Life indicates, the inspiration appears to have a different origin: ‘The African work of art – poem, music, sculpture, mask – is not considered complete until it has become a form of speech, a word-in-action, a creative element which functions’. This statement holds important implications for the role of creative practice in the revolution of everyday life. Art is in part rejected by the situationists because of its participation in the organisation of passivity. But poetry of the kind embodied in the African artwork, far from maintaining social passivity, forges direct links between creative act and social activity.

Although undeveloped, such a revised conception of poetry carries the clear implication that creative practice remains an integral part of the revolution of everyday life. The supersession of art does not entail the abolition of aesthetic creativity, nor does it necessarily consist merely of acts of negation such as détournement. The situationist notion of poetry opens the possibility for new forms of affirmative aesthetic intervention and insurgent creativity. Vaneigem refers in The Revolution of Everyday Life to ‘the scandal of free and total creativity’ – a creativity that is scandalous because it refuses all constraints placed upon it, including those managerialist constraints envisaged by the situationists themselves:

Man [sic] is in a state of creativity twenty-four hours a day. Once revealed, the scheming use of freedom by the mechanisms of domination produces a backlash in the form of an idea of authentic freedom inseparably bound up with individual creativity … Spontaneity is the mode of existence of creativity: not an isolated state, but the unmediated experience of subjectivity. Spontaneity concretises the passion for creation and is the first moment of its practical realisation: the precondition of poetry, of the impulse to change the world in accordance with the demands of radical subjectivity.

In contrast to Debord’s notion of miserable subjectivity and consequent failure of individual expressivity, Vaneigem regards subjectivity as characterised by an abundance of creativity and expressivity. Further, Vaneigem denies Debord’s emphasis on rational controls by stressing the inseparability of creativity and spontaneity – a move which opens up once again the links between the unconscious, the creative imagination and radical social transformation. Creativity, Vaneigem maintains, is a ‘revolutionary force’.

The ‘new creators’ as Vaneigem calls the practitioners of poetry in the situationist sense – are precisely that: creators, but also creators of the new. They are not restricted to shifting through the detritus of existing culture in
order to plagiarise and détourné those materials – although such procedures might play a limited, secondary role in their practice. First and foremost they are creators, poets, imaginers and insurgents. The liberation of language remains one of their aims, but once it is liberated, language must be allowed to express the meanings generated spontaneously by the creative imagination. Liberation, unlike in the case of occupied Europe, does not mean the replacement of one regime by another. Liberation, in other words, does not mean subordination. Revolution is an act of permanent insubordination, and the revolution of everyday life will not become an actuality until the insubordination of words is recognised as a necessary condition. The new creators, those who embody and express the scandal of free and total creativity in words and words-in-action, have a vital role to play in creating a poetry of insurgency that will inform and shape the revolution of everyday life.

NOTES


5. Debord, Society of the Spectacle Detroit: Black and Red, 1983, section 207. This section remains only one example. Like Lautréamont’s Maldoror, the entirety of this text remains a tissue of détournements, appropriations, quotations, allusions and intertexts.


7. ‘Especially during the early years, the Situationists looked upon themselves as the bearers of “the modern” … At the same time, their most dangerous enemies, as they saw it, were those modernists who sought to use the results of revolutionary progress, for improving the prevailing organisation of society’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 99).


11. Ibid, 8.

22. In section 206 of Society of the Spectacle, Debord accords the technique an even older genealogy, tracing its use back through the young Marx to Feuerbach and ultimately Hegel. Some indication that the technique is not ideologically neutral,
nor even necessarily socially progressive, emerges in the same section, where Debord refers to Kierkegaard’s use of it.


77. Ibid, 85.


99. Ibid, 221.


21. For the situationists, historical developments provide the material and technological conditions which make ‘the supersession of aesthetics [both] possible and necessary’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 57). The situationists neither recommend an abandonment of art nor assume an anticultural stance: ‘We are against the conventional form of culture … We place ourselves beyond culture. Not before it, but after. We say it is necessary to realise culture by transcending it as a separate sphere’ (Quoted in Jappe, Guy Debord, 69; final emphases added).


23. For Debord, the problem with art – as with other forms of spectacularised representation – ‘resides in the independence achieved by representations that, having, escaped from the control of human beings, proceed to address them in a monologue that eliminates all possible dialogue from human life’. As a result, ‘direct experience and the determination of events by individuals themselves are replaced by a passive contemplation of images. The alienated contemplation of these representations occurs in inverse proportion to the individual’s experience of real life, to the point where his [sic.] most ordinary gestures are lived by someone else instead of by the subject himself’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 68). Underlying this set of perspectives, there seems to lurk a curiously unexamined Kantian conception of aesthetic activity as disinterested contemplation.


27. There might seem a paradox in the fact that Debord, a film maker who directed at least seven films, and regarded film making as ‘his only real métier’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 108), rejects individual expressivity and the legitimacy of artistic creativity. In On the passage of a few persons through a rather brief period of time, one of the narrative voices proclaims, ‘The cinema too has to be destroyed’ (ibid). But this raises the question of the legitimacy of film as a vehicle for destroying cinema. Debord addresses this question in his 1961 film Critique of Separation, when the narrator says of the ‘idiotic spectacle of the fragmented and filtered past’: ‘it is not
a question now of transmitting it – of “rendering” it, as is said – in another neatly
ordered spectacle that would play the game of neatly ordered comprehension and
participation. No. Any coherent artistic expression already expresses the coherence
of the past, already expresses passivity. It is necessary to destroy memory in art.
To destroy the conventions of its communication. To demoralise its fans. What a
task! As in blurry, drunken vision, the memory and language of the film fade out
simultaneously. At the extreme, the miserable subjectivity is reversed into a certain
sort of objectivity: a documentary on the conditions of non-communication’ (ibid,
51-2). In order to challenge the codes, conventions and language of film, which
form a coherent image of the past, Debord generates films which are profoundly
anti-realist and non-representational as well as deliberately incoherent. Although
such films clearly transgress established expectations regarding cinema, whether
they thus lose their status as works of art or as expressions of an individual
sensibility remains dubious.

28. As Jappe notes, ‘Ever since the notion of the historical proletariat reached its climax
and the class was successfully integrated into capitalist society … the Left has
been placing various pretenders upon the vacant throne of “the good cause”’, not
least a number of ‘disembodied phenomena’ including ‘everyday life’ (Jappe, Guy
Debord, 136). In situationist discourse, a slippage occurs in which ‘everyday life’
sometimes becomes, not the site of revolutionary transformation, but the fetishised
agent of historical change.

29. Debord, Critique of Separation (1961) in Society of the Spectacle and Other Films,
50-1.

30. Or, as Vaneigem maintains, ‘direct experience is deemed less important than its
representation, than its image – a perfect epitome of the alienation of life by culture’
Jules-François Dupuis (Raoul Vaneigem), A Cavalier History of Surrealism trans.

31. Debord, Critique of Separation (1961) in Society of the Spectacle and Other Films,
52.

32. Ibid, 47.

Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organisation and Action’ (1957) in SIA,
19. ‘The relationship between the Debord tendency and the original Surrealists is
an ambiguous one’; however, [André] Breton in particular was the butt of a near-
Oedipal hatred’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 56). Debord’s oedipally-conflicted attitude
toward surrealism in general, and Breton (whose relation to the surrealists Debord
was to replicate with the situationists) in particular, testifies to a profound anxiety
of influence. In contrast, Vaneigem’s response toward surrealism, as evinced in
his A Cavalier History of Surrealism (written in 1972, published in 1977), although
ostensibly flippant, is more sustained, even-handed and appreciative, if rather
critical. Vaneigem notes, en passant, that both the dérive and détournement – the
principal methods of situationist intervention – were both devised by the surrealists
(A Cavalier History of Surrealism, 16, 93). While Debord subsumes individual
subjectivity within collectivity and negates the unconscious as a source of resistance,
Vaneigem refers to surrealism’s ‘open[ing] the way to a practical investment of
the riches of subjectivity in the collective struggle for the total liberation of the
individual’ (A Cavalier History of Surrealism, 52). Vaneigem charges the surrealists
with not developing creativity far enough, and remaining within the bounds of art,
rather than realising creative activity in revolution: ‘So, although surrealism drew
attention to each individual’s potential for creativity in everyday life, it failed to
THE INSUBORDINATION OF WORDS

spur the collective actualisation of that creativity by means of a revolution made by all in the interests of all’; the surrealists ‘ought by rights to have turned themselves into theorists and practitioners of the revolution of everyday life, [but] were content to be mere artists thereof’ (A Cavalier History of Surrealism, 52-3, 39).

35. ‘All the King’s Men’ (1963) in SIA, 114.
38. Ibid, 171.
39. ‘All the King’s Men’, 114.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid, 117. Jappe’s translation of this passage – ‘Our time no longer needs to draft poetic agendas; rather it needs to execute them’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 67) – provides it with a more explicitly managerialist, if less militaristic, inflection. The situationists were not averse to the use of military metaphor (e.g., ‘At this moment … the SI can only be … a general staff that does not want troops’ [‘The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries’ (1963) in SIA, 113]).
42. ‘All the King’s Men’, 114.
43. Ibid. ‘We will only organise the detonation: the free explosion must escape us and any other control forever’, the situationists proclaimed in 1963 (‘The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries’ (1963) in SIA, 113). The key word in this passage is ‘only’: although the dynamitard cannot control the unpredictable outcome of an explosive device, and risks it blowing up in his or her face, the organisation of the detonation is an act of rational calculus and the decision to cause the explosive to detonate at a particular time and place constitutes an attempt to shape its outcome and meaning.
44. Ibid, 42.
46. ‘Captive Words’, 174.
47. Ibid, 171.
49. The notion of poetry plays a much more central role in the work of Vaneigem than in the work of Debord. Jappe notes that when The Revolution of Everyday Life and Society of the Spectacle were first published, ‘Vaneigem’s book was at least as well received as Debord’s in 1967, and at that time it was widely thought that the two books said much the same thing. Today the differences are more apparent; indeed, as early as the seventies there was a good deal of bitter infighting between “Vaneigemists” and “Debordists”’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 83n).

It is true that in his autobiography, Debord says of ‘modern poetry’: ‘We were a handful who thought it was necessary to carry out its programme in reality, and in any case to do nothing else’ (Guy Debord, Panegyric, trans. James Brook, London: Verso, 1991, 24), but this statement merely reiterates the general situationist position that renewal of the revolutionary movement depends in part on putting into action the radical critique proffered ‘by modern poetry and art in the West (as preface to
an experimental research toward a free construction of everyday life)’ (‘Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of All Countries’ (1966) in SIA, 149). The notion of poetry as Vaneigem develops it does not constitute a central component in Debord’s praxis.

50. ‘All the King’s Men’, 116, 117.
51. The Revolution of Everyday Life, 156.
52. Dupuis (Vaneigem), A Cavalier History of Surrealism, 92.
53. ‘All the King’s Men’, 115, 116. As Jappe points out, this constitutes a reversal of the surrealist requirement to ‘put poetry at the service of the revolution’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 69).
56. Ibid, 154.
57. In other formulations, Vaneigem retreats to the position articulated in ‘Basic Banalities’ that poetic language is a mere prelude, accompaniment or incitement to (a more highly privileged) action. In A Cavalier History of Surrealism, for example, he variously refers to ‘poetry as an incitement to practice’ (48), ‘re-endow[ing] words with the promise of actions (40), ‘the true language of poetry [which] governs action and contributes to its fulfilment’ (83), and ‘the existence of a language (understood broadly enough to include attitude, songs, gestures, speech and so on) which … encourages us to make love, and indeed make revolution’ (82-3) (all emphases added). Clearly, however, at some junctures Vaneigem articulates more advanced perspectives – where lived poetry is seen to embody rather than merely incite revolution – which might help us move beyond the situationist impasse.
58. The Revolution of Everyday Life, 146.
59. Ibid.
60. Dupuis (Vaneigem), A Cavalier History of Surrealism, 100.
62. Some indication that these two forms of intervention need not be mutually exclusive, even within the confines of situationist practice, emerges from Jappe’s comment that in 1967 the situationists produced posters and pamphlets in comic-strip format, some of the “détournés”, others “directly created”’ (Jappe, Guy Debord, 83).

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THE INSUBORDINATION OF WORDS


