

Light Onwords / Light Onwards

LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



If infancy were dead...

by Steve McCaffery

Taken from:

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PART TWO: LANGUAGE AND ORALITY

If infancy were dead . . .

by Steve McCaffery

My own involvement with the Sandinista literacy campaign in Nicaragua gave me first-hand confirmation of the human right and imperative to read. That right is irrefutable. However, a talk in praise of literacy would be fatuous and repetitive and my chosen perspective this morning is one of scepticism. In fact this paper is not friendly to literacy and given my pretensions to being an agent provocateur as well as my predilection for political incorrectness this stance is quite predictable. The potential of literacy is always incommensurate to its application, and frequently literacy finds itself involved in acts of stupidity. Two examples: a multilingual public advertisement recently appeared in Toronto Transit shelters. "Literacy is a right and You can get help by calling this number." Precisely who is the designated addressee here? I'm literate so it's sure not me. Presumably therefore it's directed at those who can't read. Ergo, although one cannot read one must be able to read the claim that one has the right to learn to read. My second example: During the mass starvation in Biafra, much needed medical supplies were shipped in, but all items were labelled in English. Some bottles and packets carried a printed prescription "Take four times a day." But the concept of clock time does not exist in a community of starving and dying human beings and even if it did exist clocks were hardly a common household item in Biafra. As a practicing poet for the past thirty-five years, I felt it was apposite to address the stake of orality in the literatures of our new millennium. My start merits a quotation from a personal mentor and intellectual hero: Gilles Deleuze, that clarifies the background and challenge against which my own current artistic practice is formulated. It also describes the urgency I feel to stay an innovative poet.

If Literature Dies, It Will be Murder. People who haven't properly read or understood McLuhan may think it's only natural for audiovisual media to replace books, since they actually contain all the creative possibilities of the literature or other modes of expression they supersede. It's not true. For if audiovisual media ever replace literature, it won't be as competing means of expression, but as a monopoly of structures that also stifle the creative possibilities in those media themselves. If literature dies, it will be a violent death, a political assassination (as in the USSR, even if nobody notices). It's not a matter of comparing different sorts of medium. The choice isn't between written literature and audiovisual media. It's between creative forces (in audiovisual media as well as literature) and domesticating forces. It's highly unlikely that audiovisual media will find the conditions for creation once they've been lost in literature. Different modes of expression may have different creative possibilities, but they're all related insofar as they must counter the introduction of a cultural space of markets and conformity.... (1995, 131)

It's because this domesticating cultural space is already with us and irreversibly expanding at a vertiginous pace that the need for a critical avant-garde is of paramount importance. I want, in part, to revisit the classic avant-garde of Dadaism, a formative force in my own development as a sound poet through the 1970s, and reconsider its negative poetics of rejection and reflect on a crucial illiteracy at the heart of literate culture, an illiteracy that recent philosophical discourse terms *infancy*.

We're told that the current urgent literacy is the literacy of the interface in which the loop replaces the line as the dominant modality. Lev Manovich names our present culture an "information" culture. However, the neo-liberalized West's need for collective connectedness

precipitates literate labour beyond information into a data-vortex that Donna Haraway aptly christened informatics. I think information technology's a nightmare into which we're trying not to fall asleep. Around the world there are one billion e-mail messages sent each day. Like dream-shit, information passes through an alimentary tract of rapid metabolism, in which living literacy maintains a symbiotic relationship with dead letters. Sven Birkets is one of several conservative liberal thinkers who have advanced severe concerns about the information age. His fear is "that we are giving up on wisdom [and] pledging instead a faith in the web" (228).

The Web, in which a part of me participates, has been recently consecrated and celebrated as the triumph of potlatch, the birth of a hyperspatial gift economy of vertiginous excess and circulation. Architect Marcos Novak considers the web the realization of Constant's prophetic New Babylon of the 1950s. Notwithstanding this optimism I would mention Lev Manovich's likening of the internet to a Stalinist apartment. The conspiratorial relationship of literacy and surveillance is a well-established fact. So the dilemma is obvious: To enter literacy is to enter a complex of rules, restraints, and vulnerabilities. But not to enter it is to remain in another complex of rules and restraints. While having reservations about Birkets' claim, I agree with him on a different point: There is a critical distinction between instrumental communication and affective communication. The loss of affect in a regime of mediatization seems a crucial issue today and one that this paper will address.

Technological advances in literacy carry with them corresponding losses. It's a well-known fact that a Gothic cathedral is in part the Bible "written" for illiterates: a complex formulation of space, light, colour, symbol, and representation. The advent of the printing press and moveable type ushered in an unprecedented dissemination in reading material, a rapid transposition of vocalized into silent reading, and a radical shift from public declaration to private meditation. But it also occasioned a critical loss of the image-word interlacement so crucial to the complexity of medieval reading. Language and text became isolated and sovereign. To claim that print killed the margins is an apposite slogan. Prior to Gutenberg's invention, a vibrant tradition of decoration and commentary existed in the margins; and the consequent effect of the printing press is clearly stated by Michael Camille. "Language [after the invention of print] is now in a separate realm, written in discrete boxes or in fields hanging in the picture space" (158). In his *Poetria* the medieval poet John of Garland meditated on the figure of the idiota mentioned in Acts 4 and Corinthians 1. The idiota is the unlearned man, the rustic, the illiterate, whose illiteracy Brian Stock connects to the notion of "a 'saintly simplicity' that allows intuitive understanding of the Scriptures" (qtd. in Leupin: 6).

Another urgent area of address is literacy's own illiteracies, those cannot read. After a couple of decades of focusing on the politics of identity we now find ourselves dealing with a less tractable phenomenon: the mobility of identities. Framed today within the complexities and shifts of cosmopolitan citizenship, literacy finds itself thrust into a new mode of illiteracy rapidly emerging in the form of *les gens sans papiers*. These "people without papers" read and speak but cannot be read; they escape the parameters that a power through literacy erects; they remain undocumented, unprotected, unrepresented, and unrepresentable.

As humans we suffer language, suffer through and suffer in the signifier. The call of Language is a call into Language for the profit of Language. Language can't escape this primal personification as the computer of Capital among whose several outcomes is the irreversible expansion of pestilential literacy. Jean Luc Nancy remarks on the nakedness of our information technology and its evasion of the issue of the meaning of Being.

If "communication" is for us, today, such an affair— in every sense of the word . . . — if its theories are flourishing, if its technologies are being proliferated, if the "mediatization" of the "media" brings along with it an auto-communicational vertigo, if one plays around with the theme of the indistinctness between the "message" and the "medium" out of either a disenchanted or jubilant fascination, then it is because something is laid bare. What is exposed is the "content"-less web of "communication" . . . We are "ourselves" too inclined to see in this the overwhelming destiny of modernity. Contrary to such meagre evidence, it might be that we have understood nothing about the situation, and rightly so, and that we have to start again to understand ourselves — our existence and that of the world (28).

Let me tender one advocacy that supplements Nancy's position and stands as clearly antithetical to the goals and aspirations of the "information age": a particular, ontological plea for illiteracy in a recovery of the most impossible of forms: infancy.

Ruminating on Ovid's version of the myth of Narcissus, Maurice Blanchot arrives at the image of a marvellous child who is dying. Narcissus, "having turned into an image . . . dissolves in the immobile dissolution of the imaginary, where he is washed away without knowing it, losing a life he does not have" (126). This lost life the infant never had marks a singular passage and a destiny: to die into language without knowing it.

Heidegger famously posits a double negative constitution of human being in the form of a being toward death and a being toward language, both language and death are our unavoidable, irreversible destinies, and somewhere in that transit is a stage named infancy. Infancy inflects pre-subjective intensities in "a pure immediate consciousness with neither object nor self " (Deleuze 2001: 26). It also inflects the more portentous advent of language as an infant's death. A child emerges from an infant corpse still warm outside, at the limit of the debt of life to living toward language. Already belated, this infant is there as a not-yet-something, and infancy has no survivors precisely because infancy is the non-ground of language withholding that secret of language "language" can never recover. Of course, this scenario that constitutes a primal scene is the happening of a non-event, an impossible event because the infant occupies the space of the imaginary. The phrase an "infant is being killed" is of the order of a phantasmatic designation of a passage in which there is a death of an infant and a one who survives. A recurrent theme in Rilke's poetry is the disinherited child suspended between two worlds "to whom no longer what's been, and not yet what's coming, belongs" (Agamben 43). This remarks the interstitial space of infancy, a brief epoch condemned from the start to a death.

Let me try to construct a poetics of infancy, one haunted by a death into language, by opening with this question: What would it mean to desire illiteracy as an intense, ephemeral condition of being without language? This question rephrases many similar ones that reverberated through the shattered utopian halls of mirrors of twentieth century avant-garde practice. And an answer is readily available. The meaning would be "to be in infancy." Lyotard defines the infantile as "whatever does not permit itself to be written, in writing"(qtd. in Harvey and Schehr: 25) and one response to the paralogicalities of literacy is to abandon words altogether: Such abnegation forms a key tenet behind the Dada sound poem, Nepomucin Miller's and Karl Reuterswald's punctuation poems, the marbled page in Tristram Shandy, and the gestural calligraphy of Henri Michaux. And from Aristophanes to John Cage, the evidence of attempts to escape the regime of the signifier are sufficient to constitute a literary counter-tradition.

Lyotard offers implicitly a gestural poetics when he asserts that the contemporary task of writing is to "extend the line of the body in the line of writing" and inscribe "the trace of the

initiatory event in language" (qtd. in Harvey and Schehr: 49). Ernest Enrolls situates the gesture at a point before both voice and writing, while Barthes notes the subordination of gesture to both speech and writing in the west. This call to gesture and initiatory event is precisely the telos of Henri Michaux's calligraphic inscriptions. Through a poetics of the doodle, Michaux inscribes physical actions and gestures onto paper. He describes the emancipator process in *Movements*, a series of twelve hundred sheets of these markings produced from 1950–51:

It's precisely because I manage to liberate myself from words, those sticky hangers-on, that the drawings are so slender and almost joyous, that their movements were so easy for me to execute, despite their occasional exasperation's. I see in them a new language, turning its back on the verbal, a liberator . . . an unexpected soothing mode of writing in which one would finally be able to express oneself far from words, far from other people's words (Harvey and Schehr: 46).

Refusing the infant death into language, Michaux inscribes the "etymologies of gestures, enactments of their own origin, miming's of the moment at which signs, not yet fully bearers of sense, become to *come into being*" (54). Michaux's markings are signifiers without signification on the way to language perhaps, but gestural inscriptions refusing the death of infancy into language. Gestures challenge literacy at the very moment of inscription. Detached from communication the gestural inscription frees writing from language and in that emancipation offers a new relationship to literacy. Michaux's gestures in ink help us understand Barthes' insight "that writing's truth is neither in its messages nor in the system of transmission which it constitutes for current meaning . . . but in the hand which presses down and traces a line, i.e. *in the body which throbs*" (240).

The sonic and gestural parallel to Michaux's inscriptions is the sound poem, an avant-garde genre practiced by the Dadaists and Futurists and generally judged to be grounded in a poetics of trenchant negativity beyond which lies the affirmative desire for unadulterated affect. Dada poet Hugo Ball (1886–1926) claims to have invented *verse ohne worte* (poetry without words) also termed *lautgedichte* or sound poem, a minor genre whose origin seems to be a blend of social critique and mantic mysticism. These phonetic poems Ball claimed "totally renounce the language that journalism has abused and corrupted [returning words] to their innermost alchemy" (71). Here's a short excerpt:

gadji beri bimba glandridi lauli lonni cadori
gadjama gramma berida bimbala glandri galassassa laulitalomini
gadji beri bin blassa glassala lauli lonni cadorsu sassala bim
gadjamatuVm i zimzalla binban Lila wowolimal bin beri ban
o katalominal rhinozerossola hopsamen laulitalomini hoooo
gadjama rhinozerossola hopsamen
bluku terullala blaulala loooo
(qtd. in Bohn: 37)

Ball's poetry readily approximated those undertakings of linguistic delirium that Foucault notes in *Brisset* – a restoration of words "to the noises that gave birth to words, [... reanimating ...] the gestures, assaults and violences of which words stand as the now silent blazons" (qtd. in Deleuze 1988: 149 n40), but insofar as it remains a phonetic construct, rebellious against but ultimately complacent to the phonetic rule of difference, it can be accurately described as a specimen of virtual semantics.

The decisive escape from Ball's impasse occurred in the early 1950s with François Dufrêne's *cri-rythme*, which he himself placed within the wider category of prelingualism. Less text than sonic expenditure, the *cri-rythme* is a kind of paralanguage, a high-energy expulsion of inarticulate sounds, cries, and grunts. Dufrêne's special achievement is to have renounced successfully the aura of the spoken and the phonetic and to have pushed to the centripetal limits of the poetic, exploring the micro-particulars of morphology and deploying the full expressive range of predenotative elements: grunts, howls, shrieks, and hisses. His is truly a profound disturbance of language "by the mad poetics of the scream" (Lecerclé 66).

If works of art are still possible, if the system is not what alone produces them and addresses them to itself, if therefore literature, art, and thought are not dead, it is because they hysterically cultivate [a] relation with what is irrelevant.... In order to give [words, sounds, and bodies] back to their silence, which makes so much noise in the human body, to expose them to their potentiality and to obtain from them the gesture of a poem (Lyotard 1997: 214).

This gestural poetics by which the poem is returned via sound to its own silence outside the interlocutory logic of clear and possible response remarks precisely the infant's condition of abandonment whose paradoxical registration is simultaneously noise and silence.

At a level below languages, works, institutions, always lying latent beneath the audible but never covered over by it, this breath does not speak, it moans, it mutters. It has no history, it's a lament "that appears always naked and new," that has nothing to tell. It appears invincible to articulation [to that death into language], implicitly understood and prostrate even in the discourse of forms. It wanders over lips, it swells "the almost sexual and ever bared protrusion of faces," it rests ensconced in the thrust of voices stacking themselves one before the other in their millenary commerce (224).

Such an infancy is not *before* language but *beneath* it, more on the order of a social sediment than an anthropological condition prior to language acquisition. Sonorous matter, Lyotard informs, "is the sound death makes in the living body" (230–31).

"The fundamental human right asserts Bataille, 'is to signify *nothing*'" (qtd. in Richman: 138). For Bataille, totality is grasped in a gesture of the meaningless. It is the socio-cultural denial to the body of a blank, meaningless space that supports a nihilism, not vice versa. The body is nothing when trapped within its systems of representations but becomes everything when posited outside of meaning. Sound is fundamentally unoriginal and language is nothing when it's crushed between your teeth and the shadow of a mouth recovers the breath of its morselations. Sound poetry's extreme mission from Artaud to the performative enactments of the 1970s was neither expenditure nor spontaneity per se but the murder of speech in its Capitalist embodiments. This death of speech – it should be qualified – entailed a theft of silence within sound. To paraphrase a thought of Valéry's that captures with beauty and accuracy the circularity of this mission: a scream escapes from pain. Out of this accident a poem is made, with an explanation round about it. In this context the scream acquires a role, a function. As was the case with Pascal's Thought: "I had a thought. I have forgotten it. In its place I write that I've forgotten it."

Norman O. Brown offers a brief account of a *verbum infans*: "the infant or ineffable word, is speech and silence reconciled" (257) and this may be worth pondering in relation to John Cage's notorious definition of poetry: "I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry." Underlying Cage's definition is not only the poet's insight that silence is the scream on the most effective side of the dictionary, but also the ethical implications of raw orality. I

believe we have an urgent need for an alliance between creativity and philosophy for the sake of ethics. This is an old call from Kant through Kierkegaard to Emmanuel Levinas. If not unethical, writing nonetheless evades the fundamental ethical encounter, which is not a self-addressed categorical imperative as Kant would have us believe, but the exposed encounter of two faces. The link here is that of ethics onto immediacy and immediacy to the infancy of encounter. Lyotard describes that infancy as a "welcome extended to the marvel that (something) is happening, the respect for the event" (Harvey and Schehr: 49). In his *Hérésies artistiques* Mallarmé too approximates this condition when faced with the mysterious unreadability of musical notation – an unreadability that he elevates to the poetic desideratum:

Opening Mozart, Beethoven, or Wagner at will, looking over the first page of their work with an indifferent eye, we are overtaken by a religious astonishment at the sight of those macabre processions and severe, chaste, unknown signs. And we close up the missal, virgin of any profane thought. I have often asked why this necessary trait has been refused to a single art, the greatest.... I am speaking of poetry (qtd. in Lacoue-Labarthe: 43).

This infancy arrived at through encounter unfolds of necessity another matter – the infancy of ethics itself.

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Steve McCaffery is author of fifteen books of poetry and one novel. He has twice received the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative American Poetry (1993–94 and 1994–95). *Theory of Sediment* was nominated for the Governor General's Award in 1992 and *The Black Debt* was short-listed for the 1990 Before Columbus Award. Volume 1 of *Seven Pages Missing* was also nominated for the Governor General's Award in 2001. He has performed his poetry worldwide and his work has been widely translated. He is a Professor of Poetics, Critical Theory, and Contemporary Literature at York University and is the current Director and founder of the North American Centre for Interdisciplinary Poetics.