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# Junk Subjectivity

By Keston Sutherland

Whose round hairy silver magazine is angry? The journalistic discovery of literary value in spam emails – otherwise considered a pest – is no longer news. But if some poets endorse this view, celebrating the convention-breaching ‘wrongness’ of spam language, is this posture really as subversive as it seems? Keston Sutherland on a consumer revolt in the avant-garde’s inbox

Over the last 25 years, the phrase ‘avant-garde poetics’ has become synonymous with the banalisation of polemical language. A new orthodoxy has been scribbled into the so-called margin of aesthetics, a jargon of inauthenticity with its very own catalogue of abused nouns and outcast concepts, unvarying as the deep problems of capitalist existence that it serves to occlude. What are these nouns and concepts? *Dixit* jargon: they are the hangover of ‘Romanticism’. Sift through pretty much any article by Bruce Andrews and the familiar assortment of put-downs is there, icing the debris-syntax: we are against Content, The Obvious, The Smooth, ‘the transitive ideal of communicating, the direct immediate broadcast...the Truth with a capital T...usual generic architecture of signification...continuities...’ These phrases converge invariably on one principal target, the most loathsome because it is the manager of all the others. *Dixit* Andrews: ‘Psychology-Centered Subjective Expressiveness on the part of the Author.’ The self-proclaimed extremism of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetics, the predominant US literary avant-garde, consists, roughly speaking, in this: it is the linguistic means of producing text material to which it itself ascribes the capacity of resisting the mechanisms of interpretive consumption that *homo consumer* falsely and proudly believes he owns. L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry will not give its readers ‘Subjective Expressiveness’ that can be identified with the psychic operations (mood swings etc.) of an ‘Author’. It refuses to give them this Expressiveness because they take it the wrong way, i.e., as if it were propaganda or a latte; or because the state and billboards and TV use Expressiveness to sell dildos and wars; or because the mental operations of *homo consumer* herself cannot hit their peak freedom-rating until they are disaligned with the language most familiar to them; these and other reasons.

The dirty concept floating about in all these disjunctive anti-slogans and insurrectionary multiplications is the concept of authority. The author is authority incarnate, or a special instance of authority, and whenever he uses language that signifies or in some way projects his authority, he is complicit in the general authoritative mystification of real life on which capitalism depends and of which capitalism is the beneficiary. Fortunately, however, it is quite possible to be a poet without being an Author. All that needs to be done is for the poet to make sure that she rinses out from her language all the soddiness of authoritative syntax, grammar, diction, argumentation and, of course, Psychology-Centered Subjective Expressiveness, and *bingo*. Suddenly we have a materialist poetry that smashes through the logic gates of the prison-house of language and pisses into the governor’s Rolodex.

The new orthodoxy has become especially popular in the period since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the victory of the US in the Cold War, partly because of the cautious and respectful attitudes toward L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E theory of those poets and critics, writing in that period, who set out their own ideas about aesthetics and politics more or less in opposition to L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E theory. This same period has also seen an event unparalleled in the history of communication: the English language has become the final, indomitable and universal *lingua franca* of global capitalism. Possibly the internet has played a greater role in this obliteration of language differences than any other engine of propaganda and commerce (and their opposites). There before the Syrian or Indonesian retina in a millisecond is a vast hinterstate of English, all linked up and laid out in the tightest integration ever possible in the history of text production, creeping steadily across the world grid like

an emancipated fungus. Capitalism benefits immensely from this outreach, and English qua capitalism-logos also benefits, becoming more dominant as it becomes more prolific. But is English as a medium for anti-capitalist communication likewise invested with new potential as its enemy language becomes hugely more promiscuous? Are the possibilities for distorting and indicting the language of capitalism enlarged along with the quantity of that language pumped into the market?

Over the last year, a ripple of interest slid through the mainstream media, concerning spam e-mails and the apparently poetic character of some of the language that shows up in them. The journalists' suggestion is always the same: as the BBC put it, 'lots of people are starting to find literary value hidden among the porn, penis patches, generic Viagra deals and mortgage offers.' This stuff is of course valueless in itself, the dark froth of the black market; but its victims, the passive recipients of unscrupulous Nigerian demands for bank account details and offensive invitations to look at cumshots, can find something magical in it all. Poetry. What makes this language a good raw material for amateur poetising is its wrongness: frequently it is screwed up English, a breach of conventional syntax and grammar, a funny rash of solecisms and malappropriated advert-talk. The offended western consumer can laugh it all off in rhymes and verses, converting the gibberish of Dr. Arliru Ayodele or Chief Wale Adenuga into a piece of double-edged irony, poking fun simultaneously at the authors of the spam and, with a consciousness of being postmodern, at the idea of authors in general. Who would come up with this kind of language on their own? Clearly it couldn't be the expression of a native user of English; and so in English it looks oddly mechanical, oddly and strikingly devoid of Truth with a capital T, absurdly incapable of living up to the transitive ideal of communicating. Fraudulent pleas for help from endangered Arabs are the misjudged replicas of Psychology-Centered Subjective Expressiveness, impossible to believe or care about, an irritation pure and simple. But if the western consumer pauses for a few seconds before deleting them, they can make hilarious reading: aren't they in fact avant-garde? Isn't their wrongness in fact strictly semiotic, strictly a matter of signification and its fragility, and is there any reason why it can't be taken for a sort of Brechtian alienation technique? And thus the excluded, fugitive bits of English-the-capitalism-logos are picked up and recycled to the credit (in stacks of symbolic capital) of their target consumers. A salutary poetics of consumer rights in the face of a barrage of unwanted commercial pressure.

The question for poets who care about the relation of aesthetics and politics is this: to what extent are our most militant theories of poetry underwritten by the western ideology of consumer rights? Do the theories of interpretive freedom on offer in the avant-garde amount to a kind of ideological consumer watchdog? L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry plainly does not constitute any kind of barrier against the use of English as capitalism-logos by corporations and governments, nor could it; transformations of syntax are superstructural phenomena and cannot be other than this. This is true of all poetry, not just L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. But is the mode of negation described by Bruce Andrews (and ascribed by him to his own work) anything more than the freedom to reject language commodities in the name of our rights as the consumers of those commodities, and to circulate pieces of disfigured language which, in the light of that ascription, can appear only as the tokens of our rejection?

The recycling of spam e-mail into postmodern lyric is, from one angle, a symptom of this 'extremist' curtailment of negativity. The raw material comes from black-marketeers and fraudsters in countries that the US bombs or enslaves through financial debt; it ends up reinforcing the orthodox aesthetic ideology of the US avant-garde. It is negated by means of a strictly ironic *détournement*, which amounts to positive inclusion in a dominant poetic culture whose creed is Anti-Author. The interface is violent and preposterous. What western theoreticians of aesthetics are keen to be seen avoiding with sophisticated zeal – the rights of an author, authority for the English language in western society – is almost certainly something that the African 'businessmen' sitting in front of their keyboards in their IMF colonies are highly anxious to take for themselves. Spam is not there to be reordered magically into poetry. It is evidence of the desire of people to cheat capitalism and screw money out of gullible

and greedy English-speakers. And for anyone unconcerned with the consumer rights of westerners and the parapolitical ideologies that make up their pedestal, that is poetry enough.

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