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How Slogans End
2010, December

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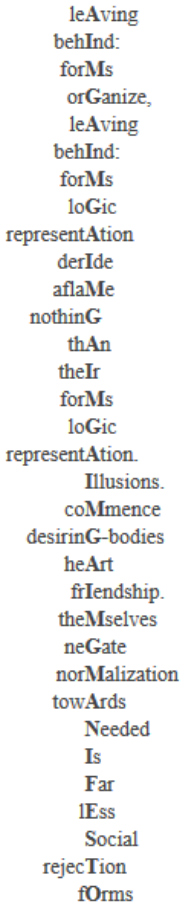

When you get sleepy, do you go to sleep? Or do you lie awake?"

- Cage, "Composition as Process"

"If among you there are those who wish to get somewhere, let them leave at any moment."

"If anybody is sleepy, let him go to sleep"

- Cage, "Lecture on Nothing"

1

There is a computer program called the Automatic Insurrectionary Manifesto Generator. AIMG produces this sort of output:

What's needed is not mobilization, and even far less absence, but a putting-into-practice of inoperative crisis, a rejection in all forms of the temporality of humanism.

This is a call to indifference, not an insistence on absence.

We must destroy all humanism—without illusions.

Confronted with those who refuse to recognize themselves in our orgies of negation, we offer neither criticism nor dialogue but only our scorn.

A link labeled "AGAIN" is conveniently centered below the text, inviting us to the pleasures of repetition. It reloads the page and each time generates a three-paragraph manifesto composed of such sentences. AIMG's output is wholly predictable, in a 'mad lib' sort of way. All the titles it produces have the same schema: "Leaving X behind: notes on Y," where X includes "mobilization," "activism," "passivity," "fossilization," "humanism," and so on; and Y includes "crisis," "rupture," "insurrection," or "zones of indistinction which need no justification," for example. The same goes for the rest of the manifestos. You may have encountered its output at its home page, whose link was posted and sent around quite a bit in 2009; or you may have

been presented with its texts in a more or less deceptive, more or less mocking way in blogs, or in comments on Anarchist News.

A link at the bottom of the page takes us to "insurrect.rb," the code. Reading those 126 lines was very interesting; despite my limited understanding of programming, the way AIMG operates was clear enough. There is a list of definitions in which words are classed together under headings such as "things we like," "things we don't like," "things we do," "things we don't do"; for the most part, then, they are groups of presumed synonyms. (I note with interest that the longest list is "things we don't like".) As I had suspected, the possible outcomes are finite. At first, reading just the code might suggest that the problem with the rhetoric of insurrectionary anarchism is that it is not inventive enough. Its terms are not sufficiently varied or differentiated and therefore they have a tendency to collapse into each other. But is the programmer's goal to use the code to produce a more artful rhetoric?

On the same page as "insurrect.rb" is a "read me" file, which offers the following explanation:

> The purpose of this little program is to expose the seductions of rhetoric, not to criticize actions taken. Despite my admiration for many of the actions taken in the name of insurrection, I'm suspicious of how easy it is to substitute style for substance in the communiques describing these actions. And this is not to say that all 'insurrectionist' texts are meaningless [...] This program is intended only to demonstrate the pitfalls of language which sounds too good to be meaningful.

The remarks about substituting "style for substance" and "sounding to good to be meaningful" suggest the contrary: the "purpose" is less rhetoric. To the degree that AIMG accom-

We might eventually get better at observing how our egos, our masks, congeal in more or less rigid acts of reading. Boredom is one path; curiosity is another. The Author and the Critic cling too rigidly in their roles to the importance of their activities to allow, as the Bored and the Curious do, their masks to dissolve or shatter in excessive laughter. Nonserious reading: ludic, festive, voluptuous.

It could begin by inventing and using writing machines that consume and transform every dull index that crosses our paths: I mean all those unexamined words that make up our slogans, that pepper our statements of intent, mission and vision, our little manifestos. I also mean those *mana*-words that theoreticians enjoy moving around their chessboards. We can do it if we can learn to inject the impersonal and random into our writing, and eventually our speech. I dream of a way to complicate the desire to say, speak, or mark, to send a message or command, in its badly omened collusion with repetition. Ah, the dull indices! Who is not tired of Freedom, Democracy, Sustainability, Consent ... even of Attack and Destroy? Clearly AIMG does not go far enough. We need a superior machine, a crueler code.

Reading through AIMG, one last program, MESOSTOMATIC:

Reading through "How Slogans End," too:

AGAIN!

Links:

AIMG

Mesostomatic

Works Cited:

Cage, John. "Composition as Process" and "Lecture on Nothing." In *Silence.* Wesleyan, 1961.

—. *Empty Words.* Wesleyan, 1979.

—. *I-VI.* Wesleyan, 1997.

—. *Anarchy.* Wesleyan, 2001.

separated from "is meaningful" and the relation between the two is always in question.

Here I invoke Cage's mesostics, and generally his practice of voiding his art of intention and ego. If there is any rhetoric in the mesostics, it is in the input alone; the poetic form makes it impossible to deliver a message. This strange form of communication that undoes rhetoric also unbinds aesthetics and morality. The author of AIMG both chooses his lists of synonyms and composes the (moral) code that arranges them; the mesostics, though they begin with golden passages, do not allow their author any control over their fragmentary rearrangement in the poems (as parts or as wholes), and thus the code does not contain, explicitly or even implicitly, a morality. There is thus no problem with rhetoric, because it has finally been undone; but there is a curious question of aesthetics (of pleasure) left over. "Sounds good" as well as "is meaningful" can no more be said to coincide than to differ. The question becomes not "does it say anything?" or "what does it say?" but "who is reading?"

Releasing writing from intention and thus from morality, voiding intention and thus the ego in writing, is the barely explored challenge that AIMG gestures towards. And it is Cage's mesostics, or something like them, that allow us to flesh out the fantastic reach of such a gesture. It is the greater randomness of Cage's process that allows us to both diagnose the secret alliance between the ego and morality (we could call it *conscience*) in political rhetoric and to discover the ego in its very emergence. I mean that, in the terms I have been employing, the ego emerges in reading, not in writing. Ego is not there in the composition of a text or code, but seems to have been there after the fact; this semblance, this mask, depends on ignoring or minimizing the importance of our practices of reading. I am not suggesting that the ego should always be voided (as though that was up to us!), but that it is productive and endlessly fascinating to create writing machines that allow us to discover it. If we do this gracefully, we will guiltlessly summon up pleasure.

plishes this goal, it does so by showing the limited inventiveness of what I will call I-discourse. And it does so from a perspective that opts for an uninventive "substance" rather than a superior "style."

One could easily undertake a critique of the programmer's assumptions by asking if the lists of "things we like" or "things we don't like" really contain interchangeable terms. (Or, supposing that they do, how such interchangeability comes about). But there is a more interesting issue, a more profound limitation in the code than finite word lists. Line 75, for example, reads

"This is a call to #{things_we_like}, not an insistence on #{things_we_dont_like}." which, in prose, amounts to something like:

> "Do the good, not the bad," or: "Do what we do,
> don't do what we don't do."

These are examples of the simplest grammatical formulations of a *moral* code, of a sort we discover in all sorts of discourses. Discovering such a code puts me beyond the desire to critique (to improve by strategic negation). The question becomes one of overcoming a morality that is so easily codified.

The programmer, or whoever wrote the "read me" file, tells me what he sees as the AIMG's purpose. I am free to understand its ouput in that manner or in a variety of others. Now, to overcome the unexamined morality written into the code, I am concerned first of all with wit. Supposing the output has something to do with its stated purpose, that purpose is achieved through being witty. (Of course AIMG is not witty, because it is not a person. But the programmer probably thought he was being witty when he assembled it; and many people think they are witty when they use it and propagate its output.) I take wit to be primarily an aesthetic matter, to be judged in terms of its success. (And there are many sorts of successes. It could be

that the joke is on the jokers.) For the overcoming I have in mind, I am also concerned with importance, with some way of getting at the values at play in a moral or ethical system. So let us play a logical game, cycling through possibilities based on varying answers to two questions: Is the AIMG's output witty? And: does the AIMG matter?

2

Given our two questions, there are four positions:

1. The AIMG's output is witty, and it matters.
2. The AIMG's output is not witty, and it matters.
3. The AIMG's output is not witty, and it does not matter.
4. The AIMG's output is witty, and it does not matter.

Now, this logical game is just that – of course anyone may occupy one or more of the positions successively or even simultaneously. But for the sake of the game I summon up a lunar landscape, where four speakers deliver their monologues.

The first two positions emphasize writing. Who has already stepped forward to say that AIMG's output is witty, and it matters? It is the Author (and his audience, amused). Such is the position laid out in the "read me" file; such is the apparent stance of many who posted the link or examples of its output. For them, the machine works; it does what it is pronounced to do. It reveals to us our familiarity with a certain rhetoric. The momentary confusion that accompanies it is supposed to be funny, and to provoke a particular insight. As Bergson so precisely illustrated, the comic usually comes down to either a living thing that acts mechanically or a machine that seems to be alive (See *Laughter*). The AIMG is obviously a case of the second. The Author knows that, in reading an automatically generated manifesto, I will likely, at least initially, attribute some

fantasize about more fully: a way of rewriting and rereading everything that we care to read. A machine to dissolve slogans.

Let me explain. I place myself between the Bored and the Curious because I have little use for AIMG as it is offered to me by someone who says "this program is intended *only*…" But neither do I want to intervene and replace that intention with another, correct, counter-intention. Someone wants the program *only* to show something about the rhetoric of I-discourse, and perhaps more generally about rhetoric; I reply: that is *only* another floating statement. It seems to me that a written statement of intention, separate from the writing in question, should be approached as the strangest of clues. Especially when the Author is more or less anonymous; at least presented with a body and a face one may hear the tone of words, study facial expressions, analyze posture and gesture, take in the surroundings and context, and so on. This is already the case when one is reading a poem, essay, or manifesto. It is far more of a problem when it comes to randomly generated output. So I have set aside the authority of the Author, and treated his claim of intention merely as one way of reading. His is a rhetoric that aims to dissolve itself: the rhetoric of minimal rhetoric, perhaps of zero rhetoric. What about rhetoric as an art? It has long been agreed that rhetoric must involve an aesthetic component, since it is first and foremost the art of speaking to crowds, of condensing a message. The message, unfolded, could in some cases be spelled out as a series of reasoned arguments; enfolded, the arguments become enthymemes, generated by the invention of the speaker. The art is in the invention, which, classically, means the speaker's style. Suspicion towards rhetoric is (which is as ancient as rhetoric) is focused on the danger of a message, surreptitiously encoded in an eloquent style, and so concealed from reasoned criticism: an enthymeme that is lovely or effective but that does not unfold into a reasoned argument. "Sounds good" is thus suspiciously

is always an accident.) Embracing randomness, chaos, everything in language games or discourses or speech genres that is not under our control: it could mean liberating our language, if that does not sound too trite. It could also mean unbounded pleasure.

4

When it occurred to me to seize upon the AIMG as an example, I supposed I had been waiting on Cage, patiently seeking an opportunity to re-engage with and share his mesostic experiments. Now I feel things are the other way around, as though he had been waiting on me, offering his smiling face as a mask. I daresay I have been used by him – in the gentlest way imaginable. I have proposed that the mesostics in *Anarchy* are the illuminating counter-example we need to question the AIMG. But I also think I have made clear that they are not against, counter to, anything. It is ultimately not interesting to me to occupy the position of the Author nor that of the Critic. I find nothing objectionable in the existence or use of AIMG. I occupy rather the readerly positions of the Bored and the Curious. But he who is Bored has nothing to add to this conversation (unless, interestingly, it becomes a conversation about boredom – but I will leave that for a future essay). She who is Curious regards AIMG as an embryo of something, as an opportunity to read and write differently – perhaps, eventually, to speak differently as well. A hint of this was evidenced when someone commented on Anarchist News that some of AIMG's output was not so bad, after all: "yeah! a few times i found some lines that i actually dug! haha!" Let us go farther in this absurdist, affirmative direction. It is, I think, the mask Cage was always holding out to us. Let us treat AIMG as a partial, unconscious, fortuitous reach in the direction of a project I would like to

authorial intention, some message, to the text. When I discover or when it is revealed to me that I have been fooled, I may be angry, amused, confused … Aha! And ha! ultimately I will laughingly accept the lesson of the AIMG. The AIMG's output is not meaningful, it is *just* rhetoric! The apparent fancyness of the language is belied by the simplicity of reproducing something like it. And, for the Author (and his audience, amused), such automatically produced rhetoric is not what our political common sense demands. Sometimes I want to side with the little pleasure evidenced in this position: pleasure in a machine that works, the pleasure of repetition. AGAIN!

A second voice intervenes and says: but the AIMG's output is not something like I-discourse. The simplicity is in the attempt at recreation, which therefore fails, not in I-discourse itself, which is meaningful. This amounts to saying that AIMG's output is not witty, and it matters. Who has spoken? It is the Critic. This is the voice of the audience, unamused, expressing their revolt. For them, the machine does not work; it does not or cannot do what it is pronounced to do. It presupposes lazy habits of reading, in which people respond badly to jargon they do not recognize, complex ideas and theories that require long study, etc. The Author's common sense has spoken up and said: the AIMG demonstrates the hollowness of I-discourse. The Critic responds: you are the fool who does not discriminate between the meaningful original and the meaningless bad copy! For this speaker, what the AIMG actually reveals is a misprision of I-discourse: the output's lack of meaning is not an example of anything. The synonyms are not synonyms; the terms are generally not used with sufficient precision. The Critic engages, then, in a militant defense of a militant discourse. I am this critic, too, sometimes: much of the time I want to side with the defense of complex ideas, of study, even in a certain sense of the mutant speech that is theoretical jargon, and to be suspicious of the common sense that warns away from all that. At the same time, it is difficult to side with a humorless Critic,

and unwise to take the side of the good original against the bad copy.

The latter two positions place emphasis on the activity of reading rather than that of writing. The third belongs to one who, bored, says nothing. If we poked him and demanded a response, he might sigh like a character from Beckett: what matter where the simplicity originates? For he who is Bored, AIMG's output is not witty, and it does not matter. The position of the Bored is similar to that of the Critic, but represents its degree zero. For him the output's lack of meaning does not reveal anything of importance. It rather reveals the habit of reading in a generic way. When the Bored learns that he has been fooled, all that he takes to have been revealed is the habit as such. But this sort of insight is available in more or less any event of reading, whether the text in question has been written by one or more people, in part or entirely automatically, etc. I note with interest that this could equally well be the position of someone who uses I-discourse, or of someone who does not. The former would be like the Critic, but unconcerned about the way the AIMG misses the mark. The latter would not see this as an important lesson: everyone knows that GIGO. Sometimes this is my position – anytime, really, if I am bored.

This leaves the position of one who thinks AIMG's output is witty, and it does not matter. She speaks last. I call this the position of the Curious. It is similar to the position of the Author, but is characterized by an excess of amusement, an unruly overflow of amusement beyond the stated lesson of the "read me." This amusement, not grounded in the thought of a lesson or its importance, suggests manners of writing and reading of which the AIMG is the crudest form. So she has little use for the AIMG according to its Author's intention for it, since she can't imagine any way to use it and be witty. She who is Curious says: doesn't this all suggest that the truly remarkable question here concerns the capture of a vocabulary by a grammatical-moral code, whether or not the AIMG is a good example of it? What

turn imaginable: I would say that, rather than shocking, he only wishes to play.

Indeed, there is no critique, implicit or explicit, in Cage's writing machine. What goes in is what he wishes to affirm; what comes out is in another way also what he wishes to affirm. They are "golden passages," as Giambattista Vico used to say. There is no real point to this doubling other than the pleasure it affords: there is no growth or insight, other than one which may come as randomly as any as long as we keep playing. "As we go along (who knows?) an idea may occur in this talk. I have no idea whether one will or not. If one does, let it" ("Lecture on Nothing," 110). Cage followed Buckminster Fuller and Marshall McLuhan in claiming that work was already obsolete. "Instead of working, to quote McLuhan, we now brush information against information. We are doing everything we can to make new connections" (*Anarchy*, vi). Reading is then the *last* thing we should describe as labor: the labor of reading, in all its seriousness, is subsumed in a game of reading. The game is not a way to unwind from labor; but labor is a particularly wound-up sort of move in the game. It is justifiable only as a matter of taste.

Cage paid homage to his influences and inspirations in a schizoid way, drawing them into, drawing them along in his mesostics. Who among us knows how to play along with such unserious affirmations? Many of the more or less anonymous masks that leave their comments on the mirror pools of the Great Web know what to do with such a list of names and such a set of quotations. They attack some names, defend others, negate, launch petty attacks, etc. The paranoia of Critics! When we are these sad egos we miss the pure affirmation of Cage's writing machine. It multiplies the originals, diffracting them not just by reinterpretation or application of them to new conjunctures and objects; it disassembles them down to the level of word, letter, and phoneme. This is precisely how we could overcome the sad egos that we accidentally fall into being. (Sadness

Most of the mesostics invite me to active reading. How many ways can you read this delightfully polysemic excerpt?

public's revolution is the destruction ofAll coercive ties it is
public's revolution is tHe
give the gOvernments
the pubLic's revolution is the destruction of all
organization of all public services bY those who work in them in their own
power serve to make known andCoordinate the desires and interests of people
of regions revolUtion is the
which act thRough
that exIst
and must nOt take part and the
way can people be freed fromSlavery
the free federatIon
broughT about
which enslaves people will be abolished onlY in this way can people be freed

Cage's mesostics may be understood in the context of a long history of writing experiments undertaken for their own sake, that is to say: for pleasure. This field is vast, but arguably its sundry protagonists all share in a suspicion towards, a methodical sidestepping of, the traditional image of the artist as beautiful and creative soul who, inspired, materializes the artwork. They all have in common a sense that there are social, political, psychological, even metaphysical blocks to the outflow of creativity. Arguably, from Dada to Burroughs and beyond, many of these experiments have discovered their pleasure in some form or another of the game called *épater la bourgeoise*. For Cage, by contrast, the writing machine that makes mesostics is meant neither to shock anyone nor to reveal a hidden truth or reality by subverting the rules of writing. If there is a resemblance to the motivations of the authors I am alluding to, it is in their common suspicion of the author as ego, as consciousness. In their own way they all echo that fascinating Nietzschean lesson, that consciousness is a second-order process, a derivative of the interplay ("combat") of non-conscious forces, drives, affects, or desires. What Cage added, then, is the most innocent

does *that* reveal, not about I-discourse, which is a fashion of the times, but about political rhetoric (including the minimalist rhetoric we call "common sense") in general? Most of the time I am interested in unserious ways of reading. So, curious, I have seized AIMG as an example, staging my curiosity by offering an illuminating counter-example.

3

There are two computer programs called IC and MESOLIST. They produce this sort of output:

everyone iMean
accordIng to individual desires tastes and enjoy and as soon as peopleClearly understand
nature and freedom a free man wins tHe victory
eternAl
anything but thE
nationaL
By
thousAnds of representatives
anarchy in a place that worKs
the intellectUal seed must
Not a mere theory for a
new socIety
their owN

Using IC and MESOLIST, John Cage invented a writing machine that produced what he called mesostic poems, a variant of the more familiar acrostic poem. In acrostics, it is usually the first letter of each line that, read vertically, forms a name or phrase. In mesostics, the vertical component, or "spine," is in the middle of each line. The mesostics invite multiple forms of reading, not the least of which is reading aloud, because they are themselves ways of reading and invitations to creative rereading. This is so inasmuch as the mesostics are composed of either an entire given text (in *Empty Words*, for example, Cage explains how he used mesostics using the spine "JAMES JOYCE" to "read through" *Finnegans Wake*) or a set of quotations from various writers. Often other strings of letters appear,

such as the names of authors and the titles of books. (One might conclude that it is not just re-reading or "reading through," but *study* that is at stake, though this would require dramatically re-evaluating what we usually mean by that word.) Cage composed many texts in which a love of language, of the ideas, words, and sounds in his preferred authors combined with his serene and studied use of random processes for composition. Now, Cage's music remains obscure for most. Among those I know who are familiar with his name, it usually functions as a historical point of reference rather than an object of appreciation (an artwork). His writing is, I suppose, even more mysterious. But it is also light, the lightest butterfly-writing one could ever wish to read. It is our problem if we are the ones who expect a message from either. Using IC and MESOLIST, Cage wrote several books of compiled and interlinked mesostics, such as *I-VI*, *Themes and Variations*, and the one that concerns me here, *Anarchy*. MESOLIST lists "all words" in the source texts "that satisfy the mesostic rules" (*I-VI*, 1). IC, "a program … simulating the coin oracle of the *I Ching*," is used to decide "which words in the lists are to be used and gives … all the central words" (*ibid.* A more complete discussion of this process with respect to its creation and use may be found in *Empty Words*, 133-136). In *Anarchy*, the source material is thirty quotes from Kropotkin, Malatesta, Bakunin, Tolstoy, Thoreau, Whitman, Goldman, Goodman, Buckminster Fuller, Norman O. Brown, and Cage himself. For example: "Periods of very slow changes are succeeded by periods of violent changes. Revolutions are as necessary for evolution as the slow changes which prepare them and succeed them" (Kropotkin); "The liberty of man consists solely in this: that he obeys natural laws because he has himself recognized them as such, and not because they have been externally imposed upon him by any extrinsic will whatever, divine or human, collective or individual" (Bakunin). But also: "What we finally seek to do is to create an environment that works so well that we can run wild in it" (Norman O.

Brown); "I'm an anarchist, same as you when you're telephoning, turning on/off the lights, drinking water" (Cage). Or even little stories such as this one, drawn from Hyppolite Havel's biographical sketch of Emma Goldman: "In San Francisco, in 1908, Emma Goldman's lecture attracted a soldier of the United States Army, William Buwalda. For daring to attend an Anarchist meeting, the free Republic court-martialed Buwalda and imprisoned him for one year. Thanks to the regenerating power of the new philosophy, the government lost a soldier, but the cause of liberty gained a man."

These quotations and the twenty-five others, in which the use of "rhetoric" as construed by the Author and the Critic is generally at a minimum, reappear in fragmentary form according to the processes described above. Sometimes, as in the mesostic I have already cited, the explicitly anarchist nature of the content is evident (though not for all that clear in the sense implied by the desire to reverse the priorities of "style" and "substance"). Sometimes it is not so evident: