Against written thought

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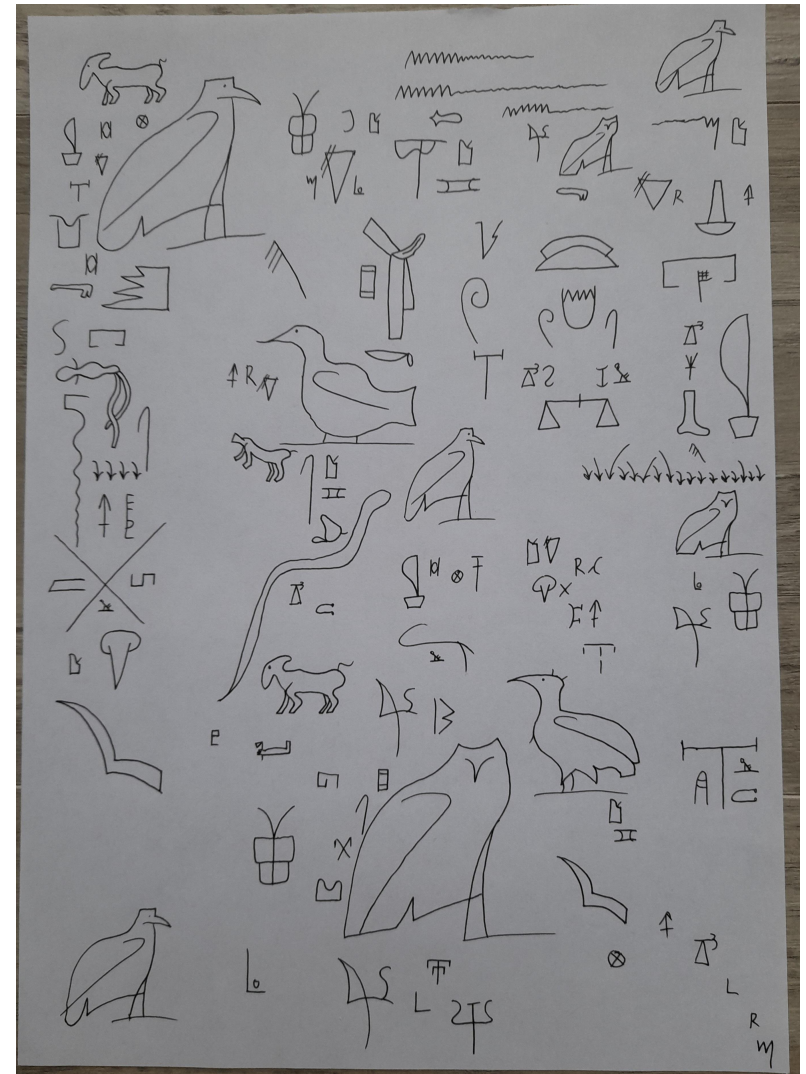
A second step might then deemphasize the abstract elements and instead emphasize the deictic elements of the alphabet thus created, rendering the text-space of the previously created polysemic alphabet that much more feral -

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Addendum: Towards Feral Writing

One potential way of reestablishing the continuum of deixis and world is a feralization of writing. One might proceed in two steps. First, one might restore polysemy to the imperialism of the Latin alphabet, reintroducing older elements ranging from ancient Phoenician consonant scripts to ancient Mycenaean Linear B and ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic scripts. Thus one sentence of the preceding text may become -

Stripping the continuously present world of its marvel, written thought is an autocracy in all senses of the word: its rule is of itself, by itself, and for itself. Its primary - indeed, its only - gesture is the transformation of deixis into writing, ossifying the continuous world into discrete entities, enabling their use and abuse. By way of clarifying what each of these terms means, we will be able to develop a strategy against them.

'Deixis' means any gesture by which an entity is singled out of any given continuum. Its archetype is the gesture of pointing with the (aptly named) index finger. By doing so, I single out a part of the continuum unfolding before me, and render it a discrete entity which I can name, identify, and ultimately control. But such pointing gestures need not solidify. What I have provisionally identified as an entity in the distance may well turn out not to be one - it may be a shadow, a mirage, a reflection. Physical deixis remains tentative, open to the marvel of the present world. Moreover, it is synaesthetic and undermines itself by synaesthesia: my finger may point, but meanwhile my ears and nose hear and smell otherwise. I can temporarily identify what I need to survive, yet the world remains a flickering continuum of temporary constellations.

Writing, by contrast, solidifies temporary and tentative deixis, replacing situational interplays of light and shadow, sound and silence, taste and smell with conceptual rigidity. The play of shadows in front of me is rewritten as a tree, source of wood and linchpin of 'reforestation' moralisms. The loving vibrancy by my side is rewritten as a human, source of labor power and linchpin of 'human rights' pontifications. The loving, caring mother of four is rewritten as a cow, source of milk and linchpin of PETAesque publicity stunts. And the stream of semi-conscious thoughts at the center of marvellous presence is rewritten as a personality, registered at the passport office, tethered to employment and bank accounts, expropriated property-owner with login details and passwords. It is the readability of the world that strips it of its marvel: "Language, and

symbolism in general, are always substitutive, implying meanings that cannot be derived directly from experiential contexts"[1].

The rule of discrete thought renders the temporary deixis of discrete constellations permanent, eradicating the continuum from which they sprang. That is, it operates by substituting each deictic gesture with linguistic gestures: instead of the living, breathing entity before me, I perceive a 'human' or a 'dog', and instead of the play of shadows and gentle green, I perceive a 'tree'. Once identified this way, industrial society can close in on living beings. The lush green before me becomes so many 'trees', each an iteration of the written word 'tree' and its ossified deictic content. Breathing constellations of bodies on pastures become so much 'cattle', each derived from a number on a page or screen and paying for the sin of wanting to be more than that with their lives. And I become a person, an overworked zombie tethered to my online identity.

The readable world thus becomes an industrial hellscape, "an arid, anti-spiritual dimension, emptier and colder with each re-enactment"[2]. But rendering oneself defenseless is no escape: illiteracy is not a strategic move against discrete writing. On the contrary, as every illiterate person and indeed every illiterate creature can attest, the empire of literacy closes over those illiterate with all the more precision. Relegated to a mute outside, illiterate 'humans' are barely able to exercise their fabled 'human rights', while illiterate animals and plants are reduced to so much cattle and development, respectively.

What is required is rather a means of "practically challenging the present social order" which "aims at a rupture" with it and thus "begins with an attack upon all institutions of this society"[3]. Challenging their core, the substitution of deixis with writing, we need to read continuously. The strategy at hand must go back to the ba-

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[1] John Zerzan, Twilight of the Machines (Port Townsend: Feral House, 2008), 5.

[2] Ibid, 9.

[3] Wolfi Landstreicher, Barbaric Thoughts, via The Anarchist Library, ch. 2.

and my fingertips and the USB stick and my desk and the stack of books on it, and then as you read them on the screen. Each time, iteration attempts to re-inscribe this A and this A and this A into 'the A' governing all of them, but each time they don't ossify fully, for you, too, now see this A which is not the same as this A, neither of which are any of the previous As, and all of which form unions of egoists with you and the sights and sounds around you; continuous being unfolding in different ways.

Destabilizing writing thus destabilizes discrete entities and constitutes a step towards the re-emergence of continuousness. Such re-emergence is not that of a pure tapestry without any imposition. I remain within it, and so do you, and thus so does deixis, and thus so does writing. But I, too, dissolve, and am in continuousness, and continuously "experience the so-called communities we inhabit, or the alchemy of the chemical combinations we ingest, or the people we love, or the wars we wage, or the bacterias in our gut, really any situation or context"[20]. Continuousness is thus not a mythical state before an equally mythical fall, but the recovery of a world always already at my fingertips, concealed by an industrial hellscape.

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[20] Invecchiare Selvatico, "Living and Breathing Anarchy", in Egoist Ecologies, 12.

the shape of a "t", and this one here ('r') is that of an "r"? Why do I not apply the same doubts to the coherence of a letter, a syllable, and a word, as I do to a tree, a cow, and my so-called personality and physical integrity[18]?

And secondarily: not only is the connection between the set of experiences which deixis might tentatively identify, and its reification as 'a tree', irreducibly questioned. Rendering writing subject to deixis also threatens the integrity of the 'set' here and now. How do I know this particular set of experiences is a discrete entity at all - that these leaves belong to this tree - rather than, say, this other one - where they belong to a nearby shrub - or this third one - where I am strapped into an Oculus Rift? After all, as Gorgias points out, "it is manifest that the same individual does not even perceive similar things" at the same time, "but instead different things by hearing and by sight, and differently now and formerly"[19]. How do I know, except by the authoritarian imposition of iteration, of writing, that these sights and these sounds 'belong to the same entity'?

Once these questions are taken seriously, writing is threatened at its core. This A is not the same as this A which is not the same as this A, which means that each dissolves into constituent lines, pointing up, down, and sideways towards their surrounding paper, to the hand holding it, to the knee on which it rests, the perch and plants surrounding me as I jot this down, the sky above me and the river before me, the raindrops connecting them and the pen and again this A and this A and this A, neither dissolved nor disappearing but now thought in their radical individuality, which is simultaneously - but not identically - their union of egoists with paper and river and sky and raindrop, their continuousness within this particular constellation. Each A solidifies, first as I type them now, later, where they form a union of egoists again with the screen

sics of how deixis solidifies, if it is to show a way out. How do I know that the lush green before me is 'a tree', how do I identify it? Deixis provides a stream of experiences: I can touch what is before me, smell it, even taste it - and see it, of course. In itself, this does not involve the subordination of its presence to a phrase (the word 'tree') or its content (the discrete entity 'tree'). Rather, the constellation emerging before me implies others: a chorus of voices points towards birds, a play of shadows points towards nests and foxes and other plants, elastic branches point towards a path, moss points towards what side I need to go, and so forth. Thus a continuous mode of being in the world emerges, "a flux, a movement of myriads of be(com)ings. And when I have the opportunity to relax into thoughtlessness, into 'self-forgetfulness', I become the center of this flux and take it all into myself"[4].

Deixis of 'this tree' however remains temporary, and both I and the entity before me recede into continuum as soon as we have concluded our interaction. The play of shadows and light, the presence of fur and skin, and the gestures of hiding and chasing, playing and fighting, create and destroy so many unions of egoists. These unions go beyond the supposedly solid barriers of species: "As I stand on a hill and see individuals I might call buzzard, hare, oak or foxglove, my egoism affirms them as being the world that is an extension of me and that I am extension of. That is both a solitary encounter and one that is shared between us"[5].

To be sure, even the temporary gesture sketched here includes a form of recognition, even short of (written) identification. I have to single out the 'tree' before me, even just for the purposes of swerving. And of course my own survival will take the form of making use of it, ending its existence as a tree and rendering it kindling. Some gesture of recognition, and indeed of use - and thus of

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[18] It goes without saying that the present text endorses the expanded, or eliminitavist, version of identity, over its narrow-minded econometric incarnation. For more on that, see Egoist Ecologies, 29-31.

[19] Gorgias D26a, at 25, in Laks/Most, Early Greek Philosophy, 229.

[4] Apio Ludd, "My Worlds and I," in Egoist Ecologies (Greensburg, PA: Enemy Combatant, n.d.), 39.

[5] Julian Langer, "An eco-egoist destruction of species-being and speciecism," via The Anarchist Library.

abuse - remains. The union of egoists before me need not be romanticized either. Its members, too, can be antagonistic to one another. Yet these antagonisms are situational and resolve as soon as as the constellation dissolves that gave rise to them. Ending up between what my deixis temporarily identifies as a bear and her cub is and remains a deadly experience. Yet it's nothing like the systematic enslavement, rape and war which industrial society forces onto what it constitutes through discrete thought, once and for all, as 'nature'.

Deixis does, therefore, temporarily and tentatively, identify. Yet its ossification into writing need not persist. Consider how I know that this is 'a tree'. In everyday life, this identification will mostly be through language: I call it 'a tree', thereby identifying it, which is to say, carving its shape and characteristics into continuous constellation, substituting 'the tree' for the living union of egoists before me. The archetype of this gesture is the written letter.

To make this clearer, consider these two questions.

First, consider how I know that this specific set of experiences, right here and right now, corresponds to the set of experiences I had when someone pointed them out for the first time and explained that they're referred to as 'a tree'? Moreover, even if there was a way for me to know that this specific set of experiences right here and right now is the same as the one back then: how do I know that my sets of experience are the same as those of the person who first pointed? The other's sets of experiences are theirs, not mine - how do I know their experiences correspond? Perhaps, too, the person wanted to mislead me and pointed at a 'house', telling me it's a 'tree'?[6]

Secondly, assuming I have some sort of way of telling not only that the sets of experiences I have of 'a tree' are the same each time, but also that they correspond to those of the one who first pointed

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[6] This is, of course, the Cartesian challenge of the genius malignus. And just as Descartes did, so contemporary society seeks refuge from this doubt in authority: in Descartes' case, the authority of God; in ours, that of 'adjustment' by whatever means necessary.

and over in the same way, I carve 'tree' and 'bear' ever deeper into the continuum of the world; which is to say, I write.

This means, secondly, that a feral strategy which is aware that writing inhabits deixis cannot simply claim that speech is closer to deixis and thus needs to be exalted as a remedy. Nor can such a strategy affirm an interiority of thought, nor an immediacy of sensual impression. Appeals to immediacy are, after all, themselves implemented in writing. Thought and speech are both projected, from within written language, as that which is beyond written language.

Just as the relation between writing and what is beyond - speech, thought, world - is not a simple negation, so a critique of writing will not consist of a negation of this negation. Rather, it can be implemented as an escalation. "To negate a negation does not bring about its reversal; it proves, rather, that the negation was not negative enough...What is negated is negative until it passed"[17]. Such an escalating negation transposes the script by which writing, in its classical sense, comes to be implemented. Rather than what is written, the escalating negation assays the script itself.

In this way, the escalating negation re-inscribes deixis into the core of writing in the classical sense which, because this type of writing is at its heart, constitutes a potentially terminal threat to writing in general. Even if I accepted the authoritarian imposition of this iterated sound (the sharp motion of a 't' followed by 'ree' rolling off the tongue) and this iterated constellation of ink marks ('t-r-e-e') for the living union of egoists, how do I know that this particular set of ink marks, and this particular sound, form a coherent entity? How does their deixis work? How do I know that the shape of a "t" is a 't', how do I know the shape of an "r" is an 'r'? Moreover, how do I know that this scribble right here ('t') is indeed

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[17] Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics (New York: Continuum, 2007), 159-160.

all speech. It inscribes writing, the dissolution of continuousness into iterated discrete entities, into the heart of speech[15]. This encompasses writing in the conventional sense, on paper and screen, but also rock carvings and paintings, pottery sheds used for doodles and ostraka, road signs and warnings on fences. Yet it also includes the roads themselves and the fences, landfills, dams, and farms, borders and landmines. Nor does it need to be monumental: iteration is also imposed in any discrete gesture which I repeat because 'it's done that way' or 'I was brought up that way', any footprint I leave in dust or mud, any bottles littering the landscape, any name I give or accept, any social role I play (no matter how badly).

Not all of these are iterated to the same extent. My footprint in dust or mud is easily erased. My plastic bottle, on the other hand, will vastly outlive me. Writing in general is a sliding scale of subordination of continuous deixis to discrete iteration. Where a gesture solidifes to the extent that it becomes 'the same' in each new constellation, this gesture gradually sheds its deictic continuousness, its connection to other gestures in a union of egoists, and becomes discrete iteration: writing. At the end of that sliding scale is the written ink mark on page or screen, which is - seemingly - nothing but iterated imposition[16].

This means, first, that writing is never simply opposed to deixis, and does not constitute its straightfoward negation. The deictic content of a sentence is still there when it is uttered and even when it is written down in the conventional sense, but now reified as an abstraction. Thus 'a tree' becomes a biological entity to be described and dissected, felled and reforested. By the same token, deixis is never without writing. Even temporarily and tentatively approaching a union of egoists, I impose discrete boundaries on constellations of light and sound. Yet as I repeat this gesture over

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[15] Hobbes, Leviathan, 26.
[16] Ibid, 27.

it out to me - how do I know that these sets of experiences, mine and theirs and everyone else's, correspond to the set of experiences which ought to be indicated by the word 'tree'? In other words, how is it guaranteed that 'tree' means 'tree' each time I say it or someone else says it?

Once these questions are posed, the authoritarian core of discrete thought becomes evident. 'The tree' is 'a tree' because by identifying it, I constitute it - and by constituting it, I follow rules telling me how to do so. For the question - 'how do I know that my set of experiences corresponds to that evoked by the word 'tree'?' - needs to be rephrased to: 'how is the spoken word 'tree' made to apply to a specific set of experiences?' After all, "what we indicate is by speech, but the things that exist and that are are not speech"[7]. The word 'tree' is, in itself, nothing but agitated air, just another sound in a continuum of sound, or again nothing but a series of ink marks on a page, just another colored blip in a continuum of sight. "So it is not the things that are that we indicate to other people, but rather speech, which is different from the things that exist"[8]. There is nothing inherent to the sound of saying the word 'tree', or inherent to the ink marks on the page, which makes them stand in for the living constellation before me.

Nothing, that is, but authority and the reiteration of this authority. The sound 'tree' hits my ears in waves, just as the ink marks 'tree' hit my eyes in photon traffic. The mechanisms by which these are perceived are exactly the same as those effected by the sound waves of leaves rustling in the wind, and again the same as those effected by the photon emissions of those same leaves' green surfaces. Yet at some early point my domestication begins. Someone -

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[7] Gorgias D26b, at 84 (Andre Laks and Glenn Most (eds), Early Greek Philosophy, Vol. VIII (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 241). There are a lot of difficulties with these passages - not least the fact that they have come down to us in two different traditions, neither of which preserves Gorgias' actual words - but for reasons that should be evident, this doesn't bother me here.
[8] Ibid.

with the necessary authority - takes me aside, points to a constellation of sound and light, and says 'tree'. They do it again and again, until hearing the sound waves which form the word 'tree' combines with the leaf-sounds and the leaf-light and -shadows. Thus a set of experiences is formed, combining word-sound and leaf-sound[9]. Yet this initial set of experiences is unstable and polysemic - a family resemblance at most, of 'tree', 'shrub', 'hedge', and so forth - and thus needs to be refined and reified by ever more precise impositions. Each of these comes about in a similar process: as I get older, calling things 'trees' that 'are not trees' carries ever more social sanction. What I learn over time, then, is not 'what a tree is', but in what situations it is permissible to refer to which constellations by which words[10].

Which is to say: I learn how to impose the notion of 'a tree' as a discrete entity onto the synaesthetic continuum unfolding before me. I learn that the constellation of sight and sound needs to be structured by the meaning of the word 'tree' rather than vice versa; that the word-sound precedes the leaf-sound. Indeed, I learn that the word-sound precedes me. After all, to call a 'tree' anything but 'tree' requires me to unlearn the word and replace it with something else, exchanging one authority for another. (This is why it's so difficult to learn a new language: it's a social problem, not a cognitive one.) Authority never stops governing[11].

Yet the challenge to authority - and its response - don't end here. For what such authority implements at its core goes beyond (quasi-)juridical sets of rules for speech[12]. It is the subordination of

leaf-sound and word-sound to iterated regularity: to an institutionalized inability to separate deixis from the iteration of authority.

Consider the structure of the act by which authority imposes the sound 'tree' as a substitute for deictic acknowledgement of a union of egoists. Agitated air drumming against my ear seems to be merely an audible element within a continuum of sound. Which would mean that it's subject to the same temporary and tentative deixis as every other such entity. The sound of the word 'tree' needs to be singled out in differentiation to the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, birds tweeting and, yes, cars passing by and ferries honking in the distance. In such constellations, and in different languages, the word-sound 'tree' will never be the same. Yet it is 'recognized', i.e., imposed, each time. The authoritarian imposition of 'the tree' for its deixis is therefore not the imposition of this specific sound. Were that the case, the relation between word-sound and leaf-sound might as well be reversed: "Surely speech is constituted out of the external things that strike us, that is, from perceptibles... But if this is the case, it is not the speech that presents the external thing, but the external thing that indicates the speech"[13].

What is imposed is writing, inhabiting speech and working through it: an incision into the continuum of the world which regulates and standardizes each constellation by dissolving its continuousness into iterated discrete entities. This is already acknowledged for so-called 'performative statements': "Could a performative statement succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable statement, in other words if the expressions I use to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming to an iterable model, and therefore if they were not identifiable in a way as 'citation'?"[14] But this iteration is not just at the heart of performative speech, but of

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[9] Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2014), 19-20.

[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein's On Certainty comes closest to acknowledging the authoritarian background of this in no. 204, yet somehow continuously misses this particular mark.

[11] Hobbes, Leviathan, 21.

[12] Which is where Derrida leaves the matter in his "Signature Event Context".

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[13] Gorgias D26b, at 85, in Laks/Most, Early Greek Philosophy, 241.

[14] Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context", in Margins of Philosophy (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1982), 326.