

About smoking, language and Münchhausen - Noël Reumkens

I used to smoke, until one day, when I was sitting in front of this very computer screen and I suddenly heard a sound similar to that of people yelling, from deep down inside my throat. It was a sound I had heard before, lying in bed after a day of approximately five cigarettes an hour, or after running to catch a train, sweat gushing down my forehead and people around me looking at me with a mixture of disgust and curiosity in their eyes.

The sound of your bronchi is something quite unsettling. You cannot control it; cannot, for example, use it to annoy other people in the way Hermine Kleefeld irritates Hans Castorp in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* by whistling her pneumothorax. The sound is simply there, generated by your body. It is neither language, nor speech as we are used to hear on an everyday basis. Yet, though it is not language, it is without a doubt part of a system of signs that sets in motion a particular kind of semiosis in the receiver's head. When you hear it, you immediately know what it means. In fact it belongs to what the coiner of the word *semiotics*, Galen of Pergamon, regarded as its subject matter: bodily symptoms.

In 1937, the German *bête noire* of Dada, Kurt Schwitters, composed his so-called *Nießscherzo* and *Hustenscherzo* (*Sneeze Scherzo* and *Cough Scherzo*). In these compositions, Schwitters turned bodily symptoms – still considered signs without a conscious sender some fifty years after the death of God, as proclaimed by Nietzsche – into the constitutive elements of a work of art. What is normally an unwanted, natural sign became part of a consciously emitted, artistic message. Although it may be hard to attribute a sense of 'real' meaning – besides that of the body's natural reaction to the invasion of foreign germs – to Schwitters' sneezes and coughs; the intrinsic friction in the act of using a speech-impeding, normally uncontrollable symptom as a means of artistic communication is obvious. By using indexical, unconventional bodily symptoms as artistic material, Schwitters implicitly questioned the essence of that other artistic material produced by the body: speech.

German literature and culture in general are well-known for their practically uninterrupted chain of language criticism originating at the end of the 19th century. The experience of crisis when standing before the omnipresence and opaqueness of language expressed in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Ein Brief (A Letter)* can be looked upon as the dawn of modernity in the German-speaking world and beyond. Language criticism, in fact, appears as a *sine qua non* for modern German writing and philosophy in general. Nietzsche famously regarded language as a *Zuchthaus*, a prison, and, according to perhaps the most well-known language philosopher of all, Ludwig Wittgenstein, the boundaries of his language were the boundaries of his world.

Now, there is this famous lie told by the most notorious liar of all times, Baron von Münchhausen. Von Münchhausen allegedly tore himself and his horse out of a swamp by his own hair. The lie has been used as a metaphor by contemporary German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger in his poem *Hommage an Gödel* to point at the intrinsic impossibility of criticising language. In the poem, Enzensberger argues that you can never truly critically speak about language from inside the system itself. In this context, he compares Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem* with Münchhausen's lie and comes to the conclusion that whatever you do, however much you try to escape from it, you are and will always be stuck within the swamp of language. Thus you can never completely describe language, nor can you fully understand it.

So what to do then? Avoid language? To criticise language with words is *a priori* a useless act. However, a non-verbal work of art is equally not automatically an act of language criticism, of course. To make a non-verbal work of art into a language-critical work, one – quite unfortunately – needs language. To criticise language from outside the system – that is to say – without using any elements originating from it – is impossible and will remain impossible. It could be so that the only productive way to criticise language's inadequacy is by not using it, yet in an explicit way. Perhaps in the way of Schwitters' *Nieß-* and *Hustenscherzo*. But even then we need language for its interpretation as being a possibly language-critical work.

Enzensberger offers a solution to language's swamp that is at the same time seemingly easy and perfectly useless. He ends his poem with the appeal to take 'these sentences' and 'pull'. With 'these sentences' he both refers to Gödel's sentences that are neither true nor false and to those of the poem itself. In art, whether it be literature, music or painting, the mere idea of the possibility to escape the swamp of everyday *Geschwätz* will remain, despite the awareness of its impossibility. In this respect art will always be some kind of a beautiful lie told by a fairy-tale baron.

*Freely following Enzensberger quoting Gödel: 'In every sufficiently rich system there are sentences to be formulated that within that system are neither true nor false, unless the system itself were inconsistent.'