MICHEL THÉVOZ

Dubuffet: The Nutcracker*

Casser une noix n’est vraiment pas un art, aussi personne n’osera-t-il jamais convoquer un public pour le distraire en cassant des noix. S’il le fait cependant, et que son intention se voie couronnée de succès, c’est qu’il s’agit au fond d’autre chose que d’un simple cassement de noix. Ou bien s’il ne s’agit que d’un cassement de noix, c’est qu’il est apparu que nous n’avions jamais pensé à cet art parce que nous le possédions à fond, et que le nouveau casseur de noix nous en a révélé la véritable essence, et pour cela il peut être nécessaire qu’il soit un peu moins adroit que nous.

—Kafka, Joséphine la Cantatrice, ou le Peuple des Souris

There probably is at the source of any literary vocation a problematic relationship to one’s maternal language, or rather, to one’s paternal language, in the case of Jean Dubuffet. His father, he tells us in his Biographie au pas de course [unpublished], was an authoritarian man who, given any opportunity, would lapse into terrifying fits of anger. He had a passion for books and constantly bought them and piled them up everywhere. He had a chauvinist’s exclusive and purist reverence for French classical language. In his salon, he loved to bring together brilliant conversationalists, Parisian ones if possible. This was so near to his heart, notes Jean Dubuffet, that “l’existence auprès de lui d’une épouse et d’un fils avait peu de consistance. Ma mère n’avait guère la parole, il lui était enjoint de se taire comminatoirement, j’en ressentais indignation. De moi, on exigeait que je sois au lycée le premier de ma classe en toutes matières et si j’y manquais éclataient les effrayantes colères” [the existence of a wife and a son at his side had little substance for him. My mother was never allowed to speak; she was told unceremoniously to be silent; I felt indignant. As for me, it was required that in school I be the first in my class in all subjects, and if I failed to do so, frightening fits of anger followed].

In brief, everything was done to correct* both the child and the


*châtier: To correct, or purify is used in French for both the child and the language.—Translator’s note.

YFS 84, Boundaries: Writing & Drawing, ed. M. Reid, © 1994 by Yale University.

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language at the same time, and to assimilate the latter to paternal tyranny. It is thus understandable that painting became feminine, or maternal:

Au cours d'un séjour au Mont-Dore, je rencontrai dans la campagne une femme devant un chevalet et qui peignait le paysage avec des pastels, dont elle avait une boîte pleine auprès d'elle. Les coloris de cette boîte me frappèrent fortement et son tableau aussi. On n'y distinguait pas grand chose que des taches de différents verts, justement ce que les moqueurs nomment "un plat d'épinards." Ce m'incita dans la suite à faire de petites peintures semblablement absconses. Je les thésaurisais dans un porte-document que je me plaisais vivement à compulsier. J'éprouvais vif désir, mais aussi grande hésitation, à les montrer à une fillette de mon âge que j'affectionnais (j'avais sept ou huit ans) dans la crainte de me leurrer sur le bien-fondé de l'émerveillement que je leur portais. Je n'ai, pour finir, pas osé le faire, je les ai cachées puis détruites.

During a stay at the Mont-Dore, I encountered in the fields a woman in front of an easel who was painting the countryside with pastels, of which she had a full box next to her. The colors of this box struck me and her painting too. In it one could not make out much more than spots of different greens, exactly what is mockingly called "a plate of spinach." Later this prompted me to make some small, similarly abstruse paintings. I collected them in a briefcase which I took vivid pleasure in consulting. I had a great desire, but an equally great hesitation, to show them to a little girl my age whom I liked (I was seven or eight) for fear that I was deluding myself as to the justified wonder that I derived from them. I did not, in the end, dare do it; I hid them and then destroyed them.

Thus the Oedipal triangulation is determined in this case with reference to language: the man proffers the arrogant discourse of power, and the woman paints silently, in spinach style, the real, in other words, the unnameable.1 Jean Dubuffet, the child, also paints secretly, and with guilt. But come the time, the time of adolescence and revolt, painting would take the upper hand, conceived of as a weapon against words, against culture, and against the enslavement of the mind (they are all one):

Mon dispositif (la peinture) fonctionne comme une machine à abolir les noms des choses, à faire tomber les cloisons que l'esprit dresse

entre les divers objets, entre les divers systèmes d'objets, entre les différents registres de faits et de choses et les différents plans de la pensée, une machine à brouiller tout l'ordre institué par l'esprit dans le mur des phénomènes et effacer d'un coup tous les chemins qu'il y a tracées, une machine à mettre en échec toute raison et à replacer toutes les choses dans l'équivoque et la confusion.2

My weapon [painting] functions as a machine to abolish the names of things, to knock down the partitions that the mind erects between different objects, between different systems of objects, between different registers of facts and objects and different levels of thought, a machine to blur the entire order instituted by the mind in the wall of phenomena and to erase with one fell swoop all the paths that it had mapped out, a machine to foil all reason and return all things to ambiguity and confusion.2

But a child cannot settle his Oedipal relationships by falling back on the maternal register and leaving the father to occupy center stage. Painting, as offensive as it may be to cultural stereotypes, could not exempt the budding artist from having to take on verbal language. After meals that were endured like sessions of sempiternal reprimands, Jean would rush to the garden to execute Indian ceremonies in a redskin language of his own invention, whose lexicon he had carefully established in a school notebook, a childish way of signifying through linguistic aberration that he was not duped by paternal loutishness—the "non-dupe erre,"* wrote Lacan, taking apart precisely that forbidden name . . .

At the origin of Dubuffet's literary activity there is therefore a utopia, or "uglossia" as the linguists call it, or in other words the belief in a first language, pre-Babel, phylogenetically anterior to the law of the Father, and consequently untouched by any solicitation of power, a primitive language, childish in the etymological sense of the word, a language, if we can risk this paradox, hallucinated at times by paranoiacs or mediums. The logophobia manifested toward the languages so improperly called "natural" is always the other face of a passionate logophilia, polarized by an intrauterine fantasy of interpersonal fusion, of immediacy, of unity, of totality, of ineffable communion. During his

*Play on words between nom du père, that is, "the name of the father," and the homophonous non-dupe erre, meaning "the one who is not a dupe wanders"—Translator's note.
entire life Dubuffet will remain fascinated by the inventors of languages who take on the tyranny of the instituted word and who radicalize in their adult strength his own childish rebellions. Certainly, the freedom is illusory, and the possibilities delirious. In the end, they enclose these authors to another prison, that of incommunicability. It remains that the acceptance of the socially necessary "idols of the tribe" [mots de la tribu], constitutes for Dubuffet a capitulation and a mutilation of the mind:

Communiquer c’est une bonne chose, pas si grave. Mais il y a que nos mots, nos langues, ne servent pas seulement à communiquer la pensée; elles la font. . . . Le monde regorge de gens devenus inaptes à toute appréhension directe des choses. Ils ne peuvent les appréhender qu’au travers de la grille des mots. Rien ne leur est perceptible qu’après transcription sur la grille. Ils ne sont plus branchés sur les faits et les choses, mais sur leur formulation. Ce n’est plus de vin qu’ils sont gourmands, c’est maintenant seulement d’étiquettes. 3

To communicate is a good thing, not so serious. But the issue is that our words, our languages, do not serve simply to communicate thought; they make it. . . . The world is overrun with people who have become inept at all direct apprehension of things. They can only perceive them through the grid of language. Nothing is perceptible to them except after transcription on the grid. They are no longer tuned into facts and objects, but into the formulation of these. It is no longer wine that they have a taste for, only labels [Fig. 1].

As a result, an individual in love with the living word is confronted with the dilemma of autism and stereotypy, between which there is certainly no middle course. Dubuffet shares with Nietzsche the feeling that all roads lead to Rome, except that of compromise. He chooses on all occasions that of inflation and parody. Thus, if verbalization petrifies thought, and if we must use it nonetheless, we might as well go directly to the ultimate stage of fossilization, as the only way to bypass the logos and to confront, once again, the concrete. In his period of Parisian dilettantism, Dubuffet applied himself to learning languages that are preferably dead ones, frozen in clay, marble, parchment, or papyrus, sedimented in their own epigraphy, and if possible enigmatic

in meaning, like Egyptian hieroglyphs. Ultimately he undertook a search for those ultrasecret and hyperindividualistic hieroglyphs that are exhumed from the archives of psychiatric institutes and which he will call “l’art brut dans l’écrire” [raw art in writing] [Fig. 2].

However, Dubuffet knows well that, once initiated into the culture of the educated, he is inexorably immersed in instituted language, and that “on ne sort pas de l’arbre par les moyens de l’arbre” [one does not get out of the tree by means of the tree], as his friend Francis Ponge put it. He does not even make the paranoiac pretence of circumventing the logosphere or of dominating it from above. As for him he will proceed by a sort of internal swaggering aimed at a disruption of the representational function of language, seeking to stress its articulations, its mechanisms, its constraints. He will therefore, as a writer, attempt a balance between the genealogical and structural extremes of verbalization, between primitive vociferation and the learned turn of phrase, between glossolalia and literature, between the graphic instinct and the alphabetical code, between the substance of the sign and the ideality of the meaning. From one pole to the other we find the

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1. Jean Dubuffet, “La Botte à Nique,” pages 2 and 3 of the manuscript.


2. Jean Dubuffet, “La Botte à Nique,” pages 4 and 5 of the manuscript.

essays on aesthetic and philosophical themes, the calligraphic essays (La Fleur de Barbe, Oriflammes) [Fig. 3], the texts in “jargon relatif” [relative jargon], in other words a free phonetic rendition of popular speech which defies spelling (An vouaiaje, Oukiva trèné sèbot, etc.), the texts in “jargon absolu” [absolute jargon], in other words formed by invented words which cannot be found in any lexicon (Couinque, l’Hourloupe, etc.), the engraved or lithographed calligraphies in which the substance of the sign tends to overcome the meaning (Ler dla canpane, La bonfam abeber), the paintings which [re]present inscriptions (the series of Messages, of Murs, of Paris Circus, of Tables Paysagées), and the final series of Mires and of Non-Lieux which cipher the real according to an unpublished script. One comes to realize that Dubuffet has spread out, so to speak, the spectrum which goes from legibility to visibility. He evolves in all its registers, from childish babble to the preciousness of erudite language, like an insane linguist who has cast off all moorings and allows be borne by the trials of morphological and syntactical variation and commutation, oscillating from side to side in the verbal field.

Given this, would it be possible to identify a Dubuffet “style”? This extraordinary fading* of expressiveness verifies by default the Laca-

*In English in the original.—Translator’s note.
nian assertion that the subject constitutes itself only as a linguistic effect. Dubuffet uses, or rather misuses verbalization as a jubilant disintegration of self that should cause an earthquake to spread throughout the entire literary field. He always obstinately denied that he was a writer, against the protestations of his critics who took this for modesty, whereas in fact it was a challenge: “Qu’ai-je à faire avec ces colo-
nels des Lettres, hauts dignitaires du Bel-écritre, commissaires aux Syntaxes, moi qui ne hisse de pavillon que noir, noir comme du cirage, votre échotier ne le sait-il pas?” [What have I to do with the colonels of Letters, the high dignitaries of Beautiful Prose, the commissaries of Syntax, I who raise only a black flag, black as shoe polish, doesn’t your hack know that?], he writes in a letter to the Figaro littéraire (Prospectus, vol. 2, 513). Far from experiencing with regard to language that sentiment of mastery, of familiarity, or of property felt by officially patented writers, Dubuffet has instead the impression that he is an undesirable addressee or tenant. He therefore might as well precipitate the conflict, make the worst of the situation, hoist the black flag, and instigate linguistic catastrophes that would disqualify the distin-
guished idioms and tics of expression that are supposed to qualify the style of an author: “Le mythe du Bel-écritre est une pièce capitale de la défense bourgeoise. Si vous voulez frapper au cœur de la caste sévis-
sante, frappez-la à ses subjonctifs, à son cérémonial de beau langage creux, à ses minauderies d’esthète” [The myth of Beautiful Prose is an essential piece of bourgeois defense. If you want a direct hit at the caste in power, hit it in the subjunctives, in the ceremonial of beautiful shallow language, in its effete mannerisms], he writes of Céline (Prospectus, vol. 2, 52).

To be sure, the majority of Dubuffet’s writings defer to lexical and grammatical rules, and even show what one must call quirks of style, which Raymond Queneau takes perverse pleasure in recording: 6 the shift of the adverb to the end of the sentence, the suppression of the article, the inversion of the noun and its attributive adjective, the position of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, certain archaisms or neologisms, and even, occasionally, the proscription of the subjunc-
tive, deemed to be a superfluous mood. Is there any reason other than the customary infatuation of an author for these peculiarities? Un-
doubtedly, as Queneau notes, one reason might be the pragmatic use of

6. “Quelques citations choisies dans le corpus des écrits de Jean Dubuffet,” in Jean
language, a determination to go directly to the essential without niceties, even if it is at the expense of syntax. But Dubuffet also seems maliciously to search out with Machiavellian malice moments of friction between the order of ideas and the order of words. And it is all the better if he gives the impression of struggling with an excessively heavy apparatus of language, too-rigid concepts and excessively procedural grammatical rules! If the expression seems laborious and language is strained at the seams, it is precisely so that we may understand that there are seams, that is, a linguistic conditioning of thought. Dubuffet the writer can be compared in this respect to the nutcracker in Kafka’s short story, who, through a heuristic clumsiness, informs us about his art much better than would a virtuoso.

Consider the antecedence of the adjective, even when it has more syllables than the noun, transgressing the rule called “du second lourd” [of the heavier second] (for example, “la fallacieuse image” [the image fallacious], “une frappante marque” [a sign striking]).* It is certainly an expressive turn of phrase, which indicates the quality before the thing, and consequently corresponds to the synthetic movement of sensation, whereas the succession of the noun and its attribute follows the analytical-rational order of intellection. The same can be said about the position of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, which gives the movement before the identification of the agent (“cessera alors la réfraction . . .” [thus will end refraction . . . ], “Frappe dans ces dessins . . . ” [Strikes in these designs . . . ]). There is thus an inversion, but with respect to what norm? Is there an order of words that is naturally related to objects? Perhaps logic commands us to say: “le sang est rouge” [blood is red] and sensation: “rouge est le sang” [red is the blood]. In any case, the experience is all-encompassing, sensation and intellection intermingle, and it would not be possible to prescribe an order of succession limiting verbal expression. In fact, Dubuffet prefers the less canonical order, not because it is more faithful to the real or to the sequence of ideas, but because it betrays the ideolinguistic double bind† from which verbalization proceeds. (Thévoz, Le Langage de la rupture, op. cit.) If it is true that thought is not independent of the words which formulate it, the irregularity will at least have the effect of emphasizing this subjugation. Generally, the order of words is never innocent, and it is when it is the most “natural,” in other words

*Unlike in English, in French the adjective generally comes after the noun. The reversal of normal order is as noticeable in French as it is in English.—Translator’s note.
†In English in the original.—Translator’s note.
the most transparent to meaning, that it is the most ideological, since it naturalizes precisely the significations which it induces. The natural in writing has no ontological value, but is only a lubricant of which, speaking of the movement of the pen and the linking of the alphabetical characters, the encyclopedist Paillason gives the composition: "Sans recourir à des observations anatomiques, l'expérience, d'accord avec la raison, me fait reconnaître une liqueur onctueuse appelée par les anatomistes synoviale qui, se filtrant par les glandes qui portent son nom, arrose, pénètre, humecte les ligaments des nerfs et leur donne le jeu, le ressort que demande l'articulation la plus facile et la plus complète"7 [Without recourse to anatomical observations, experience, in tune with reason, makes me recognize an unctuous liquid called "synovial" by anatomists that, filtering though the glands that have its name, waters, penetrates, and moistens the ligaments of the nerves and gives them the play, the tensile strength required by the easiest and most complete articulation].

Dubuffet does not like discourses that are bathed in synovial liquid. He prefers the machinery of language to grate, like Ratier's cranks,8 betraying its inertia, its bone structure, and its friction. He takes pleasure in stressing the limits of the speakable, in other words, he likes to "friser le code" [brush up against the code]. The neologisms which he fashions out of suffixes, prefixes, derivation and analogy still proceed from linguistic rules, certainly, but in an application at once extensive and excessive (Oedipal, one would be tempted to say, recalling his authoritarian father) which demonstratively accelerates that which could be an imperceptible process of evolution of the language ("notionneuse est capitalement la culture . . . " [notionous is culture capitally . . . ], "il fait mêmement de l'inutilitaire son site . . . " [he does likewise with the uselessitarian his site . . . ]). These singularities are at once motivated and striking, they underline the workings of language, they propagate their own opacity in words that have already passed into common usage by reactivating their etymology, they consequently elude the opposition between lexical legality and infraction by showing that all of language is a neologism—even though, as they age, words assume the affectation of "naturalness".

The same can be said of the syntactical initiatives, such as the proscription of the subjunctive or the famous "une personne ria si volontiers" [a person laughed so willingly] that so amused Paulhan (Prospectus, vol. 2, 500). Dubuffet knows full well that he will not start a school. One cannot make language evolve voluntarily. The will in language, which proceeds from consciousness, thus from language itself, is tautological, and thus is incapable of innovation. Just like the genetic code, the code of language resists premeditated intervention. If it is nevertheless modified, it is unbeknownst to the agents of that change. The paradox requires that it is enough merely to question language for language to reinforce its system, and, conversely, that one must lose oneself in language to the point of losing consciousness in order to have a chance of modifying it. Thus Dubuffet does not claim to be either an inventor or a reformer. He merely wants to experience the body of signs which he inhabits and in which he thinks as a living, autonomous organism, with its chance conversions, its own initiatives, and especially its assertive character, proper to our logocentric culture. Words do not adjust themselves to reality, nor do they represent it; they fashion it and order it according to their own devices. In other words, the real that they pretend to describe is apocryphal. Dubuffet does not intend to stop language from reinventing the world, but only to expose this construction by preventing it from disappearing into the objective evidence which it creates. Thus he will readily proceed by outbidding or provoking, speculating on the referential power of discourse, in order to accredit the most paradoxical and the most contradictory opinions. When it is pointed out to him that his writings contain contradictions, he answers that he reproaches himself for not having been contradictory enough, given the fact that any affirmation maintained for too long a time turns into absurdity.9

The greatest contradiction is already evident in the disparity of his writings: while the commentaries of the painter on his own work aim toward elucidation and intelligibility, and thus toward the transparency of language, the jargons and the fatrasies wordplay dismiss reasoned meaning and deliberately obfuscate linguistic sign. In other words, Dubuffet the writer behaves alternatively as a virtuoso and as an agitator. He is even both simultaneously, and thus more contradictory than ever, in the texts said to be in "jargon relatif" [relative jargon], which expressively emerge out of a desire for reform, and yet precipitate

the catastrophe. For the Oedipal reasons that we have mentioned, Dubuffet is sensitive more than anyone else to the disparity between current French and the classical language such as it is taught in school, a disparity further aggravated by writing, which preserves only the words, not the intonations, the accents and the idiosyncrasies of elocution which play a major role in verbal messages: “Une certaine manière de prononcer un mot ou de souligner une syllabe, ou d’élever la voix un tout petit peu autrement qu’il n’est d’usage, donne subtilement le sens exact, comme le donne aussi à l’écriture le tracé d’un jambage, au dessin celui d’une hachure” (Prospectus, vol. 1, 82) [A certain way of pronouncing a word or stressing a syllable, of raising one’s voice just a little differently than the norm, subtly gives the exact meaning, just as the tracing of the downstrokes in handwriting and a streak in drawing]. Evidently, Dubuffet takes the side of orality against what he calls the “langue-éteinte” [burnt-out language] and its sedimeted spelling: “C’est inconcevable que les gens faisant profession de poésie—Breton ou autres—fassent usage de la même langue écrite que les secrétariats commerciaux ou les journaux—qui est à peu de chose près la même langue que celle des actes notariés ou traités de médecine. Ils n’ont aucune chance de nous émouvoir dans cette langue-là” (Prospectus, vol 1, 480) [It is inconceivable that people making a profession of poetry—Breton or others—use the same written language as commercial establishments or newspapers—which is with few exceptions that same language found in notary acts or medical treatises. They stand no chance of moving us in that language].

In 1937 already—although Dubuffet was not aware of it—Raymond Queneau had proposed and put into practice a form of writing that was “photographically” traced from current spoken language.10 Nonetheless, at the conclusion of the experiment, Queneau agreed that once the first moment of surprise and amusement was past, the phonetic transcription ended up substituting a new orthodoxy with respect to the spelling that it was rejecting. Dubuffet’s proposal differs markedly in its inspiration. During a stay in the Sahara in 1947, seeking initiation to an Arab dialect spoken by the Bedouins, he had been led to write this language phonetically in Latin characters. The unusual aspect of these transcriptions had given him the idea of doing the same thing with spoken French, as if he were a foreigner ignorant of all the terms

and their separation from one another: [Prospectus [vol. 1, 481–82] "SQON NAPELE LEPE ISAJE SAVEDIR LA CANPANE IARIIN QI MANBETE COMSA LACAPANE LACAPANE SEPLIN DLEGUME ONDIRLE UNE SOUPE MINESTRON, ETC." [WATSCALD AVIU MEEN SDH QUNTRY NUHTHINGBA THERSME MORTHANDHE QUNTRY ITSFULO VEGTA BLE SLAIKA MIN-

ESTRONEE, ETC.]. Dubuffet ironically presents his little book entitled LER DLA CANPANE [QUNTRY EYER] as "le premier texte publié en langue française vivante depuis les Serments de Strasbourg" [the first text published in French as a living language since the Oaths of Strasbourg]. In the end, it was certainly not a question of rejuvenating or reviving the language, but of upsetting its functions.

Certainly the recourse to integral phonetics can lead to confusion, especially after the precedent set by Queneau, by appearing to be a reform of spelling and a renewed fidelity to the spoken word. The latter is supposed to be a prelude to writing. All the more since we currently define the phonogram, in other words alphabetical writing, by its opposition to the ideogram, by assigning to the latter the direct representation of meaning, and to the former the representation of the word. But this is a simplistic opposition. As phonetic as it might claim to be, alphabetical writing is never properly speaking, a graphic representation of voice: it does not reproduce the physical sounds as they were proffered, but only their intelligible articulations. As Jacques Derrida notes, "s'il n'y a pas d'écriture purement phonétique, c'est qu'il n'y a pas de phonè purement phonétique" [if there is no purely phonetic writing, it is because there is no purely phonetic phonè]. Supposedly phonetic writing aims, within the phonè, only at what pertains to writing in a wide sense, in other words at a combination of discriminative units. This does not mean that for all that one should invert the order of precession and consider writing to be originary. In the phono-

centrist system, spelling functions as the auxiliary of meaning, in the manner of a well-groomed valet, both efficacious and self-effacing at once, worn out from the effort of never allowing himself to be distin-

guished as the object of attention. To make a fetish of voice or hand-

writing and to invest the second with the repressive instinct of West-

ern metaphysics, would constitute two symmetrical errors. One should consider instead that graphemes and phonemes correspond to one another, form a system and stand against each other as

representative idealities, through reciprocal alibis, as it were: oral expression refers to writing as to its norm, and writing presents itself as a phonographic representation of the word, like two mirrors which face one another. In other words, the written and the oral are disincarnated through a specular effect that bounces the presumption of an objective referent back and forth. As brash as it might appear, the living word evolves at the limits of writing, in a freedom on probation. As a corollary, the written message tends to claim its innocence against its spelling by putting on the fluidity of oral expression: “Il y a lieu d’observer au passage que cette conception de l’écrire réduit à une simple notation de l’oral, outre qu’elle a pour effet de faire oublier toutes les ressources visuelles des graphies, a par ailleurs aussi celui de faire oublier de même toutes les ressources du parler qui ne peuvent être transcrites dans le système adopté” [Prospectus, vol. 1, 293] [One should observe in passing that this conception of writing reduced to a simple notation of the oral, beyond the fact that it has the effect of making us forget all the visual resources of calligraphy, also makes us forget the resources of speech which cannot be transcribed in the adopted system]. One must have recourse to irregular writing in order to elude the mirage effect, that is, the ideality of discourse, and to redirect our attention to the substance of the sign, that is, respectively, on the vocal aspect as an inscription of sound, and on written speech as a trace.

This is why the attempt to create a phonetic transcription faithful to empirical discourse, or the “textualisation de la diglossie” [textualization of diglossia] as linguists call it, results not in a transparent writing that ultimately vanishes in its representative function, but instead and paradoxically in a disintegration of the oral-written system and in a blurring of the signified. The oral and graphic signifiers become opaque and consubstantially meet each other as fragments in a play of mirrors that thereafter is dislocated. This is why Dubuffet, initially thinking perhaps, like Queneau, that he would readjust written language to oral language thereby regenerating writing, realizes that he has behaved like a sorcerer’s apprentice and has triggered off a chain of semantic catastrophes which eventually take him under their spell.

Having set out to reestablish the representational function of writing with respect to the spoken word, he ends up with the realization that he has unhinged the overall system of linguistic representation.

Wild phonetic transcription does not restore naturalness to language, since for the literate, its only users, it is precisely correct spell-
ing that constitutes language's naturalness. One would obviously lose the essential in the jargon texts by listening to them being read, since there would be nothing left but the drivel of Monsieur-Tout-le-monde or the wild imaginings of a senile gardener. Dubuffet's populism is not socially vindictive, rather it is anarchist or nihilist; it is not a question of reestablishing popular genius against the jargon of intellectuals. Rather, the silliness of the discourse should make us turn our attention toward a contre-écriture [anti-writing] that does not respect the phonocentrist game and thwarts the specular recourse of writing and voice. The fact is that reading the texts in relative jargon is initially disconcerting: they have to be read aloud to be understood, as was apparently done until the Renaissance. Various accounts, including Augustine's, indicate that reading, even solitary, was oral: one read by mumbling. The printed book has since imposed silence by sustaining sight exclusively. In other words typography has provided a powerful contribution to spiritualizing one's relation to the book by inhibiting the pulmonary, glottal, and lingual elements of reading. With his uncanny phonetic transcription, Dubuffet compels meaning to pass through utterance once again, in other words through the body. By thwarting and delaying the intelligibility of the text, by forcing the reader to take this somatic detour, the writer of jargon reactivates the libidinal genealogy of verbal expression and the excremental origin of concepts.

Childish babble is not originally determined by an intention to communicate, but, as psychoanalysts say, by the convergence of the first undifferentiated instincts towards the buccal area. The pulmonary contractions, the occlusion of the glottal sphincter, the friction of the air against the palate, salivary lubrication, cranial vibrations, the touches of the tongue, the suction of the lips, the anal investment of sound substances, represent the various elements of this primitive oral eroticism. It is only in a second phase that an articulated word hurls forth in this libidinal sound magma, and gradually converts phonatory elements to signification. (We find the same phenomena of fortuitous semantic meaningfulness in the graphic register when the initial scribble suddenly turns into figuration.) By delaying the precipitation of meaning, Dubuffet awakens for a suspended moment this primitive erogeneity of the word.

There is no regression in this. Words are never completely objects, even if they recover their body—indeed, especially if they recover it. What point would there be in depriving the word of its meaning if it

then simply took up the vacant place of the referent and proposed itself as a substitute substantial being? Thus one must conversely avoid an ontological valorization of the vocal or graphic substance which, following Bachelard’s psychoanalysis of the materials of painting, would send us back to an intuitive wholeness. Even the infant who is not initiated to lexical signification of words senses their symbolic value, as Freud showed regarding the game with the spinning top. Conversely, in the adult, although latent, the muscular and tactile sensations related to articulated language will remain a source of pleasure even and especially in the most sophisticated discourse. Syllabic mastication, wet or liquid sounds, erectile, fricative, constrictive or nasal consonants: the technical metaphors of phonetics already indicate the subconscious sexualization of the gestures of phonation. Erudite language never frees itself in full from primitive magic; meaning is not able to steal away sound completely. The university chair, the bar, or the political pulpit open the way for an honorable derivation of the initial oral sadism.

In short, language always evolves between the poles of the sonorous body and of ideality. Dubuffet takes a perverse pleasure in accelerating this oscillation, in order to prevent the resolution of the harmony between sound and meaning. The vocal or graphic materiality that we would be tempted to savor for itself nonetheless continues to be articulated in phonemes and letters and to call for a meaning upon which, conversely, we cannot concentrate without becoming distracted by its unusual incarnation—hence the deliberate ineptitude of speech. The same game of mirrors which in the practice of writing with proper spelling functioned in an illusionist manner reverses itself to rob us indefinitely of the idea that would resolve the reading.

There is more: words in general have multiple meanings, at times proceeding from different etymologies, or from a semantic evolution that allows the coexistence of successive meanings, or from metaphorical usages that do not exclude the primary meaning, or from homonymy, aggravated by oral expression and its ambiguities regarding the separation of words (once again the non-dupe erre in all the meanings authorized by orality awaiting the intervention of paternal spelling—orthographe—a noun that French alas puts in the feminine . . . ].* Far from hindering the use of language, polysemy contributes to its generative potential: it entails semantic slippages, associations of ideas, metonymical displacements, metaphorical conversions,

*Orthographe, or spelling, is a feminine noun in French—Translator’s note.
in brief, an openness toward invention. If language were a code rigorously systematized by bi-univocal relationships between signifiers and signifieds, as in computer science, it would remain protected from the original and subject to the field that was already verbalized. It is the indecision of the signs, their constitutive ambiguity, their internal play, that exposes them to the attraction of virtual signifieds in search of formulation. This passage from latency to expression which allows an unconscious or potential thought suddenly to take over homologous signifiers, converting them to an unexpected usage follows what psychoanalysts call the primary process; it is manifested in the *wit* [pun], the slip of the tongue, or poetic invention; it makes us laugh or feel anguish, and in any case disrupts the working of the code in a process similar to genetic mutation in the animal realm.  

Of course, in normal communication, words restrict their semantic spectrum to a precise acceptation by joint interdependent determination. It is said that context reduces meaning. This takes place just as in those graphic games that theoretically allow us to interpret motifs that are in relief or hollowed out, but that in fact force us to choose a perceptive option from which it becomes difficult to escape. The clarity required by communication, reinforced by redundancy, thus constrains words to a univocal meaning. And spelling, we have noted, powerfully contributes to the reduction of polysemy, by thwarting oral ambiguities, by making the syntax precise, by rooting words in etymology, in grammatical legality, etc. Any discourse—and especially the discourse of power—refers to its potential transcription as to its canonical version and its guarantee of ideality. Hence the ideological over-determination of spelling in the specular relationship of writing and speech: the master is one who speaks the way we write. Claude Hagège gives the example of the *liaison* without linking ("il avait un plan" [he had a plan] pronounced "il avète . . . un plan,")* the orally inadequate hypercorrection of one for whom spelling is self-evident and who wants to make this fact known.  

The flights of oratory paradoxically have as their condition this mooring to writing, just like the kite that would rush downwards without its string. This is illustrated *a contrario* by the intellectual coquetry of giving orthographic precision

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*Although the consonant at the end of *avait* is not normally pronounced, because the next word begins with a vowel the *liaison* causes this consonant to be pronounced as if followed by that vowel in the same word.—Translator’s note.  
in order to dispel ambiguity, whereas the purpose is really to bring attention to its existence (thus as it happens I would say that I am analyzing—with a y—the writings of Dubuffet, even when we are dealing with the excremental nature of concepts). As a general rule, spelling intervenes like a censor, by imposing a despotic meaning and exacerbating the libidinal character of the significations that it represses—and inevitably take on a sexual or obscene coloring. The corrected writing does not oppose itself to speech as its antithesis but as its superego.

Hence the reason why Dubuffet’s practice of désécriture [unwriting] has the effect of freeing us from that sort of semantic cramp that subjugates us to a despotic meaning, thus it makes us more sensitive to uncontrolled transverse significations. Within obvious [and pointless] speech, it awakens a latent polysemy which is of concern to psychoanalysts, particularly when they attempt to break the intentional sequence of their patients’ discourse in order to submit its fragments to the play of free association. Like them, Dubuffet cuts the “points of anchorage” that secure the signifier to an exclusive signified, and reestablishes the indefinite and uncontrollable movement of a universal “logology.” If it is true that the order of words is the order of the world, the accrued fragility of the system of language is a prefiguration of the mental cataclysm initiated by a different ordering of signs and a redistribution of their elements.

The texts in “jargon absolu” [absolute jargon], which is characterized by the disappearance of any explicit meaning and by an integral formalism, are presented as a radicalization of the experience of phoneticization. This does indeed prove that the latter did not aim to reward the fault of writing nor to reinforce its ties to the living word, but on the contrary to focus the substance of the sign to the point of abandoning any narrative alibi: “Qualle pesse! Qualle pesse d’argule! Amin d’ingander l’anquet rijoube à l’argule! Podissons l’antctuaire! J’ombile au jude. Les merisseaux fasculent! Anjandés! Rambochent! J’enduquais l’omboque, j’arduchais gravant—bovant la turluque en rabellant crovoche un dermi d’entourle. L’ouve aux racharles! Bancarles! Pas d’avermis d’ongular l’anque! J’ardonnais canut la pinousse. Fripaillais le richot dans tous les cachards du magrole: à sige, à sonagre” (“Couinque,” in Prospectus, vol. 1, 145).*

*The words used are all nonsense words that do not exist in French, except for prepositions, articles and pronouns; the grammatical forms (like conjugation) are derived from French—Translator’s note.
Absolute jargon is certainly not a phonetic or grammatological creation *ex nihilo*. It remains dependent on the French language, of which it respects the general morphology, the grammatical forms, and the punctuation. It would even appear to follow the rules of spelling more than the relative jargon. But the meaning emphatically refuses to surrender. Language is functioning correctly, but for no purpose, a little like the machines of Tinguely that have no other purpose than to move on their own through the nonsensical or tautological multiplication of their mechanism. The phonemes follow upon one another anarchically, as if the language, struck with a generalized cancer, had exhausted itself in ininterminable metastases that emptied it of meaning—this could be academic confinement and logorrhoea in their parodic degree.

It would therefore be an error to equate Dubuffet with the inventors of languages like Hélène Smith and her ultramartian idiom, like Louis Wolfson and his system of conversion of the maternal word, or like so many other authors of raw writings who withdraw into inaccess- sible idiolects. We have said that the repudiation of maternal language is always illusory; in wanting to encode language or make it cryptic at his pleasure, the speaker rarely heightens with a simulacrum the prison of signs in which he is condemned to think. In his analysis of Hélène Smith's ultramartian language, Ferdinand de Saussure noted that it was conceived in order to appear as exotic as possible, and that it thus emerged from the most fantastic morphological principles, with only one constraint, but a sizeable one: not to resemble French—which evidently put it in counterdependency with the repudiated language, thus in a dependency aggravated by its semiotic conditioning. Saussure also stresses the infantile origin of this cryptographic impulse: "Les enfants sont très souvent *onomatopoioi* et, chez les ma- lades, les névrosés, cette faculté persiste dans l'âge adulte. Mon frère, dans sa première enfance, s'était composé ainsi tout un langage à lui. Ma grand-mère, qui était remarquablement intelligente, pouvait en- core réciter *verbo tenus* dans son extrême vieillesse un petit jargon d'une dizaine de lignes qu'elle s'était composé dans son enfance" [ibid., 182] [Children are very often *onomatopoioi* and, in the case of the sick, the neurotic, this faculty persists into adulthood. My brother, in his

17. Cf. Olivier Flournoy, *Théodore et Léopold* (Neuchâtel, à la Baconnière, 1986), 193–94. The author has reproduced the correspondence between Saussure and his grand- father, Théodore Flournoy, concerning the problem of invented languages.
early childhood, had thus invented a language that was all his own. My grandmother, who was remarkably intelligent, could still recite verbo tenus in her extreme old age a little jargon of ten lines or so that she had composed in her childhood. We should note that Théodore Flournoy had already quoted this observation by Saussure in his book on Hélène Smith, but that he had omitted the reference to the sick and the neurotic [a reference which would probably have frustrated the relationship of transference . . . and countertransference with his seductive patient before its time] [Théodore Flournoy, op. cit., 269]. We should also note that we cannot hold Saussure, who was writing in 1896, responsible for speaking of neurosis instead of perversion, whereas in fact it was a case of regression to an infantile position—in this case, ludic glossolalia and the practice of an idiolect as a resistance to parental discourse.

Of course, it is true that Dubuffet’s invented redskin language illustrates what Saussure says about infantile onomatopoeias. Yet, the jargons and the delirium cannot simply be attributed to the persistence of this obsession—and we need not take the same precautions with Dubuffet as Flournoy took with his medium. Certainly, by semantically unmooring French words and communicating with the reader only with blank morphemes, Dubuffet brings into play what could be considered a psychotic potentiality. Roman Jakobson notes cases of “semantic aphasis,” in other words the incapacity of certain patients to communicate anything at all even though they express themselves with apparent ease by respecting the morpho-syntactical rules of the language.18 Their discourse still has an architecture, but the meaning is lost. But Dubuffet remains bilingual, and he plays parodically with the alternatives without becoming their tool. If we were to speak of perversion in his case, it would not be in the pathological or infantile sense, but in a subversive or nihilist one: his texts in absolute jargon, which present all the superficial forms of French [as opposed to those of Hélène Smith] announce a conceptual meaning that they do not honor, since the words finally do not express anything that transcends their own linguistic substance. The movement of reading suddenly comes to an impasse and flows back upon itself like the thrust of a battering ram that dislocates the whole system. This is a manner of semiological epoché which leads us to experience language as the mold of thought and to sense its infused innate ideology.

As opposed to the paranoid cryptographies which still guarantee the signs of a semantic recuperation, be it hidden, Dubuffet's jargons lead to a heuristic disappointment. The vacuousness that is produced is unstable, like certain chemical compounds: at any moment an uncertain signified can stabilize and turn the graphic substance into a message. Writing resists semantic void and, rather than remaining a dead letter, it will lend itself to any and all conjectures (preferably sexual or obscene) without confirming any of them. Absolute jargon exacerbates polysemy, and with it, our need for meaning, identity, univocity, security, objectivity, being or en-soi [being-in-oneself]. Or, to say the same thing in a different way, the ablation of meaning functions like zero in numbers, multiplying its effects. We feel in it the vertigo of a limitless language, which effectively finds its pictorial equivalent, especially in the cycle of the Hourloupe, and even more spectacularly in the aptly named Cabinet logologique.

Concerning this, we can affirm that the hiatus between writing and figural motif has never been so close to being stitched up. Words that follow upon one another independent from any intelligible signification can constitute only a simulacrum of writing, or a text in a figural representation, like written pages depicted in painting, for example on the table of the figure, for instance, pages which the painter has wanted to make identifiable as writing, but at the same time indecipherable, for fear of converting the visible to the legible. We can understand why Dubuffet would have felt the need to consign his jargons to a script that was as laborious as possible, by engraving them in linoleum for example, in wood planks, or even in the bottoms of Camembert boxes, all materials appropriate to render the sign opaque and create a meaning decipherable only through paleography, as in the dead languages that he had been so passionately interested in deciphering:

LER DLA CANPANE fut tiré par moi à l'aide de ma femme, page après page, sur la table de la salle à manger débarrassée après les repas, à un nombre d'exemplaires dont je ne me souviens pas au juste, deux cents je crois (cela nous occupa bon nombre de soirées), sans autre machine que le plat de la main pour les gravures, et, pour les pages de texte, un rudimentaire stencil [fine grille de soie tendue dans un petit cadre] sur lequel j'écrivais avec une pointe. D'où une impression, comme on peut penser, assez barbare, et que venait aggraver l'emploi d'un papier mince qui laisse transparaître le verso et brouille par là quelque peu les caractères maigres du texte. Mais j'aimais l'effet qui en résultait. J'aimais que fût difficultueuse la
The text reads:

**Ler dela Canpane** was printed by me with the help of my wife, page after page, on the dining room table, quickly cleared after meals; it was printed in a number of copies that I do not remember exactly, two hundred I think [this occupied us for quite a number of evenings], without any instrument but the flat part of our hands for the engravings, and, for the pages of text, a rudimentary stencil [a fine silk grid stretched in a little frame] which I wrote on with a spike. Hence an impression, as one might expect, that was rather barbarous, and was aggravated by the use of thin paper that let the other side of the page show through, blurring the meager characters of the text. But I liked the effect that resulted. But I liked the resultant effect that the reading of the words was difficult like the deciphering of old inscriptions in languages that are little known and half-erased by bad weather. It was in the same spirit that I had omitted the accents on the *e*, which causes, I am well aware, a further difficulty in reading, since the accented *e* become confused with the silent ones. To darken is sometimes effective. Furthermore the edition included ten favored copies, particularly dark, all the pages being decorated with stains, printed with a roller, which rendered the text barely visible [Fig. 4].

Dubuffet the writer likes to fight fiercely with a resistant material, using a tool that he is unfamiliar with, once again like the nutcracker. Typographical characters? The term, for him, is contradictory: he is fond of characters that earn their name, resisting normalization, at once threatening the authority of voice, in other words, of breath, of meaning, of spirit, and reactivating its corporal premises, its physiological machinery, its work of vociferation. The phonetism of jargons is the polar opposite of phonology, obstinately restoring the repressed element of the chain of equations that oppose phoneme to word, meaning to sound, typography to tracing, intelligibility to the graphic instinct, semantic value to the work of writing, etc. All things considered, Dubuffet’s *contre-écritures* do not dismiss meaning but instead
only frustrate its functioning, reactivate its genesis through a set of perturbations, spatialize sound, temporalize the letter, visualize meaning, spiritualize the graphic evidence; they invert the poles of the legible and the visible, unglue their relations, and provoke oscillations that carry the mind to the limits of the Gutenberg galaxy.

—Translated by Laura Harwood Wittman