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Review essay

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Watch your words: A manifesto for the arts of speech (originally published in French as Il faut voir comme on se parle: Manifeste pour les arts de la parole)

Gérald Garutti (translated by Raymond Geuss) Cambridge, Polity Press, 2025 pp 127 ISBN: 9781509567294

Words and their latent power have long mattered in France. As one *graffito* from the Paris student protests of May 1968 declared: '*Les murs ont des oreilles. Vos oreilles ont des murs*' ('The walls have ears. Your ears have walls.') Barriers and walls, both literal and metaphorical, punctuate French history, serving to define partially what it means to be a child of France. The national motto – *liberté, égalité, fraternité* – possesses a chant-like rhythm which even today carries an echo of the barricaded-defiance of the 1789 revolution from which it emerged. In the century following that upheaval – and with no little irony – two writers who were to become standard bearers of French literary culture had to try to hurdle the censor's barrier: Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* was banned in 1856 and soon after that all the sheets of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* were confiscated. Like the ambiguous flowers in Baudelaire's disquietingly beautiful poetic sermons, words can be intoxicating and they can be dangerous – and no more dangerous than when they are intoxicating. (It was a bit over the top, and perhaps playing to an English gallery, but not for nothing did Aldous Huxley refer to Baudelaire as 'a bored Satanist'.[1])

Gérald Garutti's self-declared 'manifesto for the arts of speech' therefore taps into a prominent artery of French culture when it declares: *Watch your words.* Garutti is the founder and director of Le Centre des Arts de la Parole in Paris, and this is a book (originally published in French in 2023) which is at once distinctively French and ambitiously global. It seeks to provide both the diagnosis of a near-universal cultural infirmity and propose a cure. The infirmity derives from our current inhabitation of what Garutti terms the 'Kingdom of Irresponsible Speech' (p. 25), which has its centre of power on the internet but whose writ now spills into wider human communication. The internet is 'a diabolical landscape of desolate over-plenitude where all that exists is, on the one hand, shrieking excess, and on the other, unfathomable emptiness, each the mirror image of the other' (p. 43), writes Garutti with a flourish that is typical of this highly readable, urgent and at times profound short book. We are trapped, he writes, by 'media-induced ultra-solitude – the radical loneliness paradoxically generated by hyperconnectivity', and so our state is worse than that envisaged by Baudelaire, in which each person remains 'alone in the middle of a busy crowd', so that 'multitude' and 'solitude' become 'equal and interconvertible terms' (p. 45). The digital revolution cannot be fully re-wound and its technologies do offer tremendous possibilities, says Garutti, who insists he is no Luddite pining for the restoration of an analogue-only prelapsarian Eden. Yet one facet of the revolution which should be reversed, he urges in the spirit of McLuhan, is one that would result in the re-establishing of 'the primacy of the content over the medium' (p. 111).

Calling upon his Gallic intellectual inheritance, Garutti deploys a cultured lens to analyse the fetid quagmire that is today's social media-propelled arena of 'free speech'. We have entered an epoch of what Garutti terms 'universal cacophony' (p. 7). The cool, calm and considered application of *logos* has been toppled and replaced by an online pandemic of *logorrhoea*, a condition of unthinking and always-on transmission. This condition afflicts everyone from influencers to anonymous keyboard warriors. 'In the beginning was the word,' he quips, 'but in the end it is verbiage that is accumulating' (p. 6).

Garutti uses an analogy from economics to capture how we – led by the siren calls of digital technology – have debauched the precious currency of words and retreated into a pernicious isolationism at the same time as having more global reach than ever before. 'We suffer from verbal inflation; our discourse is devalued; our messages have become worthless; what we say is no longer creditworthy,' he writes. 'The conditions under which exchanges take place have deteriorated, and the value of the Other has been massively reduced' (p. 4). The social implications of this are enormous.

Even as it proliferates, speech, in many of its contemporary forms, is undergoing a process of degradation. The result is a trivialization and instrumentalization of one of our most precious resources. It becomes a means of dividing and humiliating people, and of making them cruder and coarser than they were. The destruction of meaning debases the speaker while degrading the listener. The social bond is torn apart (pp 4-5).

There is a plea in Garutti's manifesto for the continuation of civilisation itself. 'This text makes a simple appeal: we must value speech properly; otherwise the current explosion of forms of expression, far from being a sign that we are treating our common humanity as a sacred trust, will rather be an indicator of our social atomization,' states Garutti, before asking: 'Who are we and by what right do we make such an appeal?' The words he gives in answer to his own question are as beautiful as they are necessary:

We are artists of the spoken word, artisans of speech in action, workers engaged in the maintenance of the social bond; we tell stories and pass on history, we create meaning and open up spaces in which people can encounter each other directly. We speak in the name of arts that are already three thousand years old. Arts which since the dawn of time have shaped the human heart, and have laboured, over the course of ages, to allow our humanity to emerge and express itself. Arts which even today make us all a very generous offer: they offer us the possibility of transcending ourselves (p. 5).

But rather than being a vehicle for self-transcendence – of opening up new horizons of human connection – words have become units of self-promotion and other-negation. This is vividly played out in debates on 'free speech'. The invocation of the sacrosanct principle of free speech is, argues Garutti, too often an 'alibi' for the use of outrageous expression at any cost, a process which he apocalyptically says tends towards mutually assured destruction. 'As if there could be such a thing as freedom without any limits,' (p. 24) he says with what feels like a morose shake of the head.

So much for the disease, what of the cure? Garutti's tonic for restoring the value of the debased currency of words is for us to learn collectively 'how to *hold to what we say,* to keep our word' (italics in the original). He continues: 'We must make sure what we say is well founded, but we must then live what we have said, give it substance, carry the burdens associated with it, give an account of it, and accept responsibility for it' (p. 47). Garutti, in other words, wants us to rediscover the gravity that words can possess. His mission is about regaining our maturity of speech through both commitment and craft. This is an enterprise that stretches into the future. Adopting a Heideggerian idiom, Garutti writes: 'Speech is an adventure which constitutes the foundation of our humanity, the network of girders that supports our being in the world; we need to take care of it. It must be worked over until it is in good shape. We need to cultivate speech until we have mastered it' (p. 55). Mastery includes deploying speech in all its dimensions, including the aesthetic. By elevating speech to the status of an art, beautiful words can help redeem our disfigured discourse and our disfigured world. Garutti's Centre for the Arts of Speech is a living space committed to revivifying the integrity of words, where the 'ideal is the citizen who has fallen in love with language as a common resource shared by all humans, who loves the multiplicity of languages as a part of the spiritual inheritance of humanity, and who loves words as a universal treasure' (p. 109).

Garutti is surely right to seek thoughtfulness, nuance, kindness and beauty in the use of words where there is now predominantly thoughtlessness, vitriol, pusillanimity, ugliness and cruelty. But his message is more than just a worthy and articulate appeal for us to say nice things to one another. Speech is underpinned – and assumes – an ethics of reciprocity: a dynamic of mutual listening, which opens up a moral field of genuine interaction. This precious and vulnerable field is undermined by the tyranny of the new digital eco-system, whose hyperconnectivity and ubiquitous gadgetry means that 'multitasking has become our default position, and enforced distraction our natural state' (p. 38). We exist in a state of permanent information saturation, addicted to the river of stimuli which sweeps us along and which perpetually frustrates our capacity to belong – quietly – in the present.

One of the book's strengths is its beautiful use of words to defend the use of words. The construction of each thoughtful and striking sentence serves as a fresh reaffirmation of the power of the word. Garutti underscores the importance of words by invoking a battalion of French writers in the course (and cause) of his manifesto. Rimbaud's is one such voice which Garutti invokes in his prose which – as in all the best manifestos – can be simultaneously mellifluous and outraged. But Rimbaud is just one among many: Molière, Racine, Boileau, Hugo, Verlaine, Gide, Camus, Debord and the poet Louis Aragon are all brought under Garutti's banner.

As noted at the outset of this review, it is important to locate Garutti's words in the wider context of France's literary – and political – history. It is emblematic of Francophone culture that Jean-Paul Sartre's 1963 autobiography was called *Les mots* (*Words*) – words, not deeds. Moreover, Sartre himself had a nice line in *bon mots*. '*L'enfer, c'est les autres*' ('Hell is other people' or 'Hell is the Other') says a character in his play *Huis clos* (*No exit)*. Sartre was exploring how our judgement of our own actions is always informed by our

supposition of how some other person or entity will judge it. Judgement is mediated through words. If only we could expel other people from our existence then we would each be free of the mechanism that communicates our condemnation and denunciation. But words can go beyond that, too: words can link us – or shackle us – to the past. As Proust attempted to show in *Á la recherche du temps perdu*, words are the means by which the past can be conjured back into existence and life aesthetically redeemed. There is something of this Proustian mission in Garutti's words, albeit in a different idiom and in a world of TikToks rather than madeleine cakes.

Indeed, so important are words and their delivery in France that something approximating a national joke hinges on the very matter: in Molière's play *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (1670), Monsieur Jourdain is giddily taken aback when he realises 'for 40 years I have been speaking prose without knowing it!' Poésie, prose and paroles are simultaneously a laughing matter and a national priority.

Words, as modern French people know, can also be deadly. When people around the world declared 'Je suis Charlie' in the aftermath of the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* magazine slaughter, many could have been declaring 'Je suis français'. There is a strong equivalence between free expression and modern French identity, although it is a far from uncomplicated relationship, as the stubbornly intractable questions raised by the horrifying *Hebdo* attack attest.

Yet silence is an undeniable theme in French literature and culture, too. Rimbaud, following a prodigious outpouring of poetry in his late teens, stepped away from literature aged 19, and the rest was silence. *'La vraie vie est absent. Nous ne sommes pas au monde*' ('Real life is absent. We are not in the world') he wrote *in Une saison en enfer* (*A season in hell*) (1873), lines which Garutti quotes approvingly.

Another invigorating – and hopeful – aspect of Garutti's book is that it serves to restore the credibility, relevance and importance of French philosophy as a clearly written, approachable field of enquiry about matters of vital public interest. In the philosopher's mouth, words should be used to interrogate, explore and clarify. But French philosophers, particularly those of the second half of the 20th century, were not immune to charges of impenetrability, obfuscation and general linguistic misuse. If Montaigne, Pascal and Voltaire provided a model of clarity in earlier centuries, then Derrida, Baudrillard, Althusser and other members of the French intellectual pantheon of the last century have stood accused of hiding vacuity beneath a simulacrum of conceptual sophistication (somewhat ironically, given Baudrillard's writings on simulacra). The most persistent accuser in this regard was the late English philosopher Roger Scruton, whose 'J'accuse' on the matter, *Fools, frauds and firebrands: Thinkers of the new left*, pulled no punches; chapter six was entitled 'Nonsense in Paris: Althusser, Lacan and Deleuze'. For Scruton, the intellectual confusion sown by philosophers deploying only a veneer of intellectual depth in the name of social change and violence was a professional crime; a 'fraud'. The cool pursuit of truth, according to Scruton, was sacrificed on an altar whose celebrants demanded both revolutionary fervour and dogmatic commitment to the untestable – and therefore irrefutable – Marxian theory which sustained their creed. Scruton's critique takes us back to where this review began, to the 1968 uprisings in Paris. Scruton, who was living in Paris at the time of the *soixante-huitards*' rebellion, writes:

It was possible, in particular, to observe how quickly and adroitly the left-wing message was encased in dogma, how energetically the new revolutionaries went about the business of inventing spurious questions, barren controversies and arcane pedantries, with which to divert all intellectual enquiry away from the fundamental question that had – from emotional necessity – been begged in their favour, including the question of revolution itself: what, exactly, is a revolution, and what good does it do? (2015: 159).

Put another way, the accusation is that French intellectuals were not sufficiently *watching their words.* Scruton's case is stated with typical provocation. Yet it serves to highlight just how far removed Garutti's book is from the convoluted impenetrability that accompanied a good deal of French philosophy and literary theory in the late 20th century. Through watching his own words, Garutti has put French philosophy right back in the middle of accessible public discourse, and shone a coruscating light on one of the sharpest civilisational issues of our time. Moreover, his book is beautifully translated by aesthetician Raymond Geuss, whose gloriously wide-ranging 'Foreword' is a worthy piece of literature in its own right. From start to finish, these are words that should be read, shared and, yes, watched.

Note

[1] Scarfe, Francis (1986) Introduction to *Baudelaire: The complete verse,* London, Anvil Press Poetry p. 10

Reference

Scruton, Roger (2015) *Fools, frauds and firebrands: Thinkers of the new left,* London, Bloomsbury p. 159

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