BAD WORDS

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Introduction

The worst words revivify themselves within us, vampirically. Injurious speech echoes relentlessly, years after the occasion of its utterance, in the mind of the one at whom it was aimed: the bad word, splinterlike, pierces to lodge. In its violently emotional materiality, the word is indeed made flesh and dwells amongst us—often long outstaying its welcome. Old word-scars embody a “knowing it by heart,” as if phrases had been hurled like darts into that thickly pulsating organ, but their resonances are not amorous. Where amnesia would help us, we can’t forget.

This sonorousness of vindictive words might help to characterize how, say, racist speech works on and in its targets. But doesn’t such speculation also risk becoming an advocacy for the cultivation of insensitivity on the part of those liable to get hurt—or worse, a criticism of their linguistic vulnerability: “They just shouldn’t be so linguistically sensitive”? There’s much to be said for studiously practicing indifference. But the old playground chant of “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me” was always notoriously untrue. The success of the tactics of indifference will also depend on the vicissitudes of the words’ fate in the world, which is beyond my control. I change, too. As the terrain upon which malevolent accusation falls, I am malleable, while the harsh words themselves undergo their own alterations across time, and so their import for me weakens or intensifies accordingly. At times the impact of violent speech may even be recuperable through its own incantation; the repetition of abusive language may be occasionally “redemptive” through the irony of iteration, which may drain the venom out of the original insult and neutralize it by displaying its idiocy. Yet angry interpelation’s very failure to always work as intended (since at particular historical moments, I may be able to parody, to weaken by adopting, to corrode its aim), is also exactly what, at other times, works for it. In any event, interpelation operates with a deep indifference as to where the side of the good may lie, and we can’t realistically build an optimistic theory of the eventual recuperability of harm. Here there’s no guaranteed rationality, nor any inescapable irrationality. Repetition breeds its own confident mishearing, but its volatile alterations lean towards neither automatic amelioration nor inevitable worsening.

This observation, though, leaves us with the still largely uninvestigated forensics of spoken injury. Verbal attacks, in the moment they happen, resemble stoning. Isn’t it making heavy weather, then, to ask how they do damage: isn’t the answer plain, that they hurt just as stones hurt? At the instant of their impact, so they do. Yet the peculiarity of violent words, as distinct from lumps of rock, is their power to resonate within their target for decades after the occasion on which they were weapons. Perhaps an urge for privacy about being maliciously named may perpetuate the words’ remorseless after-

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1. See chapter 5 of my The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony.
2. Joan Scott, writing about history’s phantasms, notes that “retrospective identifications, after all, are imagined repetitions and repetitions of imagined resemblances” [287].

diacritics / winter 2001 diacritics 31.4: 41–53
life: I keep what I was told I was to myself, out of reserve, shame, a wish not to seem mawkish and other not-too-credible reasons such as guarding the word so it can’t slip away to be lost in the broad linguistic flood; yet even if I manage to relinquish this fatal stance of nursing my injury, it may well refuse to let go of me. Why, though, should even the most irrational verbal onslaught lodge in us, and why should it stubbornly resist ejection, and defy its own fading? For an accusation to inhere, must its human target already be burdened with her own prehistory of vulnerability, in the shape of some psychic susceptibility; must it even depend on her anticipating readiness to accept or even embrace the accusation that also horrifies? Maybe, then, there’s some fatal attraction from the aggression uttered in the present toward earlier established reverberations within us, so that to grasp this phenomenon, we have to leave a linguistic account and turn instead to a prelinguistic psychic account. Yet here the standard contrast between the linguistic and the psychic, in which we are usually forced to plump for either the unconscious or language, is especially unhelpful. There’s nothing beyond interpellation, if by that “beyond” is meant a plunge into an ether of the psyche as soon as we topple off the ledge of the historical and linguistic. For refusing these thoroughly synthetic alternatives need not commit us to a belief in an instantaneous, ahistorical impact of the bad word—or to assume some primal word of injury which made us subsequently open to verbal assault, as if the chronology of harm must always unfold in a straight line of descent.

The impact of violent speech in the present may indeed revive far older associations in its target. An accusation will always fall onto some kind of linguistic soil, be it fertile or poor; and a well-prepared loam is no doubt commoner than a thin veneer on bare rock. Should we, though, necessarily call such a variation in anger’s reception its “psychic” dimension, in a tone which implies a clear separation from the domain of words? There has, undoubtedly, to be something very strong at work to explain why we can’t readily shake off some outworn verbal injury. The nature of this strong thing, though, might better be envisaged as a seepage or bleeding between the usual categorizations; it need not be allocated wholesale to an unconscious considered as lying beyond the verbal, or else to a sphere of language considered as narrowly functional.

For the deepest intimacy joins the supposedly “linguistic” to the supposedly “psychic”; these realms, distinct by convention, are scarcely separable in practice. Instead of this distinction, an idea of affective words as they indwell is implied in this essay—a broadly linguistic conception, but which isn’t separated from, contrasted to, or opposed to the psychic. So, for instance, my amateur philology may be quiet vengeance: fury may be, precisely, an intense, untiring, scrupulous contemplation of those old bad words which have stuck under the skin.

The tendency of malignant speech is to ingrow like a toenail, embedding itself in its nearer until it’s no longer felt to be “from the outside.” The significance of its original emanation from another’s hostility becomes lost to the recipient, as a tinnitus of remembered attack buzzes in her inner ear. The bad word reverberates—so much so, that it holds the lure of false etymology; it’s easy to assume that “to reverberate” derives from characteristically self-repeating verbal actions (whereas it meant “striking or beating back.”) Rancorous phrases, matted in an undergrowth, appear to be “on the inside” as one fights them down while they perpetually spring up again. This is where it is crucial to remember that the accusations originally came from the outside, and the rage they echo was another’s rage. But this half-consolation of the realist’s recourse to history is not enough; we also need to dedramatize the words as they continue their whir-

3. Words of Selves 84–89. For an introduction to the history of pragmatics, which does differently consider the forcefulness of language, see Nehrlich and Clarke.
ring, and to sedate their bitter resonances in the inner ear’s present. For how does anyone withstand this common experience of being etched with harsh names? One art of survival, this essay will suggest, is to concede that, “Yes, this person really wanted me dead, then,” yet in the same breath to see that the hostile wish is not identical with the excessive hostility of the lingering word, which has its own slow-burning temporality. The accuser’s personal rage has a different duration from the resonances of the recalled inner word: to be able to separate and apportion these two may help. We would need to try out some art of seeing the denouncer as separate from the denunciation, while also at its mercy himself. Is there some stoical language practice to counter the property of accusation to continue its corrosive work, even though the accuser may have died years ago? How this might be attempted is ventured in the following discussion where, rather than any kindly strategy of humanizing the pronouncer of the bad word, or of grasping the special susceptibility of its human target, a cooler tactic of enhancing the objectification of the word is suggested. It is the very thinglike nature of the bad word which may, in fact, enable its target to find release from its insistent echoes.

1. Accusation Often Lodges in the Accused

There is in Paris, on rue Pavée in the quatrième, a decrepit-looking language school which displays in its window, in English (on a dusty cloth banner, in fifties-style white on red lettering), this injunction: “Don’t let the English language beat you—Master it before it masters you.” A curious exhortation to have been chosen as a motto by any language school—since for the native speaker the onrush of language is unstoppable, yet the exhortation is also irrelevant for the non-native, who’s never subject to joyous capture by a language not her first.

But what certainly threatens any comforting notion of our mastering language is the gripping power of predatory speech, which needs our best defensive efforts in the face of its threatened mastery of us. It’s true enough, though, that not only imperious accusation is apt to indwell. So can lyric, gorgeous fragments, hymns; beautiful speech also comes to settle in its listeners. There’s an unholy coincidence between beauty and cruelty in their verbal mannerisms; citation, reiteration, echo, quotation may work benignly, or as a poetics of abusive diction. If graceful speech is memorable, by what devices do violently ugly and lovely language both inhere, or what does the internal strumming of lyric quotation have in common with the quotation of aggressive speech? Perhaps the happily resonant indwelling of lyric may be explained in ways applicable to the unhappy experience of being mastered by hard words far better forgotten. Evidently there exists what we could call “linguistic love,” a love sparked and sustained by the appeal of another’s spoken or written words—that is, by something in the loved person which is also not of her, and which lies largely beyond her control—her language. But if there is a linguistic love which is drawn outward to listen, there’s also linguistic hatred, felt by its object as drawn inward. A kind of extimacy prevails in both cases. Such imagined speech hollows can resemble a linguistic nursing home, in which old fragments of once-voiced accusation or endearment may resentfully or soulfully lodge. Where verbal recurrences are distressed, they are carried as scabs, encrustations, calcifications, cuts. If inner speech can sing, it can also tirelessly whisper, mutter, contemplate under its breath to itself, and obsessively reproach itself. It can angrily fondle those names it had once been called. If there’s a habitual (if not inevitable) closeness between accusation and interpellation, there’s also an echolalic, echoic aspect of interpellation itself. Persecutory interpellation’s shadow falls well beyond the instant of its articulation. There are ghosts of the word which always haunt any present moment of enunciation, render-
ing that present already murmurous and populated. Perhaps “the psyche” is recalled voices as spirit voices manifesting themselves clothed in the flesh of words, and hallucinated accusation may underscore factually heard accusation. There exists in effect a verbal form of post-traumatic stress disorder, marked by unstoppable aural flashbacks. Here anamnesia, unforgetting, is a linguistic curse of a disability. The inability to forget, too, has been classified as a neurological illness.\textsuperscript{4}

If language spills to flood everywhere, if it has no describable “beyond,” that broadly true claim can’t tell us exactly how it operates on its near side and why its apparent innerness is so ferocious. The malevolent word’s reverberation is incalculable; it may buzz in the head of its hearer in a way that exceeds any impact that its utterer had in mind. Yet its impress may be weak. Or it may feed melodramas of an apparent addiction to domestic-as-linguistic violence: imagine someone who habitually ends up in a position of pleading with those deaf to all her appeals to act humanely, when it was long clear that they would not do so, yet at those dark moments it seemed to her that her whole possibility of existence was at stake in extracting a humane word from them, although this had always proved impossible. She compulsively redesigns a scenario in which her question “Am I a bad person?” can be asked and answered, always in its own unhappy terms; for she cannot get her ancient interrogation answered by someone who’s not already her opponent; anyone else would rephrase her question, returning it to her for reexamination to expose its irrationalities. Only she can undo it. Meanwhile if she persists in posing it, it will only receive an affirmative answer. Must the force of “the psychic” be isolated here, then, if the unrelenting person to whom she presents her hopeless appeal is rediscovered with a terrible reliability, if some damaging next interlocutor conveniently appears for her, while the impassioned questioner labors to rephrase her history as if to discover grounds for believing, despite her own sound memories of real events, that such cruelty could not have happened?

To continue in this (fatally exhilarating) vein of psychologizing speculation—the capacity of lacerating accusation to indwell may be such that, while its target is fearful that it may be true, she’s also fearful that it may not be true, which would force the abandonment of her whole story. As if in order to “justify” the years of unhappiness that it has caused her, she almost needs the accusation to be correct—as much as in the same breath, she vehemently repudiates it. Perhaps she would rather take the blame on herself for the harm of the past, because it has already and irretrievably been visited upon her, than to admit it had happened arbitrarily in that she was then (as a child) truly helpless, an accidental object lying in the path of the assault. Perhaps the need for the accusation to be true, as well as fought against, is in part her need to have some show of a rationale, and hence less of frightening contingency as the only explanation for the damage. Perhaps her pleadings for exoneration are also pleadings to have some nonexistent logic underlying the blame laid bare, so that at last she can grasp and understand it. Hence her tendency to ask repeatedly, “But then why am I, as you tell me I am, an evil person?” There is an anxiety of interpellation, in which the subject ponders incessantly to herself, “Am I that name, am I really one of those?” Her query, while it interrogates the harsh attribution, remains under its rigid impress. She needs to find those to whom she can address it and have it taken seriously, despite its capacity to provoke their irritation; this is why recalcitrantly obdurate people will always prove her “best” (that is, least maleable) addressees. She is reluctant to be emancipated from her distressing situation, only because that rescue would make retrospective nonsense out of a wrong that she was forced to live out as if it had a rationale. Her attachment to the apparent truth inherent in her damnation (even while she nervously denies it) is that she must know it

\textsuperscript{4} In, for instance, some South American psychiatric classifications.
to be deserved, to make sense of the misery it has caused. To have that mimesis of logic taken away from her in retrospect, to be shorn of its "necessity" in the name of her own emancipation is hard—despite the fact that she also profoundly disbelieved it. She has struggled intently to convey intelligibility to the damage in the moment that she has undergone it, as if there had to be a truth in it. This is a difficult point, and I am not hinting at any masochistic notion of hers that her pain is deserved, is her own fault—am simply describing her wish for there to have been some retrospective necessity for it, in order to justify it.

These last two paragraphs have mimicked a train of speculation as to why, for some purely imaginary heroine of pathos, the harsh word might have come to resound in and be taken seriously by her. Yet if we’re inquiring what exists already that chimes within its target for lacerating interpellation to work, the pathology of that accusation itself might accompany our attention to that of the accused. An air of reason makes its fatal appearance when accusation insistently claims that it speaks a purely rational cause and effect in its sentence "You are this bad thing, because I say so." A fantasy of formulaic interpellation is that it’s really addressing the target which stands before it, whereas its own temporality is badly askew. Then the distorting work of repeated echo may happen for the hearer too: “I’ve heard this accusation before, so it must hold some truth.” Compelled to seek out any logic in the charges against her, she may desperately try to impose some sequence upon the deeply irrational. Perhaps her will to find consistency and sense, especially within cruelty, means that she won’t ever detect and register any sense in whatever more benign utterances may later come her way. But now we have slipped straight back onto the terrain of speculative psychology again; this time we might try turning it, not onto the target, but onto the utterer of the bad word.

2. Accusers Themselves Are Forcibly Spoken

It is the cruel gift of the malignant word to linger and echo as if fully detached from its original occasion, whose authoritative hostility I might by now, having recognized it as such, have dethroned. For the word itself still retains its reverberating autonomy, despite my potential overthrow of its speaker. This fact may offer one answer to the suspicion that accusation can retain me in its clutches only because I am especially emotionally pliable in the face of the authority of the Other. The word, instead, may be the real Other. Or the Other may be cut down to size as “just” words, and dedramatized to lower-case.

A difficulty with theories of the capitalized Other is that they short-circuit the complexity of influences, suggesting a narrowed dialectic, since they function as descriptions of a fantasized mastery which operates within and on the singular figure of the self. But my “I” also always emerges from somewhere else, before the concealing of the Other, and across some history of linguistic exchanges prior to my mastery of words. I am the residue of echoes which precede my cohering and imbue my present being with a shadowiness. These aural shadows may be dispelled, but they may thicken and as-

5. As Joan Scott writes, “the fantasy also implies a story about a sequential relationship for prohibition, fulfilment, and punishment (having broken the law that prohibits incest, the child is being beaten)” [290].

6. Jean Laplanche has remarked on the “message” which always comes to me from another, as an impingement on me of the other’s unconscious, formative for my own, and has raised the question of how to take account of that constitutive alterity. “Confronted with this enigmatic message, a message compromised by any number of unconscious resurgences, the child translates it as best as he can, with the language at his disposal” [Laplanche 59].

46
sume deeper powers of obscurantism. This uncertainty also troubles my accuser equally—or perhaps worse. Which is not to deny that there is (relative) mastery; but we could remember that the big Other of theorized fantasy is also mapped onto the mundane lower-case other in the daily world, those ordinary human others who are also produced by the script of rage, driven along by its theatrical auto-pilot. The accuser, too, is spoken.

Wittgenstein, a nervously driven questioner himself, brooded over the psychology of compulsive philosophical doubt: “Why should anyone want to ask this question?” The same musing could be turned toward the accuser as a phenomenon: “Why should anyone ever want to speak with this violence?” But there’s another thought which sidelines such an interrogation of my accuser’s motives: the reflection that he is dispossessed of his own words in advance. The rhetoric of rage speaks him mechanically and remorselessly. However much the accuser feels himself to triumph in the moment of his pronouncement, he is prey to echo. For, as Wallace Stevens neatly observed of the cavernous grandeur of inner oratory, “When the mind is like a hall in which thought is like a voice speaking, the voice is always that of someone else” (“Adagia” 907). The orator of violence is a mere instrument of dictation by tics and reflexes. There’s nothing gratifyingly original about the language of attack, in which old speech plays through the accuser; it’s the one who speaks damage who becomes its sounding board. (I’m not inching toward a sneaking sympathy for the utterer of hate: that he himself is not remotely in possession of his language does nothing whatsoever to soften his words as they streak through him to crash onto his target.) Rage speaks monotonously. The righteousness of wrathful diction’s vocabulary often sorely restricts it, and the tirade is marked by that lack of humor which alone lets the raging speaker run on and on. Once any awareness of his repetitiousness creeps over him, rather than feel vindicated by the tradition which is driving him, he’s more likely to feel embarrassed enough to stop. His fury may be exaggerated by his helplessness at being mastered by his own language (whether or not he gives this description to his subjugation). For the language of anger is so dictatorial that it won’t allow him to enjoy any conviction that he is voicing his authenticity. Meanwhile, my very existence as the butt of his accusation is an irritant to him, since under his onslaught, I am apparently nothing for myself any longer but am turned into a mere thing-bearer of his passion, to which I am maddeningly unresponsive. This is almost irrespective of my own passivity or my retaliation; it is because his utterance has, in its tenor, thrown me down. For the rage-speaker, I can have no life left in me, or rather none of that combative life that he needs to secure his own continuing linguistic existence for himself. Attacked, I have been rendered discursively limp, but no real relief can be afforded to my adversary by what he has produced as my rag doll quiescence. The more intense the anger, the less the sense of any agency its utterer possesses, until eventually he feels himself to be the “true victim” in the affair. Hence that common combination of rage with self-pity: a lachrymose wrath.

In the light of this, the injunction to “get in touch with your anger” is hardly the therapeutically liberating practice its proposers assume. Instead, this variant on the Parisian language school’s exhortation, “master the language of anger before it masters you,” might prove more emancipating. But what about being the bad speaker myself? There’s an experience that could be described as a “linguistic occasion,” poised somewhere halfway between “language speaks me” and “I speak language.” It is the flashing across the mind of words which fly into the head as if they somehow must be said. A clump of phrases shape their occasion which swells toward articulation. But I could

7. A burden of his sustained discussion of pain and skepticism about its reporting, in vol. 1 of Philosophical Investigations.
stop their translation into speech; when maxims are actually uttered aloud, then something else has already given these wordy impulses a currency, licensed their entry into a world of ordered fantasy.

This “something else” runs close to the question of somewhere else. Where is the place where language works? A doubtful contrast of inner and outer haunts the puzzle of whether I speak (from the inside outward) or whether I am spoken (from the outside in). This old tension between speaking language and being spoken by it is delineated well enough, yet still vibrates uncertainly; and neither the topography of language’s extrusion from the speaker’s mouth like ectoplasm, nor its companion, the topography of linguistic penetration from the outside, seem apt resolutions. The latter offers a vision of penetration through the ear, like that persuasive Byzantine myth of the annunciation and conception, in which a falling star has shot into the ear of the patient Virgin Mary. Sometimes, in an attempt to resolve the puzzle of place, its polarities are folded together so that the conventionally outer traverses the conventionally inner. Here, for instance: “This passion of the signifier now becomes a new dimension of the human condition in that it is not only man who speaks, but that in man and through man it speaks, that his nature is woven by effects in which is to be found the structure of language, of which he becomes the material, and that therefore there resounds in him, beyond what could be conceived of by a psychology of ideas, the relation of speech” [Lacan 315]. How does such a sonorous relationship work in respect of bad words? If words themselves might neatly exemplify the concept of extremacy, in that they are good candidates to be that celebrated trace of externality, the foreign body at the very heart of psychic life, our impression of an unalloyed inwardsness in the case of inner speech is still acute. Despite the many attractions of conceiving language as lying out there and lunging from the outside to speak the speaker, we still sense that we fish up our inner words, dredge them up. But in the case of recalled damaging speech, there’s less of a trawling expedition to plumb some depth, and more of its rising up unbidden, Kraken-like, to overwhelm and speak us. Yet at the same time we might also understand this unconscious to come from the outside, in the shape of the common and thoroughly external unconscious of unglamorous language. This then mutates into what we experience as our profoundly inner speech. Or as Volosinov (who by the word “ideological” appears simply to mean the whole world of signs and gestures8) tautly formulated it; “Psychic experience is something inner that becomes outer, and the ideological sign, something outer that becomes inner. The psyche enjoys extraterritorial status in the organism. It is a social entity that penetrates inside the organism of the individual person” [39]. These shards of imported sociality as bad words remain as impersonal traces in me, in the way that swearing is impersonal; I have not thought them up, they are derivations, cliché fragments of a deep unoriginality which have lodged in my skull. Usually my verbal memory isn’t bland or kindly, or even discreet in its recall. Linguistic shrapnel can lie embedded for years yet still, as old soldiers from the First World War reportedly used to say, give me gyp in damp weather. Still, language is not exactly speaking me at these points—for, unlike the swear word that escapes me when I hammer my thumb, I retain some capacity to not utter it. A single speech event doesn’t work in isolation, but darts into the waiting thickness of my inner speech to settle into its

8. The Russian word “ideologiya” has, like “ideology,” debated meanings. As one glossary on Bakhtin’s terms, by Graham Roberts, asserts, “The Russian ideologiya is less politically coloured than the English word “ideology.” In other words, it is not necessarily a consciously held political belief system; rather it can refer in a more general sense to the way in which members of a given social group view the world. It is in the broader sense that Bakhtin uses the term. For Bakhtin, any utterance is shot through with “ideologiya,” any speaker is automatically an ideolog” [249].
dense receptivity. It may become a furious dialogue where I'll plead with some imagined inward other; its script grows heavy with his antagonism, which it preserves in me. My subsequent distress is rehearsed intently and silently under my breath, in a darker version of Volosinov's more benevolent persuasion here:

Therefore the semiotic material of the psyche is preeminently the word—in inner speech. Inner speech, it is true, is intertwined with a mass of other motor reactions having semiotic value. But all the same, it is the word that constitutes the foundation, the skeleton of inner life. Were it to be deprived of the word, the psyche would shrink to an extreme degree: deprived of all other expressive activities, it would die out altogether. [Volosinov 29]

My swollen (because word-stuffed) psyche can, however, assume most unbecoming shapes. Some graceless prose of the world has got me in its grip, and my word-susceptible faculty is seized and filled up by it. It's a neurolinguistic circus, this wild leaping to my tongue of banally correct responses, bad puns, retold jokes to bore my children, and citation without discernment. To this list could be added many other kinds of stock formulae, in the shape of racist utterance, idle sexism, and other prefabrications. Inner language is not composed of graceful musing, but of disgracefully indiscriminate quotation, running on automatic pilot. Nevertheless, even if such reflections mean that I'm displaced as an original thinker, I'm not quite evacuated. Even if my tawdry inner language is thinking me (although “thought” is too dignified a term for such gurglings) there's many a slip between inner thought and lip. It's certainly speaking in me, but I can subdue it before it fully speaks me; I can edit or inhibit the invading words. I am an enforced linguistic collaborator, but only insofar as a long parade of verbal possibilities marches across my horizons. Thought is made in the mouth, but it can also be halted before it passes my lips. And if it isn't, this is hardly an expression of my spontaneity, but rather of my consent to language's orders. Uttering bad words entails an especial passivity of allowing myself to be spoken by automated verbiage, by an "it is speaking in me." If my bad words aren't moderated, my supposed authenticity of expression consists merely in my obedience to the rising of what is ready-made to the tongue. I am not literally compelled to speak my love, my despair, or my cynicism. Uttered aggression happens when something in me has licensed the articulation of my linguistic impulses into more than flickers. The expression flashes over me, and it will have its way, but only if I don't throw it out. That is the extent of the act of my linguistic will; it is no powerful author of its own speech. It comes puffing up in the wake of the inner linguistic event to deal with its violence, to assent to it or demur, to ascribe some given sentiment, to abrogate to myself that standard opinion. This is what it takes for me to succeed or fail at being the bad speaker myself—not to be a beautiful soul with the hem of my skirts drawn aside from the mud of linguistic harm, but to elect whether to broadcast or to repress the inward, yet still thoroughly worldly, chattering of imported speech that fills me.

3. The Word as Thing

Gripped by visions of exuberance swelling into parsimony, Hegel writes: "Speech and work are outer expressions in which the individual no longer keeps and possesses himself within himself, but lets the inner get completely outside of him, leaving it at the mercy of something other than himself. For that reason we can say with equal truth that these expressions express the inner too much, as that they do so too little [. . .]" [187].

diacritics / winter 2001
Such a reflection seems to lean toward an antiexpressivist stance, in which the notion of language’s natural “expressivity” becomes terribly misleading, either because my utterance is too immediately saturated with me, or it is radically separated from me and is at the mercy of whatever carries my words away and out of the range of my intentions. Bad naming in particular, through its overblown immediacy, “does not therefore provide the expression which is sought” [188] and lacks that mutual yet finally productive self-alienation which pertains (at least in the spasmodically softer focus of the “Hegelian” view) to language proper. In this, Language or Word is Spirit. If the word is also historical and material, then the cruel word must also call us into social being, if of a deathly kind. As for the possibility of our resisting it, the language hangs there, supremely indifferent as to whether it is resisted or not. What is more critical for that rather ambiguous thing that we could roughly call the Hegelian view of language is that to ignore its sociality would go violently against the way of language in the world. Sociality, of course, is not sociability. On the aspect of making people up, a post-Hegelian claims,

What I seek in speech is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question. In order to be recognised by the other, I utter what was only in view of what will be. In order to find him, I call him by a name that he must assume or refuse in order to reply to me. [...] But if I call the person to whom I am speaking by whatever name I choose to give him, I intimate to him the subjective function that he will take on again in order to reply to me, even if it is to repudiate this function. [Lacan 86–87]

In this manner, Lacan continues to emphasize, I install him as a subject.

Yet we might demur here, in respect of bad words. For hatred aims, not at any animated exchange with a respondent, but at that person’s annihilation. My defense against serious verbal onslaught, then, could well adopt an analogous tactic of impersonality, and espouse a principled nonengagement with the proffered scenario of (hostile) recognition. That is, I will ignore the utterer, the better to dissect the utterance. To isolate the word as thing, to inspect it and refuse it, demands a confident capacity to act highly unnaturally toward language, which normally functions as an energetic medium of human mutual exchange. Bad words’ peculiarly seductive distraction to me incites me to slip toward self-scrutiny, because another’s angry interpellation so readily slides into my own self-interpellation—where a thousand inducements to self-description, self-subjectification, and self-diagnosis are waiting eagerly at its service. But if I simply act “naturally” toward these inducements of the bad word, by treating it as any token of exchange and recognition between humans, I’ll be thrown down by it. Then how may I shield myself from its furious resonances? If I don’t want to stay petrified by it, then instead I have to petrify it—and in the literal sense. That is, I’ll assert its stony character.

From the perspective of anyone faithful to an “intersubjective” view of language, aggression is only formally language and scarcely that at all. It resembles a stone hurled without reflection, which the furious thrower has snatched up just because it lay to hand. The target won’t deflect the blow, but will be spared its after-effects, because she realizes the impersonal quality of the object. The word considered as stone will shock but not break her. The denunciation hurts on impact, but later it weakens, as its target sees there is only an accidental link between what was hurled and the will to hurt. She realizes that the bad word is not properly “expressive” of the speaker’s impulse to aggressive speech (it cannot be, since “there is always at once too much as too little”

9. “[...] through all the techniques of moral and human sciences that go to make up a knowledge of the subject” [Deleuze 103].
diacritics / winter 2001  

[Hegel 308]) while the impulse needs to be understood in itself and independently of its instrument, the thing-word. So if I decide to embrace this defensive strategy, I can inform the malignant word that it’s not really a word by the strenuous artifice of detaching it from the person who pronounced it (dispatching him, for the time being, to wander stripped of his tongue in the idiosyncratic shades of his own psychology). This is my opening gambit. Next I’ll turn to contemplate the malevolent word, now separated from its speaker, and quivering furiously like an abandoned dart lost to the guiding authority of the hand that threw it. Now I have to aim at its death, in the same way that, as a spoken accusation, it had aimed at my death. I can kill it only by artificially abstracting it from the realm of language altogether (although I realize perfectly well that human utterance always bristles with such weapons). I have to let it go indifferently, as a thing to which I myself have become as indifferent as really the bad word itself had been, all along, to me. The accuser was not indifferent, then. But the after-life of malignant speech is vigorously spectral, quite independent of its emission at the instant of some long-evaporated rage. The bad word flaps in its vampire’s afterlife in the breast of its target, who can try to quell it, but “cannot go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation: in other words, he only works on it” [Hegel 116]. The spoken savagery hovers there still. How can its target’s “work” on it? Stripping the speaker away from the word brings it into a loneliness, into its prominent isolation from the occasion of its utterance. This act of detaching it returns it to its impersonal communality into the dictionary of latent harm, while wrenching it away from its respectfully bland and democratic-sounding claim to share in language’s “intersubjectivity.” And as suggested, I can also turn the phenomenology of cruel speaking against my accuser to characterize him as not having been the master of his own sadism, but of having been played like a pipe, swayed like a hapless reed. The words that rushed to his tongue were always an ersatz rhetoric. Meanwhile, I can also recognize his or her distance from me, his or her indifference—an indifference which, by now, is not only a spent feeling only coolly attentive to me, but of a psychology which has long since returned to itself, and now wanders about the world intent on its fresh preoccupations, far out of the range of my unhappy surveillance.

Yet there’s a further turn in the work that I have to do. (Love’s work10 pales in comparison with Hate’s work, in the sense of the legacy of being hated, which condemns its recipients to an iniquitous toil of elucidation.) Having returned the bad word to its waiting niche in the stout dictionary of unkindness, I’ll need not only to return the speaker to the accident of himself, but I have to attempt a further labor of emancipation for myself. I must recognize his indifference to my present tormented memories of his old utterances, and return him to an absolute indifference in which I abandon him, even in my speculations. I, too, have to “have done with the thing altogether” [Hegel 116]. But to succeed in having done with it demands a prior and ferocious dwelling on it, which first unsparingly remembers the reverberating word as word—yet only in order to restore its truly impersonal quality, to return it to the generality of utterance from whence it came, and to acknowledge its superb and sublimely indifferent capacity to take me or leave me. That is, I’ll get rid of understanding myself as “the suffering person.” And I shall manage to give up that unhappy and unproductive self-designation only at the same stroke in which I can fully grasp the impersonality of the bad word. This I’ll come to do as a consequence of registering its cruelty, letting it sink completely into me—that is, by going straight through the route of the profoundly personal. Only then, through entering its peculiar blackness unprotected, can I sever the word from its speaker in order to imaginatively return him to his true contingency and to his present

10. A recall of the title Love’s Work, by Gillian Rose.
cheerily amnesiac indifference to my continuing lacerations by his verbal attack, the occasion of which has doubtless long since escaped his mind.

By this stage, I have gradually and waveringly relinquished what is standardly assumed to be a “Hegelian” concept of language, because it would have been too optimistic (too tranquilly intersubjective) for the task at hand. Now, instead, some of Hegel’s own and less sunny descriptions of language as a “stain,” a “contagion,” and the ground of “a universal infection” of selves may receive their testing-ground on the territory of damaging words.11 (Admittedly there are pleasant kinds of stains, and perhaps even happy contagions; but Hegel’s scattered metaphor of infection is harder to recuperate.) Let’s follow its logic. To enable my release, my initial infection by the bad word with virulent fear and the most relentless self-doubt is necessary. A mild anxiety won’t suffice. My entire self-conception must have tottered. “If it has not experienced absolute fear, but only some lesser dread, the negative being has remained for it something external, its substance has not been infected by it through and through” [Hegel 119]. With this apparently paradoxical association of language with infection, we are dealing, in short, with the true sociability of language—as contagion, as a mouth disease. To recover, as I must, from accusation’s damaging impact on me, I can’t effectively stand lonely proof against it, but instead have to admit something that so far I have been reluctant to consider: that, exactly as my injury, it enjoys a fully languagelike status. Now, in this moment, I have abandoned all my earlier “humanist” strategy of seeing the bad word as a hurled stone and therefore not as true language. Instead I have begun to concede that the bad word is an indifferently speaking stone. In sum, that harsh language evinces a combination of sheer indifference both to me and also to my accuser; an ultimately sociable impersonality; and a sadness that (uninterested in me though it is) has worked successfully on me while it also suffers its own corrosion and decay.

But if instead I overlook all these characteristics of language, and meditate solely “psychologically,” I will examine only my own idiosyncratically undefended subjecthood by discovering some prior susceptibility within my depths, an early wound which is the key to my constant vulnerability—as if therein I could unearth some meaning to my haunting by the word and free myself. The trouble with this speculation is that the linguistic structure of my childhood verbal wounding was and is exactly the same as that which vexes me now; when I was two years old, there was no “purely psychic” naming for me even then, but an interpellation which, always linguistic, was thereby always affective. Infancy’s learning to speak is also entangled in parental emotions—the hostility, anxiety, lucidity, mildness. But this evident fact only reinforces my persuasion that the linguistic and the psychic are neither separable, nor to be subsumed one under another. If there is now the same scenario, an original injury which I relive, its endless reanimation in me is not surprising, given the paucity of my capacities for self-protection then. That is, there is no chronology of depth of my early “psychic” injury which precedes, founds, and accounts for some later, differing “linguistic” vulnerability—other than that vital history of my childish and necessary dependence on the affective words of others.

All the considerations which might help to deflate lacerating speech—considerations of the vatic and generic nature of the language itself, and the transient emotion of its speaker, who is driven by the rhetoric he deploys—might be equally applied to a recollected “I love you.” The erratic love-speaker claims to have meant his declarations then, but now he has changed his feelings and disavows everything. And he protects

11. “Just as the individual self-consciousness is immediately present in language, so it is also immediately present as a universal infection; the complete separation into independent selves is at the same time the fluidity and universally communicated unity of the many selves; language is the soul existing as soul” [Hegel 430].
himself from the charge of fickleness by avowing the innocent contingency of his declaration, rather in the way that to protect oneself from the hate-speaker, one considers how the bite of his words may be eased through a recognition of their awful contingency. If we compare the aftermath of hearing “I love you” with the aftermath of hearing “I hate you,” in both instances the hearer may fight to sever the utterance from its vanished utterer. With the former declaration, the struggle is to find compensation in the teeth of impermanence (those words were definitely said to me, so at least I can be sure that once I was loved), and with the latter, to find protection from the risk of permanence (those words were directed at me then, but it wasn’t me, especially, who was hated, I just accidentally got in that speaker’s way).

The stoic’s route to consolation, however, can’t follow this path of detecting necessity in the instance of her being loved, but contingency in the case of her being hated. She is more prone to regard both love speech and hate speech alike as workings of that language which (to return to our Parisian language school’s slogan) we’ve not the faintest hope of mastering before it masters us. Nonetheless, we can elect to suffer our subjugation moodily and darkly, or we can treat it more lightly and indifferently, as a by-product of the disinterested machinations of language. To espouse a notion of linguistic impartiality in this way is, I think, the sounder course. I could be more effectively freed by first confronting and then conceding my own sheer contingency as a linguistic subject. I am a walker in language. It is only through my meanders and slow detours, perhaps across many decades, toward recognizing language’s powerful impersonality—which is always operating despite and within its persuasive allure of “intersubjectivity”—that I can “become myself.” Yet I become myself only by way of fully accepting my own impersonality—as someone who is herself accidentally spoken, not only by violent language, but by any language whatsoever—yet who, by means of her own relieved recognition of this very contingency, is in significant part released from the powers of the secretive and unspeakable workings of linguistic harm.

WORKS CITED