



**« Magic and language. Or why Bernard Bloch, Noam Chomsky, Allen Ginsberg, Zellig Harris, Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, Bell Telephone, IBM and the US Military Thought it was sexy / Useful / Exciting to study linguistic in the 1950s »**

Robert F. Barsky

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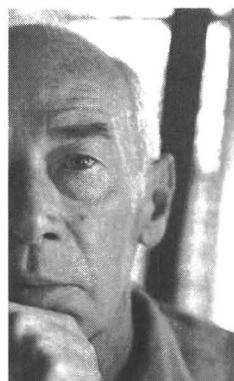
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## MAGIC AND LANGUAGE

Or why Bernard Bloch, Noam Chomsky, Allen Ginsberg, Zellig Harris,  
Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, Bell Telephone, IBM and the US  
Military Thought it was Sexy / Useful / Exciting to Study Linguistics  
in the 1950s.

By Robert F. Barsky

In 1934 Henry Miller is in search of the magic of exaltation, crying out to they who would listen only after battles of censorship for his *Tropic of Capricorn* : “ ‘Show me a man who over-elaborates and I will show you a great man !’ What is called their ‘over-elaboration’ is my meat ; it is the sign of struggle, it is struggle itself with all the fibers clinging to it, the very aura and ambience of the discordant spirit. And when you show me a man who expresses himself perfectly I will not say that he is not great, but I will say that I am unattracted.” It’s the deformity Miller seeks out both in his own writings, and in those of his “old idols,” the “chaos and confusion they wallowed in,” the “obstacles they heaped up about them,” their “confusion,” their “stuttering,” their “staggering effort.” I seek not to be human, says he, but to be “inhuman,” to “join my slime, my excrement, my madness, my ecstasy to the great circuit which flows through the subterranean faults of the flesh.” Miller, the Bakhtinian carnival king, “the man who raises the holy bottle to his lips, the criminal who kneels in the marketplace, the innocent one who discovers that all corpses stink, the madman who dances with lightning in his hands, the friar who lifts his skirts to pee over the world, the fanatic who ransacks libraries in order to find the Word,” and as such he wants “to make a detour of those lofty arid mountain ranges where one dies of thirst and cold, that



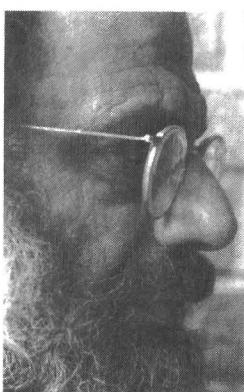
'extra-temporal' history, that absolute of time and space where there exists neither man, beast, nor vegetation, where one goes crazy with loneliness, with language that is mere words, where everything is unhooked, ungeared, out of joint with the times ;" what he is rejecting here in language that at times seems taken from contemporary physics, with its time, space, chaos and universe-bending references, is the systematizing dream of his generation, inspired in part by experiments in the hard sciences, and their application to unrelated domains like language. Instead, he follows a path that would become typical of those Lawrence Lipton called the "Holy Barbarians,"<sup>1</sup> people like Allen Ginsberg, Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Stuart Perkoff, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Dylan Thomas, who sought meaning and Zen through fooling, clowning, disorder, and madness. For Miller, the goal of the "hard sciences" dissolves in favour of a search for "rivers, sewers, lava, semen, blood, bile, words, sentences," "the amniotic fluid when it spills out of the bag," the "urine that pours out scalding," "the words of hysterics," the "sentences that flow on like dysentery," the "menstrual flow that carries away the seed unfecund," "scripts that flow," "everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that brings us back to the beginning where there is never end," all that is fluid, all the pus and dirt that in flowing is purified," for "the great incestuous wish is to flow on, one with time, to merge the great image of the beyond with the here and now. A fatuous, suicidal wish that is constipated by words and paralyzed by thought." Sciences may in fact be the threat to the world rather than its solution, he suggests, as though reviewing the growing technological advances which threaten to destroy the planet ; but if we are doomed, even if "there is no hope for us, any of us," then at least "let us set up a last agonizing, bloodcurdling howl, a screech of defiance, a war whoop !" (254-8).

Twenty-one years later and in the same vein, the howl that Beat the Straights flowed out at the Six Gallery poetry reading, and Allen Ginsberg seemed to find a space for a whole generation. Using ideas of magic that he found in Cézanne's paintings, with their grid of paint strokes that were so inter-knit on the canvas that "no light gets through," he found a whole new space because, he says, by reducing existence to canvas in two dimensions, doing "it in such a way as it would look if the observer looked at it long enough it would look like as much three dimension as the actual world of optical phenomena when one looks through one's eyes," something which allowed Cézanne to reconstitute "the whole fucking universe in his canvases" (46).<sup>2</sup> In "Howl" it was this same technique, a creation of space not by the juxtaposition of color against color, but by the "juxtaposition of one word against another," creating "a gap between the two words — like the space gap in the canvas" so there'd be "gap between the two words which the mind would fill in with the sensation of existence." Now, says Ginsberg, in a haiku like :

O ant

Crawl up Mount Fujiyama  
But slowly, slowly.

What you end up with is that you have “a small ant and you have Mount Fujiyama and you have the slowly, slowly, and what happens is that you feel almost like... a cock in your mouth ! You feel this enormous space-universe, it’s almost a tactile thing. Well anyway, it’s a phenomenon-sensation, phenomenon hyphen sensation, that’s created by this little haiku of Issa, for instance.” Here Ginsberg is inspired by the new space-time compendium explored in contemporary physics, by “Einstein in America, sleeping in a cottage in Princeton, dreaming of bent light [bent eternity] in the inevitable curve of time ( $E = \infty$ )” (from “The Fall of America”). This is the science of poetry recalling, in “Blessed the Muses,” the science of the magic



which allowed Cézanne to create juxtaposed planes, and which comes by his description to be “separated by the infinity ellipsis of the cold receding tone blue plains (meadow) [or pond] between them” (137). Description becomes technique, and the poem comes to be “as an equation (a machine), reproducing in verbal images the visual and other images of the dream of Joan — reproducing the elements which juxtaposed gave me the awe and terror and knowledge in the dream.” Ginsberg’s poetry, his “Art,” thus gives to him the wherewithal to “recreate after the 1948 Vision of Eternity (slowly substantiated) and finally after long years of thought to communicate it. Thru the science of the poem — this is the key : What is needed in a poem is a structure (magical, miracles in the head) of clear rational actualities put next to one another to suggest (in the eclipse of Time between the images) Eternity. The ‘intervals.’ The gap of time... Setting up two (images) points (with a gap) separate in time and showing the distance between them.” This is all magic to nourish the imagination, but equations as well to figure out how the imagination works, such that he becomes one in the same with the Einstein-inspired “Celestial physicians” who on the one hand describe the magic of infinity, but on the other, consistent with the Holy Barbarians, he is also fearful because, as he says in “The Fall of America,” they are “making bombs as if the crazyhouse of matter were indestructible.” Einstein had indeed become an inspiration for the millions who heard through the media of the positive results of the eclipse expedition in November 1919, or who read the considerable efforts made in journals such as *The Dial*, *Current Opinion*, *Harper’s*, *Contemporary Review*, *The Living Age*, and *The New Republic* to make his theories comprehensible to a broader public. And, as Donley and Friedman suggest in *Einstein as Myth and Muse*, Einstein through his ideas also became a muse for as broad a camp

as William Carlos Williams, Archibald MacLeish, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Karel Čapek, Lawrence Durrell, Vladimir Nabokov, and Virginia Woolf.

In short, we are witness from the early part of this century to a shift in paradigms within which writers are thinking about their writings and their words, inspired in part by the horror and the promise of contemporary physics, and also a new quest for the eternal philological quest for a magic language, the terms of which could carry meanings by their very nature, or perhaps a magical dance, or a magical howl, which might make the same kind of claim, produce the same effect. It's not that the tools available to the philologist, or what was coming at this time to be known as the linguist — he who was inspired by Saussure's scientific approach to language studies — it's that there seemed to be new avenues which could be explored to solve the mysteries of human language, and therefore there was a new hope placed upon the domain of language studies, a hope which was in some ways inspired by the ways in which Einstein's work was being digested, that is, understood and misunderstood, by those outside of the field of physics. Einstein-inspired work was going on in all sorts of quarters during this period, in Europe and the United States, including studies of language and its relation to larger laws of the universe. In his book on the Prague Linguistic Circle, fortuitously entitled *The Magic of a Common Language*,<sup>3</sup> Jindrich Toman notes that in a 1919 article entitled "Futurism," Roman Jakobson "takes up Einstein's theory of relativity. His discussion, which is not technical, is typical of a sentiment that saw in Einstein's theory something basically congruous with the feeling that seemingly eternal truths and values were crumbling. This was a popular way in which change in the natural sciences was related to the widespread feeling of crisis of values — indeed, of cultural decay" (28). The ability to move from particle physics to linguistics, and to theories of aesthetics, reflected the fact that Einstein's work offered whole new ways of considering space and time; in his 1905 special theory of relativity, according to which all measurements of time and space depend on judgments as to whether two distant events occur simultaneously, which had led him to develop a theory based on two postulates : the principle of relativity, that physical laws are the same in all inertial reference systems, and the principle of the invariance of the speed of light, that the speed of light in a vacuum is a universal constant. Einstein was hereby able to provide a consistent and correct description of physical events in different inertial frames of reference without making special assumptions about the nature of matter or radiation, or how they interact. In 1916 came the General theory, according to which the interactions of bodies, which heretofore had been ascribed to gravitational forces, were explained as the influence of bodies on the geometry of space-time (four-dimensional space, a mathematical abstraction, having the three dimensions from Euclidean space and time as the fourth dimension), an idea which was confirmed during a 1919 solar eclipse, after which time his

fame, and various ideas about how his work could be extended, spread across disciplines and continents. His development in a scientific framework of the uncertainty principal, and his rejection of the idea of strict causality, seemed to offer a dose of magic to science, and, perhaps, a bit of science to magic.

Linguists seem all the more inspired by the implications of this new science, partly because the appropriation, or misappropriation, of the sciences across the disciplines is nothing new. The celebrated linguistic example is Edward Sapir's 1924 work "The Grammarian and His Language" (1924), which finds credence for a certain "relativity of language" on the basis of the fact that the observation that "The stone is falling" would be assessed differently in different languages because French and German would add genders to the nouns, Chippewa the fact that the stone is inanimate, Russian the question of the definite nouns employed, Kwakiutl Indian the issue of whether or not the stone was visible at the moment of speaking, and so forth. This led Benjamin Whorf to later take Sapir's observations about the Einsteinian relativity of language and thought, and cast them into careful scientific language, calling it the principle of linguistic relativity after Einstein's principle of general relativity. And of course Roman Jakobson wrote specifically on "Einstein and Language," suggesting that "the most telling concordances between innovation in physics and that in contemporary linguistics are those coincidences that seem to be due to purely convergent, independent development. Such latent correspondences reveal a substantially parallel course in these different sciences. Both Einstein's demand of the theoretical physicist to strive for the highest possible standard of rigorous precision in the description of pure relations... and the close counterpart of this demand — namely, the ever stricter inquiry into the physical world as a network of interrelated components — and in eloquent correspondence with the tasks of advanced linguistics. Careful comparisons between the fundamental concepts of relativistic physics and the constituents of language as analyzed and defined by contemporary linguistics disclose a salient isomorphism that could be easily exemplified on the different levels of verbal structure."<sup>4</sup> On a more pragmatic level, there was also according to Jindrich Toman, an effort on the part of Jakobson and the Prague Linguistic Circle an effort to work in a concerted and coordinated way upon issues of universal importance to language studies, and thus to find between them a kind of magical common language : the Prague Circle's desire to synthesize led them to create loose leaflets, under the rubric of "thesis" on a range of topics. In retrospect, says Toman, much in the Theses appears too heterogeneous to yield adequate results ; however, it is important to realize that they were directed against the atomistic character of the nineteenth century linguists and that they expressed dissatisfaction with the "monographism" and affirmation of "normal science." Moreover, not only do the Theses radiate the magic of a common language; beside that, they are imbued with the collective spirit they were signed by the Circle, not by individual authors" (152).

But beyond the desire to render scientific the softer sciences, there's also a very interesting link between Albert Einstein and major figures in contemporary American linguistics through the Zionist movement, to which Einstein contributed ideas, discussions, speeches, and even a book, *On Zionism*, published in 1931. This Zionist link brought Einstein, perhaps even more powerfully than would otherwise have been the case, into a world occupied by those concerned with the magic of language, the linguists and anthropologists of the day whose affiliation, through Judaism and through a little-known organization called Avukah, made the linguistics community perhaps even more attentive than most to the approach apparently suggested by Albert Einstein in his work in physics. Recall that in the first few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the leading American linguists could be counted on but a few fingers, the most prominent of which were Leonard Bloomfield, Zellig Harris, and Edward Sapir, all Jews. Less known, or, if you wish, never mentioned, are a couple of facts linking Zellig Harris directly to these ideas, the first being that there was a petition circulated amongst American intellectuals to keep Roman Jakobson from immigrating to the US, and it was through the efforts of Zellig Harris that he gained admittance. And secondly, there's the fact that in a December, 1930 issue of the Avukah newspaper, we find a long description of an address by Albert Einstein to Avukah, "the only organization under whose auspices he would make a public pronouncement upon his arrival in the United States" on the S. S. Belgenland at 9:30 A.M., December 11<sup>th</sup>. In the address which preceded Einstein's talk, the Executive Secretary of Avukah George M. Hyman recalls that "in the library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem is deposited the original manuscript of Professor Einstein's 'Theory of Relativity.' This monumental document has revealed to the world a new truth, and it may well be that from Zion shall go forth to all humanity new values resulting from the development of the Jewish homeland in Palestine." Einstein then gave a general greeting from the ship, and upon his arrival he was given a reception arranged by the Zionist Organization of America, during which time he was presented with the Golden Book of the Jewish National fund and the Avukah Annual, as well as other Zionist literary texts. Avukah had a few prominent members during this period, including one named Zellig Harris who had been a member since his undergraduate years, and rose as an eventual faculty member at U Penn, beginning in 1931, to high ranks in that organization. And as it happens, ahem, Zellig Harris would eventually marry Einstein's principal assistant at Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Studies, Bruriah Kaufman, and this years after his first contact with Einstein, in the late 1920s, on the subject of Zionism. Further, in the March 1930 issue of *The Avukah Bulletin* we learn that Edward Sapir, who would play such an important role for Zellig in his linguistic work and had looked for the linguistics-physics link six years earlier, gave a public forum under the auspices of Avukah, entitled "The Jewish Ego," with

proceeds designated for the Chizik memorial Project.

This detective-like narrative leads us to some fabulous gossip and some surprising and heretofore unexplored direct links between key figures on the American intellectual scene from the 1920s to the 1950s, including links via Zellig Harris to a whole range of monumental intellectual icons in different disciplines, including Bloch, Boas, Bloomfield, Chomsky, Einstein, Epstein, Goetze, Jakobson, Kaufman, Lukoff, Mattick, Prince, Putnam, Sapir, and Segal. Does this make Zellig Harris the Zelig, the "Leonard Bloomfield" of Woody Allen's film? Even the name of the principal character suggests that we might be onto something here, but I'll suspend that magical thought; more importantly for this paper is the new level of hope that this magical science inspired in researchers, such as Zellig Harris, and those who came to show interest in his work, including the U.S. Military, Bell Telephone, and IBM. The former probably regretted the character with whom they came to be directly involved, through various funding schemes, because Harris was a radical Marxist, with affiliations to Council Communism through his friendship with Paul Mattick and his interest in Anton Pannekoek, who was known in the U.S. through Mattick's personal efforts and writings. He was also a Zionist who eventually promoted close relations between Arabs and Jews in Palestine which, incidentally, had been Einstein's own suggestion in the speech he made in the US upon arriving in 1930; it's an idea which may have saved us from a lot of bloodshed, right up to today. In any event, this led the U.S. government to quite literally follow Harris's work, and to "follow" him around, as they did Boas, who was the subject of a rather long FBI file describing the dangers of having Communist linguists in the United States. The reason why the lot of them escaped McCarthy and other like-minded witch-hunts was the utility of their work for the search for the magical key to critical linguistic problems of the day, including machine translation, electronic content analysis, decoding, and the teaching of foreign languages, notably Japanese, Russian and German, to U.S. military personnel involved in the dubiously named field of "intelligence."

The results of all of this was, as we all know, rather mitigated, even though there were some quite interesting products of this work, including the idea, from a title of a later article, written with Paul Mattick Junior, which studies "Science Sublanguages and the Prospects for a Global Language of Science." But Harris's real hope, that he had with his *Structural Linguistics* set out the necessary codes which would then be studied with the help of the emerging computer technology, was challenged by the work of a student named Noam Chomsky who came to study with him in the late 1940s and who opened linguistics up to an entirely different branch of study which in its version of science offers what he takes to be the most promising route to override the language studies undertaken by Harris and indeed most of those who were working during that period, right up to those working in the

“naturalist” paradigm today. But is there still room for the magic of literature ? Says Chomsky, “someone committed to it can consistently believe (I do) that we learn much more of human interest about how people think and feel and act by reading novels or studying history or the activities of ordinary life than from all of naturalistic psychology, and perhaps always will ; similarly, the arts may offer appreciation of the heavens to which astrophysics does not aspire. We are speaking here of theoretical understanding, a particular mode of comprehension” (77).<sup>5</sup> This “theoretical understanding” is the tentative link to the search for the right magical formula to create, and to understand. In short, we seem to be back into Miller’s realm of senses and uncertainty flowing endlessly ; and after all this, we certainly aren’t surprised to learn in Norman Mailer’s *The Armies of the Night*<sup>6</sup> that subsequent to the arrest of hundreds of protesters after the 1967 March on the Pentagon, which led to the fortuitous meeting of Noam Chomsky and Norman Mailer in a prison cell, that “Mailer looked for some way to open a discussion on linguistics — he had an amateur’s interest in the subject, no, rather, he had a mad inventor’s interest, with several wild theories in his pocket which he had never been able to exercise since he could not understand what he read in linguistics books” (180). Wild theories about a domain about which Mailer knew not from reading the scholarly literature, it being too obtuse, but from his own incantations, his own ruminations, his own madcap scientific theories. He isn’t able to ask any questions of the young Chomsky, however, for even he, the muse of his own story, is silenced, trapped within unexplored galaxies about which so little is known, for they remain places of the creative mind where time and space hold new meanings, and create new magic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*, NY, Julien Messner, 1959.

<sup>2</sup> *Beat Writers at Work : The Paris Review*, introduction by Rick Moody, NY, Modern Library, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Cambridge, MIT Press, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Holton and Yehuda Elkana, *Albert Einstein : Historical and Cultural Perspectives*, Princeton UP, 1982, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky, *New Horizons in the Study of Languages and Mind*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night : History as a Novel : the Novel as History*, Penguin, 1999 [1968].