

Argot: The Flesh Made Word

by JONATHON GREEN

Then came the Kingdom of Argot, otherwise all the vagabonds in France, marshalled in order of their various ranks, the lowest being first. Thus they marched, four abreast, bearing the divers insignia of their degrees in that strange faculty, most of them maimed in one way or another, some halt, some minus a hand—the *courtauds de boutanche* (shoplifters), the *coquillarts* (pilgrims), the *hubins* (housebreakers), the *sabouleux* (sham epileptics), the *calots* (dotards), the *francs-mitoux* (“schnorrers”), the *polissons* (street rowdies), the *piètres* (sham cripples), the *capons* (card-sharpers), the *malingreux* (infirm), the *marcandiers* (hawkers), the *narquois* (thimble-riggers), the *orphelines* (pickpockets), the *archisuppôts* (arch-thieves), and the *cagoux* (master-thieves)—a list long enough to have wearied Homer himself. It was not without difficulty that in the middle of a conclave of cagoux and archisuppôts one discovered the King of Argot, the Grand Coësre, huddled up in a little cart drawn by two great dogs.

Victor Hugo *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831)

Introductory

Bilingual dictionaries notwithstanding, the strict translation of France’s *argot* is not slang but is more properly defined as *cant*, i.e., the occupational slang of the criminal classes, ‘*les classes dangereuses*’. As with what would become slang, other than a few fragmentary prior references the first knowledge of argot is found in the late Middle Ages, c. 1450, but whereas across the Channel the original collection of cant gradually gave way to lexis of what France would term *l’argot commun* or *la langue populaire*, general slang as used by the population at large, the basis of non-standard French lexicography was for at least four centuries the taxonomy of the language of crime. If there is a turning point it is the 1828 *Memoirs* and even more so the 1837 *Voleurs* of Eugene Vidocq, the arch-criminal-turned-chief-of-police, both of which underpinned the way in which argot proper was beginning its absorption into *la langue populaire parisien*. By 1850 Balzac (whose magnificent villain Vautrin was modeled on Vidocq himself), albeit with a little exaggeration, could claim that argot was now as much the product of ‘the rosy lips of young ladies’ as it was that of the grimier mouths of the traditional underworld.

Argot: a definition and an etymology

It is, albeit masochistically, endearing to find that as regards its etymology, *argot* offers as near-impenetrable a history as does its English peer *slang*. And like its Anglo-Saxon cousin argot has drawn from the lexicographers a selection of suggestions that range from the feasible to the near desperate.

To dispose of the latter, it may be assumed that argot has nothing to do either with Greek Argonauts nor their city Argos; nor is likely to be linked to one Ragot, a

celebrated beggar, at least in print, from whom the *argotiers* supposedly took their commands. Slightly less absurd are proposed links to *zingaro*, a gypsy, or Latin *argutus*, pointed and subtle, and finally, most feasible, the French word *ergot* (also spelled *argot*), the spur of a cockerel. This last conjures up the image of the beggars raking in their loot like a cock rummaging his dunghill with his *ergots* or spurs. Louis Sainéan, in his authoritative *Argot Ancien* (1907), is satisfied to accept this and notes synonyms in a variety of French dialects; later commentators are less convinced. It is suggested that the shape of the spur does not resemble the hook with which, like England’s contemporary *angler*, thieves lifted items from stalls and windows. In addition the original *argotiers* were beggars, albeit criminal ones, and not thieves as such. And while it has been suggested that the rue d’Argout, in what was once the heart of Paris’ underworld, might not only be linked linguistically but might also have hosted the *Cour des Miracles*, the city’s the semi-mythical equivalent to London’s criminal sanctuary Alsatia, there is no proof. In the end one must accept that most frustrating of etymologies: origin obscure.

Unlike its European peers – *cant* in England, *rotwelsch* in Germany, *germania* in Spain, *calao* in Portugal and *gergo* in Italy – France’s argot began linguistic life as a description not of a subset of the standard language, in this case the jargon of a group of criminal medics, but of the criminals themselves. Hugo’s ‘kingdom of argot’ is metaphorical, but as the first definition of the word in the *Tresor de la langue française* states *l’argot* is ‘L’ensemble des gueux, bohémiens, mendiants professionnels, voleurs.’ Only in definition 2 do we find the modern use: ‘Langage de convention dont se servaient les gueux, les bohémiens, etc., c’est-à-dire langage particulier aux malfaiteurs (vagabonds, voleurs, assassins)’. It offered a variety of early synonyms, among them *jobelin*, language intended to fool the *jobards*, the suckers; *blesquin*, the language of the *blesches*, minor merchants, street sellers and pedlars; *le*

gourd, *le narquin* or *narquois* (the language of soldiers, or those who posed as such, turned beggars and/or criminals); and *le bigorne* ('counterfeit' a figurative use of *biscornu*, two-horned), usually in the phrase *rouscailler le bigorne* ('sling the patter').

The most important, and long-lived synonym is *jargon*, which appears in mainstream dictionaries long before argot, the first being the *Grand dictionnaire françois latin* by Nicot (1625). Furetière (*Dictionnaire universel*, 1690) calls it a 'Langage vicieux & corrompu du peuple, de paysans, qu'on a de la peine à entendre' and notes that every region of France has its own variation. He adds that *jargon* can also represent the made-up speech of a given 'cabal', e.g., cut-purses or con-men, although he suggests erroneously that the bulk of the vocabulary comes from Greek. *Jargon* originally referred to the twittering of birds, a term that may be linked to another, later synonym for argot, *la langue verte* 'the green tongue', which itself seems to have originated in the idea of 'green' as trees and the birds within them.

Cant, as far as can be ascertained, has no creation myth. In theory at least, the origins of argot are more specific. Oliver Chereau, sets them out on the opening page of his *Jargon ou langage de l'argot reformé [...] Tiré et recueilli des plus fameux argotiers de ce temps* (1628). It is indeed the first occasion on which the word itself has been found in print.

'Antiquity teaches, and the Doctors of Argot inform us, that a King of France, having established the Fairs of Niort, Fontenay[-le-Comte] and other towns in Poitou, many people wished to trade in haberdashery; in order to deal with which [situation] the senior haberdashers assembled and ordered that those who wished to be admitted as haberdashers should be received by their seniors, naming and calling the small merchants *péchons* [lit. children, i.e., beginners] the others *Bleches* [small merchants], and the richest of them *coesmelotiers hurés* [head, i.e. chief merchants]. Then they laid down a certain language among them, with some ceremonies to be held for those who professed themselves merchants.'

When, Chereau continues, a number of these merchants ran through their funds and needed to expand their trading into other fairs, they encountered a number of *pauvres jeux* (lit. 'poor beggars'), who not only traded but augmented their funds through theft and trickery. The legitimate merchants taught them their 'initiate' language – argot – in turn the beggars taught them their larcenous tricks. 'Thence came so many celebrated Argotiers who established the order that followed.' For Chereau, the Argot was compounded of three groups: the *mercelots* (minor nomadic merchants, living on their wits), the *trucheurs*, tricksters, beggars who used a variety of 'things' (*trucs*) to maximise their appeal and elicit alms, and

downright thieves; each sort being accompanied by their female companions.

And as he notes, coincidentally delineating the first users of argot, 'to be a perfect argotier one must know the language of merchants, the tricks of beggars and the subtlety of cutpurses.'

Gradually the group became its language. In 1740 it was registered as such by the *Academie française*, albeit the first edition of their dictionary had stated in 1694: 'Argot: On dit plus communément Ergot. Pointe dure qui vient au derrière du pied de quelques animaux. Les argots d'un coq, d'un chien ; il s'est rompu l'argot en courant'.

Early Argot Lexicography

Chereau's dictionary, in which this founding myth plays an introductory role, is but one of those that is encompassed by the 'genealogy' of argotic lexicography. As across the Channel, one can see two distinct threads: on the one hand the formal, whereby this alien language was set down in glossaries, their intention both to teach 'civilians' the beggars ever developing lexis, and at the same time, like a modern tabloid exposé, to titillate the readers' appetites for criminal reminiscences. On the other were the records of trials in which the evidence, essentially fortuitously, offers information of the argot of a given villainous band.

It is one of these last that is generally accepted as the first 'sight' of argot. In 1455 the *Coquillards*, a group of criminal medicants made up mainly of ex-soldiers of the 100 Years' War, came to trial in Dijon. Not a gang as such, they still boasted a degree of organization, including in their ranks a variety of criminal specialists, whether violent or otherwise. By 1450 they were considered a major problem; the Dijon authorities demanded an enquiry, to be lead by one Jean Rabustel. In 1455 he arrested a dozen Coquillards, and with them some of their otherwise respectable bourgeois accomplices, but all maintained their *omerta*. Finally, offered their freedom, two members cracked. They volunteered much information, among it, and most importantly for lexicographers, the language that the Coquillards used. The accused were tried: three were hanged, the rest banished from Dijon.

Other than a few words encountered in the mouths of brigands, hangmen and robbers in the 'mysteries' of the early 15th century this was the first occasion on which a substantial body of argot was recognised. Yet it would be 400 years before the trial's records were unearthed, in 1842, and published as *Les compagnons de la Coquille, chronique dijonnaise du Xve siècle*, and a further 40 before in 1880 Marcel Schwob, researching the poet-criminal Francois Villon, appreciated the linguistic importance of what had been revealed in 1455.

Contemporaneous with the Coquillards, and perhaps one of their number, was the poet-villain François Villon. Educated as a scholar, but preferring a life of ever-increasing crime, Villon's contribution to argot is perhaps the least accessible. In 1460 he began work on his magnum opus, the 2,023 verses of *Le Grand Testament*, filled with bitterness, invective, lamentations for a wasted life and an imminent sense of death on the gallows. For the student of argot, his work is irresistible, however it remains a challenge to modern readers. The Testament was published in 1489; the edition included a group of *ballades argotiques* entitled *Le Jargon ou Jobelin de Maître François Villon*. Like England's later canting songs, these ballads, which mention the Coquillards in several verses, are larded with an argot nearly impenetrable to modern readers. Whether they were actual coded message to his fellow criminals, or simply what they appear: ballads filled with argot, remains debatable.

The Coquillards and Villon offer, as it were, *argot* glossaries by default. The first conscious effort to categorise the world of the argot and the language that it employed comes thirty years after the English magistrate Thomas Harman had offered c.1566 his *Caveat for Common Cursetors*, detailing the occupations and vocabulary of England's 'Canting Crew', and contemporaneous with the 1590s 'coney-catching' pamphlets of the ne'r-do-well playwright Robert Greene. *La Vie généreuse* (= 'heroic') *des mercelots, gueux, et Boesmiens, contenant leurs facons de vivre, Subtilitez et Gergon* (i.e. jargon) was published in 1596. Its pseudonymous author called himself Péchon de Ruby (roughly equivalent to 'The Smart' or perhaps 'Naughty Kid'). Like Harman he lays out a hierarchy of villainy and offers a glossary of criminal argot.

Thirty years later came Chereau, with his *Jargon Reformé*. Like Pechon de Ruby he offers a hierarchy of crime, topped by the *Grand Coesre* (i.e. 'Caesar' or 'Tsar'). Hugo's list, above, was probably taken directly from Chereau. The glossary represents many of the same preoccupations as do those derived from contemporary English vagabonds. Domestic animals, food and drink, the authorities and their prisons, the gallows, parts of the body, clothing, and so on. In many cases he repeats Pechon de Ruby, but his glossary is rather more structured. And like many slang collectors, he is at pains to show his contemporaneity, offering not merely a list of the latest *argotique* terms for given items, but dismissive references to their defunct predecessors too. The *Jargon* was a huge hit, still seeing reprints (filled with extra words, even if many were but marginally argot) well into the 19th century.

One more argotic way-station concerns neither trial nor dictionary, but a gloriously romantic individual. Louis Dominique Cartouche ('Cartridge') seems to have epitomized the charming villain of myth, defying

nearly every effort at his capture (and escaping from those that succeeded – other than the last, which ended on the wheel), appearing in high society's salons to rob the highborn ladies, doubtless with a deep bow and courtly kiss, and delighting the masses who bought his posthumous biography *Vies de Cartouche* (1723) in their thousands. In 1725 appeared a poem, 'La Vice puni, Cartouche' by Nicolas Ragot, known as Granval. It included a glossary of argot. And although it was Ragot who suggested that *argot* came from Argos, his glossary added a substantial number of new terms to the recorded lexicon. And its hero's popularity ensured that more than ever before, a knowledge of argot entered the public consciousness.

It was another trial, that in 1796 of the Chauffeurs d'Orgeres, another roving band, in this case benefiting from the chaos that engulfed rural France during the Revolution, that saw more argot brought to light. The Chauffeurs drove nothing, but their name refers to the literal meaning of *chauffer*; to heat. In their case, the feet of hapless farmers, who were thus forced to disclose the hiding place wherein lay their savings. They rejoiced in such pleasingly *grand guignol* nicknames as 'Mort aux rats', 'Tremble au vent' and 'le Chat sourd'. Like that of the Coquillards, the trial of the Chauffeurs, in 1800, revealed not merely their deeds, but their language. Supposedly unique to themselves, it seems to have been heavily influenced by Romani and by French localisms. It was, for many, their sole memorial: eighty-two Chauffeurs faced trial, 37 of them women. Twenty men and three women went to the guillotine, all but 19 of the remainder were jailed.

By the mid-19th century the line between *argot* and *la langue populaire* would become harder to draw. Vidocq's books (the second of which may have been ghost-written) made the crossover clear. The rest of the century would see a variety of books in which this trend was accentuated. Such artificial 'languages' as *louchebem* or *largonji* (both forms of 'Pig Latin') and in time the backslang known as *verlan* (*l'invers*, backwards) would further muddy the waters. If one believes Albert Simonin, l'argot, whether as a collection of human beings or as a form of criminal jargon, did not survive World War II.

But *argot*, whether in its original sense, or in the general definition that has succeeded it in modern dictionaries, continues unabated. Hugo having had the first words, let Balzac, in his *Essai philosophique, linguistique et littéraire sur l'argot, les filles et les voleurs* (1838), have the last: 'It may astonish many people but there is no more energetic and colourful language in the world... Argot keeps coming, from everywhere. It follows civilisations, it grasps on to them, it enriches them.'