

Comments and Arguments

The Language of Forgetting and the Academic

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In a leading Marxist academic journal I recently read the sentence: “social performativity and ontological constitutivity of discourse.” I like and respect the journal, don’t get me wrong, but I had to ask myself whatever happened to the goal those on the Left used to have, to try to speak and write in a way ordinary people could understand. The ‘progressive’ argument in defence of such language would probably be that a new ‘radical’ way of speaking or writing is necessary if we want a new society. This may be true (I think it is a bit Troglodyte), but it still seems rather strange that this ‘new way of speaking’ should be so full of those extra long words used in such quick succession.

What’s *true* is usually, after all, often quite obvious (as Marx said: *because it is true*). Reading, say, Marx, or Freud, or Einstein, or Saussure, or Darwin, is actually not difficult because of the language but only sometimes because the science itself is not easy. But then along come the academic ‘interpreters’ of these great figures, who are supposed to mediate between this knowledge and the great unwashed, for their benefit. And what happens? Somehow, peculiarly, everything goes haywire, and especially so with Marx. Personally, I remember how shocked I was to discover it was fairly easy to understand Marx’s own writing (yes, with a bit of normal effort), after finding it so difficult to grasp the academic versions of his work that were supposed to ‘make it more digestible’ for me. The same went for Freud and Darwin, who are both straightforward, clear writers. You soon find out that it is not just a matter of simple interpretation; there is also the politics.

But perhaps too the poor academics are in need of translators into ordinary language, which happens to be, by happy coincidence, also the language of the

geniuses. These geniuses were almost all outside the main loop of professional academicism, which has a lot of politics to negotiate, does not like things to upset its status quo and inertia, and is of course a ‘career’ with an almost military concept of rank.

And what is this career? Education is a peculiar thing. We do not really know in capitalist society what it is for. We know it is not apprenticeship for a job. There are lots of theories of course, and much good Marxist work on the subject (I stick with Althusser’s concept that education is the work of Ideological State Apparatuses), but these theories, critical ones, do not seem to have done much to alter the style of academic language (even on the Left), which still seems ‘clerical,’ as if, in taking over from the church to provide ‘instruction’ on the way to live life (as Althusser noted), some of the same theological style was carried over in modern education. It seems obvious that this is the case if we also look at some of the other aesthetic trappings of academia. For example: the traditional celebrations, the gowns and dress, the ‘tone,’ the little mannerisms of academic power.

But the root of the leftward academic’s often convoluted language sits in the politics of its philosophy of relativism, of its ‘super-liberalism.’ There are the usual ‘poststructuralist’ suspects, including Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Butler, and Lyotard, who are the movement’s main references, and they hold this relativist philosophy not simply because it is sincerely ‘its philosophy’ (which it does and they do) but, I suggest, because it is *obliged* to anyway. It must do so in order to fulfil the requirements of the academy, of the job it has to perform. This philosophy is produced, custom, for the institution (for the ISA). An academic, especially in the field of humanities, must not be seen

to be 'totalitarian' (whether 'right' or 'left'), they must be in some form or other relativist, and this works out as being either a traditional humanist liberal or a postmodern anti-humanist liberal.

(My academic background is in art/art history. I have professional qualifications in both art practice and art theory/history. Consciously, through my life, I have sought to overcome the division of labour between 'theory and practice' in this domain. Doing so is a kind of taboo, strangely even amongst Marxists in this arena. My background is also from well outside what you might call the British Marxist aristocracy: the 'tweedy,' Fabian, Oxbridge-connected lot. This group has a slightly different way, given its avoidance and dislike of French theory, of dealing with the problem that I refer to here: where it is more a case of its archetype 'Companion of Honour' Eric Hobsbawm's peculiar success. The scission from all that, which by default I am a part of, is the 1960s and particularly 1968. At least in the US such figures as Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, and de Man seem to be part of the theoretical legacy of this scission, while in the UK the establishment is far more traditional and, in a sense, stuck.)

A good example of this academic situation, and the contradictions that stem from it, is the lifetime of the once highly celebrated literary critic Paul de Man, who talked about the 'irreducible interpretive undecidability' of texts. The veritable Heisenberg of writing, at the time of his death he was Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale, a close friend of Jacques Derrida, and one of the central figures in the development of literary 'deconstruction.' After his death almost 200 articles, some anti-Semitic, that he wrote during World War II for a collaborationist Belgian newspaper were discovered by a Belgian student researching his early life and work. It caused a furor of course. You may know of it; certainly you will (or you should) if you are an academic in higher education humanities, but you may not if you are outside this milieu (to an extent it is a specialist area). His posthumous 'trial' went on mostly in the learned journals and cultural sections of the mainly US press.

What almost every commentator missed about the de Man affair, however, including the very critical ones, was the factor that made his text "The

Jews in Contemporary Literature" really so despicable. It was *clever* anti-Semitism, not just crude stuff written without thinking following some direct or indirect orders or pressure. I think some guile and effort went into how he could promote his own literary prowess in the context of the general attack on Jews. His attack was therefore insidious and could be seen as an attempt to 'win over' even those intelligent enough to be put off by the brutishness of 'vulgar anti-Semitism,' which he was, astonishingly, defended for being against.

Afterwards, attitudes to de Man ranged from the rightwing critics saying it proved the destructive *leftwing* nature of academic relativism, and leftist critics saying it proved the destructive *rightwing* nature of academic relativism; all pretty confusing stuff. The arguments still go on, although academia now seems to have gone fairly silent about it, embarrassed at least we hope. Yet, note how the two sides become united about de Man.

Set up as a 'rebel,' de Man was something of a quack salesman, a chameleon, a survivor, an opportunist able to ride the tide of academic fashion when it was politically expedient, and someone who was also very clever. But what is this really a description of? Is it not a description of the ideal, obedient, *policeman of knowledge*? A more-or-less ex-criminal authoritarian personality who wishes to forget the past? Not just any past, I would add, but a specific one: the crimes of fascism, World War II, and imperialism. Paul de Man was an individual who performed his job and sought to be 'the golden boy' in that role, as we now know, regardless of a lot of the moral consequences. And he practiced from the point of view of an ethical vacuum that derived from a theory of knowledge that exonerated himself in this, and 'deconstruction' was for him a logical extension of this.

But, naturally, he did not make up the context (in which he flourished) all by himself. I suggest there is, and especially today, a concerted desire amongst the bourgeoisie to forget about what happened in the last world war. Recently, thus, European news reports have documented how statues and plaques commemorating the extensive Soviet contribution to the victory of the allies in World War II have been removed (in some cases there have been battles over this).

In education a similar move is felt as a kind of institutional pressure. And it seems this pressure gets more intense the more exalted the institution, the more the institution has a 'reputation' to defend (it increases in inverse proportion perhaps). Paul de Man's peculiar circumstance was, I submit, one result of that pressure. It is not usually a conscious desire/pressure, I am sure, but equally I'm certain that it exists. And it wishes not only to forget but also to substitute some 'sins' in its mind. (The recent case in the US of Norman Finkelstein's loss of academic tenure at DePaul—he criticized defenses of Israeli policies presented by Alan Dershowitz and Joan Peters—and his argument with Dershowitz also highlights this pressure but in a slightly different, yet historically related, way).

Its 'preferred memory' goes like this: fascism must be the fault of the communists, communists are the fault of themselves, and so of an abstract 'evil.' This 'evil' is also the current problem in the world, although manifesting itself today in a different way. As an 'evil' it seeks power for its own sake, and it uses workers as its stupid pawns. The only force that can stop it is the super-liberal democratic 'Third Way,' which itself 'is forced to' use power undemocratically ('Third Reich'). From this it would prefer it if the Nazi's and the Soviets were imagined/recalled as one entity, that Germany was remembered as actually 'good' and representative of 'the West' and the communists were never 'our allies.' This 'false memory' of course neatly changes, *inverts*, the relationship between the institutional collaborator and the resistance (David Lehman has already pointed this out in his excellent book *Signs of the Times*, that nevertheless falls back on the classic humanist position). And it is a quite convenient way to think of your job if you are an academic, because it makes a capitulation to the ruling ideology easier in a context where one is at least expected to be critical of common (i.e. vulgar) ideological themes. In fact it enables the appearance of being critical, even downright radical, at the same time.

Being, for my sins, sometimes an academic myself, I have had to negotiate this 'forgetting.' I was once told by my Dean not to teach too 'scientifically.' It was given as 'friendly' advice, but it is strange advice in the context of a university, don't you think? Given what a university is supposed to do? If I had any scientific knowledge about contemporary art history (then my subject) clearly at least some of it would have to be forgotten. The context, a relatively new Italian university that spoke German and Italian because it was situated in a town near the mountain border with Austria that had a history of being occupied, and was therefore involved with two forms of fascism during World War II (German and Italian), might be of only small relevance, but it added some poignancy to how to negotiate the problem. I laughed and, rather big-headedly, thought of Galileo. But there was a definite moment when I felt that coverage of the modern period (from 1900) might not be meant to include the condition of art during the last War, and my reference to Rachel Whiteread's Austrian holocaust monument excited no discussion at all, no matter how hard I tried. Admittedly for the students it might have been awkward, but the weight of the institution was there, and I could feel it palpably.

Art history is probably the most ideologically backward area in academia, I think, and that is the area I have ended up in as my chief form of 'remunerative employment.' My contract was not renewed recently and I'm not entitled to an explanation why. It is a familiar situation for me though. I am one of those people who have never had a permanent 'career' job in my life. I am the veritable 'flexible citizen,' born into the era of 'hot desking' and so on. I sometimes wonder if this lack of a proper career path is because I am a communist, or just because of the general exploitation of lecturers on the low rungs. Yes, it is an unanswerable question. My guess is that it is a mixture of these things.