

Preface

In 1977, three years before his fatal accident, Roland Barthes was elected to the Chair of Literary Semiology at the Collège de France and gave the celebrated inaugural lecture that was published under the simple title *Leçon* (1978). It was a lesson in perfect Barthes fashion, on the power of a certain kind of language to resist the totalizing power that exists in the midst of all language as a social institution. He specified this as the language of literature, but he configured it broadly enough for literature to coincide with the act of writing as such or the creation of a certain textuality, as was the idiom of the day. But, remarkably, there is nothing dated in this train of thought, even if the permutations of power in today's world have significantly changed, in part by having absorbed the knowledge and language of counterpower developed by that preeminent generation of thinkers.

Barthes delivers here an inaugural lesson and, at the same time, a discourse on lesson, on the act of seeking new ideas by thinking out loud in front of a seminar audience, as have been the time-honored practices of the seminars at the Sorbonne.

His phrasing for this activity—"to dream one's research aloud" (*de rêver tout haut sa recherche*)—is uttered in full cognizance of the extraordinary privilege of acting in an institutional context that is orchestrated, strictly speaking, to operate "outside the boundaries of power"—in French simply noted as *hors pouvoir*.¹ We can, of course, raise all kinds of skeptical questions about the merit of this assertion. What institution is really ever outside the boundaries of power, and how could anyone in his or her right mind assume that some of the longest-existing, almost ancestral, institutions have survived *hors pouvoir*? And what does it mean to operate "outside the boundaries of power" while residing within the boundaries of an institution—any institution, much less a venerable institution like the Collège de France? These questions go to the heart of the contemporary discussion about higher education in the Euro-American sphere, in a historical moment shamelessly driven by the command to turn universities into corporations, while simultaneously proclaiming the social irrelevance of a humanities mode of learning in a market of quantifiable skills.

This paradoxical privilege of inhabiting the institutions of power but speaking a language *hors pouvoir* from within has been the main target of the methodical corporatization of the university in Europe and North America. In the political juncture of his day, Barthes remains unaware of this as a possibility in the future, but in retrospect he seems to be conducting a ceremony about the nature of the life of the university on the horizon of its eventual extinction. This too is part of the paradoxical privilege. It haunts our every utterance, perhaps less in the classroom, where the experimental nature of all pedagogy is palpable and real bodies with real minds and real affect shake language from its sovereignty, but surely when we seek to

1. Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 458. Hereafter cited in the text. French publication as *Leçon* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

speak against the institution, or outside it, in a public sphere desperately trying to protect itself from its own increasing abstraction. Barthes explicitly calls language "fascist," not because it represses what we say but because it compels what we say. So the wager of speaking *hors pouvoir*—of daring to think of speaking *hors pouvoir*—is how we outmaneuver this compulsion, how we speak against the language that speaks us, to use again the idiom of the day, and therefore, "to cheat with speech, to cheat speech [*tricher avec la langue, tricher la langue*]" (462).

To be accurate, this wager is less about language, simply in a linguistic sense, and more about exposing *how*—in *what* language, in what manner, with what staging—society's institutions speak on their behalf and against what threatens them, or even more precisely, on how institutions sustain their believability by rendering their adversaries unbelievable, incredible, and indeed impossible. After all, this was the mark of Barthes's maverick semiology, which, let us not forget, foregrounded society's mythographic theatricality long before discourses of performativity became current. *S/Z* was about impersonation, and its strategy of reading ultimately drew more from Brecht than from Saussure. So here, too, the handling of language is dramatic: "Because it *stages* [*met en scène*] language instead of simply using it, literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity: through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse that is no longer epistemological, but dramatic" (463–64).

This *mise en scène* destabilizes the abstract sovereignty of knowledge, as well as the concrete sovereignty of both the subject and the object of knowledge. Staging the dialectics of subject and object in this way relieves us of the instrumentality that sustains and reiterates their sovereignty. For there is no subject of knowledge that is not simultaneously an object of knowledge, and vice versa—that's what ceaseless self-reflection means. Because this dialectical image is dramatic, simultaneity can never be reduced to an epistemological collapse; it animates instead the kind of self-questioning without which no

pedagogy is worthy of its name. Destabilizing the sovereignty of knowledge begins with the recognition that questioning oneself is questioning the institution that enables this process—"this enormous, almost unjust, privilege" (458)—to begin with. Barthes makes sure we recognize that the privilege of speaking "outside the boundaries of power" is in fact an instituted privilege—it does not come by fiat, by talent, or by divine inspiration. It too is the mark of a certain social-historical institution and is therefore permanently threatened by the power that has permitted us to stake out the presumptive domain of thinking outside power: "The freer such teaching, the further we must ask ourselves as to under what conditions and by what processes discourse can be disengaged from all will-to-possess [*tout vouloir-saisir*]" (459). Because no lesson is impervious to the lurking desire for power, the object of a lesson—beyond the technical dimensions of each discipline—is to place itself, its own power, and its own framework of speaking to power under question.

It should be obvious why I have taken a moment to remind us of this once celebrated but now rather neglected lesson. I chose to title this series of texts *Lessons in Secular Criticism* because I see the task of secular criticism to be putting into question the means by which knowledge is presented as sovereign, unmarked by whatever social-historical institution actually possesses it. I discuss the permutations of secular criticism at length in the texts that follow, so I will not detain us with definitions here, except to reiterate, very broadly, what I think is elementary: Namely, secular criticism is the practice of elucidating the ruse of those tacit processes that create, control, and sustain conditions of heteronomy, that is, conditions where the power of real men and women is configured to reside in some unassailable elsewhere. This practice of elucidation is quintessentially pedagogical in the way that Barthes outlines, for one learns to combat heteronomy by undoing the sovereignty of the self who conceptualizes and authorizes learning as if knowledge is other. In this very simple sense, all learning (and, of course,

teaching) is, first and foremost, self-learning, autodidactic learning, according to that unavoidable paradox that knowledge can never be mastered and can never be a master, for whatever I know (in order to teach myself) is always destabilized by whatever I don't know (in order to learn) in a continuously shifting process that ends only when I die.

But there is another reason I turned to Barthes as a point of entry. Such teaching and learning, he says, take place when one can "dream one's research aloud," which, if we keep the notion rigorous, takes dreams outside their solipsistic silence into a public space where they resonate with the dreams of others. When I was presented with the honor of giving the Sydney Lectures in Philosophy and Society, I was immediately struck by the requisite stipulation of "thinking out loud," which I take here to be integral not only to how thinking is to take place but to what sort of thinking is to take place. If secular criticism is going to be worthy of its task, it must not take place in the secrecy and solitude of one's spirit but in the shared space of contentious thinking together. Secular criticism is democratic criticism, as Edward Said, who invented the notion, came to call it in his last work. In this sense, secular criticism entails the practice of a certain mode of political being.

So, although the experimental thinking that goes on in these pages is drawn from a long-term effort on my part to reconceptualize the space of the secular against both the limitations of secularism as institutional power and the new orthodoxy going by the name "post-secularism," it is explicitly dedicated to the risk of thinking out loud, of exposing the varied (and sometimes contradictory) contours of one's thought process to the public eye and ear without the benefit of the scholarly apparatus that usually safeguards academic writing. As much as is possible within the demands of a written text, all the essays retain the modalities of their having been performed as public lectures, chiefly at the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney, where they were also broadcast on Radio National of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC RN), but also on other

occasions, whether within a university framework, a public forum, or an open Internet medium. And all the essays bear the imprint of comments, critiques, or arguments made by audiences and interlocutors on those occasions, as well as my own thinking-out-loud responses (in instances when the conversations happened to be recorded), which is a privilege rarely granted to any writer.

As is the essential mark of the essay as a form, each text is composed of its own trajectory. And although there is a specific architecture that entwines them all, there is no intended sequential argument or cumulative proposition. In musical terms, this is perhaps a song cycle, that is, a circulation of certain motifs (or even literally phrasings) composed on a variety of settings that seek no particular resolution but are nonetheless self-contained in their specific arrangements. By its very nature, thinking out loud does not shirk from retracing already-trodden ground in the same insistent spirit of discovering possibly overlooked traces or improvising on a different scale material that may be thought to be already set. Whatever is being thought out in such retracing registers itself by resonance, either with material already deployed in various ways in public (whether otherwise performed or actually published) or with a vast range of responses by readers, audiences, and interlocutors, whether friendly or adversarial, which keep this material living, pulsing, and shifting.

From this standpoint, the Sydney Lectures were an immensely fortunate event, for they came at the apex of extensive research, teaching, publication, and performance of work on the question of the secular that has been ongoing for more than ten years, since the yearlong seminar at the Center for Cultural Analysis at Rutgers, conducted by Michael Warner, and soon after, the conversation on critical secularism in *boundary 2*, conducted by Aamir Mufti. The work that emerged from these collaborative occasions has already been channeled into two nearly completed book projects, *The Perils of the One* and *Nothing Sacred*, which have been bearing *Lessons in Secular Criticism* as a subtitle. The present text, as a realization of the Sydney

Lectures, figures simultaneously as both prelude and distillation of the work contained in the other two books, forming in this respect—but really, in an entirely unexpected, accidental, way—a triptych of self-contained meditations on a problem too extensive and too slippery to be handled in one particular way and by one particular method.

In fact, in this laborious and long-term process of thinking, teaching, and writing, I discovered that the discussion of the problem of the secular—I detest the coarse general term “secularism” and, even more, the absurd nomenclature “post-secularism”—was ever more bound to questions of disciplinary knowledge and language. As the so-called secularism debates grew at furious speed and unexpected scale, I discovered that they were disproportionally consumed by, broadly speaking, a social studies methodology, with specific investments in an ethnographic conceptualization of the field of research, against a critical-skeptical practice of reading the field, which, even in its most speculative elements, characterizes the disciplinary methods of literary studies, comparative literature in particular. Hence, among other reasons, my insistence in underlining the notion of secular criticism, which emerges from literary studies and persists in this mode even in my most philosophical meditations, even when I am engaged in problems of political theory. Hence also my persistence in connecting the question of the secular to the language of *poiēsis* in its most distilled meaning, that is, the capacity of human beings to alter radically the forms and structures they inherit, which has led me, in certain instances, to inquiries of an ontological nature on the way to a political analysis beyond mere institutional structures or social-historical occurrences.

In this sense, my research into the question of the secular is inextricable from my concern with reconfiguring the conceptual terrain of radical democratic politics against a range of presumably allied competitors that run the gamut from the various permutations of liberalism to the ever more desperately fashionable Jacobin leftisms of all creeds. So, by sheer historical

conjuncture, these lectures embody the lessons of the political-economic situation of the last few years: the brutal demolition of societal safeguards worldwide as a point of leveraging the scorched-earth policies of global financial capitalism. The question of the secular—the implications of what it means to encounter one's life as a worldly affair and responsibility that rests on no foundation—cannot be explored in disregard of the question of social autonomy: the implications of people refusing to consent to modes and institutions of authority that exceed them. This has become more dramatic in today's world, when various discourses of emancipation from imperialist power are advocated in theological terms. Such discourses are delineated in a stunning range of expressions: from masses of the faithful in spaces of worship or in the street confirming, in their rebellion, their obedience to external authority to media manipulators, from radio and television to print and the Internet, stoking the exclusivist cultural passageways to conformism, and to enlightened beneficiaries of disenchantment in prominent universities and think tanks who presume to be radicals. In the end, all these discourses either share or participate in safeguarding the worst of contemporary capitalism: conforming to a way of life where "leaders" (of whatever fashion, "secular" or "religious") conduct politics on your behalf while you settle for whatever is the conventional expectation of a "good life," with the only concern being how to enhance it.

The December 2008 events in Greece, chiefly in Athens but also in many other cities around the country, which signaled a spontaneous insurrection of the country's youth (including immigrant youth), unplanned and unmanaged, have been a watershed for me.² It was the first response to the cost of a way

2. Hence my decision to frame this book in a series of epigraphs that emerged from the streets during those days. I have translated these from the Greek collection of images and photographs *Unrest [Ανησυχία]: An Account of the Spontaneous in December 2008*, ed. Alexandros Kyriakopoulos and Efthymios Gourgouris (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2009).

of life exemplified by the crisis of Western capitalism, signaled by the U.S. banking collapse of the same year. Of course, they occurred not because any one in Greece understood the magnitude of the historical moment, which was soon to spread to the de facto disintegration of the Eurozone, but because, in an utterly visceral and inconfigurable way, young Greeks had sensed with horror that the future of their life had been sold down the river. The insurrection was fueled by extraordinary rage, not only against the obvious avatars of commodification but also against all legitimacy: civil, social, political, cultural. Hence the unleashed fury of destruction. The broad phenomenon of assembly movements in public spaces that emerged as the insidious realities of financial capitalism were unconcealed was the next step, the other side, in the expression of this fury—not its sublimation but its reorientation into a radical democratic politics. However, the fury and the rage remain, because, for one thing, democracy has not been founded without them since the days of Sophocles, but also because the legitimacy of political institutions that escorted the rampage of financial capitalism has been utterly discredited.

The economic crisis is really a crisis of the political. Perhaps that is always the case, but that is a theoretical discussion, and we miss the point. The current crisis of the political is liberating economic forces of unprecedented and uncontrollable magnitude. Capital is endemically incapable of self-regulation. So, ironically, some of its greatest gains have been the result of political intervention, occasionally even by its quintessential enemies, the workers movement. But all these gains came with substantial cost, which was duly deemed transferrable to hapless others in an ever-expanding geography of victims. Because this transferability is shrinking by the speed of its own expansion, the political forces of masses of people expressing themselves carry high risk; hence access to the political is increasingly impeded, either by overt repression or by covert manipulation and manufacturing of consent, so that economic forces can run unregulated. Part of this manipulation takes place via

political-theological discourses, some of them quite explicit and extensive, so that a meditation on the problem of the secular—a meditation that would seek to reconfigure the language of the secular away from its institutionalized secularism—is not merely a matter of scholarship. It is a political matter. The various political theologies that are currently animating broad constituencies of political actors in many parts of the world not only feed on their constitutive exclusionism, thereby disenfranchising large masses of people, but also buttress sovereignties (from national state apparatuses to civic or cultural institutions) that continue to deprive people of their freedom to act on their own behalf. Whatever the inadequacies of institutionalized secularism are—and they are many—it seems self-evident to me that only a secular social space can handle the conflicts of social differentiation and enable a new radical democratic politics to flourish.

My musings in these texts take place in confrontation with this task. Just as I could never claim to speak “outside the boundaries of power” from within the institution, I am perfectly cognizant, to return to Barthes for a moment, of how “power seizes upon the pleasure of writing as it seizes upon all pleasure, to manipulate it and to make of it a product that is gregarious and non-perverse . . . , to turn it into militants and soldiers for its own profit” (468). It is therefore imperative, he argues, to shift ground, to shift one’s own ground [*se déplacer*], which means “to go where you were not expected, or more radically, to *abjure* what you have written (but not necessarily what you have thought), when gregarious power uses and subjugates it” (468). To think in secular terms means to accept—Barthes would even say to seek—a shifting ground in your modes of knowledge so, if your language cannot entirely resist being appropriated by the institution, it can perhaps discredit this appropriation. Hence, perhaps, the sometimes unrealistic dimensions of this writing. Hence, also, the propensity to consider the ruses of reality from the standpoint of thinking about what Foucault used to call “unrealized instances”—folds that

history or knowledge has yet to open, which are nonetheless ever persistently in play, haunting and provoking our thinking out loud in response to a contemporary reality ever driven to secrecy and to silence behind the continuous noise machine of media technologies.

Galaxidi and New York, August–September 2012