

Is Freedom Academic?

R. Radhakrishnan

One of my earliest encounters, and I must say it was an academic encounter, with the category of “freedom” was during my early teens when I used to write poems compulsively every day. It used to be an enjoyable ritual, strangely both spontaneous and predictable. As someone who composed both “free verse” and at the same time was addicted to the sonnet form with all its splendid variations from Petrarch to Surrey and Wyatt, from Spenser to Shakespeare and John Milton and then to Keats (not to mention the twentieth-century unrhymed uses of the 14-liner by poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman), my teenage anxiety, both existential and epistemological, thematic as well as formal, was about my freedom. Was I freer composing free verse, or was my freedom performed with greater distinction by way of the complex and appetizing rigor of the “14-liner?” Would I be freer “subjecting” myself to the waywardness of free verse or to the canonical exactions of the sonnet form? In either case, what is the relationship between freedom as founding desire and freedom as the end product of a certain procedural performance? How would I know that I was really free? How would being free be different from or the same as knowing that I am free? If the knowledge of being free requires dependence on the externality of an apparatus, a genre, a mediation, then isn’t the interiority of freedom already compromised and contaminated? When a poet masters a certain form and consequently finds her freedom within that form, is she still “subjected” to the austere alterity of that form? To anticipate Foucault and Althusser, is freedom even thinkable without subjection? To complicate matters further, which was the “I” that was agonizing over the freedom issue? Was the existential “I” worried about the freedom that was available or not to the poetic “I,” or was the poetic “I” concerned about its ability, or the lack thereof, to honor generically the freedom of the existential “I”? Or was the poetic “I” arrogant enough to want to demystify the existential “I” of the so-called aura of experience and persuade it instead to negotiate with “experience” as a mediated category?

Is freedom directly, i.e., unmediatedly, ontological, or does it have to be modal and disciplinary?¹ Is freedom initially conceived as an existential-ontological possibility and only then referred to the performative logic of genre; or is freedom an intrinsically relational category constituted as the function of a performance anchored neither in the transcendence of the existential Ego nor in the immanence of

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generic form or materiality? Why can I just not be free outside of context, outside of any generic containment?² Why do I have to find a field, an area, or a domain to showcase and thematize my freedom, particularly when I am aware that I will have to submit myself to the exactions of that domain as a precondition for the discovery of my own freedom?³ My simple point here is that when I am a poet, whether I write free verse or the conventional sonnet, I become an academician of my own experience, for good or for bad, or for both; and therefore, my freedom has to be calibrated on a double register: substantive as well as modal. Of course, it is always possible to claim that true freedom would consist in not submitting at all to the law of mediation, generic alterity: just “be free” and “be” and not look for a medium for the thematization of experience as freedom. Of course, I could just howl out the intensity of my experience, but surely something self-reflexively would nag me into making a definitive distinction between a howl and a “howl.”

What is interesting about the problematic of Freedom is the uneasy and contingent relationship between the desire for freedom, or freedom as desire, and the choice or set of choices that such a desire is constrained to make. It is within the dialectical contradiction of freedom and choice-making that freedom as infinite desire historicizes and normativizes itself as a determinate, nameable, sovereign, and generic freedom. The plenitude of freedom has to experience the privations of embodiment, exemplarity, and instantiation before it earns the name of “historical freedom.”⁴ My point here is plain: if freedom, in all its ideality, categorical apriorism, and critical utopianism, belongs to the order of necessity, then history pertains inevitably to the realm of contingency. The invocation of freedom has to be inevitably double-voiced: in the name of a transcendence anchored in a carefully chosen immanence, and in the name of a temporality to come whose legitimate pulsations are to be identified and differentiated in the history of the present.

With this broad preamble on the philosophical-ideological nature of Freedom, I would now like to focus on my specific concern in this essay: the category of “academic freedom.” What is so special about academic freedom? How and why is it different from other forms and modalities of freedom? Is academic freedom just another subset of that immense possibility known as Freedom, or is “academia” a fraught custodial site for the progressively polemical defense and protection of freedom? In other words, how should academia as the privileged site of advanced erudition, research, and pedagogy bear the brunt of freedom? If freedom is a macropolitical horizon, how is such a horizon given shape by the micropolitical, specialist, and procedural imperatives that constitute the autonomous rationale of academia? To invoke Raymond Williams’s useful vocabulary and to conflate it with Saidian discourse, how does academia as “formation” deal with the “worldliness” of “projects” that are forever taking shape in a protean whirl out there in reality?⁵

Where then is academia in relationship to the temporality of the “real world?” The term “academic” figures interestingly, and often negatively, in popular usage. For example, when we say of a situation at a certain point that it is only of “academic interest,” we really mean that academic temporality is a kind of posthumous temporality

that accommodates certain modes of analysis and understanding, long after the situation has been resolved in reality. Academic analysis here is much like a postmortem or a statistical analysis of a game or a match after it is all over. Only statisticians, analysts, commentators, and experts who have a specialist relationship to the event endow an "after life" to something that is over and continue talking about it as though it were still real. In this context, academic is opposed to the real, the practical, and the pragmatic.

Or "academic" could refer to a fascination for second-order complications or the complexities of metaformations. Whereas a lay enthusiast would be quite content to experience happiness and pleasure without having to account for them theoretically and technically, the academic revels in theorizing and providing meta-descriptions and justifications and counterjustifications of the so-called "primacy" of the organic experience. It is in the guise of a specialist, who insists on retaining a normative and custodial relationship to a particular region of experience that has been renamed as an epistemological domain, that the academic pursues her esoteric commitment to "the real."⁶

But the question remains. At what remove from "reality" does the production of academic knowledge take place? What does "remove" mean in this context? From such a position of self-consciously produced distance, does academic knowledge have any didactic objectives vis-à-vis reality; or is didacticism of any sort extrinsic to the "dispassionate" academic venture; or, is academic knowledge open to didactic instrumentalization? When the nonacademic world passes judgment on the goings-on in the world of academia, it seems to be doing one of two contradictory things: (1) It finds academia cute, precious, and recondite and therefore not really applicable to the pulse of real life; or (2) It expects academic knowledge to provide avant-garde directions for the rest of society, i.e., directions that in the very act of transcending the status quo acknowledge the status quo as a correct and normative point of departure. All contemporary societies take immense pride in the freedom they accord to academia, their institutions of learning, to their writers, thinkers, and researchers even when their projects seem farfetched and removed from the practicalities of quotidian life, even when their research seems to fetishize the means and postpone the ends and celebrate endless and wayward process at the expense of determinate goals and objectives. Ironically, that very domain that is often satirized as precious and quixotic is also valorized as the most advanced achievement of civilized societies. In a strange manner, that very academia that would seem to be out of sync with the rest of society is also perceived as society's most advanced representation of itself. Whether academic freedom would be defended as valuable or criminalized as dangerous would depend on the ideological "bottom line" that presides over our lives in the name of common sense and mainstream reality. Academic freedom is immediately under suspicion when it seeks to denaturalize our basic beliefs or rename our beliefs as ideological constructs.

Is academic scholarship politically motivated? Is there room for ideology in the academic production and dissemination of knowledge?

Is academic politics more refined, less reductive, more self-reflexive, and ultimately more progressive than a visceral politics divorced from epistemological and methodological concerns? Is academia characterized by autonomy or heteronomy? The classic cliché, one that has been manipulated to mean everything and nothing, that one associates with academia is the notion of the disinterested production of knowledge.⁷ But what does “disinterest” mean, and how does one arrive at disinterestedness as the starting point of knowledge production? After Nietzsche, after Marx, after Freud, after colonialism, patriarchy, after racism, and a whole range of colonizing knowledges and epistemologies that have falsely claimed universality for their point of view; after hermeneutics, postmodernism, and poststructuralism, after the dazzling emergence of a plethora of subaltern and subjugated knowledges, it is impossible to return to “objectivity” and disinterestedness as perspective in the old-fashioned humanist sense of the term. So, does this mean that objectivity has been rendered impossible by the endlessly conflictual encounter among warring perspectives? It was in response to this question, that in a recent talk delivered at the University of California-Irvine, Dipesh Chakrabarty, the eminent subaltern historian and theorist, was attempting to theorize “resignation” as an epistemological attitude for historians and historiographers to adopt in a context where “doing one’s history” had degenerated into the task of identifying an enemy and destroying that enemy’s credentials within one’s own discourse. Chakrabarty was suggesting that a number of recent identitarian deployments of Nietzsche’s dictum, “Perspective is all,” had gone too far in the direction of the polemicization and militarization of knowledge. Perhaps it is time to revisit terms such as “bias,” “interest,” “balance,” “neutrality,” and “objectivity” neither in a spirit of non- or transideological humanist recuperation nor in the name of an implacable and forever furious perspectivism, but in the name of a relational and deconstructive critique capable of non-paranoid scholarship.

Clearly, Chakrabarty is not recommending for a moment that knowledge be divested from its perspectival and conflictual investment in the world, and indeed, in the worlding of the world. The attitude of “resignation” that Chakrabarty was invoking had to do with the problem of how to dwell and conduct oneself in perspectival spaces and discourses in nonformulaic and ideologically unpredictable ways. To acknowledge “where one is from” is indeed *de rigueur*, but such an acknowledgment cannot claim the authority of a manifesto, or pretend to know preemptively what any perspective will discover as its own knowledge. No perspective is doomed to its own truths and verities ahead of an actual perspectival performance.⁸ Resignation, in this sense, is an attempt to cultivate a deliberate formal and methodological distance from the by-now-predictable pieties of an avowed, and often virulent, perspectivism. In other words, the political production of knowledge has to be something richer, something more transformative and surprising than the “homing” of perspective along preset directions and objectives. It is right here that an interesting relationship emerges between freedom and politics; and academia as a site of the production of truth in the name of freedom has a great deal to contribute.

Let us juxtapose the concepts “academic freedom” and “academic politics,” and let us also insist that a mere juxtaposition alone will not do. What is required is a complex theory of mediation that will seek to elucidate how the academic site of knowledge production is simultaneously free and political. My contention is twofold: (1) that freedom itself is political and is situated in politics, which is to say that freedom to be truly free does not have to free itself from politics and partisanship; and (2) that it is possible to discover within the meaning-making processes of academia ways to align freedom with politics without coercion, ideological reductionism, and a zero-sum opportunism. So how do terms like “freedom,” “representation,” “intellectuality,” “politics,” “ideology,” “bias,” and “neutrality” ring differently in the academic milieu than in the real world? Perhaps I should explain in greater detail what I mean when I say that academic knowledge has to seek freedom in and through the political, and not in abeyance or in transcendence of the political. If political knowledge is necessarily perspectival and partisan, then so indeed is academic knowledge, but with a difference. Even as academic knowledge stays within the worldly dictates of political knowledge production, it finds a way to redefine, reunderstand, and reterritorialize our understanding of terms such as “interest” and “perspective” and “partisanship.” It is in the form of the critique that is both in the world and heterogeneous with the world that academic knowledge production works and performs.⁹ It is time to ask the following question: In the name of what imperative should the academic will to knowledge function, and how can this imperative differentiate qualitatively from a drive that is mired exclusively and unself-reflexively in political ideology?

For starters, the academic world is double-conscious, and as such, is necessarily representational and postrepresentational. If the regime of representation insists on a righteous and defensible correspondence between knowledge and its object, the momentum of post-representation opens up another frame where representation as such is posed as the problem and not automatically revered as the solution. If, as Jacques Derrida would have it, the purpose of academic thinking, i.e., the purpose of a university, is to engage in radical self-reflexivity and thus “think thought itself,” then it automatically follows that being a citizen of academia spells double duty: being a citizen of the world and being a practicing citizen of the domain of scholarship and self-reflexive intellectual labor.¹⁰ As Walter Benjamin would have it in the context of “translation” as an activity, to be an academic is to perform “modally” and to acknowledge that “modality” as constitutive of one’s being. The title of one of Gayatri Spivak’s many books, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, sums up the layered complexity of academic ontology/epistemology very well. Is the world out there and is academia an interior space? Isn’t the world somehow always already in, and isn’t academia always in a relationship of heteronomous exteriority to the world of which it is a representation/mediation?¹¹ Aren’t outsides and insides always reciprocally relational and mutually constitutive such that there can be no absolute and nonnegotiable forms of exteriority and interiority?

The question to ask in this context, it seems to me, is this: Why does an academic take her modality so seriously, i.e., more seriously, with

more *gravitas*, than any other professional? In other words, is the academic professional too full of herself? Is the academic professional, to invoke Edward Said's telling critique of a wall-to-wall professionalism, guilty of fetishizing "modality" at the expense of reality or worldliness? Is the academic professional guilty of the arrogant assumption that the worlding of the world can only happen "modally" and never extramodally? What then is modal thinking and what is the price to be paid for the pleasures of modal thinking? The important questions that come up, as we attempt to align the temporality of academic research with the pulsations of the world without, are the following: What are the representative parameters of academia? Is the University for example a world unto itself, and if so, how is the relative autonomy of this world cathected by the rationale of the world without? If the University is the domain of knowledge, what is such a knowledge all about? When there are clashes or temporal lags between what an academic "believes" as knowledge and the measure of populist knowledge, who should resolve this dissidence and in the name of what principle? If academia stands for the "cutting edge" and recognizes itself with pride as the avant-garde, then how are the politics of such an avant-garde transmitted and made intelligible to the rest of society?¹²

Research and pedagogy are the twin pillars that constitute Academia. It is to be assumed that these two dimensions feed into and thrive off each other. Research ensures perennial search and self-renewal, and pedagogy transmits the dynamics of knowledge production to students both as theme and as methodology, as product and never-ending process, as content and as form. Built into this "academic ideology" is the secular assumption that knowledge is contingent and is forever vulnerable to its own micrological practices, performances, and findings. In the ongoing relationship between affirmation and deconstruction, conservation and radicality, solidarity and critique, academic scholarship has a vital role to play. What principle should academic freedom be loyal to? What indeed is the relationship between loyalty as a particular mode of sovereign belonging and freedom that is always seeking to make trouble for regnant modes of loyalty? If the discourse of belonging attempts to domesticate, territorialize, and "at-home" the will to knowledge within certain consecrated parameters such as humanism, nationalism, and the nation-state, freedom as the will to knowledge refuses such complicity and forever deterritorializes knowledge in the name of its own momentum. The most memorable expression of this position is the one offered by Michel Foucault in his affirmative reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's ultimate challenge and dare to the human subject, i.e., to lose itself irretrievably in the processes of knowing.¹³

We are all too familiar with the classic distinction between conservatives and radicals. What is one group conservative of, and what is it that the other group is radically dissipative of? Clearly neither group is nescient or agnostic when it comes to questions of knowledge. The difference between the two camps has to do not with the content of knowledge, but with modes of valorization that canonize knowledge as truth. By and large, conservatives tend either to naturalize or essentialize the findings of knowledge, whereas radicals are prepared not

to build fortresses and moats around truths that are after all contingent historical constructs. Conservatives would like to believe that historically produced truths, even revolutionary truths, are nothing but unpackings of a number of basic tenets and principles enshrined in some "first" book, secular or religious, whereas radicals would maintain that truths and values are produced historically and circumstantially and not as actualizations of primordial intentionalities or covenants. Let us take the examples of humanism and nationalism. Why is it that during the infamous period of McCarthyism that the word "un-American" took on such a terrorizing normative power? Why is it that in our time and place, the Bush-led version of *Pax Americana* has become the prime text that is mobilizing worldwide assent and dissent? The answer of course is obvious. Nationalism, the nation-state, and the rationale of sovereign citizenship are the hegemonic principles and the normative baseline against which individual and collective performances and behaviors are evaluated as loyal or disloyal, meritorious or reprehensible, free or unfree. In other words, despite all talk about globalization, the free market, and transnationalism, the macrologic of the nation-state remains the ideological horizon within which we perform the procedures and rituals of freedom. To put it somewhat dramatically, when was the last time an American citizen was lauded and granted a medal in recognition of her divestment from American interests and her passionate advocacy of a foreign cause antithetical to American ideology? The freedom of the citizen is always calculated and calibrated with reference to national solidarity, which of course automatically translates into solidarity with one's own country.¹⁴ Freedom is valorized only as an interpellation of the nation's call.¹⁵ A similar kind of naturalization takes place with reference to the ideology of humanism, of the so-called "naturally human." Homosexuality, cloning, artificial insemination, stem cell research, transgendered movements, etc. are instantly branded as not "natural," and therefore the freedoms undertaken in the name of these constituencies are perceived as transgressions against the natural order. No phrase is more violently coercive and didactic than "family values," and yet it is this phrase that is perceived as innocent of all ideological charge.

I bring up the massive examples of nationalism and humanism to raise the following questions. When is a value deemed political and/or ideological, and when is a value natural? To put it simply, why is it that an unabashed partisanship on behalf of capitalism and the so-called free market is never understood as an ideological platform? The mystifying term of opprobrium, "political correctness," has gained such popular currency for one simple and flagrant reason: the coiners of this phrase have conveniently exnominated themselves as active political propagandists and rendered their own political biases invisible even as they color the left with the infamy of political shrillness and intolerance. The right-wing coiners of the phrase conveniently forget that they themselves are interested in establishing and legalizing political correctness; the only difference is that conservative upholders of political rectitude see themselves as acting on behalf of the status quo, the natural attitude, and a set of values that are putatively unconstructed and therefore foundational. Radical or left-wing political

correctness on the contrary is portrayed as the result of undue, and often violent, ideological interventions that interfere with the politics of the natural, and academia is criminalized as the hothouse of political correctness. When we talk of academic freedom and academic politics, the first thing to be mindful of is that we are not holding our discussions in a vacuum. The academic site, despite its relative autonomy, is a given and ideologically inherited site. The indictment, for example, of “tenured radicals” and their ideological pedagogy and scholarship can, neither in principle nor in practice, be understood or evaluated objectively or in neutrality for the simple reason that the ideological breach of neutrality and objectivity has already taken place well before the putative interventions of the tenured radicals. In fact, an ideological skewness is already in place, anointed as a natural *status quo*.¹⁶

Time now to address the two terms “neutrality” and “objectivity” in all their interconnectedness in the context of the academic production of knowledge, and it is to “objectivity” that I turn first. The term “objectivity” can have no meaning except without reference to its binary partner and dialectical opposite “subjectivity.” It does not take a philosopher or an epistemologist to know that the world is objectively “there” prior to human cognition, and yet at the same time, it is equally valid, as the phenomenologists and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in particular understood so well, that the very objectivity of the world had to be “given” to human subjectivity as its binding and ultimate horizon.¹⁷ In other words, the meaning of the world as objective is never available as the burden of an omniscient and nonperspectival knowledge; such a meaning has to be understood as embodied and situated in human perspectivism variously, differentially, and heterogeneously. In other words, it is not possible to abandon subjectivity in the name of an “always already” objectivity; just as much, it is not admissible to grant subjectivity a constitutive power over the objectivity of the world. What this means is that to the human subject, both epistemologically and politically, the world, or the worldliness of the world, is accessible only as an ongoing negotiation of contradiction and accord, of harmony and dissonance between the objectivity of the world and its subjective availability to the *Cogito*. And it becomes the obligation of academic thinking to bear official and professional witness to this double bind. To put it in other words, the academic subject has to make sure that this negotiation is upheld both thematically and methodologically, both ideologically and procedurally.

I come back to the question of “sovereignty” that I had posed a few paragraphs ago. The question is: in the name of what is the academic production of truth to be valorized? We are all aware of the many sovereignties in whose name truth is identified as such: the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, Capital, the commodity form, the money form, the nation-state, etc. But what if truths were free, i.e., free of the taint of sovereignty itself? What would a nonsovereign truth feel like, and how would such a truth establish its modes of persuasion? Would such a truth speak to Power unabashedly, without fear of compromise or complicity? Michel Foucault has much to say in this context. His famous essay “Society Must Be Defended” begins thus:

In order to conduct a concrete analysis of power relations, one would have to abandon the juridical notion of sovereignty. That model presupposes the individual as a subject of natural rights or original powers; it aims to account for the ideal genesis of the state; and it makes law the fundamental manifestation of power. One would have to study power not on the basis of the primitive terms of the relation but starting from the relation itself, inasmuch as the relation is what determines the elements on which it bears: instead of asking ideal subjects what part of themselves or what powers of theirs they have surrendered, allowing themselves to be subjectified [se *laisser assujettir*], one would need to inquire how relations of subjectivation can manufacture subjects. (59)

The question I would like to raise here for Foucault is this: Who is making this diagnosis? Foucault the individual, or Foucault the intellectual; and if it is Foucault the intellectual, is it as an organic intellectual, à la Gramsci, or is it as a specific intellectual interested in the microphysical movements of power in all its ubiquity?¹⁸ In a quintessentially posthumanist move, Foucault identifies sovereignty as a problem to be dismantled by thought and not as an *imprimatur* to be named as the ontological home of thought. What is problematic, and perhaps even threatening, to most readers of Foucault is the fact that he dares to yank away from under their very feet the very bedrock of their ontological security: the category of “sovereignty.” We all like to be secure as sovereign citizens, sovereign males or females or workers or tax payers or mothers or fathers or as family members. We require *a priori* forms of normativity that lend stability to our otherwise contingent lives. What the academic thinker has the audacity to attempt is to render the ontological vulnerable to the performativity of the epistemological subject. The academic thinker deprives us of a number of “primitive” and “fundamental” sources of ontological anchorage, and instead compels us to rethink our “natural” comforts and guarantees as manufactured and produced effects. The academic thinker announces and validates a different commitment: the commitment to processes of knowing, processes whose dynamic runs counter to the rationale of sovereignty. The academic thinker has to insist that processes of knowing and thinking have to make a difference to the ontological project. Living cannot go on in the old-fashioned way as though processes of knowing had not disturbed and called into question the all-too-transparent and un-self-reflexive placidity of existence.

Let us take the simple example of practicing and honoring one’s citizenship. Radical academia, whether it be postcolonial studies or Middle East and Palestinian studies or the New Americanist formation, that has the courage to question American exceptionalism has been under state surveillance for potential antinational directions of scholarship. The populist and commonsensical bottom line is the orthodox piety of the nation-state. All flows of academic research are expected to conform to the well-being of American sovereignty. If sovereignty is the ultimate juridical place holder of normativity,

then the ideology of the nation-state constitutes the empirical verity of sovereignty. What sovereignty-centered ontology cannot tolerate is the notion of a critique that has the audacity to eviscerate solidarity of its “natural rights or original powers.” It is not coincidental that Foucault’s problematization of sovereignty identifies both “the individual” and “the state” as objects of denaturalization. The critique raises “knowing” and epistemological performativity as perennial questions directed at forms of sovereignty: the individual and the state. There is a reason why I am focusing on the critique: the university is the site of the critique and, in general, of self-reflexive thinking. As Judith Butler reads the meaning of the critique in Foucault’s framework: “Further, the primary task of critique will not be to evaluate whether its objects—social conditions, practices, forms of knowledge, power, and discourse—are good or bad, valued highly or demeaned, but to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself” (306-07). Like Derrida’s “dangerous supplement,” the very heteronomy of the critique, in Foucault’s discourse, calls into question any form of originality or naturalness that sovereignty would want to claim in the name of life itself. Let us hear more of Butler on Foucault’s notion of the critique:

Foucault’s contribution to what appears as an impasse within critical and post-critical theory of our time is precisely to ask us to rethink critique as a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing, what Williams referred to as our “uncritical habits of mind” and what Adorno described as ideology (where the “unideological thought is that which does not permit itself to be reduced to ‘operational terms’ and instead strives solely to help the things themselves to that articulation from which they are otherwise cut off by the prevailing language”). One does not drive to the limits or a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability. And it is from this condition, the tear in the fabric of our epistemological web, that the practice of critique emerges, with the awareness that no discourse is adequate here or that our reigning discourses have produced an impasse. Indeed, the very debate in which the strong normative view wars with critical theory may produce precisely that form of discursive impasse from which the necessity and urgency of critique emerges. (307-08)

What Butler is describing in this passage is what I would term “the Kafkaesquization” of the quotidian. The crisis is the everyday and not the exception, and the reigning discourses, in all their sovereignty, “have produced an impasse.” To put it differently, the transgressive wavelengths are not elsewhere, out of dialog with the normative broadcasts and sovereign bulletins and communiqués, but rather, they lie at the very core of dominant discourses: consubstantial,

coextensive, and coeval with them. What is at stake here, in Foucault's agon of thought, is this: Is the critique something more than a transgression? Does the critique have the obligation to be "normative," or is the critique obliged to problematize and destabilize normativity as such, perennially? Butler gives us an opening when she refers to "the strong normative" suggesting thereby not a total elision of the normative as such, but rather holding out the possibility of a "weak normativity," i.e., a normativity healthily vulnerable to the "urgency of critique."¹⁹ The difficult epistemological or the truth question that Foucault raises is this: How does the critique know that it knows, and how will it transform its self-recognition as a binding mandate on its object, i.e., the dominant discourse with its strong normative view? Let us hear Foucault at length on the phenomenology of transgression:

The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess; a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable and, reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it merely crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows. But can the limit have a life of its own outside of the act that gloriously passes through it and negates it? What becomes of it after this act and what might it have been before? For its part, does transgression not exhaust its nature when it violates the limit, being nothing beyond this point in time? And this point, this curious intersection of beings that do not exist outside it but totally exchange what they are within it—is it not also everything that overflows from it on all sides? [. . .] And yet, toward what is transgression unleashed in its movement of pure violence, if not that which imprisons it, toward the limit and those elements it contains? What bears the brunt of its aggression, and to what void does it owe the unrestrained fullness of its being, if not that which it crosses in its violent act and which, as its destiny, it crosses out in the line it effaces? ("Preface to Transgression" 73)

Is this act of transgression that is marooned in its durationless duration the same act as the critique? Can the critique be the proud and sovereign owner of its own truth? In either case, can the critique and/or the act of transgression be construed as an instance of "speaking truth to power?" To bring both Antonio Gramsci and Partha Chatterjee into the conversation, when truth addresses itself to power in antagonism, is it waging a "war of maneuver" or a "war of position?"²⁰

If a critique is interior, to what is it interior; and if it is exterior, to what is it exterior? Do canonical notions of insides and outsides, heteronomy and autonomy, heterogeneity and homogeneity apply in the case of the critique? Or does the critique, with its open challenge to commonsensical ways of knowing and doing, destabilize the very notion of inside and outside that is so central to hegemonic ways of understanding the politics of constituency and accountability? The cardinal challenge to the discourse of the critique is this: How to think, within the same thought, both solidarity and opposition, both normativity and normativity as crisis? Edward Said would of course be very eager to point out that "the critique" and "critical consciousness"

are not the same. To Said, the critique is part of an official systemic discourse that in the act of validating and perpetuating its methodological autonomy loses touch with the world and with worldliness in general; whereas critical consciousness, in not fetishizing theoretical discourse and academic ways of knowing, remains alive and responsive agentially and individualistically to the objective reality of the world. The important question that Said is asking is: Where does true oppositional critical thinking really flourish, in the system or outside the system or between culture and system?²¹ Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Edward Said, and Raymond Williams—each in his own way champions passionately the practice of self-reflexivity, but of course they differ modally in their understanding of what really constitutes self-reflexivity, and where self-reflexivity is real and consequential and where it is deluded and mystified. Needless to say, Foucault and Derrida would be in the same camp methodologically and theoretically, and Said and Williams in another.

When, for example, Derrida insists that the site known as the university should dedicate itself rigorously to the task of thinking thought itself as the absolute prolegomenon for thinking about the world and the Real, he is in fact making a strong announcement about priorities and about the politics of representation. What indeed is thinking, and what is a thought? What is a lay thought and lay thinking, and what is academic thought and academic thinking? Are lay thought and thinking more representation-bound and -centric than academic thought? When thought is persuaded to think about itself in preparation for its thinking about the world, is it guilty of academic narcissism or not? Built into the category of the critique as academic is the notion of demystification. What may appear to be commonsensically and transparently true may indeed be false, and on the contrary, what seems counterfactual, counterempirical, and counterintuitive may well be true and valid, theoretically and epistemologically. What sounds like a natural truth may well be an ideological and cognitive distortion in need of critical demystification. It may look as if the earth is centered and all the planets and the sun are revolving around it, but that thesis is erroneous. Creationism may well be a comforting thesis, but it is Darwin who has the right answer. Each one of us, in her inherent humanistic goodness, may think that she is unbiased, nonethnocentric, nonracist, etc., but the ugly reality is that all our knowing and all our paradigms of enlightenment are constitutively and inescapably biased and “pre-judged.”²² Derrida and Foucault, whatever their internal differences, would insist that freedom as academic freedom would take the form of a perennial unrest that would forever spell trouble for normativity and those discourses in which it is enshrined. Sovereignty is neither a natural home nor a trustworthy custodian of epistemological interest. Whereas common sense and ideology reconcile us “naturally” to our habitat, the critique forever keeps opening up a gap between where we live and where we think: all in the name of an ongoing crisis within the regime of the normative. Here, for example, is Foucault waxing rhapsodic about “being intellectual”:

I dream of the intellectual destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he will think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present. (n. pag.)²³

It is precisely this kind of utopian transgressive restlessness in Foucault that annoys Slavoj Žižek, in whose eyes Foucault is an adolescent rebel who will not accept the inevitable reality of Oedipalization and the truth of the symbolic order.²⁴ Whether one agrees or not with Žižek's harsh evaluation of Foucault's intellectual agency, the question still remains: In what temporality does the Foucauldian intellectual exist and perform, or better still, exist as performance and performer? Why should the intellectual be cast exclusively, I would say even obsessively, in the mold of the antagonistic destroyer? Is Foucault guilty of romanticizing the destructive activity *carte blanche*, or does the act of destroying take on paramount importance because of the destruction-worthiness of "evidence and universalities"? In other words, it is precisely because evidence lies and universalities misrepresent or represent by way of epistemic violence that they deserve to be destroyed. Is destruction then a form of creation? What remains after the destruction? Should a counterdiscourse be inaugurated after the radical act of destruction? Clearly, and this is a Nietzschean inheritance, what is at stake for Foucault is the status of the present, ontologically as well as epistemologically. Foucault is deeply concerned that the present not be forced into a teleological or historicist narrative, or be constructed as the launching pad for projects of duplicitous transcendence. Fiercely verbal and processual in orientation, Foucault is anxious that knowledge as a nominal formation will come in the way of knowing as an expression of an ongoing and unstable temporality. In Foucault's diagnosis, the inertias and the constraints of the present preclude the flows of the temporality of knowing that the knowing subject would like to pretend that what has been known historically has been known "always already," and insist that knowledge be naturalized as home. A domesticated present, or a present with whose status quo we make peace, covers up the weak opening, sutures the openings, and neutralizes the lines of force that refuse teleological comfort. It could be argued that "the eternal present" that Foucault advocates, as a perennial overrunning of itself, could be construed as the ultimate validation of transcendence: for, in Foucault's temporality, could the present not be seen as perennially transcending itself? Perhaps there is the figurality of transcendence built into Foucault's intellectual momentum, but it is a dissipative and not a conservative or teleological transcendence. It is a transcendence based on expenditure without reserve (the influence of Bataille here), rather than expenditure as conservation or investment in the future.

It would be most useful to think of academia as the custodian both of crisis and those forms of knowledge that emerge from crises. It would be quite normal for the critique to recognize the status quo as zero degree crisis or as asymptomatic malaise, whereas such "pathological"

descriptions of “normal” situations would sound irrational to commonsensical ears. The question surely arises: If academia is the home of the critique, and if it is the business of the critique to keep normativity at bay, and if, furthermore, the critique is obligated to speak Truth to Power, then in the name of what principle does academic freedom work? How is academic normativity different in kind and persuasion from other forms of normativity? In asking this question I have already made the assumption that speaking Truth to Power cannot bypass the question of normativity for the simple reason that truth without the armature of normativity is virtually unthinkable. Either academic normativity is superior in kind to other forms of normativity, or there is something about the academic process of knowledge production that rethinks and radically redeploys the category of “in the name of.” It is impossible to raise the categorical issue of “in the name of” without also raising simultaneously the nature of “interest” in the context of knowledge production. Is academic interest, and by extension epistemological interest, different in motivation from political or social or ethical or ideological interest?²⁵ How is epistemological interest to be understood as politically constituted but not as politically bound or hamstrung? In other words, how can academic freedom help in the perennial, i.e., second order, refashioning of the political and politics as such?

What differentiates academic correctness from other forms of rectitude is that, in the academic context, blindness and insight, to borrow from the late Paul de Man, are always in a state of mutual complicity. Whether one goes the Adorno way or the deconstructive way, à la Derrida, or for that matter the Nietzschean-Foucauldian path that demands the sacrifice of the knowing subject in the processes of knowing, the deconstructive critique disallows the realization of knowledge as home and the ideological naturalization of truth. Here then is the problem. There can be no life without a sense of home, and yet, radical epistemology teaches us to problematize home and constantly put it under erasure. Home is the home of values and yet radical thinking exhorts us to think of every document of civilization equally as a document of barbarism²⁶ and of home as homophobic²⁷ and ethnocentric-racist and xenophobic, and of values as nothing but a system of merciless and punitive normativity. Identity seems to be a natural craving, but advanced theory dares to dream of a community based on difference. Common sense drives us to the conservation of the status quo whereas theoretical thinking insists on no less than a perennial interrogation of the very ground we are standing on even as we instrumentalize that ground as the basis of our self-transcendence.

Where academic thought is different is in its conscious cultivation of ambivalence, contradiction, and doubleness. What academic thought at its Utopian best performs is the Heideggerian practice of locating the questioner within the question, and insisting on hermeneutic circularity in the context of “pre-judice” and its constitutive relationship to the production of knowledge. It is within this double bind of self-reflexivity that academic freedom takes shape and achieves its unique temporality. The freedom that academic work as critique cherishes is in fact the result of an ongoing work, of an ongoing asceticism.

Academic critique takes nothing for granted and abjures privileges. The concern of the critique is to ensure that the very "name" in the name of which (whether the name be that of one's country, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, one's constituency or cause) freedom has been gained should not get in the way of the ongoing processes of "being free." It is this commitment of the critique to a Heideggerian "nothing," this commitment to "namelessness," that makes it an easy target of populist or lay alarm. It is this burden of self-reflexivity that will entertain no comfort or anchorage that makes academic critique seem and sound like so much like anomie and anarchism to mainstream eyes and ears.

Let me offer the following example. How would mainstream America respond to the following exhortation: *Celebrate America namelessly?* In mainstream reception, such a call would sound insane, illogical, seditious, antipatriotic. How is it possible to hold together within the same thought namelessness and a name so axiomatically powerful as "America?" Such a call sounds like an appeal for the disintegration of the U.S.A. Here is an example where, in mainstream perception, self-reflexivity has run amok and threatens to dissolve the very identity that self-reflexivity is supposed to be all "about." As Virginia Woolf would have it in her woman-context, academic freedom knows no country, and in fact, it makes the acute diagnosis that nationalism is a dire and ongoing threat to the practice of freedom. It is precisely because the critique compels the human subject theoretically and epistemologically to understand and acknowledge that its present moment of conviction and rectitude is fraught with blindness and error, it is precisely because the critique calls into question the very notion of "the proper subject," that it is feared and demonized by orthodoxies of what Edward Said would call Culture and System. By not wanting to reach home, by not wanting to create a secure domain that it can call its own, and by refusing resolutely to celebrate solidarity as a *fait accompli*, the critique opens up the temporality of perennial thinking where to be alive is to be vulnerable. In cultivating vulnerability as the core of both thought and existence, the critique dreams of a freedom that runs counter to identitarian regimes and prisons of representation. Indeed, academic freedom is about "nothing," that very nothing that official and dominant discourses want to make a nothing of.²⁸

Notes

¹ My use of the term "modal" is derived from Walter Benjamin, who, in his influential essay "The Task of the Translator" makes the assertion that "translation is a mode." For an extended discussion of Benjamin's notion of modality, see my essay "Is Translation a Mode?"

² See Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, for radical notions of individual existential freedom untrammelled by the ideology of the social.

³ There are a number of Zen stories that play out this paradox, in particular the one about a master archer who gets so adept with the bow that as a mark of his transcendent excellence he is unable to recognize the bow as a bow. In typical fashion, Zen wisdom questions and transcends the materiality of mediation in the name of ineffability.

⁴ For more on the agony of having to make a choice among untenable options, see Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism*.

⁵ Raymond Williams uses the terms “project” (happenings and movements in the world) and “formation” (institutional reflections and mediations of projects under specialized conditions) in his posthumously published *The Politics of Modernism*. Beginning with his text *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Edward Said uses “worldliness” time and again to indicate a protean reality available to secular, human, historical intervention. See also the conversation between Said and Williams in *The Politics of Modernism*.

⁶ Among the many thinkers who insist on the constitutive role played by theory in our demystified understanding of the Real, Louis Althusser stands out for his uncompromising integrity. See, in particular, *The Humanist Controversy*.

⁷ This notion of “disinterest” one way or another goes all the way back to Kant and Kantian notions of enlightenment.

⁸ See Das.

⁹ There is a rich tradition of the Western critique: Kant, Hegel, Marx, Habermas, Althusser, Foucault, Adorno, and Derrida, to name just a few.

¹⁰ See Derrida.

¹¹ For more on the heteronomy of heteronomy, see Balibar.

¹² See the forthcoming collection of essays edited by Schueller Johar and Dawson that addresses the many facets and complications of academic freedom. See also Burt.

¹³ See Foucault, “Nietzsche.”

¹⁴ The question here is this: how to generate a sense of an ontological “we” across, beyond, and in transgression of the provincial parochialisms of nationalism and the nation-state? For a memorable attempt at articulating a “we” in the context of a common loss and mourning, see Butler, *Precarious Life* and my appreciative critique of Butler, “Grievable Life.”

¹⁵ For more on the relationship among democracy, freedom, and the nation-state, read the works of Wolin, in particular, the essay “Fugitive Democracy,” and my essay “When is Democracy Political?” See also Wolin, *The Presence of the Past*, and Connolly.

¹⁶ See Readings for a profoundly elegiac rendition of the ways in which the university has transformed into its current corporate capitalist manifestation.

¹⁷ See Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*.

¹⁸ For a comparative analysis of the Foucauldian and the Gramscian models of the intellectual, see my essay “Towards an Effective Intellectual.”

¹⁹ For more on phenomenological normativity by way of Merleau-Ponty, see ch. 3 of my book *History*.

²⁰ See Gramsci; Chatterjee; and Brennan.

²¹ For more on the nature of critical agency in the works of Said, see *Edward Said*; ch. 2 of my book *History*; see also Spanos.

²² See the ongoing work of Mahzarin Banaji on the cognitive sociology of prejudice.

²³ See Foucault, back cover of *Foucault Alive*.

²⁴ See Žižek.

²⁵ For an ethico-epistemological reading of “interest,” see ch. 2 “The Use and Abuse of Multiculturalism” in my book *Theory*.

²⁶ See Benjamin.

²⁷ See Anzaldúa for a moving and intense showing-up of home as homophobic.

²⁸ Both Heidegger and Nietzsche champion the cause as well as the semantics of “the nothing” in opposition to positivism, Platonism, essentialism, and metaphysical thought.

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