

French Lessons

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This essay is a brief response to two rather different provocations: an old suspicion and a relatively recent text. The suspicion is mine but I believe it was and still is shared by many others. The text is Alain Badiou's essay on the French language in Barbara Cassin's huge volume, the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

The old suspicion is that even when we were reading Roland Barthes well – 'we' being anyone who was reading from a cultural situation outside of the French one – we were misreading him, looking past something in his writing, losing sight of something. 'Misreading' is probably not the word I need. It was not that 'we had the experience but missed the meaning', to borrow a phrase from T. S. Eliot.¹ Reading Barthes we had the experience and the meaning, but – perhaps – we missed the game. We didn't know what the stakes were, or quite how the game was being played.

When they were not suspicious enough, English and American interpreters of Barthes were apt to make him sound more sensible than he literally was. Barthes would say, as he did in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, that language was fascist, and we would explain that he didn't entirely mean that. 'Fascist' was a hyperbolic, excitable way of saying 'restrictive' or 'oppressive' or something along those lines. But what if we thought Barthes meant exactly what he said?

Badiou's essay offers a highly tendentious account of what may be the game. It is called philosophizing in French, but the rules seem to apply very well to writing critical comment or reflections in that language – or written from within the culture that speaks that language. The essay has been read as an exercise in unstinting praise of Frenchness, an expression of galloping linguistic chauvinism. I think it's more ironic than that, in the end something more like a comic lament about French philosophy's desperate commitment to epigrammatic cleverness. But the whole point about irony, as I shall recall later, is that we can read it differently; find it or not find it.

Badiou asserts that the installation of thought in the French language – that is the turn in philosophy from Latin to French – is political from the

start, a matter of democratizing discussion. It is never a question of the French language in its historical particularity, but simply of French as the language you happen to use if you are French. Any other language would do just as well, as long as it permitted the same democratic, universalizing gesture. I'm not sure how far Badiou, or indeed Descartes, actually believes this. The project is literary as well as political, Badiou argues, and this is why French philosophers have always wanted to be writers as well. In language itself they highlight syntax rather than substance, they are opposed to both consensus and ambiguity – a nice pairing of enemies.

What Badiou turns out to mean by democratic discussion is one that carries beyond the academy, beyond the Sorbonne, and especially the mode of discussion fostered by the salons, and therefore often by women rather than men. Badiou is aware of but unbothered by the consequence that princesses rather than professors thus become the philosopher's audience, and when he writes in praise of 'a sort of royal indifference', 'une indifférence royale', to the origins and etymologies of the French language, he is certainly taking democracy in a strange direction.² But the argument is clear. French philosophers want to write, and write for everyone. The longing for a clean, universal view is unmistakable, and perhaps it isn't the philosophers' fault if 'everyone' turns out to be an aristocrat.

'[T]he essence of language is syntax' – but only French philosophers invest thoroughly in this essence. 'This language—whose heart is in La Rochefoucauld's or Pascal's aphorisms ... abstraction is natural to it.' 'It is a language of decision, of principle and consequence.'³ Badiou's high-wire act here – describing the essence of a language while claiming not to essentialize that language – is impressive, and sincere, I think, or at least straight. It is itself aphoristic, an instance of its own theme, but not, so far, ironic or critical.

But then. 'French leads to the hollowing out of all substantiality... It is a thin language.'⁴ Here the tone and angle begin to shift. The rest of the essay is a witty caricature of the use of language Badiou has been describing, but the virtues look as if they might well be limitations. This is partly because he is now writing about his contemporaries and immediate elders – Sartre, Lacan, Althusser, Deleuze – and a note of mockery creeps into even the affectionate evocations. Badiou cites a passage from Lacan about the Id, and exclaims, 'How beautiful that all is! It is persuasive beauty, which is

more important for any French writer-philosopher than exactitude. Or rather, it is a secondary exactitude...⁵

French philosophers speak the same language even when they are disagreeing. '[T]he same effervescent language is used to say that desire is a lack (Lacan) and that desire lacks nothing (the anti-Oedipal Deleuze-Guattari).'⁶ And all attempts to be obscure like the Germans or ambiguous like the English or baroque like the Italians end in the same place: another maxim. This is why French thinkers will always be saying things like man is a useless passion or the unconscious is structured like a language. French thinkers, Badiou concludes, are doomed to this style of argument: seduction and skirmish rather than truth and conviction. No repentance, no uncertainty, he says, just persuading an assembly of some sort to vote: politics. 'One must accept this strength, or weakness.'⁷

There may be more simple celebration of French practice here than I can see; more discreet dissent from the practice than others have seen. But the project goes beyond any simple verdict on it, and as a textual performance it makes a claim rather different from the one it makes as a statement. It seems to be asking us to take this picture or leave it, to vote for it or not. But if we can't vote for or against it, what can we do with it?

Well, how do we read aphorisms, if we don't mistakenly take them as offering plain propositional claims? Here are two simple, famous examples. '[*T*]hat is dead and *that* is going to die.'⁸ The second half of the sentence – '*that* is going to die' – is certainly true, if the photograph is of a person. The first – '*that* is dead' – may or may not be true, depending on the timing of the photograph, the person either is dead or she or he isn't. But of course these meanings are irrelevant, or rather only form the basis of the meanings we take from the sentence. Every photograph is a *memento mori*, in the stillness of the pose we seem to see the future death of the subject. '*That* is dead' is a dramatic announcement, a trope, a kind of game with time. '*That* is going to die' reminds us that the trope is not only a trope.

Or take this second case, where literally nothing seems to be said. 'She was my grandmother and I was her grandson.'⁹ This is what Proust's narrator asserts when he finally, one year late, registers his grandmother's death. He knew she was dead, of course, he had grieved. But he hadn't measured his loss until she was resurrected in a moment of memory: her vivid, undeniable life in memory taught him how dead she was. What does he do? He simply names the relation, as if the mere formulation of it could

say everything he needs to say. Or rather, as if it can't say it, for nothing can; but it marks better than anything else the vast, irredeemably particular realm of the unsaid.

The spoken truth or untruth of these sentences is a long way from their propositional content, and only a complicated, if easily practiced act of interpretation gives them any sense. They have no substance in Badiou's terms. But they are not just beautiful expressions either. They have what Badiou calls a 'secondary exactitude', they are trying to tell us something, although tell is not the right word.

Language works in this way all the time, in jokes and casual remarks and in highly wrought pieces of literature. I don't mean to suggest there is anything unique about aphorisms in this respect, although they do offer a rich territory of examples, and their method is instructive for thinking about other instances. An aphorism seems to say something complete and final, to offer the last word. But its stylization and simplification are usually so extreme that it reminds us of everything left out even as it pretends to leave nothing out. I should like to suggest that we do not limit ourselves to national myths when thinking about these matters. It's true that French writers have a fondness for aphorisms; but they are not alone in this, and every language has its forms of elegant indirection masquerading as straightforward declaration.

It is also true that Barthes is a great aphorist ('History is hysterical', 'The writerly is the novelistic without the novel', 'it is precisely because I forget that I read', 'the realistic author spends his time referring back to books', 'not the story of a castrato, but of a contract', and so on¹⁰). He seems in this respect to conform to Badiou's picture of the French writer. He would agree with Badiou too about the necessarily political coloring of such linguistic events. But Barthes really is talking about language where Badiou is talking about French. And Barthes' use of aphorisms, along with many other figures, does not enclose him in a mockable tradition, it provides a sketch of whatever liberty might be available to us within a culture – any culture.

Barthes calls trickery what I was earlier calling caricature. Let's listen to him a little more closely. When he says language is fascist, he has a quite specific form of oppression in mind: not one that silences us but one that obliges us to speak:

But language – the performance of a language system (*la langue, comme performance de tout langage*) – is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech (*dire*), it compels speech.¹¹

Signs themselves are deeply conformist:

The sign is a follower, gregarious; in each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype. [...] Unfortunately, human language has no exterior.¹²

Barthes thinks perhaps Kierkegaard and Nietzsche may have found ways to get outside language but the rest of us have to do what we can within it, and this is where we turn to trickery:

But for us, who are neither knights of faith nor supermen, the only remaining alternative is, if I may say so, to cheat with speech (*langue*), to cheat speech. This salutary trickery, this evasion, this grand imposture which allows us to understand speech (*langue*) *outside the bounds of power*, in the splendour of a permanent revolution of language, I for one call *literature*.¹³

Elsewhere, thinking of Flaubert, Barthes gives this trickery, this lure, the name of writing, *écriture*:

[A] circularity in which no one [...] has an advantage over anyone else; and this is in fact the function of writing: to make ridiculous, to annul the power (the intimidation) of one language over another...¹⁴

When Badiou thinks of literature – of French philosophers wanting always to be writers – he thinks of a spectacular doom, a condemnation to wit, elegance, even dandyism. When Barthes thinks of literature he thinks precisely of an escape from the language of others, the nauseating ‘discourse of others’ that haunts his book *S/Z*.¹⁵ It comes as a slight shock to see that in spite of this huge difference they are talking about the same thing. Because the aphorism, like all uses of language, all performances of language, as Barthes says, can represent a commitment to show and glamour rather than

truth; and can also represent a commitment to a truth that can't be said, that can be communicated only across or inside or in spite of obvious meanings. One claim is that mere truth is trivial. It is what we all know already. We need to be awakened to the truth anew and just telling us the truth won't do this. The other claim is that even the most brilliant remark will be a prison if it arises only from the language of others, that there is no use of language that does not stand in need of subversion. Another slight shock: Badiou's caricature and Barthes' definition are both against consensus.

Barthes has a wonderful remark in *Camera Lucida*, quite difficult to understand or to get one's head around entirely because in French as in English the word 'argue' has so many meanings. He is talking about his likes and dislikes. He doesn't want to exclude them as most serious scholars would and do. He doesn't want to indulge them as petulant and admiring assertions of opinion either. He wants to use them. And this too is not only a methodological option but a sort a reliance on desire, a form of liking.

I have always wanted to argue with my moods; not to justify them; still less to fill the scene of the text with my individuality; but on the contrary, to offer, to extend this individuality to a science of the subject, a science whose name is of little importance to me...¹⁶

An argument is a discussion, a quarrel, a summary, a gist, a plot, a thesis, a set of reasons, and much more. Not all of that 'more' is present in Barthes' sentence, though. Not the quarrel, for example. In Barthes' sense I can want to argue with my moods or to turn my moods into arguments, or to find arguments for and against them. But I can't win or lose any of these arguments, there is no duel and no vote. I think of the line in Adorno's *Minima Moralia* about philosophers always wanting to be right.¹⁷ And I think of the sheer difficulty of at the same time loving arguments and not wanting to be right. Literature in this view doesn't refuse arguments, it is full of them. But it doesn't award victory to any of the arguers, or an end to their argument.

Badiou celebrates syntax but ends up finding it a little oppressive. This is perhaps because he has more of a longing for consensus than he fully admits – universalism after all requires some sort of consensus, even if it excludes professors. Barthes has no such problem, and when it comes to

language he has another cherished enemy, not a form of discourse but a part of speech: the adjective. 'The world is adjectivized', he says, meaning the story is over and we have come home to our most comfortable banalities.¹⁸ A utopian dream would be to abolish adjectives:

[T]o abolish – in oneself, between oneself and others – *adjectives*; a relationship which adjectivizes is on the side of the image, on the side of domination, of death.¹⁹

And in one of my favourites lines in all of Barthes, not such much an aphorism perhaps as a simple notation of a recurring event, but aphoristic in effect all the same, we read, 'At night the adjectives return, *en masse*.'²⁰

An adjective is not an argument, can't support an argument, can only close one. This seems a little hard on an unfortunate piece of the machinery of language, but we can see where Barthes is going. Adjectives just tell us a little more about someone or something, throw in a few more attributes. Of course some adjectives must be innocent, but some do a lot of damage; and none of them are going to be welcome when they come back in the night, *en masse*.

Where does all this leave my old suspicion? It seems pretty thin and elementary, and too grounded in simplistic notions of national difference, but I haven't quite persuaded myself to let it go entirely. Let's think again for a moment about the phrase equating language and fascism. We can read it as a statement, and for this we need to know what it says. Barthes tells us this, so if we are puzzled by the assertion we have only to wait: language is fascist because fascism is not preventing people from speaking but obliging them to speak. This is one definition of fascism, there are plenty of others but we don't have to think of them for now, this is the one that counts, and it makes sense. I don't see how we can understand the claim without reading it in some such way, but is this enough? Aren't we missing something, as the old suspicion suggested? We're not missing the propositional meaning, but perhaps we are, if we read only for content, so to speak, missing the sheer bravura of the claim: not what Barthes means by fascism, not what he *says*, but what he *does* by using this word and not another for what he means. I'm not suggesting he's merely out to shock and I don't want to go all the way with Badiou about what French philosophers are doing. I do want to say

that style is part of the meaning, and that the meaning it is part of is not the same as the propositional meaning.

We might think for a moment of our use of the word ‘impossible’. Of course we know that sometimes the impossible is impossible, but we rarely have occasion to use the word in that way. More often we say impossible on the sort of occasion on which we say ‘This can’t be’, ‘This isn’t happening’, ‘No one would say that’ – that is on occasions when whatever it is has just happened, or someone has just said it. What our word or phrase suggests is our intense desire for the opposite. We are not denying reality, we are recognizing it by mock disbelief. But we are denying it our literal recognition, in the way we do not recognize a government we don’t like, whether the government cares or not. One of the great lessons of recent history – well, perhaps of all history – is that the impossible happens all the time, and when it happens, it’s very tempting to try to close the door on it.

Language use of this kind exists in all kinds of locations, not only in literature and philosophy. Or it is literature if we understand it as the Russian Formalists did, and as Barthes sometimes seems to: as any use of language that refuses or exceeds a direct function, that abandons its post in some sense. We know about performative language from J. L. Austin, we know that many speech acts have to be happy or unhappy rather than true or false. We know from Wittgenstein that meaning lies in use rather than lexical or semantic correctness. And we know that the force of a sentence is different from its meaning. But do we know how many games we play, have we any idea of the amazing frequency, fluency and invention of these moments of language we broadly describe as happy/successful, covered by use, a matter of force. I really need to insist on the obviousness of the obvious here, because I’m not sure we have any kind of analytic grip on what is staring us in the face. Think of the way children understand irony. That’s just great, you say when they make a mess. They know you mean terrible, and they’re in trouble. Or to take a grand literary example, think of Kafka’s telling his father how ‘magnificently’ things went wrong for him:

[T]hen I was frantic with desperation and at such moments all my bad experiences in all areas, fitted magnificently together.²¹

I think irony is the best broad term for all this, although hyperbole is a good example too. There’s no business like show business means the

speaker likes show business not that there is nothing like it. Actually lots of businesses are like it, business is business. The reason irony is a good umbrella is because the criteria for its working or not working are so elusive, nothing like the sort of rules Austin uses for speech acts like promising or getting married or naming a ship. In fact speech acts as a philosophical category belong entirely to what Barthes would call the fascist linguistic state. Nothing but obedience there. Well, failure and fraud too, but those are not rebellions.

An irony can be intended or unintended. Picked up not picked up if intended, attributed or not attributed if unintended. There is no rule here, or no rule different from those that govern ordinary conversation and interpretation. There is no real criterion of success either. If we miss or dislike the ironies in Jane Austen, we are not wrong, we just have another Jane Austen. Of course there are dark, negative, conservative ironies, products of a habit for always seeing the same other side of things. But this only means the practice we are talking about is not always part of the resistance, a bid for freedom. My suggestion is not that irony and indirection are everywhere but that they can anywhere, and that we are all experts in them without knowing how expert we are. The thing is to start knowing and to do something with our knowledge. Our model might be the lady in Henry James' story 'The Jolly Corner', whose irony comes not from any sort of negative disposition but from having 'so much imagination'.²² We could try to remember how much imagination we have, and look in detail at some of its uses.

Notes

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'The Dry Salvages', in *Four Quartets: The Complete Poems and Plays 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1971), pp. 130-37 (p. 133).

² Alain Badiou, 'French: Language Stripped Bare by its Philosophers', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, trans. by Steven Rendall, Christian Hubert, Jeffrey Mehlman, Nathanael Stein and Michael Syrotinski, translation edited by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 349-54 (p. 351).

³ Badiou, 'French', p. 351.

⁴ Badiou, 'French', p. 352.

⁵ Badiou, 'French', p. 353.

⁶ Badiou, 'French', p. 353.

⁷ Badiou, 'French', p. 354.

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), p. 96.

⁹ Marcel Proust, *Sodom and Gomorrah*, trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 177.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 65; *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 5, 11, 39, 90.

¹¹ Roland Barthes, 'Lecture: In Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977', trans. by Richard Howard, *Oxford Literary Review*, 4.1 (1979), pp. 31-44 (p. 33).

¹² Barthes, 'Lecture', pp. 33-34.

¹³ Barthes, 'Lecture', p. 34.

¹⁴ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 185.

¹⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 18. Translation modified.

¹⁷ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), p. 70.

¹⁸ Barthes, *S/Z*, p. 76.

¹⁹ Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (London: Papermac, 1995), p. 43.

²⁰ Barthes, *Roland Barthes*, p. 115.

²¹ Franz Kafka, 'Letter to his Father', trans. by Ernst Kasier and Eithne Wilkins, in *The Sons* (New York: Schocken, 1989), pp. 115-67 (p. 121).

²² Henry James, 'The Jolly Corner', in *Selected Tales* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp. 550-76 (p. 555).

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