

# Euphemism, the university and disobedience

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Euphemism is the linguistic condition of contemporary society and spreads through the university as much as through any other institution. But what, exactly, is a euphemism? After having turned his attention to the different meanings of the Greek word from which ‘euphemism’ is derived, and having considered the fact that they seem to contradict each other and bring about a ‘euphemism of the euphemism’, French linguist Émile Benveniste states that, once the distinction between language and speech is taken into account, it appears that the ‘proper meaning’ of the word is ‘doubtlessly positive’: ‘Since what should be self-evident has been misconstrued, we need to stress that *euphemein* means always, and only, ‘to speak words that bode well.’<sup>1</sup> A euphemism, Benveniste explains, can be used to ward off a risk or a danger, the menace of a fatal interruption, where even ‘futile words’ may prove precarious and lead to a catastrophic reversal. In this sense, euphemisms denote an active rather than a passive usage of language. Yet Benveniste also insists on the necessity of establishing the precise conditions of the use made of a euphemism in speech. It is ‘the situation alone’ that determines the euphemism’s function and functioning. What Benveniste calls ‘semantic deviation’, a deviation caused by the ‘play of different usages’, may erase the traces of a euphemism, turn the active usage of language into a passive one. Thus he shows that *tuer*, the most common word for killing in French, has ‘euphemistic origins’.<sup>2</sup>

One could be tempted to conclude from Benveniste’s remarks that precisely because one cannot understand what a euphemism is without moving between language and speech, structure and actual utterance, or between a ‘proper meaning’ and a meaning dependent on the particular circumstances of linguistic usage, euphemisms remain an ambiguous phenomenon, hovering between the active and the passive, between memory and forgetting, as if the euphemism were

itself in need of a euphemism, a ‘euphemism of the euphemism’.

That euphemism is the linguistic condition of contemporary society means that those who live in this condition know about the reality of their lives without actually confronting it; deception and a belief in some magical power merge in euphemistic speech, and the ability to deceive oneself and others collapses into self-deception as fate. When speaking, writing and thinking, euphemists actively contribute to the suppression of their awareness, and are therefore aware of what they seek to conjure away, as well as of the repelling conjuration itself. They produce an ambiguity in which they install themselves. Using a euphemism always signals a resistance that stems from a fundamental acceptance. *All* acceptance is ultimately a virtual resistance, in so far as there is an active element to it, or in so far as pure passivity could never accept anything. What the euphemism does, then, is to exploit the resources of acceptance in the realm of language.

If euphemism can be understood as exploiting the resources of acceptance in the realm of language, if the one who uses euphemistic speech reveals to all others that he is a player, it should be clear why there is no place for it in the university. Using euphemistic speech is a manner of saying something with the intention not to say it. Today, it is even a manner of not saying something with the intention of saying it, as if the euphemism were being used against itself, a husk of a husk. The university, however, is the place where, as Jacques Derrida remarks in his 1998 lecture on the idea of an ‘unconditional university’, the ‘fundamental right to say everything’, and to say it publicly, even in the guise of fiction or as an experiment of knowledge, must inform the teaching imparted and the research undertaken.<sup>3</sup> It follows from this paradoxical condition that the restrictive fiction of euphemism subordinates teaching and research to power, hence to exclusion, and destroys the very idea of the university.

It abandons its name to manipulation and domination. The operation performed by euphemistic speech severs the link between the word and the idea. As a result, it transforms words into euphemisms not only by substituting a particular content for another content but also by way of the substitution itself, of a formal procedure, as if language and speech, or structure and actual utterance, were inseparably intertwined. Once the university is governed by euphemistic speech, once the word 'university' is severed from its idea, it is already a euphemism, regardless of how it is used in specific academic, political or social contexts. Seven years ago, Mary Evans noted that 'the word "university" is, in contemporary Britain, a vague and unreliable term'.<sup>4</sup>

### Conditions of the unconditional

Why is the condition of the university a paradoxical condition, and does this condition not threaten to enclose the university, or its discourse, in euphemistic speech? Does it not threaten to install power at the centre of the university? Surely it is not enough to point to the attribution of unconditionality to the university for its condition to prove paradoxical, at least not to the extent that the condition of unconditionality indicates the impossibility of separating the condition from the conditioned, the form from its content: in the unconditional university, there can be no euphemism because the idea is not separated from reality by a gap. Yet inasmuch as the university is an institution, an institution placed within a larger social and political context, and inasmuch as it has a history, the force of its independence is also the impotence of a dependence, and idea and reality, condition and conditioned, do not simply coincide, so that the condition proves paradoxical indeed. If the university, or its discourse, can fall prey to euphemistic speech, in principle, it is on the basis of this paradox: it is because the university's condition does and does not differ from its unconditionality. This can also be expressed differently, by stressing the fact that unconditionality cannot be an extrinsic attribute of the university, of a whole that would then be nothing else but the agglomeration of its parts, of the subjects taught at the university, of the knowledge produced, accumulated, archived in its departments and libraries. In this case, in the case of a totality achieved only externally, condition and unconditionality would never really be one.

If, therefore, unconditionality must be intrinsic to the university for it to be a whole, then its criterion must be sought in what makes the whole into a whole in the first place, namely its inclusive character: the

university as the place where 'everything can be said', hence the university as the place of the open and of openness, as a place that remains 'heterogeneous in relation to the principle of power', to quote Derrida one more time.<sup>5</sup> And yet there would be no 'fundamental right to say everything', the university would not be the whole of a radical openness, had everything been said already such that teaching at the university would consist merely in the repetition, the rehearsal, the reminder and the recalling of acquired knowledge. *As a whole*, the university has to be the place of an event 'worthy of its name', as Derrida puts it,<sup>6</sup> the place of what resists euphemism, because otherwise it would turn against itself. It would need to claim that nothing unknown is left that could still be researched; it would dissociate teaching from research, rendering itself superfluous or succumbing to its own reification. The university is the place, perhaps the only place, of the paradox of the whole and its unconditionality. It is thus the criterion or the mark of unconditionality itself, the 'fundamental right to say everything', the fact that 'saying everything' must be a 'fundamental right' and cannot be a mere fact, that opens up a gap between the university's condition and its unconditionality, and in doing so allows for the possibility of euphemistic speech and the principle of power to take hold of the university. When this can happen, the question 'whose university?' arises; that Derrida does not locate the unconditional university, the university 'without conditions', inside the university, within 'the limits of what today is called the university', testifies to the necessity of the question, to the spectre of power and euphemism haunting the university from within.<sup>7</sup>

Yet another way of expressing the same thought is by distinguishing between, on the one hand, an openness conditioned by the kind of 'neutral theoreticism' that Derrida does not wish to renounce, and, on the other hand, an openness that refuses to go along with the neutrality of theory, and with theory itself, exposing it to a 'critical and more than critical unconditionality'.<sup>8</sup> While it is true that the 'chance' of such a 'critical and more than critical unconditionality' may lie in a 'neutral theoreticism', it is also true that its manifestations remain a challenge to theory and cannot easily be accommodated by its neutrality, not without being altered. 'Neutral theoreticism' is more on the side of conditions and the conditioned than on the side of a 'critical and more than critical unconditionality'. Why does Derrida hold fast to it? Probably for two reasons. Derrida holds fast to 'neutral theoreticism' because only the 'neutrality' of theory can have the catalysing function that a 'critical and

more than critical unconditionality' requires if it is not to petrify. Any non-neutral discourse or practice could not obtain the effect of catalysis without biasing the unconditional's 'critical and more than critical' import. But Derrida also holds fast to 'neutral theoreticism' because 'theory' flags the particular institutional set-up that 'unconditionality' requires, the set-up of a

university is not just one idea among others but, in a sense, the idea of all ideas, or the idea as such. The life of the university, the reality of its idea, is about the idea and the paradox of the whole. For, once again, the whole must open up, expose itself, to be a whole. From this angle, it does not come as a surprise that Derrida draws attention to the problem of the 'as' at



the end of his lecture.<sup>9</sup> How can the whole of the university be exhibited 'as such', according to the idea, if the whole itself demands an opening, if saying everything, and doing so in public, as Derrida stipulates with a Kantian overtone, splits into a virtuality and an actuality?

It is interesting that, in his lecture, Derrida mentions a euphemism. He does so when asking himself to what extent the 'organization of research and teaching' should be supported, 'that is to say directly or indirectly controlled ... in view of commercial and industrial interests'. After referring to this form of immediate or mediated

university placed in a larger context. 'Unconditionality' cannot be unconditional without being 'critical', without referring critically to theory and its neutrality. Thus the 'fundamental right of saying everything' should not be misunderstood as a 'fundamental right of saying *anything*'. Rather, whatever is said in the university must pass the test of both the neutrality of theory and an unconditionality that by its very nature is 'critical and more than critical'. And it is in the struggle between the two, as a struggle that defines and defies unconditionality, that the university exposes itself to euphemistic speech, charlatany and the usurpation of power. What appears here is that an unconditional university is, inherently, a university open to risk, to the risk of being subverted, while a university dominated by power, charlatany and euphemistic speech is a university that has ceased to expose itself or that seeks to minimize such exposure.

If what an idea does is to exhibit the thing as such, if the idea of the university is the exhibition of the university as such, that is, as a whole, and if the whole of the university resides in the paradox of a speech divided between a saying everything here and now and a 'right' to say everything, then the idea of the

control, he adds: 'let's say, by way of euphemism, "sponsored"'.<sup>10</sup> When, later on, Derrida denounces the increase in 'underpaid and marginalized' part-time staff at universities, he reminds the listener of the fact that the increase tends to be justified 'in the name of what is called flexibility and competitiveness',<sup>11</sup> thus once again exposing a euphemistic usage of language in the university. From a purely sequential point of view, Derrida mentions euphemism shortly before he alludes to a 'principle of *civil disobedience*' which he associates with deconstruction in the humanities.<sup>12</sup>

### Urgency

'Civil Disobedience' is the perhaps unfortunate title chosen posthumously for the republication of an essay by Thoreau initially called 'Resistance to Civil Government'. Although Thoreau wishes to speak 'practically and as a citizen', refusing to present himself as a 'no-government man', it is also true that the resistance he advocates is not the resistance of a citizen against the state but the resistance of an individual whose citizenship is at stake; of an individual 'who refuses allegiance to the State', withdrawing and standing 'aloof from it effectually'.<sup>13</sup> This is why Stanley Cavell

describes it as the ‘power to demand the change of the world as a whole’,<sup>14</sup> a description that resonates with his concise summary of one of the senses of *Walden*: ‘And the nation too must die down to the root if it is to continue to recognize and neighbor itself.’<sup>15</sup>

When it comes to the university, it is also a question of the whole, and of its resistance to reification. However, what Thoreau’s essay and Derrida’s lecture have in common is not so much the insistence on a ‘register of lasting’ and enduring as it appears in a ‘public crisis’ when the majority has established a ‘form of tyranny’; it is not so much the insistence on the ‘power of passivity’ that Cavell emphasizes in relation to ‘civil disobedience’. What they have in common is rather an appeal to urgency. Thus, having raised the question of the possibility of an unconditional university, of the meaningfulness and the intelligibility of such a concept, Derrida ends his lecture with an apostrophe. He tells the audience to take its time when trying to find an answer to his question, and then says: ‘But hurry up, for you do not know what is in store for you’ – or, in a more literal translation, ‘what awaits you’.<sup>16</sup> The urgency of the appeal stems from the unpredictability and unaccountability, the radical inefficiency, of the disruptive event to which an unconditional university exposes itself, the event on which the whole of the university depends for it to constitute a whole, and which at the same time thwarts it as a whole: the event of an idea or a thought, of a practice or research that prove truly innovative. Yet the urgency of the appeal also stems from the risk of the university being entirely permeated by euphemistic speech after surrendering to the conditions imposed by the principle of efficiency and accountability. Has the appeal gone unheard, is it still being ignored now that academics know more about what is in store for them?

Thoreau begins his meditation on ‘civil disobedience’ with the belief that the best government is the one that ‘governs not at all’ – here, an analogy would allow a contemporary academic to state his or her belief that the best administration of a university is the one that makes itself imperceptible, not because it has become ubiquitous but because it is almost superfluous. When it emerges for the first time in Thoreau’s text, the appeal to urgency takes on the form of an ‘at-once’, an expression Thoreau uses repeatedly. The government must change ‘at once’, he claims; it would be wrong to assume that one ought to wait until a new majority is found rather than disobeying and transgressing unjust laws ‘at once’.<sup>17</sup> It is all a matter of time, of raw time, as it were, not of domesticated, timeless time, not of procedure, plotting, negotiating, compromising, as if

a change could never be brought about other than ‘at once’, immediately, or as if the urgency of the appeal reflected the urgency, the harshness, the convulsiveness inscribed in change itself, in the opportunity that must be seized each time a change needs to occur: ‘As for adopting the ways which the State has provided for remedying the evil, I know of no such ways. They take too much time, and a man’s life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to.’<sup>18</sup>

Can irony be detected in Thoreau’s remark that ‘a man has not everything to do, but something’, and that ‘because he cannot do *everything*, it is not necessary that he should do *something* wrong’? At this point, the analogy with the university, or at least with the idea of an unconditional university, could run like this: the right of the academic to say everything and to say it in public is not necessarily the right to say something wrong, for, unable to say everything and yet constrained to say something, he or she does not have to say just anything. In short, the urgency of saying and doing something does not entail that what will be said and done will prove wrong, quite the contrary: ‘what is once well done is done forever’, and what is once well said is said forever, too.<sup>19</sup> Saying can even be a doing when ‘loving better to talk about it’ ruins both. The time of procedure, of method and lobbying, of hesitation, regret and petitioning, of opposition ‘in opinion’, is a kind of euphemism that dissimulates the necessity and also the risk of such urgency, of an urgency that is the very manifestation of thinking and doing something. It alone bears the chance of thinking and doing *something*, something new, something speculative, perhaps because thought or ‘action from principle, the perception and the performance of right’ that alone changes ‘things and relations’, must add urgency to the urgency of *saying* and *doing* something.<sup>20</sup> Such action must break with any given conditions, interrupt the course of things and the reliance on established relations.

A university forced to entrust itself largely or entirely to the market is a university based on acceptance, hostile in principle to criticism and to the new, unless criticism and the new can be transformed into commodities and thereby appeal to potential clients, patrons, sponsors. It is, to a larger or to a lesser degree, a conditioned, not an unconditional, university: a university under control. Euphemism as the exploitation of acceptance in language is the linguistic condition of such an institution. Disobedience, as that which happens at once, is the only manner of committing oneself to the idea, or to an unconditional university. If disobedience is therefore also the only manner

of resisting euphemism, academics and administrators should start calling things by their names. This practice would activate the resistance inherent in all acceptance and direct it against the restrictive fiction of euphemism, against the distancing that both disguises and shows itself, though never so as to make something visible but always so as to make something acceptable. To the extent that, on the one hand, things may have more than one name and that the ‘play of different usages’ can always extend further than one anticipates, beyond what one takes to be a ‘proper meaning’, and in so far as, on the other hand, fiction has a distancing effect, this practice would amount to the creation of the most outrageous fiction, a fiction that would no longer differ from reality but that would constitute the point of indifference where the ‘as if’ and the ‘as such’ can no longer be distinguished from each other and coincide. This would be a fiction that distances the academic and the student from euphemism only to expose them to what the euphemism says without saying it, the awful truth, and to do so at the limit where truth and fiction cannot be opposed any more. *Killing Thinking*, the title of Mary Evans’s book, is an example of this calling-things-by-their-names, since it can be regarded as creating an outrageous fiction – how does one *kill* a non-physical object? – inseparable from the uncovering of an awful truth: thinking *is* killed.

## Notes

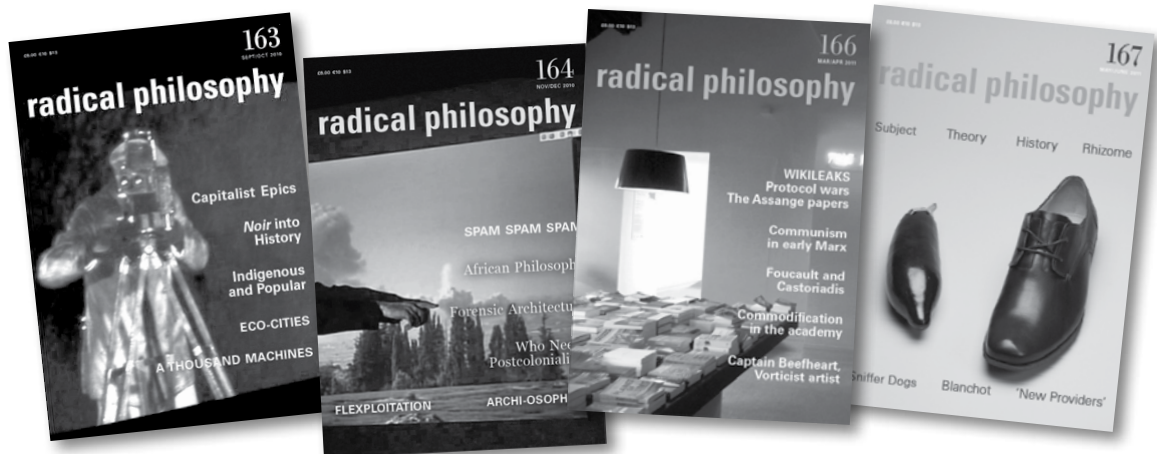
This is an abridged version of a paper presented at a conference on the idea of the university at Goldsmiths, Univer-

sity of London, organized by Jenny Doussan and Thanos Zartaloudis, 10 June 2011.

1. Émile Benveniste, ‘Euphémismes anciens et modernes’, in *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, vol. I, Gallimard, Paris, 1966, p. 309.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 314.
3. Jacques Derrida, *L’université sans condition*, Galilée, Paris, 2001, p. 16; translated as ‘The University Without Condition’, in Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2002. References below are to the French edition, since I cite my own translations. [For some reflections on the use of Derrida’s essay during recent debates in France about the new law instituting the ‘autonomy’ of French universities, see Barbara Cassin and Philippe Büttgen, ‘The Performative Without Condition: A University *Sans Appel*’, *Radical Philosophy* 162, July/August 2011, pp. 31–7. Ed.]
4. Mary Evans, *Killing Thinking*, Continuum, London and New York, 2004, p. 105.
5. Derrida, *L’université sans condition*, p. 18.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–3.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
13. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, Penguin Books, New York, 1983, pp. 386, 407.
14. Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America*, Living Batch Press, Albuquerque, 1989, p. 115.
15. Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden: An Expanded Edition*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1992, p. 116.
16. Derrida, *L’université sans condition*, p. 79.
17. Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, pp. 386, 395.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 396.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 398.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 395.

**Erratum** The title of the article on Leibniz and the Antinomy of Modern Power, in *RP* 168, by Kyle McGee, erroneously appeared as ‘Demononics’, rather than ‘Demonomics’. We apologize, in particular, for any scientological associations inadvertently produced.

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