A Theory of Regret

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If regret and hypocrisy come to indicate the affective registration of thinking itself—as I have suggested that they ought to, at least insofar as one relates to the other—then what’s left for politics?

The question appears reasonable, since we so often assume that politics depends, at the very least, on the rhetorical force of conviction, in which case we know what we say or think and why we do what we do. Regret, conceived as it is here, might strike us as small change in the work of real politics, especially since we are accustomed to thinking of regret strictly in terms of failure, and then as a near synonym for nostalgia, at least when nostalgia is understood in its more colloquial expressions as a tenacious longing for something that has passed to the extent that we fail to properly appreciate what is before us.\footnote{I hope that I have indicated no such thing myself. The answer to the question, if there is just one question, might simply be: I don’t know. But in saying so, I am not suggesting that we do nothing or expect nothing better. I simply suggest that we cease making appeals to the possible, which is nothing more than a false ground of knowledge, the proven path of what cannot, in any case, be given as proof. It may be that proof is only ever, in phenomenological terms, \textit{given}, as the second chapter should indicate. In this sense, I am in sympathy with Jean-Luc Nancy’s response to Lenin’s question—what is to be done?—especially as it continues, in a nearly unabated fashion, to haunt political theorists, and precisely as an invocation of the possible. The question, in Nancy’s formulation, promises something that it can never deliver: a guarantee. Writing a year after a series of general strikes}
in France in 1995, many of which immobilized the country in different ways and at different times, Nancy reminds us that “invention is always without a model and without a warranty. But indeed that means facing up to turmoil, anxiety, even disarray. When certainties come apart, there too gathers the strength that no certainty can match.” My theory of regret is nothing if not a way of understanding how turmoil, anxiety, and disarray are not only devastating—as such experiences very often are—but also productive of thought itself, which rarely happens, when it happens, with immediate clarity, ease, and indications of self-assurance. Only dogma can provide that quickly, and dogma is something other than thinking.

This is also why hypocrisy comes to matter as a way of understanding both regret and the work of thinking itself, for a number of reasons. When we attempt to forestall regret, when we picture for ourselves what we might do, so as to go unnoticed in error—and ideally, never to err—we are trying to avoid the appearance of hypocrisy. That is to say, if we believe that we must be consistent in the presentation of ourselves in relation to a principle or series of principles—which is what binds religious conviction to political conviction in every case—then our doubts will always be put to bad use. And yet, from this perspective, the only way to remain free of hypocrisy is to refuse change, which means that we will also have to refuse thought: what we show others, we will take responsibility for as something identical to what we feature to and for ourselves. What we feature to and for ourselves, and also for others, is not only the same thing in such cases—knowing that by “same” we do not mean identical cases so much as instances of grammatical agreement—but is merely the sedimentation of a concept understood as the stable ground of all belief. Or as Linda Zerilli has argued, “The notion that political claims are either grounded (and therefore not contestable) or ungrounded (and therefore not persuasive) occludes a third possibility: rather than knowledge claims that must be redeemed as true or false by means of a logical or cognitive (determinant) judgment, political claims are based on contingently formed public opinions that call for our (reflective) judgment without the mediation of a concept.” Hypocrisy gives name to both what remains as an expression of a supposedly grounded moral or political claim and, at the same time, the drift away from a claim that has worked for so long and now seems unworthy of the complications introduced. Hypocrisy names the presence of the original concept as it has both persisted and as it no longer applies, as well as whatever registers in the drift away, or the sift-
ing from under—whatever is given to judgment without the mediation of a concept. It is “the strength,” to return to Nancy, “that no certainty can match.” It is also an experience that requires, or at least must always risk, regret.

This is why I have featured superimposition, in the final chapter, as an important trope for understanding the work of thought in a regretful state, and as the figuration of hypocrisy itself, insofar as it allows us, as a pictorial form that is isometric with thinking, to see the stated ground of conviction accompanied by its impossibility. I come to this claim just over one hundred years after Lois Weber, a pioneer of early cinema in the silent era. In 1915, Weber released her film *Hypocrites*, in which the figure of “Naked Truth,” performed by Margaret Edwards, appears as a naked woman seen only in the film in and as superimposition, as she leads a pastor through a series of places and institutions in order to reveal the hypocrisy of first principles that animates each experience in a given institution, whether in church, politics, marriage, or some other. As a superimpository figure, Naked Truth is never in just one place or another. She can be seen and also be seen through (figure conc.1). Technically speaking, in Weber’s figuration of Naked Truth are two images from two different places at two different times seen at once, one atop the other. The only time that Naked Truth appears in one image, and as one image—that is, not in superimposition—is when she takes the pastor back in time to witness a scene in which a medieval monk erects a statue of Naked Truth only to provoke the violence of the people. Conventional wisdom regards the attack on the statue as a moralistic attack on nudity, on the indiscreet presentation of the female body. It strikes me instead as an important and familiar political act of iconoclasm that often follows and announces, ceremonially, the end of any dictatorship, or the reign of first principles.

Following this scene of iconoclasm, Naked Truth takes the pastor back to the present, to a series of scenes of hypocrisy. In the first, she takes him to a political rally in which we see a politician standing on a stage and before a sign that reads, “MY PLATFORM IS HONESTY.” The priest and Naked Truth join the politician on stage (and we continue to see Naked Truth, and also to see through Naked Truth), at which point she holds up a mirror to the politician (figure conc.2). When she does so, the entirety of the frame begins to blur, and no one has the same figural definition they had seconds before, save for Naked Truth, who remains in superimposition (figure conc.3). The screen goes black for a moment when Naked
Truth’s mirror appears in the center of the frame and shows us, in the oval that appears in an otherwise black frame, a scene of the politician in an entirely different place and time, collecting bribes from his constituents (figure conc.4). The frame goes dark and we return to the original blurred frame, in which Naked Truth continues to appear, amid the blurred figures, in the full clarity of superimposition. She can be seen through, but the layers themselves remain distinct, while the form of everyone else become significantly less distinct. As the scene of the political rally comes back into focus, the priest walks off the stage with his head down (figure conc.5). He has learned something. He looks regretful.4

It would, however, be too simple to read this scene as a clear instance of moral unveiling, of revelation. What is exposed, to return to Zerilli’s formulation, is the absence of ground in what is professed as ground, in what is expressed as first principle: “MY PLATFORM IS HONESTY.” The point is not simply that Naked Truth (and Lois Weber) shows the politician to be corrupt where instead he features his virtue. More important is that Naked Truth has taught something to the pastor—a man beholden to first principles (and unsuccessfully, since he is also shown to bore his parishioners)—namely, how to think, which means seeing something before you and also something else at once. That is, she is showing him how to think in two times at once—how, in Arendt’s terms, to be in two
places at once. Naked Truth is the visual figuration of what it means to sift from under. The principle remains on view, and so do alternative ways of thinking about or against that principle. We are all hypocrites, at some point. But what relieves us of the dogmatism in any instance of hypocrisy is our capacity for regret. If I insist on always saying one thing in the same way while doing something else in the same way, then I should be easily found out and decided against—in any venue—on the basis of my inability to think, which is also my unwillingness to try and make sense of why someone would look at the same thing in a different way than I do.

The fear of hypocrisy, unfortunately, tends to compel us to fortify our positions, to maintain what we show to others in the same way while doing something else in the same way. For this reason alone, regret—and
all that follows from it—gathers its political strength for being a way in which we can acknowledge our inflexibility and thereby create the conditions under which we can begin a conversation with someone or some others who have—or so we have thought—values entirely opposed to ours. It could be that in time the conversation goes badly and should not continue. But in that case, I can merely regret my effort and try something else. This is why the bureaucrat has been an important figure here, as well as the mentor, whom we typically take to be altruistic to the core. I see them both—the bureaucrat and the mentor—as relatable but not identical figures. For one, we often think of bureaucrats as hypocrites, just like the politician in Weber’s film, who proclaims his categorical belief in honesty while taking bribes from his constituents. But if I assume this to be true of every bureaucrat, then I am left with two options. I can either leave the institution in which I find myself ensnared—and every other institution thereafter—or else carry on raging in a state of hopeless melancholy against an enemy who perceives my limits just as clearly as I believe I perceive his. Both options suppose a belief in revolution as always the first step, in absolute breaks predicated on the absence of complete agreement, and on the assumption that there can never be agreement at any point further.

Sometimes, as we know, revolutions are necessary, but perhaps not as often as we imagine. Just as often, if not more so, the clean break is not so clean. How else to explain, for example, the institution of the first five-year plan with the beginning of the Soviet Union, a rapprochement with capitalism that seems in retrospect (and to many at the time) to have announced something less than a compromise: namely, that capitalism and socialism are not necessarily incompatible as modes of accumulation, if they differ, in principle, as modes of dissemination and distribution. I am always struck by the talk of five-year plans in the North American academy, for instance—by the language of a compromise that really never was one and that now rears its head in the West in the faculty meetings of liberal North American universities. We would do better to try and figure out what we have in common, not just what separates us, and separates us entirely. That is, if we are going to think about institutions comparatively, then we will have to consider something more than our differences, even when we are attempting to regard the differences as something to be honored, recognized as points of distinction. The differences will be what constitute the very act of comparison, since it could not happen if a rela-
tion of identity is what we pursue. The point is not to identify what is the same and then eliminate one or even both terms of any relation, but to do the work of understanding what we hold in common. “Common” is what we can accept as related, not what is related in principle or else in essence.

For this reason my theory of regret supposes a belief in institutions, and an attendant belief that they can be renegotiated from within. The experience of autonomy matters a great deal, of course. It is just that autonomy itself—at least in the realm of politics—cannot exist as a first principle, nor can it be known or experienced in a categorically distinct way. No institution can be satisfying in every way, which is something that we should be able to see, first, in what we describe as our own sensibility.

In this respect, I have in mind a late passage in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, entitled Terre promise, in which Barthes reflects, in the third person, on his own regrets: “He regretted not being able to embrace all avant-gardes at once, he regretted being limited, too conventional, etc.; and his regret could be illuminated by no sure analysis: just what was it he was resisting? What was he rejecting (or even more superficially: what was he sulking over) in one place or another? A style? An arrogance? A violence? An imbecility?” What Barthes acknowledges in himself, presumably, is what he also has gotten over, since Barthes—much like the narrator of The Postman Always Rings Twice—sees something else than what “he” once saw. If “he” regretted not being able to embrace every instance of avant-garde art, Barthes—the one who writes of an earlier “he”—seems to have recognized that it would be foolish to suppose that every instance of avant-garde art is worth supporting, in principle, and that every instance could or should be known, moreover. If regret can be illumined by no sure analysis, it is because regret supposes no surety, on the one hand, and must reject analysis itself, on the other, at least when analysis proceeds on the basis of possibility. What comes forward in Barthes’s reflection on regret, here, is what regret should actually oppose and also mitigate against: a style (as if there were just one, or even just one in every one), an arrogance (why should I talk to him?), a violence (which is wrapped up with an analysis that works as much as one that fails—first when we accept advice, and second when we reject it), and an imbecility (what I assume of the other who prefers something other than what I do). What Roland Barthes seems to do, here, is to regret the way that he had been thinking of regret—namely, as a worry about hypocrisy. Self-protection—or the careful maintenance of what I feature for others.
and also to myself in the same way, while thinking about something else, also always in the same way—opposes thinking, which registers in this passage from Barthes as an instance of vulnerability rather than weakness. The vulnerability that follows the acknowledgment of regret is an important political emotion precisely for the way in which it reopens us to a world greater than the one we have only ever made and maintained for ourselves.