STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, PHILOSOPHY
AND HISTORY OF IDEAS 2

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Deferring the Self

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EDITION

Introduction:
Practicing the Humanities

[…] if one considers accident as unworthy of determining our fate, it is only a relapse to the pious aspect of life, the overcoming of which Leonardo himself prepared when he put down in writing that the sun does not move. We are naturally grieved over the fact that a just God and a kindly providence do not guard us better against such influences in our most defenseless age. We thereby gladly forget that as a matter of fact everything in our life is accident from our very origin through the meeting of spermatozoa and ovum, accident, which nevertheless participates in the lawfulness and fatalities of nature, and lacks only the connection to our wishes and illusions. The division of life's determinants into the "fatalities" of our constitution and the "accidents" of our childhood may still be indefinite in individual cases, but taken altogether one can no longer entertain any doubt about the importance of precisely our first years of childhood. We all still show too little respect for nature, which in Leonardo's deep words recalling Hamlet's speech "is full of infinite reasons which never appeared in experience".

Sigmund Freud[1]

The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning. […] The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning.

Michel Foucault[2]

A rhetorical critic can regard a defense as a concealed trope. A psychoanalytical interpreter can regard a trope as a concealed defense. An antithetical critic will learn to use both in turn, relying upon the substitution of analogues as being one with the poetic process itself.

Harold Bloom[3]

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1 Sigmund Freud (1910), *Leonardo da Vinci. A Psychosexual Study of an Infantile Reminiscence*, trans. A. Brill, [in:] *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XI, ed. James Strachey, (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 324.

2 Michel Foucault (1984), *What Is an Author?*, trans. P. Rabinow, [in:] Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 230.

3 Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 88-89.

1. The politics of reading

The present book does not result from a single cognitive effort. It is a result of many years of studies on psychoanalysis, politics, and art. For the last ten years, supported mainly by my home universities I have been able to freely conduct research in the direction I chose and be fully responsible for those choices. The topics appearing in this book – populism, the limits of the political, identity, melancholy, the peculiarity of psychoanalytical interpretation, authority and its limitations, the connection between theater and politics, the relation between the human and the animal world – have long motivated my reflections. The partial results of my research have been submitted to public scrutiny in specialist scientific journals. I thought, nonetheless, that it was time to gather all those fragmented thoughts to shape them in a more uniform structure and look into them in their entirety. This intent of gathering the texts in one place is not simply conducive to something which may be regarded as a simple summary of my efforts, their gathering and locking in one space; therefore, it is not just to find a pretext to glance at the results of my work from a certain perspective, which is enabled by the passage of time and the unity of space and action, with which the instrument of a book endows the author. I believe the issue here is more than that.

This is a book about reading. It is a book about the practice of reading. I am writing about the practice of reading as a form of spiritual exercise as if I was writing about the ethical techniques and practices, as though I treated the latter as therapeutic techniques and practices. This is the case, in fact: I treat ethics as a domain of practical reasoning and not in the Kantian sense, but rather as a domain of spiritual exercises which are to bring one to reflection on life's principles, rules of conduct, exercises activating within us the most insecure and constantly endangered virtue of justice – enabling us to make the most informed decisions. Reading is always endangered by injustice and there is no greater temptation for the reader than the temptation of being unjust. Perception of ethics in the manner of spiritual exercises, recognizing an ethical exercise in reading is not my original idea; I am pursuing the path charted, *inter alia*, by the writings of Pierre Hadot,[4] a late work of Michel Foucault written before his death,[5] but also some works by Alexander Nehamas.[6]

4 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell's, 1995).

5 Michel Foucault (1984) *The Uses of Pleasure*, and *Care of the Self*, trans. R. Hurley, [in:] Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 3 Volumes (New York: Vintage Books, 1988-90).

6 Alexander Nehamas, *The Art. Of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, 1998).

Ethics, in the sense which has interested Hadot, Foucalt, Nehemas and me, is a set of procedures with which people not only establish the rules of conduct, but also try to change themselves, transform their individual, mortal existence and make their own life a work complying with the requirements of style. The great ethicists of reading were always accompanied by the belief that only in reading, in confrontation with the texts of others, it is possible for us to attain our identity. If we intend to associate morality with the concern for oneself, then by morality we should understand not just a set of principles and rules of conduct, which are presented to individuals and groups by various obligation-imposing institutions, but rather as the actual behavior of individuals towards the imposed rules. Morality would then define the way in which individuals oppose or submit to forbiddance or obligation. Moral acts would be that kind of practice thanks to which the human would not only reproduce the constraint of society but would also create a certain lifestyle, characteristic of an ethical subject. In this sense the practice of reading would be a political act, drawing the outline of intellectual closeness and remoteness, boundaries of agreement and its lack, activating the forces of attraction and repulsion, creating affinity maps. In this sense, for the action to be worthy of being designated as ethical, it should not be equaled to acting according to rules, laws, or values. Any moral action assumes a certain attitude to the code to which it makes reference, but it also connotes the relationship of the individual to oneself.

Roland Barthes said that "there is no Literature without an Ethic of language", but the same Barthes in the very same text, while discussing the emergence and end of literature, began his story with the purest form or writing, which is the product of fighting and power.[7] Barthes does not formulate a clear ethics of writing, he does formulate, however, a clear suggestion that political writing is preceded by novel and poetical writing. What is more, he formulates a diagnosis according to which there appears the possibility of new humanism, in which "widespread mistrust towards language in the entire modern literature would be supplanted by the writer's reconciliation with the words of ordinary people". Is it possible that literature, born from the words of power and blood, has dissipated and become life itself, abolishing all authority through the creation of a linguistic project of Noah's Ark, keeping countless hallmarks of countless dialects afloat? And does this practice of writing/reading create a community which is no longer shameful, a community of people cultivating and practicing the politics of affects which are at the same time concepts? Does in such practice of reading/writing a community emerge in which the speech of the

7 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. A. Lavers, C. Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 14.

reader blends with the language of the writer to such a degree that they begin to serve as each other's inside and outside, its justification and possible forms of coexistence? It is an open matter.

In this book I engage in polemical discourse. In this sense, I follow the tracks identified and laid by Michel Foucault. According to the basic insight of Foucault (and also his argumentation, to some extent), polemics is rather an obstacle in the search for the truth. Very schematically, it seems to him that we can recognize the presence in polemics of three models. First, there is the religious model according to which polemics sets itself the task of determining the intangible point of dogma, the fundamental and necessary principle that the adversary has neglected, ignored, or transgressed; and it denounces this negligence as a moral failing. Second, there is the juridical model according to which polemics allows for no possibility of an equal discussion; rather, it examines a case; it is not dealing with an interlocutor, it constitutes processing a suspect; it collects the proofs of his guilt, designates the infraction he has committed, and pronounces the verdict and sentence to him. The third one is the political model according to which polemics defines alliances, recruits partisans, unites interests or opinions, represents a party; it establishes the other as an enemy, an upholder of opposed interests, against which one must fight until the moment this enemy is defeated and either surrenders or disappears. For Foucault, the reactivation of these political, juridical, or religious practices in polemics is nothing more than theatre.

> In this comedy, one mimics war, battles, annihilations, or unconditional surrenders, putting forward as much of one's killer instinct as possible. But it is really dangerous to make anyone believe that he can gain access to the truth by such paths, and thus to validate, even if in a merely symbolic form, the real political practices that could be warranted by it.[8]

Similarly to Foucault, instead of polemics, I prefer discussions. In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. They depend only on the dialogue situation. The person asking the questions is merely exercising the right that has been given him: to remain unconvinced, to perceive a contradiction, to require more information, to emphasize different postulates, to point out faulty reasoning, etc. As for a person answering the questions, he too exercises a right that does not go beyond the discussion itself; by the logic of his own discourse he is tied to what he has said earlier, and by the acceptance of dialogue he is tied to the questioning of the other. Questions and answers depend

8 Michel Foucault, *Polemics, Politics, and Problemzations: An Interview,* [in:] Paul Rabinow, ed. *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 382-383.

on the game – a game that is at once pleasant and difficult – in which each of the two partners takes pains to use only the rights given to him by the other and by the accepted form of dialogue.

I would like to believe that this book remains such an open discussion, more than just religious, political, or juristic polemics.

2. The question of method

With regards to a book such as this, one must ask about the principles governing its integrity. Does it even form a coherent whole? Does friendship, even agonistic, even imbued with hostile elements, even ambivalent friendship, can become a force which unifies the text, or rather its plurality? Perhaps the best description of the method of thinking presented here is something which Walter Benjamin called "literary montage", in which the potency of juxtaposing elements alien to each other is no less significant than the conceptual continuity of the argument. To a certain degree I find close the idea of raising great constructions from the tiniest, clear and clean cut building elements as well as the conviction that one needs even during the analysis of singular, small elements notice the shape of the whole historic process. Capture the construction of history itself, through the structure of the commentary.[9] There is something in this book, however, which exceeds the limits of literary montage. Perhaps the only mark of unity of such a multitude of stories about difficult friendships developed and documented here is the category of style.

The author is left to believe that this style is strong enough for the formal unity of the text to enable the author to transcend the multitude of scattered friendships in which he entangles himself. It is not the method, not the purity of heart, not goodwill, not individual experience, not even the desire for power, not even valiance – *virtù* – the set of political skills enabling one to control one's fortune, in Niccolò Machiavelli's sense, but the power of writing itself seeking literature and an impossible friendship. The inability to conclusively explain a text is not only the equivalent of the inability of conclusive identification, it is a triumph of the rule of differentiation, division, multiplication, exposing the fundamental multiplicity of speech. Not friendship but friendships in the plural are the subject of this book.

9 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, ed. R. Tiedemann (New York: Belknap Press, 2002), p. 506.

3. Styles of practicing the humanities

A book is a form of practicing the humanities. But the humanities how understood? I shall skip the organizational – one could say "disciplinary" – issues, that is, those related to the division of the university departments. I shall also skip the organizational constraints of the idea of interdisciplinarity, and, instead, I shall focus on generating potential styles, or rather, potential orders of thinking about interdisciplinarity. Reflecting on the question of how the idea of interdisciplinarity can work in the humanities, I reached the conclusion that there are three variants, or rather styles, of practicing interdisciplinarity in the humanities. The key thing is not to define or list these options, but rather to realize what conditions need to be met to enable interdisciplinarity in each of the three approaches.

In the first approach, the humanities develop a dialogue with science – science narrowly understood as natural science. The assumption is that the humanities would not only develop simultaneously with science, but that they would reflect the explanatory procedures developed by researchers. The condition of this kind of interdisciplinarity is the preliminary assumption that science, and only science, is the form of organization of intellectual life worth the investment of energy, a form that is qualitatively different from wishful thinking, religious thinking, magical thinking, or other forms of thinking conceived of as infantile. This is the direction contemporary cognitive science is now following. It is assumed that cognitive science is essentially an interdisciplinary meeting ground for the languages of psychology, computer science, or neuroscience; interdisciplinarity is therefore achieved thanks to ontological naturalism, or at least naturalism. This means rejecting the specific and unique explanations of the humanities; instead, such uniqueness now stands for eccentricity, and on these grounds it is abolished or terminated. The basic belief is that science, at least at the explanatory or methodological level, is one. What we hear today about the so-called third culture, that is a new synthesis of the humanities and natural sciences, follows this direction. I am deeply convinced that it is a manifestation of demagoguery, as this variant seems threatened by a form of reductionism (qualifying or not – that is debatable). We could be convinced of this after reading the works of Steven Pinker, Daniel Dennett and other evolutionary psychologists, who are trying to reduce all the so-called "higher forms" of cognitive and emotional functioning to adaptation strategies, or differently understood evolutionary games, which can be described with the help of categories from the natural sciences. In this scenario, studying expands our knowledge of the mechanisms governing the brain, or, more broadly, the central nervous system, as it allows us to understand our

relationship with the natural world. However, we must remember that the "synthesis" of the humanities and natural science means the absorption of the humanities by natural science, and not the other way round.

Fortunately, this is not the only approach to the humanities we have. In the second variant, the humanities follow the model and share the paradigmatic point of departure of literature and literary criticism. This is the approach of Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty. Their demand, as formulated by Rorty, is that the humanities become poetical and romantic, and thus liberate our culture. Literature is a "paradoxical" institution which, to paraphrase Derrida, seems aware of the idiomatic human experience and dramas in which we are involved. Literature is the most humanizing factor. In this sense, reading Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust is a much more interesting intellectual endeavor for scholars than reading Burrhus Skinner or Steven Pinker. A key point of departure in this scenario is an attempt to show what Sigmund Freud called "instincts and their vicissitudes". Man is a biological structure and a collection of impulses, but these drives operate in the world, in the environment, and all have their own stories which constitute the essence of our very existence. A humanist is someone who gives an account – be it anthropological, sociological, historical or psychological – of these individual, unique and fateful instincts in the human environment. Humanist narratives attempt to show the complexity of human existence suspended between genesis and structure, strength and meaning, norm and disease – these and other mysterious connections which to a humanist are, or rather should be, the most important in a discourse concerning humans.

Finally, the third option, which I call a sociopolitical project, understands the humanities as a political project or social theory. This is founded on the belief that man is by nature a political being, or that man is a being that shapes his collective life for good and for bad, and this cannot be avoided. The contemporary Frankfurt School, critical social theory and contemporary political theories are examples of such practice calibrating the humanities. This is not solely limited to the idea of interdisciplinarity, as it is not limited solely to the impact of social concepts on philosophical concepts, but the key thing is to develop a transdisciplinary language, to build such a social theory that not only unites social order with the order of philosophy, but inhibits the assumption that the social order in which we operate is ultimate and unique. The overt intention of such thinking is denaturalization of our thinking about society. Although we might see our environs as a finite fossilized effect of evolution, which is in congruity with the eternal law of nature, it is in fact only a casual moment in the life of a culture that already knows it is mortal.

In my opinion, none of these options is fully optimal. They are not optimal because they are limited solely to juxtaposing scientific and nonscientific