

The Humanities

Toward an Impracticable Thinking.

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INTRODUCTION

Whenever we speak with things in this way we also dwell on the question of their where-from and where-to, an ‘open’ question ‘without resolution,’ a question which points toward open, empty, free spaces—we have ventured far outside.

—Paul Celan, ‘The Meridian’

‘With Nietzsche,’ Maurice Blanchot writes, ‘something unwonted comes to light’ (1993, 5). Namely, Blanchot asserts, the incompatibility between his thought, ‘his venturesome thought,’ and his official position as a university professor (1993, 5). Or again, in the words of Gilles Deleuze, it was early on in his career that Friedrich Nietzsche came to discover in his situation the ‘incompatibility between the private thinker and the public professor’ (2001, 56). Within the confines of the university, Nietzsche’s way of thinking, it seems, was out of place. But what might we, today, take from this? Perhaps this: that thinking and teaching seem to realize themselves in opposing movements. That is to say that thinking—being both venturesome and private—constitutes a mode of withdrawal, a refusal to participate in that which has been established paired with a desire to confront its own limits, to go beyond itself. Teaching on the other hand presupposes a more or less stable body of knowledge which can be passed on from one person to the next establishing it, in this manner, all the more firmly.

Thus, for Nietzsche, as Deleuze explains, the opposition between thinking and teaching sketched above is linked to the opposition between the active and the reactive, between the creative and the reiterative, between a life that is lived and a life that submits itself to established values and rules (2001, 68). Indeed, we might ask ourselves: how can we think, when we already know? Does thinking not require the instability and uncertainty of a certain ‘not-yet,’ of the promise of something which is yet to come, but which perhaps will always remain “over there,” just out of reach? Thinking, I would argue, requires the open-endedness of a question without answer and, therefore, also the possibility to suspend the validity of all given answers. Thinking, then, in this sense, is not so much productive as it is disruptive. It does not contribute to the world of endless progress, of order, effectivity and productivity. But rather it pertains to the suspension of such ideals in order to open up a space for that which historical progress

cannot so easily assimilate: for the useless, the ill-fitting, the irreducibly strange and other. Indeed, questioning value, we should not be concerned about the concrete value of the humanities, about what it produces and provides to the world, but it is the humanities which should question the very notion of value and the assumptions it relies upon.

Thus, what is proper to the humanities is not the production of any form of knowledge or value, but rather the very movement of thought itself, prior to any conclusions or evaluations. Indeed, as Christopher Fynsk recently argued, ‘the humanities would have to recover the status of a fundamental form of research if they were to survive in the current context’ which is to say that “every profession presupposes in some measure what is elaborated in the humanities’ (2013, 42). The humanities, in other words, should not focus on what is produced by research, but rather on what we might call the production of research itself: what are the conditions for research, what constitutes an active thinking and how do we not assign in a place, a stable identity, but how do we allow for it to *take place*?

Exploring these questions, my focal point is not Nietzsche, but Maurice Blanchot. It is, in fact, a short remark in the opening essay to his 1969 volume *The Infinite Conversation* which formed the impetus to this inquiry. Analysing the teacher-student relationship throughout the history of philosophy (in which, of course, Nietzsche is a central figure who I will return to throughout this paper), Blanchot draws the following remarkable conclusion: ‘[t]he master is destined,’ he writes, ‘not to facilitate the paths of knowledge, but above all to render them not only more difficult, but truly impracticable’ (1993, 6).

The teacher, in other words, is destined to betray his very vocation. Or, more precisely, teaching in the sense that Blanchot gives it, takes place *by way* of this betrayal. But what, exactly, does this ‘betrayal’ entail? And, moreover, what do we understand by ‘paths of knowledge’? First of all, I would say, this turn of phrase supposes the existence of a more-or-less stable piece of knowledge. This piece—be it a fact, a concept, some value or idea—is in the possession of the teacher and it is their task to transmit it, as perfectly as possible, to the student. This way, knowledge travels from one to the other along a path which, at least in our case, usually consists of language. If this transmission happens successfully, student and teacher are now in possession of the same knowledge and language, the path along which it has traveled leaves no trace. Jacques Derrida’s definition of teaching as the delivery of signs is helpful here. Derrida writes:

Teaching delivers signs. The teaching body produces (shows and puts forward) signs, or, more precisely, signifiers supposing the knowledge of a prior signified. In relation to this knowledge, the signifier is structurally second. Every university puts language in a position of belatedness or derivation in relation to meaning or truth. (2002, 81)

Language, thus remains in a secondary, indeed, submissive position, because it exists only to serve this pre-established knowledge. It is simply the path along which knowledge is delivered in signs which can

be unpacked to attain their meaning or truth. In the end, then, it should be the same meaning that the student unpacks as the one that the teacher sent out. Clear communication, in this sense, ensures the stability of knowledge, of meaning, and of truth. Under the yoke of which, neither teacher nor student can do much else than conform their thoughts to what is to be known. It is clear that for Nietzsche this is precisely where the problem lies: to become a 'public professor' is to become a 'submissive philosopher' who subjugates his thinking to the conformity any previously established truth or knowledge requires (Deleuze 2001, 68-9). According to Nietzsche, this submission stifles thinking and even stifles life itself. But, Nietzsche also contends, self-degradation is nothing new within the history of philosophy.

This 'degeneration of philosophy,' Deleuze comments, started with Socrates (who is, of course, the teacher-philosopher par excellence). With Socrates, Deleuze continues to explain, we first find the 'distinction between two worlds,' that defines metaphysics: 'the opposition between essence and appearance, between the true and the false, the intelligible and the sensible' (2001, 69-70). From this point on, the philosopher has one task: to bring forth, *through* his words, the truth that they contain. Speech now becomes a vehicle for transcendental truth, a means of establishing a path towards a knowledge situated beyond; here, the signifier vanishes in the face of the signified. 'The philosopher invokes love of the truth,' Deleuze continues, but beneath the 'requirements of truth and reason,' Deleuze continues, 'are forces that aren't so reasonable at all: the state, religion, all current values' (69).

For Blanchot too, reason is inextricably linked to these forces for, he insists, it *requires* this language of the signifier-signified, this transcendental construction of meaning which strives toward unity. 'Generally, when someone says something, he or she relates it to an ordered set of words, experiences, principles,' Blanchot writes, '[t]hese connections of coherency, this search for a common order, and the methodical progression through which thought transforms itself while remaining the same belong to the exigency of reason.' Reason, as does teaching, requires an established order of things and meanings because only then can it succeed in communicating knowledge. But even when this movement of reason is inevitable, and important in its own way, Blanchot too, is keenly aware of its dangers. For, he continues, 'the generality it strives for is that of the universal State when there will be no more private truth and when everything that exists will submit to a common denominator' (339).

Thus we find that the principles of reason, truth and essence, are linked up with order and the state. And we find that for Nietzsche, as well as for Deleuze and Blanchot, there exists the need for a way of thinking which constitutes a withdrawal from the principles, and a site that should remain unordered. But it was for Blanchot, perhaps, that the need to withdraw from order was the most pressing. For to withdraw from the demand for universal order was not simply an abstract gesture, but it was to withdraw from his own past. Indeed, as a prolific writer tied to various far-right nationalist journals throughout the 1930s, his biographer Christophe Bident writes, 'Blanchot was calling for the restoration of an order

of thought, which . . . would align action with consciousness, consciousness with intention, and intention with submission to a moral authority' (49). As the thirties advanced, however, and the consequences of such thinking came to be more and more clear with the rise of both Nazism and fascism, Blanchot came to a point where he would radically reject the path he found himself on. He came to realize, as Bident puts it, that it 'did not signal simply a failure of strategy, but the failing of thought itself' (79).

Thus abandoning his position, Blanchot refused to take up any position at all. For it was not simply the ideas of any school of thought that he had grown suspicious of, but the very notion of taking a position itself, all forms of political action that seek to steer the world one way or another. Indeed, it was a way of thinking, that, according to Blanchot, lies at the root of the problem, a way of thinking which itself was deeply rooted in western culture: the desire for universal truth and order that runs through the history of Western philosophy from Plato to Hegel and beyond. Blanchot, in refusing both his own personal history and the history of the West, 'would' Bident writes, 'henceforth constrain himself to withdrawal' (86). If Nietzsche rejected Christianity and 'the cult of reason instituted by Greek philosophy' for their 'teleological reductions of the truth of human existence' in order to affirm that 'man as a living, thinking being' is not a means to an end but instead a 'way' (McLaughlin 2014, xiii), so would Blanchot dedicate the remainder of his intellectual career (which would still span over half a century) to thought realized in movement of wandering. Something he would find most acutely in literature.

If philosophy, as Hegel thought, aided mankind in the 'objective conquest of the world according to the aims of the realizing mind and the productive will,' art was cast aside as an 'increasingly pure and subjective intimacy,' Blanchot writes in *The Space of Literature* (1982, 214). Art, in other words, no longer participates in the world, it has become ineffective and futile, something serving deeply private ends rather than collective ones. But it is in this withdrawal 'into the most invisible and most interior,' into 'the empty point of existence,' that it 'shelters its sovereignty in refusal.' And, Blanchot continues, nothing 'is more important than this absolute autonomy which is refusal and than this refusal which, through a change in sign, is also the most prodigious affirmation.' Precisely because it is the 'creative gift that dispenses without restraint and without justification,' it is that which 'never can be justified yet upon which justice can be founded' (1982, 214). Art is the most precious gift because it gives without giving *anything*. That is to say, it constitutes the gift of refusal or of withdrawal: through art, the refusal of established values and truths becomes a possibility. Art, then, comes to be the affirmation of the 'outside,' of that which remains outside of historical progress, rational thinking, technological progression, and the like. It is 'the world turned upside down,' the refusal of everything that counts within the world: 'subordination to ends, to measured proportion, to seriousness and order. On one front science, technology, the state; on another, significance, stable values, the ideal of the Good and the True' (1982, 215). Thus, for Blanchot in the late-thirties, literature comes to be the prime disruptive force in his life which renders everything he once thought essential debatable. It is the very refusal of higher

values or moral authority, or perhaps better put, the affirmation of something outside of established order, outside of justification and purpose.

Thus, Blanchot continues, the ‘poem is exile’ and the poet ‘is always lost to himself, outside, far from home . . . a wanderer, the one always astray’ (1982, 237). Opposed to discourse which, as Gerald Brunson puts it, “is a movement of things being settled into place. . . a program of confinement” (1997, 87), poetry is a movement which *unsettles* and opens up the world as we know it in order to show as other than it is. Poetry’s movement, therefore, Brunson continues, ‘is not toward a point of being finished but a ceaseless, open-ended movement toward what is always elsewhere’ (1997, 88). The poem is never finished, there are no rules that dictate where each word should go, and even when it is printed and every word seems to have found in place, the poem’s meaning is still to be creatively constructed each time that it is read. And for this reason, poetry’s disruptive force does not end with the poem: it extends to the criticism that deals with the poem and, it could even be said, it extends to every engagement with a text in which the act of interpretation is at stake. It forms, we might therefore say, the very heart of the humanities and the way of thinking proper to it.

This way of thinking, then, puts language in a primary position because it is concerned with words that make up the text one is dealing with and refuses the self-evident nature of the meanings these words seek to transmit. Paying attention to words as they proffer or resist meanings allows for each encounter with a text to engender something else because, in the end, the text remains and will always remain a question without a final answer. This is what the humanities teaches: to see a text not as an answer but as a question, as something that is open-ended and unfinished and to find ways to respond to this essential instability. Indeed, as a student I can only conform to answers, learn them by heart and reproduce them, but questions leave it up to me to respond. Thus, in the words of Blanchot, ‘to question is to think by interrupting oneself’ (1993, 340). It is a proposition, rather than a position; it provides a direction and not a destination. Indeed, lacking any destination, it does not, properly speaking, form a path at all.

Thus, if we are to *think* thinking, rather than assign it a value; if we are activate it, receive its creative gift, rather than to close it off by giving it a definition, we need to stick with the question, refusing any answer as final. ‘The way to thinking cannot be traced from somewhere to somewhere like a well-worn rut, nor does it at all exist as such in any place,’ Martin Heidegger maintained, ‘[o]nly when we walk it, and in no other fashion, only, that is, by thoughtful questioning, are we on the move, on the way’ (1968, 169). ‘Thinking,’ he insisted, ‘is itself a way’ and we can respond to it only when we remain underway thus refraining from ‘coming to the point’ (1968, 168-9). What it ‘is,’ is always—and *should always remain*—somewhere in front of us. But what does such a way or a such path without clear beginning or end, look like? How can it be anything else than a mindless wandering? For Nietzsche, of course, it meant that he had to leave the university. But that still leaves us with the question of what such a *teaching*

which stays true to thinking as proposed by Blanchot might look like. As an example of a teaching practice of impracticability, rather than simply a thinking practice, I would therefore like to turn to the reflections written by François Lyotard on his position as a professor of philosophy at the university of Vincennes in the early 1980s. Lyotard's experience, I think, beautifully illustrate the fate that Blanchot has ascribed to the teacher of thinking and what's more, it will help us situate the problematic in closer proximity to our current framework of a humanities asked to validate itself.

For, if today day one is asked to validate one's activities and to share what worth one's knowledge is, Lyotard did not only encounter the same questioning, but also had the same problems in finding suitable answers to those who either run or fund the department. 'According to the spirit of the times, which is theirs [meaning those who run or fund the universities]' he writes, 'to do is to produce, that is, to reproduce with a surplus value' (1982, 72) As any teacher, Lyotard is expected to reproduce the knowledge he possesses, and what's more, it also has to be good for something. Like Blanchot, however, Lyotard cannot help but continually call into question this 'prior knowledge' that he is called upon to reproduce. Thus, in his practice as a teacher, the following question comes to haunt him at every turn: 'How can you make others understand what you haven't really understood?' (1982, 73).

Indeed, how can I deliver that which I do not possess or possess only in some strange and unstable form? In a sense, Lyotard is quite content with the fact that he has no final answers when he tells himself: 'you're a philosopher You like what is unfinished. Nothing of what you write will be authoritative' (1982, 75). As a thinker, Lyotard could never be finished, or else he would not be a thinker anymore. But what's more, his thinking does not entail a process of gradual enlightenment. It is not the case that, even if he is not yet done, what he has thought thus far would be available to him any stable form. And in these moments, the Nietzschean assertiveness that speaks from his love for the unfinished turns into something closer to anxiety. Lyotard then comes to affirm that 'What is behind you isn't more certain than what you are facing; in fact, it's more uncertain' (1982, 76). Study, as he experiences it, does not order, but it disorders. Lyotard sketches the situation as follows: 'Sometimes you allow yourself to think that your working notes keep accumulating,' he writes, 'you're making progress. But, with age, you know the opposite is true, that you hoard waste, scraps, that the thing to be thought slips away from you' (1982, 74-5).

This might not be so bad for the private thinker who does not have to answer to anyone, but how does one, in this state of mind, prepare a class in which you are going to tell your students what it is all about? How to make others understand what you did not? A question perhaps always accompanied by this other question: should you? At any rate, these two opposite impulses, one stemming from personal experience and the other from exterior expectation, leave Lyotard in a state of anxiety. And so, reflecting on his preparations for a class which he intends to be done with before midnight, he writes:

So you sit down at your desk, and nothing has ever assured you that, by midnight, you will have understood. What if you didn't understand? Or what if it were to take longer than anticipated? What if you were extremely tired? (1982, 74).

If you do not know what it is to 'have understood,' which, of course, you do not because you are still trying to understand, then how could you know where you are going? Lyotard, it seems to him, has no choice but to simply keep going on, unless, he wonders somewhat mischievously, 'what if you got your hands on a good Italian or American article supplying the interpretation you had imagined yourself giving?' (1982, 74). That would be a relief because that would mean that you have the answer right there, you would only need to reproduce it in class. But, at the same time, it would be an annoyance, Lyotard thinks, because it would mean that it is 'something you have received and transmitted without transformation, without being transformed by it' (74). Then, in other words, teaching simply becomes a matter of facilitating paths of knowledge or of delivering signs and this, Lyotard knows, misses out on something. We might now say: the questioning that guides thought along without any pre-given destination, which is nothing other than thinking itself.

When Lyotard, then, enters the classroom, none of his concerns have been resolved. 'You have nothing in particular, nothing set to say,' he reflects, 'which,' he adds with some sense of resignation, 'is the general condition of philosophical discourse' (1982, 73). But even so, how does this make for a way of teaching? Lyotard's entry, then, is accompanied by a sense of anguish which he describes as being nothing other than the 'the sovereign pressure of an imbecilic "You must go there, which does not say where' (1982, 73). There is the imperative to go, to travel, we might say, along those paths of knowledge, but at the same time, there is nowhere to go except this very minimal 'there.' But where is there? There is no way to tell and, therefore, there is not even any way to tell where we are now, in relation to this there. There is no closer or farther, no right or wrong direction, there is just the imperative to go, wherever. The imperative to keep wandering, to remain underway, rather than to settle on any one place, on any one answer that prohibits the movement of thought.

This means that neither teaching nor studying can be seen as any kind of linear trajectory. There is no predetermined destination by which we can measure just how far one has traveled along the 'paths of knowledge.' Rather, we might say, there exists a field of positions, none of them more or less authoritative than any other and none of them reducible to a degree of relative (but transcendental) success. What appears then, in place of the difference between the 'here' and the 'there,' the 'word' and its 'meaning,' or between the 'thought' and the 'truth of this thought' is a plurality of thoughts which no transcendental truth can subsume. In the absence of this dualistic schema, difference no longer exists as a transcendental promise to fulfil, but rather in the repetition of thoughts themselves. That is to say, it exists no longer in the relation between my interpretation of this poem and its final meaning, but between my interpretation and someone else's. The poem then does not so much as anchor our thoughts, tying

them to the same truth, but it that which fragment itself, allowing for each interpretation to differ in its singularity. This means that all need to think for themselves, but also that this thinking for themselves opens up to the possibility of a conversation. “No thinker ever has entered into another thinker’s solitude,” Heidegger remarks, “[y]et it is only from this solitude that all thinking, in a hidden mode, speaks to the thinking that comes after or that went before” (169).

A classroom then comes to consist of a number of what we might call attempts at thinking. Indeed, returning to Nietzsche, Blanchot speaks of his speech as marking ‘the refusal of system’ as well as ‘his passion for the unfinished and his belonging to a thought that would that of *Versuch* or of *Versucher*. (1993, 52)’ What it teaches is not a number of answers but instead a way of questioning. Indeed, Blanchot continues, ‘there is no doubt also that this form is linked to the mobility of research, to the thought that travels’ (1993, 52). ‘Research,’ within the humanities, then does not mean the production of answers, or even a concern with destinations strictly speaking, but always a return to the searching, the activity that enables research in the first place. It is in this sense that the humanities are essentially different from those forms of study which are primarily concerned with results. Research within the humanities, then, does not produce answers but it produces propositions, or, to use Blanchot’s term, it produces ‘fragments’: ‘fragments’ because no thought can be final and complete in itself, no thought can produce the answer that would close off the question it carries within it. Each thought, then, always remains open-ended, always pointing to a kind of excess which it does not fill in, which it affirms only by interrupting itself. And in this interruption it allows for a next thought to appear. Fragmentary speech, Blanchot contends, answers to

the necessity of an interpretation that does not consist in the unveiling of a truth that is unique and hidden, or even ambiguous, but rather entails the reading of a text in several senses at once, with no other meaning than ‘*the process, the becoming*’ that is interpretation. (1993, 154-5, Blanchot’s emphasis)

Blanchot beautifully illustrates this ‘multiple becoming’ of a text by alluding to Gertrude Stein’s famous ‘a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.’ As long as there exists, in our minds, something like a stable signified that the word rose refers to (the rose as idea), each time the word is uttered, it is a mere repetition of the same. Difference then exists only in the difference between the signifier ‘rose’ and what it signifies, the essence of ‘rose.’ But this difference never comes to the fore because the two are structurally linked, the signifier always brings forth its signified each time it is uttered in mere repetition. But, Blanchot insists, ‘through the emphasis of reiteration, it withdraws from the rose even the dignity of its name, which, unique, claimed to maintain it in its beauty as essential rose’ (343). Repetition does not affirm the reality of the real, truthful, essential rose, but rather withdraws it from the word ‘rose.’ In the case of Stein’s phrase, we do not read ‘signifier=signified’ but we read ‘signifier=signifier=signifier=signifier’ and so we stay on the level of language without ever being able to transcend it and access the meaning it might

carry. And without this meaning which makes each utterance the expression of the same and which, thus, reduces each utterance to the same, each time this word 'rose' is said, it appears differently.: what begins to matter now are its material qualities, the way it is articulated, each time a bit differently. What Stein teaches us, according to Blanchot, is that 'a thought does not repeat itself' and that 'repetition only makes what is said enter into its essential difference' (341).

'Fragmentary speech,' 'the impracticability of paths of knowledge,' the "question with no final answer," the "you must go there" which does not say where,' 'the imperative to remain underway,' 'repetition as difference': in each of these instances thinking is activated as something that in movement, that is creative and, consequently, without a 'point.' And it is here, I argue, that the humanities 'take place. In conclusion, it should be noted, however, that this is not a free space in the sense that 'anything goes.' Thus when an imagined supervisor asks Lyotard if his reflections on teaching 'mean that each teacher in your Department speaks of what he or she likes?' the answer is 'No, it means that no one is protected, and above all, in his or her own eyes, by prescribed rules' (1982, 72). The lack of a transcendental ground to substantiate one's thoughts, does not render each thought irreproachable, but rather renders it all the more fragile. Thinking, in this sense, implies a kind of modesty ('above all, in his or her own eyes') on part of the thinker, but it also means—and here we return once more to Nietzsche—that judgement is replaced by evaluation.

That is to say, we do not judge a thought by measuring it up to any stable value, but rather values are created in the process of thinking. As Deleuze sees it, an active thinking entails the conjunction of interpretation and evaluation. Nietzsche, he contends, 'replaced the ideal of knowledge, the discovery of truth, with interpretation and evaluation' (2001, 65). Interpretation, in this sense which is very similar to Blanchot's, 'establishes the "meaning" of a phenomenon,' but, he adds, this is a meaning which is 'always fragmentary and incomplete' (65). And evaluation, Deleuze continues, establishes a kind of hierarchy between these fragments by proposing a certain perspective. Doing so, it 'totalizes the fragments [but] without diminishing or eliminating their plurality' (2001; 65). This means that we can judge each thought's worth, but only by taking up a temporary point of view from within the field of relations that exists. In the end, then, evaluation takes place on the same plane as thinking, rather than from the disembodied perspective from any values or truths that exist on a higher plane, somehow more stable and eternal than all others. Thus, neither any proposition, nor any evaluation could have the last word for what is at stake is not the production of final answers but the process of questioning itself which is the very movement of thinking. A movement which, I have argued, is very much at home within the humanities and, furthermore, of essential value to all modes of research. And should the university become more and more averse to its wandering byways, it is perhaps time for the humanities to move on, to think elsewhere, wherever that might be. Because, in the end, what is important is not its place, but its taking place. Impractical thinking, to turn to Blanchot one more time, is having

renounced having the last word . . . because to speak is to recognize that speech is necessarily plural and fragmentary, always capable of maintaining difference beyond unification. Someone says something and goes no further: this means that someone else has the right to speak and that in discourse a place for him is to be left. (341)

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