

A Letter to Foucault

Maya Rasker

Abstract:

Investigating in what way some aspects of Foucault's work can be fruitful to 'think' writing-as-research, a letter to Foucault as academic fiction unravels and values the paradoxes that emerge from connecting a dead philosopher's work with the actuality of writing to him. It becomes clear that the Self cannot *not* be addressed when relating to a foreign (beautiful and intimidating) corpus of knowledge. Simply appropriating the philosopher's words was working the wrong way around. In turning to the 'master' for clearance, the position of the 'apprentice,' the one presently speaking, must also be defined. How to investigate oneself from the position of the Self, while opening up for the work one admires? How to relate to *what moves the heart*?

Amsterdam, September 12, 2017

Dear Sir,

Let me begin by saying this is not an easy undertaking: to write a personal letter to you.

First of all, your stellar thinking and rhetorical elegance have always been quite intimidating to me rather than hospitable—or so I thought. Your work as a gesture, as a 'gift,' poses numerous problems of which the question *how to relate* most emphatically comes to the fore. To relate to what inspires and to what one admires (*to what moves the heart*) requires not only a reciprocal gesture that does justice to the gift; it presupposes an ability and willingness to truly appreciate its dimensions and profundity and thus a fair insight in the feasibility of rightful appropriation.

I don't think modesty ever helped with the birth of any good work. On the other hand, a certain courageous humbleness is asked for when relating to what or whom one admires. When reciprocity appears unattainable, what nonetheless should be at the heart of the undertaking is a balance between humbleness and boldness that equals to—responsibility perhaps?

Hence this letter to you.

Let it be clear that to hide in the shadow of the giant (= to keep oneself outside the text) is safe and comfortable—or so it seems—especially when the

stakes are high. When I catch myself in the act of producing a text with such features it annoys me: the prose serves to disguise one's self-imposed limitations (cowardice perhaps?), to quote and rephrase rather than to transform one's own thinking through the words of the other (which are not your own and never will be).

This is what happened: some weeks ago I set off composing an essay with the good intention to investigate in what way certain elements of your work can be fruitful to 'think' writing-as-research (I'll come back to that later), and soon I found myself in the pitfall I just described and that I would so much have preferred to avoid. Writing that essay consisted *not* of re-addressing my own concerns: it was an attempt to re-route yours so to speak within or into the confinements of my subject and rhetorics, serving as a veil to mask my lack of courage in finding and applying my own voice. Instead of opening up, the intended goal was so predetermining that the practice of writing neither informed nor transformed my understanding. It was the wrong way around.

The approach, the point of departure killed my curiosity almost from the very beginning—and thus killed the author.

Let me elaborate for a while on this problem that has been on my mind for some time now: How to relate meaningful and with integrity to what one admires? The issue refers to the problematic relationship between the 'apprentice' and the 'master' (the student and the teacher, the novice and the scholar, etc.) that is: the corpus of a master's teaching and the way an apprentice can—should—internalise this corpus by critically challenging one's own thinking, doing, writing. As I am doing here and now: How to relate to your gift?

Having studied your *Hermeneutics* (in which you address the issue extensively), I've come to the conviction that only from the perspective of the apprentice, one—*anyone*, no matter how learned—can learn and grow; reform and transform, in your words. Thus the initial route points in the direction of the Self, rather than in the direction of the master's finger pointing at some alluring yet distant vistas. To set out on any philosophical or artistic enterprise the beginning is with oneself, with *the noun prosekhei*, the invitation to "apply your mind to yourself" (with which Socrates encourages the shy Charmides to study himself). For if one doesn't investigate oneself at departure, mimesis and unjust levelling lie in wait; false identification on the part of the student (and the flattery on the master's soul, as you wryly add).

However, this invitation to apply the mind to oneself *as a necessary beginning* for the transformation of the Self (as both subject and object of thinking) constitutes a challenging paradox.

This is how I see it: on the one hand, the caesura (Latin: *crisis*) to everything that was before is quintessential for every beginning, which distinguishes it from any other act or event. Otherwise, there would not be a beginning but rather a continuation of some sort. On the other hand, how can 'I' effectuate such a caesura or crisis (Edward Said speaks more drastically of a 'breach' and a 'rupture') within or by myself, if I myself am part of the same 'I' from which I ought to detach?

I am not sure we can unravel this paradox, and I am not even sure we should—paradoxes are, are they not, the zest of life. Possibly I can make the concept productive by bringing its implications into the light of day.

As said, such beginning to apply the mind to oneself suggests, probably demands, a conscious act by myself—as opposed to an event to which one re-acts. In other words, to begin is an act of distancing and of distinction, an intentional interruption, breakthrough, of what appears to be whole or continuous, without the finality of the 'rupture' Said speaks about. And what makes this act of beginning exceptional, daring even, is that it is conducted in good faith, without the expectation of a particular outcome, executed for its own sake. One seeks, in a faithful suspension of belief, the confrontation with the unknown, within oneself and vis-à-vis the outside world.

(Now the thought comes to me, isn't that what writing this letter is all about?)

Marcel Proust, in his *À la recherche*, makes a beautiful attempt to capture what may follow from this paradoxical logic:

What an abyss of uncertainty whenever the mind feels that some part of it has strayed beyond its own borders; when it, the seeker, is at once the dark region through which it must go seeking, where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not so far exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day.*

What these words aim to describe is the option, the possibility of a beginning within and through the Self (*the seeker*—I love the word!) to apply the mind to oneself as *initium* (the beginning of the 'soul' according to Augustine) as opposed to the *principium* (the beginning of the 'world') for creation. It demands some exercise to imagine such move, let alone make it happen: to try and apply

* Sir: appreciating your insistence on precision, I will reference quotations like these in the post scriptum.

different voices, genres, perspectives, all this ‘toothless’ equipment, to make sense of, and create out of these dark regions.

As you wrote in *Man and his Doubles*, the modern *cogito* must traverse, duplicate, reactivate in a “constantly renewed interrogation as to how thought can reside elsewhere than here, and yet so very close to itself.”

Still I fear I have missed something here, something crucial to connect the two concepts I tried so far to describe and disentangle: First, the meaning of the relationship between the ‘master’ and the ‘apprentice,’ its implications for not just the *noun prosekhei*, the incitement to apply the mind to oneself but also for the *gnothi seauton*, the confirmation in the imperative that one *doesn’t* know oneself, that one nonetheless should strive ... et cetera. And secondly, the necessity in the beginning, *as* a beginning, to act consciously towards this suspension of belief, to heed towards Proust’s “abyss of uncertainty” within oneself, in fact, the fundamental questioning of one’s knowledge and beliefs—for letting them go entirely to keep all possibilities open. The outcome of the junction between those two elements—the master-apprentice relationship on the one hand and the disconnection of the Self from the Self in order to learn, on the other—may result in the creation of meaning. For the creation of meaning (*not* knowledge, that we can only postulate *a posteriori*; *poësis* perhaps?) can neither be situated in its outcome nor in the intent. It is, what creates itself. And: that what creates itself can only do so opposed to, or detached from, what is already there.

Would you say that makes sense?

Let me push this a little further. If we accept that to apply the mind to oneself as a beginning for transformation implies to turn the gaze on oneself, the relationship with the other (not the concept, not the ‘Other,’ but just this other being, be it the teacher or the master, it could be a friend too I believe, or a work of art, or a landscape)—that relationship *must* consist of more than mere identification and mimesis. This relation is at the core of the aforementioned paradox: it implies that the other becomes an inevitable part of myself. Since one simply cannot think the truth about oneself from the standpoint of the Self, one has no option but to suspend one’s convictions and turn to the other for clearance (‘clearance’ in the double meaning of the expression: to make clear, and to give permission to pass, to continue).

Thus, what I have omitted to consider is the implication of the relationship, not its effect or possible outcome, but why this relationship is an *a priori*, conditional, in order to create, to grow.

You said, somewhere, I’m sorry I didn’t observe the source of your remark: *A relation precedes what is related*. It is as simple as it is beautiful. To fully grasp and appreciate the meaning of these words—to put them into action—I want

to turn my mind to the notion of 'love' as in: *what moves the heart*. Hannah Arendt explores this notion in her dissertation *Der Liebesbegriff bei St. Augustin* (little appreciated, that work, but I consider it illuminating in view of her oeuvre that then was yet to begin. Did you two ever met, by the way?). If love is anything, Arendt summarises Augustine, it is a motion towards something, be it something else or something within oneself. Love is unavoidably tied to a distinct object of desire ("the thing it seeks"), and simultaneously it is defined by that very same desire, within me, here and now, to move towards that object. What follows is that this desire (Augustine uses the word *appetitus*) runs in two directions. For what I seek can only be sought for the very reason that I learned of its existence before—in the past. And it reaches towards the future because at present I clearly do not have what I wish for. If I try to visualise this dichotomy, the prime denominator is *absence*—in the present. Perhaps it quite beautifully illustrates what is meant by your words: *the relation precedes what is related*.

The absence, what lacks, determines that indeed there must be a relation. Therefore, it is acutely present, although—and for the very reason of—something is yet in demand. As Arendt points out: what emerges in this absence is not a vacuum but what the vacuum creates—a powerful force. But not just that, I would add: it is this powerful force *to move* (to seek, to create) as a fruitful plane of production.

To establish this 'thinking space' (not as a concept but factual, since I am presently writing this letter to you) between 'I' and myself in and through this act of writing, the creation of such a relation with *you* is imperative. If I honestly intend to relate—not hiding in the giant's shadow—I must confront myself with your massive thinking (the object of my admiration, remember) through establishing this relation.

Intuitively it appears that by means of writing this letter as a work of academic fiction or as a fictitious essay, this fruitful plane of production opens up before me, artistically, intellectually, through the very act. To paraphrase what you once noticed about the essay, it is an exercise of oneself in thought, rather than the simplifying appropriation of others for the purpose of communication.

This is truly not an easy undertaking.

I don't know yet where I am heading, but the journey has been definitely enjoyable so far. Thank you for your patience, Sir.

PS: I just looked it up in the dictionary: *Essayer* in French means: to try, to test, examine, endeavour. A "modifying test of oneself in the game of truth," as you said.

Monday, September 18 (one week later)

Sir, good morning,

It took some time to let land all underlying ideas of what I tried to express, explain, explore in my letter last week, and what it boils down to—not quite, but the sentence intrigues me—is this quote from your text *Las Meninas*: “. . . [I]t is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say. And it is in vain that we attempt to show, by the use of images, metaphors, or similes what we are saying.” For both you and I and the rest of the world, we all try unrelentingly, with so many words and images and metaphors, to say what we see and to show what we are saying. To relate to and share what is our world, our perception, our imagination. Why bother in the first place?

Let me propose to you an idea, an association, captured in this image:

The picture was taken near a ziggurat build by the Elamites 3,250 years ago. As a matter of fact, it was built in those times when that particular place was not a desert but the green and fruitful delta of the Dez and the Kārūn River; it made sense for men to settle. There are remnants of waterworks on the site: a small sluice, irrigation systems. If one climbs to the top of the ziggurat presently, the Kārūn River can be seen some five miles to the east—massive and impressive but withdrawn. Desert has taken over the fertile grounds.

The square surrounding the ziggurat is paved with heavy tiles, presumably made of clay from the rivers. And here, as you can see, presents itself to me, to



FIG. 4.1 Imprint of a child's foot in a an ancient tile, near a ziggurat, Iran.
Photo: Maya Rasker.

the visitor in the 21st century, the echo of the excited voice of a child not much older than ten years; a playful child that intentionally, out of curiosity perhaps, puts its little bare foot carefully on the surface of the clay tile that is just laid in the sun for drying.

Was it chastened by the foreman for this violation of the smooth surface of the stone? Did the father, being the road man, laugh affectionately? Why was this particular tile used anyway, why was it not simply replaced? Was it perhaps the footprint of a prince, the son of the King for whom the palace adjacent to the ziggurat was erected? Did anyone but the child actually notice at the time the little imprint amongst the tens of thousands of tiles?

What I observed—what made me smile—is the absolute and irrefutable presence of an absence in this little gesture; the account of a life (of a lived life and a futile event) captured for over 3,000 years in the negative. In an oblique way, it reminded me of your observation that the writer's mark is in the end not much more than the singularity of his absence.

Writing, you see, at this very moment, is as if I am, tentatively, intentionally, putting my bare foot on a wet clay tile; something elusive, yet irretrievable results from this act. I do feel your eyes upon me (As the indulgent father? The annoyed foreman?)—

[Cut.]

Intermezzo

(*three days later*)

Sir, I wonder: did you notice, while reading, that I got lost?

I obviously didn't, while writing. Until I found myself staring at these words written so far without a clue how to continue, or rather: without a clue where this path was leading me. (And this I know, as an enthusiastic mountain hiker: once you *suspect* you are getting lost—before actually losing your way completely—you must return your steps to the last recognised point where you still had an overview of your itinerary and destiny. In terms of profit and loss, the return is the least waste of time and energy to eventually reach your destination.)

It was the little foot that led me astray. It was my idea that this child's footprint could serve as a metaphor for the master-apprentice relation ... The plan was to jump from there to the thought—to explore the idea—that a student-pupil must be a master himself, just as a master must be an apprentice ... *blablabla*.

Which, of course, is not a bad idea, were it not such a huge cliché. And, I'm bound to admit, the metaphor of the footprint is really lame too.

So, what *is* at stake?

Friday, September 22, 2017

To retrace one's steps to the last hilltop known to the eye, whilst simultaneously regarding and ignoring the massive surroundings of an infinite landscape—that is the assignment for the day; not to start all over again, neither to erase the *Irrgang*, but to continue, taking into account what was gathered and what was lost on the journey.

It was your piece on *Las Meninas*, Sir, which initially attracted my attention to your ways of thinking; the sound reasoning and the meticulous language from which the idea arose that thinking through the act of writing (writing as an act of thought) can, and thus ought to be, as perfectly honed as Brancusi's egg.

Which, as I know, is a fallacy.

(But it is a useful fallacy, just the same way as 'admiration' or 'desire' are forceful, valuable misconceptions that lure you into a not yet or not entirely known world, convincing enough though to maintain the promise that *poësis* can be good for thinking.)

To return to *Las Meninas*: some years ago I came across your text (*No, no!* Vice versa: your text entered my life), in particular, the observation at the closing of your analysis of Velazquez's painting that "the profound invisibility of what one sees is inseparable from the invisibility of the person seeing." That idea or notion has hooked on me ever since because, on an intuitive level, I read it as an indicator how to begin to handle the issue I raised a few days ago: how to relate to what inspires, to what one admires—and to what moves the heart. This may not sound quite clear, I'll explain it.



FIG. 4.2

Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas o La familia de Felipe IV* (1656), oil on canvas. ©Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado.

At first glance we encounter the painter Velazquez painting a portrait of the Royal couple; he is perfectly visible behind his easel, while the canvas has its back turned to us, the viewer. By taking this specific stance, offering a view of the couple in question as just a reflection in the oblong mirror at the far end of the scene, the painter, and with him, the process of painting empathically comes to the fore. To me, the subject of this huge piece is therefore not so much what it shows (painter painting a portrait), not what it stands for (what cannot be represented), but above all the relationship between the painter and me—the viewer. As you observe: the painter stares at this particular point where I am apparently standing, albeit invisible; what he actually sees, what is represented there on the canvas, is also invisible to me, since everything I know is its barren back. So why would he stare at me like that when there is nothing to be seen or to get from?

If I take yet another step back, I am aware that the painter, *as actor*, does something highly peculiar. He makes me switch position with him. He positions me, the viewer, where *he* obviously stands while painting as if to suggest that *I am being incorporated into the work*. Or more precise maybe: this positioning suggests he needs my eyes, needs my perspective, needs my imaginary presence in a “ceaseless exchange” between the observer and the observed, as you call it: a “reciprocal visibility” that embraces a whole complex of “uncertainties, exchanges, and feints.”

This painting articulates in a moving way, so convincing to me that it overbears any other gesture it makes, the notion that the other—in this case: the viewer—is a crucial part of (the work of) the artist.

Let me recall what I tried to lay bare last week, the axis where the *gnothi seauton* meets the ‘master,’ where the beginning to apply one’s mind to oneself is linked to the existence of the other. I then tentatively arrived at the idea that perhaps this junction, this tangent somehow points at the lack itself, the absence where the relation precedes the related.

There opens up before me, not so much as knowledge but maybe as a workable image, the possibility that the other—be it a master (knowing what I don’t know) or a spectator (seeing what I cannot see)—resides perhaps within the Self, is an ‘I’ within the Self that one can search for, that one can invite to step into the light from Proust’s “abysses of uncertainty”; a folded interior, to rephrase your words, that expresses itself in relation to the Self.

In and through the work (as in: the labour)—and in the work of art.

It is, I’ve come to believe, the privilege and the responsibility of the artist (here: the writer), with the courageous humbleness I mentioned earlier, to relate to the abysses of the soul (or whatever word we want to call it), to the

void in human nature, from which the desire comes forth, the will to grow, to transform. And in addition: I believe one can do so only in and through the relation with the other (be it a person or a work—anything outside of oneself), by incorporating the other in one's exercise or investigation. It is said that Montaigne studied himself more than any subject, but I would like to frame the responsibility of the writer a bit differently, in line with your remark that essayism is above all "an 'ascesis,' an exercise of oneself in thought." It is not the Self as such that offers itself up as an object for close investigation. Rather, the challenge is to study oneself as if 'I' were the outsider, another, mere material to work on—that can and should be *fictionalised* to get closer to whatever one strives after. Beauty. Knowledge. Playful exploration. Anything but ... Truth.

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Dear Mr Foucault, it was truly a pleasure working on this piece.

I am convinced—now more than when I started this letter—that I am far removed from a full appreciation of the gift your work represents. To have received this hunch of another way of looking at my work as a writer is a present I acknowledge with gratitude—by means of this letter to you.

As an afterthought: that picture of the little foot in the tile was taken by me in 2011 near Ziggurat Choqa Zambil, Shoshar, Iran. Knowing you, I'm sure you would like to know.

Yours sincerely,
Maya Rasker

PS: I like to share with you the texts I have worked with while researching and writing this piece. Some you know quite well (having written them yourselves, or, in case of contemporaries, reflected on them), some must be new to you since they were written long after your decease. I hope you appreciate them.

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