

Hermeneutics of Tradition

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Noch liegen die Schatten der Zeit wie Fragen
Über unserem Geheimnis¹

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“The art of understanding” is a definition of hermeneutics proposed by Friedrich Schleiermacher². It is the art of making incomprehensible texts comprehensible; an art which the ancient Greeks considered the domain of interpreters and translators. It is the art of reading the representations of time-memory. Since the earliest usage of the Greek word *hermeneia*, understanding has been related to interpretation, the decryption of hidden ciphers, and the translation of the unknown into the known. In his attempt to define the philosophical principles of this art of understanding called “hermeneutics”, Schleiermacher insisted upon the decisive role of tradition. For him, every text, message, or work to be understood and interpreted not only belongs to a tradition but can only be understood and interpreted from within a tradition. However, if tradition is a condition for understanding and interpreting meanings, how should we understand the meaning of tradition? If tradition can only be understood from within tradition, how should we understand something from within itself? These questions indicate the difficulty of developing a hermeneutics of tradition insofar as one term already comprehends the other. Tradition is indeed a way of understanding and interpreting before and despite any understanding and interpretation; hermeneutics is, for the most part, a way of becoming aware of and legitimating tradition.

The word tradition comes from the Latin, *traditio*: the preservation of meanings, institutions, and practices through transmission. In its own dynamics, tradition is a conservative practice. However, it is also

a condition for innovation. Thus every innovation coins new meanings from within already preserved meanings. This dialectic of preservation and innovation has determined the meaning of tradition in the history of practices and ideas in the West. It is also this dialectic that made possible the distinction between pre-modern and modern times. Immanuel Kant's paradigmatic definition of modernity as enlightened emergence from self-imposed immaturity, in which man acquires the courage to use his own understanding without the guidance of tradition³, presupposes the dialectic between tradition and innovation which informed the famous *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. It is still within the frame of this "querelle" that the task of understanding and interpreting contemporary history, a history that defines itself as both a history of atrocity and an acknowledgment of the atrocity of history itself, is divided between a defense of the hermeneutical necessity of understanding and interpreting the past, and a claim for critique against and without interpretation. Contemporary history has brought to light the obscure and aporetic dimension of tradition in which the defense of tradition was used to exterminate traditions. Indeed, it has showed how tradition appeared to be both reason of disaster and despair and a way of dealing with disaster and despair. Affirming that "the historical trace involving things, words, colors, and tones is always the suffering of the past", Walter Benjamin indicated the suffering of tradition in contemporary history: tradition as the most extreme danger and the only way not to forget "accumulated suffering". Contemporary history has exposed the inadequacy of the dialectic between tradition and innovation insofar as tradition and innovation showed their destructive power, on the one hand, and redemptive force, on the other, and thereby how oblivions of memory and the memory of oblivion are intertwined.

The main arguments against the "defense" of tradition, which hermeneutical claims for understanding and interpretation seem to sustain, rest on a critique of the normative character of tradition and the ideological dimension of the idea of temporal continuity and destiny that accompanies the concept of tradition.⁴ Ranged against these critical arguments, there are today an increasing number of attempts to recognize the critical potential of the concept of tradition for a globalized, technological society which is entirely subject to neoliberal

and capitalist imperatives of constant innovation. Tradition may well emerge as a new strategy for responding to the challenges of the present, in which case it may take the form of “active attitude” (“sub-altern” traditions against hegemonic tradition), “freedom for the past” (as Gadamer proposed), or “memory of the unthought and forgotten” (as Adorno claimed, following Walter Benjamin)⁵. Rather than deciding whether to defend what is defensible in tradition, or to assume the necessity of critical innovation that would enable a way out of tradition, I would like to suggest another position. I would like to suggest the necessity of embracing the aporias of tradition as a starting-point for developing an understanding of tradition beyond the dialectic of preservation and innovation. This is the main scope of the present article.

Let us take as our point of departure the precept that tradition is that which one can neither live with nor escape from. Let us take as our point of departure the precept that tradition is a source of both life and death. The experience of tradition exposes, not temporal continuity and spatial enclosure, but the aporetic situation of trying to breathe while being suffocated: the suffocation of living in a tradition (not being able to exist within it) and the breathing in and of tradition (not being able to exist without it). This aporetic character of tradition can be described as *involvement*.

Tradition involves all of us as intimately as the air we breathe. The involvement of tradition is not like a mantle that can be taken away, but the involvement of a world of meanings, something that can never be taken away. Tradition involves each of us as intimately as the world in which we live. Assuming, on the one hand, that the world is not a sum of objects but a constellation of meanings and, on the other, that meanings are the play between what goes without saying (the known and the familiar) and the need to say what remains unsaid and asking to be said (the unknown or strange and the unknowable), then the world is always entangled in traditions. Each tradition is a world, the world each of us inhabit, the world without which we cannot breath, the world that suffocates, compelling us to search for worlds beyond. Considered in this way, tradition shows the worldliness of conceptualizing the world: there is no “outside” from which to understand, interpret, or describe the world. Only from within the world is it pos-

sible to conceive of the world. Tradition shows this in a dramatic way precisely in its attempts to evade tradition, presenting the very patterns from which forms of evasion and emancipation are formulated.

Being as vital to our existence in the world as air itself, tradition can be considered the world of meanings that already precedes us, giving each of us an already-understood and pre-interpreted world. The already-interpreted world of tradition is, indeed, never totally interpreted, being both interpreted and not interpreted, both an *already* interpreted world and a world *still* to interpret. In this sense, tradition precedes us going ahead of us, is both closeness and openness, being a closed openness and an open closeness.

Tradition shows the worldly condition for philosophical hermeneutics, which is one of *ontological involvement*. Ontological involvement means that only from within the world is it possible to conceive of the world; only from within language it is possible to conceive of language; only from within history is it possible to conceive of history; only from within nature is it possible to conceive of nature; and only from within being is it possible to conceive of being⁶. Ontological involvement means, not subjectivity or particularism, but the worldly condition of existence. Claiming that only from within tradition is it possible to conceive of tradition does not mean that each tradition is closed within itself, incomprehensible from outside. It means, rather, the impossibility of finding a position totally free from already existing meanings from which to conceive of meaning. Considered as an already-understood and interpreted world, tradition is a *sine qua non* for interpreting and understanding the world. That is why philosophical understanding and interpretation begin with estrangement: the already known and familiar must become strange and unfamiliar, the answers through which the world appears for the first time must become questions – questions that show the world, as if it were, for the first time.

From the viewpoint of what has been here discussed, tradition is ontological involvement in the sense of *being in a world of meaning*. Tradition presents the experience of already being grasped by the world of meanings when one seeks to grasp the world of meanings and the meaning of the world. This having been already grasped in order to grasp has its proper dynamics. As indicated before, tradition

presents the world in a state of self-evidence. Self-evidence appears as the state in which everything both “fits well together” and can be “perfectly explicated”, as Edmund Husserl claimed.⁷ It appears as familiarity and security. Meaning is self-evident when it seems familiar and certain. Faced by something self-evident, we say “of course”, for it goes without saying. In the state of self-evidence, saying goes without saying. Tradition says without saying insofar as it grasps one both as what has already grasped one and as what grasps *for* him or her. Tradition, the world of habits and familiarities, the state of self-evidence thinks, says, understands and interprets *for* each one. It grasps for each one because it grasps beyond each one, grasping for *us*, “us”, this “intimacy” with others, others before us and after us. Tradition is therefore ontological involvement, not only in the sense of presenting the being in a world of meanings, but also the evidence that the *self* is neither only itself nor entirely for itself, being a “being-with”, as Martin Heidegger called it, and hence what in itself already is beyond itself. Tradition shows ontological involvement as being in togetherness. Tradition is a primary experience of a given togetherness, called world. It is a certain experience of the common that connects many meanings of the common: common as the same in many differences, common as the banal, familiar, and self-evidently not surprising, common as what belongs to many, building a sense of community. Tradition speaks from the perspective of plural personal pronouns such as “we” and “they”, indicating the togetherness within and of a plurality.

But do these descriptions really correspond to our present? The way the “we” of traditions experiences today its meaning of having something in common with others and of recognizing meanings as “common”, “familiar” and “self-evident” is, however, the very “loss of tradition”. The historical situation for addressing the question about the meaning of tradition is today, in fact, the experience of the loss of its meaning. Loss of tradition does not mean, however, absence of tradition, but its absent way of being present, the presence of something fading away, of something that no longer possesses one and that no one entirely possesses. This is a further dimension of the aporetical structure of tradition revealed by contemporary history. Loss of tradition indeed means having tradition precisely in its fading away. Following Jean-Luc Nancy’s and Maurice Blanchot’s attempts to think

through a possible meaning of the common from a situation of loss of common meanings of community, and trying to give some continuity to what Nancy discussed in terms of “inoperability of the community” (*communauté desoeuvrée*)⁸ and what Blanchot exposed as “unavowable community” (*communauté inavouable*)⁹, it would be possible to speak about inoperability of tradition and unavowable tradition. Using these expressions is a way of insisting upon how experience of broken traditions today can provide us with a means of developing a hermeneutics of the meaning of tradition beyond the dialectics of preservation and innovation, tradition and renewal.

The boundaries of tradition today appear broken, both in “sovereign” and “subaltern” traditions. In broken togetherness and dispossessed or inoperative traditions, the “common” is experienced negatively, in a sense close but not equal to what Maurice Blanchot called “negative community” (*communauté négative*).¹⁰ This negativity does not appear as lack but as loss, as fading away, still there but almost absent, a thin and uttermost fragile link between presence and absence, between still being there and almost disappeared. This shows itself in the way the singular belongs to the common world of tradition, a tradition emptied of meaning but not without meaning, overwhelming the singular with the excess of traditional meanings and revealing the singular in its fragility and, moreover, the being in tradition or togetherness as fragility of being. The way of belonging to tradition is fragility insofar as tradition is itself transmission of what has faded away; indeed, fragility is the way one belongs to a fading away, dispossessed and loss tradition, showing the limits to tradition as fragile but, paradoxically, also presenting fragility as a “real bound” to tradition and to the common. Understood thus, it shows how another meaning of tradition and of the common can arise from it, the meaning of tradition as common life after the other’s death and before the other’s birth, *tradition as common life after death and before*.

Tradition exposes the ambiguity of a self that is in itself beyond itself, of a self out and without itself. That may explain why tradition is both an understanding that, understanding for everyone, no longer understands (alienation) and a non-understanding that opens for other understandings (emancipation); that is why it appears as source for both life and death. Heidegger saw this ambiguity clearly when he

remarked in *Being and Time*: “the tradition that hereby gains dominance makes what it ‘transmits’ so little accessible that initially and for the most part it covers it over instead. What comes down to us hands over to obviousness; it bars access to those original ‘wellsprings’ out of which the traditional categories and concepts were in part genuinely drawn. Indeed, it makes us wholly incapable of even understanding that such a return is necessary”.¹¹ As “what comes down to us”, tradition is life; as what “gains dominance” and becomes master of life, delivering what has come down to us as obviousness, common, habitual, assured meaning, tradition is death. Ontological involvement, presented in tradition, is in fact the involvement in the play of life and death, the play of generations, the play between by-passing and passing on and along, in which the self discovers itself beyond and out of itself, in which existence becomes exposed to the paradox of a continuous transition.

Tradition unfolds its meaning in the play of generations. Generation means primarily to be generated, to be born. To be born means, however, to come from, and, more precisely, to come after others. Coming after, descendent is from where the belonging to the antecedent, to the previous and foregoing can be experienced. Only as coming-after, the before us can be seen as being both time before and time forward. The coming after of the born and generated comes not only after the “parents” but also after the death of all others. Tradition as transmission of what came down to us is a life after the death of others, an experience of life-after-death in this life. It is, in fact, neither life nor death but life-after-death, a life threatened by death and death that can discover a new life in its transmission. What Heidegger thought in terms of “being-toward-death” (*Sein-zum-Tode*) can be understood as the experience of nascent life after the death of others, thus, as Heidegger himself stated in *Being and Time*: “factual *Dasein* exists nascent (*gebürtig*)”, and, nascent, it dies in the sense of being-toward-death.¹²

Assuming life-after-death in this very life as a basis for developing the hermeneutical meaning of tradition, how should we describe this life-after-death in life? In the nineteen-sixties, the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka wrote notes for the development of a phenomenology of life-after-death.¹³ He departs from the view of death as a

“close history” with “dead possibilities” that cannot reawaken in its proper originarity. As a life after the death of a near other, “my life”, says Patočka, is a life experiencing emptiness and lack of reciprocity, a life that dies with the death of our others, rather than a life that experiences by analogy its own mortality when the other dies. To experience one’s own existence as life after the death of our others means to experience one’s own mortality as a way of being that constitutes itself in relation to others, a way of unmediatedly experiencing our being as a being with others, and thereby a self constituted intersubjectively. Patočka’s phenomenological descriptions of a life after the death of others show how the death of the near other presents both the uniqueness of one’s own existence and its co-existentiality. It shows both my existence and co-existence as constituting each other. In these unfinished pages, we can read an attempt to describe phenomenologically how factual existence is both reciprocity and interruption of reciprocity, how death disrupts the bounds of life and how life is bound of reciprocity. However, what Patočka never discusses is how factual existence is nascent, being born existence and, as born, an enigmatic discontinuity in the continuous flux of life. Thus, the born is both the continuity of all lives that came before and a discontinuity insofar as it is unique and, as such, impossible to reduce entirely to previous life. In this sense, those born are at once and at the same time united and separated from those foregoing, discovering reciprocity in non-reciprocity and non-reciprocity in reciprocity. Born, nascent life exposes, in fact, an in-betweenness, for it is at the same time a life after the death of others and a life before the birth of others. It is a life after death and life before birth, life of the unborn.

Born, nascent life is the perspective from which tradition shows itself as the movement of coming down to us, through us and beyond us. As such, tradition is life after death *and* life before birth, the movement of carrying further a loss of the world and a not yet transformed world. Transmission of tradition shows omitting or reveals concealing the *non-world* pulsating in the self-evidence and communicability of the world in tradition. In its system of familiarity and security, the system of self-evidence where everything fits well together and can be perfectly explicated, showing no need for *further* explanation or inquiry, the world is always passing on and thereby always exposed to a loss.

Traditional world appears indeed as too much world. Overwhelming and all-encompassing, tradition is abundance, giving itself as “too much”, which can be experience both as suffocating feeding of the singular and as a “surging sea” to which the singular surrenders “in such way that it crests and breaks”, as Walter Benjamin expressed it vividly.¹⁴ Being suffocated when fed by tradition, or living from abundance as a wave surrendering to its movement so that it can crest and break, shows how the singular belongs to tradition as fragility. Fragility is the real bound to tradition insofar as, being within tradition, the singular emerges as the fragile turning-point between breaking down and breaking through. Comparing the fragile way the singular belongs to the ‘too-much’ of tradition with a wave surrendering to the abundance of a surging sea, Benjamin turns the question of tradition back on its “phenomenological” residue, so to speak, namely, to the experience of a world passing on and along, being therefore a world always losing itself and never having totally acquired itself as world. Seizing tradition as what emerges “precipitously like a wave from living abundance (...)”, Benjamin dislocates tradition back to the pathos of its movement, the pathos of existing in fragility, that is, of existing in permanent loss, after the death of others and before the birth of others. As life after death and life before birth, tradition is life after a loss of the world and before the birth of the world.

In the text Derrida wrote as homage to Gadamer on the occasion of his death, he addresses the question of tradition as “carrying the world of the others” and, hence, as a question of how to live a life after the death of the other. He describes this carrying the world of the other as carrying “the world after the end of the world,” and thus “death”, he says, “is nothing less than an end of *the* world (...)”¹⁵ Because the world is the world of each and everyone, being all, world and the world of all, each death is death of the whole world. But because Derrida sees only the work of tradition as life after death, as carrying the world after the end of the world, he considers that: “The survivor, then, remains alone. Beyond the world of the other, he is also some fashion beyond or before the world itself. In the world outside the world and deprived of the world.”¹⁶ The survivor, who carries the world after the end of the world – the generation, we could add – appears here as loneliness, because what is left of view is that survivor, the one who

carries “the world after the end of the world” is nascent, insofar as he/she was born. What is forgotten here is that a life after death is at once and at the same time a life before birth, a life of the unborn. From this horizon, the “survivor”, as who is born, can never be alone and that “no one carries alone the world” (*Denn keiner trägt das Leben allein*), recalling a verse by Hölderlin.¹⁷

To carry further the world after a loss of the world and before a transformed world defines tradition from its own movement. This description of tradition corresponds to the meaning of tradition in the experience of loss of traditions. Loss of traditions brings into to play this other meaning of tradition as life after death and life before birth. This becomes very clear in a life in exile. Exile can be considered an extreme experience of the hermeneutical meaning of tradition. The existential situation of exile is that of no longer having a world in the home-world and never arriving at an alien home, being alien at home and not at home in the alien. It is a situation of in-betweenness that has nothing to do with being between places or experiencing an interval between two times. It is a situation of being without return and without arrival. Here, one carries further the world after losing the world, bringing it to the waiting of a world to come rather than to a new world. Thus, in exile, one is always with the without the world, without the world before, the world that one once had and was and without the world after, the world that one does not have and is not. In exile, one is always with and without the world, is *with-out*, as it is possible to say in English with a single word, being with-out the world before and with-out the coming world. It is a situation of continuous being with others who were left behind in time and space, and therefore of being without them with them. And it is, on the other hand, a situation of being without others who have not yet existed, without the unborn, without potential births, being with this without, being without others with them. The loss of the world implicated in a life after death and the not yet of a world in a life before birth casts the world of tradition as the world of an in-between, a world without world that appears as a world of rest, a world resting in continuous transition.

Notes

1. Nelly Sachs. "Chor der Ungeborenen" in *Werke. Kommentierte Ausgabe Bd 1, Gedichte 1940–50* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2010), 42.
2. Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, ed. Manfred Frank (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 75.
3. Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, and What is Enlightenment?* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 1997).
4. Such arguments against hermeneutical claims for understanding and interpretation are important for Foucault, Habermas, Deleuze, Derrida, Sloterdijk, among many others.
5. On tradition as a strategy for dealing with the problems of the present, see Aleida Assmann, *Zeit und Tradition, Kulturelle Strategien der Dauer* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 1999).
6. Bringing clarity to this wordly condition for philosophical understanding can be considered the greatest contribution of hermeneutical philosophy, from Schleiermacher to Heidegger and its developments by Gadamer, Ricoeur, and Derrida.
7. Edmund Husserl, "Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem," *Revue internationale de philosophie* (Bruxelles) 1 (1939), 203–225, and *Research in Phenomenology* 1 (1939), 203–25. Translation: "The Origin of Geometry," in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press), 1970, 353–378.
8. Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 2004).
9. Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983).
10. Ibidem.
11. Martin Heidegger. *Sein und Zeit*, GA2, (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1967), 21; *Being and Time*, eng transl. J. Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), 19
12. "Das faktische Dasein existiert gebürtig, und gebürtig stirbt es auch schon im Sinne des Seins zum Tode". Ibidem, GA 2, p. 374; J. Stambaugh's translation reads very differently: "Factual Da-sein exists as born, and, born, it is already dying in the sense of being-toward-death", ibidem, 343.
13. Jan Patočka. "Phénoménologie de la vie après la mort" in *Papiers phénoménologiques* (Grenoble: ed. Jérôme Millon, 1995), 145–156. See Erika Abrahms' notes on the manuscript on page 295. For a very inspiring comment on these manuscripts by Patočka, see Filip Karfik "Das Leben nach dem Tode und die Unsterblichkeit" in *Unendlichwerden durch die Endlichkeit* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008), 90.
14. Walter Benjamin. Letter to Gerhard Scholem, Sept 1917, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), "Theory is like a surging sea, but the only thing that matters to the wave (under-

stood as metaphor for the person) is to surrender itself to its motion in such a way that it crests and breaks. This enormous freedom of the broken wave is education in its actual sense: instruction – tradition becoming visible and *free*, tradition emerging precipitously like a way from living abundance (...) To educate is to enrich theory (...)", 94

15. Jacques Derrida, "Rams. Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem" in *Sovereignities in Question. The Poetics of Paul Celan* (Fordham University Press, 2005), 140.

16. Ibidem.

17. Friedrich Hölderlin, "Die Titaten" in *Sämtliche Werke. Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe*, vol 2,1 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1951), 218.