The Communism of Thought

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Published by Punctum Books

Munro, Michael.
The Communism of Thought.

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§1: HOW TO READ

1.

“Reading is first and foremost non-reading.” That is to say, “non-reading is not just the absence of reading. It is a genuine activity”: “There is more than one way not to read, the most radical of which

is not to open a book at all. For any given reader, however dedicated he [sic] might be, such total abstention necessarily holds true for virtually everything that has been published, and thus in fact this constitutes our primary way of relating to books. We must not forget that even a prodigious reader never has access to more than an infinitesimal fraction of the books that exist.
“Even in the case of the most passionate life-long readers,” Pierre Bayard insists, “the act of picking up and opening a book masks the countergesture that occurs at the same time: the involuntary act of not picking up and not opening all the other books in the universe.”

If reading is, indeed, “first and foremost” non-reading, and if it is true that non-reading is “a genuine activity,” is there not perhaps, by the same token, a yet more radical—a more uncanny—way not to read? What of that non-reading, namely, at work in any given act of reading? What of that incomprehension, provisional yet indispensable, that elliptical illegibility, in other words, operative in every word that is read? After what fashion, if any, may it in turn be given to be read? And what could possibly be read by way of it?

2.

Reading is situated beyond comprehension or short of comprehension. . . . There is something dizzying about reading, or at least about the outset of reading, that resembles the irrational impulse by which we try to open eyes that are already closed, open them to life; this impulse is connected to desire, which is a leap, an infinite leap, just as
inspiration is a leap: I want to read what has nevertheless not been written.
~Maurice Blanchot

To read what was never written—that is philosophy’s first word and its last.

According to Giorgio Agamben, “the genuine philosophical element in every work, whether it be a work of art, of science, or of thought,

is its capacity for elaboration, which Ludwig Feuerbach defined as Entwicklungsfähigkeit. It is precisely when one follows such a principle that the difference between what belongs to the author of a work and what is attributable to the interpreter becomes as essential as it is difficult to grasp.

Daniel Heller-Roazen has written a beautiful gloss of that passage.

Between a work and its commentary, there is always an interval. It may consist of a historical removal, the temporal distance that separates a written thing from one that later seeks to explain it. But the interval need not be merely chronological in nature. Its pre-
sence can also be detected in the blanker regions of a single page: the typographical spaces that divide a major text from the lesser ones that, beneath or beside it, aim to clarify its argument. The border is, in any case, decisive. It belongs to the essence of the commentary to come into being at the outermost edges of a work and to move in the areas that at once surround and do not coincide with it. This fact follows from the nature of the form and can be easily ascertained. If an explanation were without relation to that which it aimed to explain, it would obviously be none at all; but if, by contrast, it were truly a part of that which it aimed to clarify, it would be equally impossible to distinguish it as such. A commentary always moves in the narrow regions that wind around the work upon which it bears, following and tracing its contours, and no matter how distant or how close to its text it may seem, an exposition never seeks either to leap beyond it or to venture within it. As its classical name indicates with a clarity that leaves little room for comment, the commentum stays at every point ‘with’ that upon
which it comments. In the realm of texts, it is an eternal accompanist, a permanent resident of the shifting space of being ‘with’ (cum). It lives nowhere if not in company: were it ever forced to be, so to speak, without its ‘with,’ it would not be at all.

For the greater part of its history, philosophy has been a practice of commentary, and it has conceived its most brilliant inventions at the edges of the corpus it has continued to accompany. Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages are perhaps the most illustrious cases, periods of the proliferation of glosses, expositions, and paraphrases (to say nothing of annotated editions and indexes) of all kinds. It is a truism that the thinkers of these epochs regularly departed from the theses of the tradition and, more precisely, from those stated in littera by the one who was for them the Philosopher par excellence. But such a claim means little as long as it leaves unspecified the role played by the encounter with ‘tradition’ in such a setting. The commentators of late Antiquity, the falāṣifa and filosofim of classical Arabic culture, and the doctors of
the Latin Middle Ages may well all have conjoined their inquiries, in differing ways, to those of the authorities of Antiquity. The fact remains: more than once, they received from the classics something other than what had been transmitted to them. It followed from the nature of their craft. Glossators and their kind are incessantly in search of the animating element in their textual objects that bears no name: the dimension in them that, remaining unsaid, demands in time to be exposed. Thinkers trained as readers, the philosophers of the tradition were no exception. They knew how to find the secret source of incompleteness sealed in every work of thought, and they knew, too, how to draw from it the matter of their art.

Reading is an art, and non-reading a genuine activity, when reading passes wholly into non-reading and what was never written comes to light in what is read.

§ “To come to light”: In “What is the Contemporary?” Agamben cites an explanation for the darkness of the night sky derived from contemporary astrophysics. “In the firmament that we ob-
serve at night, the stars shine brightly, surrounded by a thick darkness. Since the number of galaxies and luminous bodies in the universe is almost infinite, the darkness that we see in the sky is something that, according to scientists, demands an explanation”: “In an expanding universe, the most remote galaxies move away from us at a speed so great that their light is never able to reach us. What we perceive as the darkness of the heavens is this light that, though traveling toward us, cannot reach us, since the galaxies from which the light originates move away from us at a velocity greater than the speed of light.

What comes to light—here—other than the pathos of light’s absence? What is marked by black font on a white page other than our implication in something that, perpetually approaching us, must remain perpetually beyond our grasp?

3.

To read what was never written finds its corollary and completion in the injunction to write what will never be read.
Notes

Pg. 1: How to Read  “If we are interested in the ways in which a text may be trying to become something other than what its author and even readers intend and expect, we need a metaphysics of reading, and also of the texts themselves.” Eileen A. Joy, “Like Two Autistic Moonbeams Entering the Window of My Asylum: Chaucer’s Griselda and Lars von Trier’s Bess McNeill,” *postmedieval* 2.2 (2011): 325 [316–328].


Pg. 1: non-reading is not just Bayard, *How to Talk About Books*, 12.

Pg. 1: There is more than one way Bayard, *How to Talk About Books*, 1.

Pg. 2: Even in the case Bayard, *How to Talk About Books*, 6. Author’s emphasis.

Pg. 2: that incompren... operative For the dizziness of that incompren...
temporality, see *The Time That Remains*, where Agamben elaborates linguist Gustave Guillaume’s concept of “operational time”: “According to Guillaume, the human mind experiences time, but it does not possess the representation of it, and must, in representing it,

take recourse to constructions of a spatial order. It follows that grammar represents verbal time as an infinite line comprised of two segments, past and future, separated by the cutting of the present:

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 past                 present                 future
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This representation, which Guillaume even calls a time-image, is inadequate precisely because it is too perfect. It presents time as though it were always already constructed, but does not show time in the act of being constructed in thought. In order to truly understand something, Guillaume says, considering it only in its constructed or achieved state is not enough; you also have to represent the phases through which thought had to pass constructing it.
Every mental operation, however quick, has to be achieved in a certain time, which, while short, is no less real. Guillame defines ‘operational time’ as the time the mind takes to realize a time-image. An astute study of linguistic phenomena shows that languages do not organize their own verbal systems according to the previous linear schema (whose defect lies in its being too perfect), but rather by referring the constructed image back to the operational time in which it is constructed. In this way, Guillame is able to complicate the chronological representation of time by adding a projection in which the process of forming the time-image is cast back onto the time image itself. In doing so, he comes up with a new representation of time, that of chronogenetic time, which is no longer linear but three-dimensional.


Pg. 2: Reading is situated beyond comprehension Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill*

Pg. 2: There is something dizzying  Blanchot, The Blanchot Reader, 433. Author’s emphasis.

Pg. 3: To read what was never written  Daniel Heller-Roazen, editor’s introduction, in Giorgio Agamben, Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1 [1-23]: “Among the notes and sketches for Walter Benjamin’s last work, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’

we find the following statement: ‘Historical method is philological method, a method that has as its foundation the book of life. “To read what was never written,” is what Hofmannsthal calls it. The reader referred to here is the true historian.’ […] What does it mean to confront history as a reader, ‘to read what was never written’? And what is it that ‘was never written’ in the ‘book of life’? The question concerns the event that Benjamin throughout his works calls ‘redemption.’
“It is in this moment”—what Heller-Roazen identifies as “a messianic moment of thinking”—“that the past is saved, not in being returned to what once existed but, instead, precisely in being transformed into something that never was: in being read, in the words of Hofmannsthal, as what was never written.” See also, section 153 of Theodor Adorno’s *Minima Moralia*, “Finale”:

The only philosophy which can be responsibly practised in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light. To gain such perspectives without velleity or violence, entirely from felt contact with its objects—this alone is the task of thought. It is the simplest of all things, because the situation calls imperatively for such knowledge, indeed because consummate negativity, once squarely faced,
delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed, even though by a hair’s breadth, from the scope of existence, whereas we well know that any possible knowledge must not only be first wrested from what is, if it shall hold good, but is also marked, for this very reason, by the same distortion and indigence which it seeks to escape. The more passionately thought denies its conditionality for the sake of the unconditional, the more unconsciously, and so calamitously, it is delivered up to the world. Even its own impossibility it must at last comprehend for the sake of the possible. But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters.


Pg. 3: the genuine philosophical element

Pg. 3: Between a work and its commentary

Pg. 6: In the firmament that we observe at night

Pg. 7: comes to light—here
Were that “light” to reach us, in other words, the page that staged its arrival would be blank.

In our house, this enormous suburban house, a rented barracks overgrown with indestructible medieval ruins, there was proclaimed today, on a misty, icy winter morning, the following call to arms: “Fellow Tenants, I possess five toy guns. They are hanging in my closet, one on each hook. The first is mine, the rest are for any-
one who wants them. Should there be more than four, the others will have to bring their own weapons and deposit them in my closet. For there will have to be unity; without unity we will not move forward. Incidentally, I only have guns which are entirely useless for any other purpose, the mechanism is ruined, the wads are torn off, only the hammers still snap. Therefore, it will not be very difficult to procure more such weapons should they be needed. But fundamentally, I will be just as happy, in the beginning, with people who have no guns. Those of us who do, will, at the crucial moment, take the unarmed into our midst. This is a strategy which proved itself with the first American farmers against the Indians; why shouldn’t it prove itself here as well, since the conditions are, after all, similar. We can even forget about guns, then, for the duration, and even the five guns are not absolutely necessary, and they will be used simply because they are already here. If the other four do not want to carry them, then they can forget about them. I alone will carry one, as the leader. But we shouldn’t have a leader, and so I, too,
will destroy my gun or lay it aside.” That was the first call to arms. In our house no one has the time or desire to read such calls, much less consider them. Soon the little papers were swimming along in the stream of dirt which originates in the attic, is nourished by all the corridors and spills down the stairs to struggle there with the opposing stream that swells upwards from below. But a week later came a second call: “Fellow Tenants! So far no one has reported to me. I was, in so far as the necessity of earning my living allowed, constantly at home, and during the time of my absence, when the door to my room was always left open, a sheet of paper lay on my table on which anyone who so desired could enroll. No one has done so.”

Nowhere is it stated what, if anything, is written on that sheet of paper. That no one has enrolled implies that no names have been added to it. But not a single word here indicates that there is upon the page any writing at all.

To note that omission allows us to place the blank it elides. “In its deepest intention,”
Agamben writes, “philosophy is a firm assertion of potentiality, the construction of an experience of the possible as such. Not thought but the potential to think, not writing but the white sheet is what philosophy refuses at all costs to forget.”


**Pg. 7: its corollary and completion** Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 67-68 (author’s emphasis): “In every representation we make of time and in every discourse by means of which we define and represent time,

another time is implied that is not entirely consumed by representation. It is as though man [sic throughout], insofar as he is a thinking and speaking being, produced an additional time with regard to chronological time, a time that prevented him from perfectly coinciding with the time out of which he could make images and representations. This ulterior time, nevertheless, in not another time, it is not a supplementary time added on from outside to chronological time. Rather, it is some-
thing like a time within time—not ul-
terior but interior—which only mea-
sures my disconnection with regard to
it, my being out of synch and in non-
coincidence with regard to my repre-
sentation of time, but precisely because
of this, allows for the possibility of my
achieving and taking hold of it. We
may now propose our first definition of
messianic time: messianic time is the
time that times takes to come to an end
[…], it is operational time pressi
ng within the chronological time, working
and transforming it from within; it is
the time we need to make time end:
the time that is left us.

“Whereas our representation of chronological
time, as the time in which we are,” Agamben
concludes, “separates us from ourselves and
transforms us into impotent spectators of our-
selves—spectators who look at the time that
flies without any time left, continually miss-
ing themselves—messianic time, an opera-
tional time in which we take hold of and
achieve our representations of time, is the
time that we ourselves are, and for this very
reason, is the only real time, the only time we
have.”