§IV: On the Communism of Thought: A Commentary on the Brief, Beautiful Correspondence between Gilles Deleuze and Dionys Mascolo

Note: The five letters that comprise the correspondence between Gilles Deleuze and Dionys Mascolo were written between 23 April and 6 October 1988, and were first published a decade later, in 1998, a year after Mascolo’s death and nearly three years after Deleuze’s. They have been republished in Deleuze’s Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995.45

The occasion of Deleuze’s letter, the first letter of what will become the correspondence, is Mascolo’s gift to Deleuze of his recently published book, *Autour d’un effort de mémoire*.\(^{46}\) Deleuze thanks him for it and mentions that since he read Mascolo’s *Le Communisme*—first published 35 years prior, in 1953—he has thought him “one of the authors who has renewed most intensely the relationship between thought and life.”\(^{47}\) Mascolo is “able,” according to Deleuze, “to define limit-situations by their internal repercussions.”\(^{48}\) As an example Deleuze cites one of Mascolo’s sentences, “such an upheaval of general sensibility can only lead to new dispositions of thinking…,” and comments that it “seems to contain a kind of secret in its purity.”\(^{49}\) He closes the brief, elegant letter, “Let me express my admiration, and, if you accept it, my friendship.”\(^{50}\)
Second letter: Mascolo to Deleuze, 30 April 1988

A week later Mascolo sends Deleuze a very beautiful response. “Your letter arrived yesterday”—first sentence, first paragraph. The second paragraph begins: “Beyond the praise it contained, of which I cannot believe myself worthy, and not wishing merely to thank you for the generosity you displayed,

I must tell you how much your words touched me. A truly happy moment, as well as a wonderful surprise, to see oneself not only approved, taken at one’s word, but in a way found out or, precisely, surprised. This occurred in regards to the sentence you quoted (the one concerning the ‘upheaval of general sensibility’) a sentence that, you say, may hold a secret. This led me (of course!) to ask myself: What could this secret be? And I would like to tell you in a few words the response that came to me.

It seems to me that this apparent secret is none other (but then there is always the risk of wanting to pull it from the shadows) than the secret of

51 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
thought that is suspicious of thinking. Which is not without its own concerns. A secret—if its concerns do not lead it to seek refuge in shame or affected humor as sometimes happens—that can always be justified in principle. A secret without secrets, or without wanting secrets in any case. And such that if it is recognized (or is found again in another person), it is enough to serve as the basis for any possible friendship. I hope my hypothesis in response to what I sensed was a question is not too reductive.

I send you my regards, in a comrade-rie of thought, and my thanks.52

“[T]he secret of thought that is suspicious of thinking”: That is the “kind of secret,” “in its purity,” that Mascolo feels Deleuze refers to when quoting his sentence, “such an upheaval of general sensibility can only lead to new dispositions of thinking . . . .”53 But how is “thought”—and “thought,” moreover, “that is suspicious of thinking”—to be understood in relation to “general sensibility,” such that “an upheaval” in the latter “can only lead to new

52 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
53 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 327–328.
dispositions of thinking”? And what of its secret?

(Then there’s the status of that secret. Mascolo calls it “apparent,” and notes in parentheses “the risk of wanting to pull it from the shadows.”54 What risk is courted here? Can it be known ahead of time, “apparent” though it is? And what’s the risk of upheaval, here, among the shadows?)

In the very next sentence, after Mascolo reveals what he believes the secret to be, “the secret of thought that is suspicious of thinking,” he immediately qualifies it, very movingly: “Which is not without its own concerns.”55 What “concerns” are these, and what make them “its”—thought’s—“own,” concerns that may “lead it to seek refuge in shame or affected humor as sometimes happens”?56 Are those concerns what guarantee that “a secret”—that secret—“can always be justified in principle”?57 “A secret without secrets, or without wanting secrets in any case”58—what’s the difference between these two phrases? Even if a secret does not want

54 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
55 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
56 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
57 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
58 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
secrets, is it ever without secrets, secrets of its own concern, in any case, justified or not? How are the concerns of a secret to be squared with its desires? Can that be anything other than a secret? And how can it be “recognized,” let alone “found again in another person”?⁵⁹ Even if it’s true that “it”—that recognition—“is enough to serve as the basis of any possible friendship,”⁶⁰ what bearing does friendship have here with respect to upheavals in general sensibility, new dispositions of thinking, thought that’s suspicious of thinking, or its secret?

And all that on account of an offer of friendship? Over a secret, one that concerns a renewal, “intensely,” of “the relationship between thought and life”?

Third letter: Deleuze to Mascolo, 6 August 1988

A little over three months has passed since Mascolo’s letter and Deleuze begins with a recap. “I wrote to you, a few months ago already,

because I admired Autour d’un effet de mémoire and because I sensed a ‘secret’

⁵⁹ Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
⁶⁰ Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
rarely found in a text. Your answer was very kind and thoughtful: if there is a secret, it is the secret of a thought that is suspicious of thinking, thus a ‘concern’ that, if found in another person, is the basis for friendship.  

“And now I am writing to you again,” Deleuze continues, “not to bother you or ask for another answer, but rather [to continue] a kind of muted, latent conversation that letters do not interrupt, or even like an interior monologue about a book that continues to haunt me.”

Then, abruptly (with the very next words—no paragraph break, no warning): “Couldn’t we reverse the order? Friendship comes first for you. Obviously friendship would not be a more or less favorable external circumstance, but, while remaining the most concrete, it would be an internal condition of thought as such. Not speaking with your friend or remembering him or her, etc., but on

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61 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
62 Brackets—and bracketed text—are editor’s or translator’s.
63 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
the contrary going through trials with that person like aphasia or amnesia that are necessary for any thinking. I no longer remember which German poet wrote of the twilight hour when one should be wary ‘even of a friend.’ One would go that far, to wariness of a friend, and all of that would, with friendship, put the ‘distress’ in thought in an essential way.64

“Couldn’t we reverse the order?”—what’s the sense of that question, its function? “Friendship comes first for you.” On the face of it that assertion seems simply wrong. Were not Mascolo’s very words that “the secret of thought that is suspicious of thinking,” when “recognized,” when “found again in another person,” “is enough to serve as the basis for any possible friendship”?65 And what’s more, did not Deleuze himself write as much when recounting Mascolo’s reply? How is one to make sense of that question and its attendant assertion?

The sense of Deleuze’s words begins to become apparent subsequently, with what follows: they seem to take on the character of a

64 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
65 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
suggestion, a friendly correction. They also seem to clarify a previous remark, one found in Deleuze’s first letter: It’s not immediately clear what Deleuze means when he states there, in the opening letter of the correspondence, that Mascolo is “able to define limit-situations by their internal repercussions.”66 He had just written, in the sentence prior, that Mascolo is “one of the authors who has renewed most intensely the relationship between thought and life.”67 He now writes, as if by way of clarification, of the “internal condition[s] of thought as such,”68 and specifically of friendship as one such “internal condition,” an “internal repercussion” of “limit-situations” “in the relationship between thought and life”69: “I think there are many ways, in the authors I admire, to introduce concrete categories and situations as the condition of pure thought.”70 Deleuze then lists the fiancée and engagement for Kierkegaard; for Klossowski, “(and maybe Sartre in a different way),” the couple; and for Mascolo and Blanchot, friend-

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66 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 327.
67 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 327.
68 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
69 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 327 and 329.
70 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
ship.\textsuperscript{71} “This implies a complete reevaluation of ‘philosophy,’ since you are the only ones to take the word \textit{philos} literally. Not that you go back to Plato. The Platonic sense of the word is already extremely complex and has never been fully explained. Yet one can easily sense that your meaning is altogether different. \textit{Philos} may have been displaced from Athens to Jerusalem, but it was also enhanced during the Resistance, from the network,\textsuperscript{72} which are affects of thought no less than historical and political situations. There is a sizable history of \textit{Philos} in philosophy of which you

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\item Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
\item “Marguerite Duras’s apartment”—where Mascolo lived at the time—“became during the Occupation a rendezvous for resistsants, Communists and writers like Edgar Morin, Alio Vittorini and his wife Ginetta, Claude Roy, Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot and many others. It was typical of their cool-headed humanist conviction that they thought of themselves, not as ‘comrades’ (with all its nationalistic and militaristic connotations) but simply as ‘friends.’” James Kirkup, “Obituary: Dionys Mascolo,” \textit{The Independent}, August 29, 1997: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-dionys-mascolo-1247789.html.
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are already a part or, through all sorts of bifurcations, the modern representative.\textsuperscript{73}

“These are my reasons for returning to your text”—“at the heart of philosophy, in the concrete presupposition (where personal history and singular thinking combine)”\textsuperscript{74}—“and to reiterate my admiration.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textit{Fourth letter: Mascolo to Deleuze, 28 September 1988}

Almost two months later Mascolo replies. “I found your letter and your book,” the first words read, “when I returned. Thank you.”\textsuperscript{76} A new paragraph begins: “I am deeply touched by your consideration. Despite the confidence I have in your judgment, it has left me, to be frank, somewhat embarrassed,

\textsuperscript{73} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329–330.  
\textsuperscript{74} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 330. This phrase appears in the sentence immediately preceding the one in which it is here interpolated. The context makes the reference clear.  
\textsuperscript{75} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 330.  
\textsuperscript{76} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 330.
I admit. My perhaps misguided shame would have prevented me from responding if you had not already given me a certain freedom in speaking of a monologue.

What I was trying to say, in response to your first letter (your remarks led to this situation), was that if there were any wariness in a thought toward thinking itself, an emergence of confidence (which is too much, but at least the temptation to lower one’s guard) can only come with the sharing of thought. This sharing of thought must also take place on the basis of the same distrust or a similar ‘distress’ to form a friendship. […]

You suggest a reversal of the proposition, making friendship come first. Friendship would then put the ‘distress’ in thought. Once again due to distrust, but this time distrust of friends. But then where would this friendship come from? That is the mystery for me. And I cannot imagine what distrust (an occasional disagreement, of course, on the contrary—and in an entirely different sense that excludes malevolence) is possible of a friend once he
or she has been accepted in friendship.\textsuperscript{77}

What Mascolo writes here seems clear. What he writes here is largely what he wrote before: friendship is consequent to an experience of the “distress” at issue.\textsuperscript{78} If there were any “wariness”\textsuperscript{79} or “suspicion”\textsuperscript{80} of thought with respect to thinking, when it is “recognized,” when “it is found again in another person,” it can serve as an occasion for friendship—“it is enough,” even, “to serve as the basis for any possible friendship.”\textsuperscript{81}

So Mascolo resists the “reversal”\textsuperscript{82} Deleuze proposes: friendship, emphatically, does not come first for Mascolo. “You suggest a reversal of the proposition, making friendship come first. Friendship would then put the ‘distress’ in thought. Once again due to distrust”—not thought’s distrust of thinking, as before—“but this time distrust of friends. But then where would this friendship come from? That is the

\textsuperscript{77} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 330–331.
\textsuperscript{78} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
\textsuperscript{79} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329, 330.
\textsuperscript{80} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328, 330.
\textsuperscript{81} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 328.
\textsuperscript{82} Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
mystery for me.”

And that’s also the crux of it: Mascolo writes from the standpoint of friendship, Deleuze, from the standpoint of philosophy: Mascolo stresses the consequences of thought’s “distress” for life, while Deleuze stresses its consequences for thought. Deleuze first wrote to Mascolo as to “one of the authors who has renewed most intensely the relationship between thought and life.” Each writes from within that relationship, but each writes from the opposite vantage: Mascolo emphasizes the genesis of friendship and what the “distress” that forms its basis means for life, “an emergence of confidence” (even if that’s “too much,” and rather “at least the temptation to lower one’s guard”), while Deleuze insists on the necessity of trials, “trials with that person,” the friend, trials “like aphasia or amnesia,” ones “that are necessary for any thinking” as “internal condition[s] of thought as such.” The emphases may differ but the “concerns” do not. And that’s the secret, the renewal effect-

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83 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331.
84 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 327.
85 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331.
86 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331. Mascolo placed this qualification in parentheses.
87 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 329.
ed here: the correspondence between Mascolo and Deleuze shows “the sharing of thought” as it is shared out between friends. Mascolo writes, “I have called this communism of thought in the past. And I placed it under the auspices of Hölderlin, who may have only fled thought because he was unable to live it: ‘The life of the spirit between friends, the thoughts that form in the exchange of words, by writing or in person, are necessary to those who seek. Without that, we are by our own hands outside thought.’”

“To you,” Mascolo closes, “with complete and grateful friendship. Forgive the elementary aspects of this response.”

Then, daringly, in a kind of reversal or upheaval, Mascolo adds a postscript: “In the end, I should have limited myself to saying:

but what if friendship was precisely the possibility of sharing thought, from and in a common distrust with regards to thought? And what if thought that

88 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331.
89 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331.
90 Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 331.
distrusted itself was the search for this sharing between friends? Something that is already happy no doubt seeks something else that can scarcely be named. Daring to say it would be an obscure will, the need to approach an innocence of thought.\(^{91}\)

“Of course I say this with a little laugh,” he concludes. “Your questions have pushed me to avow some half-thoughts—like when you come to take the acts accomplished in a dream as your own. Forgive me.”\(^{92}\)

Fifth letter: Deleuze to Mascolo, 6 October 1988

“Dear Dionys Mascolo,\(^{93}\)

Thank you for your very rich letter. My question was: How can a friend, without losing his or her singularity, be inscribed as a condition of thought? Your response is very lovely. And it is a question of what we call and experience as *philosophy*. Asking more ques-

\(^{91}\) Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 332.
\(^{92}\) Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 332.
\(^{93}\) Deleuze, “Correspondence,” 332.
tions would only hold you back, and you have already given me so much.
With my respect and friendship.

Gilles Deleuze