

QUESTS AND QUESTIONING OR AGAIN AND AGAIN

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Abstract

This piece makes a claim for the transformative power of hermeneutics by seeing in the tradition places of undischarged Utopian potential, which are often found in a close hermeneutic engagement with poetry. All such readings, it is argued, ought to meet the four watchwords of any contemporary interpretation *viz.*, that such readings be non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, and non-apocalyptic. Such a reading is attempted of Langston Hughes's poem "Let America Be America Again" against the

backdrop of an interpretation of insights from Gianni Vattimo. All this is meant to be evidence as well of the dire necessity of the Humanities.

Keywords: tradition, poetry, non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic, Utopian, hermeneutics, transformation, the Humanities.

Iskanja in spraševanja ali spet in spet

Povzetek

Prispevek zagovarja transformativno moč hermenevtike, tako da skuša znotraj tradicije zaslediti kraje nerazgrnjenega utopičnega potenciala, kakršne pogostokrat najdevamo s pomočjo natančnega hermenevtičnega spoprijema s poezijo. Vsako tovrstno branje bi se moralo, tako trdimo, skladati s štirimi gesli sleherne sodobne interpretacije, in sicer: takšna branja bi morala biti neortodoksna, nenostalgčna, neodklonilna in neapokaliptična. Tako tudi skušamo, na ozadju interpretacije spoznanj Giannija Vattima, brati pesem Langstona Hughesa z naslovom »Let America Be America Again [Naj bo Amerika spet Amerika]«. Namen pričujočega razmišljanja je obenem pokazati neobhodno nujo humanistike.

Ključne besede: tradicija, poezija, neortodoksnost, nenostalgčnost, neodklonilnost, neapokaliptičnost, utopičnost, hermenevtika, transformacija, humanistika.

*And now don't shut your eyes, and don't desert
But learn to learn and try to learn for what.*

Bertolt Brecht: "To the Students of the Workers' and
Peasants' Faculties"

I. The way things are. Preparing to engage tradition

"[...] the classics, the things that have held out, weren't perhaps necessarily classics right from the outset, things destined to hold out, but the fact that they did become classics involves me, what I am is largely the fruit of their endurance ..."

Gianni Vattimo: *The Responsibility of the Philosopher*

To wish things not to be as they are, it helps to see hints and allusions of something other in nearly, if not in everything we already love in the texts and traditions of the Humanities.¹ We might say the Humanities give us hope as an archive of living possibilities. If, as I believe, the Humanities are at their heart a hermeneutic enterprise, because human being is a hermeneutic task, then by way of a radical hermeneutic education we are able to cultivate the

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¹ This paper was originally delivered as an invited talk on June 5, 2019, in Ljubljana, Slovenia, sponsored by the Forum for the Humanities (FORhUM) and the Institute Nova Revija for the Humanities, under the title: "Enduring the Humanities Again and Again." I keep here some of the remarks of that day as they set up my engagement with the poet France Prešeren, and poetry more generally, in a manner I wish both to keep watching over and supporting from below in the manuscript. That talk began: "I could not be more grateful for your invitation and this wonderful chance to say something about the Humanities and how I believe protecting them will require a care for words. I am also thankful for your hard-won ability, in this city of bridges, that allows us to span the linguistic divide by permitting me to deliver these words in English. To thank you, I shall try to bring a few things that are allowed in English, playing with a few words to open my paper and then share a hermeneutic reading of a poem (written in English) as a way to demonstrate some reasons why we need to defend the Humanities and how we might do so with poets whose work is a radical challenge to official words and practices."

prejudices fitting to our time. Were we to embrace the claim that every reading is a re-reading, then learning to read in sophisticated ways seems essential to imagining more fully the first comings of this something other. To achieve what—in a dialogue with Richard Kearney on the creativity of language—Paul Ricoeur calls “a redefining of what is already defined” (Kearney 2017, 133), learning to re-read in this hermeneutic sense allows us to embrace the pre-arrival of something better in the passages we come across in classic texts.

Consequently, in light of our shared work in the FORhUM and other such institutions, I understand this return to the Humanities as a radical defense of tradition or perhaps better so as not to confuse: a defense of the tradition by radicals. In Gadamerian fashion, I remain close to the power of questions and close to the point on which Gadamer insists *viz.*, that all our responses are answers to questions even if they are themselves formed as interrogatives. In English there is a playfulness in the word “question” as it includes the word “quest.” The word “question” holds, thus, a sketch of how we ought to proceed. Hermeneutic questions send us, not looking for definitive answers that can be proven, rather they send us on a quest of responding where close reading, interpretation, and persuasion are required. This going forth is a quest resembling more a sojourn of looking deep and reading carefully than a slavish following of a map; it is the former because we do not know exactly where we are going to end up when we embrace a hermeneutic comportment toward texts.

The impossibility of final answers ought to enliven the search for multiple responses and never neither discourage from nor force us to abort the never-ending search. It remains vital to stay on the quest, of which an enduring defense of the Humanities is a central part. Either settling once and for all on an answer or lamenting that there cannot be a single timeless one, would abandon the task all together.

As my title and epigraph to this section are meant to suggest, this quest of hermeneutic questioning is both something we endure and it is also an endeavor that remains never-ending. Doubtlessly, there are many dangers waiting on the horizons of such quests, and yet without our undertaking them with a sense of determination we shall cede the entire terrain of the tradition to a banal repetition or something worse. Consequently, I share with you a few

thoughts on how we might, or at least how I have, oriented myself on the quest of an enduring defense of the Humanities.

To end this opening section, let me use an example that is fitting to these Ljubljana surroundings. I agree with Ralph Waldo Emerson that we live in truth, but it needs poetic saying to matter to our lives. We are able to see poetry's profundity in the square not far from here. I had heard of this lovely example before seeing it here for myself. My host, Dr. Božič, made a beautiful discourse about it while he was with Barrett honors students in the USA recently. It has to do with the poem by France Prešeren that resides in and beneath the street.

Are Prešeren's words, which are trod upon each day, to be seen as being trampled into silence by such traffic? Or are we to see them there below the street as the most apt metaphor for how the Humanities might hear poetry's call? The words of poets—standing for the promise of the Humanities—remind us daily, even there on the well-worn crowded street, that our being is grounded in poetry. Poetry is under us—reminding us that words are our ground, words, well placed, are the buoying uplift that keeps us from falling too deeply into *Gestell*. From beneath our feet, they seem to ask: Might it be poetry that points to a way out even in these trying times? My desire today is to stay nearer the hope suggested by the latter of these two choices, while lamenting the ways we no doubt undertake the trampling of words all too often.

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II. Coordinates for radical hermeneutic resistance

“Hermeneutical experience is concerned with *tradition*. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is *language* [...]”

Hans-Georg Gadamer: *Truth and Method*

If, as Gadamer maintains above, language and tradition are inextricable, and if we cannot help but be thrown in relation to an already ongoing meaningfulness, then we shall, as we develop ways to understand this relationship, benefit from an orientation that provides some keen sense of the abounding dangers. The possibility of debilitating prejudices embedding

themselves in our understanding is one of these ever-present dangers. This is a problem, indeed, for philosophers of radical hermeneutics, a problem for teachers, and writers. A brief example from somewhere near philosophy's beginning: It is for very good reasons that Plato has the prisoners in his Cave Allegory chained there *since birth*. Few images are as powerful in showing us that that, with which we are contending, has been with us and our students for quite some time. This situation keeps us from delivering a wholly inviting message to those whose dispositions have been shaped forever by the calculative thinking of the type of world disclosure Heidegger calls *Gestell*.

306 It is difficult, is it not, to rally enthusiasm around the desire for more ambiguity, more uncertainty, more vulnerability in those whose calculative expectations of the world are for definitive answers, which come with ease and speed, and announce themselves with kitschy fanfare. Who rallies to the banner of the difficult and painstaking task of interpretation—except those who have somehow already grown fond of and enamored with the pleasure? Yet, we must find a way to attract, to get ourselves and others to embrace and endure a life of hermeneutic struggle against incapacitating literalisms, to an embrace of the Gadamerian insight that ambiguity is not a weakness of words.²

A group of thinkers who are gathered under the name Retort Collective, I believe, give us coordinates, by which to proceed and to face these dangers without succumbing to our own literalist folly. In their still masterful decades-old book *Afflicted Powers*, these coordinates, they claim, must be attended to by any theory embracing a call to transformation, a call I believe is central to the most sophisticated understanding of the Humanities. I share with them the commitment that this opposition leading to transformation needs to be:

A *non-orthodox, non-nostalgic, non-rejectionist, non-apocalyptic* critique of the modern: that ought now to be the task of Left politics. Otherwise the ground of opposition to the present will be permanently ceded to one or another fundamentalism. (Retort 2005, 177; my emphasis.)

2 Cf. Gadamer 1975, 482. For a critique of *Gestell* with respect to ethics and the public sphere along these same lines, see also Weiner and Ramsey 2011.

This focus on achieving a position that meets the demands of these four watchwords is in line with the tasks and projects of radical hermeneutics, because hermeneutics, too, is at its best when it seeks to contest all forms of religious, free-market, or scientistic fundamentalism and literalism without itself succumbing to orthodoxy. Guided by the other coordinates, hermeneutics preserves a utopian hope for the future in being non-apocalyptic. Furthermore, it must resist the wholesale rejection of modernity and tradition. Lastly, a hermeneutics of education will resist the temptation, as well as being on guard against, the inadvertent embrace of nostalgia that engaging the traditions bears within it as a constant threat. Despite our detour through traditional texts, we shall not pretend there are pre-modern solutions to our so-called post-modern problems.

As all who follow the hermeneutic legacy initiated by Heidegger and Gadamer, we suffer the weight and trajectory of the tradition of received interpretations. Understanding that this fate cannot be overcome by any full break from it (*Überwindung*), I wish to extend and make use of Gianni Vattimo's understanding of a concept, borrowed from Heidegger, of *Verwindung* as a metaphor for the type of reading heeding the warnings of the four watchwords. Translating it sometimes as "twisting away" and at others as "distortion," Vattimo offers *Verwindung* as a strategy of engaging tradition so as not to be determined to the end by it, while simultaneously acknowledging we shall never be finished with it. Nor ought we wish to be free of tradition—"to be situated within a tradition," Gadamer tells us, "does not limit the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible" (1975, 354). As we are unable once and for all to overcome traditions, because without tradition we are not, we shall have to come to terms with it. Put another way: to be our best at critiquing the banal conservatism, we shall have to be vigilant conservators of the traditions in the Humanities.

Vattimo, likening these twists and detours of *Verwindung* to a chess game, in which all the pieces are knights, says such interpretations make nothing but "horse moves" (1992, 37), and consequently prohibit unrestricted and purely linear progress. Although he does not elaborate this metaphor further, I find it wonderfully suggestive and will attempt a few moves here. The way back to traditional texts is not a straight line. We are able, however, in this

twisting and distorting movement of interpretation—even restrained as we are by the tradition—to move forward or back bit by bit, moving both to the heart of our reading while also moving by directions forced upon us. Given the restrictions on moving a knight, there are only certain places we are able to go. This movement is always partial as we are always having to succumb to the force of things, and this force and inertia requires that we level off our moves at the end of every interpretive turn we undertake. Finitude, embodied and embedded in the very real situations, in which we find ourselves acting, says to us: you may move here, but you cannot move there, or at least not yet. It takes a number of turns to get to a new place in the tradition whether we mean in one's current reading of a text, one's lifetime, or an entire generation of thinking. This necessity sets into relief both the concept of enduring and of never-ending in my title. We undertake a number of moves through our works in the Humanities and we leave the results of our moves behind to be taken up by others and those who follow.

308 In addition to these images of how interpretation both proceeds and is curtailed, I would add the idea that knights are able—without denying their limited scope—to jump over some things. If we understand how to distort, twist free of, and jump over certain aspects of tradition, we shall negotiate and create our way of being a part of the texts of the tradition, rather than being simply conservative reproducers of it.

Twisting away from the tradition, distorting, and re-orienting ourselves to it will take a fair amount of refusal, some committed resistance, and at times jumping over moments and aspects of received interpretations. This also allows the jumping over of those “troubling” moments in texts that have no place in the progress, which we mean to bring about or which has already come about through political and social struggle, and which we thus wish to conserve. This sifting and evaluating is undertaken with a view of what remains to be reclaimed, repurposed, and reintegrated from the tradition toward liberatory ends. In a real sense, the means for transformation are also there in the past, and already here in the present, as much as they are yet to come.

Another way to conceive what such distortions are able to achieve today by returning to the tradition—in my playful rendering derived from *Verwindung*—is to understand it, as we say in English, as “getting the better

of things.” “Getting the better of things” means something like making a more persuasive, a more life-inducing, a more vital interpretation after a struggle with contesting forces. A twisting interpretation moves the reading of a text so that it ends up in an unexpected place. These interpretations allow a seeing ahead from the past—from an orientation that understands we shall have to invoke the past to make a move toward the future, and that what rhetoricians call the burden of proof will most often fall to us. I do not harbor any illusions; this practice will neither be easy nor will it be any easier in the days to come. The weight of the world is substantial.

Notwithstanding this weight, more liberatory and fitting prejudices guided by the four coordinates and our twisting knight maneuvers with their distorting, jumping over, and getting the better of things shall put us in a position of being able to agree with the contemporary radical romantic philosophers Löwy and Sayre that going back into tradition consequently:

[...] does not mean a return to the past but a detour via the past, toward a new future, a detour that allows the human spirit to become aware of all the cultural richness and all the vitality that have been sacrificed by the historical process launched by the Industrial Revolution, and to seek ways of bringing them back to life. (Löwy and Sayre 2001, 253–254.) 309

Thus, part of the enduring quest of the Humanities is the never-ending challenge of making something out of tradition so as to (re)make the world.

III. Poetry as a calvary of horse moves

I saw the goose-flesh on my skin. I did not know what made it. I was cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry.

Sylvia Plath: “Ocean 1212-W”

For as easy and habitual as it is to use words, it is extremely difficult to use them well. As Walt Whitman says in his poem “Vocalism,” the question concerning language is to wonder if we shall be able, perhaps “from vigorous

practice,” to come “duly to the divine power to speak words” (Whitman 2004, 404). Words are everywhere; however, the fitting way to deploy them takes a special effort. Put another way: words are ubiquitous, and their poor use is as much our problem as their being all around is our hope.

The vital possibilities language carries with it *qua* language is the opportunity of struggle because, as the Situationists (precursors to the Retort Collective)—in a text entitled “All the King’s Men”—put it succinctly:

The problem of language is at the heart of all the struggles between the forces striving to abolish the present alienation and those striving to maintain it. It is inseparable from the very terrain of those struggles. We live within language as in polluted air. (Knabb 2006, 149.)

This pollution does its damage every day on the largest and smallest of stages. The common place clichés and misuse of words by mass media broadcasts that devastate language are as frequent as they are unnoticed. However, even if words in their debased use are tantamount to the prejudices we seek to overcome and make up the fouled atmosphere of our struggle, then it is still the case that words in the end are our allies:

Words *work*—on behalf of the dominant organization of life. Yet are completely automated: unfortunately for the theoreticians of information, words are not themselves “informationist”; they contain forces that can upset the most careful calculations. (Ibid.)

We get the better of the worst use of words, then, with words employed more excellently, which is another name for poetry.

I offer the following reading as but a single example of how the words of poetry might respond to words disastrously used whose power might leave a lasting mark on our thinking. Forgive me a U.S. example, which I am afraid has its all too global consequences. “Make America Great” is not the worst thing a radical North American hermeneut could say; indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, actualizing our better potential belongs to the struggle to win over

the dissatisfaction of all of us who suffer.³ As each of us will have noted already, this is not the slogan uttered today by red-cap-wearing throngs. We know too well it is the addition of the tag word “again” in the slogan that moves things toward a particular troubling nationalism. And yet, against this crass and dangerous use of language we are able to respond with poetic eloquence deploying these *same words* put to work in a superior way.

The words, to which I turn to respond to the slogan, come from renowned Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes in his 1935 poem “Let America Be America Again” (Hughes 1995, 189–191). From the beginning of this roughly 90-line poem, we read in its initial stanza a place opened for our contemporary thinking:

Let America be America again [...]
 Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
 Let it be that great strong land of love
 Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
 That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me).

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Embracing the insight from the Situationists that “[...] the *insubordination of words*, their desertion or open resistance [...] [is] a symptom of the general revolutionary crisis of this society” (Knabb 2006, 149), we are able to reclaim the word “again” by reading this poem. Of course, the word “again” rings here in a more excellent way to mean “over” as in “make over,” which is to say, to start over again, to start anew, to try again, but better this time. From the beginning, the word “again” is filled here with futurity and challenges the dangerous, dishonest, and disgraceful use in the right-wing populist slogan. In addition, we note in our spirit of tradition that Hughes’s “again” means to call us to undertake a makeover with the only material left to us: the remains of what has been, the potential the past still holds as can be fashioned anew by the quality of our imaginations for the future.

3 See Ramsey 1995.

The poem takes to task the avowed claims of the documents and ideals, which are said to be at work for all, by asking for whom they are not working. In the italicized lines that follow the poem's opening, a voice comes to the verse sounding as if it embodies a surprise, as if its understanding is being brought up short by the claim that, for some, America has never yet been the America of its self-proclamation. Calling these ideals the stars (certainly no innocent symbol in America), the voice asks with a dash of accusation:

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

312 Hughes, in Whitmanian fashion, responds by way of cataloguing those who dream for the attempt to try and make America again otherwise, who dream of a future fitting the excellence of decent people, which they have so far been denied. This rollcall of those who draw the veil includes “the poor white fooled and pushed apart” and the “Negro bearing slavery’s scars”; its catalogue also includes “the red man driven from the land” and the “immigrant clutching [...] hope.” Taken together, these folks and more besides (the bondsman, the worker, the Negro servant, people humble and hungry are also here) are the ones who find, like those today, that the succor offered them by neo-liberalism, as Hughes puts it so brilliantly, is: “only the same old stupid plan / Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak”—only this, then, in exchange for their yearning.

This veil, therefore, functions in the poem not to cover over and hide the faces and muffle the voices of those left out; rather, it is a veil that acts in such a way that more is now seen and heard; like shading one's eyes from the too bright sun to see more clearly what is at hand. The veil sets into relief what here must be seen, and quiets for a moment the din of the oft repeated claims of an America that will not gauge itself against the measure of its own declarations. Through the veil, the cry is raised demanding the stars shine on everyone. It asks we let noble words, represented here by stars, be allowed to mean what they say.

This demand, coming through the poem, is called from the beginning the dream. There is something resounding in the line “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed” that is future-oriented in the creative sense already

suggested by Hughes' use of "again."⁴ The flowing repetition of the words related to "dream" using it again, and again, and again brings to our vision three aspects of the dream: those who dream, the act of dreaming, and the product of the practice of dreaming. This marks a dream as something real, but not yet fully realized just as the notion of America is considered throughout the poem—*viz.*, a promise not yet kept. Keenly articulated, but nowhere near fully concretized in practice, yet America and the dream both exist. Although still looking to the future, the dream's contents come in part from the having been, from what has not been, yet remains efficacious in it.

Nonetheless, these contents remain a part of our present as they voice a desire for a trajectory toward another future, and are in keeping with Ernst Bloch's claim that reality means: "reality plus the future within it" (Bloch 1987, 162). If Bloch is onto something in this definition, then the Humanities, whatever many other things they might in fact be, are dedicated—as is poetry itself in Heidegger's understating—to being the measure and the way, by which we measure the distance between the universal promise and the particular state of affairs, between the ideal and the current practice. Poetry shines a light on what is and discloses for our understanding what could and ought to be. In this sense, then—far from being an abstraction—nothing is more real than poetry.

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Throughout "Let America Be America Again," Hughes provides us with the insight that "again" and "over" mean that something was missed, yet vaguely sighted, and that something finds itself left undone. Yet, if we understand how to read, it shows itself as being at our fingertips and near the tips of our tongues. Indeed, this poem discloses with no little clarity that some excellence that ought to have been made real has not yet been actualized. Our befriending of the tradition needs this enduring reminder: the past is also what stood as possible, but went unactualized, and what has been itself asks, if something of these past possibilities is still open to us. "There is more in the past," Ricoeur tells us, "than what happened." (Kearney 2004, 153.) We engage the past, thus,

4 There is, of course, another dream poem by Hughes: "Harlem": "What happens to a dream deferred? // Does it dry up / like a raisin in the sun? / Or fester like a sore— / And then run? / Does it stink like rotten meat? / Or crust and sugar over— / like a syrupy sweet? // Maybe it just sags / like a heavy load. // Or does it explode?" (Hughes 1995, 426.)

for the sake of the future as opposed to the mean-spirited conceit that our future become an impossible reversion to the past that missed what was best about it.

Let us linger a bit longer here with the image of the dream now linked with what has been left undone in the past, which nevertheless shows itself to our present understanding. In the middle stanza, just past the poem's half-way mark, the dream and desire for transformation that motivates all these words calls the dream at its heart: "almost dead." The radical space opened by the poem's use of "almost" is occupied by the poet himself who goes immediately on to proclaim again by repeating the poem's opening:

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.

314 This use of "yet" comes again to us in its various senses and in each a wider sense of disclosure is achieved within the poem's profound grace.

In the first instance, "yet" means to say a still scandalous present, which includes, nonetheless, a hint of a promised and better future. The second use of "yet" occurs with the word "never" meaning here something, such as "not yet," and the echo of the promised future within this "never" says simultaneously, "but ought be." Another sense of "yet" is at play here as well, this time saying "despite"; despite all that might signal defeat, the resistance endures. One more sense awaits the keen reader as the fourth use of "yet" announces an ethical claim; "yet" here means one *must*—if we are to live up to what our collective selves are capable—be willing to try again and make something other than the continuation of what stands before us.

Following this multivalent "yet" is the italicized word "every" echoing something akin to a humanist and universalist claim.⁵ Hughes shows this to be a cosmopolitan claim also, and not simply an American one, when he links this dream with dreams that began east across the Atlantic from Harlem.

5 One power of too-narrowly invoked universal claims is they promote more than they ask for.

Here, Hughes invokes what he calls the “basic dream,” the dream of liberation that is the well-spring of all such dreaming. He lists the Old-World dream of overcoming, “so strong, so brave, so true,” that it animates dreams centuries hence. This is the claim that the last line of the stanza says issues forth as a rallying cry making a demand that we: “Must bring back our mighty dream again.”⁶ Now, the dream is “our” dream shared across time and continents. Here, two seemingly simple words, “yet” and “again,” conspire to disclose this cosmopolitan claim for a more just future. Radical work in both thinking and action shall be required on our part to make good in this nuanced understanding of the basic dream and what it has inspired world-wide—intimations of which we find in the classic texts of the Humanities.

Coming back then to America, and coming without a hint of sentimentality, in the poem’s final stanza we are provided a more noble vision of how to proceed. It is offered by Hughes by way of a stunning alliteration and an appeal to redemption that awaits our engagement:

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
 The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
 We, the people, must redeem
 [...]
 And make America again!

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Evaluating this poem and my reading in light of my modest theoretical contribution, we are able to say by way of detouring words and traditional meanings that the poem performs its own twisting away from the tradition even as now, more than 80 years later, it becomes part of the Humanist literary tradition, of which we can make use in our efforts to transform the world. The poem enacts as series of beautiful horse moves to twist away from the current political slogan, as well, and confounding the cruel and indecent moves of the vile sloganeers and their mendacious pawns.

⁶ I am not unaware that many have argued that the *demos* is dead. This might well be. However, any possible resurrection of the *demos* in any qualified sense, it seems to me, will come from a thinking indebted in some measure and degree to a text or texts that make up what we call with some trepidation the Humanities.

In keeping with the four watchwords with which I began, Hughes' poem is *non-rejectionist* by appealing to America's as yet unrealized potential. With its various and creative moves, the poem puts into play questions about what "great" should mean, and asks what anyone might mean by coupling "great" with "again" in an uncritical manner. In the wake of the final stanza's list of crimes as ethical trespass ("the rack and ruin of our gangster death, / The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies"), "great" and "again" are kept from coming together in any simple slogan. To the contrary, it serves rather as a battle cry for radical transformation. Moreover, the poem is *non-nostalgic*, because it sees the past as something to be bettered, even as the past itself provides some of the resources to make this possible. It escapes the charge of nostalgia as its use of "again" looks forward through what has been left undone in the past and yet remains in our present as a herald of the future.

316 Rounding out the four watchwords, "Let America Be America" is a *non-apocalyptic* calling for an ongoing creative struggle to keep the better alive even in the face of atrocities; it's not over yet, the poem says—yet, only if we the people dream of and demand redemption. Consequently, it declares: we are not at the end, yet. Finally, as poetry, it remains *non-orthodox* by caring thoughtfully for the ever-needed interpretation of words. As poems are, by their form and content, at odds with the habituated prejudices of a language meant only to exchange information, they open a philosophical space for interpretation. "What is poetry if not the revolutionary moment of language [...]" (Knabb 2006, 149), the Situationists ask. In a word: the poem Hughes writes gets the better of—and not by a little bit—the "stupid plan" embodied in the crass political slogan.

All excellent poems, and they share this with all great art, come not to decorate a world already firmly in place and finished; rather, the most eminent poems come as insurrections that remind us of our grounding in language, that remind us language upholds us, that words keep us upright like Prešeren's beneath our feet. They come lending a hand in re-making the world. I would say to bring ourselves face-to-face with questions of language, which is the task of the Humanities and hermeneutically inspired education, is to bring us before the questions of living together and the questions shaping our resistance. I want to have faith that despite what every philosopher is by profession forced

to acknowledge as an “age-old quarrel,” both philosophy and poetry are time-honored names for looking after words, which is also, to say: how we look after one another.

IV. A never-ending quest

... preparing the shape of things to come.

Friedrich Schiller (on the power of art)

... if not, winter.

Sappho (in Anne Carson’s translation)

One last word, then. If language permeates everything that gets to us by way of tradition (which is to say *everything*), then the Humanities belong, at least as much, to the transformation as they do to conservation. We must resist, it seems to me, the imprimatur of corporations: let us not embrace their saying how well those trained in the Humanities are as workers, how much money they make, how well they are ready to learn and carry out the corporate operation. Let us not encourage the study of *Hamlet* and *As You Like It* because some so-called free market-driven corporation promises to reward reading Shakespeare with a promotion and a raise. They make this promise of wealth and advancement with this damning caveat: study the classics as long as you do not learn from them what would keep you from the corporation in the first place. There is something alive and transformative in the texts of the Humanities, if we but bring them to the fore in vital interpretations. We shall only recognize what readings are worth pursuing in the process of making and sharing them, which will itself be an ongoing defense of the Humanities.

Who would be foolish enough to try and hide the fact that the task is overwhelming and no small number of defeats await us (tradition is also the record of our many failures and defeats)? Nonetheless, let us take heart from Walt Whitman who, in his poem “To a Foil’d European Revolutionaire,” bids us:

Courage yet my brother or my sister!
Keep on – Liberty is to be subserv'd whatever occurs;
That is nothing that is quell'd by one or two failures, or any
number of failures [...] (Whitman 2004, 392.)

Possessing what I have imagined Ernst Bloch calls undischarged Utopian potential, tradition calls not for its mere repetition, but for a twisting toward its redemption, which will mean also the bringing of the new; as Whitman says: “(Who knows? the best yet unexpress'd and lacking.)” (Whitman 2004, 567.) But this expression will come from out of our careful use of words, from poetry or at least something drawing from the poetic. Meanwhile, as philosophy and poetry teach, words wait for us to be in solidarity with them, because things do not have to be this way.

318 The never-ending quest is only the promise of what might be, and brings no guarantees with it that things will go well; however, it also says things will not go well, unless we endure by both learning how to suffer the weight of tradition and how simultaneously to twist and detour within it. It is where we cannot help but begin, this hermeneutics teaches us. The Humanities, understood as radical hermeneutics, is the way to attempt this learning as the practice of writing, of teaching, of lecturing, of keeping alive institutes such as the FORhUM as sites of the invitation to question, as the sites where all of these practices make up our shared pursuit that has as its heart the desire to endure a never-ending quest.

Hence, to the tradition, yet again.

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