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Selected Letters to Franca

Louis Althusser

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Editor's Note: Louis Althusser, *Lettres à Franca (1961-73)*

Although published only posthumously in 1998, this eight-hundred page collection of letters Althusser wrote to Franca Madonia over the span of twelve years, captures the full range of Althusser's thinking and writing during the period that encompasses the final years of the Algerian War (and the high point of resistance to it in France), the general radicalization around 1968, and the first signs of a crisis of the radical movement. But the singular power of this particular correspondence owes at least as much to Althusser's interlocutor, Franca Madonia. She was a Communist, a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), who followed the PCI's interventions closely and did not hesitate to criticize them. After the events of 1968-69 (Italy's Hot Autumn), and the broad radicalization of the industrial proletariat, Madonia left the PCI and participated in various far left initiatives. Further, she was a trained philosopher known for her scrupulous translations of philosophical works (Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss, Tocqueville and Althusser's *For Marx* and *Lenin and Philosophy*). Her passion for literature, theater and film led her to translate works by Beckett, Klossowski, Genet and Prévert). It was under her guidance that Althusser discovered Carlo Bertolazzi's *El nost Milan*.

It would be a mistake to say that the letters represent the "real" Althusser, behind the published work. Rather, they represent a continuation of his published positions in the form of reflections on their origins and their likely effects. In them, Althusser carries out stylistic experiments, for example, replacing periods with commas in several long passages or, in contrast, suspending commas, showing the awareness of rhythm, tempo, and sound, that surprised readers have stumbled upon in *For Marx* and *Reading Capital* (both of which were written contemporaneously with the letters). In this sense, the letters constitute explorations of the materiality of writing, the materialism of the letter that he discovered in Lacan but which was already his own. Madonia was an interlocutor with whom Althusser could air his views of Machiavelli, Lenin, Foucault, Derrida and Barthes, explore his interest in painting, theater and poetry, and share his most profound sorrows, as in the case of the suicide of his friend, Jacques Martin. It is difficult to imagine a translator better able to capture the extraordinary qualities of Althusser's writing in these letters than Nicholas Levett, whose work we are pleased to present here.

* * *

[13-I-1962]

Saturday 3pm my poor love, Franca my poor love in tears, dear Franca, cry, Franca, you can cry¹, yes, you can, I shan't scold you oh no, you can cry, that's perhaps the only wish I have, for a common language in such a bitter and dark time, Franca, a common language, common roots, the elementary gestures of defence and consciousness, our only present recourse: and what else did we do at dawn when it was still night, the time of the train that passed so quickly it was timeless, already at Bologna I couldn't believe it, already Bologna and I couldn't speak, we only had tears to give each other and our hands and faces and bodies already trembling with solitude (like children closing their eyes to believe it's still nighttime); what else have I done on my return, on writing to you, Franca, and what else am I really doing, in the depths of this tough thankless period I've told you about in my most recent letters (speaking only of myself): beneath the frozen mute empty world of my dismay, in the very deepest part of this world, at the bottom of I know not which lost well a spring is rising up inside me, whose liquid murmur I can always hear, tears inside me, Franca, I'm covered in tears, these tears my only living water in this desert. I'm crying for you, and I tell myself that Franca knows it, I'm crying for myself and I tell myself that Franca knows it, and I know that you know it - our only common language in my desert.

yes my desert added to our pain

I implore you: make the effort necessary to distinguish them, don't let my own desert (my own little desert, my own immense desert, my exclusive deserty private property registered with all the official notaries, my chronic and limitless desert, my blindness,

¹ See Franca's letter from the 10-I-1962.

my deafness, my confusion, my head of wood and stone, the blood frozen in my arteries, this right to become sand and stone and earth and wall from time to time, my withdrawal into the most obtuse natural elements - this geological reign of the spirit - as they say that madmen, some of them at least, feel and recognise themselves in the mineral or vegetal... quite differently than in the mineral or vegetal phases of Leonardo [Cremonini]'s painting)... don't let my desert also be your desert, Franca. Let it not come along with its (apparently, presently) blocked horizon to cover the desert of this solitude and these tears. Don't let yourself also get lost in my desert, I beg you. You didn't lose yourself in it when I was close to you, now don't lose yourself in it when I'm far away. For it's true, when I was near you, I brought with me a little bit of this desert. It had begun silently to spread its sands far enough to besiege me, invest me, occupy me... it was beginning its siege and work, it had already begun its siege and work, indifferent to anything that wasn't its own logic and purpose. It's true that I didn't enjoy last summer's freedom: I said: it's the layout of the bedroom, so we changed the place of the bed and the table; I said it's the darkness of the house, so we opened the windows to the brightness of the day; I said it's the damned snow and rain, and a little sunshine would finally peep through; I said it's because I need to get out, so I went out; I said it's because I should be reading so I tried to read; I said it's because I should be speaking a bit so I gave a speech about de Gaulle; I said it's because I should be helping Franca with her translation so I sat next to you and tried to understand Roberte [ce Soir]², etc; I said, I said... a little bit of desert was already there. These are my seasons, my sbalzi... my seasonal dip, which sometimes falls in January sometimes in February or March, always in winter, just a little early this time. As for you, perhaps you didn't really notice it, Franca, you said, and the mere memory of this moves my soul to tears, that for you everything was fine, that you were happy, that things couldn't be better... while I on the contrary feared that my desert might become visible, that, believing yourself to be

² Franca was then translating Pierre Klossowski into Italian.

speaking to a living man in the flesh, you might suddenly notice I was made from another material, stone, wood, earth... now that I'm alone, I can see that I am thus so I'm telling you, I'm telling you again - and I'm begging you: don't lose yourself in my desert. It will come to an end, it isn't serious deep down, it's serious on the surface, in living from day to day, in the simplest acts, especially in the simplest acts (a simple act: like flowing water, air circulating in air): I pay an inordinate price for these acts, if I manage them at all!! but deep down it isn't serious: right down at the bottom there's the water from my well, life, the taste for life the new season will grant me, it's already flowing silently in me, it's presently just tears, my only life coming to the day, but which will in time be a real spring in the open air, under the sky... Don't let yourself into, don't lose yourself in my desert, Franca. My provisional desert. Let it not come to add yet more distance to the time and space separating us.

Cry my love, my tender love, my body and breath, Franca. I'm near you, cry without fear, I am your tears, I say yes to them, I love these tears, they are my words today, my only words, we'll exchange them for another language, we'll translate them together, we already know the translation, some paper, a pencil, sit down on the sofa, there, I'll come close to you, what were you saying Franca? what were you saying? don't worry we'll just find the translation, read the text, I'll explain it to you, step by step, slowly, we're tired, slowly my love, we'll find the words for these tears, it's still night yet we're already up, is it still nighttime, the day is coming, it always comes, just a little more time, come to my shoulder, just there, your face, your eyes closed, your chin where tears still run, your beautiful beloved face.

Louis

Saturday night - late

29-IX-62

[...]

The result of my cathartic crisis last spring is truly impressive, absolutely extraordinary, I'm not exaggerating. I believe I can say so now (I keep touching wood), for I might still have thought that the aptitude and taste for work in the summer still depended, let's say, on the period of release that generally follows this type of depression. But that it should be continuing, and above all that it should have increased considerably - while I was rather expecting an inevitable downturn - is absolutely convincing - and truly extraordinary: I can't get over it, and I can truly say that my whole life has been changed by it. I wouldn't get to the end of telling you why, and in which ways. I just want you to know that it is so, to give you tangible and irrefutable proof of the mutations about which the specialist books speak, but which always leave one wondering if they truly correspond to reality, or if it isn't rather a question either of a retrospective illusion, or of slight changes the mere passing of time could explain by itself.

That said, you mustn't believe that I write these letters simply to prolong my cultural activity - or to unwind from them... but on that point I trust your discernment, despite everything. I'd nevertheless like to tell you something concerning this change in my life, and of my life. And it is very important that you should understand me properly. You recall, when I fell ill everything appeared to be stuck in a certain number of themes that seemed absolutely obvious (but I think I've already told you this once already - anyway I'll say it again with added emphasis): themes where it was a question of you, of Hélène, and in a general way of affective problems in relation to the opposite sex, also with a certain number of spectacular fantasies where these people could recognise or suspect a certain number of roles, at will, such as mother wife sister, etc., etc. All of this, of course, wasn't wrong, but *it wasn't the main thing*. I was performing in an absolutely new

play, without yet knowing with absolute certainty the new characters, without having prepared the necessary decor and costumes: so of course I played it in the *old decor* and the *old costumes*. Note that from the beginning of the year I was aware of the fact that the number 1 problem for me was the problem of *work*. I said it and knew it, and I repeated it, but I repeated and said it (and knew it) precisely because it was a *problem* I hadn't really resolved, and all the solutions I wanted to give it, that I tried to give it, tenaciously, obstinately, in fact weren't *natural* solutions: they were 'violent' solutions that I *wanted* to find, and which I therefore finally *imposed* on the problem. It's not by chance, I now think, that in the month and a half preceding my collapse I gave the strange lesson on Machiavelli, a doubly strange, a triply strange lesson; since I *forced* myself to do it with an already vacillating, but even fiercer awareness that here was where I would be victorious or defeated; since in giving this lesson I had the feeling I wasn't the one giving it, and that it was happening outside of me, in an absolutely phantasmagoric and *delirious* way, without my being able to *control* or *verify* what I was saying, never knowing if what I was saying had any meaning whatsoever (whence my astonishment when my students told me they'd heard nothing like it that year from other teachers); since I could, in the end, find *only one way* of convincing myself that it was really *me* who was giving this lesson: and that way was to *acknowledge* that the delirium of this lesson was nothing other than *my own delirium*; in particular, I recall the central theme I developed, namely that Machiavelli's fundamental problem was to *think* the conditions of the foundation of a 'new State' from a situation (Italy's) where the conditions were at once entirely favourable (see the exhortation that concludes 'The Prince') and entirely unfavourable (because in this same Italy *no* real political movement, no real political institution, whether the Papacy or even Florence, without mentioning Venice or the South, outlined the promise and the beginning of this New State), so that Machiavelli's central problem from a *theoretical* point of view might be summarised as the question of the *beginning from nothing* of an *absolutely indispensable and necessary* New

State. I'm not just imagining, I'm not making this thought up, Franca, but by developing this theoretical problem and its implications, by exhibiting the theoretical consequences (in particular the theory of fortune and 'virtù'), I had the hallucinatory feeling (of irresistible force) of developing nothing but *my own delirium*; I felt that the delirium of my lesson coincided with (and was *nothing other* than) my own *subjective* delirium, I wouldn't even say with *my own* subjective delirium, for I couldn't *name* it, this subjective delirium, I was too wrapped up in it to take the distance necessary for its perception and definition, I would rather say: I had the feeling that the delirium of my lesson (objective delirium) coincided uniquely *with something in me that was delirious*. And in fact, when I think of it now (and I think of it precisely by writing to you, I'm *discovering* what I'm saying: I'm *seeing* it), I was doing nothing, in developing Machiavelli's contradictory demands, but speak about myself. The question I was concerned with: how to *begin from nothing this* New State which was however *absolutely indispensable* and *demande*d by a profound aspiration (which didn't have, couldn't *find*, couldn't *see* in reality the means to be realised or satisfied), that question was *mine!* Now that I utter the *same words* (those I used), I can see clearly that the words I used for Machiavelli (including the play on words with the State: at once the political state *for Machiavelli* - and a psychological 'state', general state, 'state' in the sense of the 'state' an individual finds himself in, *for me*), I was *also using them for myself*. The genius of my objective 'delirium' was simply the presence of *my problem* in my discourse, and if I thus at that time *elected* Machiavelli, it's because of the affinity I sensed between him and my 'state', between his State and my 'state', and which I couldn't help but comment on in my lesson for hours and hours. Of course, this *realisation* of my delirium didn't appear to me then, could no longer then appear to me to be the heart of my delirium: or rather, in my delirium I was no longer able to *recognise* (without falling into other abysses) that it was a question of *my work*; I was naturally taken in by the old decor and the old costumes in which this new play was being performed. I did, though, struggle against this assimilation, I remember, and until

the end I told myself: no, these are not the old problems returning, no, the old roles are no longer at stake; but there came a moment when I ended up losing even that awareness, which was itself a struggle, there came a moment when I could no longer struggle, and I let things go, no longer having the strength to resist the ghosts of the past, for they were not just inside me, they were outside me, in the thoughts of some people close to me and who offered them up (or, I knew, were just waiting for the moment to offer them up) as my own mirror, as my own truth, as my major problem... You know who I'm talking about, people who cared for me, and helped me, Étienne for example. And it is not by chance if, giving without meaning to a new body, and as though a new life to these ghosts and these old roles...³

... finally your February letter caused them to topple over onto me - and if I sought refuge in depression in order to flee the unequal and futile combat. I'm not saying this in order to return to the past, or to reproach you for it: I think I would have toppled over anyway, and I even believe that it was necessary for me thus to sink into *emptiness* to find at last the solution for this beginning from nothing, which had become the form of my problem. I can even say (see how far reason can go, when it reasons about reasons) that when all is said and done, your letter played a useful role⁴: there are battles one does well to abandon, for one gains more in certain retreats (see Lenin) than in certain offensives unsuited to the situation, the forces present and the *objectives at stake*. And besides, I hadn't entirely lost the thread: even in my defeat, I knew it wasn't really one, deep down, and without knowing what it was really positively about, I knew at least that it was about something completely different than the old roles and old ghosts: it was definitely this negative awareness that distinguished this depression from the others. In the others, I was entirely taken up by my 'state', I was without distance, I adhered immediately to the themes and roles that were *still* current; this time I no longer

³ There are two exclamation marks from Franca in the margin.

⁴ There is a question mark from Franca in the margin.

adhered to them, I experienced a kind of distance, which in a way gave me proof that even the shadows haunting me (and that Étienne for example served up to me *at home*, with the obstinacy of generosity, one seeking my good and my salvation) were out of date, just ghosts, were no longer *my* ghosts but ghosts from my past, from an anachronic time and world to which I no longer belonged. All this was then not so clear, I felt and experienced it more than I thought it, for example I didn't suffer from anxiety, that anxiety associated in the past with this kind of ghost and apprehension, it was something else; but even so, this something else was in the darkness of my depression, for naturally there was no question whatsoever of work, the very idea of which, as I was struggling quite simply to live, was forbidden me, beyond my reach, was really quite irrelevant. Yet that's precisely what was at stake, unbeknownst to most of the people close to me, caught up (the tragic nature of the situation assisting them) in the old interpretative schemes that put them at their ease, and gave them the right to intervene so as to discharge their duties (or grievances) and save me. A certain discernment and a certain technical and theoretical training were required to see clearly in this matter: which is why I've got such high regard for Stévenin's intelligence during this 'phase'; as for me, I'd had a presentiment of what was happening, I defended it for as long as possible, then I had to yield my weapons. But now I believe I can say (having let pass the laborious 'fires' and bursts of the summer without drawing any conclusions too swiftly) that the links have been remade, and that I've truly solved, on my own account, Machiavelli's problem...

Read this Franca, read it. I know you'll think about it. It's not just a simple chronicle, and it's not valid only for the past, I think its virtue extends well beyond last spring and the first months of the summer.

Now I really must hit the sack [...]. One mustn't always think, one must also sleep, meaning allow in sleep another thought to think in place of the thinking of the day. A

thought for the present and also for the future, a thought no longer in need of Machiavelli's miraculous mirror...

I love you, Franca.

Louis

Saturday 5-I-63

[...]

Reread, when I got home last night, your long letter from at least a month ago on aggression. I think I can see things a little more clearly now: beforehand, it seemed a little 'formal', as if you'd needed either to sharpen your concepts (defining, polishing and adjusting them) in order to present them to me, or that you'd had to present them so clearly in order to see them properly yourself. What you say about the opposition of violence and aggression is roughly very true, even the relation you establish between the child and the adult, and the inversion of meaning occurring between the two, and between the behaviours in question: all very accurate, but I'm not sure if it doesn't remain a little 'descriptive', even if the meaning of this 'description' corresponds to something real (although non-descriptive): I mean that you attempt to find a deep explanation, taking your departure from a *description* of different *behaviours* (violent or aggressive behaviour): and in the end you rather *repeat*, at the level of the deep explanation, the opposition you've established at the level of the *description* of the two behaviours. In concrete terms, this means: your concept of aggression clearly indicates

that something isn't right, that a certain *weakness* is betrayed (a weakness that is itself the phenomenon of an immense *guilt*), and to this extent its description really does give us, in part, the key to its nature. But the concept of violence isn't so well defined: for you, next to the *negativity* of aggression, it's a bit like the *positive* representative of *strength*, it's a bit too positive... to the point that, for example, one wonders why strength, if it's the essence of *violence*, should assume the *form* of *violence* (unless one says: it must assume this form *when* 'circumstances' impose it... but then it's very 'empirical!'). Note that, with this remark, I'm not saying that violence isn't *often* a manifestation of *strength* (conscious, reflected or unreflected, but such that its unreflectedness is itself quite simply *spontaneity*, thought and reason so well incorporated in the subject that, when it reacts spontaneously, its reason and thought are nonetheless active within it). What I want to suggest is that violence can also be a *pathological* manifestation (which occurs for example in all cases of 'acting out', as the English psychoanalysts say, meaning in cases of active 'decompensation', of irresistible 'compulsion', of '*passage aux actes*', which can take on dramatic, and sometimes irremediable, forms), and note too that in these cases the pathological element is often very ambiguous: not in itself but in its effects, it can be a kind of *positive* decompensation... but even in that case there's nothing controlled about it, and one can scarcely speak of 'strength', for it's a question of strength in a wild state, exercised in a pure form (or pretending to be so, or needing to give itself this 'free' exercise, 'for nothing', as though it were taking a kind of historical revenge, in a way, against all the times and circumstances when it had to be curbed, forbidden, maimed, reduced to silence and nothingness - you can also see this in revolutions, since you mention them), as though *to recover itself*, to give itself proof of its existence, etc. Here, we are *beneath* strength and weakness, in a region where strength and weakness take root, but which isn't itself ruled by their categories. Why am I introducing these nuances and thereby *varying* the concept of violence? For the following reason: to allow you to see that the concept of aggression (if it's the opposite of the concept of violence) can

also be subjected to important *variations of meaning*, and that it can thus either find itself at the opposite extreme to violence or, on the contrary, be infinitely close to it, in other words that you can be dealing with forms of aggression that are virtually forms of violence, or at any rate forms of aggression containing a strong dose of violence and of the demands proper to *violence* (which, and here I agree with you, aren't always in the form of *well adjusted* demands, which can take the form of demands within their very maladjustment).

All of which can be very specifically applied. I believe in Hélène's case one has precisely to do with a mixed form of aggression and violence, and that precisely in her case some of the difficulty and drama stems from the fact that she's had to appeal to these two kinds of behaviour at the same time, the one doubtless acting as counterpoint and -weight to the other: her violence (it's vital, survival behaviour, analogous to certain forms of violence that quite simply express life, the will-to-live in a raw state, quite simply in order to escape from death) acting as counterpoint and -weight to, somehow as a subjective justification of, the other kind of behaviour: guilt degenerating into *aggression*. And I believe her whole (unconscious) game consists in switching from one kind of behaviour to the other (when she's in 'crisis', of course, but crises always reveal what lies beneath) and, in this passage, to cover the (perfectly negative) excesses of aggression with the excuse (and vital justification) of violence. This is, moreover, what makes knowing which attitude to adopt when faced with these behaviours and their to and fro such a delicate question: for, from a *technical* point of view, it's clear that 1/ one mustn't just 'go along' with aggression 2/ one must, on the contrary, 'approve of' violence - meaning take the side of the most positive against the least positive, and from a technical point of view it's clear that one is thereby sketching out in advance the type of evolution the process can follow: the liquidation of the most negative as an opening onto the most positive and its development. I'm expressing this very clumsily and schematically: but it corresponds to very precise experiences and, besides, it absolutely

doesn't contradict the general sense of your analysis, for in the end I too hold violence, even in its 'pathological', maladjusted forms, to be infinitely more positive than guilt-laden aggression. What I mean is that in her great 'crises', of which I've experienced in the past some very pure and fine examples, there was at once *aggression*, but also *violence*: if you like, very crudely put: a need to *destroy* (and destroy *herself* through the others) *and* a need to *liberate* a force beyond any control, as if in a wild state, vital and triumphant, as if to put it on show, and thereby seize hold of it.

I'm saying all this also to tell you: you've no idea how *spot on* is the second part of your analysis (my relations with H.). You really are (apart from Laurent St[évenin] - and perhaps my very dear friend Jacques Martin, about whom I worry so much: the most extraordinary intelligence I've ever seen), you really are *the only person* to have discerned the true nature of things beneath massively contrary appearances. Thanks be to whatever I owe this: I imagine, to a kind of profound ability to discern you must have, no doubt enlightened as much by the heart as by the head (I think a certain degree of love, of attention from one's whole being *allows one to see* what eyes alone, from the outside, could never see). And, if you'll allow me, I'll continue my thoughts on this point beyond what you say, and in accordance with what I've just added to your own analysis. For it's true that I sought and found in H. a kind of refusal and negation of a role that was crushing me, that I'd had to play, and had played in conditions such that I hadn't been allowed to play any other role, that this role wasn't a role for me (as it would be for an actor: who can change, who *lives* his life in addition and alongside his roles), but was my only skin and face, was myself, myself forever bound to this role as though it were my nature, my destiny; and it's true that the power of negation I found in H. was the mirage of this liberation for me, *even more so* given that this negativity was the other side of something very positive (fraternity, generosity, a great freedom of imagination, a total independence in respect of 'contingencies', particularly material ones): she was at once for me the mirage of a liberation by the refusal of a role, by her

power of refusal, and in a way by her very power of destruction - and at the same time the 'programme' of a free life', after this liberation, through the positive sides of her nature. Of course, she paid very heavily for her power of refusal, for in part she was always tempted to destroy and reject *herself*, and she *even* paid for it in her *positive* behaviour (in her way, for example, of literally 'throwing' herself into her hopes, in a certain 'utopianism' of her behaviour, in a certain 'revolutionary romanticism', for instance), but it all belonged together and there was no question of separating things out - all the more so since, apart from these 'reservations' bearing more on the 'modalities' than the actual structure of her behaviour, the 'whole' suited me quite well, at once in its negative aspect and in its positive sides.

You've seen this perfectly, and it leads, deep down, to a distribution of roles (between her and me) bearing little relation to the appearances to which my 'very good' friends are attached and remain fixated upon. You're perfectly right: in our long history, and with contrary appearances, even during my depressions, I've always been the one to *lead the game*, to give it its orientation and style, I'm the one who's remained at the centre of it all, and who's been the motor of any really *important* developments. And I believe that, by virtue of a silent dialectic that was sensed and felt before being felt and thought, I must have worked out that I had a *vital* need for her as a *relay* (in all the senses of the term) to escape from my situation, meaning to escape from the impossible state I'd been in since childhood: and thus needing her as a relay, I was the main driver of what might happen to us, including what might follow the historical period of this 'relay'; that I could also thereby serve as a 'relay' to her, for other reasons, on another level, in another way (which is no doubt still, in certain respects, partly obscure: since the type of 'relay' I can and could offer her was as much defined by her *needs* as it was by my own capacities. I say 'still in certain respects', even though I essentially know what it's about, and can understand *why* I was able, such as I was, to play this role and how, having become what I am now, I can still help her). If you like, I had a vital need

(not in order to live from day to day: any one of my ‘girlfriends’ might have allowed that, but in so doing and given how I was, they forbade me at the same time the hope of ever *changing*), I had a vital need (in order to *change*, to free myself of the straitjacket of my impossible ‘nature’) of the kind of relay she offered, of the structure of her behaviour, of her power of negation, including of her *self* negation (for I too needed to negate myself, and as if to destroy myself: not knowing *what* I might ever become that should be different, but wanting to become *other*, wanting it confusedly but vitally, this aspiration in any case amounted to the muted desire to *negate myself*, going to the very edge of destruction pure and simple... here too she was a relay for me, for *self negation* isn’t granted to one whose *role* is precisely to prevent others from doing so, who is precisely responsible for *others’ souls*, responsible for others, etc., for self negation, not in imagination but in act, neither in dreams nor in a slightly acidic, sour nostalgia, not with complacency but in reality, isn’t granted to everyone, and it wasn’t granted to me either... and yet my salvation, or at least its project, really did entail this... you can fill in the rest for yourself) - without speaking, of course, of the other, positive side of her nature (generosity, imagination, concrete freedom - even when ‘over the top’), assuring me that this *negation* could lead to something positive, to a freedom the like of which I’d never had, etc. You’ve seen this perfectly well, as you’ve seen perfectly what I wanted confusedly to destroy and prepare through this dialectic: I wanted to destroy my excessive role as father, etc. And beyond the destructive negation of this role and all its attributes, I wanted to prepare a real ‘freedom’ (which could then only be a necessarily mythical wish... for I couldn’t imagine the shape it would take, I imagined my freedom from the position of captivity, not in itself, but anyhow I needed this however mythical, utopian and ‘exaggerated’ space beyond my own walls).

You’ve seen and said all of that. But I’d like to add yet another point. Concerning precisely *violence*, at any rate the kind of violence ‘in a wild state’ I mentioned. And here again, it’s connected to the character of my father. For basically my father’s only kind

of expression, for he was completely *absent* in everything else (and even if he had been present, he remained absent through my mother's behaviour, which was just a *refusal* of him) and was therefore *replaced by me* (with everything this substitution entailed symbolically, a symbolics that was at the same time *experienced*, because for the child it's the same thing), so I was saying: my father's sole visible expression consisted of sometimes infrequent, other times more concentrated, *explosions of violence*, like terrible and very short-lived but dreadful storms, literally sowing dread in their wake - or abrupt departures (a door slammed without a word, he'd leave and we'd wait... he'd come back: not a word was said). For me, it was terrifying. And I now think that, basically, my father, absent in anything positive, was present only in the negative... and in a very peculiar kind of negative, that of violence in a wild state, of 'compulsion', of (apparently) uncontrolled 'acting out'... and I think that there where my father was *active* is the only element of the paternal role I've never been able to play!! for that element, belonging to the *real* father, was contrary to the essence of a father's role in general, in any case in the father's role I had to play... I imagine that not only can a child not physically allow itself this demonstration of violence, but also and above all, and this is the main thing since I was tasked with the contrary role (looking after, reassuring), that I couldn't, without ruining this role, accept the slightest violence coming from me... (and here I'm repeating in other words what you say)... while only just such a violence might have been able to deliver me from my impossible role!! If I'd been able, one way or another, to say 'shit', slam the door, scream at the top of my voice, or enclose myself in a great deafening silence (a silence signifying a purely violent and deafening curse), as would my father, I'd have put an end to the exploitation I was subjected to, I'd have become *a child* like all the others, without feeling guilty for so being, but there was just no way (I have memories of one or two manifestations of *violence* on my own behalf: maybe just one, but it's very precise: I was five years old, in the school playground, in my first year, I was playing marbles with a little friend, when all of a sudden and without knowing

why I *gave him a slap!* but only to turn immediately as white as a sheet, and start trembling all over as if I'd *received it myself*, at the same time overcome with enormous *guilt*, then when I came around I started to engage the kid, who surely never understood a thing, in a sort of *negotiation* as though to annul, delete from existence the incident that had just taken place, as though to *suppress* from his memory, so from history period, the slap I'd given him. Even when I did manage it, I sought *to take it back*)... in sum, my father's freedom (violence) was that by which he *wasn't a father*: but it frightened me so much (me-the-father, and as such non-violent) that what would have allowed me no longer to be a father was strictly forbidden me, forever. You'll understand that when I also encountered this violence (wild, in a wild state... and not just aggression) with H el ene, a certain number of silent echoes must have risen in my unconscious memory, and I must have found myself again confronted both with my prehistoric terror and with an irresistible desire to seize, with this therefore fascinating violence, the hope of my salvation. But there again, I must have boarded my ship at once with terror and hope (they'd been aboard forever): both of them. Confusedly feeling that there should, moreover, be a kind of subterranean communication between salvation via (self) negation-destruction and salvation via (pure) violence...

It's only too clear that I rediscovered all of that with H el ene, even through the *mirage like* distortions made inevitable by the fact that I was then in, or rather then found myself in, the country *from which* I had to escape. And it's obvious that, thus rediscovering it, I couldn't perceive this structure's meaning-for-me at the same time as its meaning-for-her. I discovered the second meaning as I was exploring, using and even 'exploiting' the first (I use the word 'exploiting' deliberately: for at certain times I've truly 'exploited' her in that regard, I mean by *provoking* her into playing the role I was expecting, *provoking* her into negation and violence, etc., as though drawn into my own abyss) and, having discovered it, I had to become capable of considering it *for itself*, which wasn't easy, given the type of 'economy' I'd organised, as though imposed by the

use (exploitation) of the resources that (unconsciously) interested me - which wasn't made easy, either, given the generous services of all my friends, in a rush to save me in their own way. I think I've essentially just about managed to do this now. I've left my prehistoric role behind, I've closed the 'exploitation' of the open mine of negation and destruction, they're now turning it into arable land, they'll sow wheat and plant apple trees there, at any rate they're taking serious, and direct, care of it (H.'s state has, for some time, become a perfectly objective problem for me, meaning freed from my own fantasies), I'm now working 'on my own account', meaning that I'm able to slam doors, etc. on my own terms, like any well constituted man and, my word, I notice that, from within a truly free disposition, rarely do I feel the need to do so, and that other kinds of behaviour are more profitable; it seems to me that, as someone said: this is called dawn⁵... I might say: maybe it's called freedom, the beginning of freedom.

Do you agree?

ciao amore mio

Louis

[10-II-1963]

[Handwritten]

6.35pm, on the train⁶

shadows on the platform, so briefly, in the end it was better that way
it wasn't a bad solution, in the end, the platform with Mino and Claudine. Even
departures, even heartbreaks can be experienced in common. Sometimes you need

⁵ Appears to be an allusion to Luis Buñuel, *Cela s'appelle l'aurore* (1956) [Trans.].

⁶ Letter written on the train from Bologna to Paris, after a stay with Franca in Rome.

these mediations to pay for the presumption of having been alone - before renouncing it - in order to renounce it.

I too have learned a lot - in the breathless obstacle course my life has been for the last ten months. What I told you on our last night in Rome is true: it's been tough. For me too, what has distinguished this type of ordeal from those preceding it is that, so far, every obstacle has carried me *forwards* (rather than casting me to the ground), doubtless towards yet other obstacles, but each day has its own. Maybe you recall the image of the horse ride I used to explain this experience.

Another point of reference: Mario. It's true, he represents one extremity for me, like a brother from the other side of the world - like a brother too because at his age I was a bit like him: having spoken that language (although in a different register), I'm familiar with his taste for *fullness*, for communion with 'the world', with things, in their consonance and very dissonance (though I was then far less 'sensitive' than him, far more 'cerebral', my way of being 'sensitive' was more 'cerebral', I was 'cerebrally sensitive'). I've also known its *wealth* (I recall from my time of captivity in Germany long periods of fullness and joy, if not of ecstasy, that I seemed to derive from every being, whether from a tree, the earth or from other men - and God knows how many I saw - or from a little bit of bread, or sleep, or from a word. I recall also that I too used to *write* to my *sister*) - then after all the jolts you're aware of I took another path, which led me to the other extremity (but is it really the other extremity? isn't it rather, *for me*, the coming to pass of what existed *beneath* this first language. I rather think so). However it may be, I no longer speak the language (or can no longer seek the language) of 'fullness' (with its visual-spatial images of coexistence, light, peace, nostalgia and fusion - or of bitter wrinkles on a gnarled beach), the language of 'consonance' (not to mention communion, I say *consonance* as one speaks of musical consonance or harmony)

resonating in a space that's *given, open, spread out* (in sum, *existing* already, already formed and *resting* in its own fullness before I can recognise it and recognise myself in it) - I no longer speak that language but one of a more or less halting becoming, where all the joy (the same word - with a different meaning) I can glean comes from the tension of the journey, from the obstacles I overcome without falling, from the recurrent awareness that there'll be no respite from the ordeal, and that the only respite lies in the awareness of the journey, perpetually in the place where you have to jump rather than fall at an obstacle that's never the same twice. The only thing still connecting me to the primal images of the erstwhile 'fullness' (space, light, musical consonance or musical tempo) is *space*, but it no longer has the same meaning (it's now only the place of places, the place of the journey, the moving place of what arises, of houses slanting past, of felled trees, of incidents, events, accidents) (you remember, when I met you I was still 'working with' *light* - but not now - and I was still using *space* quite differently - although with a meaning already contaminated by what was coming) (*music*: during my times of fullness, when in captivity, I'd go up to the camp's attic to play the violin, alone. I played it quite well then. I haven't played for a long time now - and there's a problem with me and music). Why am I saying all this in a train making me shudder? preventing me from writing? I left an hour ago, I know why I'm writing: in order to continue at the level of truth the silent speech of my acts, my violence and my contradictions, the speech of an awkward love, for I love you just as I live, remember that, and from the outset I thought that with you there was no need to feign another world, a place away from life where I could love you, and that's why I'm caught [pris], you're caught, I'm caught with you and our only resource (it's senseless to speak of any other) is to decipher-disentangle this 'hold [prise]', this mutual (common) capture - in order to take 'hold [prise]' of it and not be its prisoner.

(A woman has just sat opposite me and she's smoking: I realise I can no longer *tolerate* smoke, even other people's!)

- a love that's awkward like my life, yes - and with the hidden sides of this awkwardness (which is sometimes far from awkward, or which in any case knows its awkwardnesses well enough to be able to make use of them if need be) - meaning the word is ill chosen: deftness or awkwardness are beside the point: they presuppose that *there is* a solution and that I'm shrewd enough to find it, or clumsy enough to miss it - but what if there were *no solution* at this level? - Yes, the words are ill chosen since this awkwardness *reaches, shows, designates* and even *produces* something essential - after which all the hoped for adjustments deftness can offer, whether they succeed or not, become quite derisory - no, I haven't been clumsy, my life isn't awkward: it's in search of the right adjustment and I must come to terms with it, come to terms with this quest, jolts included, to infinity.

(The train's jolts, their echo - I'm writing even so) (respite - Piacenza station, the train's slowing down) (on the move again, shunting and more jolts)

Come to terms with it - in a positive way. I'm thinking of you, who know how to do that, not without suffering but in full awareness, know how to take distance, step back and have *pazienza*. What I mean to say is: if I could remove the solitude from *your* withdrawal (with all it entails, after all, of bitterness, suffering and a sense of 'sprecato' [squandering]) by myself gaining perspective, *questo distacco* [this detachment], it seems to me that it would give another meaning to your own 'withdrawal' - it seems to me that it would be better this way, for you and also for me: Do you agree?

(The train is really racing now! Anyway I'm hardly going to write to you all the way to Milan!)

Tao amore, I kiss you without tears, but it's as good as, believe me

Louis

8pm

Sunday 17th March, I think [1963]

a dream of ashes, last night. But in exceptional circumstances, since it was a dream within a dream. I had to make a dream out of ashes. I was in a large garden moistened by a fragile rain, fine gravel crisp under foot. Behind me there was (I'll see it a bit later, but I knew it was there) a white, Victorian facade, like the ones you see in old English pictures, with two or three broad steps leading to a porch. An old man came towards me from the back of the garden (lost in the trees) pulling a cart, he was attached to it by straps, as though yoked to it, his head leaning forward, his whole body straining from the effort. But I knew it was *light*. He was bringing me *ash*. In fact, the handcart, which had high wooden sides, was full of it, the ash was piled up above the sides, I heard the silence of the ash, I heard the *silence it made*, behind the noise of the gravel from the gardener's steps. Yes, it must be the gardener, I knew from the smell. An old smell of tobacco (from his moustache, tobacco forever lingers as a smell in moustaches) (I know that from my grandfather, I imagine - but let's not interrupt the dream). I knew that, despite the man's efforts, the cart was *light* because it was full of ashes. A cedar from the bottom of the garden had been burned for me, but there were so many trees at the bottom of this garden that, one more or one less, the empty space couldn't be seen.

//as I'm writing, I think: ashes-cedar [cendres-cèdre]//. The old man was pulling the cart, then emptied it at my feet. I knew I had to *turn them into a dream*. The ash was incredibly soft, grey, grey, but light grey, powder grey as though itself sprinkled with a light grey powder, infinitely gentle to the touch. I took it in my hands, I couldn't take enough of it in my hands, I searched within it, and not only on its surface, but deep down, it was the same ash as though sprinkled with another grey ash which was the same. The gardener (he did in fact have a moustache) had left. For a long time I thus kept seeking the ash within the ash, slowly, indefinitely, the noise it made had changed, it was no longer *silence*, but a sound of feathers, caressed feathers, caressed hair. Yes, precisely a sound of caressed hair. I had to *turn them into a dream*. Then I suddenly found myself violently dragged from behind: two men had come for me. They held me by my arms. It's normal, I thought to myself, of course it's normal, because I hadn't *turned them into a dream*. They had revolvers on their belts, and military style caps, they took me away without saying a word. We climbed the steps to the house, it was then that I saw the facade: unbearably white, dazzlingly so, enough to hurt one's eyes, and I thought, how strange, but it's an old English house, must be a hundred years old, how can it be so white as to hurt one's eyes? They made me enter the house, we went through a living room, then another room, with paintings (portraits) on the walls, then we went into another very small room, also white, as white as the facade, the same unbearable whiteness. They put me on a chair and sat behind the table, the interrogation began. I knew what they were going to ask me, I knew what they wanted from me, but I'd decided that I wouldn't *give in* [je ne *cèderai pas*]. I asked them to draw the curtains, my eyes were hurting. They said no. I asked them for other things (water, I think, and some other important thing I've forgotten), they said no again. I knew they'd always say no. The interrogation was all about saying no. I knew it. Then I started asking them all sorts of questions *so that they would say no*, so that they'd say no as promptly as possible, so that they'd get to the end of all their 'nos', so that the interrogation might end. //it was

clearly a strange kind of interrogation: it wasn't about asking me the least question, rather about refusing all my demands//. They kept saying no, they never let up. Then, all of a sudden, I understood that they were saying *no* because I was asking for something, that they were saying no because I was expressing a desire, a need. Then I understood that the interrogation would last as long as I had any desires to express, as long as I had anything to ask of them... that it was I who prolonged the interrogation with my desires, to which they would reply: 'no'... but at the same time I was gripped by a panic-stricken fear, for I saw within myself an infinite number of desires waiting to be expressed, one behind the other like people in a queue... without my ever being able to see the last. I continued, aghast, for a long time, and they kept saying no, and I knew it would *never come to an end* because there'd be no end to my questions (demands), and they'd never be done with saying no. All of it against the backdrop of the phrase that stayed with me, like an echo: 'I shan't give in'. Then something suddenly happened in this crowd of desires, of demands, and I saw that I really had only one desire, that all the others disappeared before it, were absorbed into it: *to find the ashes again*, my ashes, their contact, their touch, their gentleness, their sound. This desire took over, only it remained (in the meantime, I kept asking the guardians for things, but only to trick them). Then I experienced a kind of giddiness on the edge of an abyss: I understood that if I wanted to *save this unique desire*, I had to *keep it quiet*, had to keep it quiet so that they couldn't destroy it by saying: no. I understood that at the very last moment, and just when I was going to express this desire, was on the verge of saying it, I managed to remain silent. So there was silence... then at the end of a long episode (which I've forgotten, but something else happened) I heard the sound of the gravel. I was outside, in the garden. Nobody was there. Neither gardener nor cart. *And there were no ashes*. But it didn't surprise me, I already knew it dimly, deeply, calmly: there were no more ashes because *I'd turned my ashes into a dream*. I also knew that the garden was no longer the same, neither was the house (behind me). I walked towards the trees, towards the

bottom of the garden. One could see an immense landscape, the garden overlooked the entire countryside. *The cedar was there.* Its trunk was intact, as were its branches, everything. At the base of the cedar, sitting down, I could just see a book on someone's knees and the hair of the head leaning over it, there was you. The book was my dream. *You were reading my dream.*

[...]

Tuesday, 7pm. Couldn't send this letter yesterday. Too close to the dream, which has haunted me for two days. I wrote it for you, as much as for myself. Then when I read it I found it at once so brilliant and so obscure that I wondered if I had the right to give it to you. But I know that one understands scarcely anything about one's own dreams all alone. (I have several every night.) I can see a signifying chain, as they say, connecting *ashes-cedars-I shan't give in* [*cendres-cèdres-je ne cèderai pas*]... and obviously a paradoxically conflictual situation from which I emerge victorious as long as *I don't say what I want* to people who are there *to refuse me it*, forbid it, as long as I don't express my deepest desire. I can also see the connection between this desire and the *ashes*, ashes that have in the dream an extraordinary affective charge, I was going to say as soft as skin, as feathers-hair (but that's in the dream), as soft as tears-when-they're-accepted-by-someone, something harrowing and at the same time deeply reassuring and sensual, I imagine it's something reaching far back into the needs of a child, into its memories and longings. There was also the strange situation (in the dream itself!) of having to *make a dream* with these *ashes*, and the fact that, when I've managed to save this fundamental desire (these ashes) by keeping it quiet, when I go out into the garden or find myself again in the garden, I know I've done what I had to do: make a dream with these ashes (and I did it: the ashes are, indeed, no longer there!) - and of course there's an equivalence between

1) making a dream with these ashes and 2) discovering that the desire for these ashes is my unique and fundamental, vital desire. ‘Making this dream’ is to discover and save this desire. What follows is no doubt *too clear*. Because in this entire context (the dream was therefore supposed to reveal it), or maybe even in a context existing here for the first time (garden, cedar, overlooking the countryside, the transformation of the garden, interesting, for me the garden connects with very distant memories, I spent my earliest childhood in a garden *overlooking the countryside*, in the garden of the forest house where my grandfather was a ranger, above Algiers, in the ‘Bois de Boulogne’ - and it overlooked the whole of Algiers and the sea, very far away... I’m also thinking of the garden in Bertinoro, and I’ve just thought, there are also cedars in B... as there were in my grandfather’s garden in Algiers... well, there I go with my associations, I shall never finish!), so I was saying that the end of the dream is no doubt *too clear* (but the last associations give it a depth I hadn’t seen when beginning this sentence since I only saw the following:) I was saying that the end of the dream is no doubt too clear, for in the garden that’s either being reproduced, or exists here for the first time (the cedar, the view of the countryside, recalling Algiers, my earliest childhood), I find you at the base of the cedar, reading *my own dream*. Doubtless a sign indicating, from the heart of the dream itself, that it had been dreamed for you, so that you might read it. I think that’s also why I sent it to you and why, only now, coming back to it, do I discover that I surely dreamed it in order to write it for you. Whence the deep logic of my initial impulse.

.....

[...]

Will talk to you about my sister: an extraordinary dialectic, with interesting results.

Good night Franca

good night

(the radio broadcast on Saturday was good)

Friday 26th April '63

Franca

Here's a text⁷.

The result of a month of relentless work. Never have I worked so much in my life, at least in this register.

It's the result of thoughts come from afar, you know them, I've been carrying them inside me for years, as one can carry, I imagine, a child inside oneself, or a destiny, or a desire.

I had several of them, acquired little by little, each with great effort, each in solitude. They all suggested, without daring to say so, each in its own way, each in its closed domain, that there ought to and might exist, somewhere, some day, a 'place' where they could meet each other, exchange words of recognition, a place where, all together, they would be *at home*, a casa loro, *bei sich*; where they might gather strength before leaving to explore the infinity of their common space. It's happened. They've finally found their earth, their homeland, of which they were all speaking, which none of them knew, the earth none could call *by its name*, because none had ever seen it, for they were all *born from it*.

It's happened. Unknown, invisible, I am among them. I observe, without saying anything, this recognition. The acts by which I see them taking possession of what, from all eternity, belongs to them.

⁷ Doubtless the first version of 'On the Materialist Dialectic'.

it's not by chance that I find myself again, *mutatis mutandis*, before the nearly hallucinatory situation I experienced regarding Machiavelli and the question of 'how to begin?', of 'what is a beginning when that which is beginning doesn't exist?', a situation in which I wondered if I wasn't just speaking about myself, about my purely subjective, contingent, absurd, obsessive problem. Same thing. Same thing today, but with the acute awareness of knowing that it's objective just because it's subjective (this is my lot: I only see things because I'm forced to by an iron necessity, in my own flesh, I can't see them elsewhere, and that's surely what gives what I've seen a kind of direct hold on the flesh of others) (I can't help it: it's my lot, my suffering and life, as you wish)

that you said it, you who received it from me: an infallible sign of this objectivity

it's going well, then

even when it isn't easy, that's precisely why it's going well

if the *amor intellectualis dei*⁸ means anything, then that's it: to love things as they are, because the heart of their necessity is exposed. A 'Si nudo' [laying bare]. What I would call, contrary to Hegel (who speaks of 'the labour of the negative'), the labour *of the positive*.

ciao

L.

⁸ A reference to the 'intellectual love of God' according to Spinoza.

Saturday 12-X-63

[...] (the idea that someone is going to be living close to you, in your space, sharing your shadow, your voice, your movements, your smell, what you leave behind, what precedes and what follows you, measuring - even without realising it - the space you fill, you, the space in which you live, the space of your speech, gaze (gaze!), movements, of your arms, legs, body, body, body... plus the warmth you can't stop coming from you, then... right - a little water on my embers, but it only makes them burn even more - so let's talk about something else)

then your letter about dignity⁹.

I like the sharpness of your analysis. Not showing that you're afraid (1). Showing that you are afraid (2). Showing your loved ones what you are, such as you are, so showing your loved ones that you're afraid when you are afraid. (3) Then what you say about taking one's own life.

True, when someone talks about the dignity of a third party, it's always in comparison with his own feeling of unworthiness, he's blaming himself for not having been able to keep quiet, for having spoken about himself, when the other person, who would have had so many reasons to speak his suffering out loud, overcame it through silence. J.M[artin] is the inverse, the mirror image of so much unworthiness, my own first of all - and among other things: for having made him witness my complaints and 'crises', when he, who experienced far harsher ones, would never speak first about his. I had to say the first word, clear the way, somehow cancel, by inviting him to speak, the silence he would, otherwise, never have left behind, so that he could consent to acknowledge that things had been 'quite difficult lately, that he was coming through it slowly', etc. He doubtless awaited this sign from without, he doubtless waited for the path to be cleared - and to be given the chance to express himself without taking the

⁹ Undated letter, doubtless from the 9-X-1963.

initiative for it -, but he needed, with regard to himself, to prove, to have proof of his *absolute discretion*. He died just as he held his silence: first. I do know, Franca, that, at a pinch, the word dignity only has value by dint of a tacit, latent comparison; that so intended its meaning is negatively framed and that, once this has been understood, one must go further. You're right: you don't kill yourself out of 'dignity' alone. I just meant that he bore his sufferings, and prepared his death, and carefully arranged everything so as to be forgotten, destroying every trace, everything he'd written, forbidding any mourning (a month before killing himself, he wrote detailed instructions for his notary: his 'last will'. No information, no mourning for those close to him, no ceremony, just his ashes); that he thus bore his suffering, and prepared and arranged the circumstances of his death, so as to weigh as little as possible on anyone. He never weighed on anyone. I never felt him, such as he was, to be a weight, or a worry - even though I was consumed with worry for months last year, but these concerns stemmed from what I feared for him, in no way did they come from him, his actions or behaviour. The very opposite of those people who 'need' you, whether it be in daily life, or at times of unhappiness. When he asked a favour (which happened very rarely), he was careful to do so in such a way that one never felt it as a weight, he'd cancel it out by his very way of asking. In the end, the most tragic thing for me was to feel just how much he was protecting his solitude, how much he suffered when you tried to impinge on his discretion, how disarmed I felt before the process leading him to the abyss - meaning how much he knew that any help was futile and, knowing that, sought to forbid his friends the very idea of it. I'll give you some other details later, Franca. He really did die just as he lived, signalling (in such a harrowing way I can't talk about it) that his death was nothing, and should be taken as such by those who knew him, something that would pass them by, noiselessly, and disappear into the distance. In all of this, perhaps, if you just think about him, away from any silent comparison his friends will make with themselves, the word dignity has barely any meaning; for he never proposed to be

dignified, dignity had no meaning for him, no more, besides, than any word with the slightest moral resonance: the world of 'values' was meaningless to him, was in truth nonexistent for him, was mere ideology and myth. But I'm also thinking of what he couldn't help but sense about the judgements his singular behaviour could inspire in a certain number of people, who knew about his life, and were surprised, for example, to see him remain so inactive, or who even judged him to be a 'false mind' (!) or showed, in one way or another, that they struggled to tolerate this way of being. For him, these people existed, yet as though they were nonexistent: he considered them just as he considered the sky, trees, or a stone, that's 'how it was', they 'were that way, what can you do?', and he'd move on, without insisting. He had an extraordinarily keen eye when it came to fathoming people, including those whose mediocrity his existence offended, he'd judge them just as they were, then disregard them and talk about something else: 'that's how it is'. He'd disregard them and talk about something else with visible pleasure, as though to say: right, let's turn the page and talk about serious things. And we'd talk about something else. His simplicity I also found staggering. Think that I, who'd never had a teacher, who'd never learned anything about philosophy, and was therefore ignorance itself, should find myself faced with him, who knew an infinite amount about it - who always knew infinitely more than me (and not just about philosophy). Know that, at this level, the whole trick, particularly at the School, where a time honoured tradition was revived by young philosophers' sensitivities, consisted above all of masking your ignorance, of pretending to know, and thus of never admitting one's ignorance, of never asking the least question for fear of betraying any... know that this general competition about knowledge assumed, on the side of the one being asked a question, the form of evident satisfaction at having thus scored a point, gaining an advantage over an interlocutor forced to avow his ignorance; and know that this kind of joust literally poisoned the life of the School and all relations between its students, to the point of making them impossible; well, he alone never made me feel in

the slightest, in his answers and the tone in which he uttered them, like I should have known what I was asking him... that I was thus avowing an undue ignorance... and that he might therefore either chide me for it or derive thereby any kind of satisfaction... I don't quite know how to convey this to you, for after all it's *natural* to accept that ignorance exists, it's the *most natural* thing in the world, but it was also the least natural in the artificial world of the School, the last type of permitted and admitted conduct! and you had to be a kind of iconoclast to break with that, to behave as he did - and accept that he be asked questions without being surprised that one should ask them. I never felt the least shame in asking him questions I would have concealed from all the others, for I knew he'd answer them as *perfectly natural* questions. And he wasn't only like that with me, but with everyone. And he was truly *the only one* of his kind, both then, and also, it must be said, since. He accepted your not knowing what he knew just as he accepted things that were 'like that'. He'd say, for instance, 'childhood exists', and the saying served for ages as his key and symbol, a way of stating that you have to begin at the beginning, that that's how it is, and that the beginning itself, such as it is, is 'thus'. I can now see a little more clearly what I was trying to say with the word *dignity*. Within him there was a core of unproblematic simplicity in the very way he confronted problems: an ability to acknowledge things as they are, a deep acceptance of their facticity and necessity, an extraordinary sense of 'natural movement' in the Aristotelian sense; he had this simplicity and discretion, like a manner and style of behaviour placing him in direct contact, as direct as possible, without intermediary or barrier or veil or distance, without the least overstatement, with things just as they were: 'that's how it is, what can you do?'. He burdened no one with his sufferings and his life, by dint of the same feeling for the *natural* necessity of what was befalling him (this sense of natural necessity was quite the opposite of any fatalism, or resignation: he fought every day, but experienced this struggle itself as a natural necessity), and because of the deep sense he had at the same time that nothing from *the outside* could really affect, could transform

this necessity, but that it could only be transformed *from within*. He didn't ask for anything. He thus demanded nothing. And, I'd say, neither did he offer anything in the usual guise of gifts, assistance or help. When you asked for his help, when I asked him to come over and see me during my worst times, he'd be promptly there, without the shadow of a failing or hesitation. He'd be there, and I had to speak about myself before he replied, he'd never *anticipate* what I was saying in order to offer me the least succour. I spoke and then, all of a sudden, rather than answering, rather than *giving* me what my questions were calling out for, he'd reflect out loud on what I'd said, and with a word, or very few words, he'd take sufficient distance from my speech to remove the illusory desire to find in his answer *the* answer to my question. He'd replace things in their truth, squeeze them into their essence, force them to say what they were, and nothing more, with these few words, which reduced to reality the excessive and magical hope of a *demand* for *total* help, disguised in a particular question. When I was alone with him in this way, a whole type of behaviour was forbidden and futile, forbidden because *rendered futile* by his mere critical and reductive presence. That his presence was, by its own virtue, critical, was perhaps its greatest merit. For one can remain silent *on one's own account* for a wide variety of reasons, including for example out of resignation or pride, etc. But when you manage, and in order to manage to behave with another in such a way that the few words with which you reply, with which you return his demand, with which you thoroughly criticise the illusions this demand contains, are words that remove, without causing offence, any illusions about the demand itself, are words that *truly help*, while *refusing* the help being demanded in the question, are words that help precisely because they refuse to help, meaning are words placing the one making the demand in touch with his own reality, with what he can bear of his own truth, and which eschew the beneficent illusions of consolation and complaint - when you can manage to behave in this way with others, when you can manage this kind of silent conduct in relation to others, with such tact and such an exact awareness of the limits

of its exercise, then I think there can no longer be any question of citing an array of different motives: you can't act that way either out of pride, or resignation, or self-importance. You're acting, now, out of respect for, or rather (respect still has a whiff of morals) out of a *discernment* of the other's reality - not the reality he avows and seeks more or less desperately-mythically in his exaggerations and complacent-complaints -, but the reality he displays within his very trickery as final, naked, unveiled. The 'thus it is' of the other, what he is, what he wants, including what he'd like to want.

There, I'm still talking about him.

Ciao Franca

L.

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