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Books, the Art of Reading and the Meaning of Life

Abstract: According to Foucault, up to the 17th century, words and things were linked together, as there were deep similarities between all the realms of nature. The world was a book and a mirror (*liber et speculum*), whose signs had to be deciphered. Starting with the 17th century, language and things became separated. The words are no longer similar to the things they designate, they become an arbitrary system. In agreement with this assumption, the world no longer holds a pre-established meaning, in which man can insert himself. In the 19th century, Nietzsche elaborated this thought, speaking for the first time about the *meaning of life*. In his view, only the major individualities lead a life full of meaning: the philosopher, the saint and the artist. The purposes of this text are to show that 1) the issue of the meaning of life appears in Nietzsche's early aphorisms as a consequence of his philological conception about text, reading and interpretation, which already announces a philosophy of life and that 2) in the late aphorisms this notion is refined by the will to power theory and by the genealogical critique of nihilistic ideals.

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1. The Reading Monster

What is reading good for? This is the question raised by the Portuguese novelist Rui Zink in *O Anibaleitor*. A poor child, having become a pickpocket, is lucky enough to discover books and reading. In this fantasy-infused story, the teacher's part is played by a cannibal monster, Anibaleitor. The author alludes, of course, to Hannibal Lecter's name, the character in Thomas Harris's novels, brilliantly portrayed by Anthony Hopkins on the big screen. Anibaleitor means "the reading animal", considered a monster by his contemporaries, who, unfortunately, have completely lost the sense in reading. The monster introduces the child to the art of reading, and, just like any initiation, this is not an easy thing to do. The child is forced to read certain books, chosen carefully, only to discuss them afterwards with the monster, with the child's life depending on it. It all happens like in *A Thousand and One Nights*, where Scheherazade had to tell the sultan a story every night, but weaving a thread of suspense for the following night, also in an effort to save her own life. With time, the child begins to like reading, and when he eventually sets the captive monster free, he is condemned to

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become a writer. “It is worse than prison for life”, he says. Moreover, he is forced to talk about books with pupils trapped in their own cages.

The novel is an excellent opportunity to meditate on the nature of reading. This is a “meeting between two voices: ours and the book’s”. But how does this meeting occur? Is it a free flowing encounter, or is it a violent crash? Does it cause genuine inner storms, altering the brave soul that dares to approach the book?

A reader must keep his neutral stance before the book he is reading, you ask? I wouldn’t be so radical. Why would it be appropriate for *me* to cease being *me* just to hear someone else’s thoughts? And how could *I* stop being *me*, even if I wanted? Could they have invented plastic surgery for spirit? However, it is true that the reader must try to speak the language of the book. Being able to speak it means surrendering to its melody, giving in to its streak, instead of wasting precious energy through rowing against the tide. That is by no means an invitation to subside, to obey, but we must become *available*. The book, through the mere quality of having already been written, has already made a big step towards us: it is a gift. Now it is our turn to thank the book for its kindness and make a step towards it.

What seems to be an act of hospitality before the book becomes, in a different context, an actual hunt. Ultimately, “a book is a house with many doors.” The key can sometimes be hidden. In this instance, the reader has to become a genuine predator: sometimes attacking immediately, other times leaving and returning the following day. At last, there is the blissful situation when the book and the reader are a perfect match: “just like love, reading is an encounter between two imperfect individuals who can complete each other perfectly.” The conclusion of the novel might seem sceptical. Apparently, reading does not serve any purpose. The reader remains with his own things. But, the author adds, “the most important things in life are the ones that are good for nothing.” Each individual is left with his own inner world, but reading allows him to know it thoroughly and differently.

2. Words, things, life

In the 17th century, the Neoplatonist Alain de Lille highlights an old medieval idea through a comparison that would later make history, the one between the book and the mirror: “Omnis munda creatura / quasi liber et pictura / nobis est in speculum: nostrae vitae, nostrae mortis, / nostri status, nostrae sortis / fidele signaculum” (“All the creatures of the world/ like a book and like a painting/ are like a mirror for us;/ our life, our death,/ our condition, our fate/ all are minutely inscribed”). In the Middle Ages, the book was a fundamental symbol, because the world was regarded as the book written by God; next to the book of nature, the book of life was the

one that contained the destiny of man; the book of experience was the soul itself, for the saint Bernard de Clairvaux, and every man had to read it; and even the Bible was the book holding the Word of God. Beginning with Augustin, a new idea emerged, that of a harmony between all these orders – this very idea is captured by Alain de Lille. Carefully observing the natural world helps us understand our life. Nonetheless, from a theological perspective, we acquire a mirror of our life through reading the book of nature, but this is not enough for possessing a mirror of redemption as well. Being written by God, the book of nature comprises, besides the signs of life, the signs of redemption, but the latter category is coded and requires deciphering. The same idea is highlighted by Umberto Eco as well. The Book of Creation is to be read between the lines, as its signs bear a reference that transcends them, reaching the divine author. For the Christian thinker, this idea still holds the same complete significance. In *The Conflict of Interpretations*, Paul Ricoeur talks about the effects of the Bible on the self who is fuelled by belief, and, concurrently, on the Western world, and the image used is the very *liber et speculum*: “By receiving the text, we identify with it and turn the book into a mirror” (Ricoeur 1969, 377; Ricoeur 1993, 47-8). In this mirror we can discover ourselves, being in fact invited to inhabit the world opened by the sacred text.

In *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault advocates the idea that similitude was at the centre of Western knowledge until the 16th century, language functioning simultaneously as mirror of the world and theatre of life. From its diverse semantic network, Foucault highlights four main orders of similitude: *convenientia*, *aemulatio*, *analogia* și *simpatia* (Foucault 1989, 19-50). 1) *Convenientia*, as Foucault claims, designates the resemblances between adjacent elements, like the soul and the body. Nature does everything gradually, without skipping stages, making proximity function as a tool for adaptation. In short, the world is a great chain of beings. 2) *Aemulatio* signifies the similitude between beings that have no contact with each other. Elements dispersed throughout the whole world apparently respond to each other, imitate each other. Sometimes, the world seems to be a placid mirror, but other times this mirror reflects the conflict of similar elements – here, Foucault refers to the perspective of Paracelsus. Now, the world appears as a suite of concentric circles, reflected and sometimes rival. 3) *Analogia*, in Foucault’s vision, represents the subtle similitudes, not between things, but between their rapports. Everything is a network of rapports, of resemblances, having one privileged element: man. He is the focal point of all proportions, the irradiance centre that supports all rapports and the place from where they are reflected once more. 4) Finally, *simpatia* portrays the free movement in the depths of the world, causing the approach of elements far-away. It is, in Foucault’s perspective, the power of assimilation, of making things become identical.

As Foucault states, in the 16th century we can observe a conjunction between semiology and hermeneutics. Identifying the meaning is the same as placing resemblances in perspective. To know is to interpret, and approaching texts and approaching things are similar in their nature. The world is full of words, full of signs that must be decoded, just like in the case of texts. Language is still an integral part of the world, Foucault points out. But beginning with the 17th century, the interdependence, the interconnectedness between the language and the world is destroyed. Language no longer resembles the things it designates, but becomes an arbitrary system. Words and things drift apart, Foucault claims. And beginning with Nietzsche, interpretation falls apart from semiology, it stops being a repetition of the latter (Foucault 1998, 269-278). Interpretation frees itself from the fixity of signs, descending towards the interpretative acts that gave birth to signs in the first place. New questions arise in philosophy. What type of will stands at the origin of signs? *Who* is the one that can impose a sign? What life trajectory must one adhere to, to become able to dictate the meaning of signs?

3. Slow reading and its meaning for life

A lucid reflection on reading can be discovered in one of Nietzsche's early writings, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (Nietzsche 1999a). Here, Nietzsche addresses a calm reader, who should not be captive in his own cultural age. This reader still reflects upon what he has read for a long time after he has laid the book aside. Secondly, Nietzsche points out, one's individuality and one's education should not be permanently involved as measure and criterion for all things, in the manner of the modern man. Only this style of reading allows for lending oneself to the author's will, learning from him. Then, the reader desired by Nietzsche should be equally equipped with historical and medical sense. He must understand the maladies of his time, but also their place among the broader history of the diseases tormenting the European culture. Lonely and altruistic, such a reader takes the risk of feeling the suffering and the debasement of his age. From the reader who is an embodiment of all these qualities, Nietzsche expects a symbolical destruction and a virtual obliviousness of the book he is reading at the moment, that urges him to throw himself on the battlefield and turn words into deeds. The book is a herald of action, but one that melts in its result.

The reader who suspends his own culture, his own convictions and beliefs, only to surrender himself to the guidance of the book and its author is like the genealogist philosopher, who places everything under a question mark, including his own way of being. A good practician of the genealogical method, the philosopher does not shoulder any divine eye, any viewpoint

above the phenomena explored, but understands that he is also part of their configuration, carrying their mark within themselves. Assimilating the Humboldtian model of education, Nietzsche conceives education as building oneself. For this purpose, enabling individuals to achieve their potential, education is centred on a philological model: reading great authors and great books. Moreover, approaching texts from an uninvolved perspective and a neutral standpoint can never lead to adequate understanding. We only understand what we accomplish in our own life. “We want to understand the most precious phenomenon and we want to grow side to side with it. Our task is to get accustomed to it and to transpose the text to our life”, to *live* within the reality of the book (*Hineinleben*), Nietzsche writes in his *Introduction to the Study of Classical Philology*, in 1871 (Nietzsche 1920, 339). This hermeneutic principle is known as *subtilitas applicandi*. In Gadamer’s formulation (*Truth and Method*), we only understand if we succeed in applying a certain meaning in our own life (Gadamer 1990, 312-316). Only then does life become a meaningful one.

Meditating on reading, Nietzsche also reflects upon the manner in which he would like to be read. The image of the ideal reader that he constructs also determines him to remodel his writing. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he states that “he who writes his sentences with his own blood – that writer does not desire to be read, but learnt by heart” (Nietzsche 1999b, 48). For Nietzsche, authentic writing springs from life itself. On the contrary, the writing that remains at the level of abstract ideas represents a proof for an alienation from life as such.

I have always written my texts with my whole body and my whole life: I do not know what purely spiritual issues are... You know these things as ideas, but your ideas are not your experiences, but the echo of something else: as if your room trembled when a car passes by. But for me, I am in that car, and often I am the car itself (Nietzsche 1897, 396 and 401 sq.).

The authentic spirit is nothing else than blood, Nietzsche points out. And in *On the Genealogy of Morality* he completes this idea: the reader who understands must be deeply hurt, but simultaneously thrilled by the text he is reading, by each and every word of it (Nietzsche 1999c, 255).

Here we come across a perfect illustration of the hermeneutic circularity. As an attentive interpreter like Viktor Pöschl notices, Nietzsche uses Goethe’s principle. “You must be something to do something”, adapting it, however, to understanding texts: you must be something to understand something (Pöschl 1979, 142). Understanding texts and educating through philology both require the involvement of the human being as a whole, not just its ability to reason. This is why Nietzsche criticized the philological practice of his time, because it remained abstract, bearing no connection to

life. Contrariwise, understanding is intimately tied to the practical life of the individual whose purpose is to understand.

Let us weave these ideas together. So, in order to understand we have to become something, to embody a form of life, but not an ordinary one, one of exemplary value. And in view of becoming something, it is necessary to transpose into our own life what we understand. So, books and life are two elements with a symbiotic relationship, with each of them acting as a much needed counterpoint for the other, the existence of one being indispensable for the other – in this respect, Nietzsche resembles another representative of the philosophy of life, Dilthey. Life expresses itself, while texts, works of art and religious elements are its actual expressions and objectifications. One commentator, Günther Figal, calls them hermeneutic objects (Figal 2004). For Nietzsche, these mediations of life contribute to understanding life or, on the contrary, act as negations of life, signs of a negative will to power. In fact, what matters to him is the type of will to power that finds its expression in a certain objectification of life: one which affirms itself, or, on the contrary, one which negates itself.

4. From the meaning of texts to the meaning of life

One of the most important interpreters, Volker Gerhardt (1992, 21), points out that we owe the phrase “meaning of life” to Nietzsche, this phrase being relatively novel in the Western culture. First used in a fragment from 1873, to discuss the “meaning of earthly life” (Nietzsche 1999d, 668), it is then used again in an aphorism, in 1875, in which he dwells upon the fate of philology and philologists, whose mission is to train the philosopher, who in his turn can say something about the *value of life*. Without clarifying whether the phrases “the meaning of life” and “the value of life” are synonymous here (later texts only seem to display a partial synonymy), Nietzsche specifies that “the man is an individual solely through three forms of existence: as a philosopher, as a saint or as an artist” (Nietzsche 1999e, 32).

In conclusion, the meaning of life is not a gift to everyone, being only acquired by the people with a robust individuality: the philosopher, the saint, the artist. If we attach this idea to the previously stated aphorisms, we can assert the fact that life garners meaning only if a certain will to power synthesizes its vicinity, thus offering a sense of direction. So, meaning equals, simultaneously, direction, understanding and purpose. Some critics claimed Nietzsche translates into philosophy the concepts he collected through his experience as a philologist, with the most obvious example found in the utterly surprising use of the idea of *interpretation*. However, the concept of *meaning* undergoes a similar alteration, a fact which warrants Jean Grondin to highlight a “philologization of existence” (Grondin 2003). And

the reason why Nietzsche reaches the point where he approaches the meaning of life in this manner, Grondin explains, lies in the fact that life itself had reached a point where it did not hold a given meaning anymore. It cannot remember the meaning received from outside, from the order of the universe, like in the previous centuries (Brague 1999), and thus we can find an explanation for the reasons why the meaning of life did not raise a question mark throughout so many centuries of philosophy. With Nietzsche, a new concept on the meaning of life is established, and this concept still holds its ground in our time: “life only has meaning for an individual who decides for his life, turning it into a work of art” (Grondin 2003). If we plunge into Nietzsche’s late works, we can observe a fruitful continuation of this idea. In order to decide on our own life, we need to freeze in it all the ideals of the past, all the values and meanings that our life holds – not only in our reason, but in our whole body. This is the only way to give life a new meaning, a new direction, a new significance. This is Nietzsche’s utopia, his “brave new world.”

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