

An interview with Alphonso LINGIS

(1) Our experience is that reading a text by you, above all, entails being precipitated into a relationship with the Other – often an-Other who is distant, with her/his culture and assumptions about what nature is. But the Other is never captured or reduced to an abstraction. The writing is always in the first-person singular; emphasizing the personal, experienced and immediate. The texts are stories of encounters that neither leave you nor your reader indifferent. The narrative choice(s) seem to imply a textual ethic; could you expand on that ethics, its sources and its philosophical/political significance as you see it.

We can distinguish between “different” and “other.” I can perceive someone in some ways similar to me as different by noting traits that are unlike (different sex, color, language, affirms different things). But even where the differences are minimal someone situates him- or herself apart, on his or her own, by addressing me, appealing to me and contesting me, requiring a response from me with words, with gestures, with a look.

Here there is an ethical imperative; before the other I have to respond and to respond directly and honestly. There is this presence of the other at the origin of writing; when I write, I am responding to what has been said to me, demanded of me. When I write about someone I have encountered, I seek to make that someone present to the reader. That someone addressed me, questioned me, and continues to do so as I seek to represent him or her faithfully. The reader is the third presence of yet another. The reader is present as someone to whom I offer what I say to his or her questioning and judgment.

The writing is held within these three relationships to another, three ethical relationships. The writing becomes precise and concrete in the measure that the questions and demands put to the writer are singular. Thus, I do not see philosophical texts simply subjected to an abstract value of truth. But the relationship with others in writing requires behavior and action that are open to contestation and judgment. Certain political institutions exclude this. The ethical relationships involved in writing invoke a fundamental political ethic. (There are, to be sure, also philosophical texts in the form of mathematical logic, meditation and autobiography.)

(2) Meeting an-Other through your text provides an opportunity for learning and awareness. The encounter is grounded in life experiences that have affected you. The author of the text has learned; he has been affected; he is no longer the same as before. Often the texts begin by recalling an aspect of the “natural attitude” or a conviction widely shared that will be challenged by the meeting with the Other that ensues. You seem to learn more than you’re looking for. What skills are needed to develop this ability at openness and at learning? What could social studies or science research, learn from this? And why do you rarely specify precisely what it is that you have learned?

We do pick up and pass along what is said about implements and ornaments, about people in other posts and in other lands, about neighborhood developments and political events and also what is felt about them. We pick up from others how to talk and what to feel and pass them on to others. This circulation is interrupted by something strange, or by words that appeal to us and contest us, words of a stranger. There is surprise; made of



bafflement and exhilaration. Opening upon something new – learning – comes from these outbreaks of surprise. I hesitate to speak of skill, which implies a habitual pattern of behavior. But if we assent to surprise, take pleasure in the outbreak of surprise, the pleasure can make us open to more surprises. Exhilaration launches learning and learning is exhilarating.

A writer should not supply the reader with ready-made insights or think for the reader. If I have been able to recount with precision and vigor the encounter in which an insight arose, the reader will formulate the insight in his or her own words.

A social science researcher arrives with a vocabulary, set of categories and paradigms of understanding, which in turn implicate an ontology, an implicit conception of what there is and how beings are. When she or he encounters subjects whose statements and affirmations strike the researcher as strange or irrational, the researcher can react in two different ways. She can interpret the statements as socially constructed, ideological expressions masking class conflict or masking sexual oppression, or projections of unconscious desires, conflicts and aggressions. Or she can envision the things and events to which the statements refer. She may have to construct, invent concepts and terms to convey what they represent. For example, instead of reporting that Amazonian Amerindians project the souls they experience in themselves into nonhuman species and inanimate things, an anthropologist can recognize that Amerindians do not experience by “bird” what modern Western natural science and its underlying ontology defines as a “bird.”

(3) The relationship of affect entails the “face of the other” – where, by “face”, we mean the body, the gestures and the mannerisms. Relatedness, here, does not pass via explanation. To use Levinas’ categories, you seem to be interested in the “saying” and not in the “said.” In your texts, people often speak who have no voice (the subalterns). And it is a “speech” that does not stop at words, i.e., the words’ meanings remain elliptical. The “subject” (speaker and spoken) is up for grabs: is it the Other, the author, the circumstance and/or the reader? If the “truth” of the text belongs to them all, are your texts then a form of relativism?

Speaking and writing about the given – what others, what encounters with other species, with monuments and omens, with rivers and caves gave one to see and to understand – moves naturally into listening. One speaks and writes because one hears voices that appeal to one and contest one; one speaks and writes in response. One becomes aware of multitudes who are not heard, who have no voice. Then begins the difficult task of giving them voice, making them heard in one’s own voice, in one’s writing. Here, lucidity, honesty and tact are critical. If I write of what another encounters and understands, I can submit my writing to him or her to validate. Failing that, I must invoke what I honestly believe he or she would validate.

I want to write as precisely and vigorously as possible so that the reader grasps what was given to me and the insight that arose from the given. The reader will grasp it from the perspective and direction of the succession of his or her insights. The thought the reader captures is not his, nor does he own it and is no longer mine; it is ours and opens upon further thought.

(4) Your texts are immediately stylistically recognizable. Your writing is very singular, always well honed, characterized by your way of describing and of triggering reflexivity. They are texts of affect that touch the reader. You invoke complex philosophical positions with simple words. Your writing performs, affects and transmits, rather than explains or affirms. Many cognitive aspects of your thought remain implied and concealed. Does this “episteme” define a philosophical (epistemological and/or ontological) position? In how far did you arrive at it spontaneously and/or self-consciously? Do you aspire to textual unicity or hope that others will follow you?

Language does not simply record what we have seen; language reveals things and the world. A friend visited Martin Heidegger the evening of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin set foot on the moon. Heidegger spoke with awe of the astonishing power of the scientific discourse to reveal Being. Different regions of reality induce “language games” – although “games” divert attention to the revealing work of languages.

In seeking to share an encounter and an insight, ideally it should induce the appropriate vocabulary, rhetoric and means of explanation – narrative, exposition, inductive or deductive argument. I do not reflect about these and determine them separately. Often several versions get worked on until the right one becomes clear. It is important to me not to reflect too much on why and how this essay worked; it is important that it not become a template for the composition of subsequent essays. Hopefully the topic of the next essay will induce the right way to write to share an insight.

(5) What effects/affects are you trying to convey to the reader, to society? Why write these texts? What do you see as the desired/desirable performativity of your writing?

Thought is gratitude. Gratitude, giving thanks, is an action. Someone gives us a bottle of wine; we hold it, look at its origin, we appreciate at its color and savor its aroma and bouquet as we pour it to our friends before we fill our glass. Something is given, an encounter, an event, an insight. To write it is to hold it, deepen its contours and its vibrancy. To write well, with clarity and vigor, is to share it with others.

Sometimes one writes simply to reveal and share wonder and a pleasure that were given. Sometimes the understanding that comes has important practical consequences. One day in the Deer Park in Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, an astrologist remarked to me that all the important events of our life – our birth, our physical integrity or disabilities, the individuals whose teaching or example led us to a work or profession, the person we met and fell in love with, the ailments, diseases and accidents that befall us, the way we die – are due to chance. I was struck by what he said and reflected that philosophers have not taken serious account of that. A few months later, back at the university I met a guidance counselor who told me she had in her office data banks on all possible professions and the available openings for them. She administers tests to determine the abilities and interests of students so that they can rationally determine their life work. I reflected that in ethics class we teach rational decision-making. But all the important events of our life [. . .].

When I attended some sessions of the “Khmer Rouge” trials in Phnom Penh I came to see that many things, at stake in those trials, were troubling – the goal of objective, subjective and intersubjective truth, what is required for reconciliation, the conflict between retributive and restorative justice, the questionable nature of recompense for wrongs suffered, the import of forgiveness. These issues trouble behavior far beyond the events litigated in that court.

(6) To achieve its effect, text often becomes performance. Beyond what is said and what is not said, the text is made up of images, music, rhythms, intonations, clothing, cries, breathing, a living presence. You often refer to your travels as a beginning to developing your striking literary performances: do you have a “method”, or can one better say your work is characterized by a commitment or an art of living?

It was gradually that I came to enlist more performative resources, each time as the text and the circumstances elicited them. I instinctively avoided reflecting on the composition, so that it would not emerge as a method. Intuition, distant memory of performances experienced, unformulated sense of what seems right and what seems impoverished and what excessive goes into a composition. Considerable attention and care should be devoted to developing performative resources. They do enter into the very meaning of the words. In the canon of philosophy is Aristotle’s treatise on rhetoric.

(7) *Contrary to Kathleen Stewart, for example in Ordinary Affects, you do not (claim to) tell about encounters on the corner of your own street. Do you think that writing from an American (or European) "life as usual" perspective, for instance, about a IT consultants point of view, or from a factory floor, or from a businessman's office, could trigger your sort of text? What do you think of (the pretense of) learning from the everyday?*

What is closest to us, what is there everyday can be opaque and overlooked. Our own street, the economic and social niche in which we live and with which we are most familiar may well be understood only superficially. Words can have meaning only if they are repeatable, but they empty of their meaning by being repeated. Maurice Merleau-Ponty observed that thought that is thought too much no longer thinks anything. Philosophical investigations can well make the familiar unfamiliar, can awaken surprise before things we pass over lightly. They join the multitude of short stories, novels and films that make us see how strange the family life, suburban life, or inner-city life we live is. Kathleen Stewart has given us invaluable writings.

Yet philosophy has to walk the open roads of the world. The experiences and needs of people in remote lands and economic and social positions concern us. Marxists have characterized much philosophical ethics as an ethics of bourgeois society. Women have noted that the major thinkers in ethics have elaborated a distinctively male ethics. Reading much literature in ethics one notices that many of the examples are drawn from middle class life in developed countries. In going to the far away and long ago we are not only seeking to know what humans have been and are, but what we can become. Philosophy seeks out the most extraordinary and ecstatic possibilities.

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