

## THE FEAR OF READING AND WRITING

*To my students in Caucasia.*

A few days ago I attended a meeting of university professors. In it the conditions to develop the assigned semester courses were updated. A coordinator of the program from which the meeting was called to the meeting specified her characterization of the students enrolled in the courses. Perhaps she would not say characterization, but rather cartographic fold or something more expressive and sophisticated. In the end, what she points out is that students read little and write less. Qualities that she explains by warning that 'we come from cultures of orality' and that 'our horizons are more narrative than scriptural'. For this reason, she suggests that courses should not be based on writing and, much less, on forcing students to write. What the coordinator indicates is that we need to implement other ways of developing our courses and classes. In the end, she seems to excuse us from our tasks as teachers, after all, the students can't read and write and don't want to! As you can imagine, if you judge our time well, the teachers attending the meeting say very little and those who say something seem to share the coordinator's criteria. In general, they are all eager for new didactic alternatives to replace the outdated traditional education. Writing is somewhat obsolete when confronted with the promise of a renewed educational paradise. There is no defense of the need for teachers and students to write!

At this point, allow me an aside to recommend Pedagogy (in parentheses) by Daniel Brailovsky (2019), an essay that argues for the falsity of the new/traditional opposition in pedagogy. Appropriating the thesis that Brailovsky proposes, it is that many of those things that are called new are opportune for the unabashed championing of initiatives for the capture of education by the market. Apparently, those who find that education is a commodity like any other, are the most concerned about overcoming the outdated and welcoming the latest, the latest. That is, neurosciences, self-improvement, emotional education, self-management, self-control, innovation and a long etcetera that hide the educational malaise by pointing out that everything is in our brain and in our emotions. Therefore, for the educational market, everything can be transformed with a simple personal decision. However, in those things they call traditional, there remains a content that really does aspire to freedom and self-determination. Not through the mediation of a simple personal decision, but through the patient work of man with his historical and social situation, that is, with what makes him inseparable from others. Freedom and self-determination are not where the educational market points, in our brain and in our emotions, but in the common historical and social conditions. In fact, the mind and the affections are the archive of our historical and social life. Brailovsky's thesis may lie not in adopting a sectarian stance or in defending one of the opposing points, since this opposition is known to be false, but in understanding the heterogeneity of perspectives masked in the new/traditional dichotomy. More importantly, the thesis can be translated into the purpose of distancing oneself from the times, but not giving up on asking urgent questions regarding the type of education that is promoted. Questioning, for example, why we are exempted from reading and writing at university. Also to question how it is that we teachers come to embrace with such devotion the promise of a renewed educational paradise, where that which demands discipline can be abandoned.

It may be pointed out that writing is an activity in which systems of knowledge are fixed, as well as the modalities from which such knowledge is produced, to the exclusion of other languages. In this sense, it is binding and normative. But, in writing not only knowledge systems are reaffirmed, but also systems are dissolved. In writing man not only reaffirms his normative bonds, but also opens the gap between them and the possibility of creation. This is not strange. In the eighteenth century, when the Enlightenment wrests writing from the powers of political (the king), religious (the pope) and cultural (the scholar) hierarchies, there is an expansion

of political, religious and cultural possibilities of creation for those who were once denied the opportunity to write. In *Cursed History of Literature. The Woman, the Homosexual and the Jew*, Hans Meyer (1982) argues that the Enlightenment fails to realize equality among all human beings. The proof of this failure lies in the historical events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nevertheless, women, homosexuals and Jews in writing find ways of life or, at least, styles that allow them to cultivate their difference and embellish what the historical and social courts have declared accursed.

Back at the meeting, it is clear that the students neither know how to write nor want to write. It is elliptical that neither do the professors (although this cannot be said out of discretion). So it is time to do something else; it is time to think about what to do. Something that implies reading less and writing less. That is what the coordinator's criteria is reduced to. With one stroke, writing is erased with the appeal that it is not part of the cultures from which we supposedly come. Writing has never been ours, is what we are told in conclusion. At this point in the meeting, what I can put into words, at least for myself, is that if the university is not, by definition, a space for reading and writing, if the university is not the space in which professors insist that man can give himself reading and writing as practices of freedom and self-determination, it is time to consider what is the need to insist on naming as professor this impostor who neither reads nor writes, but who has found a way to entrench himself in university classrooms.

Try to imagine the aporia into which I am thrown. The course assigned to me has writing, education and the university as its central themes. If I adopt the criterion of the coordinator, I face a horizon where one does not know how to write, nor does one want to, but in which I must act as a teacher of writing, since that is what I have committed myself to. I could orient the effort of these letters in slamming the failed postmodern attitude that celebrates performances and rhizomatic folds with which it is pretended to resist and replace writing. I could indicate, following Kant and Nietzsche, that the anti-writing attitude is the cowardly laziness of the mediocre. It could also try to show that writing preserves the memory of tradition. In this regard, note the following. For the Jewish tradition, Yahweh (יהוה) creates the world through language. More specifically, Yahweh (יהוה) creates with words; that is, creation is a linguistic event. But, creation is not complete until man is confronted with it in writing. That is, in writing man undertakes the task of completing it. Writing is what is lacking in creation. Although within the Jewish tradition, the Torah (the holy book) must be transmitted orally from generation to generation, as an effect of persecution and exile, the possibility of transmitting it properly is put at risk. In the year 190 CE, Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi compiles the Oral Torah in written form under the name of Mishnah (Hebrew teaching), in order to preserve it. Rabbi Yehudah writes it in codified form and therefore his students need the interpretation of a rabbi. In this sense, the Torah remains open to infinite interpretation. Since then, the Jewish people have been known as the 'people of the book'. The Torah is not only their mark and sign, it is also the spirit of their survival. Through writing, man shares with Yahweh (יהוה) the possibility of creating something new of truth, as also through writing he actualizes his abilities to resist the virulent force of political, religious and cultural life.

However, instead of directing the effort in answering me systematically to what the coordinator invites with her criteria, I do not make hasty decisions, I wait patiently, as if in my head I write a text that needs waiting. So I have no illusions about creating didactic twists (if such a thing exists), to make a writing course into something that has nothing to do with writing. I resume my readings and recall Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein's (2014) book, *The Chosen Few. The Decisive Influence of Education on the History of the Jewish People, 70-1492*. In general terms, the thesis explored in the book posits that, in a certain way, it has become commonplace to accept that it is persecution that gives the Jewish people their unique form. For Botticini and Eckstein, however, this explanation can be reversed by opposing another, less explored explanation. In their opinion, the transforma-

tion of the Jewish people began in the year 70 (CE) with the impulse of a norm by which every Jewish male is obliged, as a child, to read the Torah with dedication, namely, the obligation to educate himself. Through education, the Jewish people chooses itself and this brings about the transformation that makes it unique to this day. Studying the Torah, writing interpretative commentaries and discussing them, over the centuries, forms a people capable of enduring through the power of reading and memory that is intertwined with writing.

Days before the beginning of the course, I reiterated that writing is a way of choosing oneself. To write is to sign the body with the words we choose for ourselves. That is why, at the beginning of the course, I direct my questions and observations to the students. I close the criteria of the coordinator. In the first session I raise the question not about what things they would write (if they wrote), but about what things they would never write. The answers relate to religion, family, sexuality, sexual preferences, humiliations suffered, political violence and violence against women. If you notice well, this is not little. In truth, the students have a lot to say. They have a lot to write about, but choose not to. When questioned as to why, what emerges is shame and the prevention of being exposed. That is, the fear of becoming the target of the historical and social courts in force. The course progresses and, as it does so, statements are made that the writing requested by the courses in the university does not require much, at most, learning to give the professors what they request and expect. Requested writing is technical in the academic sense. Even when students are asked to write about themselves, the well-considered biographical-narrative exercises, they are never questioned about the dying metaphors (Orwell, 2009), the common sense expressions, the clichés and the lack of force in what they write. They are never questioned about whether they are really there. In short, writing about themselves also becomes technical. For that matter, repetitive and mechanical. It seems that the great narrative line of flight of postmodern teachers is not being realized. Biographical-narrative exercises prove as formative as a conversation about the weather. Of course, university students write a lot, but they learn little from writing, much less learn to see in it a space to experiment with themselves. They write because they have to, but they do not write to form themselves or to shape the “I”. For this reason, thinking about writing or writing to think and writing to shake one’s thinking, tasks of this nature, can only cause bewilderment.

The more I become familiar with the students’ attitude toward writing activities, the more evident is not the truth of the coordinator’s criteria, but what we teachers do not do to teach the love of writing. What I verify best is not so much that students do not want to read or write, which to some extent is secondary. That “wanting” can be encouraged. In fact, Benner (1998) points out that, if learning is not achieved by imposition, then the task of teachers is to encourage students to choose to learn. Our task is to incite their self-determination. Now, what I see most clearly is the scarcity of teachers capable of showing the strength that increases once you have taken possession of an activity that offers you resistance. Hegel would say that by shaping the “thing” the “I” shapes itself. Indeed, reading and writing are not simple activities. They require the effort and patience demanded by everything that escapes our immediate references. What I have found is the scarcity of teachers willing to overcome with their students the fear of reading and writing, taking risks beyond the self-satisfied arbitrariness of those who do not want to make the effort or cultivate with patience. It could be said, appealing to Nietzsche, that he who renounces writing, for fear of giving himself the discipline it demands, renounces his self-determination.

In other words, what I verify is the lack of masters in the sense that Nietzsche indicates. The more abstract the content to be exposed, the more the teacher will have to make an effort to seduce, that is, to bring to the body what is perceived as nebulous and inexperiencible. The more variegated and difficult the writing appears to us, the greater the promise of feeling the fullness of life. If Nietzsche affirms that life without music would be a mistake, life without writing would be sterile.

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