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The Next Fifty Years

Ladelle McWhorter

Continental philosophy tends to be very textual, defined not so much by a set of problems as by a set of interpretive practices. We read Levinas or Irigaray and write interpretations of those texts. Of course, we do more than issue commentary; we *think* through texts, grappling with problems, concepts, and historical and cultural phenomena. Still, most of our work remains closely tied to texts. Consequently, it often reproduces a distinction between primary and secondary philosophical work that we might question. Nobody would deny the creativity of John Sallis' or David Wood's work or that of Debra Bergoffen or Kelly Oliver; they are *doing* philosophy, not just writing about others' doings. Yet, how many SPEP papers are on the work of Sallis or Oliver or Bernasconi, outside of author-meets-critic and book sessions? How many simply proclaim themselves to be doing philosophy, independent of any text?

Feminist philosophers more often treat each other's work as primary texts than do non-feminists. One does hear papers on Butler and Young. But even among continental feminists, this is not the norm, nor are papers totally detached from texts.

Likewise, dissertations more often address European figures than North American continentalists, which reflects the idea that serious continental work must engage primarily with French or German thinkers. SPEP's book exhibit offers plenty of volumes on Derrida, but no volumes on Allison or Alcoff.

Perhaps most crucially, when we teach survey courses, do we teach our North American colleagues' work? Are undergraduates taught to take Badiou and Ranciere more seriously than Schrag or Caputo? Is this what SPEP wants?

My concern here is not who should be canonized, but rather our philosophical practice. After fifty years, most of SPEP's founders are deceased or in permanent retirement. A much larger cohort is nearing the end of their careers. A major goal of those generations was to bring European philosophy to North America—which they did! That is not a task that we must take up as they lay it down. The task for us is to decide whether those generations will be remembered primarily as bearers of European gospels or as philosophers in their own right.

Recently I picked up David Harvey's *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* and read a lengthy and careful engagement with Ed Casey's work. I was surprised. Alongside Deleuze, Bachelard, Descartes, and Kant, Harvey treats our friend Ed like a real philosopher. But why be surprised? Harvey, a geographer, writes about space, so he must engage Casey, just as he engages Kant. Ed Casey *is* a real philosopher, and he is, surely, *the* space-man of our day. But is his work taught in geography courses more regularly than it is taught in courses on phenomenology?

One of our most enchanting colleagues is Alphonso Lingis. He never lectures or argues. He takes you where he wants you to go so you can see what he sees. The first time I attended one of Lingis's presentations was in 1997, not at SPEP but was at my home institution. Lingis wandered to and fro carrying his paper in his hands. The light on his clipboard illuminated his head so that his reddish-silver hair appeared to be afire. He looked positively demonic, an incarnation of pure energy. His paper, entitled "Innocence," published in Elizabeth Grosz's *Becomings*, still enchants me.

One might say the essay is political. It tells the story of fourteen people, members of Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, who stormed the Japanese Ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru, on December 17, 1996, taking 600 hostages, among whom were "thirty-five Japanese

businessmen, eight military and police generals (including the chiefs of intelligence and antiterrorism), seven foreign ambassadors, six national congressmen, five supreme court justices, two government ministers, and [Peruvian] President Fujimori's mother, sister, and younger brother" (Lingis 1999, 214). Within days all but 72 of the hostages were released unharmed. The guerrillas' single demand was release of 442 Tupac Amaru members held incommunicado, among whom was commando leader Néstor Cerpa Cartolini's wife, Nancy Gilvonio. When Lingis gave this paper in March of 1997, the guerrillas were still inside the residence with their 72 hostages. They remained there until April 22, when government forces tunneled into the compound and thirty soldiers shot them dead. The published essay tells the end of the story, concluding with a quotation from a letter addressed to his son found on Cartolini's body: "If I ever leave this Japanese residence it will be because I have achieved what you are waiting for and dreaming of: having your mummy out of prison, being able again to see her, touch her, play with her and be in her arms" (Lingis, 1999, 216).

One might say that Lingis's essay is about love and desperation or about hope and sacrifice. And it is, and it isn't. To say any of these things is to say both too much and too little.

The essay speaks in the second person, beginning: "You, Nancy Gilvonio, a *charapa*, half Indian, were born near the town of Tarapoto on the Amazonian side of the Peruvian Andes. How extremely improbable is your existence!" (Lingis, 1999, 201). It continues thus, adding Nancy's brother, "You, Américo Gilvonio ... growing to the threshold of manhood in Tarapoto" (Lingis, 1999, 206), the brother Nancy would lose to a firing squad and whose death would be revealed to her by a stranger in the dark of night, Néstor Cerpa Cartolini, Américo's comrade. These addresses and the piece's emphatic rhythms and vivid descriptions conjure Gilvonio herself, the life coursing through her body and the world she inhabited. One feels *her*, and simultaneously,

the gaping *loss* of her. If the essay is “about” anything, it is a *turning* about that describes an emptiness—not just the emptiness left by the dead and the disappeared, but, more insistently, the emptiness that occurs at a moment of newness, birth, awakening, an innocence of all history—all causes, all reasons, all values; it is a break, a rupture with any past—like chance, like action.

“What we call action,” Lingis writes, “is not simply an adjustment to compensate for what passes and passes away.... Our action arises upon an interruption, a break, of the continuity of operations, biological, physiological, and also laborious, that go on in us.” He continues,

Philosophers of history, whether reactionary or radical, see actions as shaped by values.... They see in the driving force of an action the momentum of accumulated skills and habits. They explain an action out of an evolving environment....

But our action ... is an interruption of the continuous dialectic of history, an awakening from the drowsy murmur of the semiotics of a culture (Lingis, 1999, 205).

Everything—not just the chance encounter of sperm and egg that brought about the existence of one Nancy Gilvonio—but all life is utterly improbable. Reason—“the reasoning, reckoning intellect that identifies possibilities on the basis of past regularities” (Lingis, 1999, 209-10)—is confounded, and one finds oneself in the sheer happening of whatever happens. Once a woman lost her brother, fell in love, joined a movement, gave birth, and languished in prison. A man who loved her stormed a building, took hostages, wrote a letter, and died at the hands of a SWAT team. It was all highly improbable. Once you and I wrote a dissertation, accepted a job offer, attended a conference. All that is highly improbable as well. Once there was a star on which there were animals who invented philosophy. And it was all very, very improbable. In Al Lingis’s work, improbability and the innocence of becoming become palpable.

Let me turn away now from discontinuity, rupture, coming-apart to recall a philosophical coming-together, Elizabeth Grosz's 2010 SPEP plenary, "Matter, Life, and Other Variations," in which she presented a prospectus for an enormous ontological project: "I want to think a concept of matter that has not yet cut itself off from that which it opposes, matter that is not defined as the *absence* of mind, life, Idea, form, or Spirit... What I am seeking is a new concept of matter that also involves something incorporeal, a spark of virtuality that enables life to emerge (Grosz, 2011, 17). She returned to Darwin (as in her 2004 and 2005 books), reading him as a theorist of sexual difference. Elaborating this reading through Bergson, Deleuze, Simondon, and contemporary physics, Grosz gave us a look into a radically different material world, a physical world of differing in a process of "endless becomings" (Grosz, 2011, 23).

There is a tension throughout her paper between the verbal distinction between "life" and "matter" and the press to think them without opposition. She uses several strategies to disturb the opposition, two of which I will attend here. First, she speaks (with Deleuze) of non-organic life (Grosz, 2011, 21) and the life of events such as a "storm, the traffic, a political demonstration, a conversation." Calling this life "the incorporeal," she describes it as "the charge of being-otherwise," of becoming. This is the material event's "potential for realignment and reorganization" (Grosz, 2011, 20). Following Bergson, Grosz holds that "wherever matter unwinds itself with the thinnest measure of indeterminacy, life has the chance to emerge and differentiate itself into numberless living individuals and species" (Grosz, 2011, 20). Life is matter's free play, contingency, differing.

A second strategy is Grosz's desubjectivation of memory. "Matter and life are thus not opposites, binary pairs (plus or minus vital force), but intimately implicated in each other, different degrees of one and the same force. Life is matter extended into the virtual; matter is life

compressed into dormancy. Life erupts from (and transforms) the material conditions that enable matter to ‘remember,’” (Grosz, 2011, 20). Focusing on memory as material event, I place Grosz’s work alongside that of Paul Cilliers, author of a 1998 book, *Complexity and Postmodernism*. Cilliers defines “memory” as a “physical condition of the brain: which pathways are breached (‘facilitated’) and which are not. Memory is not a cognitive function performed by a conscious subject, but an unconscious characteristic of the brain (which is an organ, part of the body). Memory is the substrate that sets up the conditions for all the functions of the brain” (Cilliers 1998, 45-46). Memory is a distributed pattern of valences across a complex system. It is an essential aspect of complex systems open to their environments, Cilliers maintains, because it offers resistance to environmental changes. Repeated patterns of distribution strengthen the connectedness of various nodes or elements involved in a given systemic pattern; repetition intensifies some networks at the expense of others. Without these transformations, an open system would simply mirror its environment (Cilliers 1998, 92). However, such systems do not simply project immediate environmental inputs or conditions. Rather, in some configurations, matter retains or repeats patterns resulting from past stimulation; in some configurations, matter *remembers*. When it does, it differs from its environment while remaining fully within the impact and draw of whatever surrounds it. This differing is what enables a material system to organize itself, differing further from but responding constantly to its environment. Memory is not representation; Cilliers writes, “Memory traces are stored in a distributed fashion and are continuously altered by experience. In a manner of speaking, even though memory is the substrate for all the brain’s higher functions, there are no ‘memories’” (Cilliers, 1998, 108)—no representations, just repeated patterns imparting dynamic form to the matter that generates them. Thus such systems have histories—traces, in Derrida’s sense (Cilliers, 1998, 46)—yet their

futures—whatever will emerge within and from them and transform them over time—remain unpredictable, contingent. Thus Grosz writes, “The plant has a kind of memory, embodied in its cellulose structure and the arrangement of roots, leaves, branches, and flowers or fruits, a memory that gives it regularized forms of engagement with what it needs to continue to live” (Grosz, 2011, 23). This is what Deleuze and Guattari call matter’s “becoming brain” (Grosz 2011, 23), which is not an assertion of transgenetic re-formation but rather a way of speaking about matter’s resistant responsiveness in its dynamic self-organizing systematicity—or its “life.”

Affinity with Grosz’s and Cillier’s work can be seen in Charles Scott’s *The Lives of Things*:

There are in our organism physical memories of the ways to build this body, to form this heart and keep it beating, to recognize and kill organisms that are injurious to this organism—billions of memories that inhabit and constitute cells, groups of cells, and organizations of those groups.... The cells and their organizations that compose us know of nurturance, affiliation, repulsion, fear, and death—of being alive—long before as well as while “we” form objects of specific recognition through words and concepts....

Homologous, memorial awareness is integral to organic life (Scott 2002, 92).

Memory “is” not the product or possession of a subject; hence Scott’s insistence in *The Time of Memory* that “memorial awareness is found in arrangements, institutions, rhythms of movement, and lineages of development” (Scott 1999, 11) apart from conscious existence. Memory “is” an event emerging in material existence as it organizes itself, as it becomes and as its becoming.

Unlike Grosz, Scott does not seek a new ontology. Instead of being, Scott is concerned with nothing—indifference, absence of meaning, forgetting, loss, and emptiness. Scott is a master at

arranging a text to give forth what cannot be present. His texts point away from their own meaning, deflecting attention from their content toward the nothing “there” with every event.

Scott’s texts, therefore, are not primarily informative. Like Lingis’s texts, they are effective. *The Time of Memory* seeks to “re-member memory,” “to reconnect it to its own loss” (Scott 1999, 21). This reconnection occurs not so much *in* the book as *between* book and reader. Scott’s prose acts like a more or less gentle crowbar prying the lids off carefully packaged conceptual crates and barrels. As one reads and the crowbar pries, one’s thoughts—often coming as involuntary memories—fly loose; they will not stay pinned down. Scott’s books thus displace one’s skill as reader, one’s educated judgment, one’s mastery of canon and methodology, as in their midst one’s confronts how little one understands, how much one cannot recall, and how tiny a measure of even what one calls “I” is really within one’s grasp. Scott’s work effects the impact of the not-I that happens with the I, the meaninglessnesses along with meaning. *I* might be humbled in this impact, but pushed beyond one’s ego, one *feels* no humiliation, only a lightening. In reading Scott’s work I am, as Foucault might say, freed of myself.

Memory, as these texts figure it, is dynamic, self-transformative (which is another way of saying its occurrence always involves forgetting), and happens beyond the control of the agents it informs and enables. Non-representational, “it” is charged, valenced, and potent. Memories have lives.

This week SPEP gathers to remember a beginning that occurred before many of us were born. Still, in gathering, we remember. We gather to remember our earliest years, our evolving organization, the comings and goings of dear colleagues and revered mentors, our struggles and conflicts and outright fights, our growth, diversification, decisions, losses, accomplishments. We

gather to affirm those memories and ourselves in them and to affirm the importance of remembering.

If the thinkers I cite are right, remembering is both transformative of that in which it occurs and is resistant to its own transformation. It is transformative in that the event of remembering strengthens living connections, patterns, and configurations of valences in the neural networks—or institution—in which it happens, and it does so at the expense of alternative connections, patterns, and configurations. It is resistant in the same instant and for the same reason. It resists mirroring its own surroundings, copying or projectioning its immediate reality. It resists *presentation* and thus refuses to be *representation*. It both is, and enables, differing.

In this remembering, I suggest, SPEP might find a possibility for differing from its own past. My point was not that our canon should include, alongside Derrida and Deleuze, Casey, Lingis, Grosz, Scott, etc., but, rather, to urge transgression of the boundaries of the canonization—or the memorialization—that has enacted itself through the task of bringing twentieth century European philosophy to this continent and continuation of what we begin here: celebrating, witnessing, interrogating, and furthering our own thinking through and beyond the texts we have discovered and cherished and those we have generated over the last fifty years. As important as twentieth-century European philosophers have been and to us and despite the fact that there are superb European thinkers active today, the fact is that most of what we call continental philosophy now happens here, among us in this organization. In the twenty-first century *we*, along with scattered colleagues elsewhere, *are* continental philosophy.

This organization is haunted by the specter of its own dis-identity. As membership has grown, diversified, and connected with philosophical work from all corners of the globe, we have worried about losing our sense of who we are and are about. We, half-seriously, that SPEP is

best defined as the philosophical society that embraces everything Anglo-American analytic philosophy shuns or disregards. Defined only by what we are not, we have no core; we are all philosophical periphery. Urging that we look more to this continent over the next fifty years may seem only to add density to that specter. So I close with a meditation on continents.

A continent is not an island. Continents are big. They accommodate many different topographies, climates, flora, fauna, and human cultures. The people on any single continent have been of differing races and religions and have used differing languages and technologies for as long as anybody has known anything about continents. Many islands, by contrast, were homogeneous for long stretches of their histories. Nobody has ever owned a continent; unlike islands, continents, in their vastness and differing, defy possessive mastery.

And continental thinking? In SPEP's first fifty years, continental thinking has been thinking with other thinkers who, from the perspective of the British, arose on *the* continent, Europe. But why take the perspective of the British? Might we not be continental thinkers in that we shelter and enliven differings? Might we be continental thinkers in that we harbor no nostalgia for homogeneity and no desire for total possession or mastery?

We might be troubled by the fact that continents seem awfully stable; their differings take place on or in a place, to which they give a foundation. We are not fond of foundations. But I must remind you of something we Virginians were reminded of on the afternoon of August 23, 2011: Continents move. And when they do, everything moves, rather violently. The truth is that continents are not stable or unified or ahistorical. They sit on a ball of hot fluid and gas; they float on the face of a star.

In 1915 Alfred Wegener hypothesized that all earth's continents were once one supercontinent, Pangaea. Subsequent theorists suggested that through earth's 4.6 billion-year

history several supercontinents formed and broke apart before Pangaea. In the Cambrian Period, part of the land that would become North America rested at the equator. It drifted northward and bumped into and joined another land mass that became the northeastern US and maritime Canada. The Appalachian Mountains formed during the early Carboniferous Period when an edge of what is now northwest Africa rammed into the side of what then was a continent called Euroamerica.

Perhaps continental thinking affords common ground without need of firm identity, ground that transcends nationalities and canonical texts and accommodates, even inspires, differing, endless becoming, in Grosz's words, or, in Lingis's, an endless stream of improbabilities. There is room in our philosophy for things undreamt of, and for dreaming, for remembering and forgetting, loss and potency, for emergence and for nothing, nothing at all. And while there is room for conflict and even hostility, as our own years together evince, there is no room for hostility toward heterogeneity and historicity. In our next fifty years, let us take up our continental differing anew, viewing it not through the narrowed eyes of island-thought, but affirming it in its Pangaeian splendor.

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