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The Autographic Stance. Benjamin, Wittgenstein and the Re-Shaping of the Philosophical Opus. About Manuscripts, Fragments, Schemes, Sketches and Annotations¹

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Abstract. Starting from the peculiar tension between figure and writing in Walter Benjamin's philosophical thought, my contribution aims to define the relevance of manuscripts, schemes, fragments and annotations for the definition of philosophical textuality. Analyzing Benjamin's writings belonging to this genre (for example, the preparatory works for the essay dedicated to Goethe's *Elective Affinities* or for the essay on Kafka), as well as the fragmentary observations belonging to Novalis' *Allgemeines Brouillon* and Nietzsche's *Posthumous Fragments*, the processual dimension of philosophical thinking will be emphasized. In this theoretical context the processual moment of textuality can be put in tension with the moment defined by the work in its insular completeness. Finally, one wonders if the most appropriate form of philosophical thought in our era of digital production and transmission of knowledge does not really lie in the flow dynamics of textuality. In conclusion, it will remain to be clarified how the autographic moment of philosophy can be thought of in the digital age of knowledge. To this last extent, a good example would be eventually given by Walter Benjamin's archive in Berlin that contains in fully digitalized form both edited texts and manuscripts.

Keywords. Autographic stance, autographicity, Walter Benjamin, Jean Starobinski, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Johann Wilhelm Ritter, textuality & unity of thought, Romantic fragments, schemes, opus philosophicum.

Can we speak of an autographic dimension in philosophy, similar to the application of this concept to works of art as suggested by Nelson Goodman in the famous *Languages of Art*? If we do not intend

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to make a vaguely metaphorical or ingenuously speculative use of the notion of autography for philosophical writings, we must define the conditions and predict the consequences. The first condition is more general and as such it precedes the direct specific consideration of the philosophical discourse, of philosophy in its linguistic expression. It is a condition that directly concerns the iconic nature of writing as handwriting. In the famous pages of the crucial book *Origin of the German Baroque Drama*, Walter Benjamin addresses this issue, namely the relationship between image and writing, introducing the figure of Johann Wilhelm Ritter, the author of the *Fragments from the Notebook of a Young Physicist*, where the theme of the relationship between writing and image is considered starting from the so-called “Chladni figures” («those lines that form various patterns on a sand-covered glass plate as various tones are sounded») (Benjamin [1926]: 231).

The Ritterian conclusion that Benjamin values is primarily about the fact that writing is an image of the sonority of the word: icon of the word *verbum* in its utterance. Through the writing is iconically revealed the original relationship between idea and language, that is the co-belonging of thought and word. Therefore, not only does thinking coalesce (it co-evolves) with language, knowing its own articulations through its means, but of this mutual development, of such a co-implication of thought and word (of the discursiveness itself of thinking) writing becomes an expressive image. In Benjamin’s reflection this is signified by the hieroglyphic instance that pertains to the scriptural graph, to its being a sign that has the indicative value of a trace. Here Benjamin agrees with Ritter’s proto-romantic thesis about the origin of language, consisting first in underlining that «word and writing are originally one». By an “electric” way Ritter is therefore in search of the natural foundation of an “original writing” where every word is anchored to the matter of the sign and is formed by it.

To this scriptural dimension consisting in a virtuous circularity of cross-references between word-thought, sign-letter and image, Ritter brings

back not only verbal language, but every artistic language: «In such inscription and transcription belong preeminently all plastic arts: architecture, sculpture, painting, and so forth» (Ritter [1810]: 146, quoted by Benjamin [1926]: 232)². As if Ritter accessed through a paradoxically literal route to the question of a more radical autographic stance at the origin of art, an instance that precedes the same Goodmanian partition between autographic and allographic arts. This partition, as we know, is based on the fact that what distinguishes the former (the autographic ones), where it matters in an ontological and archaeological sense – also in the sense of implying a hierarchical filiation – the distinction between original and copy, from the latter (those allographic) is that the latter makes use of a symbolic system on a notational basis. In a notational system, in fact, each character is valid as the replica of a type based on certain sign characteristics (marks) that differentiate it from other characters. The autographic dimension of writing stands in evident tension with this notational dimension of the symbolic system specific to the verbal language on an alphabetic basis (grounded on the compositional nature of disjoint letters and on their finite differentiation as types or classes of inscriptions), as if it came to an image in it – as Benjamin specifies in a letter to Scholem of March 5, 1924 – the grain of the voice, its unmistakable timbre.

Following this thread of thought we can also argue that by the autographic instance inherent in the philosophical writing, the latter (especially as considered from the point of view of the corpus of manuscripts of a philosopher) attests and testifies that dimension of the living word from which the philosophical discourse draws its own birth. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Colli, to whom we owe, together with his pupil Mazzino Montinari, the critical edition of Nietzsche’s works, insisted on this origin of philosophy from the power of the living word as a sometimes violent expression of

² As translator Howard Eiland notes, «Inscription and transcription» translates here «Schrift und Nachschrift, Abschrift».

thought. The same Platonic *Dialogues*, we might add, are an expression of this origin, a tendency to keep its relevance alive. Here, however, the autographic tension, the tension that the matter of writing is tracing, is still all in the literary form, in the *theatrum* of that discursive intertwining that the Platonic *eironeia*, reminiscent of that heard by Socrates, puts on stage. Nor, on the other hand, perhaps resorting to the Plato of the *Letters*, we can limit ourselves to declining this tension as that existing between the doctrine that finds a written formulation and that which refuses the public and allographic dimension of writing. Of this one as well there could be some resonant image that consigns it to the expressive trace of the letter. But this is not the problem we intend to investigate. Rather, it is a matter of understanding to what extent the autographic instance can involve and mark in some way the identity of a philosophical thought, assuming that an autographic stance marks the origin of every philosophy. For this reason, it is necessary to adopt an extensive concept of autographicity, to include in it not only the subject of writing that feeds the corpus of the manuscripts, but also those peculiar textual forms that are usually considered as a preparation or a thematic prelude to the true works of an author: from the essay, to the article, to the book, to the treatise. We mean, that is, those textual forms that consist of the note, the margin annotation, the fragment, the study, the outline, the sketch. If we include these textual forms, usually not intended for publication while the author is alive, as full expression of the autographic stance, this can no longer be limited to a consideration of the variants or paths attempted and then set aside by the philosopher in the drafting of a Work. What we propose, in short, is to assume a different point of view in considering the overall philosophical work of an author as a document and expression of his thought, both in its unity and in its development (regardless of the fact that this unit and/or development are traversed by fractures and defined by periods and turning points). Usually, unity, coherence and development of a philosopher's thought are punctuated by the reference to his works in

the traditional sense of the term, starting from the sequence of the texts delivered to the prints. These are ultimately the comparison meter, the chance to make comparisons *ad intra* and *ad extra*.

However, we can assume a different point of view, if we apply to philosophers what the eminent critic Jean Starobinski claims about authors in the literary field in an essay, published in 1997 in the journal "Conférence" (5, pp. 167 -197), with the emblematic title *La perfection, le chemin, l'origine* (*Perfection, Way, origin*):

The loss of the primacy of the Work and the importance attributed to the preparatory states are therefore correlated phenomena: one implies the other. Today we like to see the succession of a series of different moments, an adventurous journey where each leg is as legitimate as the previous one, so that these different moments are ultimately indifferent. (Starobinski [1997]: 184)³

In his acute diagnosis, Starobinski proposes to go back to the infancy of the work, to that initial stuttering that is configured as pre-text, down to «stretching and fragmenting the moment of the Work» as if it were composed of «a succession of provisional totalities». To privilege the series as formed by fragments and attempts rather than the compactness and completeness of the Work could invite, in the case of a philosopher, to assume even more radically the point of view of the origin of his thought, not only as an initial move or a still stuttering genesis, but as the essential opening of an order of the philosophical discourse characterized by a timbre of its own and punctuated internally by Ideas or Thought-Monads rather than by Works. The origin, therefore, of an ideal continuum that can be configured in the synchronic and tendentially systematic figure of a Unity of Thought.

It is in light of this conceptual continuum that we can speak of the Unity of Thought or of the peculiar philosophy of an author, while preserving the intimate problematic and the possibility for

³ This text by Starobinski was also published as an addendum to a Portfolio by Winters (2001).

it to be crossed by fracture lines, internal jumps, hiatus, unresolved aporias. Without the presupposition of this possibility, the understanding of a philosophy as an understanding of the thought of an author who gives it its own name (so that we can speak of Kantian or Hegelian Thought, even knowing how many differences, transformations or oppositions, similar wordings may imply) would risk dissolving itself by a historicistic way in the various moments of its becoming, to the point of tarnishing its own identity. On the other hand, such an approach might sound rather idealistic. To the prevention from this risk stands, precisely, the need to assume as a constitutive correlative of this ideal and problematic continuum, in which the identity of every philosophical author is recognizable, the textual continuum: the textuality that configures in the form of writing a philosophical thought. By the framing of this original connection overloaded with tensions between the conceptual continuum of thought and the textual continuum, it is necessary to rethink the very relationship between philology and philosophy. Every single moment of a philosopher's textual continuum, the autographic stance of his thought, is no longer considered and studied as a function of the Work he prepares or of which it constitutes the variation, but acquires a value in itself; a value that relates, even in the form of a short circuit, with those constellations of ideas, with those conceptual monads, which structure the philosophy of an author from the inside. In this context, it is not only the manuscript that demonstrates with plastic evidence the autographic stance in philosophy. This process is also performed by textual units with their own autonomous physiognomy - textual units such as fragments, schemes, sketches, annotations, glosses - that in the corpus of the writings of a philosophical author come to give expression to the attempt and to the experimental character of his thought.

Rather than the figure of completeness, such as the Work in its insularity could still indicate, these textual forms of an insuppressibly autographic nature, precisely because they are decisive for the tension between the original and its replicas (its

reformulations and repositions), testify for the experimental and intrinsically fluid and dynamic nature of Thinking. Here, by virtue of the autographic instance at the origin of these textual units, the unity of thought tends towards the icastic character of the figure and becomes a Thought-Image: *Denkbild*. Some Benjaminian schemes, for example the one dedicated to Anthropology (Fig. 1: Walter Benjamin, Scheme on *Anthropologie*, AdK, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv 1200. Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur), probably composed in the summer of 1918 and in any case extremely significant for the first theological-metaphysical phase of Benjamin's thought but also for some constants that go through all of his reflection (from the link between corporeity and

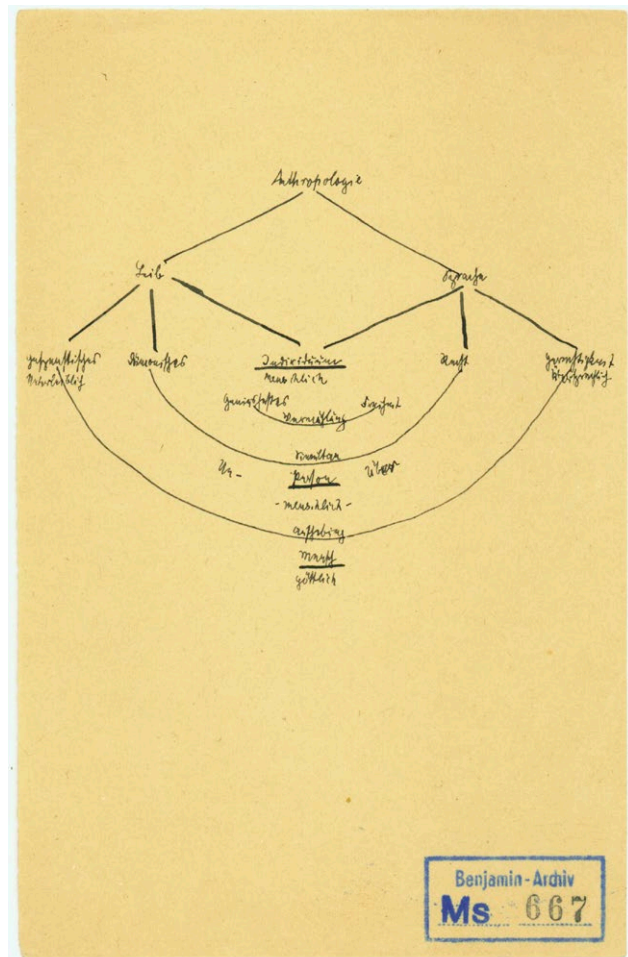


Fig. 1

language to a critique of myth), give a diagrammatic expression to constellations of ideas that are extremely significant for Benjamin's philosophy, without ever finding a complete representation in a single work. The same could be said for the famous page taken from a block of sheets bearing the San Pellegrino mineral water logo (probably around 1937) (Fig. 2: *Was ist Aura?* Notes on *zu Ein Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (1936), AdK, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv 264/2. Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur) where Benjamin's theory of Aura knows a substantial reformulation compared to the elliptically outlined perspective sketched in the different versions of the essay on the work of art. Just a mention, finally, to the pages

full of effacements and changes that document the making of the *Passagenwerk* (Fig. 3: Bibliographic List on the back of a form of the Bibliothèque Nationale, AdK, Berlin, Walter Benjamin Archiv 514/5, Hamburger Stiftung zur Förderung von Wissenschaft und Kultur).

Benjamin's one is, in any case, but an example of how the autographic dimension of the

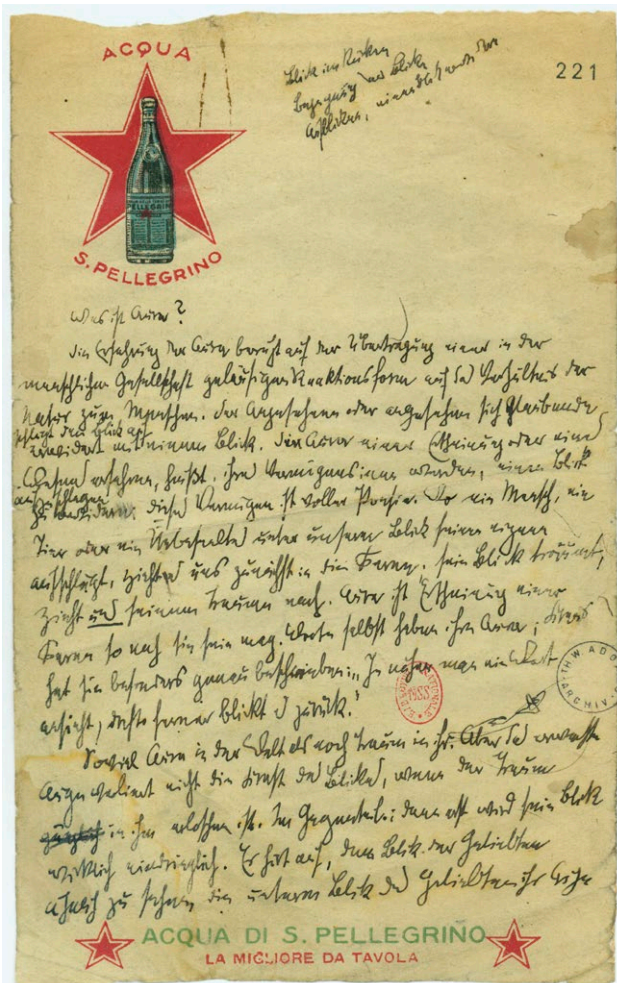


Fig. 2

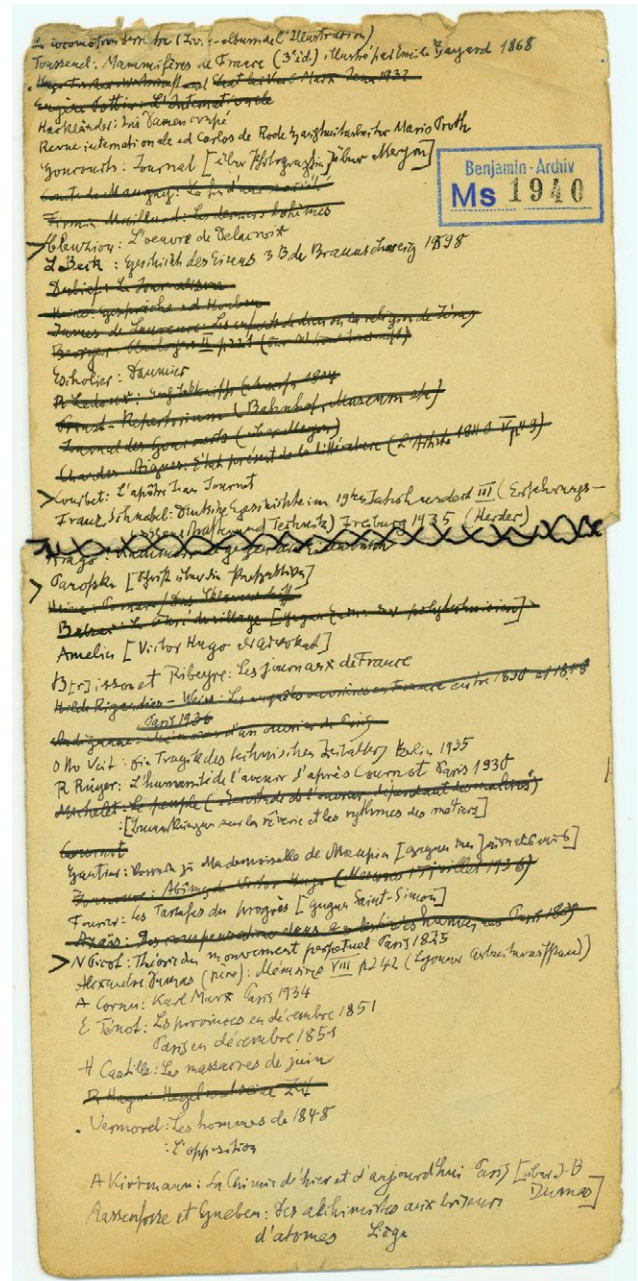


Fig. 3

manuscripts kept in the Archives and published only posthumously (in the necessarily long time required by the transcription and philological care necessary for their scientific use) is constitutive for the understanding of a large part of twentieth-century philosophy. With a clarification: already for its character and its quantitative dimension itself (in most cases overwhelming compared to the amount of texts published during life) the autographic complex of the manuscripts challenges to a reconsideration of the thought of an author, inviting not only to adopt the point of view of textuality as a continuum, but also that of the peculiar forms that such textuality assumes. Each of them (from the fragment to the scheme, to give an example) shows itself able to offer a new image of the thought of a philosopher. In this regard, Benjamin's example is certainly one of the most eloquent and persuasive, because in many cases the tension of his writing becomes pictorially evident, almost to the extent of drawing itself, of composing itself in an image: in the figure-of-thought. The case of Wittgenstein's *Nachlaß*, published and accessible to scholars' consultation in the so-called WAB (Wittgenstein's Archive of the University of Berg) directed by Alois Pichler, reinforces this thesis. To the Berg's Archive we can add, as we know, that of Cambridge, directed by Michael Nedo at the origin of the Wiener Ausgabe (Vienna Edition) of Wittgenstein's manuscripts (now published by the Springer Editor in Vienna and New York and presented as "the most important editorial project of our time" of Wittgenstein's Work). And it was always in Cambridge, that was discovered - about sixty years after the death of the Austrian philosopher - a Wittgenstein Archive of the so-called intermediate period (from November 1932 to July 1936), entrusted for the publication to the care of Professor Arthur Gibson. This discovery sounds as a confirmation to the fact that between the *Tractatus* (the only book published in life, as well as very few other writings) and the posthumous and in any case incomplete *Philosophical Researches* the enormous complex of manuscripts, composed of the various notebooks and books, some of Wittgenstein's hand and others

dictated to his pupils, does not simply represent a parenthesis or, at most, a plurality of philosophical paths undertaken and then abandoned. To support such thesis would mean to misunderstand the very meaning of Wittgenstein's philosophical work after the *Tractatus*: the dialectic and the dialogue that comes along both with the form of the *Tractatus* and the problems related to the relationship between language, logic and the world from which it arises; problems with respect to which the *Philosophical Researches*, according to the words of Wittgenstein himself, are nothing more than a set of sketches. But the sketch has precisely an autographic character, it is the expression of the autographic stance.

Neither what we have exemplified by the names of Benjamin and Wittgenstein and that we could extend to other emblematic figures of the philosophical '900 (from Husserl to Heidegger, to Simone Weil as well as the Valéry of the *Cahiers*) can be limited to the last century. Let us think, for example, to the emblematic case of Novalis, where the fragment-form as an intentional form of his thought is limited to short complete texts such as *Pollen* or *Faith and Love*, composed in an intermediate literary form between the aphorism and the fragment, the most part of the Novalis' corpus is made of studies, transcriptions, marginal notes and the extraordinary collection of numbered annotations that goes by the name of *Allgemeines Brouillon* and testifies to the desire to give shape to a Romantic Encyclopedia as a pendant to the Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*.

More generally and conclusively, assuming the point of view of philosophical work as a continuum, a continuum that has a determined origin (an original opening in the philosopher's peculiar style of thought) and the textual continuum as its necessary correlated, where each element assumes an autonomous force (inviting us to radically reconsider the relationship between philology and philosophy) we not only have the possibility of glancing at what is philosophically preceding the work, but also at what lies after and beyond it. Consequently, we can grasp an autonomous dimension of Benjamin's philosophical reflection in the

so-called *Paralipomena* for his memorable essay on *Franz Kafka* published in 1934 in the “Jüdische Rundschau”, a complex of annotated manuscripts, diary notes, schemes or, even more clearly, in the texts prepared for the essay *On the Image of Proust*, published in 1929 on the “Literarische Welt”, including a very relevant scheme dedicated to the theme of the Eleatic philosophy of happiness in the author of the *Recherche*. Schemes and annotations, in this case, contain philosophically more than the works they prepare, inviting the reader to continue by himself what they just suggest. And it is extremely significant that this dimension of autographic stance of thinking is preserved in the digitalization of the manuscripts offered to the visitors of Benjamin Archive in Berlin: a further attestation of a new sense of the aura that is transmitted in the age of the digital reproduction of autographic writing.

Summing up, in the autographic stance the distinctive timbre of every philosophy resounds as a research and a struggle (an Agon of thinking) about a few questions and the problem of representing the words that can give them the force of expressiveness. Of this timbre, of the resounding in it of something belonging to the living word or, at least, the memory or the desire of it, the philosophical writing offers autographically a trace. As writing (autography), philosophy still attests the difference between the origin of Thinking and the attempts to give it back in forms of representation. An origin, that attested by the autographic stance, which escapes the Human, All Too Human dimension of the biography.

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