

Learning from Philosophical Manuscripts and Archives

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Manuscripts became more accessible items only in very recent times, after having been handled as for-specialists-only relics over the past decades if not centuries. Nonetheless, it is still usually the case that only researchers working on the critical edition of a writer's work, or archivists in charge of related collections, develop specific knowledge on the author's manuscripts and archival materials. Work on deciphering the quirks of handwriting requires time, and it does not easily match the pace imposed on contemporary research and intellectual production in general. Archivists, editors, scholars working on manuscripts know the complexity of the information transmitted by such materials, as well as the irreducible idiosyncrasy of each writer's archive.

Philosophical manuscripts are an even less known kind of objects. Some of the "initiations" which one must undergo, if she is patient enough to deal with such enigmatic documents, are similar to those experienced by colleagues handling literary manuscripts: the first step, naturally, is getting acquainted with someone else's handwriting. But that's just the beginning. Subsequent steps include just as challenging tasks, such as becoming familiar with strategies in composition, techniques for storage *ad usum sui* of notes and quotations, recurrent abbreviations, codes used in drafts or while scribbling marginalia, ways of synthesizing when drafting a speech or a lesson... Not only are these materials richer in layers of qualitative information when compared to the printed page (the characteristics of the handwriting, the type and quality of the paper, the symbols and drawings used to implement the text, all convey contents that can be methodically analyzed, but are often grasped more intuitively): they require different skills and a different methodology in analysis and interpretation.

Since manuscripts of an author are the only surviving traces of a living process of elaborating, verbalizing and sharing thought, it doesn't seem absurd to compare the complexity of such *corpora* to an organism whose specialized parts work together as organs, which relate in turn to other parts and to the whole. Such interrelated topologies within the collections or streams in the evolutionary transformation of a project; symmetries and kinships within sets of manuscripts; the shift in meaning generated by repositioning parts of a corpus after reconsidering their classification; the peculiar logics in reading and composing emerging through the study of the material in support of the writing; the strategies in criticism and self-censorship in editing displayed by underlined and erased words... after long exposure to one author's manuscripts, all these phenomena appear to the reader almost like specters: they are effects of stratification in time, they

require a certain degree of familiarity in order to be properly perceived.

The reader often becomes aware of such “aesthetic” cognition of philosophical manuscripts, distilled in the form of a long-term trained knowledge of archives, only when she dares moving to the study of a different author. Such relocation to a new continent feels similar to the experience of a journey abroad: possibly a different language, surely new maps to discover and draw, as-yet-unknown customs and a tangible shift in the surrounding atmosphere. At the same time, investigation into a new corpus often reveals *ex post* the methodology that had been previously and more or less consciously devised to travel across our first writer’s papers. As writing methods display the idiosyncrasy of an author, the researcher approaching a different field of inquiry in the form of a new set of collections becomes aware of the specificity of the methods she had empirically crafted before, as she has to adjust them and have them fit the requirements of the new object of study.

When we come to tracking the genesis of some conceptual constellation across philosophical manuscripts, the matter is even more delicate. First, on a very empirical level, as mentioned above, it is mainly for the sake of scholarly editing or highly specialized exegesis that researchers who are not trained philologists refer to manuscripts. This means that it is even rarer for a specialist in philosophy to acquire skills and experience on more than a single archive. Besides such subjective obstacle, developing a specific approach as well as a shared methodology for the study and the edition of philosophical manuscripts stand as obstacles.

All writing is an attempt to translate an inner experience (usually self-represented as pre-verbal) into words, an attempt to make thoughts fit the mold of a language. Nevertheless, conceptual writing is not only a battle with oneself as the author often struggles in building bridges between different speculative traditions and established theories. In the elaboration of their texts, philosophers constantly produce and recreate the image of the cultural and theoretical heritage they address, either to embrace or refute it. In this regard, what we call philosophy is not only a creative act of thinking rooted in a lived experience and grounded in an existential perspective, but also a textual production involving an often explicit dialogue with one’s own culture. A dialogue that appears, moreover, structured around epistemic paradigms and specific intellectual goals, dealing with predetermined criteria of validity as with procedures, forms and styles supposed to better fit such epistemological ambitions. Despite claiming to universality, philosophical statements are the result of negotiations between individual expression and shared vocabularies. Precisely the thick medium of expression – the whole set of literary dynamics implicitly involved in the writing of philosophy, for instance – is easily forgotten, the discipline itself being traditionally focused on the theoretical contents assessed, rather than on her own ways of expressing them, as is the case for literature.

Indeed, the study and edition of philosophical manuscripts delivers a vast array of information in this regard, well exceeding the limits of the texts themselves. The archive allows the scholar to study the emergence of concepts and to trace the production of abstract vocabulary beyond the static representations offered by the printed book. It reveals how abstract thought originates through the process of working with the multi-layered fabric of language.

In this manner, manuscripts and archives uncover, for instance, the heterogeneous range of sources that inspired the formulation of ideas. Archival work also helps us observe how each thinker creates for herself an eclectic landscape of references, a galaxy of conceptual networks which hardly ever belong to a single language or national tradition. Although we like to think that theory is universal, the perspective offered by archives, personal libraries and manuscripts shows us that abstraction is also a matter of languages and codes, and reveals the work of the thinker/writer as a cultural mediator between all such codes. This suggests a different paradigm for the analysis of conceptual productions, one that focuses less on values of neutrality and universality and more on those of integration and synthesis.

Through the study of archives, one can consider the evolution of theoretical thought as an embodied adventure, experienced firsthand, and the history of the discipline as a dynamic and collective process. In a relatively recent book, French philosopher Pierre Macherey criticized the notion of “national philosophies” and contested its heuristic value in understanding the history of philosophy¹. He showed that theory should be seen as the history of successive “hybridizations,” such as illustrated by Victor Cousin “importing” Hegel to France, or by the reception of Kant relayed by Jules Barni. The concept of “nationality” itself, rooted in the Romantic idea of one land, one people, one language, seems more and more out of date when confronted with categories such as postmodernity, creolization and globalization. In this regard the work of thinkers, when seen through the lens of their manuscripts and archives, offers us models for cultural mediation: archival research reveals that the language of theory is the result of a conceptual syncretism between various codes and traditions and contributes to the disclosure and reconfiguration of heterogeneous world-conceptions, sedimented in the verbal matter of the papers.

Having been scarcely used in the study of philosophy so far (neither in the writing of its history, nor in the exegesis of its published texts), philosophical manuscripts can indeed help unfold a different understanding of the discipline, helping to reveal the underlying practices related to the writing of texts: the multiple layers and various versions of texts; the continuity of the struggle with some theoretical problems; the interactions with peers and students; the hesitations, doubts, uncertainty lying behind so

¹ *Études de philosophie française. De Sieyès à Barni*, Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 2013.

many universal statements; the role played by circumstances, travels, meetings and so much more that we do not necessarily tend to associate with abstract discourse. While genetic criticism has developed an important set of tools and a philological methodology specific to the study of authors' manuscripts since the 1970s, little has been done to elaborate guidelines when dealing with philosophical or theoretical archives.

Theoretical manuscripts are odd objects that have only recently started to receive proper attention. In France, for instance, an important set of manuscripts by Michel Foucault have been declared to be of national interest ("trésor national") in 2012 and bought by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France for such a high price that even the national daily press ended up covering the news. Less than a decade before, in 2004, much less attention had been paid to Derrida leaving his archives to IMEC. It is also worth noting that in Europe the creation of archive centers holding philosophical manuscripts has allowed the gathering and preservation of important data. These centers have enabled the survival of the memory of abstract writing and conceptual thought and allowed those materials to survive. Furthermore, thanks to the contemporary development of digital humanities, such documents are becoming more and more accessible and are receiving well-deserved attention.

Nonetheless, the creativity expressed by researchers and archivists through their development of *ad hoc* tools in order to edit, publish or interpret entire sets of manuscripts has not reached a common methodological standard yet. As poetry drafts differ, for instance, from sketches for a novel in their intrinsic logic and the strategy for their interpretation, the writing of philosophy and its documental traces entail a specific understanding. Moreover, as regards literary papers, research in genetic criticism has already come up with a shift in its ontology underlining the charm and bias hidden in any "teleological approach" to manuscripts: drafts are to be approached as interpretable documents *per se* rather than as sheer traces of the preparation of a work to come. In this perspective, it is the process and not the final product that is to be considered the "*ergon*" of literature. Such methodological advancement naturally enabled materials unrelated to a published (or even to an unpublished) project to be given proper attention and promoted the edition of new kinds of posthumously published texts. And what about philosophical papers? Together with the contemporary development of digital editions, such perspective seems to have had an impact also on the edition of unpublished philosophical manuscripts. An example might be the publication of notes for lectures and classes, which became almost a "literary genre" in the last two decades. But what can such renovated sensibility to such materials teach us about what the work of philosophy, or its *ergon*, is?

Seen from the perspective of a thinker's manuscripts, philosophy seems to be more a matter of production of an abstract vocabulary along a continuous process of reformulation, than a series of published works. From such a standpoint, the study of

the writing of philosophy through its archives appears to be a field of research that differs both from the analysis of literary manuscripts and from the study of theories based on printed books or history of ideas.

As we sit in front of a handwritten page, language, which is the medium of philosophy and of abstract thinking, becomes tangible in the form of erased words and blank spaces. As these signs tell better than anything else, there is no conceptual creation without a painstaking work on language's limits and structures. Moreover, hesitations, rewriting, erased passages and corrections show that the work of philosophy is not only a negotiation with the ineffable borders of the verbal expression, but also a constant dialogue with the vocabulary shared with peers, students and sources. From such perspective on its medium, philosophy appears as a continuous one-to-her-cultural-horizon dialogue. The dynamics of self-censorship or censorship *tout court* induce quite intuitively the interaction between the author and her cultural surroundings. The archive is a theater of forgotten books and become-too-implicit *querelles*. At the core of what seems to be the most intimate and abstract – the cabinet of the thinker alone with her game of flashes of insights and ideas – lie the most evident traces of the interaction with consciousness *in time and history*.

Manuscripts are multidimensional objects in a multidimensional space. Their corpus takes the form of a documental network that could virtually be browsed in infinite ways, according to various classifications, criteria, frameworks, and representations. From the standpoint of manuscripts and archives, the verbal medium of theory is part of a device of higher complexity compared to the linearity of the reading of a book, where information unfolds across multidirectional paths, being at once text – carriers and documents “in flesh and bones.” From the reader's standpoint, besides a conceptual understanding of the texts, an ability to grasp the complexity of such multilayered displays of the wording of thought is thus required.

A third element I would like to mention when raising the question about the *ergon* of philosophy in the light of its archives, is the peculiar dynamic ontology – different from that of the printed books – manuscripts make us confront. The researcher who chooses to work on the philosophical archive is more likely to be sensitive to the continuity in the life and story of an author's work. A sort of line of evolution seems to appear across different attempts to express what is witnessed by manuscripts. Such act might follow non-linear paths and get lost in unfinished essays, revolve around unsolved dilemmas and resurface in orally-transmitted texts. Drafts, reading notes, diagrams and sketches are the *continuum* through which we come to know or by which we are invited to represent the specificity of an approach to philosophical problems. They intimate the daily struggles of a thinker and writer with her own questions as with the answers provided by tradition. From such perspective, the production of theory appears rather “stream”-based than object-based, and the observation of what lies behind the curtains

of the philosophical scene reveals the performative features of such discipline. In other words, philosophy appears as an exercise and a constant interpellation, a dialogical practice related to specific and concrete contexts. The study of correspondences of unpublished discourses and teaching materials discloses a history of philosophy much more rooted in sharing modes. Marginalia can give us a portrait of the writer as a reader. The notes taken for courses and seminars give life to the professional philosopher, most of the time earning her life teaching, and most of the time nourishing her own discourse with the interactions with peers and students.

Genetic criticism has certainly explored the different logics corresponding to different scales of observation on manuscripts: from the complex genesis of major works to the dissection of a single folio. In this regard, the work on philosophical archives can be understood as the exploration of different hermeneutic amplitudes. The choice of a single word can be already revelatory of a perspective on philosophy itself, as witnessed for instance by the late Maurice Merleau-Ponty borrowing all his key concepts from literature instead of using a theoretically-encoded language: a criticism of western philosophy in a nutshell. On the other hand, we could imagine a study dealing not with a single corpus but with a whole network of philosophers.

However, this latter pursuit is the aim of a collective work.

As mentioned above, research on philosophical manuscripts is being done mostly by highly specialized researchers, teams and institutions, in scattered places and settings all around the world. The work on manuscripts is akin to hunting, in terms of finding and using techniques to be adjusted according to the specificity of the prey. The down-side is that such scattered competences make it even harder to establish a shared methodology in the analysis and edition of such materials.

With such aim, I have conceived and launched a five-year research program federating nine institutions dedicated to the study and/or conservation of theoretical manuscripts in four European countries and India. Financed by the Institute for Human and Social Sciences at CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France), the network has been launched in 2020 and has been in operation until the end of 2024.

The program has been coordinated by myself at the *Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes* (ITEM, CNRS/Ecole Normale Supérieure, Paris), and has involved the following institutions in its research actions on philosophical manuscripts: the Wittgenstein Archives at the Bergen University (Norway), the Husserl Archives Lewen (Belgium), the Jan Patočka Archives Prague (Czech Republic) and *Institut Mémoire Edition Contemporaine* (France).

It also included three Indian institutions: the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives Pondicherry, the French Institute Pondicherry and the School for Cultural Texts and Records at the Jadavpur University Kolkata.

The International Research Network AITIA (“Archives of International Theory, an

Intercultural Approach”) aimed to emphasize the intersubjective and intercultural dynamics across several traditions and disciplinary fields through the observation of manuscripts and archives and to imagine digital tools for a dynamic representation of these intellectual processes, enabling the reader not only to access the documents but also to visualize the stories, links, and relations existing amongst them.

Along with the increasing interdependency of national economies in the last decades, scholars have reflected on the role played by institutional archives in shaping national cultures. More recently, increasing progress in digitization has brought thousands of archival collections from national archives into the global infosphere. More and more archival images are now potentially accessible from anywhere in the world, outside the limits of archival institutions, and beyond the national framework that used to determine archival praxis and knowledge.

Such decompartmentalization has many benefits: the shift from local dusty shelves to the World Wide Web provides millions of potential users with the means to better understand their own historical and cultural grounding. It is also a testimony to the essentially transnational and intercultural character of archival documents, before their compartmentalization into separate national institutions that were often hyper-centralized and difficult to access. Ideally, digital visualization should allow us to observe how multiple local cultures and national histories have been shaped through their interconnectivity and through mediation of intellectual networks of exchanges, translations, and cultural transfers.

However, these new developments also require adapted tools for the interpretation and navigation of archival documents. Indeed, digitization in itself does not necessarily prevent these documents from becoming forgotten, illegible or unnavigable, or from becoming targets of ideological appropriations, intellectual manipulation or abuse. This can be avoided only by building adapted frameworks of knowledge and interpretation specific to the new digital archival praxis.

We live in an age when major national research institutions and universities transform their own documentary collections into proper and publicly accessible archives; when researchers themselves are becoming more and more aware of the value of the traces left by their own practices and work, and even encouraged to build their own (digital) archive via collective platforms.

In such circumstances, the AITIA project has proposed a reflection upon the interaction existing in between archives, digitization and the production of “theory,” intended broadly as the intellectual work aiming to produce concepts and abstractions on the basis of structured and targeted experiences.

Based on such standpoint, we have defined four general objectives:

1. To organize international workshops and federate an international network of specialists – scholars, archivists, and digital humanities experts coming from different

fields of theory (philosophy, humanities, political thought, natural sciences), so as to reveal the similarities that these various intellectual practices display at the level of the archive.

2. To use such knowledge to elaborate new methodological tools specifically adapted to the study, the interpretation, and to the digital edition of theoretical manuscripts. Although archival materials have been studied for a long time by scholars within certain disciplines (historians and biographers, specialists of literary studies and genetic criticism), currently available methodological tools and interpretative protocols may not be adapted to the specific challenges raised by theoretical manuscripts pertaining to philosophy or conceptual thought.

3. To develop digital strategies so as to allow the stories embedded in such corpuses to emerge as a means to enhance our understanding of the cultural history and its heritages. Such a dynamic and interoperative representation of the documents allows one to display intuitively segments and samples of the history of culture, shaping a virtual, three-dimensional (space, time, relations) interface, making available not only the archival traces, but the exchange dynamics and their link to space/time frames.

4. To emphasize the intrinsically transnational and transcultural dimensions of theoretical archives and their importance as a tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Archival research on manuscripts, correspondences, or personal notes by theorists, philosophers and scientists clearly demonstrates that the elaboration of conceptual thought and scientific concepts is by nature plurilingual and hybrid.

Innovations in theory always take the form of a crosspollination between diverse traditions, cultural horizons, schools of thought, linguistic spheres, etc. As such, the study of the archive highlights alternative political lines to national, disciplinary or communitarian horizons and archives of philosophy and theory present the theorist as a traveler, as a translator and cultural mediator.

I hope this has been the role I have played myself here today, and that we will keep this dialogue alive across countries and fields of philosophy in the forthcoming years.