

Intervention at the book presentation of *Hans van Houwelingen: Undone*

Stroom Den Haag, The Hague, December 11, 2011.

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οὔτε λόγος ἐχυρὸς, οὔτε ὄρκος φοβερός

-- Thucidydes¹

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

For me it is an honor to speak here, today, as we are closing Hans van Houwelingen's exhibition *Until It Stops Resembling Itself*, curated by Mihnea Mircan, and at the same time are celebrating the official presentation of a new guidebook on monumentalism and art in public space, *Undone*, published by Jap Sam Books. For many months it has been my pleasure, as managing editor, to work with Hans, Mihnea, Eleonor from Jap Sam, Jane and Arno from Stroom, Metahaven, and all the contributors to this publication, and first I would like to thank all of you who are present with us here or in thought.

At the same time I have been requested to respond to *Undone*, in particular to the contribution of Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, entitled "Exchange Encounter: On Walking with Hans van Houwelingen's Statues," and his performance here which featured excerpts from a book "to come," *The Swerve of Freedom after Spinoza*, which, however, will never be written.

I would gladly formulate such a response, but how does one respond to an oeuvre that *undoes* itself, to an exhibition that tries to *stop resembling itself*, to a curatorial practice that resists *identification*? How does one respond to a book which will never be written, that will have never reached its destination? And is this failure to reach a definite destination not the very fate of any book, and to what extent has this already become a worn-out cliché, to be avoided, like the proverbial plague?

Upon preparing this intervention, even before these questions of response and responsibility occurred, I therefore asked myself what exactly my own position was from which I was supposed to respond: what had been asked from me, and who was I supposed to be or represent? Even though it was never made explicit by any of the

participants in this exhibition or this book, it became clear to me that I was here to stand in front of you as a philosopher, this threadbare word that like the word artist always seems able to find a new future for itself, however uncertain this future may be.

This means that I will depart from one particular section of Mr Dronsfield's book to come, that is, the unwritten paragraph 12 entitled "*φιλοσοφία* -><- the secret mission -- wanderer {?}," at least typographically the most complicated title in his table of contents. What does it suggest? It first enjoins us to read philosophy from its Greek origins of *philosophia*, that is, the love of wisdom, as so many before us have already stressed. This love, as had been remarked before, has perhaps already turned sour, or is always already incorporated in a sadomasochistic logic, philosophy being beaten down and punished by Mistress Wisdom any time he dares to close in on her.

As is indicated by Dronsfield's double arrow, *philosophia* is at the same time on a "secret mission," perhaps -- as indicated by the question mark -- a secret mission to wander, to be displaced. A mission as unknown as the mission that brought Spinoza in our midst today, facing the author of the Dutch constitution, Johan Rudolph Thorbecke, standing here in front of Stroom's reception. The wandering that has brought them together, as Dronsfield writes, "bring[s] about the chance of our being shown how democracy and freedom might encounter each other in such a way that we glimpse the chance of an exchange between them."²

But now they *have* encountered each other, revealing their places of arrival -- albeit temporarily, according to the habit of true wanderers -- "as if for the first time" to us, their audience, trying to listen to them speak, to grasp the whisper that is only clearly perceived once the lights are out and Stroom has been locked for the night. In silence, Thorbecke and Spinoza are the resting guardians of our presence here today, the ones who make our gathering *possible*.

So suddenly I find myself not only responsible to those who asked me to speak here, to speak with a certain authority, but also to those who redrew the borders of legal and ethical authority, those who guard the gateways to my response. Am I to take a step and cross these borders now myself? But on whose authority except my own, if I would have any? Would I be allowed to draw from the account of already accomplished secret

missions to justify my own transgressions? Or would they be secret even to myself, literally separated and sacred? I stand here in front of you wandering, wondering...

Perhaps we may start by saying the following: the philosopher himself is always displaced, wandering like a restless monument for thought, and sometimes even embodying -- in a deformed way, for sure -- monumental thought, but never "at home." The amount of philosophers who went into exile, who were born into immigrant communities, or driven across borders defined by clear constitutions and high moral standards is commensurably considerable. And even where the philosopher is supposed to feel most at home, in language -- even though this home does have walls, corridors, attics, and cellars, constantly undergoes renovations, is subject to governmental safety regulations, and is most probably haunted -- he is constantly attacked for not speaking in a *clear* language. I'm sure that Spinoza knows what I'm talking about.

So here I am, still, albeit barely, standing without an ethics, without a constitution. Potentially shattered like the statue of Apollo in front of the crucifix in Tommaso Laureti's painting *The Triumph of Christianity*, as brilliantly discussed by Mihnea Mircan in his introduction to *Undone*.

The philosopher, shattered and beaten down by institutionalized language, makes a run for it -- to suicide, exile, or the modest modes of introspection and meditation. When toward the end of his life Jacques Derrida occupied himself increasingly with the problem of democracy, this was perhaps because it is the only political constellation that offers, haphazardly, by mistake, and most probably only temporarily, a place to the philosopher, or at least is willing to engage with the constant wandering of philosophy, looking for open spaces and dark corners alike. That this wandering is often perceived as empty rhetoric is correlative to the hatred of democracy.

What is crucial in the sheltering of philosophy by democracy, and the nurturing of democracy by philosophy, is that both feed on their self-destruction. In fact, it is the potential for self-destruction that opens the truly democratic discourse, that by nature carries the forcefulness and ferocity of rigorous philosophical thought. Philosophy and democracy, appearing side by side in Greek thought, are impossible without each other, no matter how distorted their bodies have become over the past few millennia. They share a

destructive character, the ability to shatter their own boundaries, limits and skins, and expose themselves to whichever auto-immune virus that is out there to infect it.

In my work with Jonas Staal, we have often referred to the current state of democracy as *democratism*, as an ideology of correct and efficient governmental administration with multiple invisible hands in place. The mistrust of current democratic formations however, should never entail a preliminary abortion of the *democratic project*.

In a recent text, Avital Ronell writes “Why is it that enthusiasm is off the table when democracy rises up for discussion? [...] [W]hy must democracy be treated by so many fine minds as a bummer, too dull to engage critical valor? Perhaps when democracy fails the reality tests to which it is always submitted, it depletes the *dēmos*, and is no longer recognizable as democracy with its exuberant exposures. [...] We should remember the difference in tenor, the nearly contradictory fervor that words such as ‘communism’ and ‘socialism’ have carried historically in comparison with the pallid advocacy that ‘democracy’ has summoned to its side.”³

This is an important point. Democracy is often discarded before it “really existed,” its mission aborted on the way to yet another massacre appearing under the euphemism of “revolution.” We should recall here what Alexandre Kojève said about 1968: “It’s not a revolution, it can’t be a revolution. No one is being killed. To have a revolution there must be killing.” Democracy, on the other hand, has since its inception been built on the *remains* of tragedy, on the *abolition* of tragedy, in order to safeguard mankind to any future bloodshed. In this sense democracy is truly “anti-revolutionary,” while propounding, however, a constant *Umwertung aller Werte*, including its own.

The birth of philosophy has often been linked to the first state in the Western world which formulated the democratic project, the Athenian republic. And we may locate the birth of democracy precisely at the end of series of tragic murders -- parents eating their children, sons killing their mothers, wives killing their husbands -- which threaten to destroy an entire family to the last man. This family, haunted by homicide and cannibalism is the House of Atreus, and this last man is called Orestes.

In the tragedy *Eumenides*, the last of the *Oresteia* trilogy written by Aeschylus, which was premiered at the Dionysia in 458 BC, Orestes, wandering⁴ and placed outside the law,⁵ haunted by the furies over the killing of his mother, seeks refuge in Athena's temple in Athens. Faced with their insoluble conflict, she states: "The matter is too great for any mortal who may think he can decide it; but neither is it proper for me to judge a case of murder which can give rise to fierce wrath -- especially since you have approached this temple, disciplined by suffering, as a pure and harmless suppliant, while these beings have an allotted function that is hard to dismiss, and if they do not get a victorious outcome, the poison that will afterwards fall from their outraged pride into the soil will be an unbearable, unending plague for this land. That is how it is: both options, to let you remain or to send you away, are very hard for me to take without incurring wrath. Nevertheless, since this matter has fallen upon us here, I shall choose for my city men without fault to be judges of homicide, respecting (*aidoumenous*) the ordinance of an oath (*horkiōn... thesmon*) which I shall establish for all time."⁶

Thus, the council of the Areopagus became instituted as a group of men, chosen from the city's population, to judge freely, being bound to neither god nor ruler. Instead, this council has to respect, or, as we would say in Dutch, show *ont-zag*, "un-sight," *a-idoumenous*, for the oath that Athena has put in place for eternity, for all time. An oath that is in the same time "invisible," an oath that cannot be looked at, an oath as awful as it is splendid, an oath that institutes the anxiety that belongs to the nature of democracy, the anxiety that all the options are open, that the future is radically undetermined.

The Furies, wanting to punish Orestes for his matricide, are enraged, lamenting the "overthrow of established laws (*nomōn thesmiōn*),⁷ which "will unite all mortals in total practicality" (*pantas...eukhereiai sunarmosei brotous*).⁸ The word that I translated here with "practicality" is in Greek *eu-khereia*, which literally means to have a "good hand," to be practical, to have a certain easiness, or even sloppiness in doing things, a "workable," "down to earth" mentality which "unites all mortals." This is in fact what Ronell refers to when she says: "Does it make sense—enough or too much sense—to call for an essential reworking [of democracy]? Is such a call even feasible in our day and age? Perhaps, in terms of the algorithms of *feasibility*, to which so much has been steadily degraded, one will raise the objection that all this—the reopening of the case of democracy, strengthening its tether to the authority of the each and every one—is not workable. 'Workable!' I say."⁹

So we may establish that foundation of the first democratic institution is accompanied on the one hand with a respect, a deference to an “eternal oath,” and on the other hand offers the potential to unite mankind in practicality, a workable solution. It is within the tension between these two that democracy operates until today. In the tension here among us represented by Thorbecke and Spinoza, the timeless constitution and an ethical life.

The course of Orestes’ trial itself gives us some additional clues about how to interpret the current crisis of democracy, because in crisis it is. The Furies argue that Orestes has to be punished for killing his mother, which is a greater felony than his mother killing her husband, Orestes’ father Agamemnon. The god Apollo, who defends Orestes, counters their argument by claiming that the mother is *not a parent*: “The so-called ‘mother’ is not a parent of the child, only the nurse of the newly-begotten embryo. The parent is he who mounts the female keeps the offspring safe, like a stranger on behalf of a stranger[.]”¹⁰

The mother is merely hospitable to the child, who is nothing but a guest to his mother. This theme of being a guest to one’s own mother thence becomes the grand fantasy of marrying one’s own mother, being a stranger in her house: the Oedipus myth. Apollo thus elevates the father above the mother, and patricide above matricide. Killing your mother is not a revolution, but killing your father is, a theme that is not only present in Freudian socio-political thought, but also ever after in philosophers treating of politics and the political.

To whom or what is this council, this originally democratic institution that has to decide over Orestes in their inaugural trial, free from god and ruler, bound? It is bound, and both the Furies and Athena stress this multiple times, to a *horkos*, an oath, that must be respected, revered, but nevertheless remains “un-seen” (*aidoumenous*).¹¹ It is the nature of this oath that will provide us with further indications of our current democratic predicament.

In his recent work on the archeology of the oath, the *horkos*, Giorgio Agamben explicitly refers to anthropogenesis, to the “becoming human” of mankind: “In order for something like an oath to be able to take place, it is necessary, in fact, to be able above all to distinguish, and to articulate together in some way, life and language, actions and words --

and this is precisely what the animal, for which language is still an integral part of its vital practice, cannot do. The first promise, the first [...] *sacratio* is produced by means of this division, in which man, opposing his language to his actions, can put himself at stake in language, can promise himself to the *logos*.”¹²

Democracy is what comes about under the light of eternal oath, even though it may be always a *promise*, as Derrida has often stressed, “to come,” à *venir*. Athena binds the members of the Areopagus council to this oath, which is sworn on nothing but *language itself*. As Lycurgus, an Athenian politician stated: “The power which keeps our democracy together is the oath.”¹³

What we have witnessed here is the birth of the first democratic institution in the Western world, the High Court on the Areopagus, the holy mountain near Athens, created in the spirit of democracy. As Athena states: “I counsel my citizens to maintain, and practice reverently, a system which is neither anarchic nor despotic, and not to cast fear completely out of the city.”¹⁴ This last point is crucial: fear, the uncanny, anxiety (*to deinon*) is an essential element of the democratic practice, be it as a fear for the war of all against all, of anarchy or despotism, or the anxiety of democracy itself as unlimited potential for equality.

In his *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger reflects upon several chorus lines from another tragedy, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in which man is defined as *to deinotaton*, “the uncanniest.” In his discussion of the chorus, he defines this *deinon* as follows: “On the one hand, [...] *deinon* is the terrible in the sense of the overwhelming sway, which induces panicked fear, true anxiety, as well as collected, inwardly reverberating reticent awe. The violent, the overwhelming is the essential character of the sway itself. [...] But on the other hand, *deinon* means the violent in the sense of one who needs to use violence -- and does not just have violence at his disposal but is violence-doing, insofar as using violence is the basic trait not just of his doing but of his Dasein. [...] Humanity is violence-doing not in addition to and aside from other qualities but solely in the sense that from the ground up and in its doing violence, it uses violence against the over-whelming. Because it is doubly *deinon* in an originally united sense, it is *to deinotaton*, the most violent: violence-doing in the midst of the overwhelming.”¹⁵

Humanity is what is most violent in the overwhelming world, whether established by gods, mother nature, or the most recent incarnation of the over-whelming, capitalist economy and providence. Heidegger connects this definition of humanity with two other paradoxical phrases from the chorus lines in *Antigone* that aim at a definition of humanity, namely *pantoporos aporos* and *hypsipolis apolis*: “with many ways without way,” and “in the highest state without a state.” Because for humanity all roads are open it has no determined route, it is stateless, homeless, yet its highest citizen.

It is here that we return to the wandering quality that Dronsfeld signaled in Hans van Houwelingen’s work *What’s Done... Can Be Undone*. By waking up the statues of Spinoza and Thorbecke, the figures of ethics and law, and making them move, taking them down from their pedestals, lowering them to a human level, Van Houwelingen tries to allow democracy to appear between them, as it has appeared among humanity: “only when we break open the statue by confronting it with another do we liberate what it is that statue embodies in the first place.”¹⁶ The silence with which they are liberated, however, is overrated, and offers us no potential, let alone a mode of critique. And even if they would be liberated, they would still be there, as *fathers* of law and ethics.

We should have been warned from the beginning. Moments after the institution of the first democratic council, it is Athena who casts the decisive vote in the trial: “This is now my task, to be the last to judge this case; and I shall cast this ballot for Orestes. There is no mother who gave birth to me, and I commend the male in all respects with all my heart: in the fullest sense, I am my Father’s child. [...] The defendant wins, even if the judges’ votes on him are equally divided.”¹⁷

There he is again, the Father, ruling through exception, and with a full claim on authority. Democracy was never *true* democracy in the first place. At the end of the tragedy, with the democratic council in full view, Athena, a male figure if any, casts the final vote. The god who refused to judge hides behind the charade of majority rule. Any philosophical consideration of democracy therefore cannot but include the question of technology, the extension of man’s practicality, the mechanics and *mēkhanē* that at any moment can bring a god on the tragic stage to decide the vote. Democracy still hasn’t dealt with the *deus ex machina*, and perhaps it never will. Democracy is still unable to cope with the bureaucrat, who, as a technological extension of government trumps the equality of votes. And in the

same way, democracy cannot deal with any revolutionary, prophet, or messiah, whose appearance is as miraculous as the coincidence of thought and life. And yet it *has to*.

It is us who are speaking here today, in the midst of an overwhelming crisis that demands our violent involvement, and that demands that we offer a critique of the eternal oath that founds and binds together democracy, in the constant anxiety of dissolving it for good, who should once again address these foundational fault lines. To cite Agamben, “[p]hilosophy is [...] constitutively a critique of the oath: that is, it puts in question the sacramental bond that links the human being to language, without for that reason simply speaking haphazardly, falling into the vanity of speech.”¹⁸ Philosophy, always wandering, on a mission secret even to itself, thus walks the fine line between the “vanity of speech” and the injunction of “clear language,” which is fully under the regime binding human beings to their current language. Like democracy, it walks the line between anarchy and despotism, fraught with *to deinon*, existential anxiety.

It is not without coincidence that the fundamental oath of democracy, which is *aīdnos*, invisible, an oath binding us to *language*, has in our modern times been supplemented with the spectacle of uncountable numbers of cameras that have invaded our public space, trying to make visible the invisible bond that linked us together, monitoring every concrete interaction to distill the essence of the perfect state. In the most literal sense, the *mēkhanē* that transported the gods onto the tragic stage to relieve the plight, this anti-democratic device has in our modern times a *machin*, as the French would say, a “thingy,” an object unknown that invades every aspect of our lives.

The webcams that in this exhibition space register the reverberating absence of Spinoza and Thorbecke from public space, the democratic space par excellence, from which they have fled, seeking refuge among us, perhaps signify that the oath that binds humanity to language, to the language of democracy, is no longer as invisible and secret as Athena once wanted it to be. Derrida was already painfully aware of this: “Technoscientific acceleration poses an absolute threat to Western-style democracy as well, following its radical undermining of locality. Since there can be no question of interrupting science or the technosciences, it is matter of knowing *how* a democratic response can be made to what is happening.”¹⁹

The regime of visibility, the predominance of sight terrorizing the *aïdnos*, and this has been remarked before, is the greatest challenge to democracy. Show and identify yourself! -- that is the watchword of despotism and clear language.

Our current, only nominally democratic, mode of government *is out in the open*, and what it shows us is empty pedestals, waiting for our responses, or our demolition.

- ¹ “Neither promise to be depended upon, nor oath that could command respect.” From Thucydides, *The Pelopponesian War* 3.83.
- ² Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield, “Exchange Encounter,” in Mihnea Mircan and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei (eds), *Hans van Houwelingen: Undone* (Heijningen: Jap Sam Books, 2011), 101.
- ³ Avital Ronell, “Powering Down on Authority,” unpublished manuscript, n.p.
- ⁴ *Eum.* 236: ἀλήτορα.
- ⁵ *Eum.* 92: ἐκνόμων.
- ⁶ *Eum.* 470-84.
- ⁷ *Eum.* 490-1.
- ⁸ *Eum.* 494-5.
- ⁹ Ronell, “Powering Down on Authority,” n.p.
- ¹⁰ *Eum.* 658-61.
- ¹¹ *Eum.* 710.
- ¹² Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 69.
- ¹³ Lycurgus, *Against Leocrates* 79.
- ¹⁴ *Eum.* 696.
- ¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 114-5.
- ¹⁶ Dronsfield, “Exchange Encounter,” 104.
- ¹⁷ *Eum.* 734-41.
- ¹⁸ Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, 72.
- ¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Nietzsche and the Machine,” in Elizabeth Rottenberg (ed. and trans.) *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 250. See also Avital Ronell, “Untread and Untried: Nietzsche Reads Derridocracy,” *diacritics* 38.1-2: 158-71.