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**Otherwise Than Writing. Text and Counter-textuality as a Problem of Methodology
and Ethics. Levinas and the Postmodern Anthropology.**

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Abstract

The aim of the dissertation is to answer two main groups of questions. The first one, which is more general, includes the issue whether it is possible to distinguish a certain moment in the development of the humanities and social sciences in the 20th century, when in some areas thereof the basic linguistic form of text in which the results of research are presented and ideas exchanged is being questioned. What are the reasons behind doubts about its usefulness and neutrality? In what ways, without giving up the academic practices of writing altogether, do certain authors try to overcome what they perceive as traditional limitations of the text form? I propose a term "countertextuality" to cover these phenomena of critique and reformulation of text. The narrower question involved is: is there a common ground for a fruitful exchange between the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the so-called American postmodern anthropology? The juxtaposition is justified by the assumption that my analysis of the problematic of how textual norms are critiqued and subverted will be limited to two cases in which the ethical motivations play a crucial role. This, however, does not imply merely a superficial similarity of the usage of the category of the Other, which is in fact employed differently by Levinas and the anthropologists. The real ground for comparisons between them are their views on the epistemological and ethical implications of language and text. Writing about two particular cases of resistance to the limitations of text as means of communication and as a metaphor of object of research, I suggest a way of thinking about how text shapes knowledge. I also reflect on the aims of "writing otherwise": otherwise than it has been done before but also differently, hermetically, unclearly, posing a text as a challenge to a reader.

The conceptual ground for the perspective assumed in this work comes from the literacy theory propounded by authors such as Marshall McLuhan, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody, Walter J. Ong or David R. Olson. Its main thesis is that the emergence and popularization of subsequent linguistic media: writing and print had fundamental influence not only on forms of communication, but also on ways of thinking and on social

organization. The main critique literacy theory has received is that it is deterministic in its understanding of writing, and that it makes the mistake of essentializing the characteristics of the medium with no reference to local circumstances and its varying types, as well as various practices involved. A reasonable solution is to build tools that allow for analyzing historically and culturally specific models of literacy and text, including practices and institutions involved. The importance of the medium can then be explored without resorting to risky generalizations. In my case, I analyze how selected representatives of philosophy and anthropology perceive the medium, rather than what its essence is. These perceptions, however, have real influence on how texts are written and used.

I begin with a characterization of the background of the problem of countertextuality. I point to the growing role of the notion of text in the humanities and social sciences in the 20th century and to its importance in the crisis of representation. I refer to Pierre Bourdieu's idea of analyzing the logic of practice as an example of a countertextually motivated methodology. Further on I proceed by outlining the main premises of the literacy theory and the role of text in its various formulations. It tends to be treated as an ideal type of all the qualities of communication and practices created or enhanced by the medium of writing. It is also increasingly seen as a template that, while employed as neutral by thinkers ranging from linguistics to philosophy, is in fact anything but neutral. The notion of countertextuality I propose is meant to cover instances of opposition to text from within a culture of high literacy. Such opposition does not try to revert to modes of communication from before writing or to create completely new ones, but it produces ways of writing differently than it is believed it has been done so far, in a manner that subverts conventions of writing and reading practices. Another point discussed in chapter one is the conceptualization of the change brought about by countertextuality in the landscape of humanities and social sciences. I refer to Kuhn's concept of paradigm change, to the framework of social crisis and to Foucault's notion of episteme. I conclude that countertextuality can be best seen as a symptom of a change of episteme. It is a crisis that brings out certain elements of what Foucault

describes as the positive unconscious of knowledge. However, unlike his analysis of the classic and modern episteme, mine is situated at the moment of change, the result of which cannot be fully seen yet. Finally, I discuss the importance of temporality and moment for both Levinas and the postmodern anthropology.

Chapter two is devoted to laying conceptual foundations for comparing Levinas's philosophy and the project of postmodern anthropology. I recount in what contexts and functions the author of *Otherwise Than Being* has so far been mentioned in the works of anthropologists. While the members of the postmodern circle have rarely and mostly perfunctorily referred to his work, some later representatives of the discipline did invoke it more. Mostly, however, such references to Levinas posited him as the ultimate philosopher of alterity, promoting personal care and responsibility for the Other, openness to dialogue and Other's suffering. His thought has also served as basis for contesting the principles of cultural relativism as not individually empathetic enough. While this is not ungrounded, it seems that so far anthropological references to Levinas's philosophy have been superficial in ignoring the difficulties and contradictions of his radical ethics. Levinas, on the other hand, was critical of anthropology as a whole, which he tended to identify with Lévi-Strauss's structuralism. Moreover, one of the more striking paradoxes of this thought is that he had very limited respect to cultural traditions different from what he termed as the common Greek and Hebrew culture. Nevertheless, philosophically he drew from Lévy-Bruhl's concept of pre-logical mentality. However, my claim is that there are important conceptual grounds for juxtaposing Levinas and postmodern anthropology. First, it is their treatment of the problem of truth and the tendency to put it second only to responsibility for and to the Other. This attitude to truth is also related to the emphasis put on the importance of the third for any representations, comparisons or generalizations. Levinas believes that the asymmetrical, ethical relation with the Other happens before and beyond conceptualization, and that it is the introduction of the third, the Other of the Other, that makes the comparisons necessary and representations possible.

In a similar vein, anthropologists emphasize contextualizing positions of the anthropologist and the other cultures in order to achieve a just representation. Further on, I show how Levinas's understanding of time as split between diachrony and synchrony translates into temporal dilemmas discussed by the postmodern anthropologists. I also suggest that the epistemological status of the postmodern critique in anthropology is similar to that of skepticism, described by Levinas as a recurring movement in the history of philosophy. While it can be rationally refuted, it remains valid in the moment of opposition and as such it is an ethical form of self-questioning.

The next stage is laying out the critique of the role of text and of textual norms put forward by the postmodern anthropologists and by Levinas. I begin chapter three with the anthropologists and proceed by discussing individually the views of some representatives of the *Writing Culture* circle. The aim is to show that while they articulate their reformatory views largely as a group and share a critical stand towards the existing norms of writing ethnographic monographs, they vary in emphasis, the way they tackle particular issues of relative importance of particular stages of ethnographic process and in their attitude to certain textual conventions. They also differ in style and rhetoric they use in their commentaries. The authors I discuss separately are: Kevin Dwyer, James Clifford, Vincent Crapanzano, Stephen A. Tyler, George E. Marcus and Talal Asad. Their critiques focus on the sharp difference between the communicative reality of fieldwork and the resulting monograph. The traditional ethnographic text imposes categorization and systematization, the descriptions focus on structures rather than practices, they objectify and isolate the culture of the informants, devoid it of a temporal dimension. Another important line of criticism involves masking the subjectivity of both the ethnographer and the people he talks to in the field, as well as the dynamic of interactions between them. As a result the very processual character of research and producing knowledge is being repressed.

Further on, I analyze Levinas's use of the notions of text, writing and the written throughout his philosophical works. I show how he links text

with totalization, and totalizing interpretations in particular. Writing and the written, on the other hand, are shown as marks of institutions such as law or science – the medium is associated with exteriorization of reason and rule that, while inevitable, leads to forgetting of the ethical ground behind them. Writing is also the medium of thematization, of objectifying the Other and of ontology in Levinas's view – it produces and petrifies beings. Finally, I discuss the genesis of the notions of the saying and the said in philosopher's work, which are the core of his understanding of language and its ethical involvement. I show how they are grounded in and derive from a certain understanding of the specificity of speech and writing which is not at all distant from how the literacy theorists viewed it.

Chapter four is devoted to an analysis of countertextual strategies employed by Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. The focus on one work is necessary to keep the analysis meticulous and relatively narrow, but more importantly it is dictated by the fact that this is the work in which the philosopher explicitly states that he attempts to write against the limitations of the Western tradition of philosophical writing. In the chapter I discuss certain already existing descriptions of Levinasian language and style, especially the one given by Jacques Derrida in *Violence and Metaphysics*, and another one, coming from François-David Sebbah, the author of *L'épreuve de la limite: Derrida, Henry, Levinas et la phénoménologie*. I treat their interpretations as stepping-stones to my own analysis. Basing on Levinas's declarations I treat his way of writing as reflecting his philosophy and as an attempt to evoke, rather than describe the sphere of transcendence, which he calls "otherwise-than-being". The rhetoric devices he employs mirror his philosophical concepts such as ex-cendence and un-saying, questioning, passivity, or ambiguity. I also point to how the shape of his language – its sounds, alliterations, hyperboles, etc. – dissociates from referential meanings to produce what he sees as the ethical meaning. The aim of language in *Otherwise Than Being* is then performative: it is meant to bring about a form of pre-conceptual passivity towards the text in the reader. It is a kind of vulnerability that mirrors and prepares the ground for the ethical passivity in the relation with the Other. Levinas's thought and the

form it takes in writing produces a project of utter reshaping of the language of Western philosophy, including Western epistemology which would recover its ethical dimension. Therefore the analysis of his attitude to writing and text together with a discussion of his countertextual strategies are a core of my work. They also offer tools to analyze countertextual efforts within anthropology, which I discuss in the last chapter.

Chapter five is divided in two parts. In the first one I go through the writing strategies postulated by the postmodern anthropologists. The most important ones are based on the principle of polyphony. Its aim is to disempower and contextualize the authorial voice. The proposed forms it can take vary from extensive quoting of ethnographic subjects, through including corridor talk in ethnographic texts and showing the 'shadow dialogues' the ethnographer is involved in throughout the research, to multiplying authorial perspectives. Another important devices are irony and bringing out the temporal character of research and interpretation. Finally, there is Stephen A. Tyler's concept of evocation as an aim of ethnographic writing, which would be an alternative to description and interpretation. This controversial idea assumes that the text can produce a sense of unity of experience which is distinct from totalization.

In the second part I analyze three examples of ethnographic works that employ countertextual strategies. I focus on Vincent Crapanzano's *Tuhami. Portrait of a Moroccan*, Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa. The Life and Words of a Kung! Woman* and Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman. Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. Apart from the general countertextual directives discussed in the first part of the chapter, which are prone to critique and conventionalization, there can be local countertextual strategies, derived for using in a particular text, being part of its structure or content. I show how in *Tuhami* Crapanzano uses the ethnographer's compulsive looking for probable versions of life facts, as well as excessive and perfunctory use of theory to undermine the author's authority. I claim that his aim is to emphasize and reform the working of text rather than to somehow neutralize its effect – he presents the text as a testimony to how interpretation changes in time throughout the research process. Shostak,

while seemingly fairly conventional, shows how ethnographer's work is shaped by her stand and the critique of her own culture. She also brings out the tensions between the individual and the general in ethnographic research, and the way the ethnographer is chosen by the informant or how the informant's competence in fulfilling the task of storytelling determines the content of ethnography. Another element is the motif of solidarity between women, despite difference and miscomprehension. These last two motifs return in Ruth Behar's book. Moreover, Behar puts great emphasis on the institutional role of writing and texts and the way textual competence, acquired through a certain cultural discipline, allows for status advancement. Her countertextuality, very different from Levinas's and Crapanzano's, happens in a way she discursively focuses on the cultural importance of texts. I also show that feminist anthropology is a testing tool of sorts for the postulates of postmodern anthropology.

In conclusion of the dissertation I sum up the major points discussed, focusing on the input offered by the analysis of countertextuality in the philosophy of Levinas and in the project of postmodern anthropology to the perspective of literacy theory. I also refer to the concept of ethical communication as interruption developed by Amit Pinchevski. He claims that while most models of communication focus on effective and accurate transfer of information, from the non-totalizing, ethical point of view, it is more important not to glide over or hide the misunderstandings and the moments when communication is impossible. I claim that the countertextual efforts of the writers which undermine text's function of communicating linear, coherent meanings and which try to show other functions it could perform, serve such a purpose of ethical communication by way of interruption. In the final section, I discuss further perspectives for the research on countertextuality as a historical tendency and as a recurring motif in the Western culture of highly developed literacy.