

# A Love-And-Hate Letter to Crisis and Critique

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I wrote this this short text because an unexpected but serious illness made it impossible for me to give an interview to CRISIS AND CRITIQUE apropos of the new issue of the journal dedicated to my work.

When I hear “crisis and critique,” my first automatic reaction is anxiety and hatred – why? At my old age, I learned to enjoy peace, but each new issue of C&C brings so many original important texts that reading that it regularly ruins a couple of my days. Even if these texts are not directly critical of me, they all too often compel me to rethink my position, or they at least bring out as aspect that I totally missed when I wrote about a certain topic. With the forthcoming issue dedicated to my work, this situation gets much worse: what I dread is that I will learn unknown things about *myself*.

Recently, I’ve referred to my favored plot of crime novels: a person (usually a woman) is in mortal danger, unknown forces try to kill her because she knows something she shouldn’t have known; this something is not some big secret or trauma that haunts her - she even doesn’t know what this something is... When this formula is brought to extreme, the woman is in danger because she doesn’t know something she should have known if the story told by the criminal to maintain his alibi were to be true. (Say: the criminal claims that he couldn’t have committed the crime because he was at some place where many people saw him, but the woman was also there and, of course, didn’t see him...) The specific experience of a woman in this situation (who knows a dangerous secret but doesn’t know what this secret is) renders in a plastic way what psychoanalysis aims at with notions like divided subject and unconscious knowledge. And what I am afraid is that the forthcoming issue about me will put *me* in this position, ruthlessly bringing out more than I know I am saying in what I say.

So I have good reasons to dread and hate C&C. It is not simply the best philosophical journal I know, it is in some sense the ONLY journal in its genre, what in logic they call hapax, a universality with just one particular case. According to a legend, they asked Rossini who is the greatest composer of all times, and he answered: “Beethoven.” A new question followed: “But what about Mozart?” Rossini snapped back: “He is not the best, he is the ONLY composer there is.” This is what C&C is among today’s journals. In other words, my dread and hatred simply mean that I am proud to be associated with C&C, and that I am ashamed of my love for it.

Each of the questions C&C planned to ask me in the interview hits the nail straight on its head. They begin with the curious fact that the Russian state ordered the destruction of my book on jokes – why exactly this one, with all my other works critical of Putin’s Russia? The easy answer would be: in a recent interview, Peter Sloterdijk kindly praised me for introducing dark humor into philosophy, and I think he was right, with a proviso that I don’t consider this my personal idiosyncrasy: we live in an

age when only dark humor enables us to adequately grasp the madness of our social reality... However, as I often demonstrated in my past work, the role of humor in political discourse is very ambiguous. Humor can express a sarcastic critique of the upper classes whose actual corruption belies their high principles. There is also humor which expresses the disdain of those in power for the “primitive” lower classes, plus – crucial today more than ever – jokes at the expense of those in power which serve the safe reproduction of this same power, giving the population vent to release their frustration (instead of openly rebelling). Today, with the growth of the openly cynical self-mocking functioning of power, making fun of those in power is more and more self-defeating: isn't Trump himself already his own caricature? So where do I stand with regard to this? Do I also not often fall into the trap of using problematic jokes which offend Woke sensitivities without really hurting those in power? I'll live this question open here since I continue to think that the Woke sensitivity is part of the problem. My position is here that of Norman Finkelstein who, in his *I'll Burn That Bridge*, shows his willingness to burn bridges not only with the establishment but also with the “left” of today: he considers its main tendency

“to have degenerated from soaring moral and intellectual heights with Rosa Luxemburg, W. E. B. DuBois, and Paul Robeson into a censorious, narcissistic, morbidly navel-gazing culture preoccupied with subjectivist trivialities like personal pronouns at the expense of solidaristic struggle for a better world. ‘Whenever I see he/him or she/her, I think *fuck/you*.’ Finkelstein declares: ‘If I can't laugh, I don't want your Revolution’”.<sup>1</sup>

One often hears that my bad-taste jokes are one of the reasons of my popularity, and C&C touch this aspect with their question: should philosophy be popular? My answer is: it cannot be, but it is. Why? Popularity can be the sign that a philosophy caught its epoch in its conceptual essence; however, such a popularity is unfortunately also always a sign that a philosophy was in its core misunderstood. The most blatant case is here that of Hegel: the predominant image of Hegel as the absolute idealist reducing reality to the self-movement of the Idea that inexorably leads to a global happy ending is a ridiculous falsification of Hegel, THE philosopher of radical contingency and historical openness. One should not be afraid to draw all the consequences of this claim: against the predominant version of Marxism, we should assert that when a philosophy seizes the masses and becomes an actual historical force, it is a sure indication that it was misunderstood and that a catastrophe will ensue. Authentic philosophy enters (or, rather, may enter) after the failure of its direct actualization, to analyze (bring out) the necessity of what may appear a contingent failure.

This brings us to C&C's next question about what cannot but appear as my pessimism: I seem to fully endorse the fact that today the Left lacks any authentic vision of a global alternative to the existing order. The only actual revolutionary force today is capitalism itself which did what the Left tried to do for decades: it left behind its neoliberal global form and is giving birth to something for which we seem to lack a proper term (techno-feudalism, neofascism). The Left is more and more reduced to a new form of survivalism: if we will not radically change our society, the very survival of humanity is at stake... While agreeing with this diagnosis, I try to give it a positive spin: the lack of the new visions of future means that we have to move not only beyond the existing global order but also beyond the utopias which just present a more refined version of this order magically deprived of its constitutive antagonisms (like the social-democratic welfare-state). Survivalism is today a positive category because it is a call for radical change: the choice is not between mere survival and radical change, we will only survive if we change our world substantially.

If we lack the conceptual vision of a new order (like "scientific socialism"), can poetry provide the answer? Last but not least, C&C asks me who is my favored poet – a very sensitive point, as Ruda and Hamza know very well, being fully aware of my deep distrust of poetry. With respect to the horrors we are witnessing today on a daily basis, how can people considered "normal" endure or even enjoy such a spectacle? The answer is: they should be incentivized by some mythic discourse, religion or poetry. Recall how the role of poetry was described by *Ernst Jünger*, a reluctant Nazi fellow-traveler who, like the Proud Boys in the US today, celebrated the purifying effect of military struggle: *"Any power struggle is preceded by a verification of images and iconoclasm. This is why we need poets - they initiate the overthrow, even that of titans."*<sup>2</sup>

However, there is a different kind of beastliness, the authentically-Leftist one, which does not rely on poetry but on *concepts*. In his "The Intellectual Beast is Dangerous," Bertolt Brecht ascertains: "A beast is something strong, terrible, devastating; the word emits a barbarous sound." Surprisingly, he then writes: "The key question, in fact, is this: how can we become *beasts*, beasts in such a sense that the fascists will fear for their domination?" It is thus clear that, for Brecht, this question designates a positive task, not the usual lament on how Germans, such a highly cultured nation, could have turned into the Nazi beasts: "We have to understand that goodness must also be able to injure – to injure savagely."<sup>3</sup> We are not only fully responsible when we decide to violate the commandment and kill; we are no less responsible when, in such a difficult situation, *we decide to follow the commandment in a false way*, i.e., when we decide *not to kill when killing is needed, no to be violent when violence is needed*. One should quote here Kierkegaard again, his precise characterization of Abraham's ordeal when he is ordered to

slaughter Isaac as “an ordeal such that, please note, the ethical is the temptation.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there is no easy way out: sometimes, the ethical injunction not to kill is the very refuge providing the excuse to act as we should. Sometimes, one has to kill IN ORDER TO keep one’s hands clean, not as a heroic compromise of dirtying one’s hands for the higher goal. This brutality is not covered by poetry, it is justified by the power of concepts which only allow us to draw the correct line of separation.

Here is the place to declare my staunch opposition to the “poetic turn” enacted by Jacques-Alain Miller in the last decades: the combination of poetry with center-right pragmatism in politics. In his 2002–2003 seminar *An Effort of Poetry*, Miller claims that the model a psychoanalytic interpretation should follow today is poetry: poetry implies a detached and ironic posture that the psychoanalyst should adopt inside and outside the clinic. Classic interpretation is prosaic, it aims at therapy, but today when therapy is medicalized, interpretation can only be poetic. So Miller proposes “an effort of poetry” which will become a “creationist effort” of interpretation.” Such an interpretation no longer targets the unconscious or meaning, and it must therefore find the use of a style that is close to that of the impenetrable oracles. Such an interpretation “without meaning” (without bringing out the deep meaning of the interpreted phenomena) aims at touching the opaque *jouissance* of the symptom (or, rather, “sinthoms”: knots of enjoyment) that hold together the subjectivity of the analysand. Language is here no longer broached as a structure, but as *lalangue* (“language”):

“The particular language that we have received bears traces of the desire of one’s parents, and the unconscious is made of these traces. It consists of *lalangue*, outside-of-meaning, indicating a *singular unsayability* and a *singular mode of jouissance*.”

A truly Lacanian interpretation, which can involve a true awakening for the subject, is marked by this “impossible to say” that tickles the body. “This is what *interpretation* aims at: to make *resonate* the *jouissance* that keeps the ‘I-don’t-want-to-know-anything of the subject’ trapped.” The aim is no longer to decipher/resolve the symptoms but to indicate their unique (singular) shape of unsayability that sustains the subject’s being...<sup>5</sup> Miller’s logic is clear here: from traversing the fantasy to identification with the synthom – so in what sense does this shift imply that, as Miller puts it, analysts must choose poetry over politics? Is it that “traversing the fantasy” still echoes a political gesture of leaving behind the fantasy-structure that sustains every collective identity, and that such a revolutionary gesture necessarily gets caught in some new form of identifications?

Is, however, Miller’s choice really the one between politics and poetry? One cannot but note that Miller’s turn to poetry coincides with his

*political* turn against any full political commitment (new nationalist Right and especially radical Left) towards moderate center-Right liberalism – Miller publicly supported Sarkozy. (Furthermore, this turn to poetry in no way precludes full support of Israel in the ongoing war.) In politics, it also holds that there is no meta-language: politics has no neutral outside, every apolitical stance is immanently political.

We thus have to return to both terms disparaged by Miller: politics and concepts. Is Lacan primarily not a creator of new concepts (or of new versions of old concepts) which circulate all around us? The Real, the big Other, non-All, surplus-enjoyment, fantasy... yes, these concepts are multivalent, as all true concepts are (think just about Hegel's *Aufhebung*). And, to conclude, this brings me back to *Crisis and Critique*: it is for me first of all a journal of concepts, providing the space for their free development in all their productive inconsistency.

1 "The Inspiring Outrage of Norman Finkelstein", available online at <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/the-inspiring-outrage-of-norman-finkelstein>

2 The Pox Populi Guide to Creating Dissident, available online at [https://poxpopuli.substack.com/p/the-pox-populi-guide-to-creating?r=182myl&utm\\_campaign=post&utm\\_medium=web&triedRedirect=true](https://poxpopuli.substack.com/p/the-pox-populi-guide-to-creating?r=182myl&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&triedRedirect=true)

3 Quoted from Palmier 2006, p.iii

4 Kierkegaard 1983, p.115

5 Interpretation Revisited, available online at <https://nlscongress2020.amp-nls.org/new-blog/interpretation-revisited>