

The School's Embrace

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Written in response to Irina Dumitrescu's article *The School's Embrace* (In: L. Kolb, R. Rügger. *We would like to learn and are working on a book...*)

There is quite a remarkable difference between proper nouns and other words. If I say “I am an artist” or “I am a teacher” surely I express true propositions, but I also reduce myself to being a member of a class of objects, namely artists and teachers, and in that sense objectifying my own being-for-myself. Proper names do not have that existential disadvantage. To say “I am Sjoerd” may be to label myself to facilitate future referencing by other people – and thereby continuing to objectify myself – but at least it is my whole being, which is Sjoerd and Sjoerd is my entire being.

Maybe it would be an interesting experiment to see what happens if one would actually start to identify with one's own name, rather than with being ‘an artist’ or ‘a teacher’. ‘Sjoerd’ has Germanic origins and is a variation of Sigiward. *Ward* is a common suffix in names and means a guard, or a keeper. *Sigi-* or just *Si-* has the same meaning as the High German *Sieg*, namely victory. Hence, *Sigiward* and *Sjoerd* are the guards of victory. *Sieg-*, *Si-* and *Sigi-* descend from the Indo-European root *segh-*, which means ‘to hold’. The word ‘school’ also goes back to *segh-*, which means that just as ‘school’ and ‘Sieg’, ‘school’ and ‘Sjoerd’ (i.e me) are distant cousins. So basically, what follows here is my family history, and one could say it is a genealogy in more than one way.

What is a school? is the apparently simple question Irina Dumitrescu asks herself and us in her article *The School's Embrace*. ‘A school’, and ‘to school’ have many different meanings extending far beyond its colloquial use today. Amongst other things, we learn from Dumitrescu’s text that ‘a school’ can be ‘an embrace’, an embrace of people and ideas, thereby connecting people's lives, not necessarily because they are forced to be at a certain place at a certain time – as is the case in most schools nowadays – but as an event of finding each other, as a moment or recognition pointing towards having something in common. Every now and then, Dumitrescu argues, the school has the potential to embrace people and ideas across time, thus creating a sense of a shared direction or intentionality to previously disconnected lifelines.

We also learn that the school informatively harasses and leisurely caresses – it punishes as much as it embraces. Such is the case with Dumitrescu's own becoming part of the histories that are inscribed in the fabric of the French city of Poitiers as the place embraced her and became part of her own history and as she herself embraced the stories and the histories that she found herself confronted with. Maybe we could say that this moment of meeting with history is the moment of writing yourself into it. It is a sudden collapse of the distance, which separates you from the archive of simplified historiographical archives, which make up secondary school style history and which is usually is not much more than a portrait gallery of heroic kings and an enumeration of bloody and glorious battles. This second type of narration of history is extremely biased. Why did we call the Middle Ages the Dark Ages for so many years? Probably because not much happened that interests us, which of course does not mean that nothing happened. We tend to read primary sources and look at works of art

presupposing the world we live in ourselves. We are looking for a confirmation of what we already believe and think. It is because we – and of course I am speaking from a Western perspective – think of history as a series of wars, discoveries and above all the individual: the rational subject who is bounded in a nutshell and counts himself a king of infinite space¹. That's why we never found much of interest in these one thousand years of supposed obscurity. During the Middle Ages, there was no Great War, there were no colonies, no Napoleon, ~~and not even a~~ Hitler. Thus contemplating the events that shaped our history and the consequent presuppositions, which shape our reading of history, maybe we should conclude that it is actually 'us' who live in the Dark Ages.

The question of how we should school ourselves in history making and reading, thus also means how to develop a sensibility for the particular, the physical and the conflicted. How do we embrace the Other that speaks an ancient language we do not speak anymore? Meeting with history, being embraced by it, is an involvement with it – an event of caressingly finding each other – not because you were physically present at Jeanne d'Arc's interrogation², but because there is an idea, a word, something quite simple, which embraces you across time and place. A thing or an idea that connects knowledge and practice, which might tell us how history is shaped, not by wars of kings, but by a more subtle strife for power. Dumitrescu found her school, or probably better: she was schooled, by coincidence, by a lucky find happening at a moment of physical exhaustion. A caressing embrace even, despite the rather painful experiences her protagonists had to undergo, or wilfully endured. The joyful event of histories meeting at a particular place and time, opens the infinite abyss of a past long gone. Histories *can* converge, maybe temporarily, but they can converge, as events, which in this case took place in a house on Rue Artur Rane 10. This house is the birth house of Michel Foucault and through some historical irony it now houses a department of the Ministry of Justice, focusing on the 'judicial protection' of juvenile delinquents. Therefore, as Dumitrescu rightfully remarks, if the house on Rue Artur Rane 10 would not have existed, it would have had to be invented, maybe as an appendix to an obscure, hermetic manuscript in a story by Borges. Thus, as a potential embrace, the story itself is also 'a school', which we coincidentally stumble upon. What may we hope for? Do we simply wait for the kind of encounter Dumitrescu describes? Is it still possible to create our own schools? If so, how do we know, which schools we need to create? Maybe the question that it all comes down to is: can we somehow set up the right conditions for the school/s to find us?

This is not the only challenge we have to face. History is not just about the Others, it is about the forever absent Others. The question then seems to be how to school in absence? How to embrace absence? Guibert of Nogent, one of Dumitrescu's protagonists, seems to have been obsessed by absence. Without a father, from the age of eight, his story is both about overcoming absence, by embracing fatherly figures such as the teacher and God, as well as embracing absence by expressing skepticism about the worship of relics. Obviously this is an aporia, an insoluble conflict resulting

1 Hamlet, II, 2 – quoted by Borges at the beginning of the story *The Aleph*. From: J.L. Borges, *De Aleph en andere verhalen*, Amsterdam, 2003.

2 In 1429, the crown prince of France ordered a theological examination of Jeanne d'Arc to verify whether her ambitions to become a military leader could be trusted. This examination took place in the city of Poitiers.

in from a constant oscillation between absence and presence. Perhaps this oscillation is the point of reading and writing history, both essentially resulting in the construction of history. The 'school's embrace', is about collapsing distance, as well as about reinstating it. It is about the confluence of lives, things and stories. It is about inscribing space, or maybe even inscribing the world, with new narratives and not through the grand narrative of Western thought, which ignores Guibert as an irrelevant footnote in the history of kings and their heroic wars. It is about the event of embracing the absent Other in an understanding, that only in that very absence one can actually begin to understand history, which in effect means to write it yourself.

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