

What is this civilization where appeals are made to culture and intellectual freedom as if they could stop wars, but whose institutions responsible for cultivating and transmitting culture and free thought work as assembly lines producing beings that Woolf describes as both submissive and violent, thirsting, if not for money, then for recognition, ready for all sorts of brutality if they feel that the abstract ideals that give them their identity are threatened? What is this society "that sink[s] the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflates in his stead a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially[?]" *Think we must.*

- I.S. & V.D.



Designed & Printed by Jason Wagner

Distributed by the University of Minnesota Press

Stengers & Despret

Women Who Make a Fuss

Univocal

Women

The Unfaithful

Who

Daughters of

Make

Virginia Woolf

a Fuss

Isabelle Stengers & Vinciane Despret

and collective

Françoise Balibar, Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent,
Laurence Bouquiaux, Barbara Cassin,
Mona Chollet, Emilie Hache, Françoise Sironi,
Marcelle Stroobants, Benedikte Zitouni

translated by April Knutson | Univocal

be the discourse on the things themselves and claims to be universal. *Someone said to me, life is a bear. You fight with it, or you watch it pass by, from behind a tree. As for me, that doesn't worry me at all that I watch it pass by, from behind a tree. The powerful discourse, man's discourse, I watch it pass by. The all-powerful philosophy—I never wanted that.* Laugh and elude the retaliative argument that makes thought a battlefield—if you engage in combat with me and it's not based on some sort of truth, you are like a barking dog.... If you are not a dog, fight like a man ... or a woman?

Watch the grand discourses pass by. As a woman among men, laugh, at the edge of the well, like the serving girl of Thrace. And like Cassin did, when she remembered that this same Thales, the one who was going to fall in the well, was affirming that everything is water, the first universal proposition, and died of thirst. But if Cassin is indeed the heir of the mischievous serving girl, she does not limit herself to profiting from the accident. She digs wells into which men of the universal will fall; she fabricates traps where they will catch their feet, in such a way that they will be unable to plead that it is their absorption in their relation to truth that makes them fall, for it is this relation itself that will have permitted them to be trapped.

And it is in an astonishingly similar vein of inheritance, that of a line of women who cultivate anger and humor in order to resist, that the response of Benedikte is inscribed. Except that for her the universal is not the theoretical universal of those who claim to speak in the name of "great problems" or in the name of Truth. Rather, it is the all too common universal that authorizes those who claim to speak in the name of others, or, a gesture of an even more fearsome violence, to know "for the others"—explain to them, in all generosity, what they—male or female—"represent," and what their words as well as their situation "really mean."

BENEDIKTE, DON'T FORGET

Explain. *One should abolish the word explain!* The violence of the one who claims to understand and who is going to explain is what Benedikte Zitouni¹ inscribed in the heart of her answer, a violence that she learned to recognize as inherent to the relation with knowledge as learned and practiced at the university. For Zitouni, in order to sustain a memory, to inherit from Woolf, she must refuse to forget that she and her mother were the women to whom explanations were given, the women from whom understanding was demanded. It is also, as a form of protection, to foster the malaise, almost anger, that this memory reignites each time. *So many men have explained things to us, my mother and I, single mother and only daughter, that I get goose bumps when people explain things to me. And especially if it's for my well-being. And even more when nothing has been asked. It does not matter: this explanation and its interest for us are taken so much for granted that it*

1. Benedikte Zitouni, urban sociologist, teaches at the University of Saint Louis, in Brussels. She is also a member of GECO (Group of Constructivist Studies) at the Free University of Brussels. She has recently published her first book: *Agglomérer. Une anatomie de l'extension bruxelloise (1828-1915)* (Brussels: ASP-Academic & Scientific Press/VUB Press, 2010). She also collaborated on the book *Usus/usures* (Brussels: Éditions de la Communauté française, 2010) and has published articles on urban ecology, on interactional studies of the city and on action led by the GIP (Group of Information on Prisons).

is delivered freely, magnanimously.... So many times, we, on our side, have politely nodded our heads, made some oohs and ahs indicating interest when we should have simply told them that if this was about explaining things to us, well, that didn't interest us, thank you very much, and goodbye! From then on, I found it indecent to permit oneself to explain things to others; explanation is a resource that I consciously deprive myself of in my work as a researcher and teacher.

Retroactive fabrication? Fabulation? Benedikte poses the question but does not resolve it; if it is a fabulation, it's in order to be able to inherit from it, to make it available for reactivation, to make the violence or rather, she says, the indecency, perceptible—in fact, after the act, we don't lick our wounds but we ask ourselves, amused or annoyed, suffering from hallucinations in any case: "But how can they believe that we are so ignorant?"

To maintain a memory of this experience is to choose to be bound by it. In her research on the history of the constitution of the city of Brussels, she had to remain constantly vigilant: *I would have liked to have railed against certain truths and declare what the city truly was, what the society was, in a way that was stronger and unequivocal and general, I sincerely believe that I had a penchant for that.* Re-suscitating the experience of the man-who-explains, reactivating the indecency, just like actively remembering that one is vulnerable when faced with this indecency, when one knows that one should say, "no, thank you, and goodbye" and one doesn't say it, this is, for Benedikte, choosing a mode through which she inherits and which binds her.

For me, personally, the confrontation with this attitude that must be repelled has constrained me rather than liberated me; it's a source of privation that has led me to do sociology in a rather factual and austere fashion. The style of the reports of my empirical data has become austere, perhaps a bit autistic, especially in order to avoid saying what others must think. I say austerity, privation, because each time that I start to give myself airs, larger momentum, truths, I must erase them

because I realize that I am reproducing a violence that I cannot assume, I see a resurgence of the man-who-permits-himself-to-explain-without-anyone-asking-anything. But at the same time, in this factual austerity, I have also learned to dramatize the account: first, in order not to bore the reader; second, and this is very important for me, the reader must always feel that there is someone telling the story, who exaggerates the trait, who manipulates the data. There are certainly other ways to confront the man-who-permits-himself-to-explain, I am not saying that this is the best, but for me factual austerity + manipulating dramatization have been a way out. Even more so because I was constrained by the antipode of the man who explains, that is I had to assume that the reader had her own universe, many other acquaintances that I did not have. Austerity has been a way to respond to this positive assumption: I cannot foresee what she, with all her acquaintances, will be able to do with my text and therefore I must leave room for unforeseen connections and not predetermine them. I must bring an end to my account, that's certain, but I cannot predetermine its consequences and connections.

Accepting the constraint to "never do that" has thus committed Benedikte to bring together what are so often opposites: the facts, nothing but the facts, or the manipulating dramatization, which transforms the facts into a vehicle that can lead to a conclusion. It is not for nothing that one may speak of the "art" of versions, while the theme, the translation that is only a vehicle toward the meaning of the original text, has no need for anything other than "letting the facts speak," that is, making them say what the *modest witness*² heard what

2. The "modest witness," in the sense that Zitouni defines it here, responds to the way Donna Haraway defines it in "The modest witness: feminist diffractions in the study of science": "This self-invisibility is the specifically modern, European, masculine form of the virtue of modesty. This is the form of modesty that pays off its practitioners in the coin of epistemological and social power. This kind of modesty is one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity. This is the virtue that guarantees the modern witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist of the objective world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity

they were obviously saying. To construct a version, to make a dramatizing gesture perceptible, would thus be to give facts an austerity that they themselves never have. To connect them in this way, to "make" them speak this way, but without validating "this way," so that they remain available for other connections.

To speak of the art of versions while speaking of Benedikte's style is to speak of a practice that affirms the conscious refusal of what one does without even thinking about it. But also of a practice that chooses its materials, which assures itself that it will resist treatment, that it will be capable of not validating an interpretation. *There are other words and attitudes that I consciously deprive myself of in my work: "it is only," "what they meant to say." As if, in saying these phrases, I was reproducing the attitude of the man who permitted himself to explain to us things that no one had asked him about. To the point where I had to abandon a practice that I had nevertheless loved a priori: interviews termed qualitative, conducted on the run and in the field. I have always had the impression that I was stealing words from them, from the interviewees, because I was noting what they were saying literally without them being able to reflect on this literalness, without them being able to construct their statements with knowledge of their purpose. Suddenly, because of this unease, I had to fall back on documents and stylized discourses constructed to exist in the world, whose existence the authors acknowledged and that I could then take seriously since they were acknowledged by their authors, whether male or female.*

This experience that Benedikte refashions, in the form of an always active memory, as a kind of tool of vigilance, a constraint of abstention which she made into a creative constraint, can perhaps be read as an inheritance "as a woman." It is indeed as such that she presents it or proposes to fabulate it in order to be able to inherit it: *Only daughter of a single mother confronted*

is his objectivity. His narratives have a magical power – they lose all trace of their history as stories, as products of partisan projects, as contestable representations, or as constructed documents in their potent capacity to define facts." *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 223-224.

with the man who explains. There are also, she mentions, *so many other things that one sniffs at a little quicker than the others when one is a female researcher, a daughter of: the patriarch (of the research center), the cocks (strutting their stuff in meetings), the polemicists (who think that the world is waiting only for their argument, their good word)....* So many repellent figures, which, in the end, it is not too difficult to avoid identification with—a little humor suffices. But the problem is completely different when one begins to teach. For in this case, the memory of the man-who-explains makes Benedikte sensitive to what is ignored via the abstraction of good will found within the pedagogical directives aiming to valorize "interaction" and the "participation of students." One has to act as if one was welcoming the knowledge and experience of students, but the dice are loaded.

This has practical consequences for the teacher: I never ask questions in the lecture hall that begin with "who knows?" or "who thinks?" because the silence that may follow makes me very uneasy. Of course they know, they know much more than I, but I have put them in too abrupt a situation, asking that they extract this small bit of information. Worse yet, they weren't asking me anything, and nothing required them to find the course interesting because it is up to me to try to get them to embark into my universe while always presupposing, still, that they know an enormous amount and that they too have their own universes, universes with which mine will perhaps connect. I find this a very violent way to interact with students during a course in the name of anti-hierarchy. As if, suddenly, the man was turning toward my mother and I, still nodding our heads politely, and asking us a trick question (from a position of entrapment since the question was asked by him, in his narration and his spirit, he has all the dates and data fresh in his mind) in order to be able to better establish his authority and to calmly continue his explanation. In the lecture hall, after class, it's an entirely different thing, because then the universes begin to meet each other.... Another consequence: I no longer ask any opinions about the authors or the books that I use because that

places the student in a position of knowing less; they never really teach me interesting things because they displace themselves too much toward my position or my universe in order to try to add something more inside it: the whole business is once again a trap. Rather, very classically, I admit, I ask them to describe for me the universe that I tried to display and, maybe, to speak about its implications and consequences.

ÉMILIE, IT'S NO ONE'S PLACE

Teaching, *there is nothing self-evident about it*, Émilie Hache¹ concludes. And here again, it is a question of keeping the memory and a willingness to be constrained by a commitment. *Not self-evident* is, in Hache's answer, like a formula at once protective and affirmative. A formula whose effect, she writes, is to not forget the relation of gender, which is as much in play in the choice that she made of thought as in the situation of having to teach.

Don't take it for granted, don't consider that it's a question of something "normal," or worse, of something merited: *The "daughters of educated men" may certainly go to the university today, but for some of them, myself included, the relation of gender undoes this false evidence of being in her place there. Not in the sense that the guys would be more at home, but in the sense that this is not the place of anyone in particular, it's not "due" to anyone. While being there, I don't forget all those women and men who fought so that the following generations could go there, or those women and men*

1. Émilie Hache is a philosopher and lecturer at the Université-Paris Ouest-Nanterre. Her research concerns ecology in its political and moral dimensions from a pragmatic point of view. She has recently published her first book: *Ce à quoi nous tenons. Proposition pour une écologie pragmatique* (Paris: Les Empêcheurs de penser en rond/La Découverte, 2011).

for whom even today the university is inaccessible. This "it is not self-evident" accompanies me in the way that I teach a course and in the way I conduct myself as a professor vis-à-vis my students, just as it does in the way I write.

The relation of gender that Émilie Hache talks about is not only a relevant category in socio-historical analysis. It is a construction, certainly, but not in the sense where one could say "this is only a construction;" it is a way of situating oneself which exposes and obligates and which itself will never be assimilated as a given. *One thing that has obsessed me since I began to teach at the university five years ago, and which adds to the fact that choosing the profession of an intellectual, a philosopher, for me will never be completely acquired, it's also a constant question of knowing if and when I begin practicing my profession in a way I don't respect. It's a bit naive, but I don't believe too naive.*

Here, again, one can hear the threat of a "devitalization," but not only that, because for Émilie, the questions associated with gender may themselves become a "power-over." For it is indeed a question of a power, *a power which makes me share with certain people the fact of seeing what others do not see. [...] In this sense, this relation is to be feared like a spell that can destroy [me], prevent [me] from writing, from acting, from thinking, a spell that one day destroyed Virginia Woolf when previously it had made her "clairvoyant."* Here the question becomes how to respond to obligations, to beings with which one must engage in a vis-à-vis, without letting oneself be destroyed by it?

Nothing goes without saying for Émilie Hache. The awareness of gender relations, transformed into an obligation, does not itself go without saying. It makes one see or feel, and it doesn't merely concern a different perspective, a different way of "constructing" reality. It's the reality itself that is different. When she talks of beings that oblige and demand to be taken into account, it's not a question of objects of belief. The relation of gender is engaged in the very refusal to make "seeing differently" a simple matter of subjectivity. Does not the

judgment "it's merely subjective," have something to do with the grandeur of Man, proudly resisting the song of the seductive sirens?

To think in the presence of beings, human and non-human, is a choice that engages and exposes. Thus Émilie Hache refers to William James and the way in which he, who had chosen to live, made it a duty to think about the meaning of this choice confronted with those who had committed suicide. There is, she writes, *something of the risk for life which is at play in this relation of gender, a risk and a test.*

My relation to thought as "having nothing self-evident about it" obliges me to write for "professional" philosophers as I do for non-philosophers, not in the sense of erasing the difference of philosophy, but rather thinking "under the test of the presence" of the latter. This choice of thought is for me something vis-à-vis what I have to "account for." That "it is not self-evident" prevents me—in part, not always, not enough—from appealing to thought in an all-purpose way, that is forgetting those in whose presence one speaks. When Virginia Woolf writes that we must think everywhere, on the bus, in the kitchen, in a parade, I also hear that we, who have entered the university, must think while confronted with the people who are on the bus, in the kitchen or in the parade. That what I write, I who have entered the university, who have made the choice of thought, does not make them feel shame.

BENEDIKTE, THEY WANTED MORE

Thinking in the testing presence of others? The test may have several meanings, depending, for instance, on whether the others, to whom one has to be "accountable," are those men and women to whom it is necessary to not bring shame, or those men and women who may cause shame. Perhaps another statement by Virginia Woolf reprised by Benedikte Zitouni could offer protective strength against the power that Émilie fears, for the "power-over" bear upon all those women who were thinking everywhere, in the bus and the kitchen, while watching the procession of educated men parade by.

They wanted, wrote Woolf about girls who struggled to have access to university study, like their brothers. And it is Zitouni who reminds us of the phrase, *they wanted*. For her answer came in two parts. First it was a question of what she couldn't do, what she refused to do: to explain, think in the assigned place of the other, but later, in the second part, it was a question of affirming, of re-suscitating what she calls an "*idée fixe*," an obsession. *When I think of that procession and the girls who were watching it from afar, there is this "idée fixe" that always comes back: They wanted. I confess that I am not so much*

preoccupied with knowing if we have become like them, those men, as I am really wondering what has been done with this desire to know, to learn, to be acquainted with those universes to which the university (the words fit well together!) gives access to or, at least, offers something to grasp onto. They wanted and we have to give an account to them.

"They wanted and we are accountable to them." In this second part of her answer, Zitouni's world gets populated. To the "man-who-permits-himself-to-explain-even-though-no-one-has-asked-him-anything" are now added those women whom Virginia Woolf memorialized and whom Benedikte Zitouni makes into a force. These women did not only want to enter the university. Certainly, they wanted access *but their hearts were still somewhere else, I think. They wanted to discover other worlds, acquaintances. I am sure of that. When women like those in Brontë's novels looked into the distance and wondered what one learns in those universities, when they wanted to be able to go into libraries and read those books, it's that they wanted to accede to other worlds of comprehension. As in D.H. Lawrence when women spend their time in the house but keep their eyes riveted on the horizon. As in one of Woolf's stories where she notes the narrowness of her world and wonders what it's like to know Greek, French, mathematics, or astronomy. Or another story, where the daughter of a peasant is fascinated by the tales that a traveler tells her. Like these farmers' daughters who were secretly reading books under their covers and dreaming about more. All of them, they wanted. They wanted more.*

Three Guineas may be read, and was no doubt written, as a call to resist the edifying history of a progress that would be that of "our society," to resist the idea that if girls can now study Greek and astronomy at the university, it corresponds merely to the normal situation, and that to recall that it was not always like that would be a proof of resentment, of pettiness. But Benedikte Zitouni wants to see herself as inheriting something that connects the past and the present, which will never be normal, not the past exclusion, rather what this exclusion makes

perceptible—as thirst makes perceptible the enjoyment of the encounter of water with the body. *One must be accountable to the desire. It is not a desire to be educated. One does not climb upon a rooftop for that. Nor is it a desire to accumulate worlds and knowledge. But I think it's a desire which arises from the sensation of a brain hurtling against the four walls of the skull, which wants more connections, articulations, and unknowns in order to make a better life, to better understand what one finds oneself in the middle of; it's a brain that knows these connections, these alterations are there, that they exist but that one can't do it all alone, that some women must help us.*

To be at the height of this desire, and also protect the vitality of one's own being, is to make oneself capable of looking into the distance, and not with the critical distance or somewhat aristocratic disdain of those women who will no longer be duped by anything. What would the woman who was climbing upon the rooftop have thought if her brother had told her: "You know, the university is not what you think it is, if you went there, you would be disappointed..."? But the situation has not changed so much, and for Benedikte Zitouni, keeping the memory alive of that girl on the roof, is, in the present, to know that she is there, perhaps veiled, perhaps gothic, in the auditorium where she herself teaches. *Because when one is not the daughter of an educated man, when one doesn't know what the university is, except through hearsay, when the university is in the distance, just on the horizon, then one has this naive idea but one which I think is nevertheless important: the idea of having the university open up for us other dimensions of understanding the world and other cerebral connections. In order to make a better life, I repeat, in order to make a better life.*

In order to make a better life: those women whom Woolf wanted us to be inheritors of, those who climbed upon rooftops, those who were reading novels, those who were questioning a traveler about other places, those who wanted to learn Greek, a language of another world and time, are still among us today. We can be

ashamed of the way in which their expectations—more connections, more worlds, more universes—will be nourished. We can dread, along with Virginia Woolf, what the university will make of them. But here they are, and Benedikte Zitouni, writing to us, makes the connection that confers to their presence the force of an obligation to be put in practice. *In practice: I had not thought about this desire in this way before reading your letter with the procession as an initial setting (because desire, yes, I am somewhat acquainted with it). And it's new and fearsome for me, this confrontation, what that means for the researcher that I am. First, do I open up a connection or a world in my research or my teaching? I know that it's pretentious to say this but at least it's a constraint that should support us when we speak in front of these generations. Second, in spite of the doubts or the criticisms that I may have about the university, I don't forget the promise that it represents, the promise whereby we can evaluate our actions within the university. It's too easy to play with the promise in a blasé fashion as if we've seen it all before. Sure, we know that the university is rotten. Ok, but then where else do we look for these necessary universes that make life better: the connections, the alterations, Greek, mathematics? We shouldn't abandon ship too quickly. Third, do we stimulate each other in order to dare, to write, to attempt, to fabulate, so that new connections can be created?*

Perhaps it is with these answers divided into two parts, those of Laurence and Benedikte, that we understand a little better the meaning of this fourth letter that we sent, the kind of evidence that we had experienced about this dispatching, in spite of its overall incongruent character, leaving to the receiver the burden of having to situate herself, to give meaning to a question that really wasn't even a question. It was, as Benedikte writes, an "attempt," in order that new connections might be created, and not only with us, or among those who answered us. For if there is a common trait found in the responses that we have cited, it is that those who responded have never presented themselves "as (individual) women"

but always in relation. We had written in our letter that it was up to each of them to determine the manner of "populating" this terrain that we were proposing. We added that general considerations would be precious to us, specifying that in these cases we would not attribute the answers to them by name. We have not had the occasion to do that. And we discover again, in the contrast made legible by this absence, that generality is not in opposition to the intimate, rather to what is always of the order of the event, of the production of an articulation. The terrain is populated with encounters, all personal, all political, deploying the multiple meanings of the equation, "the personal is political." If they speak of women, it was of those—a mother, daughters climbing upon rooftops, faculty colleagues, women thinking and struggling—who had transmitted to them not a model but a strength that helped keep this resistance to the appearance of normality alive.

Our correspondents knew that what they wrote could be reprised in another way. They knew it even more certainly that one motif unites all the letters, declining itself in multiple fashions: "It's like this. It could be otherwise." This motif marked our exchange. Maybe this is why they would sometimes mention that it was up to us to know how to hear them—and each time, it was indeed what we risked doing. The baton is being passed, and passed again in the other direction, and is creating, in its return to the sender, new connections, differed effects of induction—what do they want from us? And perhaps this "up to us to know" is appropriate to the "we" that both of us had fabulated about the unfaithful daughters of Virginia, the ones who did what she said must not be done. It is up to us, to each one separately and together, to discover how to respond to her, how to accept the question that she asks us.