

Joan-Carles Mèlich

The work of the symbol

Introduction to the anthropological thought of Lluís Duch

It makes very little sense to try to summarise the philosophy of Lluís Duch, one of the most singular and stimulating thinkers in the Catalan and Spanish-speaking world, in just a few pages. First of all, because his work is not only anthropological, it also constitutes an exercise in narration.

The story of our lives is like a detective novel, we never know the ending, or who the “good” and the “bad” guys are.

LLUÍS DUCH

AS DUCH OFTEN TAKES IT UPON HIMSELF

to remind us by quoting his own mentor, Ernst Bloch, *a good philosophy is one that has a good plot*, and his definitely does. This is why, in order to be able to *feel* what he has to say, to appreciate everything he has to offer, his intensity, his complexity, it is essential to read him directly. Furthermore, summarising Duch’s ideas would entail an act of arrogance on my part, as his work goes far beyond any attempt at synthesis. We must bear in mind that his philosophy has been and is being applied beyond the strictly academic sphere, as it has had an impact on the reflections

of pedagogues, communicologists, legal experts, moral philosophers, and philosophers of religion, among others. That said, in the following pages I will try to show what I believe to be the originality of Lluís Duch’s thought, because if his work holds any interest, it is especially due to its ability to *suggest* new spheres of reflection in unexplored territories, or at the very least territories that have never been explored in the particular way in which he does it.

It is clear that the importance of an author lies in his capacity to create new languages. Great thinkers, artists or men of letters possess

style, and this is not solely based on their way of writing, but rather on their words, their lexicon, their images. “The great” create a universe, “the small” limit themselves to reproducing –sometimes not even that much– what others have said or thought. If I had to summarise Lluís Duch’s greatest contribution to anthropological thought in one sentence it would, doubtlessly, be this: the creation of a unique language. His “categories” are easily distinguishable: *logomythics, structure, history, giving-word, transmission, ambiguity, practical theodicy, adverbial condition, structures of reception, praxis of contingency control...*

To begin with, I believe that one category among these possesses special relevance: *giving-word*. The expression *giving-word* is reminiscent of Rilke, and it defines the task human beings carry out in their world. To *give-word* is to create a “cordial semantics”, to invest in processes of *cosmisation*, processes that can never fully avoid the threat of chaos.

Human beings live *giving-word* to their world, they *create worlds by naming them*. A human, and humanising, life is not possible without configuration and expressivity, without the creation of these semantic spheres of cordiality. It is obvious that none of us can live in a completely chaotic environment, but neither could we inhabit one that was totally cosmic. The processes of *giving-word to the world* cannot be definite; in other words, the threat of chaos, of the inhuman, of *contingency*, can never be exorcised. This is why Duch’s anthropology confers a special relevance to *provisionality*.

In order to understand the meaning of this notion we will first have to take a short detour through some of the authors who have themselves configured and are still configuring the anthropological universe of our thinker. In the first place, we must mention Helmuth Plessner. Plessner’s main idea can be formulated aphoristically: *human beings are eccentric beings*. Following Plessner, Duch maintains that human beings, unlike the vast majority of animals, are beings who live in a universe in which they are never fully integrated. The tension between the *centre* and the *periphery*, between the *natural* and the *cultural*, between

persistence and *change*, between *reference* and *loss* is *structural* to all life. We live *slightly* astray. A life that was completely astray would be unbearable, just as one that was fully integrated, without any fissures, without any cracks or sombre spaces, would also be unbearable.

Human beings attempt to live this eccentric condition by *giving-word*, or, in other words, by *cosmising* their surroundings. Even though human beings know that establishing fully cordial surroundings lies outside their possibility, they can do nothing but configure a *praxis of contingency control* in order to be able to inhabit the world, in an inhabitation which will never be able to exorcise the threat of chaos, of violence, of belligerency, of suffering, of death... because *contingency* is unavoidable.

In this process of *giving-word* to the world, which is what makes it possible for human beings to inhabit their world, the *symbol* –and, consequently, symbolic narrations (*myths*) and symbolic actions (*rites*)– holds a fundamental role. Due to the constitutive finitude of everything human, the process of *giving-word* to the world, or, in other words, of the *symbolic construction* of reality, cannot be definitive. We are never fully positioned. Ours is an existence *in statu viae*, and it is impossible that the act of *giving-word* occur once and for all, just as this act cannot be exclusively mythical or exclusively logical. To be more exact, this kind of *giving-word* –either only logical or only mythical– is possible, but, in such a case, we would inhabit a totalitarian universe, because totalitarianism, no matter which historical form it adopts, always consists in a canonical end of trajectory, in an *endgame*, in the empire of one *sole* discourse through which every sphere of human life is regulated.

Giving-word to the world is intimately related, then, with the *work of the symbol*, because the symbol is what allows the world to be given-word. Sometimes there are symbols that save and sometimes there are some that kill. Unlike *signs*, which are characterised by their *univocity* (because signs mean what they mean and nothing more than what they mean), symbols are *equivocal*, they always mean *more*. While the sign points to the *significance*, the symbol

refers to the *meaning*. This is why symbolic hermeneutics is characterised by the fact that it can never be brought to a close, because nobody and nothing has the last word in reference to *meaning*, because whenever we refer to *meaning* we are always in the territory of the penultimate. In other words, because if the symbol's meaning were something definitive, it would turn into an *idol*. In fact Lluís Duch's work can be interpreted as an intense struggle against all forms of *idolatry*, in all the senses of this word, religious, moral, political, pedagogic...

An *idol* is a symbol that has stopped being equivocal, that has turned into a *total* presence. Whereas the symbol is "something" (an object, an image, a word...) which *mediately* makes present that which is *immediately* absent and which always maintains a dimension of "absence", the idol is characterised by the fact that *there is no longer an absence*. For human life, due to its unavoidable finitude, immediacy is impossible. We cannot avoid the infinite *mediations*, the eternal and interminable translations. We need intermediaries and translators not only between each one of us and the other, but also between ourselves. Anthropologically speaking, we cannot reach a present that is fully present because something like that would mean *death*.

Lluís Duch's anthropology has clear ethical and political consequences. His reflection on the symbol, the sign and the idol is not merely theoretical but, instead, he uses it to configure a sort of *practical philosophy* which has found ramifications in spheres as decisive and important as religion, communication and pedagogy, to name only a few. From his work on symbols, Duch concludes that men and women are either well or badly settled in their world according to how they give-word to it. There are infernal, idolatrous, symbolic constructions that, on occasion, adopt paradisiacal masks. For our writer, as I have repeated on numerous occasions, human being's structural *finitude* makes access to paradise impossible. Consequently, paradise can only adopt the form of a lost paradise or a desired paradise, but it can never be a paradise found. Therefore, it is also necessary for us to protect ourselves from those who intend to lead us to the *good path*.

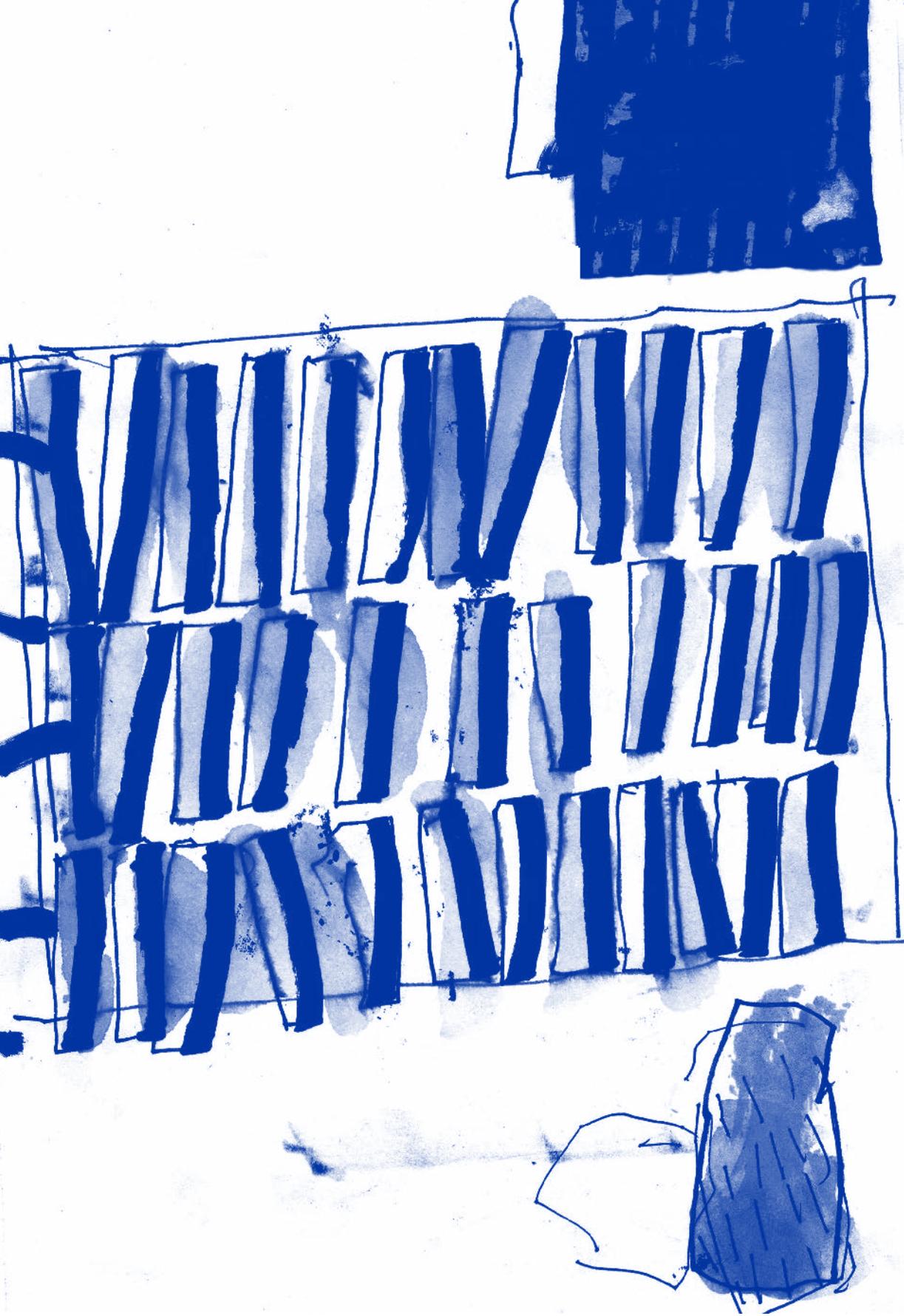
In Duch, as in Nietzsche or in Machado, there is no path, *one makes one's own path by walking*.

If there is something inevitable in symbolisation it is because human beings cannot obviate the *experience of contingency*. This is another one of the fundamental categories of Lluís Duch's philosophy which we must clarify in order to understand his fertile practical philosophy. There are two things we must disclose: the notion of contingency and the fact that contingency is an experience.

Traditionally, philosophy has understood *contingent* as the opposite of *necessary*, namely, *what is but could not be*. Now then, without denying this use of the term we must point out that, for Lluís Duch, *contingency* basically refers to *the unavailable of human existence*, all those situations that cannot be solved with the knowledge that the experts possess or that *resist any form of Enlightenment*. Violence, suffering, evil, death... are situations in which we cannot turn to any instruction manual that tells us how we must act, what we can say or do; they are situations in which we remain perplexed and which never leave us with a clear conscience because we have no referents to guide us in our actions.

Contingency is an inevitable experience which *cannot be resolved*, but which *must be dominated* one way or another in order to be able to continue living. Evidently any form of contingency control can be nothing but *provisional*, because if this were not the case, we would find ourselves at the end of a trajectory, in a paradisiacal state, and, as we have already seen, this is not only anthropologically unviable, it would also lead to a totalitarian state, an infernal universe.

This is where Lluís Duch introduces another one of the notions that I believe is fundamental to understand his anthropology: that of *practical theodicy*. Both religion and education are practical theodicies, or, in other words, practices of contingency control (always provisional). A practical theodicy is a way of giving-word to the world, to experience, to daily-life situations in such a way as to make them livable, bearable... We know that we cannot inhabit a place and a time that are fully cosmic, but it is also



impossible to live in a universe that is radically chaotic. In Duch's work, *theodicy* simply means a therapy against that which seems uncontrollable to us, against contingency. Later *theodicy* and *contingency* refer to each other, they *compensate* each other. Because contingency is unavoidable, theodicy is essential and this is the place where the *structures of reception* come into play.

In his *Antropología de la vida cotidiana* Duch discusses these *structures*. In fact, this lengthy work could have had something along the lines of *The Phenomenology of Structures of Reception: Their Crisis and Their Function* as a subtitle. His thesis is clear: *family, city and religion* perform a theodician function. One of the first occasions in which Duch introduces the notion of *structures of reception* in relation to *practical theodicy* is in his work: *La educación y la crisis de la modernidad*. Here, Duch maintains that a *practical theodicy* is the sum of representations, attitudes and feelings that a human being exercises throughout his life in order to overcome extreme situations, the dead-ends in which his very existence randomly places him. And it is in relation to *practical theodicy* that our *structures of reception* are defined. These, as Duch says, constitute the framework in whose interior human beings can put into practice the theodicies which allow them to configure the *praxis of contingency control*. It is obvious that such structures possess a *compensatory* function. They must "alleviate" the unbearable weight of extreme situations.

It is important to bear in mind that in *Religión y comunicación*, Duch explicitly associates something that was already implicit in his previous studies, that is, the rapport between the *structures of reception* and *giving-word to the world*. In this book, he writes that the task of these *structures* is none other than to make it possible for human beings to give-word to themselves as well as to the reality in which they live. Without them, and, therefore, without the consequent *giving-word*, life would never be able to turn into *human* life. We must tread carefully here, because for Duch, "*human* life" is not a synonym of "*good* life", but rather of a life

that, though being cosmic, cannot eliminate the threat of chaos, of senselessness, of violence.

Practical theodicy will inevitably lead us both to the question of ethics as well as to that of politics. Perhaps we could say that this is the place in which we begin, at least explicitly, to configure a sort of "critique of religious reason" which will reach its ultimate expression in one of Duch's major works, *Un extraño en nuestra casa* (2007). Until then the ethical issue had been studied from an anthropological perspective; now the same will be done from a religious one. In other words, in *Un extraño en nuestra casa* there is a central idea which is developed throughout its more than five hundred pages and that Duch takes from the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer. An idea that, simultaneously, is turned into one of the central theses not only of this book but of all his other books as well: *God is not a metaphysical a priori but rather an ethical a posteriori*.

In the first place, it should be kept in mind that Duch is not against metaphysical questions but rather against the answers. In other words, asking oneself foundational questions is structural to the human condition: Where do I come from? What is the meaning of my life? Why do I have to die and why do the people that I love die? These questions are inevitable and structural, because any time that a "human" being inhabits a time and a space, he will *inevitably* formulate them. Now then, metaphysical answers are something different altogether. We could, perhaps, affirm that *human beings are animals that ask themselves questions they cannot answer*. In any case, Duch has never denied the possibility of answering these questions, but only the impossibility of any *definitive* answer. We ask ourselves (foundational) questions that we cannot answer once and for all, although we may answer them provisionally. Any *clear* and *distinct* answer would place us on the threshold of fundamentalism.

In his book *Un extraño en nuestra casa* he does not tackle the issue of God as of the metaphysical question, but as of an ethical demand and answer. This is why the evangelical

paragraphs Duch quotes most often (and loves best) are Mt 25:40 and Lk 10:30; from these he will develop his central idea, his particular “critique of religious reason”, that is, that *the path to God is impossible without the mediation of the other*. In other words, the relationship we establish with the other is what shows us our proximity or our distance in respect to God.

Because of the importance he places on ethics and, therefore, also on exteriority, Duch is very critical of the *gnosis* of all times –because these, whatever their sign may be, are characterised by the suppression of exteriority. Gnosis turns salvation into a “private matter” in which “the other is unnecessary” and, furthermore, “historical time must be annulled because it is a cause of conflict and of attention to exteriority”. In short, we find ourselves in a suppression of space and time, and thus denying a fundamental characteristic of life: *history*, with all its possibilities, positive and negative. Gnosis does not tolerate the world, and it has looked for salvation from a perspective of individuality and of interiority, eliminating something that for Duch is irrepressible: *the ethical response*. Thus, Duch recuperates Dietrich Boenhoeffer’s thesis: “Neither God without my neighbour, nor my neighbour without God.”

It is necessary to emphasise that this “critique of religious reason” comes hand in hand with *ethics*, which must not be confused with *morality*. While the latter is a normative framework, a code of rights and obligations, the former is a responsible response, a *hic et nunc* response and that, therefore, can never be established beforehand, because we never know in advance what the Christian thing to do is; because the Christian thing to do is a response to demands and situations which can only be brought up when the time is right.

Morality regulates action, while ethics is a transgressive response against what is established in an unrepeatable situation. It is obvious that we need morality in order to live, and Duch, of course, has never denied this. But *ethics are not morals*; ethical are the decisions that develop the moment that normative morals prove to be insufficient, the instant in which acting under obligation would

entail an inhuman response. Incidentally, this would be what would have happened if the “good Samaritan”, for example, fulfilled the moral duties in which he had been educated. If the Samaritan is *good* it is not because he acts morally but actually for the exact opposite reason, because he *does not obey moral norms*, because he is able to *transgress* his morality. That is why what is ethical must be subversive.

In Duch’s ethics there is great suspicion of any comprehensive response, of those systems (political, religious, moral, technological, social) that are tempted to understand everything, to encompass it all, to solve all precariousness, ambivalence and ambiguity once and for all. As I have already said, if one thing is clear after reading any of his books, it is that Duch is suspicious of any form of “paradise found”, because, for him, paradise can only be conceived as “paradise lost” or a “desired paradise”, but never as “paradise found”, as an end of the line, because something like that is, ultimately, nothing more than a mask to justify some kind of totalitarian practice, because for Duch there is something that is not negotiable, from an anthropological perspective: *finitude*.

Thus, situating finitude as one of the main vertexes of a system of thought means adopting a point of view that is sensitive to what is circumstantial, situational, provisional. If there is finitude there is also *perspective*, or, in other words, at all times one says what one says, one thinks what one thinks, one acts how one acts... *from a point of view, from a situation, from a time and a space*. This is the basic idea that Duch takes from Nietzsche’s philosophy. *Perspectivism* is nothing more than the following: it is not possible to place oneself *outside* the historical, the adverbial, even of this does not mean that *everything* is historical, it does mean that everything is *a* story, in *a* historical trajectory, in *a* language.

In an exercise of extreme philosophical coherence the *work of the symbol* to which we allude in the title of this paper appears here once again. Because whenever there is *symbol* (and the human animal is a *symbolical animal*) there is also *mediation* and *perspective*, and, therefore, there must necessarily be –even

in ethics— *provisionality*. There is nothing further removed from ethics than metaphysical responses, that is, aprioristic, absolute answers. And this is also where Duch's religion (Christianity) appears, because what makes Christianity "Christian" is the *incarnation*, and if there is incarnation there is also relationality. Because if the work of the symbol ceased now, ethics would stop being ethics and would turn into just another code, into a closed, absolute, and immobile code. Ethics would become *idolatry*, and then Nietzsche would be right, we would be making an attempt on life.

If Duch's ethics save "Nietzsche's obstacle" it is precisely because they abandon the position that the German philosopher criticises and insults: the weakness of those who submit to a Law which is no longer interpreted or transgressed. The *Samaritan's* narration (Lk 10:30) is again paradigmatic. Of the three characters in the story (the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan) only one of them responds *ethically*, because only one of them has *compassion* for the wounded man: the Samaritan, who becomes his *neighbour*. And the "paradox" is that the Samaritan does not respond by obeying the law, but by transgressing it.

If God has become a stranger in our homes it is because the *other* is also a threat which must be exorcised. And there are *two* ways of ending this threat: either by pure and simple, total, destruction, or by assimilation, adaptation, integration, normalisation. This is the subtle, discrete if you prefer, form of ending with difference, with what is radically other, and reducing it all to the same. Our late-modern logic has configured a taxonomical universe, one of clear and distinct truths, a fully administered universe, a total bureaucracy, an omnipotent technology, in which there is no room for singularity. *We live in a moment of the rise of the moral and the demise of the ethical*, because never before has there been so much interest in moral or deontological codes and, at the same time, we have renounced the ethical response, a daring response, that can never be sufficiently good, that can never generate ease of conscience.

In the *work of the symbol*—work which all of human (and inhuman) life must tackle—reading performs a fundamental function. Ours is a culture of the book (which, at this time, is under serious threat). There is no doubt that Duch's anthropology is one of the symbol and, for this reason, of interpretation, translation, mediation. In brief, of reading.

A fundamental aspect of any education has to do with the relationship that we establish with the classics, with our classical authors. A classic is a *text* (book, work of art, musical piece, film...) of the past which has never stopped being part of the present, of questioning our own present. Outside, or independently, of our personal tastes, the classics are there, opening a breach in time, what I would call a *from*. Not everyone, as is obvious, is Platonic, Kantian or Marxist, but we are all *from* Plato, Kant and Marx.

Anyone who reads Duch's work will soon realise that he is participating in a journey which consists in accompanying him in his own readings. All his books are characterised by an immense critical arsenal in the form of footnotes which allow for a second, a third... infinite re-readings, because his texts refer to other texts, and these, in turn, to other texts. Because, ultimately, when do we finish reading a book, listening to a symphony or admiring a painting? Probably never, because the great classics always accompany us. I do not wish to sound apocalyptic, but I believe that what I am saying is already becoming outdated. In any case, there is no doubt in my mind that every time that I read and re-read the work of Lluís Duch I begin a journey out of which I come transformed. It is true that transforming (oneself) always entails a risk, because it is unpredictable and unprogrammable, but it is a risk worth taking. Reading the work of Duch is not only reading *what* he says, but also reading others *from* his point of view. This is, in short, one of the tasks of the true teacher, to teach how to read, because as Franz Xaver Kapuss, the recipient of the *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rilke, says: "Where a great and unique man speaks, small men should keep silence"¹ II

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■ ¹ Rainer Maria RILKE, *Letters to a Young Poet*.