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**A PHILOSOPHICAL EULOGY FOR
ÜLO MATJUS WHO KNEW
HOW TO LEAD THE WAY**

Professor Ülo Matjus (18/06/1942–25/01/2023) could not tolerate the ‘dead din of words’, to borrow a phrase from poet Betti Alver. He used to search eagerly for new words himself and liked to deploy new or forgotten linguistic forms. In *Olemine kõneleb eesti keeli* (‘Being Speaks Estonian’), Ülo Matjus has said about himself that ‘by education I am a philologist, although mainly I teach philosophy, which may clearly suggest the “fundamental” closeness of philology and philosophy, or even their kinship. Because even the words philology and philosophy lean towards something, the former toward *logos* and the latter toward *sophos*’.¹ From his philosophical legacy, I would like to highlight three big questions that have also inspired me, What is art? What is philosophy? What is ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY?

WHAT IS ART?

Ülo Matjus’s strength was that he connected philosophy, language and literature. He studied Estonian language and literature at the university and his postgraduate studies were supervised by professor of aesthetics Leonid Stolovich. While Stolovich was interested in the

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1 *Olemine kõneleb eesti keeli* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2011).



FIG. 1. ÜLO MATJUS. PHOTO: ANDRES TENNUS, UNIVERSITY OF TARTU.

question 'What is beautiful?' and became famous for his concept of aesthetic value, Matjus asked, 'What is art?'. In the articles published in *Looming* magazine 'One and Only Art'² and 'Art Questioned'³ Matjus contrasts with the approach of his supervisor Stolovich, who proposed the scheme for art's societal functioning. Matjus accepts that the eternal, movable value of art can only be the aesthetic value, but he stresses that in order to perform a function, art must also be as itself, it must be something. He explains, 'Something can be only when it has an essence, idea or meaning, purpose or function as itself...'. The dialectic of ends and means insists that art is its own end, which is why it can also be utilised as a means to something alien to art.⁴

In his candidate's thesis (defended at the University of Latvia in 1975), he tackled the problem of intentionality in the philosophy of Roman Ingarden. He was interested in the phenomenological approach to the work of art espoused by the Polish aesthetician Ingarden, a student of Husserl.

In his books *The Literary Work of Art*⁵ and *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*⁶, Ingarden argued that literary works of art are composed of various strata and they include places of indeterminacy, which the reader must concretise. This idea was later further developed by the German aesthetician Wolfgang Iser in *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*⁷, which prompted me to compare Iser's and Ingarden's approaches to the work of art's mode of being in my master's thesis, and later to seek an answer to the question, what are the characteristics of fictional texts, in my doctoral dissertation defended at Konstanz.

2 Ülo Matjus, 'Üks ja ainus kunst', *Looming*, 8 (1971), 1257–1264.

3 Ülo Matjus, 'Küsitavaks kunst', *Looming*, 1 (1980), 103–113.

4 Ülo Matjus, *Kõrb kasvab* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2003), 63.

5 Roman Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*, translated by George G. Grabowicz (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973). The original in German: *Das literarische Kunstwerk. Eine Untersuchung aus dem Grenzgebiet der Ontologie, Logik und Literaturwissenschaft* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1931).

6 Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, translated by Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973). The original in Polish: *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego* (Lwów: Ossolineum, 1937).

7 Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (London: Routledge, 1978). The original in German: *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (München: Fink, 1976).

Over time, Matjus started preferring Martin Heidegger's ontological historicity to Ingarden's phenomenological approach. In the essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1936)⁸, Heidegger demonstrates that the essence of the work of art is to reveal the truth about being, to reveal its very own world. Heidegger uses the Greek word *aletheia* – 'disclosure', unconcealment, for truth. In art, the clearing of being is revealed, being is kept unconcealed there. For example, in Van Gogh's painting of a peasant woman's shoes, the peasant world steps forth in its entirety. Heidegger's programme meant aesthetics (as the science of the senses) crossing the horizon of ontological historicist thinking, and that captivated Matjus. Under his supervision, I wrote my undergraduate thesis on Heidegger's concept of art.

WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?

The early Matjus discussed the concepts of art, morality and class, and delved deep into Edmund Husserl's phenomenological research method. But then he discovered Heidegger, in which Tõnu Luik is not completely without fault. While Husserl wanted to turn philosophy into a rigorous science and invited people to return to the things themselves, his student Heidegger invited us to ask the most forgotten question of philosophy 'What is being?' I believe that as a philologist, the phenomenological approach suited Matjus more, the observation and description of things. But Heidegger simply would not let go any more.

Matjus's philosophical approach is well depicted in his article 'The Power and Powerlessness of Philosophy', where he states, "The 'results' of philosophy do not surpass nor cancel out any antecedents. This means that obviously philosophy by nature is not 'objectifying or materialising', the essence of philosophy lies in the aspiration. Philosophy is the aspiration towards being."⁹

'Philosophy is always on the way and always will be on the way, i.e. it is always asking and will always be asking, i.e. it can never give definitive and unquestionable answers – although every true philosopher thinks they can do it; to be sure, they remain within philosophy precisely because they do not understand the nature

8 Martin Heidegger, 'The Origin of the Work of Art', translated by A. Hofstadter with minor changes by D. F. Krell, *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, revised and expanded edition, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1993).

9 Ülo Matjus, 'Filosoofia võimus ja võimutus', *Kõrb kasvab* (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2003), 426.

of philosophy.¹⁰ Matjus explicitly stressed what philosophy is not: philosophy is not science, it does not help people live happier, nor is it everyone's thing. 'Philosophy is not everyone's thing in the sense that it would be "doable" by whomsoever, nor in the sense that it would be understood by everyone. In order to be everyone's thing, "everyone" would need to be drawn to the being of being, to the most marvellous.'¹¹ This concept of philosophy is very Heideggerian and differs from most philosophers' understanding of philosophy.

At the start of every academic year, we used to talk to the first-year students about what philosophy is. Matjus began by saying, 'I went home yesterday and my son greeted me at the door and asked, "What's up?"' This is how he was able to explain to his students that the apparently simple question 'What is up?' actually contains the fundamental question of philosophy. According to Heidegger, we must differentiate between philosophy that has already come to its end, and the ontological historicist thinking that rises above philosophy.

My message to the students was that philosophy is useful because it helps us to create clarity in meanings and raise questions properly, for instance, What is art? What is morally good? What is justice? Thus we brought before the students a dispute on what is philosophy.

WHAT IS ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY?

The third question that plagued Matjus was 'What are we talking about when we talk about ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY?'. He first addressed this subject at the seminar in Valgemetsa on 6 May 2000, organised by the students of the department of philosophy at the University of Tartu, and at length in the collection *Tagasi mõteldes* ('Thinking Back').¹² Matjus explained that if we write ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY in majuscules, we may leave unclear what is meant by it. 'In minuscules, Estonian philosophy could mean the thoughts and writings of an Estonian, things thought and written down in an Estonian manner, things thought and written down in the Estonian language. If Estonian philosophy in the Estonian language only meant that which is written down and not what is thought, then

10 Ibid., 427.

11 Matjus, 'Filosoofia võimus ja võimutus', 428.

12 *Tagasi mõteldes: töid filosoofia ajaloost* Eestis, comp. by Ülo Matjus, ed. by Jaanus Sooväli (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2016).

Estonian philosophy would encompass works in Estonian that have been translated from other languages.

Capitalised, Estonian Philosophy could mean philosophy “done” in Estonia, on Estonian territory, by the Estonian state. In fact: philosophy in Estonia.¹³

Highlighting different viewpoints and showing what the dispute is about when the topic is ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY, Matjus concludes with the Heideggerian recognition that ‘perhaps our time is really not the time of philosophy but of philosophical discussions on philosophy, or even /---/ of thinking about philosophy in a different, unphilosophical manner. However, both this philosophical discussion and the unphilosophical thinking about philosophy decidedly depend on what is meant by philosophy. And indeed on what is meant by language.’¹⁴

In my article ‘Estonian Philosophy or Philosophy in Estonia’¹⁵ I proposed my version of how the question ‘What is ESTONIAN PHILOSOPHY?’ might be answered. In it I regarded Estonian philosophy very broadly, including both philosophy created in Estonia, as well as by people connected with Estonia, no matter the nationality of the writer or the language in which they wrote. In accordance with that approach, the history of our philosophy is very rich.

ON A PERSONAL NOTE

I have been very happy to share 40 years of my lifetime with him. I have been Ülo Matjus’s student, instructee, subordinate, head of the institute, friend, colleague, sometimes his comrade in arms. I owe him a debt of gratitude. He has known how to lead the way. Perhaps I have not always taken his advice but I have always listened to him intently.

His supervising has been more like a warning about what to avoid, how one should not think or speak. Through decades I have felt his

13 Ülo Matjus, ‘Millest kõneldakse siis, kui kõneldakse EESTI FILOSOFIAST’, *Tagasi mõteldes: töid filosoofia ajaloost Eestis*, comp. by Ülo Matjus, ed. by Jaanus Sooväli (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2016), 11–20; 14.

14 Ibid., 19.

15 Margit Sutrop, ‘Eesti filosoofia või filosoofia Eesti’, *Tagasi mõteldes: töid filosoofia ajaloost Eestis*, comp. by Ülo Matjus, ed. by Jaanus Sooväli (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2016), 21–83.

fatherly care – well, supervisor is *Doktorvater* in German. However, as ever with different generations, it has also been affirmation through negation. That is how it was for Heidegger with Husserl, Matjus with his teacher Stolovich, and probably is for my students with me.

In 1986, under the supervision of Ülo Matjus, I defended my thesis at the institute of journalism at the University of Tartu on the topic ‘Martin Heidegger’s Approach to the Work of Art’. In 1991, under the supervision of Ülo Matjus at the department of philosophy I defended my master’s thesis ‘On the Phenomenological Examination of Literature. In Search of the Lost Work’.

Initially, Ülo Matjus was also my doctoral dissertation supervisor, but after my doctoral studies at Oxford, Oslo and Konstanz, I defended my doctoral dissertation ‘Fiction and Imagination. On the Anthropological Function of Literature’ at the university of Konstanz (1997), supervised by professors Gottfried Gabriel and Karlheinz Striele. In my work, I tried to build a bridge between phenomenology, hermeneutics and analytical philosophy, but in the end I chose analytical philosophy. It was not the way led by Matjus, but he accepted it.

When I was elected Professor of Practical Philosophy at the University of Tartu in 2000, we became colleagues. For many years, he chaired the department of history of philosophy, I chaired the department of practical philosophy. Over the years we also chaired the institute of philosophy alternately, i.e. sometimes in the role of a subordinate, then a head of the institute, but we never quarrelled. We only had philosophical disputes.

Yes, that all happened. What’s up? I feel sad. One chapter in Estonian philosophy is closed.

CV

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