

## Chapter 13

# Heritage and heir

### 13.1 Posthumous student

#### 13.1.1 Failure of an instruction (II) - or creation and fatuity

**Note 44'** [This note was mentioned in section 50 of **VIII The solitary journey** of part (I) **Fatuity and renewal** p. 227]

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This passage “clicked” for the friend who read the previous section “the weight of a past”<sup>1</sup>(\*) He wrote: “for many of your old students, the aspect, as you put it, of an invasive and borderline destructive “boss” remains strong. Whence the impression you hold.” (Namely, I presume, the “impression” which is expressed in certain passages of this section as well as in the notes n°46, 47, 50 which complete it.) Earlier, he writes: “first of all I think that you did well to leave mathematics for an instant [!]. Because there was a kind of incomprehension between you and your students, except of course for Deligne. They were left a bit dumbfounded. . .”.

This is the first time that I hears about the impression I made in my role as “boss” pre 1970, beyond customary compliments! Even earlier in the same letter: “...I have come to realize that your old students [namely: those from “before 1970”] do not really know what a mathematical **creation** is, perhaps in part because of you...it must be said that in their time, the problems were clear-cut. . .” <sup>2</sup>(\*\*).

My correspondent surely meant that **I** was the one who formulated the “problems” and, with them, the notions that needed to be developed instead of leaving

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<sup>1</sup>(\*) (May 10th) This friend is none other than Zoghman Mebkhout, who authorized me to reveal his identity, after I thought I should keep it secret upon first writing this letter (on April 2nd 1984).

<sup>2</sup>(\*\*) (May 10th) The preceding citation was heavily modified, in order to respect the anonymity of my correspondent. See the following note for a complete citation of the relevant passage, as well as for a commentary on its real meaning, which I had missed at first due to a lack of further contextual information.

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both tasks to my students; and that in so doing I may have prevented them from becoming acquainted with what becomes the essential part of a work of mathematical creation. This also aligns with an impression which I formed after talking to two of my students from **after** 1970, about which I wrote in an earlier note (note (23iv)). It is true that I was looking first and foremost, in the students that approached me, for **collaborators** with whom to develop intuitions and ideas which had already formed within me, to “push along”, in sum, a carriage that was already there, which they did not have to summon from some kind of void, “something which my correspondent had to do”. This summoning - the act of bringing into being a tangible, supple, intense body of work from the intangible mist - had indeed always been, for me, the most fascinating aspect of mathematical work, as well as the part in which I most strongly felt a process of “creation” the “spirit of something more delicate and essential than a mere result”.

If I see certain ex-students of mine treating this valuable thing with disdain, letting grow within them this “snobbery” which J.H.C. Whitehead talked about (consisting of disparaging what is “immediately provable”)<sup>3</sup>(\*), I am at least partly to blame, for various reasons.

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<sup>3</sup>(\*)See the note (the snobbery of the youth - or the defenders of purity), n°27 p. 247.