

PRETEXTS

by

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There is nothing else of interest than that which happens in itself and is, thus, not of a narrative nature. One cannot recount it.

Marguerite Duras

The récit

Marguerite Duras, an author, gives me the pretext to develop some notes concerning what could be called the aporia of law. Another French author, Maurice Blanchot, touches upon the subject in a short book, *La communauté inavouable*,¹ which has during the past few years become one of the best known social and political texts within contemporary French philosophy. The latter of the book's two essays, "La communauté des amants", is Blanchot's reading of Duras' short prose text *La maladie de la mort*.² When literature encounters the political, one should, perhaps, examine the degree to which Duras is a pretext for Blanchot to continue a discourse on love, friendship, and community, themes which have previously been dealt with especially in the collection *L'amitié*. In the closing pages of this collection, we find Blanchot's often cited characterisation of friendship:

Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode and into which all the simplicity of life nevertheless enters, passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not permit us to speak of our friends, but only to speak to them, not to make them a theme of conversations (or articles), but the movement of listening in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even in

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1 M. Blanchot, *La Communauté Inavouable* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), hereafter cited in the text as *CI*.

2 Marguerite Duras, *La Maladie de la Mort* (Paris: Minuit, 1982), hereafter cited in the text as *MM*.

the greatest familiarity, the infinite distance, the fundamental separation from which that which separates becomes relation.³

Strangeness, distance, separation. Blanchot's friendship is incommensurability, friendship that exists only in separation.

In his book, Blanchot also speaks of his relation to Duras' text with expressions that resonate with friendship. He notes that his essay consists of observations that "accompany" the reading of Duras' text. Blanchot's company, however, is not without ambiguity. Duras' text, the *récit* that Blanchot wishes to accompany, is characterised by a certain completeness: it is "in itself sufficient", "perfect", "without a way out" (CI 51). But later Blanchot refers to Duras' "declarative text" as being merely apparently a *récit* (CI 59). Blanchot says that he is trying to extract the secret of the *récit* by turning the text around (CI 81) but, in doing so, must also "betray" the text (CI 83). What is Duras' mystery, the secret of the *récit* that requires Blanchot's betrayal?

The Woman

This is the social question that Blanchot is asking: What are the conditions of community? The answer is sought from the relation between a woman and a man in Duras' text. The lethal disease indicated by the name of the novel is the man's inability to love. According to Blanchot, the moral or physical evil of the disease cannot, however, be appointed to a subject. It concerns the other's suffering, a suffering which is incomprehensible and, yet, demands an answer (CI 59).

At first, the symptoms of the disease seem to be fairly easy to decipher. In the *récit*, a man who knows only those like himself enters into a contractual relation with an unknown woman. Addressing the man, the narrator of the *récit* gives us a motive:

You tell her that you would like to try, try for several days perhaps. / Perhaps for several weeks. / Perhaps even for your whole life. / She asks: Try what? / You say: To love (MM 8-9).

The diagnosis or the verdict seems clear enough. Being unable to love, the man can approach the woman only by stipulating the terms of their relation in a contract binding both parties. On the other hand, the woman commits herself to a relation in which she appears to be surrendering herself completely to the sexual desires of the man but, in reality, retains

3 M. Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 328.

a certain liberty that is beyond the terms of the contract. Only spurious love, then, based on commerce, a relation that could no more furnish the foundation for friendship than community. The sick man's inability to love is not, however, sexual. He even satisfies the woman but cannot recognise the signs of a life alien to him and, therefore, annuls the pleasure. This is his "malady of death" (CI 60-62).

Blanchot asserts, however, that we cannot reduce the *récit* to our preliminary diagnosis (CI 62-65). The mystery that escapes a facile reading of the text has to be searched for in the woman whose existence transcends the reality of the *récit*: she is more than *Dasein*. In a certain sense, only the woman is in the *récit*, the narrator gives us nothing but her:

She is very thin, almost slender, the beauty of her legs is of a different kind than that of the body. They are not properly implanted into the rest of the body (MM 21).

The man attempts to see the beauty but, being unable to recognise anything but his own kind, he cannot. The woman is also the man's first and, according to Blanchot, the first woman for everyone:

The body would have been long, made in a single casting, with a single stroke, as if by God himself, with the indelible perfection of individual coincidence (MM 20).

The narrator does not name the woman that no name could possibly describe. She is God's creation but without nominal existence. She is also fragile, and such weakness arouses in the man deadly desires:

The body has no defences at all, it is smooth from the face to the feet. It entices strangulation, rape, maltreatments, insults, cries of hatred, the rage of austere, lethal passions (MM 21).

But the man perceives the fragility of the woman as an unforeseen power:

You look at this figure, at the same time you discover its infernal power, its abominable fragility, its weakness, the invincible force of its unparalleled weakness (MM 31).

Lastly, the woman sleeps practically all the time. Because of her continuous sleep, her being sways in a familiar game: there, not-there.

She sleeps. You do not wake her. The anxiety grows in the room at the same time as her sleep expands (MM 17).

The Other

According to Blanchot, the woman acquires her enigmatic character from the peculiar closeness with which she offers herself to the man. The man must confront the difference of another species, of the absolutely other. The malady of death is, then, not only the man's inability to recognise the other. The illness germinates in the absolute otherness of the woman (*CI* 65):

You only know the grace of the bodies of the dead, the grace of those like you. All of a sudden you realise the difference between this grace of the bodies of the dead and the grace found here made of the utmost weakness that a mere gesture could crush, this royalty. / You discover that it is here, in her, that the malady of death is fomenting, that it is this displayed figure before you that decrees the malady of death (*MM* 37-38).

The man tormented by his disease attempts continuously to love, to detect in the woman a recognisable and common similarity that he seems to regard as the precondition of love. But his attempts are all in vain and, therefore, he weeps. The woman sees only self-pity in the tears that he sheds, but the narrator reads from them the first and original commandment of ethics: "Do not kill".

You think you cry because you cannot love. You cry because you cannot impose death (*MM* 48).

Blanchot indicates that the asymmetrical difference between the unable man and the woman acting as love's chosen emissary points to an ethical relation. Blanchot's ethics is - following Emmanuel Lévinas — a non-reciprocal relation in which the other is always granted a place closer to God. Blanchot extracts an ethics from the following passage in Duras' text:

You ask how the emotion of loving could come about. She answers you: Perhaps from a sudden flaw in the logic of the universe. She says: For example from an error. She says: never from a will (*MM* 52).

From homogeneity required by understanding arises heterogeneity, the absolutely other that cannot be wanted or desired. Love is the incommensurability between the subject and the absolutely other. That is why the man's efforts at love, his attempts to detect in the woman a recognisable semblance, are doomed to fail. The woman's answer on the possibility of love continues:

She says: From everything, from the flight of a night bird, from a sleep, from a sleeping dream, from the approach of death ... (*MM* 52).

The ambiguity of death: as a disease the inability to love, the inability to recognise the other, but, at the same time, also the movement of love itself in which the unrecognisable other arises in its absolute otherness (*CI* 67-70). Therefore, true love can take place only in the mode of loss. One day, after the contract has expired, the woman has disappeared. At first, the man searches for her everywhere but:

Very soon you give up, you do not look for her any more, not in the town, neither in the night, nor in the day. / Even so this way you have managed to live this love in the only way you could, by losing it before it came to be (*MM* 57).

The man does not live in the same time as the woman. He has not lost a woman that he would once have had as his own. The disappearance of the woman is the perfection of love itself that has not yet begun and has, by the same token, already ceased to exist. According to Blanchot, the first words of ethics are spoken in this impossible love. The suffering of the other places her above all that is existent. Confronting the absolute otherness of the woman, the man is put into question, and the only possible response to the question of otherness is the limitless responsibility that exceeds itself without, however, exhausting itself. Such a responsibility cannot be reduced to the Law but, to the contrary, precedes all Law. Nevertheless, it is precisely the Law that obliges a response. The limitless responsibility towards the other is the singular exception to the universally binding Law, an exception that cannot be articulated in the formal language of the juridical (*CI* 71-73).

The aporia of Law?

The Friend

Blanchot's short book continues his social and political thinking which is deeply inspired by Georges Bataille. Through Bataille, the book takes part in the so-called discourse of "community". The first essay of the book, "La communauté négative", is Blanchot's reply to Jean-Luc Nancy's text "La communauté désœuvrée", an essay later published as the opening text of the book of the same name.⁴

A third important contribution to this discussion is Jacques Derrida's *Politiques de l'amitié*, published a decade later. Derrida indicates that both Nancy and Blanchot have been notable sources of inspiration for the

4 J-L. Nancy, *La Communauté Désœuvrée* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986/1990).

book,⁵ but the themes through which Derrida takes his analysis of friendship — ethics, the other, responsibility — seem to be closer to Blanchot than Nancy. Nancy's political thinking has since taken on a determinedly Heideggerian bent.

In a slightly different tone, Derrida repeats the question already encountered in Blanchot: Who is the friend? What is friendship? Derrida finds that the philosophies of friendship have traditionally been articulated with the help of a distinction between true and apparent friendship. Common friendship, friendship here and now, does not measure up to the requirements of true friendship. Therefore, friendship is never what it seems, true friendship is never present. Blanchot's notion of community seems to reiterate the distinction:

Which is, indeed, one of the traits of *community*, when that community dissolves itself, giving the impression that it could never have been, even when it had been (*CI* 88).

As friendship here and now cannot fulfil the requirements of true friendship, the latter is postponed or delayed into the future with a promise. The promise of a coming (true) friendship also entails the obligation to participate in its realisation. One can prepare the way for the Messiah by studying the Torah; according to Derrida, the discourse of friendship also takes place in the mode of prayer. It is a request, a plea, or an appeal (*appel*) that is not addressed to the present but, rather, to a responsibility opening into the future. But in the prayer, one must also address the past: for the appeal to be heard, it must carry within itself the signs of a minimum friendship, a recollection (*rappel*) of a friendship preceding all other friendships, a being-together that is anterior to all speech — be it an acknowledgement of friendship or a declaration of war.⁶

Blanchot also formulates the obliging appeal of the “unavowable community” as a responsibility:

... it does not permit us to lose interest in the present time which, by opening up unknown spaces of freedom, makes us responsible for new relations, always threatened, always hoped for ... (*CI* 93).

According to Derrida, the movement and the time of friendship is the *futur antérieur* in which the making present of the future and past traces of friendship implies their concurrent repudiation.⁷ If friendship does not

5 J. Derrida, *Politiques de l'Amitié* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 56 n.1.

6 Derrida, *supra* n.5, at 260-264.

7 Derrida, *supra* n.5, at 279-280.

exist in the present, if it cannot be made present but must always be delayed into the future, how is one to understand the responsibility that is necessarily associated with friendship? How is one to understand ethics in a friendship that will never be present?

For both Blanchot and Derrida, responsibility correlates with understanding or listening (*entendre*) and with answering or responding (*répondre*). Derrida maintains that answering is, firstly, answering for oneself in as much as a thing or a happening bears a proper name when one answers "in one's name". But a response is also forwarded to an other. Of these two modes of responding, answering to an other is more original because, when answering for oneself, the response is necessarily addressed to an other. Lastly, answering takes place before an other, but in this case it is a universal and institutional representative (the law, the tribunal, etc.) of a singular other. According to Derrida, the ability to answer for oneself is understood as responsibility which is associated with time, voice, and listening. Answering to and before the other is, on the other hand, identified with space, regard, and distance. This, in the Occidental philosophies of friendship, is usually understood as the distinctive character separating friendship from love.⁸

Derrida claims that the ethics of friendship pertaining to the ideals of the Enlightenment can be located at the intersection of responsibility and respect. It is a brotherly responsibility before reason in which the latter furnishes equality with a compelling character. In this scheme built around familial relations, friendship is absolute respect and responsibility amongst brethren before the father representing reason. The relation between father and sons is, on the other hand, characterised by a reciprocal but unequal love.

In an ethics of friendship thus formulated, the other maintains its absolute singularity in principle, but the relation to the other is determined through the universality of the Law. According to Derrida, the discourse of universality refers to a third that oversees the face-to-face encounter of two absolutely singular beings. It seems, then, that we have two models of friendship. The first pertains to narcissism, the second to desire.

In narcissistic friendship, the subject recognises in the friend a *semblable*, an other ego. In the dual relation, the Law operating as the third obliges the retention of a respectable distance required by friendship and, thus, prevents the two absolutely singular beings from plunging into

8 Derrida, *supra* n.5, at 280-283.

the destructive abyss of narcissism. In friendship as desire — for Derrida, Blanchot seems to represent this model — the other intervenes in the relation between the subject and the ego. But Derrida argues that even in desire a third Law, originating in the singularity of the other, commands the recognition of the transcendental otherness of the other. But even such a transcendental otherness requires the Law, the command of which furnishes the foundation for the recognition of otherness.⁹

The aporia of Law?

The Law

I would, finally, like to touch upon the structuring of the rapport between the subject, the ego, and the other in relation to the Law from the position of the narrator in *La maladie de la mort*. In an earlier text, Blanchot states that the neuter narrator (*il*) is the third person that, nonetheless, does not have the position of a subject. In the neuter space of the *récit*, the narrative voice destroys the possibility of relations determined through a subject-object relation; the acting subjects of the *récit* lose their ability to say “I” (*je*). In the narrative voice, the other understood as the neuter imposes itself into the *récit* in its irreducible strangeness and deceitful perversity: “The other speaks”.¹⁰

The narrator of *La maladie de la mort* may not, however, be a voice in which only the other speaks. Its tone of voice is imperative rather than majestic:

You would not know anything either, never, neither you nor anybody, about how she thinks of the world or you, about your body or your soul, or about the disease that she says you have caught (*MM* 19).

Perhaps the specific nature of the narrator is the reason why Blanchot regards Duras’ “declarative text” as only apparently a *récit*. Blanchot hears something godlike in the imperative voice:

Everything is decided by an initial “You” that is more than authoritative, that demands and determines what will happen or what could happen to one who has fallen into the snare of an inexorable fate. For the sake of ease, we will say that it is the “you” of the stage director giving indications to the actor who must make the passing figure he is to incarnate appear from nothing. So be it, but it must be, then, understood as the supreme Director: the biblical “You”

9 Derrida, *supra* n.5, at 306-308.

10 M. Blanchot, “La Voix Narrative”, in *L’Entretien Infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 556-567, at 563-565.

that comes from high above and prophetically fixes the major traits of the plot in which we proceed, ignorant of what has been prescribed for us (*CI* 59).

The authoritative voice directing the confrontation of the woman and the man operates like the Law. Firstly, it localises the *récit* in a room by the sea where the contract is put into effect. But the narrator also orders the relation between the woman and the man into a hierarchy by empowering the woman to make the original diagnosis and, later, a discouraging prognosis of the man's illness:

You ask her if she thinks you can be loved. / She says that you cannot in any circumstances (*MM* 46).

Blanchot hears the voice of the woman from as far away as the narrator's:

A response so categorical that it cannot come from an ordinary mouth, but from very high above and very far away, a higher instance that also expresses itself in him with partial and trivial truths (*CI* 90).

The narrator — perhaps the Law — posits the other to address the subject “from very high above and very far away”, from the position of the supreme authority from which the “biblical ‘You’” also animates the plot. At the end of the *récit*, Duras — perhaps the director even superior to the supreme — has included directions on how the text should be set on stage. In these notes, Duras, however, invalidates the force of the Law. On stage, there would only be the woman and a male narrator, only the other in its absolute strangeness and the Law. With speech — perhaps a jurisdiction — the narrator localises and orders the confrontation between the woman and the man, but:

The man reading the story would be struck by an essential and mortal weakness that would be the weakness of the other man — the one not represented (*MM* 60).

Pretex^t, both that which precedes the text and a preceding text. Not only the relation to the absolutely other that precedes responsibility prescribed by the Law, but also the Law itself, a prescription that becomes the covenant of a friendship founded on prete^xt.

The aporia of Law.