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True Friend

Abdelkébiri Khatibi (1938-2009)

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Translated by Conor O'Dea

Friendship is involved in the invention of a dialogue and in a dangerous game of virtue and truth.

We voluntarily admit that it is, for this reason, a condition of the social bond, of public and private opinion, of the community of spirit, whether it be social, intellectual, or spiritual. A work of civilization, in short, and one of the founding paradigms of thought, of the exercise of democracy and justice.

But, could there not be a profession of faith there, which corresponds to the ideology of brotherhood? Yes and no. Yes, insofar as where the invention of dialogue, in the major example of the Greeks, holds itself in the universe of a language reserved for men, and where the absence of the feminine figure shines.

An absence which became incommensurable with the advent of monotheism. It must be remembered that in this tradition, God bestowed the power of nomination to Adam. Adam, an androgynous being from whom the prosthesis of the division of the one into two detaches itself.¹ Since the dawn of monotheism, this game of nomination is a war of disidentification, the effacement of an essential difference and dissymmetry. No wonder that the desert of that which we call love was celebrated there, phantom or angel, sin and paradise lost!

The thing is not so simple, in another measure, the one where the friendship that will be gradually articulated here, is heard as access to the law of sharing at the heart of vast individual solitude. Beyond the foundational denegation of this belief, friendship will be sought as an oftentimes indecisive promise, a possible promise, and a sign of an alliance. With whom and what? With gods? With men? With other beings and things of existence? With what secret truth about the gravity of life, sickness, death, and survival?

Let's admit that the truth of friendship is plural and perspectivist, without certainty or moral stability. A corruptible morality because it is subject to passion, to competition, to dissension. Masked, it presents itself as a cult, the veneration of the ideal image of the self, of the one and the other. It thus watches over the (political) balance of individual interests, drawing its rhetoric from tangled affectations. Each one finds or does not find their account there. It can last an entire life under this benevolent and caring illusion, after all.

Is there here, still, a "bad friendship" of consolation and substitution? Yes, according to Nietzsche, who places the cult of friendship and the praise of enmity back-to-back. Thought that Jacques Derrida redeploys in his magnificent work composed in sessions. The "good friendship" is a strange law of sharing, a paradoxical pact and one which changes the terms of the alliance depending on the vicissitudes of life. A dissymmetrical alliance, certainly, demanding respect, a distant respect, which tolerates the friend in its singularity. Each one is separated and tied to the other by separation itself, by this indestructible tie of intimate solitude. This limit of friendship and its dangerous truth, where everyone searches, explores, invents perhaps, liberates the potency of life that proves to be veiled, from day to day, covered by the graduated art of confidence and all its beautiful words. Friends valorize the undertones of confidence and come to celebrate it as love of solitude and knowledge of the truth.

Aimance: to love in thinking. It is an act, an active affinity, between men, between men and women, between animals and their fellows, plants and every initiatory thing in existence. A relation of realized tolerance, a knowing how to live together, between genders, sensibilities, thoughts, religions, diverse cultures. It is the art of living correspondences, which gives to friendship this lightness, an apparent carelessness, liberating a space of well-being, and a held-back burst of *jouissance*. The happy moments between friends are signs that ask for celebrations and rejoicings. As such, they are salutary illusions, summoning a distant desire for eternity.

Intellectual friendship declares itself as being a style, that of acting at a distance from life and its turbulences. One recognizes the sensitive value of these moments in the availability to listen to the friend, to a fair dialogue, measured or unmeasured along its moments, a sort of transmutation of living thoughts, withdrawn from their emotions and filtered by the sensitive intelligence of the body, including in sickness and in distress, and in the face of death which slips itself behind these signs of mutual recognition, of respect that honours the secret, the solitude, the singularity of the one and the other. To not speak excessively of one's friend, rather address oneself to him, and to the horizontality in him, bearer of promise. That is why good friendship is pure presence, pure virtuality, graduated, oriented toward the time of reincarnation and of inheritance.

Aimance is not a substitute for love as a word and fragment of the real; it prolongs it in an active thought, in modifying its initiatory path. Clearing an unknown space. It does not resolve any enigma, does not expect any miracle, no pretense of angelism. It proposes a more redoubtable enigma: the dangerous truth of a search without a declared finality. The enigma of a common and necessary dissidence against the intolerable, indignity, the indiscriminate devastation of the human and superhuman.

What is common to love, thus named, and to the hate which accompanies it and to their instability, is our blindness to the lure of suffering and its seductions. Its principle of uncertainty: to maintain our capacity, our possibility of being perpetually in love, across deceptions, exiles, the rage of being misunderstood by men and the gods. Softening this suffering a little, thanks to experience made thought, transfigurable in the manner of living and surviving between friends.

Certainly, taking the risk of knowing that which one is in the process of living in loving is not in itself a surplus of disarray. Neither the sublime memory of an arid depassionalization or a desert with neither trickles of water nor rhizomes with aerial stems.

Over the desert watches God, the One, the Unique, the Absolute Stranger. What is a mystic in the universe of monotheism? It is a loner who dreams of being a friend of God.

In his philosophical tale *Hayy ibn Yaqẓān* (The Son of the Awakened), Ibn Tofail, born in Andalusia at the start of the 12th century and deceased in Marrakesh in 1185, tells us of the birth of this utopian friendship. Let's follow the steps.

A baby is abandoned on Ouaqouaq Island. He is raised by a gazelle which breastfeeds him and protects him against wildlife. No articulated language: Hayy imitates birds and other animals. It's a strange little beast. A strangeness that transformed itself, in the growing child, into an investigation of natural life. Thus, the death of the gazelle, his nurse and substitute mother, destines him to his first vocation, that of a naturalist. After the pain and the beginnings of mourning, he proceeds to dissect the body of the gazelle, which is followed by a series of experiments on the cadavers of other animals. He continues his research on the different kingdoms of nature: the vegetable, the mineral, the sky, and the constellations.

At the age of 35 years, he discovers God, thanks to the Vision, internalized little by little by the knowledge of the True. Ecstasy where, at the age of 50 years, he *sees*, at last, *a man*: Asâl. A man who has come from *another* island where he lived with his friend Salâmân. This friend was a character steeped in dogmas, while Asâl devoted himself to the practice of spirituality and the community between thoughts.

This friendship, which bore within itself a discord, would separate them along the paths of the Way. Yet, a friendship is a hospitality, a law, a source of

hospitality, dedicated to the experience of the Unknown, and maybe the Unheard-of. It obeys two contradictory exigencies: friendship is held by a conventional pact of the social bond; it is also the search for a community of spirit and soul, between loners, from island to island, voyaging toward the Invisible, behind a sky covered by angels and parables in the form of signs.

This quest is consecrated to meditation, to the voyaging autonomy of the interior life—under the potency of the outside. Passion for the trace of the Unknown, of the step and the side-step, a space starred by God, of signs and images, appearances and disappearances illuminated, from degree to initiatory degree: a state of unveiling, stasis of knowledge.

Asâl leaves his friend and his island seeded with dogmas and theology for that of Hayy, which he had heard spoken of from the one to the next. At first, he could not see him. Each one, from their side, lived in isolation right up until the day where they *interperceive*. This is the first gaze of the Son of the Awakened upon a man, in the clarity of an inter-vision. A man who does not resemble the other animals which Hayy had frequented with affection.

From then on, Hayy sets himself to the work of shadowing with a growing curiosity. Observation which induced an error. Like the mystics of this era, the stranger wore a tunic of hair and wool, so fine that Hayy took it for a type of hide, enveloping the body of a bizarre animal. A fearful animal which took flight, man himself disguised as animal.

Hayy pursued him, changing tactics. Neither to capture him nor kill him, but to examine him up close, with a measured distance. In these moments, the man is an unidentified being, neither a friend nor an enemy: an unknown, a stranger, a sign of apparition to be deciphered.

Asâl broke away, stepping out of line of sight. He fled at full speed. Hayy stopped himself, side-stepping from sight as well, before continuing his painstaking investigation of the other. He did so with skill, in the animal way he carried within himself: hiding quickly, looking from a distance, watching for the movement of gestures. The body language took place (it always takes place) in three positions, three stases: the vertical, the genuflecting curve, and the seated position. Asâl lifted his hands above his shoulders, to ear height, while moving his lips. A remote murmur, incomprehensible, lost in a forest of signs.

Asâl prayed, without any doubt, by invoking God, all while crying. He forgot himself in this ecstatic state while Hayy approached him, without either divining or realizing it. Hayy heard new prayers and supplications. This time, he felt that the other voice was clear, and its lexicon, well-articulated, pleasant to hear, to repeat. A voice of an unheard accent, the man himself. He heard the human language without understanding it. He then discovered the geometric shape of Asâl's body, resembling his own. Similarly, the ornaments covering and forming part of his skin.

The more he examined him in this ecstatic state, the more he was convinced of a brilliant idea, of the secret that bound them together in this language so foreign. He reassured Asâl, spoke to him of that which we call the language of animals, without doing him harm. In turn, Asâl spoke to him in

all the languages and snippets of languages that he has learned, but without result. Asâl decided to teach him language, science, religion. Their friendship was sealed on this island, in this community of solitary basis, under the gaze of God.

This philosophical tale teaches us something precious, this participatory friendship across different kingdoms of nature: that of affection and mourning, which connects Hayy to the gazelle, by a kindness said to be natural. It also teaches us the significance of the discord which separates friends in the search for and knowledge of the truth. Asâl does not bring war against Salâmân, his brother in religion. He shows tolerance in moving himself, changing his initiatory path. He does not seek to oppose him, thus demobilizing the friendship/enmity opposition, nor to change him in any way. He orients himself according to his search, the voyage toward God. There, the place of separation.

Theology is the spirituality which attaches itself, no matter the cost, to the social bond cemented by belief and by its adepts. Consensual obedience to God and to a social politics of gathering. Everything else is the friendship between Hayy and Asâl. The crossover between two events, friendship which proves to be a step towards the confluence of the epiphanic encounter. Asâl is not the master of his friend but a companion on the road, a wayfarer (*sâlik*), a pathfinder, he who gives sense to that which his friend already knows. Friendship, a maieutic of *aimance*.

This mystical form of love is a universal given, which traverses sacred traditions, civilizations and their works. It does not require a profession of determinate faith. One can be a substantive mystic without any dogma whatsoever. This is why friendship, thus named, is a qualitative transmutation of life. The social bond is an axiom of this life and not its answer. The social bond is reabsorbed in the law of sharing and its respect: values, norms, institutions, basic communities.

Beyond these signs of alliance and this sense of belonging of the collective subject, friendship is left to itself, vulnerable, unfulfilled. When the body or the spirit of a friend, who is dear to us, bends towards sickness or death, fading away in the time to come, I am left to my untreatable solitude. More taciturn than ever, dead in thought instead of truly sick or dead, like a phantom in search of reincarnation.

Whether I suffer or whether I console myself, I know that my mourning will always be fragmentary. I will lack a way of speaking to the other, to the next one who is alive. My carelessness diminishes. I already know that I will inherit its brittleness, which precedes me in showing me the path. Such is the decline in which we shut ourselves before misfortune. Against the hardness of this misfortune which makes me grow and endure, it is necessary, I repeat to myself, to maintain, with respect, that which is dissidence in any sensitive force of life. In unleashing the shockwave, the path is made.

Biographies

Abdelkébir Khatibi (11 February 1938 – 16 March 2009) was a Moroccan literary critic, novelist, philosopher, playwright, poet, and sociologist. Among his works translated in English are the novels *Tattooed Memory* and *Love in Two Languages* and his collection of essays entitled *Plural Maghreb: Writings on Post-colonialism*. The above piece comes from a series of essays written upon the passing of his friend, Jacques Derrida (*Jacques Derrida, en effet*, 2007). Khatibi and Derrida first met each other in September 1974, in a café in Place Saint-Sulice in Paris, to discuss several of his works that he had sent to Derrida earlier that year. They became lifelong friends from that time, right up until Derrida's death in October of 2004, a friendship Khatibi describes as “a landmark in the time of living” (2007, 7).

Conor O’Dea is an independent scholar, currently working on a project bridging the ontological anarchy of Reiner Schürmann and the ontology of revolution of Guy Lardreau and Christian Jambet. He thanks Peter Trnka for the encouragement to undertake this work and A. Limoges for his sage advice and counsel on the translation.

Notes

1. The enigmatic choice of a “side” of man for the point of departure for the creation of the first woman, “mother of all the living” (Genesis, 3:20), may clear itself up if, as we have noted for long enough, one appeals to a Sumerian assonance between “side” and “life,” equally pronounced “til” or “ti” and written with the same “ideogram.” There could therefore still be a Mesopotamian reminiscence here.

References

Khatibi, Abdelkébir. 2007. *Jacques Derrida, en effet: Trois essais sur Derrida*, par A. Khatibi. Neuilly: Al Manar Éditions.