

## ***‘Oh My Friends, There is No Friend.’*** **Philosophies of Friendship from Aristotle to Derrida**

**Sandro GORGONE\*** 

**ABSTRACT.** The paper analyzes the crisis of friendship understood above all as the crisis of a theoretical paradigm that, starting from the Homeric exaltation of friendship, passing through the famous Platonic dialogue, the *Lysis*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero’s *De amicitia*, Montaigne’s *De l’amitié*, and ending with Kant’s reflections on human subject, has dominated western cultural tradition. This classical model of friendship, based on reciprocity, equality, mutual recognition and decisive for a certain conception of the political, goes into crisis at the end of the 19th century and then in the 20th century with the emergence of man’s existential loneliness. Beginning with Nietzsche, and then in the philosophy of Derrida, a conception of friendship as inequality, asymmetry, disproportion emerges, which overcomes any illusion of being-together confusingly and turns to the possibility of a being-with-another that respects its irreducible difference. A concept of friendship thus takes shape, also present in some of Ernst Jünger’s reflections, alongside the traditional one, linked to estrangement and insurmountable distance that makes the very idea of friendship extremely aporetic but at the same time opens up new forms of hospitality and relations with the other.

**Keywords:** reciprocity, equality, mutual recognition, asymmetry, irreducible difference, hospitality

The philosopher Giorgio Agamben stated that: “Friendship is so closely linked to the very definition of philosophy, that it can be said that without it philosophy would not be properly possible. The intimacy between friendship and philosophy is so profound that the latter includes the *philos*, the friend, in its very name and, as is often the case with any excessive proximity, runs the risk of missing out”<sup>1</sup>.

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\* University of Messina, Italy. Email: sgorgone@unime.it

<sup>1</sup> G. Agamben, *L’amico*, Nottetempo, Milano 2007, p. 5.



Even the etymology of the term 'philosophy' refers, as is well known, to friendship: as Plato states, philosophers are not the wise, but the friends - or lovers - of wisdom, that is, those who spend their lives in the pursuit of truth, good and beauty.

If in the classical world this proximity and almost consubstantiality between philosophy and friendship was taken for granted, today the relationship between friendship and philosophy has fallen into disrepute and it is with a sort of embarrassment or bad conscience that those who make a profession of philosophy try to come to terms with this discomforting and, so to speak, clandestine object of their thought. This is probably due to a real crisis of friendship that can be read from both a sociological and a properly philosophical perspective.

Already in 1960, in his book *The four Loves. Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity* of 1960, Clive Staples Lewis expressed the idea that friendship is not the main course of the banquet of life, but simply one among many side dishes: it is something that serves to fill the empty moments of our time<sup>2</sup>. Among young people, friendship is increasingly confused with belonging to the peer group, while among adults a feeling of pessimism prevails that borders on cynicism towards the possibility of free, altruistic and stable relationships.

But from a philosophical point of view, the crisis of friendship is to be understood above all as the crisis of a theoretical paradigm that, starting from the Homeric exaltation of friendship, passing through the famous Platonic dialogue, the *Lysis*, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Cicero's *De amicitia*, Montaigne's *De l'amitié*, and ending with Kant's reflections on human subject, has dominated western cultural tradition. This paradigm links friendship to man's natural sociability, virtue, fraternity and, therefore, to a relationship of symmetry and reciprocal mirroring, whereby the friend is considered the *alter ego* in which one can admire the ideal image of oneself.

According to this paradigm, friendship is, as Kant argues, the union of two people bound together by an equal mutual relationship of love and respect, an ideal of sympathy and benevolence, a duty for men themselves. It is the absolute trust that two people show towards each other, communicating to each other all their most secret thoughts and feelings, a bond that comforts and ennobles the human soul in both prosperity and misfortune.

We will see that the crisis of this paradigm, which concerns friendship but also politics, is definitively fulfilled in Nietzsche's philosophy. But let us analyse in steps the way in which this paradigm asserts itself.

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<sup>2</sup> See C.S. Lewis, *The four Loves. Affection, Friendship, Eros, Charity*, Collins, London 1960.

## 1. Classical Paradigm of Friendship

In the classical world, the term *philia* has a much broader semantic territory than that covered by our 'friendship' even though, of course, it includes it; it generically indicates any relationship based on various forms of affection and thus also includes the amorous dimension, intersecting the semantic field of *eros*. *Philia*, however, also designates a range of relationships both interpersonal of family proximity and a set of political, religious, economic associative ties. The concept of *philia* encompasses all forms of human cohabitation, business relations such as being comrades in war, working together such as the forms of life of marriage, the social formation of groups and the constitution of political parties, in short, the whole complex of human community life. The datum that most distinguishes the nature of Greek *philia* from modern friendship, therefore, is its pervasiveness both in the field of private relations and in the context of public relations. On *philia*, in fact, rested for the ancient Greeks the good governance of the city.

This experience of *philia*, rooted in the Greek polis, recalls crucial cultural aspects such as hospitality and other forms of solidarity and social openness that modern individualism has almost entirely stifled or relegated to the private sphere of 'good feelings'. Socrates had placed friendship at the centre of his life experience as a philosopher, attributing to it an indispensable moral role in human relations.

### 1.1. Plato's *Lysis*

Plato with the *Lysis* proposes for the first time the need to reflect in a focused manner on the causes and essence of *philia*. Without going into the complex plot of the dialogue, we can say that in the first step Plato proposes an interpretation of friendship based on goodness ("At last we know who the friends are [...]: they are the good", 213E) and mutual love ("There can therefore be no friendship if there is no mutual love", 212D).

In a second, deeper perspective, however, Plato makes Socrates, the protagonist of this dialogue, state that only those who are neither good nor bad can become friends with the good, and this because of the presence of bad, to be understood as a lack of good. To clarify this, Plato uses the example of medical science: one is a doctor's friend because of one's illness. Socrates, therefore, states that the friends of wisdom are those who have the 'evil of ignorance' within them, but "have not yet become completely ignorant and still think themselves not to know what they don't know" (218 B). We find here, then, another version of the famous Socratic maxim: 'I know that I do not know'.

More generally, Socrates can state: “Both in respect of the soul and in respect of the body, and everywhere else, is that the neither bad nor good is friend of the good because of presence of bad’ (218 C). And, further on, with radical socio-political connotations, we find this Socratic statement: “So then the neither bad nor good, because of the bad and inimical, is friend of the good for the sake of the good and friend” (219B1). Anticipating a perspective of political philosophical thought that modernity would largely develop from Hobbes to Schmitt, one could, therefore, say that friendship turns out to be a kind of almost necessary remedy for an evil; one is a friend and needs friends to defend oneself against the common threat of the enemy. Friendship is, therefore, an antidote, a kind of *pharmakon* for good living.

But, at the same time, being aroused by the need to overcome a lack, friendship takes on an erotic character: that is, it arises from a defect and from a desire (*epithymia*) to overcome it. It is also for this reason that Plato/Socrates can conclude, with a statement that will be taken up by many later authors, that friendship naturally doesn’t turn to what is like us, but to what is similar (*oikeion, oikos*). There is, therefore, no friendship, neither between the equal nor between the opposite ones, but only between the similar ones. The term *oikeion* means that which is similar, familiar, convenient, but not equal. As we shall see, however, Cicero already forgets this Platonic lesson.

### **1.2. Friendship in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics***

At the beginning of his treatment of friendship, in Books VIII and IX of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle enunciates one of the most persistent and influential praises of friendship in all Western traditions. After declaring that friendship “is a virtue or at least is united with virtue” (155a, 2), he states:

No one would choose to live without friends, even if he had all the other good things. [...] In poverty too, as in all other misfortunes, people think friends to be their only refuge. Also, friends are necessary to young people with a view to the avoidance of error, to old ones with a view to being taken care of and being given aid with the actions they have to leave unaccomplished because of their weakness, and to those in their prime with a view to doing noble actions – for when “two go together” they are better able both to understand and to act (1155a 3-6; 13-15)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Regarding friendship in Aristotle cf. Nathalie von Siemens, *Aristoteles über Freundschaft: Untersuchungen zur Nikomachischen Ethik VIII und IX*, Karl-Alber Freiburg-München 2007; E. Berti, *Il concetto di amicizia in Aristotele*, in *Il concetto di amicizia nella storia della cultura europea. Atti del 22. convegno internazionale di studi italo-tedeschi*, Merano 9-11 maggio 1994, Merano 1994; S. Stern-Gillet, *Aristotle’s philosophy of friendship*, State University of New York Press, Albany 1995.

Aristotle also immediately asserts the political character of friendship, which, more than justice is decisive for good governance: "It also seems that friendship holds cities together and that legislators take it more seriously than justice" (1155a, 24). Indeed, legislators primarily aim to establish concord in society, which is a kind of 'political friendship'.

However, at the bottom of this social exaltation of the sentiment of friendship it is possible to find a utilitarian foundation. If friendship consists, in fact, more in loving than in being loved<sup>4</sup>, there is a decisive egoistic trait in the Aristotelian conception of friendship that will be transmitted, in various forms, to many liberal political theories of modernity. By loving friends one loves, in effect, what is good for oneself: "in loving their friend they love what is good for themselves, since a good person, in becoming a friend, becomes a good for the person for whom he is a friend". In this context, Aristotle states belows the reciprocal and symmetrical character of the friendship relationship: "So each of the two both loves what is good for himself and makes an equal return in the good he wishes and in what is pleasant. For friendship is said to be equality" (1157b, 35).

According to Aristotle, therefore, the true form of friendship is the bond that the virtuous man forges with the virtuous man because of virtue itself. And virtue is that by which and in which man fully realises his nature and value as man, so that true friendship is precisely the bond of man with man according to man's own value. Aristotle, therefore, regards friendship as essential to the full realisation of man's nature and believes that on its possession depends happiness itself. Moreover, man, as a structurally political being, by his very nature, needs friends precisely to be able to receive and to do good.

Aristotle even goes so far as to determine the friendship feeling as a projection of the virtuous person's feelings towards himself: "The features fitted to friendships toward neighbors, and those definitive of the various sorts of friendship, seem to derive from the features of a person's friendship for himself" (1166a 1-2). It is not a question here of bending friendship to the logic of egoism understood as petty attachment to self. Considering the centrality of virtue in the classical and later Hellenistic conception of friendship, this projection unfolds, rather, as a just affective adaptation of the friendship relationship to the moral value that the virtuous subject knows it represents. The necessary conclusion is that the virtuous man, and conscious of being so, can only feel love towards himself. Loving others according to *philia*, therefore, can only be possible to the extent that others reflect himself in some way. Feelings of friendship, therefore, not only rest on, but confirm the 'dutiful'

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<sup>4</sup> "But friendship seems to consist more in loving than in being loved" (1159b, 27).

feelings of affection and admiration that the virtuous person has for himself. The egoism of the virtuous man is nothing other than altruism understood as the deployment and transfer of love upon oneself. This concept of friendship is, as can easily be seen, completely distinct from what the Christian ethic would later codify as listening, selfless commitment to the other, and giving freely.

### **1.3. Cicero: The friend as alter ego**

Cicero takes up and amplifies this approach to the philosophy of friendship and transmits it to humanist culture. Friendship, according to Cicero, is the supreme of earthly goods because in it is fulfilled the very moral and civil nature of man and can be fruitfully practiced in every situation of life: “you should place friendship above all other human concerns. For nothing else is in such harmony with nature, nor is anything else so helpful to us in both good times and bad.”<sup>5</sup> Cicero, after repeating the Platonic-Aristotelian conviction that friendship cannot exist except between good people, praises above all the confidence that exists in friendship according to which you can speak with your friend as with yourself. But what Cicero decisively adds to the ethical-political paradigm of Platonic-Aristotelian derivation is the idea that in the friend you see the image transfigured in an ideal sense of yourself from which emanate the strongest motivations to overcome difficulties and strive for continuous self-improvement. This sort of spectralisation of the friend constitutes, moreover, the remote origin of the crisis of the traditional paradigm of friendship on which we will focus shortly. Thus Cicero states: “Since friendship has so many and such great advantages, it exceeds other virtues by far, especially as it shines a bright light of hope into the future and does not suffer our spirits to stumble or fall. You see, whoever looks upon a true friend looks, in a sense, at an image of himself (*exemplar sui*)”<sup>6</sup>. In friendship a kind of ontological reversal takes place whereby absence becomes presence, poverty wealth and death life: “Even when friends are absent, they are still present. When you lack the necessities of life, with a friend you have more than enough. With such a friend, you are strong even when you are weak. And— though this is more difficult to say— when friends have died, yet they are still alive in you (*mortui vivunt*)”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> M.T. Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia* in *How to Be a Friend. An Ancient Guide to True Friendship*, trans. by P. Freeman, Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45; 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

The friend thus becomes – and this gesture will be decisive for the entire humanist philosophical tradition – the alter ego, one's own exemplary image: "A friend is, quite simply, another self (*alter idem*)"<sup>8</sup>. Not, therefore, a mere mirroring, but an ideal projection in which all the aspirations and hopes of achieving a state of perfection and liberation from all natural (the precariousness and finiteness of existence) and moral (the fallacy and imperfection of our behavior) conditioning are gathered. In the friend as in my alter ego, I see what is best in me and I measure, therefore, the gap between my presence and my ideal possibility: in it is delineated that phantasmatic space of tension towards the future and towards the good that coincides, moreover, also with my own moral survival: beyond death, it will be the surviving friend who will bear witness for me and for my noblest aspiration to the Good. As Jacques Derrida observed, there is always survival and the work of mourning at stake in friendship: "*Philia* begins with the possibility of survival. Surviving – that is the other name of a mourning whose possibility is never to be awaited. For one does not survive without mourning. (...) Hence surviving is at once the essence, the origin and the possibility, the condition of possibility of friendship; it is the grieved act of loving. This time of surviving thus gives the time of friendship"<sup>9</sup>.

In Cicero, however, beyond this affirmation of the relationship between friendship and survival, the egalitarian and symmetrical paradigm of friendship is definitively established. He emphasises, then, the congeniality that reigns in every authentic friendship: the true friend must necessarily have a character congenial to ours: "We also need to choose a friend who is honest, sociable, and sympathetic – that is, someone who is motivated by the same things as we are. All these things contribute to loyalty between people"<sup>10</sup>. On this congeniality is also based the possibility of trusting the friend: "For a character full of twists and turns cannot be loyal, nor can someone who is not moved by the same things and whose nature is fundamentally different from yours be either loyal or steadfast"<sup>11</sup>.

Benevolence, love, concord, loyalty and security are, therefore, the beneficial effects of all true friendship.

#### **1.4. Montaigne: the fusional friendship**

We find a similar characterisation of friendship in Montaigne's 1580 text *De l'amitié*. Montaigne distances himself from the Platonic contiguity between eros and friendship and instead sets a clear distinction between them: while in the former

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> J. Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. By G. Collins, London-New York 1997, p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> M.T. Cicero, *Laelius de Amicitia*, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

reigns a “mad desire in following that which flies-us”<sup>12</sup>, in true friendship, on the other hand, there is “a generall and universall heate, and equally tempered, a constant and setled heate, all pleasure and smoothnes, that hath no pricking or stinging in it”<sup>13</sup>. Unlike erotic passion, friendship “is enjoyed according as it is desired, it is neither bredde, nor nourished, nor encreaseth but in jouissance, as being spirituall, and the mind being refined by use and custome”<sup>14</sup>. Montaigne then takes up the egalitarian and fusional paradigm that we have already seen in Cicero: “In the amitie I speake of, they [our minds] entermixe and confound themselves one in the other, with so universall a commixture, that they weare-out, and can no more finde the seame that hath conjoyned them together”<sup>15</sup>.

Friends identify with each other, they immerse themselves in each other to such an extent that the will of one is lost in that of the other: “I may truely say, loose, reserving nothing unto us, that might properly be called our owne, nor that was either his, or mine”<sup>16</sup>. The pair of friends thus constitutes a kind of self-sufficient monad: This friendship “hath no other Idea than of it selfe and can have no reference but to it selfe”<sup>17</sup>: the souls of the two friends reveal themselves to each other right down to the very entrails in such a way that one relies spontaneously and without reservation on the other. Because of the total fusion of their wills, there is no longer any possibility of division or difference between the two friends and, therefore, their relationship is entirely gratuitous and free of any benefit, obligation, gratitude or thanks. In this context, Montaigne can quote Aristotle’s sentence handed down by Diogenes Laërtius: “O my friends, there is no friend!”. As Giorgio Agamben has remarked, this sentence, which Derrida places at the centre of his reflections on friendship, is in fact the result of a medieval transcription error, and the original, much less sibylline sentence says: “he who has (many) friends, has no friends at all” taking up similar statements in the Nicomachean Ethics. Montaigne interprets the Aristotelian quotation in the sense of the necessary exclusivity of such a relationship of ‘perfect friendship’ which is not, unlike common friendships, in any way divisible: “each man doth so wholly give himselfe unto his friend, that he hath nothing left-him to divide elsewhere: moreover he is grieved that he is double, triple, or quadruple, and hath not many soules, or sundry wils, that he might conferre them all upon this subject”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> M. de Montaigne, *Of Freindship*, in *Essays*, trans. By J. Florio, HyperEssays.net, Book 1, Chapter 27, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 7.



It is only within such a relationship of absolute unity and sharing that even the most unmentionable secrets can be revealed, because the friend is not others but is – as Cicero already said – ‘myself’. This exclusive and indissoluble bond, almost sacred, does not, however, have any possible socio-political declination: it remains confined to the sphere of private relations because it cannot open up to a ‘third’ friend (the instance of thirdness on which, for example, in Levinas’ philosophy the birth of law and every possible juridical comparison is rooted<sup>19</sup>, is here completely excluded); in other words, no ‘confraternity’ can be founded on this type of bond. Authentic, perfect friendship excludes any sharing with the outside and any comparison, thus configuring itself as a kind of symbiotic relationship that rejects any form of gratuitousness and donation that is not an integral part of the fusion process.

### ***1.5. The limits of classical friendship paradigm***

Just a mention, now, of the Christian, evangelical conception of friendship which, despite the idea of gratuitous giving, is nevertheless not entirely foreign to the classical paradigm based on knowledge and revelation and on the fusional schema: Jesus says: “as I was one with the Father, I will be ‘one’ with you” (*John*, 14, 20). I will only quote the most important passage from John’s gospel: “You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (*John* 15, 14-15).

We can, therefore, conclude this recognition of the Greek-Christian tradition of friendship by reaffirming that the classical paradigm that is affirmed is that of an egalitarian and symmetrical relationship based on knowledge, proportion and proximity, which dissolves all authentic difference and therefore also precludes the possibility of recognising an incomprehensible alterity to which, in any case, I am called to be responsible. Taking up the lexicon of E. Levinas’ philosophy of alterity, Maurice Blanchot affirmed the ethical limits of this paradigm: “The *Greek* *philia* is reciprocity, exchange from Same to Same, never openness to the Other, discovery of Others (*Autrui*) as responsible for the Other, the recognition of the Other’s pre-eminence, the awakening and sobering the Other who never leaves me alone, the enjoyment (without concupiscence, as Pascal put it) of the Other’s Highness, which makes the Other always nearer the Good than me”<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. by A. Lingis, The Hague, London-Nijhoff 1981.

<sup>20</sup> M. Blanchot, *For Friendship*, trans. By L. Ill, “Oxford Literary Review”, 22, 1, 2000, pp. 25-38, here p. 35.

In another text dedicated to friendship, then, Blanchot thus describes a paradoxical form of friendship in distance and difference that opposes the classical paradigm of friendship:

We must give up trying to know those to whom we are linked by something essential; by this I mean we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us as well, in our estrangement. Friendship, this relation without dependence, without episode [...] passes by way of the recognition of the common strangeness that does not allow us to speak of our friends but only to speak to them, not to make of them a topic of conversations (or essays), but the movement of understanding in which, speaking to us, they reserve, even on the most familiar terms, an infinite distance, the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation<sup>21</sup>.

For distance and separation to be preserved, it is necessary that a supreme 'discretion' reigns in friendship, that an infinite modesty preserves the space of difference that paradoxically brings friends together by separating them. Blanchot describes this discretion, which already prefigures the 'cleft of death', as follows: "Here discretion lies not in the simple refusal to put forward confidence (how vulgar this would be, even to think of it), but it is the interval, the pure interval that, from me to this other who is a friend, measures all that is between us, the interruption of being that never authorises me to use him or my knowledge of him (were to praise him), and that, far from preventing all communication, brings us together in the difference and sometimes in the silence of the speech"<sup>22</sup>.

### **1.6. From Nietzsche to Derrida: Turn or crisis of friendship?**

According to Derrida, it is precisely the need to break out of the fusion bond of perfect but exclusive friendship that dramatically determines, with the irruption of the third, the 'becoming-political' of friendship and with this, the very possibility of democracy opens up: "With this becoming-political, and with all the schemata that we will recognize therein – beginning with the most problematic of all, that of fraternity – the question of democracy thus opens, the question of the citizen or the subject as a countable singularity"<sup>23</sup>. The necessity of comparison and equality,

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<sup>21</sup> M. Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. by E. Rottenberg, Stanford Univ. Press, Stanford 1997, p. 291.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. By G. Collins, Versus, London-New York 1997, p. 22. On the political significance of friendship in Derrida see A.J.P. Thomson, *Deconstruction and democracy: Derrida's Politics of friendship*, Continuum, London 2005; L. Collison, C. Ó Fathaigh, G. Tsagdis (ed.), *Derrida's Politics of Friendship: Amity and Enmity*, Edinburgh Univ. Press, Edinburgh 2021.

on the one hand, and the absolute devotion of exclusive friendship determines two irreconcilable instances in which democracy, which began as a 'community of friends' is destined to struggle without any possibility of reconciliation<sup>24</sup>: "There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the 'community of friends', without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding"<sup>25</sup>.

Far from configuring itself as the fulfilment of Greek *philia*, modern democracy, therefore, is intimately inhabited by the crisis of the classical-humanistic paradigm of friendship; we could say that democracy, the 'democracy to come' of which Derrida speaks, is profoundly marked by the solitude starting from which moderns experience friendship.

Nietzsche was one of the first thinkers who, against the reassuring faith, not only idealistic, in the progressive and painless 'socialisation' of man, had the courage to stare into the abysses that surround and isolate all existence. He also saw how supremely painful the moment is when the illusion, cultivated with extreme gentleness and generous care, of being fraternally and completely together with another man collapses. In a famous aphorism from *The Gay Science* we read:

There was a time in our lives when we were so close that nothing seemed to obstruct our friendship and brotherhood, and only a small footbridge separated us. Just as you were about to step on it, I asked you: 'Do you want to cross the footbridge to me?' - But then you didn't want to any more; and when I asked again, you were silent. Since then, mountains and torrential rivers, and everything which separates and alienates, have been cast between us, and even if we wanted to reach each other, we couldn't anymore! But when you think of that little footbridge now, you have no words anymore - only sobs and bewilderment<sup>26</sup>.

The most painful disillusionment is perhaps the loss of that which of all was the sweetest hope: friendship. An extreme closeness can be transformed in an instant and for no apparent reason into a sidereal distance that makes one estranged, nullifies all complicity and dashes all promises of sharing. Nietzsche is perhaps the

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<sup>24</sup> This is the aporia that various authors, including Levinas and the later Bensussan, analysed as the irreconcilable opposition between law (equality before the law) and justice (absolute responsibility for each other). See E. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, cit. and G. Bensussan, *Éthique et expérience : Levinas politique*, Phacide, Strasbourg 2008.

<sup>25</sup> J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. by B. Williams, trans. by J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2001, § 16, pp. 41-42.

first to invert the Greco-Roman and properly philosophical tradition of the *philia*, opening it up to a new, unprecedented conception of friendship as inequality, asymmetry, disproportion, which overcomes any illusion of being-together confusingly and turns to the possibility of a being-with-another that respects its irreducible difference.

However, as Jacques Derrida has effectively shown, this heterodox conception of friendship, which first emerged with Nietzsche, is not completely absent from the classical philosophical tradition; on the contrary, we could say that it inhabits its most secret folds. Even in Aristotle, in fact, next to the idea of friendship as reciprocity and equality<sup>27</sup>, we find the idea of a possible friendship between unequals: a relationship that implies imbalance and superiority, which Aristotle sees exemplified in the relationship between father and son, or in the bond that connects the living to the dead, later taken up, as we have seen, by Cicero.

A concept of friendship thus emerges, alongside the traditional one, linked to dissymmetry, estrangement and insurmountable distance that makes the very idea of friendship extremely aporetic. And it is, perhaps, precisely the extreme distance that separates us from the dead, to whom we continue to be intimately linked, that shows how unusual, but at the same time unavoidable, is this enigmatic form of friendship that is based on an irrevocable separation.

But what is it possible to share in this strange, alienating and disturbing form of friendship? How do we consent with those who remain foreign and distant to us? What has become of the sweetness and joy that friendship, supreme among all earthly goods, promised us as ultimate comfort? Neither similarity, nor proximity, nor familiarity: our existential condition of disorientation and bewilderment is reflected in our relationships with others, in the new friends who remain irretrievably 'beyond the footbridge'. One by one, the sweet hopes fall, and the walls of our loneliness grow thicker and thicker; we are invaded by the yearning of Aeneas who in the Underworld tries in vain to embrace the shadow of his father: "'Let me clasp your hand, my father, do let me, and do not withdraw from my embrace'. As he spoke, he bathed his face with ample tears. Then three times he tried to put his arms round his father's neck; three times, grasped to no avail, the ghost escaped his hands, like light breezes and very similar to a swift dream" (Virgil, *Aeneid*, VI, 967-702).

Similarly, the friend becomes a specter that escapes our embrace.

But, perhaps, it is only from this desperate awareness that it is possible to open up to that other form of friendship that, unheard, like a gentle whisper, runs

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<sup>27</sup> Equality that is first and foremost sexual, since, as Derrida well notes, the predominant model is that of a 'male-sexual' (i.e. male-homosexual) and fraternal friendship (of both Greek and Judeo-Christian derivation) that is born and nourished by an attraction [*aimance*] that is quite similar to the erotic one.

through our entire tradition, to that paradoxical possibility in which we are given to become friends in solitude, or perhaps, to use another Nietzschean expression, 'friends of solitude'.

While commenting on Nietzsche, Derrida writes: "We are first of all, as friends, the friends of solitude, and we are calling on you to share what cannot be shared: solitude. We are friend of an entirely different kind, inaccessible friends, friends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore, without a horizon of recognition, without a familial bond, without proximity, without *oikeiôtes*"<sup>28</sup>.

And further on, while insisting on the need for some form of community among these "sworn friends of solitude", Derrida writes: "Thus is announced the anchoritic community of those who love in separation. The invitation come to you from those who can *love only at a distance, in separation* [*qui n'aiment qu'à se séparer ou loin*]. [...] Those who love only in cutting ties are the uncompromising friends of solitary singularity"<sup>29</sup>. Separation, estrangement, and estrangement paradoxically become the only method of recognition between solitaires: not in the way one soul approaches another, but in the way it distances itself from it, its secret affinity is recognised. In this sense, friendship reveals itself to be the sphere in which the apparent impossibility of the bond between separates can take place; it becomes at the same time the occasion in which the Nietzschean 'dangerous perhaps' can be realised, that perhaps which characterises the new philosophers, the philosophers of the future: "Perhaps friendship, if there is such a thing, must honour [*faire droit*] what appears impossible here"<sup>30</sup>.

Friendship must, therefore, enable that which appears to be impossible, that impossible double bind, which enchains us in the very act of dissolving, of untying ourselves. But it is precisely this paradoxical injunction, which provokes us to what Zarathustra calls the 'love of the remote' [*Fernsten-Liebe*]; it preserves us from the identity-bound, all-encompassing closures of the confusing friendship praised by Cicero and Montaigne.

The other friendship, the 'good friendship', according to Derrida

Supposes disproportion. It demands a certain rupture in reciprocity or equality, as well as the interruption of all fusion or confusion between you and me. By the same token it signifies a divorce with love, albeit self-love (...). 'Good friendship' is born of disproportion: when you esteem or respect the other more

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<sup>28</sup> J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

then yourself. (...) 'Good friendship' certainly supposes a certain air, a certain tinge of intimacy, but one 'without actual and genuine intimacy'. It commands that we abstain 'wisely', 'prudently' from all confusion, all permutation between the singularities of you and me. This is the announcement of the community without community of thinkers to come<sup>31</sup>.

The Nietzschean friends of the deepest, most nocturnal and most meridian solitude, the free spirits heralding the philosophers to come, are, therefore, the members of a paradoxical 'community without a community' in which there is no bond of belonging and fidelity; there is neither similarity in the Greco-Hellenistic sense, nor proximity in the Christian sense. Derrida himself wonders whether, in this idea of friendship, one must renounce any relationship of familiarity and trust – the Platonic *oikeiotes*. These paradoxical friends, Derrida asserts, try to recognise each other *without* knowing each other. Their strange relationship no longer passes through the Socratic search for truth and goodness, through Dante's *virtute e canoscenza* that sustains the insane flight of Ulysses and his companions/brothers. The friends of loneliness recognise themselves insofar as they retreat from all common possession, from all sharing, because before that they have retreated from themselves to let the other come, who always precedes and anticipates me.

In this paradoxical form of friendship of loners, there is an equally paradoxical logic of the gift that admits of neither gratitude nor reciprocation; a gift that points towards non-reciprocity, towards asymmetry and disproportionality, and in which the hospitality offered or received can in no way be returned. And yet for Derrida, this logic of a boundless and incalculable gift does not lead to any alienation, does not entail a loss of identity, responsibility or freedom that would result in the 'madness' that perverts all common sense. Rather, it would grant the possibility of thinking of a justice beyond the principle of equivalence, i.e. beyond the law of the talion that Nietzsche's genealogy identifies as the origin of morality and right dominating Western culture. But what would it be, Derrida wonders, this unprecedented concept of justice that no longer calculate? "And would carry itself beyond proportion, beyond appropriation, thereby exceeding all reappropriation of the proper?"<sup>32</sup>. This 'dispossession' would indicate, for Derrida reading Nietzsche, *another* love, beyond all lust for possession, whose true name, whose 'right name' is friendship. Illuminating in this regard is the end of paragraph 14 of *the Gay Science*: "Here and there on earth there is probably a kind of continuation of love in which this greedy desire of two people for each other gives way to a new desire and greed, a shared higher

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

thirst for an ideal above them. But who knows such love? Who has experienced it? Its true name is friendship"<sup>33</sup>.

So this friendship is a kind of love, but a love that loves more than love because it has completely overcome any claim of ownership over the other that is hidden even in the seemingly most disinterested form of love that is Christian charity, that is, love of neighbor. Finally, oblivion becomes necessary to this friendship: oblivion, in the Nietzschean sense, not as a synonym for neglect and lack of fidelity, but as a necessary openness to the future, the testimony of a paradoxical relationship that demands infinite and irremediable separation from the friend. Derrida writes: "Oblivion must. Friendship without memory itself, by fidelity, by the gentleness and rigor of fidelity, bondless friendship, out of friendship, out of friendship for the solitary one on the part of the solitary. Nietzsche already demands this 'community without community', this bondless bond. And death is the supreme ordeal of this unbinding without which no friendship has ever seen the light of day"<sup>34</sup>.

This friendship with the friend always to come has, finally, for Derrida an essential relationship with another conception of democracy no longer based on the classical paradigm of the fraternal and phallogocentric relationship that he names, at the end of his book on friendship, as 'democracy to come':

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future time, to come. [...] Is it possible to open up to the 'come' of a certain democracy which is no longer an insult to the friendship we have striven to think beyond the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema?

When will we be ready for an experience of freedom and equality that is capable of respectfully experiencing that friendship, which would at last be just, just beyond the law, and measured up against its measurelessness?<sup>35</sup>.

This kind of friendship has to do, then, not with the neighbor but with the remote, with the permanently unsatisfied aspiration to overcome oneself, with the tension towards a self-giving beyond any goal and any reciprocation. This idea of friendship not only uncovers, as Derrida intuits, an unprecedented possibility of human coexistence by revealing the impossible of democracy (which alone makes it possible), but also grasps, perhaps, the essence always to come of man himself, that essence that Nietzsche tried to think of through the figure of the overman.

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<sup>33</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, cit., §14, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> J. Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, p. 295.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

In *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, in the chapter *On Love of the Neighbor* in this regard we read:

I do not teach you the neighbor, but the friend. The friend shall be your festival of the earth and an anticipation of the overman.

I teach you the friend and his overflowing heart. But one must understand how to be a sponge, if one wants to be loved by overflowing hearts.

I teach you the friend in whom the world stands complete, a bowl of goodness – the creating friend who always has a complete world to bestow. Let the future and the farthest be the cause of your today: in your friend you shall love the overman as your cause.

My brothers, I do not recommend love of the neighbor to you: I recommend love of the farthest to you<sup>36</sup>.

## 2. Ernst Jünger and the friendship of loners

An emblematic example of this unprecedented and paradoxical form of friendship can be found in the writing of Ernst Jünger, especially in his famous war journals<sup>37</sup>. By nature a loner and taciturn, Jünger intuited, perhaps without being fully aware of it, the meaning of this extreme and enigmatic form of friendship. We can grasp this by transparently analysing the fraternal or friendship relationships that Jünger describes in his novels. Although they apparently follow the traits of the traditional model of friendship (male homosexuality, reciprocity of experiences and sensibilities), on closer inspection they deviate from it in a very significant way: there is never a confusing intimacy, nor a striving for equality; on the contrary, more often than not, such relationships configure the dissymmetry typical of the relationship between master and disciple, and the figure of a 'spiritual guide' is often present, leading the younger of the two friends through a series of formative experiences and initiatory trials. Jünger felt that at the bottom of every authentic friendship there is the profound sharing of solitude and the *impossible* desire to make a gift of it to the other, as well as the common suffering for the ineluctable separation from the crystalline beauty (of surface and depth) of this world; the friends of whom he writes could be defined as the 'immortal friends of absence', united by the solitary and common fidelity to the giving of the Eternal in time, to the revelation of the

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<sup>36</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, ed. by A. Del Caro and R.B. Pippin, trans. by A. Del Caro, Cambridge Univ. Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 45.

<sup>37</sup> See above all E. Jünger, *Storm of Steel*, trans. by M. Hoffmann, Penguin, London 2004.



Imperishable among the transient forms of the earth: 'friends of the Eternal' in the time that flees and inexorably identifies and separates.

Extreme loneliness is, perhaps, the only way to access the transfiguration of transience and that paradoxical 'commonality' of the lonely which, now, is no longer simply the blind solidarity in the face of death (typical of soldiers at the front), but is the lucid awareness of those who resist ruin and in the darkness of despair perceive – almost a spectre of a lost (or never been) fraternity – the 'friendly' resonance of the heart of the lonely:

The only comforting memory is of times during the war when suddenly the blaze of an explosion wrenched from the darkness the lone figure of a sentinel who must have long since remained hidden in the dark. During those countless, frightening nights on guard in the darkness, a treasure was accumulated that would be consumed later.

Faith in the lonely ones arises from a longing for an unnamed brotherhood [*Die Glaube an die Einsamen entspringt der Sehnsucht nach einer namenlosen Brüderlichkeit*] and for a deeper spiritual relationship than is possible between men<sup>38</sup>.

Jünger thinks that this anachoretic community of solitaries passes through historical epochs as an unchanging network of reference and orientation that it is the task of thought to make visible and describe as a landscape, perhaps the most fascinating, the only one in which man can recognise himself: "Among the thoughts that return to me periodically occupying my reflections is the idea of a landscape that would exist unchanging through the ages, and such that spiritual relationships would be visible. It should correspond to a way of understanding philosophers as one reads reports and descriptions of journeys"<sup>39</sup>.

It is not born, this friendship, from mutual acquaintance or moral appreciation, nor – the last of the paradoxes – is it nourished by memory: the sentinel in the darkness, who no longer speaks like the one in the book of Isaiah<sup>40</sup>, remains motionless in waiting in the face of ruin. But the more one delves into the abyss of anguish and loneliness, the more the gnostic sense of nostalgia for a remote and forgotten belonging to a land, a motherland [*Heimat*], beyond the Wall of time matures, and with it the faith of a common spiritual destiny of the lonely, of an astral friendship that in this world can only take place in separation, oblivion and distance.

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<sup>38</sup> E. Jünger, *Das abenteuerliche Herz. Aufzeichnungen bei Tag und Nacht*, Zweite Fassung, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 11, Essays III, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2015, p. 191 (my trans.).

<sup>39</sup> E. Jünger, *Das abenteuerliche Herz*, cit., pp. 266-267 (my trans.).

<sup>40</sup> "A voice comes to me from Seir, Watchman, how far gone is the night? how far gone is the night? / The watchman says, The morning has come, but night is still to come" (*Is.* 21, 11-12)

The understanding of such an unprecedented concept of friendship necessarily passes through the attempt to think together gift and abandonment, memory and oblivion. Significant in this regard are the words with which Blanchot concludes his memory of his friend Bataille: "Thought knows one does not remember: without memory, without thought, it already struggles in the invisible, where everything sinks back into indifference. This is thought's profound grief. It must accompany friendship into oblivion"<sup>41</sup>.

Loneliness is an inevitable destiny, and each individual carries with him or her a world that with his or her death plunges without residue into nothingness. Only a sidereal gaze, can recognise the affinity of the friends of solitude who, in their earthly existence, are destined to remain strangers, if not to clash as enemies. This is how Nietzsche describes, in a very famous aphorism from *The Gay Science*, the fatal destiny of these argonauts of the spirit in which he sees the image of the 'new philosophers' devoted to the disaster (with this expression Blanchot links disaster to the stars) of friendship and representing, perhaps precisely through the tragic failure of their relationship, the extreme possibility of *philia*:

*Star friendship.* - We were friends and have become estranged. But that was right (...). We are two ships, each of which has its own goal and course (...); maybe we will never meet again – or maybe we will, but will not recognize each other: the different seas and suns have changed us! That we had to become estranged is the law *above* us; through it we should come to have more respect for each other – and the thought of our former friendship should become more sacred! There is probably a tremendous invisible curve and stellar orbit in which our different ways and goals may be *included* as small stretches – let us rise to this thought! But our life is too short and our vision too meagre for us to be more than friends in the sense of that sublime possibility. – Let us then *believe* in our star friendship even if we must be earth enemies<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> M. Blanchot, *Friendship*, cit., p. 292.

<sup>42</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, cit., §279, p. 159.