

The Dissimilar
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For Jacques Derrida the scene of ethics is constituted as a distinct sphere of deliberation and action on the basis of a particular figure, if one can call it that. In the latter's absence, things are not yet situated in the field of the ethical, which remains bound to this figure as its condition. And yet at the same time it belongs to this figure to exceed the scene it gives rise to. Its emergence presides over someone, or something, that at its limit cannot be made to appear as such; it will not be brought into line with the means by which its presence could be verified. It is nowhere else - it will have given rise to a scene, after all - but its manifestation cannot take on a determinate form there, to the extent that it must go unrecognized wherever it comes to pass, necessarily. This does not mean it can be bypassed. On the contrary, it is precisely as such that it elicits a response of sorts from whomever it has addressed, that it makes this addressee responsible. In the late Derrida's writing on ethics this figure, for all its ambiguity, does come to be associated with a particular motif: *le dissemblable*, the dissimilar or the unlike, the one who falls beyond the scope of those who recognize each other as counterparts or fellows [*semblables*]. "A principle of ethics or more radically of justice, in the most difficult sense, which I have attempted to oppose to right, to distinguish from right, is perhaps the obligation that engages my responsibility with respect to the most dissimilar [*le plus dissemblable*, the least 'fellow'-like], the entirely other, precisely the monstrously other, the unrecognizable other."¹

Dissimilar beyond all comparison, this figure of the other - which is always tied to the hyperbolic register in evidence here - this other is not, then, simply the other of the same. Its dissimilarity is not deducible from what is similar. It is, rather, dissimilar in and of itself, which makes it, in turn, dissimilar *from itself*, persisting at a point outside of all possible identification. This other resembles no other, it does not resemble, precisely: as *the most dissimilar* - "the absolute unlike" he writes elsewhere² - it is each time singular and unique in its dissimilarity, which means it does not come together as a case that could serve as a precedent for anything else. For this reason the response it elicits cannot be guided by a protocol of any kind. This is why an ethics founded on or even qualified by the principle of recognition, mutual or otherwise, is not strictly speaking an ethics.

All this is what the encounter with the other as dissimilar implies as it pertains to the scene of ethics. And once this figure is set at the horizon of its terrain, it will leave in its wake a fundamentally reconfigured sphere of action, a redrawing of its limits and a redetermination of the relation maintained with these limits. Nowhere does this show itself more readily for Derrida than in relation to the question of *the human*. This passage - we are quoting from *The Beast and the Sovereign* - continues as follows:

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 1*, eds. Michel Lisse, Marie-Louise Mallet, and Ginette Michaud, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009. p. 108.

² Derrida, Jacques. *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. p. 60.

"The 'unrecognizable' [*méconnaissable*], I shall say in a somewhat elliptical way, is the beginning of ethics, of the Law, and not of the human. So long as there is recognizability and fellow [*semblable*], ethics is dormant. It is sleeping a dogmatic slumber. So long as it remains human, among men, ethics remains dogmatic, narcissistic, and not yet thinking. Not even thinking the human that it talks so much about."³

This much is clear then: the human can be considered neither the starting point nor end point for the scene of ethics; whether in theory or in practice, it cannot inform the decisions and encounters that make up ethical engagement and comportment. In this sense an appeal to the human is even a way of foreclosing the ethical; to proceed on the basis of its categorization is to preclude the very possibility of ethics. The latter can only be said to have begun with the admittance of a figure that falls outside of the common bond of filiation and fraternity – those I recognize as my fellows – and in such a way that this dissimilarity is not rendered any less incommensurable by the act of admittance itself. And if the other is not synonymous with or restricted to the human, one should not neglect the final and additional complication Derrida alludes to here: namely, that one cannot think "what is proper" to the human on the basis of the human alone; this would already be to presume an association between the human and the *semblable* that is in no way secure and in no way justified; said otherwise, in order to think the being specific to the human it appears necessary, in one way or another, to pass by way of the other in its very irreducibility to this being.

(Perhaps this is the first indication that when it comes to the human there is no foundation for "what is proper," a thesis also reiterated in more than one way by Sylvia Wynter in 'The Ceremony Found': for example, what presents itself as the human in general is in fact, so she argues, a "rhetorically overrepresented" "genre" or "fiction" that is itself the function of a longstanding process of subjugation, the history of which it is imperative to construct.⁴) This configuration of the dissimilar and its incommensurability with the human, discernible across a wide variety of Derrida's thematic concerns (the questions of hospitality, friendship, the animal and the "to come" would be immediate cases in point), makes one its first appearances in 'The Ends of Man.' A reading of this text from the perspective of this problem finds itself with multiple points of possible entry, foremost amongst which are the following:

On the one hand, the question of man's end, or ends, is pursued by Derrida with a view to showing the way in which a certain humanism persists over and above the critique of metaphysics as it is undertaken in and around the philosophy of Heidegger (the latter having laid the groundwork on the basis of which it is possible to pose this question, without however entirely extricating himself from the limitations that this question seeks to disclose). The being of the human, understood as a self-presence sustained by a certain "proximity to oneself,"⁵ and the place assigned to this being, is what this critique stops

³ *The Beast and the Sovereign*, op. cit.

⁴ Wynter, Sylvia. 'The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition,' in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, eds. Jason R. Ambrose, Sabine Broeck, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. pp. 199; 216.

⁵ Derrida, Jacques. 'The Ends of Man,' in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Press/Prentice Hall, 1982. p. 125.

short of considering, what it leaves inadvertently unaddressed and thus in place; it is therefore what remains of metaphysics after this critique has run its course. It is Sartre's reading of Heidegger that Derrida is thinking of when he writes, "And yet, despite this alleged neutralization of metaphysical presuppositions, it must be recognized that the unity of man is never examined in and of itself...Everything occurs as if the sign 'man' had no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit."⁶ Any discourse that retains the vestige of this sign without having accounted for its privilege remains locked outside the sphere of ethics.

On the other hand, the end, or ends, of man cannot necessarily and without qualification be placed in the service of this critique. Why so? Because the pursuit of man's end, the surpassing or overcoming of man through the accomplishment of this end, is one – if not *the* – means of augmenting man's position as it has been staged across the history of metaphysics. From this perspective it does not do away with man but installs and maintains him in relation to his essence. It is here that Derrida draws upon the register of *aufheben* and *relever*, that cancellation or negation that in the same stroke elevates and preserves; man negated in this way is in truth cast all the more fully in "relief." "*The thinking of the end of man, therefore, is always already prescribed in metaphysics, in the thinking of the truth of man.* What is difficult to think today is an end of man that would not be organized by a dialectics of truth and negativity..."⁷

How then would this other end present itself? How would one stage "today" the end of man differently, so that what is brought to an end is thought differently, having been displaced elsewhere in the process?

It is here, in concluding, that we want to turn to a remarkable article of Maurice Blanchot's, 'Atheism and Writing: Humanism and the Cry.' Written in 1967, one year prior to 'The Ends of Man,' it shows numerous points of thematic convergence with the latter's, not least the key motif laid bare in the closing stages of Derrida's argument, that "trembling" which signifies the exposure of man to an "outside" that would confound his metaphysical determination.⁸ Against all expectation Blanchot's text culminates in a valorization of "humanism." This is unexpected not least because this commitment is made having fully acknowledged the "ideological" functions of "'the sign' man" in the preceding work. And yet Blanchot stages this affirmation in such a way that it transforms in its entirety what it is this sign refers to and the manner in which it does so. Here, then, is the gesture that interests us (and it shares something of Wynter's desire to recover a "heretical" kernel in humanist discourse⁹):

"A humanism of what kind? Neither a philosophy nor an anthropology: for to tell nobly of the human in man, to think the humanity in man, is quickly to arrive at an untenable discourse and (how to deny this?) more repugnant than all the nihilist vulgarities. What, then, is this 'humanism'? How can it be defined so as not to engage it in the logos of a definition? Through what will most distance it from language: the cry—that is to say, the murmur; cry of need or of protest, cry without words and without silence, an ignoble cry—or, if need be, the written cry, graffiti on the walls. It may be that, as one likes to declare,

⁶ Ibid. pp. 115-16.

⁷ Ibid. p. 121.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 134 ff.

⁹ Wynter, op. cit. pp. 190-92.

'man is passing.' He is. He has even always already passed away, inasmuch as he has always been adapted to and appropriated by his own disappearance. But in passing, he cries out: in the street, in the desert; he cries out in dying; he does not cry out, he is the murmur of this cry."¹⁰

Is this cry that announces the passing of man the last word of a dying language or the first word of a new language? Does it even belong to the order of language, or is it the outside of language made to manifest within language, leaving language something other than an order? In its indeterminacy it is perhaps all these things at once. And this is what sees the human being, that speaking animal, exposed to the outside that sets it an untraversable distance from what was taken to be proper to it. In other words, this cry constitutes its bearer as unrecognizable, the dissimilar itself.

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¹⁰ Blanchot, Maurice. 'Atheism and Writing: Humanism and the Cry,' in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. p. 262.