Marie NDiaye
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The feeling that something is missing never, ever leaves you – and it can’t, and it shouldn’t, because something is missing.

That isn’t of its nature negative. The missing part, the missing past, can be an opening, not a void. It can be an entry as well as an exit. It is the fossil record, the imprint of another life, and although you can never have that life, your fingers trace the space where it might have been, and your fingers learn a kind of Braille.

Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

NDiaye’s blank-riddled surfaces can be used in all kinds of astonishing ways. People bring to their fantasies about these chopped-up tales and yanked-out characters a great deal from their own lived experience, prejudice and, perhaps, trauma. There is no universal reader. The fact that I have a Cornish mother (whose Greek father abandoned her when she was eight), a West African father (whose brother was sacrificially murdered at the age of twelve), and was brought up with my two older sisters in an almost exclusively white, working-class town in the northern provinces of a northern European country cannot help but inform much of what I ‘recognize’ (interpret, smell, hallucinate) in the work of Marie NDiaye. And yet these are just a handful of the myriad reasons I may consciously or unconsciously believe that I am well-positioned to ‘talk to the blanks’. In my experience, all of NDiaye’s usually obsessive admirers, no matter how intellectually sophisticated,
tend to speak as if her writing is being directed at them, as if they have been equipped with the gift of sensing what is ‘really’ going on beneath her enigmatic surface. These readers are variously gendered; they occupy different ages; they live out a range of physical, mental and emotional disabilities and sexual preferences; and they experience the often violent mystery of ‘race’ inside differently marked bodies. I have watched them, in fascination (and usually in a seminar room), arguing passionately (and often making excellent cases) about the obvious reason for Ange’s wound; about the malevolence – or not – of the femmes en vert; about whether or not ‘Fanny’ is ‘black’ (or ‘brown’ or ‘yellow’), and why such a question could possibly matter.

A reader can never relate ‘correctly’ to any texts, much less to ones which veil themselves in blankness and paradox. We might go further still and say that any sustained engagement with an object – human, textual or otherwise – which is largely defined by its hauntingly absent presence, its fragmentary incompleteness, is doomed to founder on the rocks of the most self-indulgent fantasy. Is there any way, though, that, as consumers of the NDiayeian blank, we can avoid the worst excesses of our unchecked projections? It is true that NDiaye creates stories and characters which fail to acknowledge what is most psychically – and often physically – ‘real’ about themselves. Her fictional and theatrical landscapes present themselves in a disquietingly incomplete fashion, often refusing psychological depth, affective substance or ontological information. Yet it is precisely within these zones of seeming affectlessness, absence and invisibility that I suggest NDiaye’s readers and spectators must actively insert themselves – even at the risk of delusion – and so begin the challenging process of bearing strange new psychic fruit within a spectral dwelling-space. As Racine puts it in his preface to the wonderfully ‘nothing’ tragedy that is Bérénice (1670), ‘Toute l’invention consiste à faire quelque chose de rien’.

In the short story ‘Les Sœurs’ (2008), young Bertini spends years trying to grasp the reality of his cheerful and attractive – yet weirdly impenetrable – schoolmate and neighbour, Victoire. Following Victoire wherever she goes, all in the unstated aim of really getting to know her, Bertini eventually has a miraculous conversation with Victoire in which he falteringlly testifies to having ‘seen’ her suffering. This awkward conversation reveals something psychically real slipping momentarily out of Victoire, despite her best efforts to mask it. One would never have predicted that silly little Bertini’s powers of analysis would be reliable or accurate. But his determination to remain, at any cost, with Victoire,
in all her frustrating unknowability, ultimately dislodges a presence which – to quote the narrator of *Autoportrait en vert* – ‘n’a pas de nom dans notre langue’ (*AV*, 93). The revelation of emotional truth – if this is what it is – is confused and fleeting: Victoire, overwhelmed and humiliated by the intimacy of it all, will run from Bertini, never to be seen again. And yet, for the reader, there is a powerful and unforgettable intensity to the story. This intensity is not located in the articulate expression of anyone’s emotional ‘truth’, as such, but emerges instead from Bertini’s clumsy half-revelation of Victoire’s defensive falseness. Victoire’s horrified witnessing of that falseness as it escapes from her – in a movement reminiscent of Nadia’s darting eel-foetus in *Mon cœur à l’étroit* – contains the ultimate image of the NDiayean psyche that grows despite its best efforts not to.

In any given relationship, it may sometimes be the object’s failure to be fully ‘there’ that can generate unprecedented forms of psychic aliveness and sensitivity within the subject, and indeed within the relationship itself. The most miraculous moments of insight and connection for a psychotherapist, for example, may occur when she is able to be receptive to ‘dead’ areas in her client’s blocked discourse. Inserting herself into the other’s zones of blankness, she is able not only to name the blankness as blankness, but may also, if she is especially empathic, be able to find some way of dwelling in that blankness in a way that the person who is undergoing the therapy is not yet able to do. With a great deal of patience – and the courage to get things wrong – the therapist’s countertransferential sojourn within her client’s gaps may eventually yield a new language with which to describe and understand them.

Sometimes we see this kind of improbable growth in the context of relationships between ‘dead’ parents and their children. In a provocative essay Arnold Modell (1999) speculates on the possibility that a parentally ‘failed’ child may not necessarily become a fragmented, emotionally disinvested or psychotic subject, but may instead turn into someone so acutely aware of the early interactions that were denied her that she is exceptionally well-attuned to what is at stake in relationality.

‘Hypersensitivity to one’s own inner life and to the inner life of others’, declares Modell, ‘is only one such compensatory outcome of a child’s exposure to the dead mother’ (85). Similarly, Winnicott suggests that there may exist for infants who have not been sufficiently ‘mirrored’ by their primary caregiver options other than those of inner death and self-annihilating falseness. Such children may develop a peculiar kind of vision:
Conclusion: A Beam of Intense Blankness

They may succeed by some other method, and blind infants need to get themselves reflected through other senses than that of sight [...] Naturally there are half-way stages in this scheme of things. Some babies do not quite give up hope and they study the object and do all that is possible to see in the object some meaning that ought to be there if only it could be felt. (Winnicott, 1967b: 151–2)

An intense sense of aliveness potentially arises, then, from the frustrated child who passionately stays long enough with the parent who feels ‘dead’. Equally, something new and mad and real can be born when the half-blind, hallucinating subject stares long enough at the blank, glittering object she thinks she may recognize. It is, perhaps, this human potential for generating ‘something out of nothing’ that Keats was describing when he wrote so seductively in a letter of 1817 of the artist’s need of ‘negative capability’:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke upon various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (Keats, 2010: 276)

NDiaye’s later narratives actively draw the reader’s attention to the potential miracles that can be effected through an improbable lingering in uncertainty, mystery and doubt. In her texts which depict some kind of quasi-cosmic relational ‘breakthrough’ à la Bertini and Victoire, the breakthrough emerges from one character’s rapt attention to another character’s frustratingly zombified quality. In circumstances of thwarted perception, knowledge and feeling, then, it may be the subject’s capacity to adapt to alternative forms of looking and knowing that ultimately generates the most emotionally truthful experience. As Ladivine gazes at the mysterious dog which may or may not have been following her for days, all she can reflect is: ‘C’était possible, c’était probable. Mais, au fond, elle ne savait pas’ (L., 221).

The novel Ladivine synthesizes every conceivable layer of the emerging NDiayeian whispered injunction that protagonists – and readers – go forth into the half-light of blankness, at the heart of which may lie the possibility of something resembling post-blank recognition. Malinka/Clarisse is the ultimate blank centre: swathed in the shame of quintessential NDiayeian blancness – the racialized version of the desire to
remain colourless – she is the embodiment of the affectively absent daughter, mother, partner and heroine. Following her actual, physical murder, her mother, daughter, ex-husband and the reader are all left with the same unanswerable question: who was this woman? And what did she really want? For the daughter, LaDivine II, the internalization of her mother’s blankness converts her own insides into a zombie-ridden crypt, populated by secrets and foreclosures which linger, spectral and unsymbolizable. More frustratingly still, the ‘original’ LaDivine I, secret grandmother, aged cleaning-woman and potential ‘keeper of the key’, is herself something of a blank-riddled cipher. Cheerful and kindly she may be, but little else is forthcoming in the way of details: LaDivine Sylla masks not only her culture of origin, but also anything resembling a past, a personality, or an unconscious. How exactly have she and her glacial daughter Malinka/Clarisse arrived at the situation described in the early pages of the novel, this once-a-month, tea-and-cake carcass of a secret, shameful relationship? Early trauma? Schoolyard stigma? Failed attachment? Institutional racism? All these putative ‘reasons’ wither away, flimsy and inadequate, when we grasp at them as totalizing explanations for the blank horror. All are valid hypotheses, yet no single one really resolves anything. The horror, meanwhile, remains.

The reader’s only option – and the only option for the younger LaDivine, not even consciously aware that anything is wrong with her family in the first place – is to give up on explanation and instead to go forward into the fantastical zone that is formed at the crossroads of blankness and recognition. The novel presents its protagonists’ development within an increasingly intense series of interactions beyond reason. These interactions take place in a dimension that appears to have taken shape ‘in dreams’, akin to Lynchian theatres of impossible recognition such as the Club Silencio of Mulholland Drive, or the Black Lodge of Twin Peaks, where a woman approaching her own death may laugh, converse and weep with an avatar of the very stranger/detective/angel who will later lead her murder investigation. When LaDivine II gazes into the eyes of the brown dog, the moment is experienced as one that is simultaneously inexplicable and affirming of her capacity to be emotionally alive. Something resembling soulful connection has taken place, and LaDivine knows that this is what distinguishes her from her dead (in every sense) mother ‘Clarisse’. LaDivine’s trajectory is thenceforth characterized by an embrace of the quasi-psychotically hyper-relational. Entering into an oneiric dialogue with the person who believes her to be the woman from the wedding, LaDivine spins tales
which are as unsubstantiated as they are weirdly, madly ‘true’: ‘Elle avait pourtant si bien raconté, et avec tant de détails justes, elle voyait si précisément ce qu’elle avait décrit qu’elle en venait presque à douter d’avoir inventé’ (L, 251). Ladivine accepts and revels in a recognition without logical foundation, and in doing so begins her movement towards a relationality beyond the restrictive codes of identity.

Is this just another way of saying that Ladivine has entered total madness? Perhaps. And, if this is the case, I am loath to posit the development as a positive one, for, unlike some theorists of post-repressive ego-dissolution, I tend to consider the loss of psychic control as more of a handicap than a liberation. It may be that Ladivine II can steer no safe route between the spirit-numbing blankness of her old life and the shape-shifting excess of her new one precisely because she has no access to the halfway space of partial dissolution. She is accordingly ‘engloutie’ (L, 373) by the enchanted forest, overwhelmed by a sudden bursting of the thought-dam that has kept her anchored, if affectively dead, for so many years. But her grandmother, Ladivine Sylla, offers the reader, in the novel’s devastating final section, the glimpse of a form of ‘mad’ recognition that may be potentially more useful as the blueprint for psychic growth. Communing on the morning of her daughter’s killer’s trial with the various figurines she has accumulated over the years, Ladivine I experiences the inanimate statuettes as improbably empathic:

Elle atteignait alors l’état qu’elle recherchait, mi-conscient, mi-hébété, où il lui semblait que les figurines pleuraient pour elle, ayant pris une part de sa peine, la considérant de leur regard soudain animé, mouillé, brillant.

Elle voyait le reflet de ses yeux secs et morts dans leurs prunelles de porcelaine, elle se sentait mieux et lui montaient aux lèvres des phrases de consolation qu’elle adressait dans un murmure à ses pauvres figurines, se retenant tout juste d’essuyer leurs joues trempées de larmes. (L, 395)

The moment is a genuinely uncanny one, qualities of aliveness and deadness, vulnerability and caregiving now strangely loose and free-flowing amongst Ladivine and the living dolls. And yet this seems to me to be far removed from a description of psychosis. Old Ladivine has instead entered into something resembling Wilfred Bion’s description of reverie, that half-conscious state into which a mother (or therapist) drifts so as to be able to attend at an unconscious level to the psychic needs of her infant or interlocutor, converting the dependent party’s unprocessed and unthinkable non-thoughts (‘beta elements’) into meaningful emotions. The difference here, of course, is
that Ladivine is caring for herself, using the statuettes as ‘transitional objects’ (cf. Winnicott, 1953) with which she may unlock tearful feelings that would otherwise remain buried and blank. Recognizing the ‘dead’ figurines as alive is, on the one hand, quite mad – and yet, at another level, this act of recognition is a healing one, allowing Ladvine to become the genuinely strong woman who, in the novel’s final pages, will welcome a fantastical dog into her own safe and containing home rather than having to follow it into an uncontrollable, enchanted forest. Unlike her granddaughter Ladivine Rivière, ‘swallowed up’ as she is by her blistering encounter with the all-consuming, unimaginable intensity of ‘the One’, Ladvine Sylla is accorded relational, survivable, ‘angelic’ revelation: she has discovered a negotiable zone between divine and human intelligence.2

The reader’s mad recognition of the NDiayean ‘blank fantastic’ is a double-edged sword: it may swallow him whole, or it may help her to grow and to relate. It all depends on what use s/he makes of it. In my own dealings with NDiaye’s ‘blank dolls’ over the last ten years, I have found that by gradually internalizing them – helplessly and despite myself: it was never a conscious decision – I have been accompanied by uncannily strange and familiar objects whose power I have experienced as truly angelic, in terms of the psychic protection, playful comradeship and manageable enlightenment they have afforded me. These porcelain surfaces and their variously ‘dead’ inhabitants have gradually, over the course of a complex process of mourning, transference, dialogue and imagination, acquired the bright, moist eyes of Ladivine’s dogs and figurines.

In her analysis of the intuitive overlaps between Samuel Beckett and his erstwhile therapist Bion, Angela Moorjani reflects on the possibility of a ‘binocular’ subjectivity, blank and seeing, strangely powerful in its outlandish, one-eyed asymmetry:

Bion concurs that the unknowable can at best be only partially grasped through the mind’s evolving transformations (verbal, musical, artistic, for instance). One could either flood the darkness with ‘brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light’, Bion suggests, or count on maximum darkness to reveal flickers of the unforeseen. Accordingly, Bion postulates that one seeing eye and one blind eye would be the best approach to problems, using one for observation and the other for intuiting the unforeseen in the dark. (2004: 30)
I propose, by way of conclusion, that the reader of Marie NDiaye learn to exploit precisely this powerful ‘two-ness’ of vision, keeping one eye wide open, and the other – to borrow a Kubrickian phrase – ‘wide shut’. Is this hybrid, half-blind, half-lucid creature not incarnated in the figure of NDiaye herself, as she veers between stances of revolutionary perspicacity and disquieting shortness of sight? Do we not find the same ‘binocular’ monster in En famille’s Fanny, on occasion brilliantly insightful vis-à-vis her unspeakable predicament, while on others so unknowing as to appear idiotic? NDiaye’s ‘binocular’ creatures may inhabit a single body, or they may be split into two physically separate, twin-like entities like Paula (who sees too much, her eyes and ears overwhelmed by hyper-racialized perception) and Victoire (blank, blind, seeing and feeling nothing, or so she claims). But if the reader is to learn to see, to know and to feel NDiaye in an empathic and enlightening manner, s/he needs to transform into something as radically binocular, or even two-headed, as NDiaye’s creations themselves are. S/he must be capable of lingering for as long as is necessary in an ambiguous heart of blankness, but s/he must also be ready, when the time comes, to stake that blank heart with colour and recognition and life.