The End of Man

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4. The Side Story

INTRODUCTION

The story goes that he is a man and that he is profoundly asleep, that is, in a sleep that nothing, not even a knife to his side would awake. We do not yet know who this man is. One thing is certain: he definitely does not stand for humanity; he is just another man, maybe the wrong man.

With this story comes a woman. Unlike he, who is fast asleep, she is awakening, slowly gaining awareness of her strange surroundings. We also do not know who this woman is. Maybe she stands for kindness, or maybe she is simply another woman. She too is perhaps the wrong woman.

In the following chapter, there is a difference of tense. His side of the story is told in the past tense, while her side is more or less transcribed using the future anterior, this compound tense that consists of two verbs: an auxiliary verb in the future tense (‘will’) and a past participle verb (‘have read,’ for example). ‘More or less transcribed,’ because although facticity needs no explanation, language nearly always fails to transcribe it, commentary always creeping in, unnecessary and yet, however annoying, unavoidable.
In any case, the future anterior is the only tense available. There would be no ‘side’ story (and therefore no fiction in general), if it were not for this crucial temporal tense that expresses the im-possible factuality of the (living) present by gracefully resting on both past and future (‘will’ ‘have…’). In other words, without this tense, that is, without the factual emphasis implied in this compound tense, there would be no fiction, explanation, or commentary.

This chapter has two aims:

The first one is to demonstrate—once more, can this be done enough times?—that the origin of all things has, contrary to Aristophanes and the authors of the Bible, neither an androgyne nor a lonely man as a starting point, but a couple.

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56 The following is inspired by, but also departs from, a commentary by Jean-Luc Nancy in a series of notes written for a seminar at the University of Paris 8 on 28 January 2005 and subsequently published in Littérature. The commentary is as follows: “If one must wait for something out of the division of sex (this division of the one-being narrated in Aristophanes’ discourse in the Banquet) it would have to be that One (from which two supposedly appears) never really existed. The conclusion would be that the division would have always preceded it. And if this is the case, then there is never division or separation. The division is therefore the originary relation, the originary exposition, and this must also be understood as the original exposure itself: if the origin ‘is’ relation, then the origin dissipates itself in the relation”: Jean-Luc Nancy, “Et après,” Littérature 2, no. 142 (June 2006): 34, my translation.
and that it is impossible to think about this masculinity, male body, and man without thinking this supposedly originary couple, which defies all kinds of nostalgia for unity.  

The second aim of this chapter is that this couple brings fact and fiction together: a fiction about an inversion of biological truth and a biological fact that can only be expressed using the future anterior. The unusual aspect of this juxtaposition is that neither fiction nor fact can be understood independently of each other.

Please note that his side of the story is told here first. This does not show the usual disrespect or a contradiction in the

57 Always desperate to dominate, always in need to control, aimlessly wondering alone in their own superiority, male readers of Luce Irigaray’s recent work (In the Beginning, She Was) can only be left at once in awe and disturbed at her discourse. The End of Man will not be addressing the contents of Irigaray’s latest work. The reasons for not addressing this important late book is this: Although it takes 148 pages for Irigaray to admit that, she is “not a male person,” the whole book is structured on the basis of a gross generalization about men: what they are like, have always been, and presumably will always be. Women on the contrary are either (understandably) the victim of men’s oppressive language or (curiously) elevated to such a degree that it is no longer possible to differentiate between “she,” “the goddess,” and “Mother Nature”; the last holding men (and women) as if in a perpetual womb. Irigaray’s curiously phallic discourse relies heavily (however much she decries it) on an unflinching Hegelian hetero-normative dialectic in which women and men are placed, without ambiguity, in radical opposition to each other, an opposition that ultimately can only be sublated when a self-affected, but mysteriously undefined “we” pops up (on the last page) finally recognizing its common origin in this all-encompassing “Mother Nature” (tsunamis and earthquakes presumably included). How does “Mother Nature” come about, is not explained, but “we” must allow her—or Her—to emerge in order to stop sexism, misogyny, and patriarchy. See Luce Irigaray, In the Beginning, She Was (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

58 This does not mean that fiction and facticity are the necessary components of every reality or that they are eternal. Fiction is not necessarily fabrication. It is also invention. Facticity is not necessarily a fact. It is also the possibility of disputation. In both cases, it is impossible to talk, as Meillassoux intimates, for example, of an implicit
chapter. Fiction can only come first because this is her story. Consequently, the subsequent transcription of the fact can only be made here, by me, fraudulently. The relationship between hermeneutics and facticity can only indeed be fraudulent because a fact—and the fact of giving birth specifically—is not something that one can take cognizance of or have knowledge about, not even while holding the hand in a maternity ward. Facticity is an existential knowing.

Please also note that any similarity with fictitious or factual events or characters is purely coincidental. The reading of texts such as The Bible (especially Genesis 2:4-2:25), Mieke Bal’s “Sexuality, Sin, and Sorrow,” Daniel Boyarin’s “The Politics of Biblical Narratology,” and the texts of Phyllis Trible are not necessarily accurate. Following a Talmudic tradition that Levinas never tires to recall, what counts above all is not the truth of the texts examined, but their reading. Texts are not here to be studied as if dead matter, but in order to contribute to their message and this implies, in a gesture that can only be as respectful and faithful as possible, to create misreadings all in the hope of pushing things along and thus contributing to the Word. As Levinas says, pushing the argument way further: “the irreplaceable part that every person and every moment contribute to the message—or to the prescription itself—which is received and whose wealth is thereby revealed only in the pluralism of persons and generations.”

Fiction

Once upon a time, there was a man lying down in a pool of sun, sleeping. Except for his sex, no specific features marked him out. He was simply a naked man lying down presumably

absolutization. For lack of space, I leave this enormous question in suspension. For a challenging discussion of these issues, see Quentin Meillassoux, After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency, trans. R. Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), especially chapter 3.  

on some grass, in a garden among trees, doing nothing, but napping.

Of course, he was breathing and his heart was beating, but he had no control over them. His hairy chest went up and down and his heart pumped blood, but without any controlling gesture on his part. He occasionally snored, but even this did not manage to wake him. It was as if someone else was in control of the task of taking air in and out of his lungs and of pumping blood in his heart.

Lying there in the sun, he was thus unable to refer to himself and therefore to assert himself against another (God or nature, for example). He was clearly without referent and therefore without power. Even his penis was here useless. He was just mere matter, a lump of breathing flesh.

This lack of control was in fact quite remarkable because at one point that morning (or afternoon?), part of his side disappeared. This drastic event took place without sedatives. Suddenly and without interruption to his snoring, his side was wrenched out of him. He clearly was not mastering his body.

But this was not all; he was also unable to control whomever was subsequently created from his side. He played no role in the creation made of his flesh and bones. He was neither a participant nor an observer. He just slept.

And yet, by having his bones and flesh wrenched out of him while he slept, he also paradoxically became in the process ‘for the other.’ He was not just separated from a part of himself; he also became ‘for the other,’ a kind of generous inability to hold it together, a gift without mastery or control (an ironic ‘start’ for what later will always strive for mastery and control).

However this gift was not meant as an altruistic gesture. His loss of flesh and bone was an in-voluntary gift made to whoever was created out of him. This gift was a little unusual for it evaded all forms of economy: it expected no return for he, himself, was without return.

As such, this was his own form of maternity. Yes, maternity and not paternity for here no conception at a distance took place. There was no arousal, penetration, and ejaculation in the hope of conception, gestation, and birth. He un-wittingly
gave himself in his sleep or more precisely, he un-intentionally brought another to the light of day.

Some will say that this is a strange kind of maternity because it more or less coincided with the birth of his ability to speak and therefore with his ability to wage war. However, such coincidence might have something to do with it. After all, through his side gift, he not only gave himself away, he also opened up the possibility of disputation and therefore war. Unfortunately, there can be no maternity without war.

However, such a gift was not an indication that he was either the first or the only one at the start of creation. Teleology here means nothing. Neither cause nor purpose, not even a random series of events can structure such a happenstance. The surreal parting of some flesh without suffering or anaesthetic clearly places the event in question here outside of all logic. If this were not the case, there would be neither fiction (the (re)telling of this or other story) nor facticity (the suffering of birth) in the world.

Two then started the world. The ‘two’ here is what is in question; it stands for the impossibility of the question, like, for example: Was I snoring? Did you sleep well? Did you have nightmares about bleeding to death? These questions are impossible because their answers necessitate both facticity and fiction before the invention or creation of facticity and fiction: a glorious aporia that knows no poros. In this way, space and time have no origin properly speaking; they open each other to create an interruptive doubt or ambiguity about origins, wakefulness, and bad dreams.

After much repetitive snoring, he finally woke up. The woman by his side asked him a question. He replied by remaining silent, obedient. He did what he was told for she had awakened first and already knew the ways of the world. She later gave him fruit, which he ate in silence.

The end.
She will have been first. She will have been the first to recognize herself not only as a human being awakening one afternoon, but also, considering the man snoring by her side, as woman. In doing so, she will have given him the possibility of also recognizing himself. The birth of subjectivity will have come from her, first.

She will have also been the bearer of another gift: Her refusal to bow down to the authority coming from on high (a refusal that, as is well known, demonstrates will, autonomy, and thoughtfulness) will have given him the power of knowledge. (Suddenly, apples are not the only fruit.)

(These two first gifts show that the process was in fact relatively fair: ‘two’ giving each other: on the one hand, as it were, flesh and bones, and on the other, self-recognition and knowledge: an odd, but perfect equity—which does not mean equality—the separation of what comes together: flesh and word).

However, although their birth took place in perfect equity, there will also have been (at least…) four main discrepancies (the history of the world is paved with all the others):

Firstly, for good or bad (and although she was the first to be named), she will have given him the opportunity to be the first to speak (first discrepancy). (Insolent, he grabbed the opportunity unceremoniously: the first to signify. His first speech could have been: ‘after you, madam,’ but no…). In

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60 I deliberately (and perhaps a little perversely) reference here Levinas’s famous attempt to address the ethical through the sentence: ‘after you, sir.’ The aim here again is not gratuitous. The aim is simply to highlight that even as fiction (Adam’s parting rib story), the ultimate ethical gesture of giveness (Adam’s giving himself away) cannot be distinguished from the economy (and therefore the violence) that comes with the act of giving (Adam’s first speech). For Levinas’s reference, see: Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2004), 186; Emmanuel Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo, trans.
doing so, she will have suddenly become ‘the other character.’ (As the character who spoke second, she was often then ‘spoken to.’ This, as it should always be emphasized, had disastrous consequences).

But this will not have been all; in the process (second discrepancy), she will have also managed to turn God into a character. (As a nameable entity, God thus came third in the ‘suddenly’ teleological order imposed by language. Such a low ranking position meant that He would never be able to regain His powers as ‘original’ potter and midwife, thus remaining for ever a mere topic of conversation and a(n) (un)reasonable addressee for prayers—with all the unfortunate consequences that this position entails—being supposedly neutral, the third party, the judge…)

Third discrepancy: having introduced these two characters, she will have also introduced, in the process, the fictional story summarised above: this story of rupture: the surreal fiction of man’s parting side, parting without origin, immemorial. (Unfortunately, as is sadly known, those who interpreted it grossly misread it. They—men, obviously—were convinced that they once were able to give birth from their side, thus giving them the delusion of thinking themselves closer to God… As is well known, patriarchy partly rests on a misreading).

Finally (as if giving him the opportunity to be the first to speak, turning God into a fictional character or witness, and introducing the fiction above was not enough), she will have added a fourth discrepancy: she will have kept childbirth to herself. (No more side-parting for him. Being ‘for the other’—epekeina tes ousias—should always be seen—whether as fiction or fact—as a gendered affair). As compensation, she will have given him the shared experience of both sexual difference (masculine-feminine) and the difference of sexes (male-female, man-woman). (For good or bad, they tend to make the most of this).

(But this last discrepancy was not entirely egoistical:) By retaining the ability to give birth to herself, she will have also given them both the seemingly endless possibility of change. (They now occupy historical positions: being a son-becoming-father and a daughter-becoming-mother. Together, they make history.)

The beginning.

A QUESTIONING

What is one to make of this juxtaposition of fiction and facticity, the latter being more or less comprehensible with the use of the future anterior? What does this inversion of biological truth (the fiction of ‘a’ man giving birth to a woman) and this biological fact (the facticity of ‘a’ woman giving away subjectivity, knowledge, speech, fiction, and babies) tells us?

The meeting of fiction and facticity shows that each protagonist constitutes him or herself not in order to form a whole, but in separation. They are together as separation,61 a strange kind of status that never coheres either as a lovely story (turning a rib into a woman makes surrealist stories somewhat second rate) or as a comprehensible event (birth is, after all, always a miraculous fact).

As such, they will always already be unable, not to be whole in a Platonic sense, but to totalise themselves. The meeting of facticity (woman’s birthing comprehensible only through the use of the future anterior) and fiction (man’s chronological story narrated in the past tense) is a meeting that leaves them (man and woman) unable to perceive themselves as singular

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61 I explore this expression in detail in After ‘Rwanda.’ I borrow this expression from Derrida who writes: “Face to face with the other within a glance and a speech which both maintain distance and interrupt all totalities, this being together as separation [cet être ensemble comme séparation] precedes or exceeds society, collectivity, community”: Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” trans. A. Bass, in Writing and Difference (London: Routledge, 2001), 119, my emphasis.
meaningful entities (either as a singular moment in space and time or as what is always already outside of space and time).

In this way, their sex, like their lives, is always already ‘not yet.’ Man and woman are, each time, another man and woman, another experience, another life. Hence the fact that they could always be the wrong guys: they never are in the right place, always already elsewhere. In this way, He and She are always already futural and yet curiously unable to predict the future.

Thus man and woman are not just better or worse halves to each other; they are always already equivocal, always open to interpretation: at once clearly defined and recognizable as such and yet never absolutely cogent or coherent: each one expecting the other to make sense of their being together as the sense of their togetherness separates them away. With and without the other, they cannot live.

Thus, when they play, they are simultaneously always already in need (past repeating itself as present) and desire (the present projecting itself as future), a muddle of fact and fiction ruled by a mixture of concupiscence and transcendence that keeps them together as separation: the enigmatic as such.

However, this fiction and this facticity are not everything. In their equivocalness, they are still mortal, vulnerable, and sensitive; neither man nor woman is eternal and, as the cliché goes, that is precisely the only thing they have in common: the fact of being born and dying—mortal neuters with sexes.

This finite nature brings eschatology (man ‘never-two’) and messianism (woman ‘sometimes-two’) together. This togetherness, as we have seen, is not a cosy work in tandem or a necessary correlation, but a union-separation that is irreducible to any traditional form of reading or logic of representation: being together as separation.

Considering such an odd situation, their task, should they accept it, would then be to provide each other with what they ought to give away: an end to the story (man), the beginning of the story (woman). Their task is therefore not to seek union or fusion, but to maintain together their separation. Each ending
and each beginning validating and cancelling each other thus making them ‘be’ a little longer still.

This task is akin to love, because to love the other is to give what one does not have: the end, the beginning. Again, this does not mean that these will match, in the way one would imagine the end matching the beginning, for example. There is no eternal return here, not even of the type that recurs every second of time because love creates time indistinguishably as end and as beginning.

To give what one does not have is therefore to ensure that ends and beginnings, fact and fiction remain always already in play, in love. The task is to never overcome the duality ‘man and woman’ however much they try, however much it gets blurry, and however much they are always called upon at sunrise and sunset to hear that ‘God is One.’