

Introduction

Can One Write of Friendship?

The question “What is friendship?” is, to say the least, overdetermined. Behind the word “friendship” lies a host of cultural assumptions and debates. On the one hand, “friend” often seems, in common parlance, to mean little more than “acquaintance” or, at best, “person whose company I currently happen to find pleasant,” with no deeper sense of commitment. On the other hand, the fears that twenty-first-century Americans in particular use the word “friend” far too readily and that social media is spreading a facile conception of friendship show that the notion of friends as deeply committed to each other, even for their entire lives, remains an ideal. The ease with which we can “friend” people on Facebook is alarming only if we suspect that the name of “friend” ought to mean something more profound—but criticizing shallow notions of friendship is far simpler than discovering whatever more profound sense it might have. Op-eds pointing out that Facebook “friends” are often not real friends and advising us not to mistake shallow social media relationships for genuine friendships are commonplace, almost to the point of being cliché, yet we still struggle to determine what, exactly, friendship might be. Might it be the case, however, that this struggle is not simply a product of twenty-first-century alienation and atomization but is essential to any attempt to speak of friendship? Might not wrestling with the question “What is friendship?” involve from the start a certain alienation insofar as friendship challenges the self’s powers of knowledge and comprehension? For even those we dare to name “friends” are profoundly Other than ourselves, and we can never know precisely what will result from a long-lasting commitment.

Indeed, I can scarcely think of a better beginning for a discussion of friendship than a passage from Charles Baudelaire's prose poem "The Stranger" that calls into question our very ability to know what friends might be:

Whom do you love best, enigmatic man, your father, your
mother, your sister, or your brother?
I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
Your friends?
Now you are using a word whose sense has remained unknown
to me unto this day.¹

Significantly, Baudelaire's "enigmatic man" does not deny having friends; rather, he denies knowing the meaning of the word "friend." He implicitly claims to know what a father is, what a mother is, what a sister is, what a brother is, for he confidently asserts that he has none, but this confidence disappears when it comes to friendship. Perhaps he does have friends even though he does not know the sense of the word; in any case, we cannot exclude this possibility before considering what relation holds between knowing what "friend" means and actually having friends. Is it possible that having friends does not depend on knowing the definition of the word? Is it even possible, perhaps, that friendship is indefinable? Friendship, if it takes place at all, may take place beyond any possibility of definition.

This suggestion that friendship is beyond definition calls to mind the cry attributed to Aristotle, cited by Michel de Montaigne, who is in his turn cited by Jacques Derrida throughout his *Politics of Friendship*: "O my friends, there is no friend" (PF 17/1)—a paradoxical exclamation that calls out to *friends*, plural, while denying the *friend*, singular. The *singularity* of the friend thus seems at once essential to friendship—for how can there be friends if indeed there is no friend?—and yet forever unknowable, as the singular is precisely that which cannot be circumscribed within or referred to the general. And if it is true that friendship cannot be thought apart from singularity, investigating friendship cannot be a matter of giving a definition that would treat *friend* as the name of a genus. Furthermore, supposing that friendship does take place, or that it can meaningfully be said to take place, claiming the ability to define friendship would be incompatible with friendship insofar as such a claim would amount to an attempt to subsume the singular friend under

a general category. Baudelaire's "enigmatic man" who confesses that he does not know what "friends" means, who does not even repeat this unknown word, may thus be closer to friendship than the questioner who takes knowledge of the word's meaning for granted.

In short, not only is it insufficient to simply ask what friendship is, but such a question already assumes that friendship is both possible and definable. This book seeks rather, therefore, to attend to this question and to the ways it must be complicated. Yet to circumscribe the discussion, and even to begin it at all, it is necessary to make certain assumptions about what sort of relationship is under investigation. Accordingly, let us suppose that this investigation concerns the character and possibility of a lasting, committed relation between two people—the sort of relation that might be named the most complete friendship—without, however, excluding the possibility of having multiple friends, including friends who are friends of each other, such that there may be a group of more than two people, all of whom are friends. In addition, it seems that friends know each other well, though it will be especially important to investigate the sense in which that is true. Friendship seems to entail a commitment to and love for the other that is not found in merely political relations; indeed, insofar as friendship is a deeper commitment than citizenship, friendship risks destabilizing the political realm. The complex place of friendship in relation to the political will require considerable examination: from Aristotle onward, friendship has often been taken as the foundation of civic life, yet it also seems to be a private relation that stands apart from the political. Friendship differs from familial relationships in that one cannot help being someone's relative, whereas one is not simply born into a friendship, though this is not to say that relatives cannot also be friends. At the same time, friendship is not merely arbitrary: it is not brought into existence by one person's sudden whim, nor does true friendship dissolve, as one must remain faithful to the friend even beyond the friend's death. Friendship differs from eros as well, for friendship contains no sexual element: friends qua friends neither become nor desire to become one flesh. It does not follow that people cannot both be friends and be in an erotic relationship, but even in that case, friendship and eros are different.² Friendship is, crucially, not a prelude to eros or otherwise a form of eros, nor is it in any way inferior to eros. Indeed, because it does not seek even a unity of the flesh, friendship stands as a unique sign of singularity and difference.

The preceding statements are preliminary remarks meant to open a way for further questioning. It bears noting that the initial problem this investigation of friendship faces—namely, that it must find some comparatively fixed starting point to begin yet thereby betrays, right from the start, the possibility that friendship cannot be thus fixed—is analogous to the problem of fidelity to the friend. For perfect fidelity would seem to require perfect understanding of the friend, yet claiming perfect understanding would itself be a betrayal of the friend's unknowability. Just as one who discourses on friendship betrays friendship, so too one always betrays the friend. Even if one cannot be perfectly faithful to the friend, however, refusing to attempt friendship is still further from fidelity than is attempting friendship imperfectly. Likewise, the only alternative to inadequate speech is total silence, and falling into absolute silence through an excessive fear of betrayal may be a greater betrayal of friendship than speaking of it. As Derrida observes in "Violence and Metaphysics," his response to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*, "the philosopher (man) must speak and write within this war of light, a war in which he always already knows himself to be engaged; a war which he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence" (173/117). This remark should be read not as a condemnation of philosophy but as an acknowledgment that there is no alternative to philosophizing within language. The self always already relates to the Other through language, and so, as dangerous as speaking and writing are, refusing to speak or write at all amounts to refusing any relation to the Other.

This book is a continuous wrestling with the joint dangers of, on the one hand, speaking too readily of friendship and the friend and, on the other, failing to speak at all for fear of speaking inadequately. Thus the interrelation of betrayal and fidelity is a crucial question throughout. Chapter 1 considers selected ancient and medieval examinations of friendship in order to clarify friendship's unstable place in the borderlands of hostility and hospitality and concludes that friendship, if it is to bind people into a community, must also shatter open any community in which they believe themselves to be comfortably at home. Chapter 2 further explores, in light of Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, the potential conflict between friendship and one's obligation to others. Investigating why friendship is good despite its dangers, chapter 3 then argues that friends translate the world for each other, and translation can never be perfectly faithful—but only within the finitude that renders perfect

fidelity impossible can friendship take place at all. Chapter 4 takes up the suggestion, raised in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, that friendship is an illusion because, as the narrator of the *Search* claims, it pretends to offer knowledge of another even though such knowledge is impossible. Careful attention to the text of the *Search* reveals, however, that writing itself functions as an act of friendship and that true friendship is a relation across absence. Pursuing the notions of absence and presence, chapter 5 argues that one's knowledge of one's friend is always grounded in a deeper non-knowledge, for in the encounter with another, the self is called into question and dispossessed of itself. One never knows what will come of the promise. Finally, chapter 6 shows that the promise of friendship creates the self and the world that the self is called to translate for the friend. I conclude that although one can never achieve perfect fidelity to the friend, this is no reason to despair of fidelity: the very infidelity of the self's witness to the friend may still faithfully bear witness to the friend's irreplaceability. Certainly friendship remains a risk, but it is a risk to be undertaken in gratitude and joy, for friendship is a great good of our existence within finitude.

Over the course of these chapters, I seek to explore the productive tension between a phenomenological study of the conditions of possibility of friendship and a study of its impossibility—a study, that is, of the limits of any attempt to consider friendship as a phenomenon. I therefore consider how that which we call friendship emerges within human existence, while also highlighting the way it always exceeds and calls into question phenomenal expression. In other words, this analysis is focused on the hinge around which possibility and impossibility are articulated. Declaring that friendship is impossible might seem a natural response to the impossibility of perfect fidelity, yet such a claim would assume, just as much as the assertion that it is possible, that friendship is some definite *thing* of whose possibility we can speak, and we therefore can conclude neither that it is simply impossible nor that it is simply possible. Friendship is possible insofar as one admits that it is impossible: it is possible for those who love that the Other remains unknowable. Ultimately, inquiring into the character and possibility of friendship compels us to confront the limits of language and the horizons of human existence.

This book is thus inscribed on the one hand within the return to what one might call “human issues,” to the study of self and other as *persons*, a return Paul Ricoeur notably calls for in *Oneself as Another*

when he deplors “the loss of [the] relation [of the problematic of the self] to the person who speaks, to the I-you [*Je-tu*] of interlocution, to the identity of a historical person, to the self of responsibility” (22/11)—a loss that began with the Cartesian cogito but that, Ricœur argues, the Nietzschean rejection of the cogito did not repair (see 11–38/1–26, “Introduction: The Question of Selfhood”). On the other hand, however, this study of friendship leads us beyond the sphere of the strictly human to that of language and languages. The impossible fidelity of friendship reveals itself also in the attempt to be faithful when translating, or even when writing in one’s native tongue. Indeed, I argue that friendship is translation, and translation between languages is but one manifestation of translation. Friendship is thus essential to human life yet not exclusively human: translation between languages, and also writing within a single language, is an act of friendship.

As I seek to write of friendship, therefore, I also aim to bear in mind Maurice Blanchot’s remark in *Friendship* that “friendship [. . .] 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 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” (328/291). If what I have written may be a call and testimony to the friend, it will indeed be so only across “an infinite distance,” the distance that marks the gift of a text that says at once less and more than I meant to say. For friendship always remains ultimately a secret, to some degree out of reach of the political, the general, the universal, and so this text, in seeking to write of friendship, falls short; yet insofar as it may be an act of friendship, this text is itself a secret that its author cannot comprehend wholly. This latter point is not an excuse for its failings, whatever they are; yet neither do its failings stand as a condemnation of its undertaking. I offer this text, without wholly knowing what I give or what will come of the gift, in the hope that its very failure to adequately testify to the friend may yet testify to the greatness of the secret.