

Thomas The Obscure

Maurice Blanchot. Translated by Robert Lamberton.

1941

one

Thomas stayed in his room to read. He was sitting with his hands joined over his brow, his thumbs pressing against his hair line, so deep in concentration that he did not make a move when anyone opened the door. Those who came in thought he was pretending to read, seeing that the book was always open to the same page. He was reading. He was reading with unsurpassable meticulousness and attention. In relation to every symbol, he was in the position of the male praying mantis about to be devoured by the female. They looked at each other. The words, coming forth from the book which was taking on the power of life and death, exercised a gentle and peaceful attraction over the glance which played over them. Each of them, like a half-closed eye, admitted the excessively keen glance which in other circumstances it would not have tolerated. And so Thomas slipped toward these corridors, approaching them defenselessly until the moment he was perceived by the very quick of the word. Even this was not fearful, but rather an almost pleasant moment he would have wished to prolong. The reader contemplated this little spark of life joyfully, not doubting that he had awakened it. It was with pleasure that he saw himself in this eye looking at him. The pleasure in fact became very great. It became so great, so pitiless that he bore it with a sort of terror, and in the intolerable moment when he had stood forward without receiving from his interlocutor any sign of complicity, he perceived all the strangeness there was in being observed by a word as if by a living being, and not simply by one word, but by all the words that were in that word, by all those that went with it and in turn contained other words, like a procession of angels opening out into the infinite to the very eye of the absolute. Rather than withdraw from a text whose defenses were so strong, he pitted all his strength in the will to seize it, obstinately refusing to withdraw his glance and still thinking himself a profound reader, even when the words were already taking hold of him and beginning to read him. He was seized, kneaded by intelligible hands, bitten by a vital tooth; he entered with his living body into the anonymous shapes of words, giving his substance to them, establishing their relationships, offering his being to the word "be". For hours he remained motionless, with, from time to time, the word "eyes" in place of his eyes: he

- THOMAS THE OBSCURE -

was inert, captivated and unveiled. And even later when, having abandoned himself and, contemplating his book, he recognized himself with disgust in the form of the text he was reading, he retained the thought that (while, perched upon his shoulders, the word *He* and the word *I* were beginning their carnage) there remained within his person which was already deprived of its senses obscure words, disembodied souls and angels of words, which were exploring him deeply.

two

The first time he perceived this presence, it was night. By a light which came down through the shutters and divided the bed in two, he saw that the room was totally empty, so incapable of containing a single object that it was painful to the eye. The book was rotting on the table. There was no one walking in the room. His solitude was complete. And yet, sure as he was that there was no one in the room and even in the world, he was just as sure that someone was there, occupying his slumber, approaching him intimately, all around him and within him. On a naive impulse he sat up and sought to penetrate the night, trying with his hand to make light. But he was like a blind man who, hearing a noise, might run to light his lamp: nothing could make it possible for him to seize this presence in any shape or form. He was locked in combat with something inaccessible, foreign, something of which he could say: "That doesn't exist" and which nevertheless filled him with terror as he sensed it wandering about in the region of his solitude. Having stayed up all night and all day with this being, as he tried to rest he was suddenly made aware that a second had replaced the first, just as inaccessible and just as obscure, and yet different. It was a modulation of that which did not exist, a different mode of being absent, another void in which he was coming to life. Now it was definitely true, someone was coming near him, standing not nowhere and everywhere, but a few feet away, invisible and certain. By an impulse which nothing might stop, and which nothing might quicken, a power with which he could not accept contact was coming to meet him. He wanted to flee. He threw himself into the corridor. Gasping and almost beside himself, he had taken only a few steps when he recognized the inevitable progress of the being coming toward him. He went back into the room. He barricaded the door. He waited, his back to the wall. But neither minutes nor hours put an end to his waiting. He felt ever closer to an ever more monstrous absence which took an infinite time to meet. He felt it closer to him every instant and kept ahead of it by an infinitely small but irreducible splinter of duration. He saw it, a horrifying being which was already pressing against him in space and, existing outside time, remained infinitely distant. Such unbearable waiting and anguish that they separated him from himself. A sort of Thomas left his body and went before the lurking threat. His eyes tried to look not in

space but in duration, and in a point in time which did not yet exist. His hands sought to touch an impalpable and unreal body. It was such a painful effort that this thing which was moving away from him and trying to draw him along as it went seemed the same to him as that which was approaching unspeakably. He fell to the ground.

three

He felt he was covered with impurities. Each part of his body endured an agony. His head was forced to touch the evil, his lungs to breathe it in. There he was on the floor, writhing, reentering himself and then leaving again. He crawled sluggishly, hardly different from the serpent he would have wished to become in order to believe in the venom he felt in his mouth. He stuck his head under the bed, in a corner full of dust, resting among the rejectamenta as if in a refreshing place where he felt he belonged more properly than in himself. It was in this state that he felt himself bitten or struck, he could not tell which, by what seemed to him to be a word, but resembled rather a giant rat, an all-powerful beast with piercing eyes and pure teeth. Seeing it a few inches from his face, he could not escape the desire to devour it, to bring it into the deepest possible intimacy with himself. He threw himself on it and digging his fingernails into its entrails, sought to make it his own. The end of the night came. The light which shone through the shutters went out. But the struggle with the horrible beast, which had ultimately shown itself possessed of incomparable dignity and splendor, continued for an immeasurable time. This struggle was terrible for the being lying on the ground grinding his teeth, twisting his face, tearing out his eyes to force the beast inside; he would have seemed a madman, had he resembled a man at all. It was almost beautiful for this dark angel covered with red hair, whose eyes sparkled. One moment, the one thought he had triumphed and, with uncontrollable nausea, saw the word "innocence", which soiled him, slipping down inside him. The next moment, the other was devouring him in turn, dragging him out of the hole he had come from, then tossing him back, a hard, emptied body. Each time, Thomas was thrust back into the depths of his being by the very words which had haunted him and which he was pursuing as his nightmare and the explanation of his nightmare. He found that he was ever more empty, ever heavier; he no longer moved without infinite fatigue. His body, after so many struggles, became entirely opaque, and to those who looked at it, it gave the peaceful impression of sleep, though it had not ceased to be awake.

Thomas der Dunkle

Maurice Blanchot. Übersetzung Jürg Laederach.

1941

eins

Thomas blieb auf seinem Zimmer und las. Er saß mit vor der Stirn verschränkten Händen, die Daumen gegen die Haarwurzeln gedrückt, und so absorbiert, daß er keine Bewegung machte, als die Tür aufging. Wer eintrat und sah, daß sein Buch immer noch auf denselben Seiten geöffnet war, der dachte, er tue nur so, als lese er. Er las aber. Er las mit unüberbietbarer Genauigkeit und Aufmerksamkeit. Vor jedem Zeichen befand er sich in der Lage des Männchens, das von der Gottesanbeterin gleich verschlungen wird. Der eine wie das andere schauten sich an. Die Worte, die aus einem mit tödlicher Macht versehenen Buch stammten, übten eine milde und friedliche Anziehung auf den Blick aus, der sie berührte. Jedes Wort ließ den allzu lebhaften Blick wie ein halbgeschlossenes Auge in sich ein, es hätte ihn unter anderen Umständen nicht eingelassen. Thomas glitt so auf diese Gänge zu, näherte sich ihnen wehrlos bis zu dem Augenblick, wo der innere Bezirk des Wortes ihn erblickte. Das war noch nichts Erschreckendes, fast noch ein angenehmer Augenblick, den er gern verlängert hätte. Mit Freuden sah der Leser sich diesen kleinen Funken Leben an, den zweifellos er erweckt hatte. Mit Vergnügen sah er sich im Auge, das ihn sah. Sein Vergnügen wurde so — gar beträchtlich größer. Es wurde so groß und unbarmherzig, daß er sich ihm gewissermaßen mit Schrecken unterwarf und sich, unerträglicher Augenblick, ohne von seinem Gegenüber ein erwidertes Zeichen des Bündnisses zu erhalten, aufrichtete und die ganze Seltsamkeit sah, die darin lag, von einem Wort wie von einem lebenden Wesen angeschaut zu werden, und nicht nur von einem Wort, sondern von allen Worten, die in diesem Wort steckten, von allen, die es begleiteten und wiederum in sich andere Worte enthielten, wie eine Reihe Engel, die sich unendlich weiter bis zum Auge des Absoluten fortsetzt. Von einem so gut verteidigten Text lief er bestimmt nicht weg, legte seine ganze Kraft in den Willen, sich seiner zu bemächtigen, weigerte sich hartnäckig, seinen Blick abziehen, glaubte noch, er sei ein tiefer Leser, als bereits die Worte sich seiner bemächtigten und ihn zu lesen begannen. Er wurde von Händen fühlbar ergriffen und durchdrungen, von einem Zahn voll Gift gebissen; mit seinem lebenden Körper drang er in die namenlosen Formen der Wörter ein,