

Thomas The Obscure

Maurice Blanchot. Translated by Robert Lamberton.

1941

Thomas sat down and looked at the sea. He remained motionless for a time, as if he had come there to follow the movements of the other swimmers and, although the fog prevented him from seeing very far, he stayed there, obstinately, his eyes fixed on the bodies floating with difficulty. Then, when a more powerful wave reached him, he went down onto the sloping sand and slipped among the currents, which quickly immersed him. The sea was calm, and Thomas was in the habit of swimming for long periods without tiring. But today he had chosen a new route. The fog hid the shore. A cloud had come down upon the sea and the surface was lost in a glow which seemed the only truly real thing. Currents shook him, though without giving him the feeling of being in the midst of the waves and of rolling in familiar elements. The conviction that there was, in fact, no water at all made even his effort to swim into a frivolous exercise from which he drew nothing but discouragement. Perhaps he should only have had to get control of himself to drive away such thoughts, but his eye found nothing to cling to, and it seemed to him that he was staring into the void with the intention of finding help there. It was then that the sea, driven by the wind, broke loose. The storm tossed it, scattered it into inaccessible regions; the squalls turned the sky upside down and, at the same time, there reigned a silence and a calm which gave the impression that everything was already destroyed. Thomas sought to free himself from the insipid flood which was invading him. A piercing cold paralyzed his arms. The water swirled in whirlpools. Was it actually water? One moment the foam leapt before his eyes in whitish flakes, the next the absence of water took hold of his body and drew it along violently. His breathing became slower; for a few moments he held in his mouth the liquid which the squalls drove against his head: a tepid sweetness, strange brew of a man deprived of the sense of taste. Then, whether from fatigue or for an unknown reason, his limbs gave him the same sense of foreignness as the water in which they were tossed. This feeling seemed almost pleasant at first. As he swam, he pursued a sort of reverie in which he confused himself with the sea. The intoxication of leaving himself, of slipping into the void, of dispersing himself in the thought of water, made him forget every discomfort. And even when this ideal sea which he was becoming

ever more intimately had in turn become the real sea, in which he was virtually drowned, he was not moved as he should have been: of course, there was something intolerable about swimming this way, aimlessly, with a body which was of no use to him beyond thinking that he was swimming, but he also experienced a sense of relief, as if he had finally discovered the key to the situation, and, as far as he was concerned, it all came down to continuing his endless journey, with an absence of organism in an absence of sea. The illusion did not last. He was forced to roll from one side to the other, like a boat adrift, in the water which gave him a body to swim. What escape was there? To struggle in order not to be carried away by the wave which was his arm? To go under? To drown himself bitterly in himself? That would surely have been the moment to stop, but a hope remained; he went on swimming as if, deep within the restored core of his being, he had discovered a new possibility. He swam, a monster without fins. Under the giant microscope, he turned himself into an enterprising mass of cilia and vibrations. The temptation took on an entirely bizarre character when he sought to slip from the drop of water into a region which was vague and yet infinitely precise, a sort of holy place, so perfectly suited to him that it was enough for him to be there, to be; it was like an imaginary hollow which he entered because, before he was there, his imprint was there already. And so he made a last effort to fit completely inside. It was easy; he encountered no obstacles; he rejoined himself; he blended with himself, entering into this place which no one else could penetrate.

At last he had to come back. He found his way easily and his feet touched bottom at a place which some of the swimmers used for diving. The fatigue was gone. He still had a humming in his ears and a burning in his eyes, as might be expected after staying too long in the salt water. He became conscious of this as, turning toward the infinite sheet of water reflecting the sun, he tried to tell in which direction he had gone. At that point, there was a real mist before his sight, and he could pick out absolutely anything in this murky void which his gaze penetrated feverishly. Peering out, he discovered a man who was swimming far off, nearly lost below the horizon. At such a distance, the swimmer was always escaping him. He would see him, then lose sight of him, though he had the feeling that he was following his every move: not only perceiving him clearly all the time, but being brought near him in a completely intimate way, such that no other sort of contact could have brought him closer. He stayed a long time, watching and waiting. There was in this contemplation something painful which resembled the manifestation of an excessive freedom, a freedom obtained by breaking every bond. His face clouded over and took on an unusual expression.

Thomas der Dunkle

Maurice Blanchot. Übersetzung Jürg Laederach.

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Thomas setzte sich und sah das Meer an. Während einiger Zeit blieb er reglos, als wäre er hergekommen, um die Bewegungen der anderen Schwimmer zu verfolgen, und ob gleich ihn der leichte Nebel daran hinderte, sehr weit zu sehen, blieb er hartnäckig da stehen und hielt die Augen auf die nur mit Mühe schwimmenden Körper gerichtet. Und dann, als ihn eine stärkere Welle berührt hatte, rutschte er seinerseits die Sandschräge hinab und glitt mitten in die Strudel, die ihn sogleich unter Wasser drückten. Das Meer war ruhig, und Thomas schwamm gewohnheitshalber lange und ohne müde zu werden. Heute aber hatte er eine neue Strecke gewählt. Der leichte Nebel verbarg das Ufer. Eine Wolke war auf das Meer herabgesunken, und dessen Oberfläche verschwand in einem Lichtschein, der das einzig Wirkliche zu sein schien. Strudel wirbelten ihn umher, ohne ihm allerdings das Gefühl zu geben, er befinde sich mitten in den Wellen und wälze sich in Elementen, die ihm vertraut sein mochten. Die Gewißheit, daß kein Wasser vorhanden war, zwang sogar seiner Anstrengung zu schwimmen den Charakter einer leicht fertigen Übung auf; sie konnte ihn nur entmutigen. Er hätte sich vielleicht nur zu beherrschen brauchen, um solche Gedanken zu verjagen, weil aber sein Blick sich an nichts festmachen konnte, schien es ihm, als schaue er suchend ins Leere, um dort Hilfe zu finden. Da fing das vom Wind aufgepeitschte Meer zu toben an. Der Sturm trübte es, zerspreute es in unerreichbare Weiten, Windstöße erschütterten die Luft, und gleichzeitig herrschten Schweigen und Ruhe, die die Vermutung nahelegten, alles sei schon zerstört. Thomas versuchte sich aus der abgestandenen Flut, die ihn umspülte, zu befreien. Empfindlichst fühlbare Kälte lähmte ihm die Arme. Das Wasser drehte sich in Wirbeln. War es denn Wasser? Bald wirbelte der Schaum wie weißliche Flocken vor seinen Augen, bald wurde sein Körper von der Abwesenheit des Wassers ergriffen und heftig mitgerissen. Er atmete langsamer, einige Augenblicke lang behielt er die Flüssigkeit, die die Windstöße ihm an den Kopf warfen, im Mund: schale Süßigkeit, eigentümliches Getränk für einen Mann, der seinen Geschmackssinn verloren hatte. Und dann vermittelten ihm, aus Müdigkeit oder unbekanntem Anlaß, seine Glieder die selbe Empfindung von Fremdheit wie das Wasser, in dem sie sich wälzten. Die