

Thomas the Obscure  
*Maurice Blanchot*

*translated by Robert Lamberton*

1941

I

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.



HE NEVERTHELESS DECIDED to turn his back to the sea and entered a small woods where he lay down after taking a few steps. The day was about to end; scarcely any light remained, but it was still possible to see certain details of the landscape fairly clearly, in particular the hill which limited the horizon and which was glowing, unconcerned and free. What was disturbing to Thomas was the fact that he was lying there in the grass with the desire to remain there for a long time, although this position was forbidden to him. As night was falling he tried to get up, and, pushing against the ground with both hands, got one knee under him while the other leg dangled; then he made a sudden lurch and succeeded in placing himself entirely erect. So he was standing. As a matter of fact, there was an indecision in his way of being which cast doubt on what he was doing. And so, although his eyes were shut, it did not seem that he had given up seeing in the darkness, rather the contrary. Likewise, when he began to walk, one might have thought that it was not his legs, but rather his desire not to walk which pushed him forward. He went down into a sort of vault which at first he had believed to be rather large, but which very soon seemed to him extremely cramped: in front, in back, overhead, wherever he put out his hands, he collided brutally with a surface as hard as a stone wall; on all sides his way was barred, an insurmountable wall all around, and this wall was not the greatest obstacle for he had also to reckon on his will which was fiercely determined to let him sleep there in a passivity exactly like death. This was insane; in his uncertainty, feeling out the limits of the vaulted pit, he placed his body right up against the wall and waited. What dominated him was the sense of being pushed forward by his refusal to advance. So he was not very surprised, so clearly did his anxiety allow him to see into the future, when, a little later, he saw himself carried a few steps further along. A few steps: it was unbelievable. His progress was undoubtedly more apparent than real, for this new spot was indistinguishable from the last, he encountered the same difficulties here, and it was in a sense the same place that he was moving away from out of terror of leaving it. At that moment, Thomas had the rashness to look around himself. The night was more somber and more painful than he could have expected. The darkness immersed everything; there was no hope of passing through its shadows, but one penetrated its reality in a relationship of overwhelming intimacy.

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## The Solar Anus *Georges Bataille*

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*translated by Allan Stoekl*

It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form. Ever since sentences started to circulate in brains devoted to reflection, an effort at total identification has been made, because with the aid of a copula each sentence ties one thing to another; all things would be visibly connected if one could discover at a single glance and in its totality the tracings of an Ariadne's thread leading thought into its own labyrinth. But the copula of terms is no less irritating than the copulation of bodies. And when I scream I AM THE SUN an integral erection results, because the verb to be is the vehicle of amorous frenzy.

Everyone is aware that life is parodic and that it lacks an interpretation. Thus lead is the parody of gold. Air is the parody of water. The brain is the parody of the equator. Coitus is the parody of crime.

Gold, water, the equator, or crime can each be put forward as the principle of things. And if the origin of things is not like the ground of the planet that seems to be the base, but like the circular movement that the planet describes around a mobile centre, then a car, a clock, or a sewing machine could equally be accepted as the generative principle.

The two primary motions are rotation and sexual movement, whose combination is expressed by the locomotive's wheels and pistons. These two motions are reciprocally transformed, the one into the other. Thus one notes that the earth, by turning, makes animals and men have coitus, and (because the result is as much the cause as that which provokes it) that animals and men make the earth turn by having coitus. It is the mechanical combination or transformation of these movements that the alchemists sought as the philosopher's stone.

It is through the use of this magically valued combination that one can determine the present position of men in the midst of the elements. An abandoned shoe, a rotten tooth, a snub nose, the cook spitting in the soup of his masters are to love what a battle flag is to nationality. An umbrella, a sexagenarian, a seminarian, the smell of rotten eggs, the hollow eyes of judges are the roots that nourish love. A dog devouring the stomach of a goose, a drunken vomiting woman, a sobbing accountant, a jar of mustard represent the