

THOMAS THE OBSCURE (1941)**by Maurice Blanchot****trans. Robert Lamberton**

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. His first observation was that he could still use his body, and particularly his eyes; it was not that he saw anything, but what he looked at eventually placed him in contact with a nocturnal mass which he vaguely perceived to be himself and in which he was bathed. Natu-

rally, he formulated this remark only as a hypothesis, as a convenient point of view, but one to which he was obliged to have recourse only by the necessity of unraveling new circumstances. As he had no means of measuring time, he probably took some hours before accepting this way of looking at things, "but, for him, it was as if fear had immediately conquered him, and it was with a sense of shame that he raised his head to accept the idea he had entertained: outside himself there was something identical to his own thought which his glance or his hand could touch. Repulsive fantasy. Soon the night seemed to him gloomier and more terrible than any night, as if it had in fact issued from a wound of thought which had ceased to think, of thought taken ironically as object by something other than thought. It was night itself. Images which constituted its darkness inundated him. He saw nothing, and, far from being distressed, he made this absence of vision the culmination of his sight. Useless for seeing, his eye took on extraordinary proportions, developed beyond measure, and, stretching out on the horizon, let the night penetrate its center in order to receive the day from it. And so, through this void, it was sight and the object of sight which mingled together. Not only did this eye which saw nothing apprehend something, it apprehended the cause of its vision. It saw as object that which prevented it from seeing. Its own glance entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed the death of all image. New preoccupations came out of this for Thomas. His solitude no longer seemed so complete, and he even had the feeling that something real had knocked against him and was trying to slip inside. Perhaps he might have been able to interpret this feeling in some other way, but he always had to assume the worst. What excuses him is the fact that the impression was so clear and so painful that it was almost impossible not to give way to it. Even if he had questioned its truth, he would have had the greatest difficulty in not believing that something extreme and violent was happening, for from all evidence a foreign body had lodged itself in his pupil and was attempting to go further. It was strange, absolutely disturbing, all the more disturbing because it was not a small object, but whole trees, the whole woods still quivering and full of life. He felt this as a weakness which did him no credit. He no longer even paid attention to the details of events. Perhaps a man slipped in by the same opening, he could neither have affirmed nor denied it. It seemed to him that the waves were invading the sort of abyss which was himself. All this preoccupied him only slightly. He had no attention for anything but his hands, busy recognizing the beings mingled with himself, whose character they discerned by parts,

a dog represented by an ear, a bird replacing the tree on which it sang. Thanks to these beings which indulged in acts which escaped all interpretation, edifices, whole cities were built, real cities made of emptiness and thousands of stones piled one on another, creatures rolling in blood and tearing arteries, playing the role of what Thomas had once called ideas and passions. And so fear took hold of him, and was in no way distinguishable from his corpse. Desire was this same corpse which opened its eyes and knowing itself to be dead climbed awkwardly back up into his mouth like an animal swallowed alive. Feelings occupied him, then devoured him. He was pressed in every part of his flesh by a thousand hands which were only his hand. A mortal anguish beat against his heart. Around his body, he knew that his thought, mingled with the night, kept watch. He knew with terrible certainty that it, too, was looking for a way to enter into him. Against his lips, in his mouth, it was forcing its way toward a monstrous union. Beneath his eyelids, it created a necessary sight. And at the same time it was furiously destroying the face it kissed. Prodigious cities, ruined fortresses disappeared. The stones were tossed outside. The trees were transplanted. Hands and corpses were taken away. Alone, the body of Thomas remained, deprived of its senses. And thought, having "corpse which opened its eyes and knowing itself to be dead climbed awkwardly back up into his mouth like an animal swallowed alive. Feelings occupied him, then devoured him. He was pressed in every part of his flesh by a thousand hands which were only his hand. A mortal anguish beat against his heart. Around his body, he knew that his thought, mingled with the night, kept watch. He knew with terrible certainty that it, too, was looking for a way to enter into him. Against his lips, in his mouth, it was forcing its way toward a monstrous union. Beneath his eyelids, it created a necessary sight. And at the same time it was furiously destroying the face it kissed. Prodigious cities, ruined fortresses disappeared. The stones were tossed outside. The trees were transplanted. Hands and corpses were taken away. Alone, the body of Thomas remained, deprived of its senses. And thought, having entered him again, exchanged contact with the void.

SI MUERO EN LA CARRETERA (1970)

IF I DIE ON THE ROAD

by Virgilio Piñera

trans. Juliana Canal Paternina

I

Si muero en la carretera no me pongan flores.

If I die on the road do not put me flowers.

Si en la carretera muero no me pongan flores.

If on the road I die do not put me flowers.

En la carretera no me pongan flores si muero.

On the road do not put me flowers if I die.

No me pongan si muero flores en la carretera.

Do not put me if I die flowers on the road.

No me pongan en la carretera flores si muero.

Do not put me on the road flowers if I die.

No flores en la carretera si muero me pongan.

Do not Flowers on the road if I die put me.

No flores en la carretera me pongan si muero.

Do not flowers on the road put me if I die.

Si muero no flores en la carretera me pongan.

If I die do not flowers on the road put me.

Si flores me muero en la carretera no me pongan.

if flowers I die on the road do not put me.

Flores si muero no en la carretera me pongan.

Flowers if I die on the road do not put me.

Si flores muero pongan en me la no carretera.

If flowers I die put me on the do not road.

Flores si pongan muero me en no la carretera.

Flowers if put I die me on do not the road.

Muero si pongan flores la en me en carretera.

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