

‘And Losing Thus the Boundary / Of the Finite Me, / Diffusing Outward, I Approach / The Edges of Infinity’ (Plath, 2020: 133) – The Two Dimensions of Extimacy in Contemporary Psychoanalytic Thought

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ABSTRACT

The article investigates the meaning and value of Jacques Lacan’s term ‘extimacy’. It argues that there are two competing notions of extimacy at work in the literature, a negative one (which dominates the literature) and a positive (nascent) one, which is not yet fully worked out in the literature and to which this contribution offers a form of development through the recourse to the instance of the (love) letter in the unconscious. The author associates the positive ‘valence’ of extimacy with what Paul Cilliers calls ‘a certain slowness’ which is inextricably tied up with reflection as one of the fundamental features of any successful psychoanalysis, namely an analysis that passes through the Act. The author shows how the writing of a love letter – as an instance of slow reflection – not only exposes a (repressed) positive dimension to extimacy, but also (and perhaps because of this) qualifies as an instance of more or less successful self-analysis – what the author associates with a psychic progression of sorts.

Keywords: extimacy, slowness, revolution, violence, love

INTRODUCTION

British legal academic, Maria Aristodemou (2016), in a paper titled ‘Freedom in the free world: The estimate becomes the law’ begins by recalling what she calls the ‘well-known and oft-repeated’ anecdote according to which, when Sigmund Freud travelled to the United States in 1909, he remarked to his then friend and confidante, Carl Jung, that the warm reception they were being given was premised on a fundamental confusion: ‘They don’t understand’, Freud is said to have remarked, ‘that we are bringing them the plague’ (Aristodemou, 2016: 85).

Elisabeth Rottenberg (2021: 115) argues that this remark was meant as a kind of serious joke. She writes that she has always imagined the remark as being delivered by Freud with something of the ‘impish grin’. Yet, as Rottenberg (115) suggests, we cannot understand the significant reach of the remark without attending to the view Freud held about America: ‘a land Freud loved to hate. Americans were uncultured, shallow, prudish, enamored of money, and covertly antisemitic’. Rottenberg (115) suggests that against the backdrop of this view, Freud with the reference to the ‘plague’, meant to convey the hope that the ‘subversive, rebellious, irruptive, *outbreak* quality of psychoanalysis would spell the end of a certain “American way of life.”’

Now, Rottenberg (2021: 115), quite correctly, tells her readers that in actual fact these words were never uttered by Freud – the words are the ‘pure invention’ of Jacques Lacan, ‘who attributed them to Freud in order to sound the death knell of American ego psychology’. So, in Rottenberg’s correction, the target of the remark, put in Freud’s mouth by Lacan, is not so much a certain deplorable American ‘way of life’, but rather becomes the predominant form of psychodynamic ‘treatment’ in the then existing American clinic – a treatment which Lacan abhorred. Rottenberg (115), however, acknowledges that the remark – precisely because we can impose (in the manner of Rottenberg) a kind of external justification for it if it *was* made by Freud – acquires the status of pure myth in contemporary psychoanalytic literature, so much so that no one dares to believe today that Freud didn’t actually utter these words.

Aristodemou (2016: 85) elaborates that this kind of deliberate misconstrual, a misconstrual that cannot be accounted for without recourse to the way in which it is always mediated by signification (what Aristodemou (2016: 85) calls the ‘circulation of the signifier’), was for Jacques Lacan, ‘at the heart of all human communication’. The best we can hope for, Aristodemou writes, ‘is a successful, and hopefully bloodless, misunderstanding’ (85), in the

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midst of being foundationally thrown into, delivered over to, a system of signification – the symbolic order – which consists of an arbitrary array of signifiers that always more or less fail to capture ‘meaning’, sense and representation. For Aristodemou’s part, she goes on to take Lacan at face value as regards the plague remark and argues that psychoanalysis is like a plague because it exposes us to that which we most shy away from, that which we most deny, that which we are most ashamed of, that which we ‘avoid like the plague’ – thus, psychoanalysis is like a plague because like a plague it exposes (and exploits, one could even say ‘feeds on’) the weaknesses of our psychic constitution, the negative dimensions thereof.

Why, after all, Aristodemou asks, ‘would we embrace a discourse whose likely outcome is to show us our own ugliness, confront us with the self who, even if we suspected we harbored, hoped no one else would realize we had’ (85). In doing this plague-like work, psychoanalysis is what Lacan called an ‘extimate’ discourse, a discourse, in other words, that exposes to us an Other that hides in the very core of our intimacy, an exterior (an Other) that lies in wait in our most intimate thoughts. My contention in this article is that there are, as is the case with Freud’s / Lacan’s remark about ‘the plague’, two equally valid but bifurcating approaches to extimacy, one – the dominant one – is negative, the other is positive and affirmative and views extimacy as an indelible source of transformation and progress in the world and in our psyche.

Like Aristodemou, I do not deny that the exposure of extimacy can be upsetting and indeed subversive of a *status quo* whether individual or collective – in that sense it is always connected to the plague-ish nature of psychoanalysis. But I do not regard such subversiveness, upset and revolt as necessarily a bad thing, as necessarily ‘ugly’, to put it in Aristodemou’s idiom. After all, and as brutal as it may sound, psychoanalysis is a plague with a very specific purpose, namely to bring about transformation and rebirth if not exactly a full and final healing, at least not in the way in which Lacan rethought psychoanalysis. For in Lacan to successfully ‘pass’ in an analysis, is to be fully identified with the symptom (what Lacan called the ‘sinthome’) that operates as the core of enjoyment of our being and that makes each of us unique.

To illustrate the positive valence of extimacy, it will be necessary to confront, first of all, its ugliness, the ways in which it indeed causes misunderstanding that is not, as Aristodemou would have it, ‘hopefully bloodless’ but rather the ways in which it spills so many forms of blood in the world.

But first, something about the origin of the term. The notion of extimacy was coined by Lacan (1992) on 10 February 1960 in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. There Lacan referred to extimacy in relation to what he intriguingly called ‘the Thing’, when he referred to ‘the central place, this intimate exteriority, this extimacy, which is the Thing’ (171). So we have in Lacan a direct correspondence between the Thing and extimacy. Thus, to appreciate extimacy better, we have to know what Lacan meant with the Thing or what is left untranslated in the Routledge edition of the Seminar as *das Ding*. What does Lacan have in mind with *das Ding*? To put it simply, *das Ding* is merely the, or that which is, Other to the subject, but it is an Other with a particular character for it represents that Other which is at the same time interior and with whom we have an affective relation – it is an Other whom we desire and, specifically, desire above and beyond all Law – it is, as Lacan says, the ‘beyond of the signified’ (54).¹ Dylan Evans (1996: 207) remarks that *das Ding* is for Lacan an Otherness that lies beyond our imagination, an ‘unknowable x, beyond symbolization’, an object of desire that we certainly do not know that we desire at the level of consciousness and the ordinary law. Accordingly, *das Ding* stands for the ultimate object of our *unconscious* desire. At its heart, *das Ding* is nothing more than a void around which our desire circulates in an eternal restlessness. Evans says that it is the original lost object that is continuously refound in our unconscious (Evans, 1996: 207). To put it at its phenomenological level, *das Ding* is none other than the ‘mythical’ maternal thing (Lacan, 1992: 81) – the mother’s body as the original lost object and thus subject of our original *incestuous* desire (Lacan, 1992: 82). In this regard, Lacan (1992: 82) remarks as follows: ‘The desire for the mother cannot be satisfied because it is the end, the terminal point, the abolition of the whole world of demand, which is the one that at its deepest level structures man’s unconscious.’

Now, since this (m)Other is originally lost, our experience of *das Ding* can only be an experience of a fundamental emptiness that lies at the core of our being and, in fact, propels it. Lacan (1992: 150) therefore refers to *das Ding* as the ‘emptiness’ inherent in the signifier and ‘the emptiness in the centre of the real’ (150). As the ultimate object of desire, *das Ding* therefore stands also for unattainable desire, for that which sets desire in motion² – a dimension which the later Lacan explored via his recourse to the so-called *objet petit a*, the object-cause of our

¹ Elvio Fachinelli (2021) has teased out the origins of *das Ding* in Lacan by tracing it back to Freud. In Freud there is a splitting of the perception of the *Nebenmensch* (the neighbour) into their familiar and conceivable part, their part which is ‘like us’ and their unfamiliar and strange aspect which Fachinelli describes as their ‘unchanging apparatus’ which Freud coded as *das Ding*. *Das Ding* thus originates in the aura of a strangeness, an alien part of the neighbour which renders the neighbour at the same time as close but also as far, as alien or *Fremde*. Thus, the neighbour is at the same time both close and far, both intimate and strange, both ‘interior’ and ‘exterior’.

² Fachinelli (2021) remarks that ‘Lacan seemingly proposes through the Thing a general form of desire, valid as a universal law of action.’

desire. It is, therefore, safe to say that Lacan's reflections on the extimacy of *das Ding* completely eschews the conventional psychological idea that our psyche is constituted in a bipartite structure of interior and exterior world – extimacy names the instability between the interior and the exterior, how the interior is folded into the exterior and vice versa, how the border is fundamentally unstable.

Lacan's cursory remarks about extimacy in the seminar on ethics, however, in no way represents a fully developed version of the concept. For an interpretation that sheds light we must turn to those who have come in Lacan's wake. In this regard, Jacques-Alain Miller (1988) has offered the leading interpretation of extimacy. Miller (1988: 122) takes up extimacy from the very point where Lacan left it by remarking that in the analytic experience extimacy means that 'the most interior', the most 'intimate', 'has a quality of exteriority'. Miller illustrates this with reference to the psychoanalytic relationship itself: the patient shares their most intimate thoughts on the couch with another, external person – the analyst – about whom they know next to nothing (123). Thus, the psychoanalytic relationship is by its very nature a relationship of intimate exteriority or exterior intimacy – extimacy. Miller then goes on to make an interesting move that is totally congruent with Lacan's teaching on the extimacy of *das Ding*: he says that the most interior, the most intimate is *not* what is most well-known by the subject (122). Rather, the interior, the most intimate, in fact exists in a state of opacity (122).

Extimacy, then, means as I have already intimated, that the interior is Other, unknown, indeed beyond conscious knowledge as *savoir*. Miller writes, further, that the extimate is not simply benignly opaque. Rather, it is like 'a parasite, a foreign body' (123). Miller then suggests that it is *jouissance*, that is, enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, that grounds the alterity of this extimate Other. 'It is', Miller writes, 'in its relation to *jouissance* that the Other is really Other' (125). The reason why it is specifically in terms of its relation to *jouissance* that the Other is really Other, is because Lacanian psychoanalysis takes the view that each of us have / suffer an unconscious enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle – a *jouissance* – which is completely unique and singular. While all of us are universally subjected to the law of the signifier, the ways in which that subjection to the laws of the signifier displace and sediments an enjoyment in our unconscious is as personal as its occurrence is universal – there is no subject without *jouissance* and there is no *jouissance* that is not particular and due to contingent factors in our unique psychic constitution.

It is at this point that Miller makes the negative (in the sense that it negates an established structure or essence), or negative (as opposed to 'positive') move in relation to extimacy on which his dominant interpretation turns: he says that we find 'war' where we find this Other who is only really Other in her relation to *jouissance* (125). Miller's example of such a war is racism. He writes as follows:

racism calls into play a hatred which goes precisely toward what grounds the Other's alterity, in other words, its *jouissance*. If no decision, no will, no amount of reasoning is sufficient to wipe out racism, it is indeed because it is founded on the point of extimacy of the Other (125).

Miller reasons that racism is founded on the extimacy of the Other precisely because of the proximity, the closeness, the intimacy of the neighbour Other. It is easy to love the neighbour as yourself when they are far away, distant, over there and thus not really a neighbour (when they are a domesticated Other and thus not really Other). However, when the neighbour is close to us, intimately related, yet an Other, when the neighbour Other is proximate in their alterity, hatred rears its ugly head. And this hatred in racism is always a hatred of the particular way in which the Other enjoys, whether it is by playing her music too loudly or cooking smelly food or talking too loudly in the street or, indeed, by sleeping with (and thus desiring) those who 'we' think are undesirable – a notion which J. M. Coetzee (1991) has shown to lie at the very heart of apartheid.³

Sheldon George (2014: 362) uses the example of the shooting of Jordan Davis in the USA who was shot at ten times and killed by a white man, Michael Dunn, because Dunn said that 'this gangster-rap, ghetto talking thug "culture" that certain segments of society flock to is intolerable' and that the way in which Davis and his friends behaved towards Dunn after he asked them to turn down their music, was 'obnoxious,' causing him to conclude that 'everybody in the car was a thug or a gangster' (362). Closer to home, we can cite the infamous Penny Sparrow⁴ example – again a racism grounded in a subliminal but no less hateful fantasy about how the Other is taking their enjoyment, a fantasy that there is something wrong and dangerous about the Other's enjoyment, a fantasy that arises because of the intimate proximity, a too-nearness of the Other, and, therefore, founded, as Miller says, on the extimate aspect of being.

Aristodemou (2016: 89) also relies on this negative reading of extimacy in her paper about how the extimate becomes the law, at least according to her reading of the documentary cinematic representation of Indonesian

³ Coetzee (1991: 11) has shown that '[a]n inability to face the desire of black for white or white for black manifests itself in motions of evasion [...] or of revulsion and denial' in the mind of apartheid.

⁴ See Mutiga (2016). Sparrow likened Black South African beach goers to 'monkeys' when she complained in a social media post about the litter that was ruining a South African beach.

genocide of communists in 1965-66. According to Aristodemou, Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary, *The Act of Killing*, exposes the law as an extimate that is a 'raw and obscene excess' (86) that only once in a while rises to the surface of our discourse in an 'obscene and traumatic horror' (89). Aristodemou concludes that an extimate exposure in relation to law enables us to see not law's greatness, but its 'obscene ugliness' as founded in violent crime that perpetuates itself beyond the constitutional moment (89).

Aristodemou's argument invites reflection, in our context, on the obscene and horrific violences that attended the founding of the South African Constitution in 1993 while the country was on the brink of a race war – a situation that has been vividly portrayed in another important documentary, *1994: The Bloody Miracle*, by Bert Haitsma and Meg Rickards which is described as follows: 'it's hard to believe that the "Mandela Miracle" nearly didn't happen. In an *orgy of countrywide violence*, some were intent on derailing the first free elections. Now for the first time, those responsible for countless deaths and widespread mayhem explain how they nearly brought South Africa to its knees' (IMDB, n. d.), emphasis added). This ('memorial' [Snyman, 1998]) dimension of the Constitution's founding is often overlooked or covered over in favour of the celebratory, monumental narrative that sees the Constitution in terms of a neoliberal triumphalism.

So, from Miller and Aristodemou we have a distinctly negative reading of the extimate as really the core of the plague that psychoanalysis brings to light and this negative reading of extimacy dominates the literature. As my example of the violence and violations that attended the founding of the South African Constitution illustrates, and as is illustrated in Aristodemou's own reading of the Indonesian genocide, there is a lot of critical purchase to this negative reading of extimacy, since it can expose to us the often hidden, horrific violences that lie at the core of foundings and constitutions, however broadly conceived.

In what follows, I am by no means at pains to disavow the negative readings of extimacy along with its critical potentials. However, I am not convinced that this distinctly negative reading of the extimate is all that there is to it. For there is a different tradition of the exposure of the extimate which is founded in an altogether different reading of what I would call the 'valency' of the extimate. This different reading of the extimate is intimately bounded up with extimacy's relation to *das Ding* as something that vacillates between the 'Good' and the 'Evil'.⁵ As Evans (1996: 207) indicates in his discussion of *das Ding*, the Thing is presented to the subject as at the same time their 'sovereign Good' whilst its attainment is strictly also associated with the subject's dissolution in evil. In extimacy, there thus lies a fundamental ambivalence and eternal oscillation between negative and positive, bad and good, evil and virtue and, I argue, it is because of this border of undecidability in the concept that it (also) opens on to the positive, good, affirmative and even emancipatory.

What I would wager is that Miller and Aristodemou fail to reckon with their own unconscious when it comes to their negative reading of the extimate as grounded in hatred, obscenity and horror. One political example of the different, affirmative tradition of the extimate can be found in Nathan Gorelick's (2013) reading of the Haitian Revolution. But before we come to this reading, let me say in advance that this other reading of the extimate on which I will rely from hereon, is no less devastating for an established *status quo* whether individual or collective, than the 'obscene', 'horrific' version of the extimate that we find in Miller and Aristodemou. But this version of the extimate is devastating precisely because it is positive and positing, precisely because it is grounded in a true psychoanalytic Act – an Act which introduces the law anew through a refounding.

As all Lacanians know, the outcome of a successful psychoanalysis is the acquisition of what Lacan in Seminar XVII calls a different, 'another', 'style' (Lacan 2007: 176) of the master-signifier (the law), a style which Bracher (1988: 46) describes as 'less absolute, exclusive, and rigid in its establishment of the subject's identity, and more open, fluid, processual, constituted, in a word, by relativity and textuality'. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek (2008: 309) writes that the Act occurs on account of 'ontological non-closure, inconsistency, gaps, in a situation'. The Act occurs when the subject becomes finally able to 'traverse the phantasy' and 'confronts the void, the gap, filled up by the fantasmatic object'. My sense is that the positive dimension of extimacy becomes legible precisely on account of the psychoanalytic Act in that it is the Act that both exposes and fundamentally relies upon the 'ontological non-closure' of extimacy – that it is not all obscenity, trauma and horror, that there is a beyond to trauma, horror and obscenity which becomes available through the traversal of the phantasy and the confrontation with the fantasmatic object that fills the void or gap of our desire.

So, to come to a political reading of the positive dimension of extimacy. Gorelick (2013: 115) reads the Haitian Revolution as what he calls an 'extimate revolt'. Why is it an *extimate* revolt precisely? Because, as Gorelick shows, the Haitian revolution was at least in great part instigated at a psycho-dynamic level in the practice of creole mesmerism, which is really the intimate exterior of psychoanalysis, its extimate core as antecedent (125).

⁵ In this regard, Fachinelli (2021) quotes from Seminar VII that part where Lacan, in linking *das Ding* to Kantian ethics, explicitly links *das Ding* with the Good in Kant, as follows: 'On the horizon, beyond the pleasure principle, there rises up the *Gute, das Ding*, thus introducing at the level of the unconscious something that ought to oblige us to ask once again the Kantian question of the *causa noumenon*'.

Mesmerism came to Haiti from the European metropole via the work and practice of Anton Frantz Mesmer who first used magnetised water to bring about altered states of consciousness in his patients (115). Whilst this is not well known today, before psychoanalysis Mesmerism was in fact all the craze in Europe (118). Gorelick describes what he calls the ‘inaugural importance’ of Mesmerism for psychoanalysis and posits that this importance lies in Mesmer’s, ‘insistence on his discoveries’ conformity to the spirit of the Enlightenment’ (this, at least, according to the seminal work of Ellenberger (1970) on who Gorelick relies throughout his analysis. According to Gorelick (116), Mesmer succeeded in inviting critical clinical discussion in scientific terms about the human mind, partly because of his successes and also partly because of his failings. This emergence of clinical discussion amongst informed commentators at the time, Gorelick argues, ‘founded the scientific approach to the psyche out of which psychoanalysis later developed’ (116). For instance, the so-called ‘magnetic rapport’ which Mesmer developed with his patients, is an early instantiation of what psychoanalysis would later develop as transference (116). In fact, Gorelick goes as far as advancing the notion that Mesmerism constituted the ‘key to the Freudian discovery more than a century later’ (116).

Yet Gorelick complicates the assertion that psychoanalysis simply developed out of the Mesmerism that was practiced in the metropolitan centre at the time. Rather, Gorelick is interested in the role of the colonial periphery, Saint Domingue specifically, in the evolution of psychoanalysis. Saint Domingue was particularly characterised by a seldom mentioned ‘mania for mesmerism’ (Gorelick, 2013: 117) which, upon closer investigation, turns out to provide an instance of ‘analytic refraction’ which locates the origin of psychoanalysis in this ‘truly revolutionary dimension’ of the ‘nascent dynamic psychology’ that emerged ‘along the margins of late eighteenth-century empire’ (117). Through a careful and thoughtful analysis, Gorelick shows how mesmerism was outlawed by the French colonial authorities in relation to black slaves, because of the potentially revolutionary / emancipatory dimension that the practice could unleash amongst the slave population.

Inspired by the practices and revelations of mesmerism, Haitian culture incorporated mesmerism into the practice of *voudou* (Regourd, 2007)⁶ and so the mental aspect of the Haitian Revolution became extimate precisely because it represented an undoing of Europe from within its very heart – it was, as such, an intimate Other of Europe that undid it from within, at least to the extent of the revolution at that point in world history. In this regard, Gorelick (2013: 134) writes of the ‘revolutionary dimension of the unconscious’ that erupted at the end of the eighteenth century, long before Freud coined the term psychoanalysis. It is this positive, emancipatory, assertive and no less disruptive dimension of extimacy – a dimension that introduces a new law and a new constitution – that I want to conclude with by telling you a story about love and intimacy.

I do this because I want to highlight a dimension of extimacy that I think can be aligned to revolution, recovery and perhaps, emancipation. To highlight this dimension, I hope that the story will show perhaps a glimpse of what it would take to overcome the negative dimension of extimacy at the level of love and intimacy. Before I tell this story, let me say that I think that the positive valency of extimacy can only truly become available to us through what Paul Cilliers (n. d.) calls ‘a certain slowness’. This ‘certain slowness’ is fundamentally grounded in the notion of reflection of which Cilliers writes that it, in turn, fundamentally involves the idea of delay or hesitation. Cilliers quotes Wittgenstein as the epigraph to his paper: ‘In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets there last’ (1). Thus, when it comes to the hard work of truly thinking (philosophy), delay or hesitation (slowness) is an ally rather than an adversary. Before we hear more of what Cilliers has to say, let me interject here the voice of Henrik Enckell (2010) for whom psychoanalysis is the very art of reflection. As Enckell (2010: 1094) writes:

We reflect on human productions to get hold of something imperceptible to direct introspection (something ‘lost’, or something we do not yet experientially ‘own’), at the same time as mediated consciousness is more reliable than the immediate. To a great extent the human sciences (like history, art theory and literature) have their motivation here. Psychoanalysis can be seen as part of this culture.

For Enckell, psychoanalysis is either teleologically reflective or it is archeologically reflective, but it is reflective through and through. In fact, there is little sense to a psychoanalytic enquiry at all without immediately positing that it is and must be grounded in reflection. After all, it is only through reflection that the patient can recover themselves as part of the goal of the psychoanalytic cure.

To come, now, to Cilliers (n. d.: 2) who writes: ‘[t]he argument is against *unreflective* speed, speed at all cost, or more precisely, against speed as a virtue in itself’. From this quotation we can come to learn that reflection is

⁶ Regourd (2007) carefully traces the incorporation of ‘animal magnetism’ into the practices of Voudou through a reading of two judgments given by the Conseil supérieur du Cap ‘in reaction to repeated nocturnal meetings of black people’ during which a *Voudou* ceremony was performed with the incorporation of elements of animal magnetism. Regourd concludes in his reading that the judgments were given in terms of a ‘trial against Vodou, in which Le Cap judges saw, or feigned to see, a mere manifestation of the familiar [...] “animal magnetism”’.

necessarily and intimately bounded up with a view of speed as ineffective, even harmful, when it comes to thought. And if you think about it, racism and the horrors of crime becoming the law is always already grounded in a certain quickness, a certain visceral speed and, above all and consequently, a certain lack of thought as reflection. It was Hannah Arendt (1963: 252) who wrote about the ‘banality’ of evil as a kind of thoughtlessness, an inability to put oneself in the position of the Other. This placing of oneself in the position of the Other as the basis of radical empathy, in fact, relies on the positive version of extimacy that I am interested in here, for empathy demands that we momentarily make of ourselves an Other, an exterior stranger, and then think from the vantage point of this othered positioning. This positioning is, at the same time, intimate as it occurs entirely through the interior mental apparatus. The context of Cilliers’s argument against unreflective speed and for the delay of reflection is, of course, complex systems and I think that it goes without saying that the unconscious is, precisely, such a complex system. Therefore, the notion of reflection must be brought to bear on the unconscious if we are to have any chance of apprehending an extimacy from which we can draw, let us say an emancipatory version of community (grounded in radical empathy) if not of intimacy.

Jean-Luc Nancy (1991: 42), in his essay on the inoperative community, which is replete with references to the intimate, writes, in what seems to be an echo of Arendt, that ‘[r]eflection is the resistance and the insistence of community’. Reflection, then, on Nancy’s account is what draws the Other (and all the Other Others as ‘community’) into thought. And we can extrapolate this back into Lacan’s system of thought for the big Other as socio-symbolic authority is, in Lacan, always present with the subject on the scene of any existence. As Louis Althusser (1969: 59) was fond of remarking: the Other as socio-symbolic system of authority, as the great ‘order of language’ or ‘Law of Culture’ lies in wait for every infant before their birth and before their first cry. One is thus, in Nancy and Lacan, never without the other, never without ‘community’ and reflection is the way in which the external Others of community become represented and peopled in the psyche to the point, as Jacqueline Rose (2004: i) has suggested, that the psyche is a fundamentally social space (‘without the presence of the other, there can be no mental life’). So, the argument for a slow approach to the unconscious by way of the delayed route of reflection is, at the same time, an argument for a certain kind of community, one which no longer buckles under the violent forces of communitarianism (which is a reduction of the Other to the same) while also working against the vicissitudes of a no less violent individualism (which denies the notion of alterity altogether). It is no coincidence that Nancy, through a careful reading of Bataille, finds the idea of an inoperative community in the community and communism of lovers, on condition that we comprehend love as the confluence without fusion of the absolute irreplaceability of singular finitudes, the cutting across each other of two or more hearts.

This, then, brings me to my story. Once upon a time there was a man who killed his father. It was not that his father was dead but nonetheless it was the case that he had decidedly killed his father in the realm of the symbolic. The man thought that his father deserved this murder, because his father was, as he recalled, a horrible, abusive, indeed obscene and horrific father. So the man killed his father although his father remained alive. Then the man started falling in love and, it has to be said, unreflectively so. He repeatedly and inexplicably to him fell in love with the ‘wrong’ kind of man, namely the man that was by definition and in advance unavailable to him. In other words, the man repeatedly fell in love with what our culture calls ‘straight’ men. At first, the man thought, because he had read a lot of queer theory, that these men he fell in love with were not necessarily and ineluctably straight, that ‘straight’ was a cultural construction. In his states of being in love, he thus desperately clung to the thought, encouraged by all stripes of confidantes, that it takes two to tango. But he was also repeatedly gravely disappointed because it so happened that the ‘straight’ men that the man fell in love with, when it came to it, pointedly refused to tango.

This left the man in a state of painful perplexity and indeed with a surfeit of shame. Inevitably, when the relationship with the straight man broke up, the man would find himself in a state of self-reviling depression – a depression so vast that he had to be admitted to the clinic several times. At the heart of his searing depressions was the incomprehensible question as to why, why on earth indeed, he repeatedly fell in love with men he could not have. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure it out. Not once did he think to himself that the symbolic murder of the father and the subsequent love he developed for straight men, could have been intimately related in his psyche.

One day, the man again, as had become his habit, formed a friendship with a younger, straight man. This straight man, let’s call him M, was everything that the man desired in another man. Leaving aside the difference between desire and love, let’s just say that there is no need to dwell here on the exemplary qualities of M, there is only the need to believe the narrator when he says that M soon became everything for the man – the subject of an all-consuming ‘love’. This M was as straight as they come, but he was also a decent and indeed loving friend and this only complicated the situation for the man even further, for M responded to the man’s acts of love with a caring sensitivity and thoughtful appreciation which, at the same time, stopped short of reciprocity.

So, one day, after again facing grave disappointment by M who told the man that he was in love with a beautiful woman, the man sat down finally to reflect for himself and this reflection brought him to the act of writing. And

so he began to compose a letter to M (which he entitled *Shattered Love*, after the essay by Jean-Luc Nancy) in which he confessed that he was in love with M but also stipulated that he realised that this love could never be reciprocated. Thus the letter became not just a love letter, but indeed a confessional farewell letter which, by necessity, also dissolved the friendship.

Reading the letter today, the man is struck by the emotion in the letter, but he is also struck by something else, namely that in the revelation that constitutes the letter, a revelation of love, he slowly confronted himself with an intimate Other, an indeed shameful Other who was hidden deep within, until he finally came to some sort of half-light in the form of the love letter – this Other was one who was deeply affected, I guess one could say ‘plagued’, by love for something shameful and by definition unavailable. Whether one could describe the extimate Other that was confronted in the letter as ugly, as a ‘plague’, I do not know. Suffice it to say that the confrontation with extimacy that the letter represents, has caused what Sylvia Plath in her poem ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’ called a ‘content of sorts’ to take hold in the man’s life and this he calls progress if not exactly transformation and revolution. The love letter, in other words, allowed the man to reconcile himself with an Other that, until the instance of the letter, could not be productively apprehended – it was an Other that indeed wreaked havoc in the man’s life.

I can’t read you the full letter, but I will tell you how it ends and say that I think that perhaps we should all be writing letters to our lost loves if there is to be any chance of the inoperative community of love of which Nancy speaks, for in the end and upon reflection, we need perhaps to realise anew how love, as the song has it, hurts. Love, as Lacan (2015: 129) had it, is giving what you do not have to someone who does not want it. What will the world be if we were prepared to instantiate this version of love, if we were prepared to confess our unrequited love to our extimate others? Could it come to stand in some tentative and incomplete way, against the place of the hatred, obscenity and horror which the extimate so often seems to bring into the world? The extimate, in this positive iteration, is everywhere if we are prepared to open our eyes. It is in poetry, in prose, in music and in art, in dating sites and in spaces, and, as in my case, in a love letter composed slowly, with reflection.

So here is how the letter ends. After wishing M everything that he wishes for and after making it clear that I understand that there can be no reciprocation from M for the love I have confessed in the letter, the letter reverts to the words of others, namely, first W. H. Auden (1945: 136), writing in October of 1940:

There are no fortunes to be told, although,
Because I love you more than I can say,
If I could tell you I would let you know [...]
Will Time say nothing but I told you so?
If I could tell you I would let you know.

And second, still further back in time, with the words of Denis Diderot, writing on the 10th of June 1759 to his friend, Sophie Volland, with whom he was in love:

‘where there is nothing, read that I love you’ (Derrida, 1993: 1).

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