Writing Solitude or the Possibility of a (Feminine) Community (without an Exception)

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For Am and Matt

1.

Two weeks into the declaration of pandemic, as one thinker after another was lining up to keep abreast of the new reality by composing reflection pieces at breakneck speed, a unique contribution came from Catherine Malabou; one that can be regarded as an intervention in the *minor key*.[1] Neither insignificant nor inconsequential, it referred to a mode of thinking that, instead of speculating about global and/or systemic problems (such as the future of capitalism), suggested contemplating what it might mean to dwell within ecologies of quarantine. Reflecting on Rousseau's *Confessions*, especially his decision to leave the ship that was supposed to take him to Venice, stuck in Genoa's port because of a plague epidemic going on in town, and self-isolating in a lazaretto all by himself instead of staying on the ship to wait it out with others, Malabou pondered what she would have done under those circumstances. Would she have chosen to be quarantined alone or with other people?

I think this is a good reformulation of the question that is looming in everybody's mind nowadays concerning whether or not we will be witnessing the birth of a new community (or at least new practices of communing) that would be cast within life—suspended under global lockdown. To be quarantined on a ship with others, under the command of a captain directly speaks to the mandate of "we are all in this together"; and to be quarantined in a lazaretto (the maritime quarantine stations on land) can be regarded as dwelling in a spatial limbo and reassembling life from within. As far as preferences go, I am with Malabou (which probably also

makes me Rousseau's ally), and therefore, in the pages to follow, I will be tracking her breadcrumbs, which will take me gradually to Gadamer, Derrida, Lacan, Žižek, and finally Agamben. It is an unusual crowd, tied together with unusual threads, but then again, these are unusual times.

2.

What made the quarantine unbearable for Malabou was self-isolation, which she defined as her incapacity to withdraw into herself, or "to find this insular point where I could be my self (in two words)."[2] Only after she found it did she participate in the communal experience of quarantine. In other words, first she exited the collective routine of enduring self-isolation; and only then did she find her solitude (procured in her writing practice), which became her newly-found entry point into community. Solitude through writing became this unique topology that, while no outside entry was possible, still constituted the ground of her exchange and connection with others. Neither sharing the agonies of isolation experienced as such, nor its difficulties, but conversing from this newly invented topology was what enabled the beginnings of a new form of connectivity, and perhaps enabled Malabou to participate in digital community life with a recalibrated sense of self: not to dismiss the challenges self-isolation precipitates, feeds, and exasperates, but to cope with whatever they are, from a place of solitude that one invents via whatever practice.

What practice is, for Malabou, is work or profession for Gadamer. Uncannily enough, in a public lecture he gave in Bern in July 1969, isolation appears in relation to the loss of meaningful participation in public life, and solitude in its rediscovery in friendship.[3] In this lecture, he reads isolation as a symptom of self-alienation and solitude (not unsurprisingly through a detour to the ancient Greeks) as a presupposition of being friends with oneself. Is this

not Malabou's cut between *her* and *self* which she puts together in solitude? Only he who can be friends with himself (yes, for Gadamer, friend is masculine) is capable of participating in the *philia*, the friendship that makes up the community. Gadamer sums it up succinctly: "only someone who is friends with himself can fit into what is common."[4]

Are we not observing a similar tendency today in the distinction between essential and non-essential work, which is nothing but continuation of life in its bare minimum? Maybe it is less the fact of being isolated in our homes or the suspension of public life as we knew it, and more having to shift gears towards preserving and protecting the "essentials" from our lives prior to the pandemic, that is making it hard to acclimatize to the new normal. Postsecondary education that shifted overnight to online platforms, K-12 primary and secondary education shoved into homeschooling, office work carried hurriedly into homes and so into the burdens of childcare and elderly care… all of it is to continue with whatever means necessary to keep the system functioning as if running a virus-infected computer on safe mode.

The *common* in Malabou's piece is her dialogue among friends, which only became possible after she attuned herself to her solitude (whereas before, she says it was only a monologue). In this contemplation of hers, I hear echoes of Derrida when he marks being caught up in the *excessive assignation of responsibility* as the quintessential component of friendship.[5] Every friendship begins with a response, he writes, and it is never only a response to a single individual, but always a response to a community: "one *answers for*, for oneself or for something (for someone, for an action, for a thought, for a discourse), *before*, before another, a community of others, an institution, a tribunal, a law. And one always *answers for,* or *before*, by answering first *to*."[6] It is the proper name that one answers for, says Derrida. However, I do not think it is too much of a tiger's leap to suggest via a Gadamerian detour that one always answers to a

community from where one finds and/or invents one's solitude; or through one's practice, work or profession (or vocation for that matter, if one wants to bring Weber into the party).

Having said that, the question is not only *how to respond* but also *to which community*? Yes, with Malabou we are contemplating whether or not we would like to be quarantined with others, with a captain, on a ship; or with whoever is sharing the liminal space of the quarantine; but which others, with whom? Derrida's text embodies a caution, a critique, and an opening on this point. He draws attention to the fact that one always answers to a community of "brothers." In its experience and dominant interpretation, he says, friendship hitherto referred to a fraternal community, privileged the figure of the brother more than the father, and, by implication, the public space over the private space.[7] This has two immediate implications: first, what underlies the political community within modern democracies is the conceptualization of fraternal community, the phallocentric social bond; and second, to the extent that fraternal community marks the polis and the public space as its quintessential dwelling, the exclusion of the feminine (and women) from that community.[8] In other words, what characterizes friendship is the double exclusion of the feminine from friendship: through the impossibility of a friendship first between a man and a woman, and then among women.

It is interesting how Derrida, uncharacteristically, switches too quickly from feminine to woman. But nevertheless, in so doing, this hasty shift presents further openings. If all friendship is written and conceived of as a brotherhood, and if underlying visions of democratic political communities are a fraternal bond, then is it possible to imagine a community in the feminine (which obviously is not formed by substituting sisterhood for brotherhood)? And if it is, then what would it look like? Curiously, Derrida himself never asked the question as such; and even though he explored the possibilities of a different conceptualization of friendship (specifically

via Nietzsche, which, in itself, is a very interesting conversation, but not an exploration of politics and friendship in the feminine tense), being stuck within the framework of "democracy to come," he sought the answer to the problems of current democracies in their incessant improvability and perfectibility.[9]

3.

I depart from Derrida, moving forward to explore the possibilities of a community in the feminine, which I find particularly crucial in the current moment, especially if the resurgence of brotherly community shows itself within the discourse as a ship in which we are all sailing together under the direction of a captain. In speculating about what a feminine political community might sound like, Lacan's formulas of sexuation might serve as an indicator, not least because fraternal political communities echo the formulations of the masculine, and the unexplored possibility of the feminine could be sought in the not-all of the feminine. A community in the masculine would read in Lacan as that which has a border and a limit set by an exception. In Seminar XIX, exception emerges as the father who has access to all women (which for Lacan is an impossibility "because there is no such thing as *all the women*"), who naysays the castration function, the one who sets the limit of the brotherly community.[10] Even though there is a contradiction between the exception and the all (the father and the brothers), it is nevertheless inconceivable for them to exist without one another: the principle of exception functions as the boundary for the all, and the exception is, by definition, saying no to the castration function.[11] It is only through the exception that "one may speak of *tout homme*, of man one and all, as being subject to castration."[12] Therefore, the challenge Lacan is putting in front of us in reimagining community in the feminine, is to visualize a collectivity that would not be constructed with a principle of exception, and speculatively, the name we give to this collectivity would probably

not be "community." If all notions of community that transverse via friendship are masculine, then a non-masculine feminine community, by definition, is impossible. What is possible, is a replacement of brotherhood with sisterhood. However, if, following Lacan, we say that *the Woman* does not exist, and what only exists is *a woman*, then the challenge would be to imagine a feminine collectivity that would not be defined as a community.

Here is the difficult question then: thinking about the current pandemic, does a community without an exception encompass also rejecting the exceptionality of the present moment? Would it not be the case that whatever community is built, it would have the *exception of the pandemic* as its necessary legate? In other words, the question is, in our seeking of a new community, are we or are we not subscribing to the principle of exception by christening this moment ripe with new possibilities (because it is a global epidemic, because we are seeing all kinds of solidarity we have not seen before, because life is suspended, because sharing variations of lockdowns is now a global phenomenon, and so on)? And if we are, if this is an exceptional moment, then what is the agent of this exceptionality?

The fact that we are no longer enunciating contemporary communities via father figures does not mean that the principle of exception has expired. We might agree with Agamben in his observation that when we conform to the state of emergency measures, we are choosing bare life and forsaking friendships, but then disagree with him when he points his finger at what he saw was the core of the problem.[13] It is not because we comply with the state of emergency rules that we are choosing *bios* over *zoe*, political over biographical, or public over private. Look at all the global reactions; not only to the armed right-wing protestors, or the anti-vaccine groups seeking one massive conspiracy network amidst the global lockdown, but also to those on the opposite end, those who abide strictly by lockdown rules, to the digital communities finding the

emergency healthcare measures not thorough enough and asking for them to be tighter and punitive. In other words, more than complying with the states of emergency (which do not go beyond proposing guidelines and frameworks within which one can act, and whose target is controlling the circulation of the virus and the people without enforcing behavioural injunctions), it is an excess that defines the current horizon of communities.[14] Whichever way this excess shows itself, it is always in *the name of the virus* that it appears. In this sense, it hardly matters if one is denying the existence of the virus or accepting it. The images of all these communities position the virus as the necessary detour through which all principles are sorted, (re)arranged, de- and re-territorialized. This is how the virus acts as the exception principle, as the necessary detour that needs to be taken, as the limit which allows us to say "all" (regardless of which community we are imagining), and as the only agent that does not recognize any boundary for itself. Or, to sum it up in Lacanese, as that which naysays the phallic principle.[15]

There is ample scientific evidence to recognize the virus as the exception. It is beyond any classification of life as such. Neither alive nor dead,[16] not only can it not be killed (it can only be de-activated), but it also transcends the Linnaean taxonomy of living organisms, forcing virologists to come up with an entirely new classificatory system.[17] Known to late 19th and early 20th century scientists, the virus was the "filterable agent" that could not be retained by filters; it was for whom the borders did not work.[18] Give it a crown (or not; it already has one), and it would be the only sovereign in town. The question then becomes, to what extent are we willing to be governed under a sovereign? Or do we have no other choice, but?

4.

The feminine not-all in Lacan is the name of that which is contingent, *able not to be able*.[19] In Agamben, it is Bartleby the scribe who prefers not to; the definition of potentiality that is not

waiting to be realized but is quite comfortable in its virtual state of not to be or not to do.[20] Thus, Lacan's formula reads not only as *able not to be able*, but able *and* not to be able simultaneously. That in-betweenness is the element which lends itself to the impossibility to say one and all (one-all?), and the impossibility to write woman as an exception. For Žižek, it all points to the non-totalized multiplicity that does not have its grounding in the *One* (whatever that *One* is), but in the ontological openness of the zero (or the void).[21] Considering that for Lacan, woman always exists between zero and one (and in the form of decimals instead of integers), "contrary to the One which is on the side of the Father," [22] maybe then, it is the in-betweenness that needs to be conceptualized for the community to be imagined in the feminine, or the *and* in Malabou that makes the cut between her *and* self, and which she writes as the formula of solitude in times of quarantine.

[1] Catherine Malabou, "To Quarantine from Quarantine: Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe, and 'I'," last accessed May 17, 2020, https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/23/to-quarantine-from-quarantine-rousseau-robinson-crusoe-and-i/.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Isolation as a Symptom of Self-Alienation," *In Praise of Theory — Speeches and Essays*, trans. Chris Dawson (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1998).

[4] Gadamer, *Isolation*, 112.

[5] Jacques Derrida, "The Politics of Friendship," *The Journal of Philosophy* 85, no. 11 (1988): 634.

[6] Ibid, 638.

[7] Ibid, 642.

[8] Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Bennington, "Politics and Friendship — A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," last accessed May 17, 2020, http://hydra.humanities.uci.edu/derrida/pol+fr.html.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Jacques Lacan, *...Or Worse (1971-1972), The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XIX* (Cambridge, UK & Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2018), 34.

[11] Ibid, 178-80.

[12] Ibid, 179.

[13] Giorgio Agamben, "Clarifications," last accessed May 17, 2020, https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/.

[14] I discussed this in the short piece I wrote for the Lacan Salon's *Listening to COVID19*. See Sanem Güvenç, "Viral Transmissions 1: Foucault avec Lacan — Archives of Quarantine and The Coming (Hysteric) Community," last accessed June 17, 2020, http://www.lacansalon.com/listening-to-covid-19/viral-transmissions.

[15] Lacan, *…Or Worse*, 179.

[16] For a discussion of whether the viruses are alive or dead see: Eugene V. Koonin, Petro Starokadomskyy, "Are Viruses Alive? The Replicator Paradigm Sheds Decisive Light on an Old but Misguided Question," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 59 (2016): 125-134.

[17] International Committee on Taxonomy of Viruses Executive Committee, "The New Scope of Virus Taxonomy: Partitioning the Virosphere into 15 Hierarchical Ranks." *Nature Microbiology* 5 (2020): 668-674.

[18] Milton Taylor, *Viruses and Man. A History of Interactions (*Bloomington, IN: Springer, 2014), 13-14.

[19] Lacan, …*Or Worse*, 13.

[20] Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or On Contingency," in *Potentialities,* edited by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 243–271.

[21] Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing — Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London & New York: Verso, 2012), 741.

[22] Lacan, …*Or Worse*, 181.