

THE BOOK TO COME

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Profound, eternal call, in the depths of Hell, from Eurydice to Orpheus, call that will not cease and which, even in the bosom of the Enclosed House ["La Maison Fermée"], when he will be watched over by the great foursquare Muses, the four cardinal powers, severe guardians of his doors, he will never be allowed to escape.⁷ "Whoever has tasted blood, will never take nourishment again from brilliant water or ardent honey! Whoever has loved a human soul, whoever once has been close to the other living soul, he remains trapped by it forever."

§ 8 Prophetic Speech

The word "prophet"—borrowed from the Greek to designate a condition foreign to Greek culture¹—would deceive us if it invited us to make the *nabi* the one who speaks the future. Prophecy is not just a future language. It is a dimension of language that engages it in relationships with time that are much more important than the simple discovery of certain events to come. To foresee and announce some future event does not amount to much, if this future takes place in the ordinary course of events and finds expression in the regularity of language. But prophetic speech announces an impossible future, or makes the future it announces, because it announces it, something impossible, a future one would not know how to live and that must upset all the sure givens of existence. When speech becomes prophetic, it is not the future that is given, it is the present that is taken away, and with it any possibility of a firm, stable, lasting presence. Even the Eternal City and the indestructible Temple are all of a sudden—unbelievably—destroyed. It is once again like the desert, and speech also is desert-like, this voice that needs the desert to cry out and that endlessly awakens in us the terror, understanding, and memory of the desert.

THE DESERT AND THE OUTSIDE

Prophetic speech is a wandering speech that returns to the original demand of movement by opposing all stillness, all settling, any taking root that would be rest. André Neher notes that the return to the desert glimpsed by the prophets of the eighth century was the spiritual counterpart to the return to the desert practiced by the Reikabites [nomadic sects]

of the ninth century, themselves faithful to nomadic aspirations that have been transmitted without interruption. This is a unique phenomenon in the history of civilizations, he notes.² And we are not unaware that the one tribe without territory, the Levites, represented and maintained among the other, definitively fixed tribes the premonition of a mobile existence. Just as the Hebrews had been only sojourners in Egypt, refusing the temptation of a closed world where they could have had the illusion of freeing themselves in situ by a slave stature, and just as they began to exist only in the desert, freed by having taken to the road in a solitude in which they were no longer alone, so it was necessary that, having become in turn possessors and dwellers, masters of a rich space, there would always be among them a remnant that possessed nothing, that was the desert itself, that place without place where alone the Covenant can be concluded and to which one must always turn as to that moment of nakedness and separation that is at the origin of true existence.

Neher profoundly connects this nomadic spirit with the refusal to “valorize space” and with an affirmation of time that would be the mark of the genius of Israel, since its relations with God are not timeless relations but make place for history, are history. No doubt, but we wonder if the experience of the desert and the recollection of nomadic days when the land was only promised might not express a more complex, more anguishing, and less determined experience. The desert is still not time, or space, but a space without place and a time without production. There one can only wander, and the time that passes leaves nothing behind; it is a time without past, without present, time of a promise that is real only in the emptiness of the sky and the sterility of a bare land where man is never there but always outside. The desert is this outside, where one cannot remain, since to be there is to be always already outside, and prophetic speech is that speech in which the bare relation with the Outside could be expressed, with a desolate force, when there are not yet any *possible* relations, primal powerlessness, wretchedness of hunger and cold, which is the principle of the Covenant, that is to say, of an exchange of speech from which the surprising justice of reciprocity emerges.³

Prophets are indeed constantly mingled with history, whose immense measure they alone provide. There is nothing symbolic, nothing figurative in what they say, no more than the desert is an image, but the desert of Arabia, a place that is geographically localized, while still being also the way out without a way out to which the exodus always leads. If prophetic

speech is mixed, however, with the fracas of history and the violence of its movement, if it makes the prophet a historical character charged with a heavy temporal weight, it seems that it is essentially linked to a momentary interruption of history, to history become an instant of impossibility of history, a voice where catastrophe hesitates to turn into salvation, where in the fall already the ascension and return begin. Terrible passage through negation, when God himself is negative. “For you are Not-My-People, and I am Not-God for you.” And Hosea engenders non-children who, later on, become children again. When everything is impossible, when the future, given over to the fire, burns, when there is no more rest except in the land of midnight, then prophetic speech, which tells of the impossible future, also tells of the “nonetheless” that breaks the impossible and restores time. “Indeed, I will hand over this city and this country to the hands of the Chaldeans; they will enter it, they will set it on fire and reduce it to ashes, and *nevertheless*, I will bring back the inhabitants of this city and this country from all the countries where I have exiled them. They will be my people, I will be their God.” *Nevertheless [pourtant! Leken!]* Unique word by which prophetic speech accomplishes its work and frees its essence: it is a sort of eternal sending on a journey, but only there where the journey stops and it is no longer possible to go forward.⁴ So we can say: speech prophesies when it refers to a time of interruption, that *other* time that is always present in all time and in which people, stripped of their power and separated from the possible (the widow and the orphan), exist with each other in the bare relationship in which they had been in the desert and which is the desert itself—bare relationship, but not unmediated, for it is always given in a prior speech.

“MY INCESSANT SPEECH”

André Neher has gathered together the most persistent traits of prophetic existence: scandal and argument. “No Peace,” says God. The “No-Peace” of prophecy contrasts as well with spatial priesthood—the sort that knows only the time for rites, and for which the earth and the Temple are places needed for the Covenant—as with profane wisdom. It is a speech that is thus scandalous, but that is scandal first for the prophet. Suddenly a man becomes other. Jeremiah, gentle and sensitive, must become a pillar of fire, a rampart of bronze, for he will have to condemn and destroy all that he loves. Isaiah, decent and respectable, must strip off his clothes: for three years, he walks naked. Ezekiel, scrupulous priest who

was never lacking in purity, feeds himself on food cooked in excrement and soils his body. To Hosea, the Eternal says, "Marry a woman of whoredom; let her give you a prostitute's children, for the country is prostituting itself," and this is not an image. Marriage itself prophesies. Prophetic speech is heavy. Its heaviness is the sign of its authenticity. It is not a question of letting one's heart speak, or of saying what pleases the freedom of the imagination. False prophets are pleasant and agreeable: amusers (artists), rather than prophets. But prophetic speech imposes itself from outside, it is the Outside itself, the weight and suffering of the Outside.

Thence the refusal that accompanies the calling. Moses: "Send whomever you want. Why have you sent me? Erase me from the book you have written." Elijah: "Enough." And Jeremiah's cry: "Ah, ah, Eternal Lord, I do not know how to speak, I am just a child.—Do not tell me 'I am just a child.' But go where I sent you and speak as I command." Jonah's refusal is pushed even further. It is not only the calling that he flees, it is God, dialogue with God. If God tells him: rise and go toward the East, he rises and goes toward the West. In order better to flee, he takes to the sea, and to hide himself better, he goes down into the ship's hold, then he sinks into sleep, then into death. In vain. Death is not an end for him, but only a form of that distance he sought in order to distance himself from God, forgetting that distance from God is God himself.⁵ If the prophet does not feel prepared to be so, he sometimes has the troubling feeling that God is not ready either, that there is "a sort of divine lack of preparation." Defeat in the face of the absurdity of what he says, what happens and what is linked to that time of interruption and alteration where everything that happens, the impossible, always is already changed into its opposite. He repeats: "Why?" He experiences tiredness, disgust and, says Neher, an actual nausea. There is in the prophet a strange revolt against the lack of seriousness in God: "And it is thou, Eternal Lord, who tells me that!"

Prophetic speech is originally dialogue. It is so in a spectacular manner when the prophet converses with God and when God "confides in him not only his message but his anxiety." "Am I going to hide from Abraham," says God, "what I am going to do?"⁶ But it is dialogue in a more essential way, in that it only repeats the speech confided to it, an affirmation in which by a beginning word something that has actually already been said is expressed. That is its originality: It is first, and yet there is always before it already a speech to which it answers by repeating it. As if all

speech that begins began by answering, an answer in which is heard, in order to be led back to silence, the speech of the Outside that does not cease: "My incessant Word," says God. God, when he speaks, needs to hear his own speech—thus become response—repeated in the man in whom it can only assert itself and who becomes responsible for it. There is no contact of thoughts or translation into words of the inexpressible divine thought, only exchange of speech.⁷ And no doubt it is a matter of God, but *Exodus* says: "As a man speaks to another man!"

The relationship of God to a man by a speech that is repeated and yet entirely other, having become its own answer, the understanding of itself and its infinite realization, perpetually in movement, introduces into prophetic language an ensemble of contradictory qualities from which it draws the extent of its meaning: relationships bound and free, a word that is eaten, a word that is a fire, a hammer, a word that seizes, devastates, and engenders, but at the same time a word that is spirit and the maturity of the spirit, a true speech that one can hear or refuse to hear, that demands obedience and questioning, submission and knowledge, and in the space of which there is the truth of an encounter, the surprise of a confrontation, "as of one man with another man." What Neher calls the *ruach* (the spirit and the breath), whether its mystery is to cover all levels of significance, from supreme spirituality to physical emanation, from purity to impurity—the *ruach* of God is pathetic—is no less true for the mystery of speech, *danur*, while still making it an essentially spoken relation, from which inner magic and mystical fusion are almost excluded. Language that is not spiritual and that nonetheless is spirit. Speech of movement, powerful and without power, active and separate from action, in which, as in Jeremiah's dream, nothing outlines the future if not the rhythm of the march, the men en route, the immense motion of an impossible return.⁸ Language of transport and of being carried away. Something here is unfolding in the abrupt, rending, exalting, and monotonous violence of a perpetual taking-to-task of man in the confines of his power.

TO THE LETTER

To what extent can we welcome this language? The difficulty is not only in translation. If it is of a rhetorical nature, it is because its moral origin, linked to an implicit obligation, even for unbelievers, of believing that Christian spirituality, Platonic idealism, and the whole symbolism with which our poetic literature is impregnated give us the right of possession

and interpretation of this language that might have found its completion not in it but in the advent of better tidings. If what the prophets announce is actually Christian culture, then it is perfectly legitimate to read them starting from our own sense of delicacy and security, most notably that truth is henceforth sedentary and firmly established. The peasant wisdom of Alain rejoiced that the Bible was unknown to Catholics, and the exceptional injustice that Simone Weil shows with regard to Jewish thought—that it does not know, does not understand and yet judges with a harsh firmness—is certainly revelatory.⁹ For if she feels profoundly that speech is originally in relation to the void of suffering and linked to the demand of a primitive poverty—which the reading of the Bible would also have taught her—the aversion she feels for the anxiety of the time without repose, her refusal of movement, her faith in a timeless beauty, the fascination that makes her turn to all the forms of time in which time is renounced—cyclical time (Greek and Hindu), mathematical time, mythical time—above all her need for purity, the horror she could not help but feel instinctively for a God who cares not about purity but about sanctity, who does not say: be pure because I am pure, but “be holy, as I am Holy,” God whose pathos endlessly puts prophets to the test in a familiarity without relationship, all these strong incompatibilities, which make her condemn the speech of the Bible without hearing it, must also act in us and act in translators by an obscure urge not to translate but to complete and purify.

Symbolic reading is probably the worst way to read a literary text. Each time we are bothered by language that is too strong, we say: it is a symbol. This wall that is the Bible has thus become a tender transparency where the little fatigues of the soul are colored with melancholy. The coarse but prudent Claudel dies devoured by the symbols he interposes between Biblical language and his own. Actual sickness of language. Yet, if prophetic words reach us, what they make us feel is that they possess neither allegory nor symbol,¹⁰ but that, by the concrete force of the word, they lay things bare, in a nudity that is like that of an immense face that one sees and does not see and that, like a face, is light, the absolute quality of light, terrifying and ravishing, familiar and elusive, immediately present and infinitely foreign, always to come, always to be discovered and even provoked, although as readable as the nudity of the human face can be: in this sense alone, figure.¹¹ Prophecy is living mimicry;¹² Jeremiah does not content himself with saying: you will be bent under the yoke; he gets hold

of some cords and goes under a wooden yoke, a fire yoke. Isaiah does not just say: do not count on Egypt, its soldiers are conquered, taken, led “barefoot, bare-bottomed,” rather he himself takes off his sack and sandals and goes naked for three years. The prophet brother of Ahab demands that a man strike and mutilate him in order better to portray the verdict he wants the king to understand. What does that tell us? That we must take everything literally; that we are always given over to the absolute of a meaning, just as we are given over to the absolute of hunger, of physical suffering, and of our body of need; that there is no refuge against this meaning that everywhere pursues us, precedes us, always there before we are, always present in absence, always speaking in silence. Impossibility for man to escape being so: “If they burrow down into Sheol, my hand will seize them; if they rise up to the heavens, I will make them come down; hidden under Carmel, already I find them there; if they think to take refuge in the deepest depths of the sea, there I make them bitten by the Serpent.” Terrible curse of speech that makes death vain and nothingness sterile. Uninterrupted speech, without void, without rest, that prophetic speech seizes and, seizing it, sometimes succeeds in interrupting to make us hear it and, in this hearing, to awaken us to ourselves.¹³

It is a speech that takes up all of space and that is still essentially not fixed (thus the necessity for the Covenant, always broken, never interrupted). This harassment, this assault by movement, this rapidity of attack, this indefatigable overleaping—that is what the translations, even the faithful ones, tangled up in their fidelity, have so much difficulty in making us feel. We owe much, then, to the poet whose poetry, translated by the prophets, knew how to transmit the essential to us: this primal eagerness, this haste, this refusal to be delayed and attached.¹⁴ Rare and almost threatening gift, for he must above all make perceptible, in all *true* speech, by the devotion to rhythm and primitive accent, that speech always spoken and never heard that doubles it with a pre-echo, rumor of wind and impatient murmur destined to repeat it in advance, at the risk of destroying it by preceding it. So prediction, using as support the anticipatory intensity of diction, seems to keep trying finally to produce its rupture. Thus Rimbaud: that genius of impatience and haste, great prophetic genius.