Weaving Friendship

BY JEAN-PIERRE VERNANT

There is in Greek a sort of saying, a dictum that expresses a consensus view: Among friends, everything is in common. The Greek distinction between the private and the public is well known. What's private belongs to each as his own [*en propre*], in his singularity, his difference. What's public is to be placed in common and shared equally among the members of the group. Friendship relates to these two domains; it binds them together and governs them both. Every friendship is indeed "particular": to each individual his personal circle of friends, but this circle forms a community which is like the image in miniature of the city. For there to be a city, its members must be united among themselves by ties of *philia*, a kind of friendship that renders these members, among themselves, like [*semblables*] and equal. In the private space that friends lay out together, everything is shared among equals, everything is in common, as in the public space of citizenship. Friendship is woven through the articulation of the private, what is one's own [*du propre*], the different along with the public, the common, the same.

Based on what I have lived under varying circumstances, I would say that friends are those with whom one has the essential in common: memories, experiences, values, and so on. To say that among friends everything is in common signifies that there exists, as in the city, a particular relationship of equality by virtue of which private life itself (at least in many of its components) is shared with others. It is not simply that

one can say to one's friends things that one would not say to others; instead, the memories, the joys, the misfortunes that pertain not to the public domain, in the Greek sense of the term, but to what I would call one's own sphere [*le propre*], the particular, are lived in participation with others in a relation of egalitarian exchange.

Indeed, equality is fundamental to friendship. From the moment people become friends, even when there is discord and rivalry, they are equals. For a Greek, one can be friends only with someone who is in a certain way one's peer [*semblable*]: a Greek toward another Greek, a citizen toward a fellow citizen.

Philia consists in rendering a group homogeneous, in unifying it. At the same time, however, there is no *philia* without *eris* (rivalry): the deep feeling of community among equals always includes the idea of competition through merit, for the sake of glory. The aristocratic point of view is present even within a democratic vision of social life and the State. Without this tension, it doesn't work. Democracy means discussion, but it also implies a potential for conflict. Within the unity of the city is contained, at each moment, the possibility of division.

At the Centre Louis Gernet, the group for "comparative research on ancient societies" I founded in 1964 and directed for twenty years, the goal was to create a community whose hierarchy was neither imposed nor institutionalized from outside the very life of the group. That is always what I have tried to do with people who work with me. I was the oldest member of the group, its founder. Many of those who belonged had been my students, but I never imposed anything on them, I believe, because I always considered them my equals. And it is because they were my equals that they were different and that they had the right not only to contradict me but even to take paths completely divergent from my own.

Friendship is also inscribed within psychological, historical, and social realities that change with the context. On occasion, I have encountered people very different from myself whom I would nevertheless describe as truly my friends simply because, all of a sudden, I felt I had discovered in them a dimension of existence that was quite other than my own and yet, at the same time, echoed it. That experience touched me and moved me. At such moments, friendship, even between men, has a tendency, in my opinion, to tip slightly toward the kind of feelings one can have for a woman. There's love involved.

There are passionate friendships that border on what we call love. The boundaries are not clearly defined. Nonetheless, love is something else. What characterizes the latter is not the fact of sharing with someone but of being oneself shared—that is to say, of being a part of the other at the same time that the other is a part of oneself. In this sense, we can say that, in love, the presence of the other is always inscribed within our own horizon—with all the difficulties that that experience carries with it. On the other hand, love implies, in my view, a sort of exclusive attitude toward the object on which it bears: one tends to say "*the* beloved" and "friend*s*," even though there can also be beloved ones in the plural and the one true friend.

In friendship, there are also *copains* ("buddies")—*Les copains d'abord*, to borrow the title of a Georges Brassens song. To be buddies with someone is to be close on a day-to-day basis. When one has eaten, drunk, and laughed together, and also done solemn and serious things, this complicity creates emotional ties such that one fully feels one's own existence only in and through the other's proximity. During my youth, in the Latin Quarter, the term *copains* designated those with whom one had relationships of this sort, conducted on a level of egalitarian exchange. For example, *copains* were those with whom one engaged in militant activities, those who held the same positions. Back then, to say of someone, "He's a *copain,"* meant "He's a Communist." Later, this term was taken up again to designate those with whom one was engaged in the Resistance. There, the political experience we shared overlapped with what the Greeks called private life, with one's ways of being and behaving, with the company one kept and the kind of life one led. What is personal becomes bound up with the realm of public activities, because these things are fundamental.

When this word is used to designate the woman with whom one lives—one doesn't say, "She's *mon amour*," but rather, "She's *ma copine*"—it takes on a very strong sense. It evokes not merely one's amorous relationship with a woman but also the way in which she is integrated into a community, and this dimension draws still tighter the ties of love. Even if one doesn't engage in militant activities with her, she is integrated into this group of equals who stand out, a bit, from the others.

This type of relation has played an important role in my life. My father was killed during the war; my mother died when I was very young.

As far back as I can remember, my childhood recollections seem to relate less to a father figure or a mother figure than to the images of my brother and my cousins. My childhood is placed under the sign of the brothers, even though I myself had only one of them; it is placed under the sign of a group in which I was the youngest member but one in which we placed everything in common, on the level of equality.

Later, at *lycée*, I lived through my high-school years in the same way, with ever-widening circles of *copains*. The idea that I was in school to learn something rarely crossed my mind. The teachers were completely on the outside, even if some of them exerted a great influence over me. I had some excellent teachers, people who left a lasting mark on me—in literature class, of course. In other classes, I had some nice teachers who had to put up with me; for them, I felt both affection and admiration. But, to a certain extent, they were external, the foreign element—I wouldn't say "the enemy," but in any case they were outside my space. I was at school, first and foremost, to be with my *copains*, to profit from what was good and then discuss it with them. At the same time, the main thing for us, I'm afraid, was to create an uproar. Even within the group we formed, there were certain kids we didn't like: those who were too good as students, those who were too bourgeois and well behaved. For, in order to be a group of buddies, you need enemies. So, as in grade school, we cooked up practical jokes and plotted attacks against them.

That was school for me: the experience of a community of students, a group united by the solidarity of those who belonged to the same cell—with all that that entails. For example, one didn't snitch. Later on, I lived out the same experience in the Latin Quarter.

Although friendship has been for me something basic, it can also involve realities different from the one I have just mentioned. How, within a relation of an egalitarian type, one conducted along the same lines as those that enabled the Greeks to define their friends, could authority and prestige ever arise? How, among friends, when everything is common, can different levels of responsibility be distinguished and different statuses, different strategies, be determined? The question can be raised in the case of the Resistance groups. How was it that, from the outset, certain people had leadership functions to perform while others agreed to obey them and risked their own necks, when those who gave the orders did not hold their

title of command from any institution? Various reasons may be advanced: sometimes it was personal qualities, sometimes it was habit—someone had to be leader. Personal radiance, the confidence one feels under certain circumstances to carry out one or another task also enter into play. Everything is in common, everything is equal; but one is not the equal of just anybody. The people you have chosen, those with whom you have some affinities, are those who inspire you with a total confidence. There is something here that pertains to choice, to an evaluation of some sort; the "we" is not given from the start just because one works in the same field as others or shares with them the same ideas. In the Resistance, however, certain people gave me the feeling right away that one could get along with them.

The problem relates, rather, to how authority can operate in the absence of any institution, any rule, any determination by social status or birth. I see no institutional model that would enable me to comprehend this phenomenon. Why is it that such and such an individual exercises authority? It may be because he has eliminated his competitors. If, however, he has been able to do so, he has done it with the support of others who, at a given moment, listened to him. Nevertheless, it also sometimes happened in those Resistance groups that the authority of certain departmental or regional leaders would be challenged.

It is my belief that, if certain people were able to play a leadership role and keep a hold on all the threads, it was because the original, founding cells of the movement were set up by friends, people who belonged to one and the same body and who thought in the same way on a whole series of levels. These groups of friends had a sense of themselves as the equals of their leaders and thus could agree to let the latter play that role. But perhaps, also, those who held such positions of leadership could likewise conceive of themselves occupying them only while considering the others as their equals. That is the problem: to accept having both a leadership position and relationships based on equality.

In the Resistance, I worried simply about practical, technical things. It was only recently, while reading a thesis by a young historian, that I began to pose the following question: "What kind of social group does a Resistance movement form?" Since the existing social body, the institutions already in place, the police, the courts had tipped to one side,

those who, on the contrary, wished for victory were obliged to form secret societies. One could speak here of a kind of "mafia." But this term implies a kind of complicity that marginalizes you in relation to the ethic of a society; moreover, in a mafia organization what one aims at are profits, whereas in the Resistance there was a total lack of self-interest. In a certain way, it could be said to have worked somewhat like the Mob—but with gangsters who, far from being out to enrich themselves, were idealists. Among a band of gangsters, surely there are things that are beyond my imagining, given my lack of experience, but I think that friendship is also present. The members of the band are united; they obey; they feel that they belong to a community. And there is no community without *philia*, without the feeling that between another person and oneself something circulates. This is what the Greeks represented in the form of a winged *daimon*, flying back and forth from one person to the other.

One can obtain recognition for one's authority simply by wearing stripes. A captain wins obedience because he has three stripes; and even if he has only two, or one, or none at all, he will be obeyed because of the way the institutional game is played. The fact that one holds some titles can also be a source of authority. Every society is founded upon hierarchies. Authority implies a difference of levels. The problem of whether it can be instituted in a group where nondistance is fundamental has always troubled me greatly, even in my career as a teacher. If one adopts the point of view of someone who exercises authority, there is always an aspect of play-acting. A professor becomes a theatrical performer when he steps into a classroom. Yet there are different ways of going about this. One can pound on the table and make students feel the full distance that separates them from their teacher. One can also play the opposite game, which is what I did when I taught high school: not only did I address my students familiarly [*en tutoyant*], but I tried to abolish, even by the clothes I wore and the language I used, every indication of an authority conferred by a social hierarchy.

Obviously, no matter what strategy he adopts, the teacher knows very well that being a student is not the same thing as being a teacher. The person seated in class and the person standing behind the desk do not enjoy the same status. The strategy of nondistance can be very adroit or, on the contrary, can lead the person who employs it to catastrophe. But if he has

recourse to this strategy rather than another one, it is not for purely strategic reasons. He does so, rather, because this strategy corresponds to the idea that he himself has formed of the relationship between teacher and student and of what a group is. If he enters into the game of abolishing hierarchy, it is not just to be clever, for an aesthetics—and an ethic of social relations—also are involved.

One has to begin by ceasing to be a teacher in order to become one. What this necessarily means—and, in my opinion, it is a Greek idea—is that every social relation, with a class as with the group in which one was engaged during the Resistance, implies a cement. And that cement is friendship. This fundamental element comes from a feeling of complicity, a sense of essential community with respect to the most important things. The relationship the teacher maintains with his students comes from the fact that they all share a certain image of what a person ought to be, that they have in common a way of feeling for and receiving the other, that they agree on the idea that to be other also signifies being similar [*semblable*].

In my own case, the kind of relations I was to institute in my classroom had to be identical to those I had known elsewhere. My students thought so, too, as they later told me. It was a matter of constructing the reality of the classroom somewhat on the model of the experience I had already had, but extended and modified under conditions that were different from those of the war and the Resistance. That experience was one of a strange proximity, a nearness to people who are different from you and suddenly become close.

Erasing Distance

I know now to what extent this desire to reconstitute how as a student I related to others played a determining role when I arrived in my Toulouse *lycée* classroom in late November/early December 1940. It was my way of refusing to leap to the other side of the rostrum, of recreating the kind of society I had known in my childhood, and thus of continuing what had been such an important part of my life. But at the same time, it was absurd, impossible, and certainly much too arrogant—even vain and conceited, I would say. One cannot be at once teacher and student. Such

an attitude can be successful if it is based, as was the case with me, on something rather deep-seated. That is what happened, I believe, with my students at the Toulouse *lycée*. But it is also true that egalitarian strategies have a hypocritical, demagogic aspect to them that can, in reality, reinforce positions of power.

The feeling of community that is at the heart of friendship is also to be found in family ties. For a Greek, there is in civic friendship something rather akin to family. Members of the same family fight among themselves, striking the lowest blows, but they are at the same time united by a fundamental kind of solidarity. I have often said that, in the Resistance too, something of this sort was at work. When I meet someone I don't know who was an active Resistant, I feel, even if that person is a political adversary, a sense of belonging analogous to the kind of feeling I might have in finding a distant cousin: "He's one of ours." In a family, the stories that circulate, the traditions one has heard recounted, one's childhood memories form a kind of common or shared horizon. When someone is inscribed within this horizon, it doesn't necessarily mean that this person is a friend or *copain*, or that you feel a sudden urge to jump into his arms; nevertheless, you embrace him, which is one way of recognizing him as someone close. Shared roots, family ties, suddenly come to reinforce your own identity, and you reconstruct yourself in finding other members of the family to which you belong. The sentiments you feel both for yourself and toward others are tied up with what you've felt in previous times. Here we have, at bottom, the problem of time: you no longer are the same; things come unraveled, and you knit back up the fabric of your personal life in the presence of those whom you have not seen for a long time. With them, a whole series of recollections that never come to mind can be evoked. The past comes back, and it comes back shared. If you think of it all by yourself, you can't even be sure if it's true; but, from the moment the past is integrated into family folklore, it becomes a part of your history.

On the other hand, the kind of solidarity characteristic of a family also brings to mind the clan, and the clan presupposes exclusion, secrecy; the other parties aren't in on what's going on. Friendship is another story, since it is a matter of a choice, not a genealogical relationship. Of course, there is always, in this choice, an element that does not depend upon yourself but upon the fortunes of life or pressures of all sorts. And yet,

despite it all, you still have the feeling that you do indeed choose your friends. Relatives, on the contrary, are not chosen; they are received. Friends, it is true, can constitute a kind of family, and you can do with them what you wouldn't do with others—including, sometimes, things you don't approve of. But friendship always implies affinities relating to the essential things in life. One cannot be a *copain* with some guy from the Front National. That just isn't possible.

Another particularity of friendship is this: it changes us. Let us return once again to the Resistance, which was an experience that changed those who lived through it. Before the war, I had my group of friends who thought as I did. During the war, I found myself close to people who were Catholic activists, and even to some who had been members of Action Française.[1] The fact that, with a passion, we took very great risks together led me to no longer view them as I had before; nor am I exactly the same since then. Once they became, by an almost automatic process, my friends (which is to say, people close to me) through our mutual engagement in matters of considerable emotional importance, I no longer looked upon Christians—or even nationalists, in certain respects—as I had before. Likewise, those Communists who actively participated in the Resistance alongside non-Communists were deeply changed in their way of being Communists; in my view, they ceased to believe that it was a matter of conquering others, or of eliminating them. They were led to believe that there had to be some way of coming to an understanding with others in order to create something together. And that, too, is friendship: getting along with someone who is different from yourself in order to build something in common. That is why most of the Communists who were in the Resistance, especially in the non-Communist Resistance, found themselves excluded rather rapidly in the years that followed: they could no longer see things as they had before. But those who are unwilling or unable to change, whether they be individuals or political or social groups, those who do not accept the idea that change is a way of constituting one's own identity, build up Berlin Walls around themselves. In the Resistance, on the contrary, identities were not fixed, save in relation to the enemy. An extremely diverse group of people participated in this movement. Consequently, the Resistance served as a sort of crucible in which a certain conception of France and of social progress was worked out.

By the same token, if one does not want to change, one cannot fall in love!

The Problem of Love: Detaching Oneself from Oneself

The problem of love is cast in a different way today than it was for the Greeks. What one loves in the other, Plato tells us, is oneself; what one regards in the other is one's own image. I would add that there are two ways of seeing oneself: the first is through one's limitation, one's ego, and one's egotism; the second, for Plato and even more so for Plotinus, consists in going to the very limit of what one is—that is to say, ultimately to the divine. It is this extreme alterity that is the essential element. One thereby rediscovers oneself, but this "oneself" is no longer an ego; it is the cosmos, the universe, the whole, God—which is perfection.

Self-construction travels by way of reception of the other. Mine is not a religious being, so for me the search for identity is not the quest for the absolute. This "oneself" is neither turned toward the absolute nor closed upon the ego. That is what the world, life, finitude are. We are men, and each of us fashions his own identity as one slaps together [*bricole*] most everything, often badly. One fabricates one's own identity with others and with some other, but not just any other. That is where friendship comes in. You must have some "interlocking atoms" in common with this other who is going to be facing opposite you and who is going to make you reflect upon yourself. Asking yourself why you feel some affinities for someone else, why you experience pleasure in being with that person—all that implies an emotional knowledge, a sympathy toward the other, and, thereby, a return to yourself and a change in yourself—a self-fabrication that is, at the same time, a fabrication of the other, for the other, too, is constructed. How could you know him if not by fabricating him, fashioning an image of him, finding paths toward him?

Thus, during moments of war, of danger, friends, *copains*, all at once become like members of a sort of mafia; and as a result, the ties become all the stronger. Moreover, one senses the friend's difference. The men who were at the front during the Great War of 1914-1918 felt united by something that set them completely apart from the others. In the same way, the people who were engaged in the Resistance in a very active way had the feeling that they themselves and those whom they saw when going

about their jobs were in a world apart. *Aristoi*, the Greeks would say: the best, the good guys.

The Fabric of Friendship

One exists with and through others, who are and are not oneself. "Individual psychology" always plays a part in social relations, in one's relationships with the collective (which need not at all be institutionalized).

It is in this way, too, that the fabric of friendship is woven—through advances of greater or lesser difficulty, through failures, misinterpretations, new beginnings, and so on. Nothing is immediate in man. Everything goes by way of symbolic constructions.

Sometimes, too, you must apply your scissors to this fabric, even with people whom you have greatly loved, so that the fabric itself can continue. The image and the vocabulary of weaving were charged with value in ancient thought. They enable us to comprehend a whole series of phenomena, in particular the constitution of the "social fabric."

When Plato wants to show how a city is built, he says that one has to have recourse to a weaver-king. Why? Well, when one prepares to weave, one has the warp, a masculine element, and the woof, a feminine element. In Greek, the words designating the warp are masculine. The warp is vertical, upright; it is a thread that is stretched, held strong, suspended by weights fastened by a kind of tenon. Indeed, Aristotle explains at one point that these tenons are comparable to testicles. Likewise, in the Orphic literature, *mitos*, the word meaning warp, can signify a man's genitals or sperm; and, on certain vases, alongside a woman can be seen the figure of a young boy, who represents the male and is called *mitos*. The woof, on the contrary, is feminine. We thus have a grid in which the masculine and the feminine intersect like the vertical and the transversal, and all of weaving consists in the creation of a fabric through the association of these opposing elements.

Plato says that the king is a kind of weaver because the people he has to unite into a tight community consist, on the one hand, of those who are on the side of *andreia*—the energetic, the violent—and, on the other,

of those who are on the side of *sophrosune*—the mild, the temperate. Everything is arranged first via marriages, where one tries not always to unite the same with the same, for in that case it is all over! Next, via education, *paideia*, which is to go in the direction of both *andreia* and *sophrosune* at the same time. Nor is that all: with the warp and the woof of these two contrary elements must be made a coherent and unified fabric that gives the impression of being a single cut of cloth. For that, however, opposition is necessary. The woof consists in its passing in front and in back, in front and in back.

In a certain fashion, this image of the constitution of a communitarian social fabric is also the Greek image of friendship, a form of *philia*, because *philia*, too, presupposes this labor and this tension. What did Cleisthenes do when he set out to found the city? He endeavored to unite, in the new institutions he had created, parts of Athens that were different—the coastal region, the mountainous interior, and the town proper—so that each tribe would include a part of these three elements.

It is in this manner that one constructs oneself, striving to reunite what goes off in all directions. Here, solidity is the product of a weaving that begins with separate, heterogeneous elements. A kind of struggle is also to be found in friendship. Friendship is woven. The same holds for love, which would not attain such intensity without the possibility of a break.

Those who are steadfast are faithful in love and in friendship. This does not mean that their relationships never break up. One may cut the fabric in order to be faithful, faithful to oneself. There are, however, people who do not want to be faithful, who feel the need, at each moment, to break not only with those who were their friends but also with themselves. They cannot be themselves except by cutting not only the fabric that unites them with others but also the one uniting them with themselves.

Among all those who left the Communist Party, some couldn't quit without becoming the exact opposite of what they had been. Others broke with the Party in great pain and sorrow. For them, the break was truly wrenching, and they endeavored not to repudiate themselves in the process; that is to say, they tried not to disavow the reasons why they had been Communists. Still others, such as myself, broke joyously. Why?

Because, in thus breaking with the Party, I considered myself to be absolutely faithful to what, in my initial engagements, had been most profound, most valuable, too.

In the structure of their personalities—and, consequently, in their relationships of friendship and love as well—some are people of discontinuity. Others, as they evolve, continually feel the need to renew the threads of their own fabric.

When I was teaching philosophy courses at the Toulouse *lycée* and would speak of memory, explaining to my students that it is a self-fabrication, I told them, I believe, something along these lines: "You see, as you go forward through life, you'll need to have a past that is more or less ordered in order to know who you are. This construction take place across the social frameworks in which you find yourself, but also through the recasting of your own past. It's therefore like a lady who walks forward in her dress, carrying a long train behind; when she changes direction abruptly, a little kick puts the train behind her again." This is what we, too, do.

—Translated by David Ames Curtis

Notes

"Tisser l'amitié" is based on an interview with S. Jankélévitch that appeared in *Autrement*, No. 17 (February 1995), pp. 188-202, and that was revised for publication in my book *Entre mythe et politique* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1996), pp. 17-31.

1 With its roots in the anti-Dreyfusard movement, Action Française, the nationalist and royalist group and journal founded in 1908 by Charles Maurras, supported the Vichy regime during the Occupation and was banned after the Liberation. —Trans.