

## INTRODUCTION

The principal aim of my study is to participate in the current renewed discourse on friendship, as represented especially by the works of Jacques Derrida, Maurice Blanchot, Emmanuel Levinas, and Giorgio Agamben, by combining the philosophical method of inquiry with the hermeneutical approach that, supported by the praxis of commentary, focuses on the poetics of friendship in the *Iliad*, the *Divine Comedy*, and the *Decameron*.<sup>1</sup> As I examine these works, which in a unique way exemplify, respectively, three important periods in the Western tradition – Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the transition from the Middle Ages to Early Renaissance – I am guided by Aristotle’s notion that “friendship... is a particular virtue, or it involves virtue” and “it is something most necessary for life”, and by Cicero’s view of friendship as a complex communion, a lived experience and not just a philosophical idea.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Nicola Masciandaro, Introduction to *Glossator: Practice and Theory of Commentary*, vol. I (Fall 2009), ii: “According to Giorgio Agamben’s diagnosis, it is precisely the ‘loss of commentary and the gloss as creative forms’ that attests to the impossibility of ‘any healing’ in Western culture ‘between *Halacha* and *Aggada*, between *shari’at* and *haqiqat*, between subject matter and truth content’. To this schism we may add, as a rough parallel, that between *practice* and *theory*, the proportionally inseparable variables included in this journal’s title with deliberate emphasis on the priority of the former as what holds the key to both (practice founds theory)”. The passage from Agamben is from his *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), 143-144.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1155a. This and all subsequent citations are taken from Aristotle, “*Nicomachean Ethics*”, *Books VIII and IX*, trans. and commentary by Michael Pakaluk (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Cicero, *De amicitia* V.18: “I do feel first of all – that friendship cannot exist except among good men; nor do I go into that too deeply, as is done by those who, in discussing this point with more than usual accuracy, and it may be correctly, but with too little view to practical results, say that no one is good unless he is wise. We may grant that; but they understand wisdom to be a thing such as no mortal man has yet attained. I, however, am bound to look at things as they are in the experience of everyday life and not as they are in fancy or in hope”. This and all subsequent quotes are from Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De amicitia*, vol. XX, trans. William Armistead Falconer, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

I began to reflect on friendship after the death of a friend. As I mourn the loss of my friend, more than ever I am keenly aware of the desire to explore both the meaning and the experience of friendship. Jacques Derrida has noted that “it is *thanks* to death that friendship can be declared”.<sup>3</sup> We may recall Gilgamesh’s declaration of friendship as he mourns the death of Enkidu:

“Listen to me, Elders. Hear me out, *me*.  
I [have been] to [you], Enkidu, your mother, your father; I will  
weep for you in the wilderness.  
For Enkidu, for my friend, I weep like a wailing woman,  
howling bitterly’.<sup>4</sup>

David’s words of mourning addressed to his friend Jonathan also come to mind (2 Samuel 1:26)<sup>5</sup>:

Jonathan, in your death I am stricken,  
I am desolate for you, Jonathan my brother.  
Very dear to me you were,  
your love to me more wonderful  
than the love of a woman.

We are thus reminded of the deep link between mourning the loss of a friend and the desire to engage others in a conversation on friendship, as expressed in Cicero’s *De amicitia*, in which the death of Scipio Africanus Minor is mourned by his friend Laelius, and in Montaigne’s essay “Of Friendship”, in which he mourns the loss of his friend Étienne de La Boétie.<sup>6</sup>

But what is the friendship that can now be declared? Is it possible to define it? And can I define the friend, *my* friend? While I am certain of the reality of both my friend and of our friendship, I am faced with an aporia similar to the one acknowledged by Socrates at the end of *Lysis*, Plato’s dialogue on friendship: “Well, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves rather ridiculous today, I, an old man, and you children. For our hearers here will carry away the report that though we conceived ourselves to be friends with each other – you see I class myself with you – we have not as

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London, New York: Verso, 1997), 302.

<sup>4</sup> *Gilgamesh*, Tablet VIII, Column ii,1-2, in *Gilgamesh*, trans. from the Sinleqi-unninni version, John Gardner and John Maier (New York: Knopf, 1984), 187. I thank Edward Tuttle for pointing out to me the friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

<sup>5</sup> All citations from the Bible are taken from *The Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Michel de Montaigne, “On Friendship”, *Michel de Montaigne, The Complete Essays*, trans., ed. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

yet been able to discover what we mean by a friend”.<sup>7</sup> As Socrates admits defeat in discovering “what we mean by a friend”, he declares himself a friend of Lysis and Menexenus. In this affirmation of friendship, beyond definition, we witness an expansion of the singular love between two friends toward another, a love which is also implicitly extended to the “hearers”, the anonymous “third party” as a plurality of undeclared friends. Hence, we are made aware of the social and ethical ground of friendship, which Aristotle has elaborated in Books 8 and 9 of his *Nicomachean Ethics* – an ethical ground upon which my discourse is beginning to take shape, for it involves an awareness of and ultimately a responsibility for the other, both as one who is near, and whom I face as my neighbor, and as distant, indeed infinitely remote.

Isn't this proximity and this distance what essentially characterized the friend whom I now mourn? Have I not, then, loved him (as I still do) not only as the known, the familiar person, but also as other, as a stranger? In fact, I can say with Maurice Blanchot, who is mourning the death of Georges Bataille:

How could one agree to speak of this friend? Neither in praise nor in the interest of some truth. The traits of his character, the forms of his existence, the episodes of his life... belong to no one. There are no witnesses. Those who were closest say only what was close to them, not the distance that affirmed itself in proximity, and distance ceases as soon as presence ceases... With death all that separates, disappears. What separates: what puts authentically in relation, the very abyss of relations in which lies, with simplicity, the agreement of friendly affirmation that is always maintained.<sup>8</sup>

From another angle, the very proximity of friendship may be viewed as an obstacle to its conceptualization or definition. As Agamben explains, “What is friendship, in effect, if not a proximity such that it is impossible to make for oneself either a representation or a concept of it? To recognize someone as a friend means not to be able to recognize him as ‘something’... Friendship is not a property or quality of a subject”.<sup>9</sup> He

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Lysis*, 223.b. All quotations from Plato's works are from *Plato, The Collected Dialogues*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollingen Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). In his *The Philosophy of Friendship* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 176, Mark Vernon notes that *Lysis* “shows that any good friendship will be open ended, as the dialogue is. So the *Lysis* offers a portrayal of friendship as a way of life in which, at its best, Socratic philosophy and becoming friends are one and the same thing”.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *Friendship*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 289, 292.

<sup>9</sup> Agamben, “Friendship”, trans. Joseph Falsone, *Contretemps* 5 (December 2004), 4.

then notes that the proximity of the friend is akin to the proximity of the friend to philosophy: “The intimacy of friendship with philosophy is so deep that philosophy includes the *philos*, the friend, in its very name and, as is often the case with all excessive proximities, one risks not being able to get to the bottom of it”.<sup>10</sup>

If I cannot adequately speak of my friend and of friendship, I can speak of the desire to renew a dialogue on the meaning of friendship, not only of that unique love between two persons based on familiarity and proximity, but as the love for the one who is far away, the stranger, for this is a natural extension of the implicit love of the distant other, of the other-as-stranger – what Emmanuel Levinas has called “the infinity of the Other” – which is concealed in our friend, and puts us “authentically in relation” with him or her. This relation is marked not by the will to power but by humility: “Humility not to be confused with an ambiguous negation of Self, already prideful of its virtue which, on reflection, it immediately recognizes in itself. But humility of one who ‘has no time’ to turn back to self, who takes no steps to ‘deny’ the self, if not the abnegation of the Work’s rectilinear movement toward the infinity of the Other”.<sup>11</sup>

The words of Isaiah come to mind: “Peace, peace, to far and near, / I will indeed heal him’ says Yahweh” (57:19). The one who is far, the stranger, is mentioned first, taking precedence over the one who is near. This precedence of the one who is far is given an even more radical expression by Nietzsche in Zarathustra’s discourse “On Love of the Neighbor”: “Do I recommend love of the neighbor to you? I prefer instead to recommend flight from the neighbor and love of the farthest! Higher than love of the neighbor is love of the farthest and the future”.<sup>12</sup> Derrida offers this illuminating commentary: “Of Love of One’s Neighbor’... seems to oppose friend to neighbor, and blatantly to the neighbor of the Gospels. In truth, it does not *oppose* friend to neighbor, it wishes to raise it *above* the neighbor – and this in the name of the far-off and of the future. The neighbor is believed, like his name, to be close and present. Friendship is a thing of distance, a thing of the future”.<sup>13</sup> We find a similar view of friendship as “a thing of the future” in these remarks by Emerson in his essay on friendship:

The higher the style we demand of friendship, of course the less easy to establish it with flesh and blood. We walk alone in the world. Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables. But a sublime hope cheers

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>11</sup> Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller, intr. Richard A. Cohen (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, eds. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 44.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 285.

ever the faithful heart, that elsewhere, in other regions of the universal power, souls are now acting, enduring, and daring, which can love us, and which we can love.<sup>14</sup>

Recalling Aristotle's definition of the perfect friend as the one who "is related to his friend just as he is to himself – for a friend is another self" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 9. 1166a 31-32), we must note that this love of self, upon which the love for the friend is based, is also implicitly a love for the unknown, the distant other or stranger hidden in the self. Commenting on Aristotle's notion of the friend as another self (*hetéros autos*), Agamben writes:

The friend is not another I, but an otherness immanent in self-ness, a becoming other of the self. At the point at which I perceive my existence as pleasant, my perception is traversed by a concurrent perception that dislocates it and deports it towards the friend, towards the other self. Friendship is this de-subjectivization at the very heart of the most intimate perception of self.<sup>15</sup>

Without explicitly speaking of friendship toward the stranger or the foreigner, Julia Kristeva notes:

Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns "we" into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities.

She then adds, "Let us not seek to solidify, to turn the otherness of the foreigner into a thing. Let us merely touch it, brush by it, without giving it a permanent structure".<sup>16</sup>

These observations, as well as others that remain unspoken, call for reflections not only by philosophers (or the philosopher in us), but also by poets. They call for representation and performance of an action or a story, in and through which friendship and the friend are manifested and made present in such a way that it brings forth the meaning of friendship

<sup>14</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Friendship*, in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 212.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, "Friendship", 6.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1, 3. See also Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

at the same time that it asserts its unfathomable yet *experienced* reality beyond meaning.<sup>17</sup> It is useful to recall Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's discussion of the real experience that "meaning cannot convey" and of "the tension/oscillation between presence effects and meaning effects [that] endows the object of aesthetic experience with a component of provocative instability and unrest".<sup>18</sup>

The representations of friendship that I shall examine at once reveal and conceal an idea and an experience of friendship, which, like prayer, points to the future. As Derrida has remarked in his book on friendship:

Friendship is never a present given, it belongs to the experience of expectation, promise, or engagement. Its discourse is that of prayer, it inaugurates, but reports nothing, it is not satisfied with what is, it moves out to this place where a responsibility opens up a future.<sup>19</sup>

John Caputo has written this enlightening commentary on Derrida's view of and prayer for a "friendship to come":

The lines of demarcation, the conditions of possibility of such chance, would not be staked out a priori by an ontology or a theology of friendship, but happen in a certain borderless experience of the *perhaps*, which is the experience of an impossible possibility, the experience of what is to all the world and its philosophy an impossible 'event' taking place right before our eyes. But these eyes would be the eyes not of philosophy and its *theoria*, not the eyes of seeing at all but the eyes of faith, eyes blinded by praying and weeping for an impossible friendship to come.<sup>20</sup>

As I focus on the poetics of friendship in Homer's *Iliad*, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, I shall be attentive to "borderless experiences of the *perhaps*" of an "impossible friendship to come" inscribed in and opened up by the text. I shall be engaged in the play of a dialectical opposition between the speculative and the experiential modes of knowing, between the narrow economy of ideas and the expansive econ-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. John Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), 216: "I do not take lightly the need to tell stories. It is unceasingly a question of telling stories, good stories, the best one possible, and it is possible to pit story against story, to see which one wins out, not because of some macho storytelling power of the narrative subject, but because we are struck by the trauma of alterity in a story, by the shock of transcendence, by the blow which is invariably delivered by something divine, which is quite other, wholly Other".

<sup>18</sup> Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 236.

<sup>20</sup> John Caputo, 68-69.

omy of the world of action and performance, attempting to transform, to use Levinas' terminology, "the said" (*le dit*) into "the saying" (*le dire*), the fixed, absolutizing word and meaning into the *living* word in the presence of and *for* the other:

Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity. Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other; it might be called humanity, or subjectivity, or self. Being and entities weigh heavily by virtue of the saying that gives them light.<sup>21</sup>

Simon Critchley offers this perceptive commentary in his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, which helps to further define my indebtedness to Levinas' conceptualization of the humanism of the Other as I weave my discourse on friendship – as an *ethical performance*:

[Saying] is the performative stating, proposing or expressive position of myself facing the other. It is a verbal and possibly also non-verbal ethical performance, of which the essence cannot be captured in constative propositions. It is, if you will, a performative *doing* that cannot be reduced to a propositional description. By contrast, the said is a statement, assertion or proposition of which the truth or falsity can be ascertained. To put it another way, one might say that the content of my words, their identifiable meaning, is the said, while the saying consists in the fact that these words are being addressed to an interlocutor, at this moment each of you.<sup>22</sup>

As I examine a particular manifestation of friendship, including its negation or perversion, I shall pay special attention to the uniqueness of the ethos and worldview informing each work selected for the present study. I shall also seek to bring to light a measure of the universality of friendship, for which, as we face with great urgency the stranger, the foreigner at this beginning of a new millenium, we must all pray, as we pray for a miracle. In the words of Simone Weil,

As practically every human being is joined to others by bonds of affection that have in them some degree of necessity, he cannot go toward perfection except by transforming this affection into friendship. Friendship has something universal about it. It consists of loving a human being as we should like to be able to love each soul in particu-

<sup>21</sup> Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 18.

lar of all those who go to make up the human race. As a geometrician looks at a particular figure in order to deduce the universal properties of the triangle, so he who knows how to love directs upon a particular human being a universal love.<sup>23</sup>

The universality of friendship, especially as we attempt to trace the movement from friendship as *said* to the *saying* of friendship, may also be experienced, in all its creativity, as *play* – as we shall find represented in Boccaccio's *Decameron*. "Creative friendship", notes Eliot Deutsch, "becomes a kind of *play* – an activity that is carried out for its own sake without regard for personal benefit. It is a performance which extends potentially to all who encounter it".<sup>24</sup>

Speaking of play, I would like to include in my introductory remarks a disclaimer. The path, or method I have chosen, including the choice of the authors and their work that I shall examine, is not intended to systematically formulate a new theory of friendship. My close reading and commentary of the texts – a commentary enriched by the voices of a "chorus" of philosophers, ancient and modern – counters the rhetoric of plenitude with an open hermeneutics of auscultation whereby aesthetics is indistinguishable from ethics and thus, ultimately, from political concerns. Therefore the "story" of friendship and of friends inscribed in those texts summons me and my readers to "speak" friendship, to perform it, acknowledging the "said" in order to transcend it with the "saying". Hence, what distinguishes my study is its special focus on the performative power of literary texts to transform philosophical ideas of friendship into an *experience* of friendship, an experience that is deeply related to the ethics of reading and of writing, or of interpretation – what Adam Zachary Newton, from a Levinasian perspective, has called "narrative ethics".<sup>25</sup> Thus my aim, as both reader and writer, is to share with my reader a "transcendence of the ego" as I address him or her. As Massimo Lollini points out (following Levinas),

In an ethical approach to literature the writer and/or the reader may experience a change emerging in the very act of writing and of reading, a change leading to a transcendence of the ego. Writing and reading are ethical activities as long as they leave the door open to the unex-

<sup>23</sup> Simone Weil, "Friendship", *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay, 1977), 370. On today's urgent question of the foreigner and the related question of hospitality, see *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Eliot Deutsch, "On Creative Friendship", in *The Changing Face of Friendship*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Adam Zachary Newton, *Narrative Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), especially the chapter "Narrative as Ethics", 1-33.

pected, to an interruption of the economy of the same made possible by the encounter with the other.<sup>26</sup>

Throughout my essay I shall endeavor to share with my reader-as-other a measure of my “encounter with the other” as inscribed in the selected texts, aiming to find in a manner somewhat analogous to Derrida’s work on the politics of friendship, in the words of John Caputo, “the signs of a tension [... that] feels about for ruptures and heterogeneities in this tradition [of friendship], for these are just so many openings for another friendship and another politics”.

As I argue in Chapter 1, such “ruptures” and “heterogeneities” correspond to rare moments in which, in several scenes of the *Iliad*, usually in connection with the rhetoric (and poetics) of supplication, enemies (strangers) are transformed into friends. Moreover, I show how friendship (*philotēs*) is born of pity (*eleos*), which in turn is awakened in the adversary and victor by the power of language and shared memories, in contrast with the ethos of violence met with violence of the warrior society. In Chapter 2 I focus on a number of episodes of Dante’s *Inferno* in which figures of the damned reveal traces of the friendship that through their sin they have perverted or betrayed, especially in relation to the life of the *polis*. In chapter Chapter 3 I examine Dante’s encounter with friends and fellow-citizens in *Purgatorio*, giving special attention to the rhetoric of friendship whereby he chastises Italy and his Florence for the hatred and violence that divides its citizens. I also focus on the representation of the friend and fellow-citizen as addressed and loved *as stranger*, before his identity is revealed. In Chapter 4 I comment on *Paradiso* VIII and IX, in which Dante celebrates the highest form of friendship as a love that nourishes and founds the *polis* along with and even entwined with erotic passion. I examine Dante’s notion that these loves constitute the natural foundation of *caritas*, which corresponds to friendship with God. In Chapter 5 I analyze the first three tales of the *Decameron*, exploring the power of wit, and of the fictive and the imaginary, to neutralize conflict and violence, unexpectedly transforming enmity into friendship. I also shed light on the problematic of friendship, as represented in the second story, in which the desire for “sameness” that negates the Other concealed in the friend, proves to be a parody of true friendship.

As announced by the epigraphs placed at the threshold of this essay, while recognizing important differences in the “ethics of friendship” distinguishing each work, they reveal at once a degree of specificity and timelessness that speak to us across the centuries as they share the ethos

<sup>26</sup> Massimo Lollini, “Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony”, in *Who, Exactly, is the Other?: Western and Transcultural Perspectives*, eds. Steven Shankman and Massimo Lollini (Eugene, OR: University of Oregon Books, 2002), 24.

of the love for the stranger, the stranger as friend. They remind us that this ethos marks the foundation of the Western tradition, which coincides with Greece and the Bible, Athens and Jerusalem. Speaking of Homer's notion of "friend" (*phílos*), Émile Benveniste remarks that it is intimately connected to the notion of "stranger" (*xénos*), who is entitled to the rights of hospitality and is thus welcomed as both stranger and friend.<sup>27</sup> There are many examples in the *Iliad* of friendship and hospitality shown to the stranger (*xénos*). Similarly, the love for the stranger is repeatedly recorded in the Bible as God's commandment: for example, not to mention the already cited passage from Leviticus 19:33-34, in Exodus 23:9 we read: "You must not oppress the stranger; you know how a stranger feels, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt". On the notion that we must love the stranger as ourselves for we are all strangers, as revealed by Yahweh in Leviticus 25:23 ("Land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land belongs to me, and to me you are only strangers and guests"), Levinas – who has placed the love for the stranger at the center of his thought – has written the following commentary:

[The] difference between the ego and the world is extended by obligation toward others. Echo of the permanent *saying* of the Bible: the condition – or incondition – of strangers and slaves in the land of Egypt brings man closer to his fellow man. They seek one another in their incondition of strangers. No one is at home. The memory of that servitude assembles humanity. The difference that gapes between ego and self, the non-coincidence of the identical, is a thorough non-indifference with regard to man. The free man is dedicated to his fellow; no one can save himself without others.<sup>28</sup>

These words are an invitation to further reflection on the ethics of loving the stranger as ourselves, as our friend. They, along with the words of other thinkers and of the writers chosen for my essay, will inform the work that lies ahead in the pages that follow, whereby I shall attempt to transform the *said* into *saying* as I address my reader as stranger and friend.

<sup>27</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 1. *Economie, parenté, société* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969), 341: "La notion de *phílos* énonce le comportement obligé d'un membre de la communauté à l'égard du *xénos*, de l'"hôte" étranger".

<sup>28</sup> *Humanism of the Other*, 96. Cf. Ephraim Meir, *Levinas's Jewish Thought: Between Jerusalem and Athens* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2008).