

ALAIN BADIOU

MODERN FINITUDE'S TRIAL BY POETRY: RENE CHAR

(from the forthcoming book *The Immanence of Truth*, translated by Susan Spitzer and Kenneth Reinhard)

Using a metaphorical apparatus that in this case illuminates more than it obscures, a poem (or is it a simple prose passage?) by Char in the collection *La Bibliothèque est en feu* [The Library is on Fire] describes with remarkable precision one of the mechanisms of modern finitude, the one I presented in the previous chapter as being related to the economy. Here is the poem (clearly, it is more than just a prose passage):

There's a malediction unlike any other. It flickers in a kind of laziness, has a pleasant nature and puts on a reassuring face. But what energy after the feint, what a mad rush to the goal! Since the shadow where it builds is malicious, the very zone of secrecy, it will probably defy naming, will always slip away in time. The parables it outlines on the veil of the sky of a few clairvoyant souls are rather terrifying.

Contemporary finitude ("malediction"), for Char, is primarily a combination of laziness and pleasantness (it "has a pleasant nature"). This should be understood as: There is a "laziness" of thought when it merges with the shifting play of opinions. Plato had already seen that the conflation of truths with opinions results from laziness. There is a "pleasantness" because there is something relaxed and enjoyable about this laziness. Which, once again, Plato very aptly noted, as is evident when he describes the superficial pleasure of life in democracy. But Char immediately sees that beneath this "pleasant" exterior there is criminal predation, which he transcribes in a sports metaphor: "what energy after the feint, what a mad rush to the goal!"

This could be expressed, in a very rough, broad way, as: capitalism is hidden behind democracy. How, for Char, does this relentless activity, linked to the systematics of capitalism but concealed behind a consensual, pleasant modernity, work? Above all, in the shadows, and secretly; it is anonymous (“it will defy naming”) and elusive (“it will always slip away in time”). In contrast to the spectacular predations of the past, modern predation is unattributable, unlocalized, because it appears as a quasi-natural mechanism rather than as the personal action of a group of people.

It could be objected that that’s not true, that it is possible to draw up a global list of the major capitalists, their political and media lackeys, their military and police subordinates, their henchmen hidden in the world of organized crime, and so on. This would basically be the “one percent” of the world’s population that the young Americans of the Occupy Wall Street movement, from September to November 2011, opposed in an extremely appealing way – albeit without much insight or perseverance – when they declared: “We are the 99%.” In reality, this list, this “one percent,” would only very imperfectly designate the brutal leaders of modern finitude. The names can be changed, one CEO can be overthrown and another one appointed in their stead, boardroom coups can be orchestrated, the list can be expanded to include a countless number of cronies, or, on the contrary, be reduced, in accordance with the harsh law of the concentration of capital, and so on. Clearly, the names are not linked to the dominant positions in the same way as they were in the old predatory regimes, in the time of aristocracies, for example. Even if, at a given moment, you have a relevant list of names, the functioning of the modern economy, and therefore of the power based on it, remains essentially anonymous and elusive. This is because the modern oligarchy, even when counted and ranked (the annual ranking of the “world’s wealthiest people”), is not symbolized and generates no value other than that of the count.

The fact is, “democracy,” due to its inevitable correlation with the growth of capitalism and the concentration of capital, is first and foremost

a de-symbolization of power, which radically detaches it from any presumption of infinity. Moreover, the majority of people may think that “political leaders” are paragons of useless arrogance, or even that “the wealthiest people” are lucky crooks: that, in itself, as a judgment, has no real importance, nor does it really have any impact on the course of events. When Hannah Arendt claims that political subjects arise from reflective judgment, that they are like informed witnesses to the system to which they belong, she fails to see that the modern world – the de-symbolized bourgeois world – has created the permanent possibility of an informed and “critical” witnessing but one without any control whatsoever over what happens, even if it is expressed on an ongoing basis through voting. Arendt fails to understand the a-symbolic laws of modern finitude.

This is what Char *does* understand. Indeed, what he tells us is precisely that the modern predatory regime is not one that can be contained within a closed symbology. It is a regime that covers with the mask of lazy pleasantness an unprecedented inegalitarian violence, violence that is in some respects obvious but ultimately invisible. Char concludes, as he too often does, that only an aristocracy of poets, of thinkers, a Heideggerian aristocracy, “a few clairvoyant souls,” can detect and fear the predation behind the mask of lazy pleasantness. They alone can interpret the “rather terrifying parables” outlined “on the veil of the sky” – in an ominous light – by the finitude of the modern world.

Actually, there is no reason other than the consensus it maintains by its own lack of visibility, by its withdrawal from all symbolization, for modern finitude to remain invisible. As regards this consensus, the possibility of a way out, of an escape from it, is open to everyone, following in the footsteps of the revolutionaries of the past two centuries, the nineteenth and the twentieth, whose work is still quite unfinished, perhaps only barely begun.

Lyotard’s critique of the revolutionary “grand narratives” of these two centuries, of their illusory pretensions, notwithstanding, it is really to them that we must return if we are to bring about the communist

revival of infinity, in opposition to the restoration that is contemporary finitude and its monstrously inegalitarian predation. The critique of grand narratives, in particular of revolutionary eschatology, is part of post-modernism's critique of all "greatness." Indeed, when Lyotard pronounces their end, he explicitly invokes postmodern discursivity. Yet I think that if by "greatness" is meant the touching of the infinite, i.e., the infinitization that every truth introduces into a given regime of finitude, we must on the contrary see in "grand narratives" a positive imaginary, a necessary accompaniment of the process of emancipation. The mental representation of the unfolding of a truth procedure, even the imagining of a particular figure of its outcome, belongs to the regime of truth *insofar as it overcomes finitude*.

The fact is, there has been a conflation of "grand narrative" and "prophetic expectation," which are two completely different things, because the grand narrative is the subjectivated and immanent accompaniment of the rationality of a truth, not the representation of a promise coming from transcendence itself. This conflation has led, as we know, to the idea, popularized by Marcel Gauchet, that communism was a "secularized religion." This amounts, once again, to valorizing modern finitude in the form of its mask, i.e., democracy.

On the contrary, reviving the infinite means living and acting in the real world in such a way that the present is so intense that there is no need for tomorrow to be "waited for," in the messianic sense. As Brecht puts it, as soon as we are dealing with a political truth, "'never' becomes 'today'." Tomorrow must *be here*. Activating the present in such a way that tomorrow is always-already-here has nothing to do with prophesy.

I can understand why the idea of waiting is attacked. I myself have often had to counter a misinterpretation of my concept of the event, namely that it must be waited for. Waiting is ultimately the primacy of receptivity, that is to say, the primacy of the waste product over the work. But the primacy of action is when our idea of the future ("tomorrow"), based on the infinite activation of a truth, is validated in a dis-enclosure – immanent

and operative (“today”) – of finitude. Action must always uncover and address, identify, one by one, the points internal to finitude that seem to lead to the touching of the infinite.

Char says something like this in a short poem (“To...”) in the collection *À une sérénité crispée* [To a Tensed Serenity]:

I say fortune the way I feel it
You have raised the summit
That my waiting will have to reach
When tomorrow disappears.

What is at stake is not the waiting but the reaching of the summit, the summit reached by the present, from which one can see tomorrow disappear. The revival of infinity, as immanent, cannot mean that tomorrow is merely the day that comes after today, for in that case we would be returning to the repetitive structure of the finite, in the form of prophetic repetition (“Maybe tomorrow salvation will come”), which is nothing but an empiricism in disguise.

The work of truth that touches infinity – the end *in truth* of finitude – cannot be waited for from outside; it will have to *reach my waiting*.