

*ON THE CO-RESPONDENCE
BETWEEN DERRIDA AND GRANEL*

INTRODUCTION: “HELLO” AND “GOODBYE”

“Salut” can be the gesture of a wave (geste), a greeting (parole), the military salute and the religious salvation. And it can be both, a “hello” and a “goodbye”. Not only is the french salut a question of sauver (cure), but also with greeting and rituality (respect, civility marker).¹ What distinguishes letters from notes, is them being sent to an address. On the envelope there is a sign that indicates where they are meant to be. I think that without this marker, a letter wouldn’t be recognized as such. In Derrida’s improvisation on the famous address for the cited phrase of the history of philosophy, “Oh my friends, there is no friend”, the address is framed as a performative contradiction. The problem is that indeed here there is that the “addressee of this sentence [is of] of uncertain origin”².

One of the etymological meanings of salut is greeting³. Gérard Granel writes to his “Cher vieux” (Dear Old) Derrida from St. Sauveur on the 16th of September 1967: “our convergence can make great things happen”⁴. Let us assume for a moment that friendship is a conjunction. How would this particular union look like? In the following, I would like to argue that if there is a concept of “friendship” that evolves between Granel and Derrida, it would be that of a co-responding friendship, I mean: not a corresponding, but a co-responding friendship. I will also trace the line of the etymology of the French word for address, salut, suggesting an interplay of the “salut” and its response, the letter and its counterpart, by a still to be defined third party. It will be stated in this article why I believe that the question of how to address a friend in a letter is not a secondary one, but on the contrary the decisive and primary question to friendship.

Let us read Plato’s Lysis. Socrates is speaking:

“However, just as they were moving off, I remarked: Today, Lysis and Menexenus, we have made ourselves ridiculous—I, an old man, as well as you. For these others will go away and tell how we

¹ Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française, 8^{ème} édition, to be checked under <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/salut> (18.06.2016, 10:00). and TLFi, to be checked under <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/salut> (18.06.2016, 10:00).

² Derrida, Jacques (2005 [1994]): *Politics of Friendship*, London/New York, Verso, 214.

³ *Salut* in French can mean an exclamative formula of wish or civility. Académie française: <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/academie8/salut>.

⁴ Unpublished letter, Granel to Derrida, GD 8, St. Sauveur, 16.09.1967: “Je crois comme toi qu’il peut sortir de grandes choses de cette conjunction qui se fait entre nous.” (unpublished letter cited with many thanks to IMEC, Élisabeth Rigal and Marguerite Derrida).

believe we are friends of one another—for I count myself in with you—but what a “friend” is, we have not yet succeeded in discovering.”⁵

No “friend” is to be named. Somehow the three of them know they are friends, but they haven’t found the proper words to identify the “friend” in language. Socrates is referring to himself in the past in this passage, and he seems to regret to address his friends by telling them that they did not find a “friend”.

In a quote attributed to Aristotle, we reach a similar problematic. The phrase “Oh my friends, there is no friend” has been repeated by Diogenes Laertius and Montaigne and was cited by Derrida in *Politics of Friendship*.

RESPONDING FRIENDSHIP

Let us set aside the reading of the phrase “Oh my friends, there is no friend” for a while in order to see how Gérard Granel and Derrida used to write to each other in the Seventies. It is 1972, and Granel writes to Derrida:

“I know you don’t have the time to ‘respond’ to my last letter – and this is not absolutely possibly either. But what is necessary is that I know (of) your friendship, and, whatever were our difference, that it never transforms into indifference. Three lines will be enough.”⁶

He puts “response” in quotation marks, which seems to show that he is distancing from the possibility of being able to answer. Derrida wrote to Granel one year earlier:

“I cannot finish this letter. You know that it will continue. Between us; and publicly, if I will still have the force to work. And I don’t want to make you wait for my ‘answer’. Nor for the sign of my grace and my friendship.”⁷

Derrida, too, set “response” in quotation marks. What is to be sent by a letter is, according to him, a “sign of my grace and my friendship”, but maybe not a “response”. How does this “sign” look like?

In another letter, Granel wrote that the feeling of being loneliness remains, and that writing to Derrida, he hopes for a *Wink* to take place. *Wink* means sign or wave in German, and it is important to note that he uses the German word here instead of the French one:

“And to you, too, not only so that you know what is happening, but also as a sign [*Wink*] from one extreme solitude to another.”⁸

⁵ Plato. *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 8 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1955, 223b.

⁶ “Je sais que tu n’as pas le temps de “répondre” à ma dernière lettre – et ce n’est pas non plus absolument nécessaire. Mais ce qui est nécessaire est que je sache ton amitié, et que, quelle que soit notre différence, elle ne retombe jamais à l’indifférence. Trois lignes y suffisent.” (Unpublished letter, Granel to Derrida, 27.04.1972, GD29, cited with many thanks to IMEC, Élisabeth Rigal and Marguerite Derrida.)

⁷ “Je ne peux pas finir cette lettre. Tu sais qu’elle se poursuivra. Entre nous; et publiquement, si j’ai encore la force de travailler [x, mit Hand]. Et je ne veux pas te laisser attendre ma ‘réponse’. Ni le signe de ma gratitude et de mon amitié.” (Unpublished letter, Derridas to Granel, DG 3.3, 04.02. without year, probably before 1971, cited with many thanks to IMEC, Élisabeth Rigal and Marguerite Derrida).

By using the word *Wink* in German, Granel is making reference to Heidegger, whom he was intensely reading at that time, as well as Derrida. According to *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, words point or wave towards “the essence of language” (“*in das Wesen der Sprache*”)⁹. The *Wink* Heidegger is thinking of, does not occur between “you” and “I”, and it possesses no place in metaphysics, but comes from a completely different dimension.¹⁰ Granel might thus be linking the possibility of the response to a prior responsibility, splitting every possible response into two : the first one is his response to Derrida, and the second one is linked to the responsibility coming to him from somewhere else (Heidegger would say *Sein*).

The second meaning of salut I want to point out is that of a wave or gesture.¹¹

In the words of Derrida, a letter is a sign or, in other terms, a “salut”, that is “a sign of my grace and my friendship”. But it is a sign Derrida cannot “give”. When he tells Granel that he cannot “finish this letter”, he shows himself unable to give what the other expects. If a sign is given, it is by the practice of Derrida sending a letter to Granel, but this seems to be not yet enough to be a response. In terms of Granel, a letter can be a *Wink* from one solitude to another one. For him, unlike Heidegger, the signs do not come from a completely different sphere, but rather, from the friend. But even though letters can be gestures desiring to greet the other, are they furthermore to be seen as signs of *correspondence* ?

CORRESPONSIVE FRIENDSHIP

Contrary to Heidegger, Derrida and Granel do not want to point out the essence of language in their signs. They are sending the signs (letters) to each other. But they remain doubtful about the possibility of response, distancing themselves from it, which can be seen by the use of quotation marks. Then, what is a response? In his article on *Politics of Friendship* (published one year before the book containing his lectures on the same theme – and about twenty years after this cited letter) Derrida says that we (he and his readers, philosophers) have begun to respond to “a strange violence”, done to “the origin of the most innocent experiences of friendship or of justice”¹². He links response to to a responsibility which is prior to our speaking. As far as the “response” is linked to a prior responsibility, it is divided into two parts, and cannot be given from one person to another directly. Following this, there is always more to a response than just an answer.

In *The Postcard*, Derrida writes that when he conducts correspondence, which he describes as the situation of writing many letters to several people at the same time, he is scared from the moment onward, when he has to enclose the letter in its envelope. It might be sent to the wrong person, or two

⁸ “Et à toi aussi, non seulement pour que tu saches tout ce qui se fait, mais encore comme un signe (*Wink*) d’une extrême solitude à une autre.” (Unpublished letter, Granel to Derrida, GD44, 22.11.1968, cited with many thanks to IMEC, Élisabeth Rigal and Marguerite Derrida).

⁹ Heidegger, Martin (1985 [1959]): *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. Frankfurt a.M.: Vittorio Klosterman: 114.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, 117.

¹¹ Cp. <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/dmf/salut> (18.06.2016, 10:00).

¹² Derrida, Jacques, “Politics of Friendship”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 365.

letters to different friends might end up in the same envelope. Sometimes he would even open up an envelope again to properly identify them.¹³

Orhan Pamuk exposes in the Istanbul Museum of Innocence an envelope with a letter inside – enclosed into a glass cube. This appears to me a good picture to compare to what Derrida describes about the inaccessibility of the letters once put into an envelope. Such is the quality of a letter as perceived by Derrida. Derrida and Pamuk both know what is in the letter, but there is no access to the meaning after having written. The difference between the Derridean letter and Pamuk's is that in Pamuk's case, the meaning is kept in a glass cube, inhibiting readers to make sense of it, whereas in the Derridean case, the letter can be sent to places other than the intended, and a letter intended to be one can even multiply in the envelope¹⁴.

If a letter can be neither addressed (delivered correctly) nor responded, what remains of it is nothing. And if a letter is a correspondence without an object to be sent, it can disseminate into every possible direction, being nothing more than an empty box of imaginary – either literature, lie or gift of god.

Let us remember a third etymological definition of “salut”, according to which “salut” can be a cure, in the sense of religious salvation.¹⁵

Is Derrida looking for a cure or is he praying – or sougning – for one, by noting the impossibility of the response? In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida cites Aristotle who states that prayer (*eukhe*) is a type of discourse (*logos*) that in the manner of a performative is neither true nor false.¹⁶ Acknowledging this, Derrida indeed is praying. He is praying in the sense that Althusser has given to prayer: in order to pray, the praying person kneels down and folds its hands.¹⁷ According to him, the prayer “works” because of its ritualistic force. Derrida is repeating “Oh my friends, there is no friend”, but it is as if he directed himself to someone, while writing a text.

Then whom is he praying to?

Let us repeat once again the quote cited in many texts on friendship – “Oh my friends, there is no friend” and Derrida's interpretation of the first part of it. Derrida writes in the same paragraph that any kind of address or notion responds to an absolute past:

“Without this absolute past, I could not, for my part, have addressed myself to you in this way. We would not be together in a sort of minimal community – but one which is also incommensurable with any other – speaking the same language, even were it so as to manifest a disagreement, if a sort of friendship had not already been sealed, prior to any other contract: a friendship prior to friendships, an ineffaceable,

¹³ Cp. Derrida, Jacques (1983). *Die Postkarte von Sokrates bis an Freud und Jenseits*. 1. Lieferung Envois/Sendungen. Berlin: Brinkmann und Bose, 128.

¹⁴ Cp. Derrida, Jacques (1979). *The Postcard. From Socrates to Freud and beyond*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ Cp. Collins French English Electronic Dictionary, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005, to be checked under <http://dictionary.reverso.net/french-english/salut> (18.06.2016, 10:00).

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques, “Politics of Friendship”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 367.

¹⁷ Cp. Althusser, Louis (1977 [1965]). *Ideologie und ideologische Staatsapparate. Aufsätze zur marxistischen Ideologie*. Hamburg/Westberlin: VSA.

fundamental and bottomless friendship, the one which draws its breath in the sharing of a language (past or to come) and in the being-together which any allocution supposes, including a declaration of war.”¹⁸

If Derrida is praying, he answers to this minimal community, in the first part of the quote. What about the second part ?

According to my reading, Derridean friendship resonates in the realm of the living, it does not merge with infinity (this would be love), but is linked to practice and society, to a community which does not exist nor is to be named but that is pre-given – in terms of “minimal community”. If friendship depends on the “sharing of a language”, *ergo* “friendship”, *ergo* minimal community, then friendship – like response – is, in itself, divided.¹⁹

And even though Derrida and Granel respond to each other by writing letters, they do not only or not necessarily answer to the one they intend to write to.

So what I would suggest is that Derrida and Granel are co-responding. Forming a chiasmus, each of them responds to the other by taking responsibility with respect to the minimal community. The minimal community however is not a community in the sense of an institution or group, but rather a common experience or the common perception of a loss or an absence, that is shared by “friends”. This minimal community is linking Granel and Derrida before they have started to speak (or write) to each other.

So we have to acknowledge a friendship as well as a minimal community that is prior to thought, which Derrida calls friendship, too.

“Thought, insofar as it has to be thought of the other – and this is what it must be for man – does not happen without *philia*.”²⁰

At this point, Derrida speaks of *philia* instead of friendship, and so connects the second kind of friendship (prior to thought) to Aristotelian friendship. Aristotle divided friendship into three. According to Aristotle, friendship can be of utility, pleasure, or thirdly and ideally, it can be connected to the good. Derrida points towards another translation of the phrase that is attributed to Aristotle – “Oh my friends, there is no friend”, being translated sometimes from the Greek to “Oh my friends, there is no true friend”. It is then possible that this phrase suggests that in friendship, we can also address the friends that are addressable, that is the ones, who are not true. A true friend would be ideal, would be good, would resemble God, as some have read Aristotle. But how would this ideal friendship look like from the perspective of Derrida, and how would he propose a different reading of “Oh my friends, there is no true friend”?

I quote:

“This passage clearly shows that (true) friendship can only be human, but most of all, and at the same time, that for man there is no thought unless it is a thought of the other and a thought of the other as a thought of

¹⁸ Derrida, Jacques, “Politics of Friendship”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 368f.

¹⁹ ... and always already plural : Oh my friends.

²⁰ Derrida, Jacques, “Politics of Friendship”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 362.

the mortal. Within the same logic, there is no thought, there is no thinking being, at least if thought has to be thought of the other, except in friendship.”²¹

If Derrida insists on iterating “oh my friend, there is no friend”, he is showing that friendship is under the current risk or tension of falling apart through its division. It is true, impossible and possible at the same time. Friendship for Derrida has to remain in the possibility of being more than a friendship of pleasure or of utility, but it is never pure as the third Aristotelian friendship. While repeating the Aporia, Derrida is suggesting that the impossibility of friendship is as such the best form of friendship. So in *Politics of Friendship*, inaccessibility is seen as a *telos*²². The contradiction in itself is seen as a proper question of friendship. According to this reading of Aristotle, a spiral or an ellipsis links friendship in terms of minimal community (neither theory nor practice) to the practice of friendship.

CONCLUSION: CO-RESPONDING FRIENDSHIP

In a letter to Derrida, Balibar writes :

“I ask myself with whom to share a little bit of mourning about the death of Bourdieu and I only see you. Therefore, it is needed that you accept this, and I don’t doubt it. It is just a small thing.”²³

So This is what I would call co-respondance. While Balibar is writing to Derrida, there is someone or something he responds to. It is the loss of an important friend that makes him write to Derrida. He writes to him because he knows that the other one is also affected by the loss. Balibar is responding to the death of Bourdieu by sending a letter to Derrida, offering to Derrida to share this knowledge or emotion of the death of the friend. He assumes “I know you, too, you are suffering”. “I know you, too, you are suffering”. Maybe the possibility a “minimal community” is anchored in the shared perception of senselessness in the moment of the death of a friend. And with it, the possibility of another friendship (that between the ones who share the experience).

In friendship, it seems then, we co-respond without the “r” of correspondence that would transform our mutual relation into a union or conjunction without intermediary. There is always already a third party involved. This third one has by definition no definition and cannot be described in terms of ordinary language. Possibly, it can be implied through the absence of a missing “letter” or in the indirect way of addressing the friends, that is in literature. If there is conjunction or union in friendship through shared responsibility, which type of responsibility could be meant ? Granel writes to Derrida, thanking him for the sending of his texts :

“One doesn’t respond to a book like this one without writing another one. About the rest, ‘répondre’ here replaces ‘répons’ (the other part of the song), because I don’t find something here that calls for ‘riposte’,

²¹ Derrida, Jacques, “*Politics of Friendship*”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 362.

²² Derrida, Jacques, “*Politics of Friendship*”, *American Imago*, 50:3 (1993: Fall), 361.

²³ “je me demande avec qui partager un peu de deuil à propos de la mort de Bourdieu et je ne vois que toi. Il faut donc que tu l’acceptes, et je n’en doute pas. Ce n’est qu’une toute petite chose” (unpublished letter from Balibar to Derrida, No. 39, 05.02. without year, probably 2002, many thanks to Étienne Balibar).

‘réplique’, and finally, I don’t find in me a ‘responsibility’ – a capacity to respond to what is in question – other than yours.”²⁴

As a conclusion, there is nothing *else* that binds friends to each other except the decision to stay close to one another, to respond to the other, even though there is difference in time and space. While sending letters remains a risk, friendship is the decision to still send these “letters” even though they can get lost on their way or, by mistake, reach another destination. If this risk is not taken, friendship ends or is interrupted. Derrida stopped sending letters to Granel at some point, but this was a decision of the time. Later on they took up their correspondence again.

Let us finish with another short comment on death and friendship. Bataille reminds us that the French word “chance” has the same origin as deadline.²⁵ If we are lucky, by chance, our responses to what has already happened or to what others have already said before us, form a duet or enter into a symphony with the responses of the ones we are writing to. Ideally, they resonate and make us sensitive or receptive like the “chora” (= receptacle) of what has just passed away, leaving us in front of a timeless, spaceless horizon, being naked and exposed to nothing but a full responsibility towards the “own” imperfect decisions.

Nicola TAMS

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Nicola TAMS est doctorante rattachée aux Archives Husserl de l'Université de Freiburg (Breisgau). Elle prépare sur le thème de l'amitié à partir de la correspondance de Derrida; elle enseigne la communication interculturelle à l'Université de Chemnitz.

²⁴ “On ne répond pas à un livre comme celui-ci, sauf à en écrire un autre. Du reste ‘répondre’ ici, pour moi, relèverait du ‘répons’ (l’autre partie du chant, la relance du même chant), car je n’y trouve rien qui appelle ‘riposte’, ‘réplique’, et enfin je ne trouve pas en moi une ‘responsabilité’ – une capacité de répondre à et de ce qui est en question – autre que la tienne.” (unpublished letter, Granel to Derrida, GD40, without date, ca. 1987, because they write about Derrida’s *Psyché* and *De l’esprit*, cited with many thanks to IMEC, Élisabeth Rigal and Marguerite Derrida).

²⁵ Cp. Botting, Fred; Wilson, Scott (ed.) (1997): *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, p. 95.