The Times of Love and Friendship

1. When we meet a friend, even after many years have passed, it is as if we had only left him moments ago. We resume the conversation as if it were an interrupted dialogue. And yet it isn’t. Neither is it simply the continuation of that previous conversation. The subject matter is different. We have changed, and so have our interests despite the impression that we are continuing to do what we have always done as if there had been no interval, as if there had been no passing of time at all. This is a disconcerting phenomenon. There is nothing quite like it in our everyday experience. Meeting a family member we first ask, “What have you been up to?” Our question seeks to fill a void in the fabric of continuous time. We know a person if we know every single moment of their history. Thus, speaking to one of our acquaintances, we ask what plans they have, what they will be doing for summer, for example: “Where are you going to spend your holidays?” The question about the future complements one about the past: “Where were you this winter? Where did you spend Christmas?” If there is a low degree of familiarity and we don’t know what to speak about, we talk about the weather, compare yesterday’s to today’s and wish for better tomorrow.

When two friends meet even after many years, on the other hand, they ask each other nothing. They do not deluge one another with questions about what they have done in order to reconstruct the past step by step. Actually, the past by no means appears interesting to them; they proceed to talk about what is in their hearts in the here and now. Each is completely and spontaneously open to the new. Those friends who upon meeting say to each other “now you’ll tell me everything”, or simply “tell me everything!”, are not true friends. These are throwaway lines. Equally, those that say, “But how long I haven’t seen you! Why haven’t you been in touch?” are not friends. Friends limit themselves to the question, “How are you?”, or “Are you well?” because the only thing that interests them is each other’s wellbeing. When friends meet they light up and smile because they are happy to see each other. They may add, “How much time has passed ...”, but this is merely an expression of pleasure. The explanation of this mysterious conduct lies probably in the fact that the friend regards my past and future from the same perspective as me: he identifies with us, and since we don’t need to ask ourselves what we have done, or what we desire, neither does he. We already know, and that is enough for him. Whatever happened is fine for him as long as it was fine for us. This is the reason why he asks,
“How are you?” What matters, what interests the both of us, is whether we are well or not, happy or not.

The time of friendship and the time of love are exact opposites. While the time of friendship is granular—a succession of present moments that are juxtaposed—the time of love is dense, continuous, spasmodic. Lovers endlessly talk about the past. Each is fascinated by the other’s past, which is continuously interrogated. And even after a brief separation lovers want to know what the other did so as to refill all the vacant spaces and even the briefest of intervals. They want to know the other’s thoughts, the hues of their sentiments, their doubts. The state of being in love wants to reconstruct everything, to reassemble the lived experience of the beloved in order to rediscover and to assimilate him. Being in love in fact tends towards fusion in order to create a new unity for two distinct persons, a couple into which both mutate. Lovers, by means of love, radically change their lives and so critically reexamine their past. Before they met they were different. After falling in love they realize how impoverished, cold, arid their previous lives were. Consequently, each has to relive their experiences and to devalue things past. Love’s “nascent state” is a kind of judgment day during which all that spelled unhappiness is sentenced and executed. And it augurs the beginning of a new epoch of unbelievable, unimaginable joy. Lovers are oriented to the future. At every instant they desire the beloved. If far away, they wait anxiously, feverishly. They always arrive early to a rendezvous only to wait. Being in love is remembrance and waiting. Its time is like a spasm that tightly binds together the very remote past and the very distant future. The present is that spasm’s tension. Every instant of love suffers from an excess of temporality; it wants to be eternity itself, a desire that in turn springs from love’s heightened temporal tension.

But friends do not meet to build a new collective entity that transcends them. They must not aim to change each other. Each follows his own life trajectory, his own personal destiny, seeks his fortune, seeks his love. The friend who accompanies the other on his quest, while remaining by his side, even while supporting him, is nevertheless not the object of this quest. When we are with a friend who is in love with someone, we understand him, enter his temporal dimension but then leave. Detaching ourselves from his point of view, we help him break away and thus provide him with the possibility of being on the outside looking in and to use those external fragments of knowledge he may need.

In friendship, too, one speaks of the past. When one of the two friends must return to their past, the other will accompany them on their journey.

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1 This important process has been called historicization. It pertains not only to falling in love, but also to collective social movements. See Alberoni, Movement and Institution.