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Two songs of friendship: The Convergence of Judeo-Christian and Nuu-chah-nulth Philosophies of Friendship in the Narrative Space of the 21st Century

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TWO SONGS OF FRIENDSHIP:

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and Nuu-chah-nulth Philosophies of Friendship
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INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of friendship is a curious concept. Even though it is not yet an established term for a full-fledged current in philosophical thought, the coinage has proven useful as a collective category, capacious enough to encompass all intellectual stances sharing the intuition that friendship is a prerequisite of any ethics. Interestingly, it is easy to observe that such an orientation of intellectual endeavors is neither unique to the cultures of the West, nor can it be reduced to being a mere outcome of poststructural revisions of inherited philosophical paradigms. The above notwithstanding, it must be admitted that it is predominantly owing to the cultural ferment of the Culture Wars of the 1980s that such a trend could become noticeable, owing to which studies devoted specifically to the discourses of friendship came into existence.

The present article has been inspired with the productivity of this current. Limiting its scope to the domain of comparative postcolonial studies, I seek to demonstrate how parallelisms observable in the intellectual reflection on friendship in the culture of the West, the perspective of which is represented by two corresponding philosophies of Jacques Derrida and Tadeusz Sławek and in the culture of Nuu-chah-nulth, presented on the basis of the analysis of E. Richard Atleo's *Tsawalk*, may become a point of departure for a cross-cultural dialogue. The potential outcome of such a dialogue restores hope for a harmonious world: with a philosophy of friendship at its foundation, the processes of building

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a balanced world—in which the long practice of the Western usurpation of power over the Other, his worldview, culture, religion, and lifestyle would be seen as illogical—might produce a paradigm in which the Other, being an indispensable component of the self, would not be conceived of in any other way than as a friend.

Such an assumption readily translates into a set of pragmatic—operational—principles encouraging not only revisions of what one already knows, but also good faith in learning. Friendship, founded upon knowledge about the Other by means of a polyphonic dialogue enhances the formation of new identities of the parties involved (Szahaj, 2004: 24–25). This, in turn, is a prerequisite of a new world order, which would exclude the notion of superiority and subordination from mutual relations. On the whole, as Sara Goering observes:

Our friends play a key role in our understanding of ourselves as well as in our interactions with others and our outlook on the world as a whole. Through intimate dialogue with friends, we are able to see the world and ourselves not only through our own eyes, but also from the perspectives of others. We get privileged access to another's view, and thus to a broader view of the world. (Goering, 2003: 404)

It is worth noticing that even totally different cultures—like those of Judeo-Christian Europeans and Nuuchahnulth, being one of Canadian First Nations, residing on the western coast of Vancouver—have surprisingly much in common when their respective discourses of friendship are considered. As soon as one's reflection renders the inherited attitude of one's cultural superiority null and void, common elements are revealed and the intercultural dialogue begins. Eventually, mutual complementation instead of competition, harmony instead of hegemony, creation instead of destruction come to the forefront of the debate and may provide the basic axiological framework of reference for legislatures and individuals alike.

Yet, the optimistic vision this article advocates is far from a naïve idealization of humankind as it is, and even further from a sentimental exhortation to 'love one another.' Demonstrating the potential for mutual development, the argument of my article simultaneously helps to map obstacles which need to be overcome in the process. Fostering cross-cultural friendship requires of the friends to relinquish the safety of their old habits and beliefs and to run the risk

of departing from well-known paths and orders to recognize and acknowledge values inconceivable within the inherited language, and to revise both: the old knowledge and the new.

A PHILOSOPHY OF FRIENDSHIP DERIVING FROM WESTERN METANARRATIVES

The cultural repertory of ideas seems to offer a potential which, sublimated, might serve as the basis for the establishment of a new relationship in a world of asymmetrical orders. This part of the article seeks to demonstrate the potential of the philosophy of friendship, which—if translated into the language of everyday education, politics and media—could provide a point of departure towards change.

The contemporary Judeo-Christian perspective, discussed below on the basis of Jacques Derrida's and Tadeusz Sławek's stances, recognizes the importance of such features in friendship as the lack of equality and homogeneity, opposition and distance. Both influential philosophers question traditional philosophical propositions, thus opening space for the revision of prevailing orders of super- and subordination. Both of them share the idea of the development of the relationship of friendship as a chance for the establishment of better world order. Their potentially complementary perspectives demonstrate the characteristics of the western 'party' committed to intercultural dialogue.

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JACQUES DERRIDA'S PHILOSOPHY OF FRIENDSHIP

In Jacques Derrida's understanding 'friendship is the relation that escapes definition', because it 'is the basis for a better social order which can neither be described nor prescribed but only experienced in a transformed future' (MacCabe, 1997: 50). On no account does Derrida aspire to provide a concise and explicit definition of friendship. In *The Politics of Friendship*, an extensive and profound analysis of the statement attributed to Aristotle: 'O my friends, there is no friend,'¹ Derrida introduces a new perspective on friendship, which deconstructs (and in many cases undermines)

1. Quoted in William Watkin (2002: 223).

the principles of former approaches, represented by Western philosophers from Plato, Aristotle and Cicero to Carl Schmitt, a 20th century German jurist and political thinker.

The first notion proposed by Derrida's antecedents and challenged by the French philosopher is the notion of equality, which Aristotle claims to be indispensable in the primary and most valuable type of friendship governed by the principle of virtue (the remaining two types are related to the primacy of usefulness and pleasure accordingly). This kind of friendship, however, would be built upon a condition of ultimate reciprocity and symmetry, which seems to contradict another thought of Aristotle's, who elsewhere claimed that it is better to love than to be loved (Derrida, 2005: 23-24). Only the latter of these two concepts Derrida finds acceptable. He supports it by stating simply that friendship is 'to love *before* being loved' (8). In a similar vein, as Calvin O. Schrag puts it, Derrida compares friendship to a 'gift, genuinely understood as a thinking and a giving without expectation of return, transcending all economies of exchange relations, approaching its crest and culmination in the gift of love' (Schrag, 2006: 154). All these practices would be automatically excluded if friendship were to be founded upon symmetry and reciprocity.

Hence, paraphrasing Nietzsche's words, Derrida proposes an alternative theory:

'Good friendship' supposes disproportion. It demands a certain rupture in reciprocity or equality, as well as the interruption of all fusion or confusion between you and me. ... 'Good friendship' is born of disproportion: when you esteem or respect (*achtet*) the other more than yourself. (Derrida, 2005: 62)

'According to Derrida, the encounter with the other is always already marked by asymmetry,' notices Chantéle Schwartz (2003: 13). It is not the evenness of the parties that makes this relationship worthy, but *de facto* the opposite, the asymmetry, inconsistency, a crevice on the harmonious surface of Aristotelian friendship. Similarly, Cicero's conviction that the answer to the question about the nature of friendship should be sameness rather than otherness is challenged by Derrida. A friend cannot be 'our own ideal image,' a better equivalent of ourselves, as the Roman orator would like

to think (Derrida, 2005: 4). Derrida is inclined towards an opposite belief that 'it is friendship with the stranger that constitutes "star friendship"' (Secomb, 2006: 456).

Thus, also the principles underlying the notion of friendship as stemming from the natural bond of brotherhood, or that of kinship, as promoted by the ancient philosophers, are undermined. Friendship based on the principle of homogeneity, meaning that those of the same blood as ours, as well as those sharing our national (or ethnic) affiliation, are our friends; those who do not—are strangers and, by extension, enemies is the symptom of ethnocentrism or outright racism, positions sharply opposite to friendship. Exposing the fissures upon the apparently even surface of what at first glance seems to be convincing argumentation, Derrida concludes that friendship cannot be based on the concept of brotherhood, which, in itself, lacks an explicit definition: 'there has never been anything *natural* in the brother figure on whose features has so often been drawn the face of the friend' (Derrida, 2005: 159).

Summarizing, Derrida creates a vision of a future-friendly democracy, which will no longer be based on the 'homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema':

[N]ot founded on equality and fraternity, but on responsibility to the other and on love of the stranger this friendly democracy would exceed the calculations and evaluations of reciprocal exchange and the homogenizing imperatives of fraternal similarity. (Starling, 2002: 112–113)

Derrida proposes a new, non-exclusive order of friendship, in which everybody is welcome to enter into the relation: 'the stranger, the woman and the racial other' (Secomb, 2006: 456). In this respect, Derrida's views seem to concur with the vision of friendship proposed by Tadeusz Sławek, presented in the next section of this article.

TADEUSZ SŁAWEK'S PHILOSOPHY OF FRIENDSHIP

Tadeusz Sławek derives his philosophy of friendship from his profound analysis of William Blake's oeuvre. Friendship, he asserts, 'is a therapy against despair' (Sławek, 1999: 19), it 'alleviates the pressure of existence' (Sławek, 2001: 141). He defines friend-

ship as a specific attitude towards the Other, which does not imply a simple collection of positive feelings one has for their friend, but a force which makes us go beyond ourselves (Sławek, 2001: 121). To experience such a relationship however, one must forget about oneself, so to speak, disappear, prepare space for the Other, who can enter only when one's thoughts and fears are shifted to that Other, to a friend (158). So that friendship involves withdrawing oneself from the centre of attention, which runs parallel with diminishing oneself in favour of the primacy given to Another.

The analysis of Sławek's further observations upon the notion of friendship leads to the recollection of the statement that friends never take possession of each other, since a friend can never be treated materialistically as an object or a product (122). The recognition of complete autonomy of both oneself and the Other is indispensable in every friendship, because it is always built upon the foundations of freedom and independence. There is no space for the dominance of either party in this relationship, as otherwise friendship would automatically be annihilated. When one party takes over power, friendship has no chances to survive.

The above notwithstanding, humans do have a tendency to dominate over one another and—according to Sławek—the only way to avoid it, is to keep a distance. 'Friendship, which—as Thoreau says—is always exercised at a distance, ... always appears ... on the horizon of our being' (Sławek, 2006: 21).² Maintaining this distance is of major significance, as it allows for the formation of a relationship which does not affect anyone's freedom; on the contrary, it recognizes and respects Another's independence (Sławek, 2001: 142) and contributes to the creation of a unique proximity between the parties. In this understanding friendship is a path leading to Another, it is a relationship, in which one moves towards Another, but still increases the distance (136).

Freedom of speech, the right to express oneself is another demonstration of one's autonomy. Remembering the fact that in friendship one's freedom cannot limit that of the Other, in conversations friends may say to one another whatever they choose, even if these

2. The original quote in Polish reads: 'Przyjaźń, którą—jako powiada Thoreau—ćwiczymy zawsze w odległości, ... zawsze pojawia się ... na horyzoncie naszego bycia.'

are words of anger or irritation, sometimes evoked by the friend. Anger does not have to destroy friendship: on the contrary, it often tightens its bonds. Uttering words of exasperation, indignation, or annoyance—friends are honest: they do not hide their true emotions from one another. In contrast, while encountering an enemy, one is more likely to be striving to be in control of one's emotions in order not to expose his or her weaknesses. In friendship, honest, albeit angry words lose much of their destructive power (Sławek, 2001: 121).

Furthermore, Sławek draws special attention to the fact that friendship necessitates an appropriate dose of criticism. It implies, first of all, being cautious about the validity of some truisms. As was suggested before, being a friend does not necessarily denote 'being friendly.' Friendship is not a superficial relationship of 'mutual understanding' and apparent similarity between people, but, as the philosopher suggests, the comprehension of the fact that the relation is built on the fragile foundations of specific circumstances, intermingled with our subjective perceptions and opinions (Sławek, 2001: 140). Correspondingly, friends must beware of the (misleading) apparent perfection of Another. In friendship, there always must be space for some opposition and critical thinking, allowing one to point out the other's weaknesses without ever turning to aggression (134).

The concept of the opposition is one of the fundamentals of Sławek's philosophy of friendship: in his view 'the moral philosophy of friendship is the ethics of contrariness' (Sławek, 1999: 13). It is a prerequisite of friendship to oppose a friend, yet not in a gesture of aggression but rather with the intention to leave space for Another and to respect their freedom (Sławek, 2001: 132). Sławek explains the idea further:

Friendship is a manner of being together which unconceals an unusual space in the network of human sociability: it certainly *takes place*, but in the place taken it discovers yet another realm which remains empty and vacant, and thus *not taken*, a realm of freedom and opposition. (Sławek, 1999: 29)

Sławek's analysis of Blake's works leads him to a metaphorical observation that friendship, in fact, 'is the garb of otherness' (Sławek,

2001: 132). Friendship, in other words, is not about the rejection of Otherness or about pretending that it does not exist in the relationship between friends. Instead, it is about caring respect for otherness in Another, it is about 'clothing otherness so as to keep it warm,' approaching it without fear. Friendship consists in the recognition that it is 'a sequence of othernesses which refuse to be tamed, and hence a friend must remain an ever unknown Other, distant, and untranslatable proclamation of meaning which cannot be merely "friendly"' (Sławek, 1999: 31).

On the whole, friendship awakens individuals, opens their eyes and makes them understand not so much Another as themselves, in the process of making space: diminishing, 'be-littleing,' and withdrawing to make space for Another.

The philosophies of friendship of both Derrida and Sławek exclude from the concept of friendship the component of the necessity of homogeneity, similarity and equality, considering all these concepts both unreliable and non-definable. Simultaneously, highlighting the importance of autonomy in each relationship, they advocate the diversity, and even open opposition among friends. Such a comprehension of friendship allows for the recognition of other cultures, as well as other new fields of enquiry. Eventually, it opens space for new perspectives, such as the perspective of Nuu-chah-nulth.

A PHILOSOPHY OF FRIENDSHIP DERIVING FROM TSAWALK

Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories have it that *heshook-ish tsawalk*, everything is one (Atleo, 2004: xi). This idea is central to what I refer to as the theory of Tsawalk, as oneness involves all aspects of reality, 'both physical and metaphysical' (xi). E. Richard Atleo defines Tsawalk as '[a] worldview wherein the universe is regarded [as] a network of relationships' (118). In the light of Tsawalk, unity is 'a natural order of existence' (20), not only on the level of family, community, or nation, but also in the context of the whole globe.

Relationships testifying to the unity of all can be found between the physical and spiritual worlds, but also among all living beings: everything has one Creator and one origin. This aspect of the theory of Tsawalk seems particularly significant, as its practical application

may prove to most visibly affect the everyday life of the Nuuchah-nulth: creation, as Atleo observes, '... was not designed for the separation or alienation of individuals from one another but to emphasize togetherness and relatedness between life forms' (Atleo, 2004: 108).

This belief constitutes the core of the Nuuchah-nulth culture, underlying their philosophy, tradition and lifestyle. Consequently, since people have not been created to live in alienation, they form communities, and hence Nuuchah-nulth's large houses have always been inhabited by a number of nuclear families which belong to one extended family. Nuuchah-nulth relations with others are regulated by the teachings contained in the origin stories. These narratives sublimate the most important values of the community, including helpfulness, kindness, and—last but not least—respect. Friendship thus understood is not a guideline or a suggestion: it is each Nuuchah-nulth's obligation. Their narratives teach men and women that such an obligation must be met first and foremost with respect to family members: '*Clayahoeaulth-ee yakh-yew-itk*: Greet with joy, gladness, and enthusiasm those who are related to you,' but by no means is restricted to them: 'Since the Creator owns everything, all must be held in esteem' (16). There are no exceptions to that rule, as Nuuchah-nulth believe that everybody is of one essence: 'People have human skins of different colours. When they all take off their clothing, it will be found that each is like the other spirit, in essence' (62). Consequently, Tsawalk 'necessitates a consciousness that all creation has a common origin, and for this reason *isaak* is extended to all life forms' (15–16). Since everybody is connected with Quaootz, everybody is to be held in esteem and treated with respect.

In the Nuuchah-nulth worldview there is no room for any manifestation of racism or prejudice. The idea of inferiority of any living form within this worldview is alien to their culture and hence, also any attempt to treat any species more favourably than others is an unacceptable breach of the balanced order of oneness.

In the light of the above, it is possible to claim that the Nuuchah-nulth worldview of *heshook-ish tsawalk*, everything is one, is built upon a philosophy of friendship which admits everybody with no exceptions. It assumes the common origin and essence

of all, rejects superficial divisions among human beings resulting from the lack of knowledge giving birth to stereotypes and, ultimately, fear. Nuu-chah-nulth teachings govern the relationships of all living beings. Relying upon the principles of the obligation of helpfulness, friendliness and respect, Tsawalk does not limit the idea of friendship to human persons only. Since all is one, the friendship of Tsawalk is a friendship towards one and all.

JUDEO-CHRISTIANITY. TSAWALK.
THE CONVERGENCE OF PHILOSOPHIES

The dialogic debate on the philosophy of friendship in Tsawalk and in the cultures of the West presented so far seems to suggest the first, summary, conclusions. The very first step in looking for the points of convergence between the Judeo-Christian and Nuuchah-nulth worldviews is the realization of the fact that Tsawalk 'assumes the unity of creation irrespective of any contemporary society's contradictions' (Atleo, 2004: 133). Thus, this theory functions in all circumstances irrespective of how far the present day world departs from the celebrated unity. Disruptions of harmonious existence are superficial: what counts is 'a natural relationship between creation and the source of creation' (71), the Creator. The Nuuchah-nulth worldview reflects upon human nature in general, presenting all people as having 'a natural desire for light and a natural antipathy toward darkness,' '[t]he desire for heroic exploits,' and natural proneness to succeed as well as fail in their enterprises (11). Interestingly, in Judeo-Christian cultures, the global understanding of the universe as an orderly Universe functioning in perfect harmony with God's plan, like in Tsawalk, is not questioned even in the face of the notorious neglect for the commandment of love. The doctrine of the awesome justice of the Creator holds, and all tragedies befalling humankind are attributed to the logic of some chain of causes and effects: if a traumatic experience does not lend itself to being read as punishment for sins, it is interpreted as a test, to which the faithful are exposed by God. Reality can never contradict the Order: a contradiction is always explicable within the system of beliefs.

Such characteristics of the two paradigms of thought do not, however, exhaust the list of similarities. Apparently, the Judeo-

Christian and Nuu-chah-nulth philosophies, evolving in two different edges of the world, have surprisingly much in common. The practical implications of Jacques Derrida's philosophy of friendship combined with those deriving from the reflection of Tadeusz Sławek, are much closer to the practical implications of the worldview of Tsawalk than any of the preceding theories.

To begin with, the concept of the binary opposition of 'brother' vs. 'enemy,' characteristic for the traditional Judeo-Christian metanarrative, has served as the basis for the establishment of all interpersonal relations as well as relations between groups for centuries. Until the emergence of the deconstructivist revision of the phenomenon of friendship the admittance into a friendly relationship has been restricted: the brother, fellow citizen, another representative of the same culture practically exhausted the list of potential friends. Such a perception of friendship is gradually changing: today, the formerly voiceless or marginal others have been finally brought back to reality, and gained a status equal to the 'non-others' in the discourse of governing the relation of friendship. Even though in the Nuu-chah-nulth philosophy of friendship excluding anyone would be incomprehensible in the light of Tsawalk, the practical implications of the two discourses of friendship may be claimed as similar.

Another aspect which may serve as a cornerstone for the convergence of Nuu-chah-nulth and Judeo-Christian 21st century philosophies of friendship is the recognition of the diversity of all living forms, which Nuu-chah-nulth always appreciated and which eventually starts to be valued by the Judeo-Christian world. According to Nuu-chah-nulth: '[a]ll life forms have intrinsic value. Humans of every race have equal value' (Atleo, 2004: 130). Moreover, each has its role intended by the Creator, so he or she is indispensable to the creation of complete reality. For the Western world, diversity starts to appear as an extremely rich source of information, not only about other people, languages and cultures, but primarily about oneself. The experience of multiculturalism gave birth to eco-philosophical stances, acknowledging the interrelatedness of all life forms, as well as human rights movements, struggling for the non-discrimination of people on grounds other than merit. The encounter with the Other allows one to reconsider one's own

worldview, beliefs and opinions with a certain dose of criticism, as is illustrated by the two following observations by Sara Goering:

when we talk about the value of diversity, we do not blindly value any and all differences, but rather we value the kind of difference that contributes to a greater understanding or appreciation of our lives and our aims, as well as those of other people.

and elsewhere:

Mill suggests we should value diversity (as rich variation rather than just any difference) for its ability to keep us questioning and reassessing our own beliefs, theories, and styles of living. (Goering, 2003: 405)

Eventually, the most significant point of convergence of both discussed stances is the *obligation of friendship*, which, in Judeo-Christian culture, stems directly from the deconstructivist revision of the various faces of the *politics* of friendship by means of the critical study of its language, and in the culture of the Nuu-chah-nulth is a direct consequence of the elementary sense of unity conditioning the preservation of harmony and comprehensible order, as well as individual and group survival. Differences notwithstanding, it is worth remembering that '[t]he benefits to be had from seeking out more diverse friendships are multidimensional' (Goering, 2003: 405–406), and that individuals representing even the most distant cultures, yet functioning under an *obligation* to befriend Another do stand a chance to enjoy the above benefits.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS THE PRACTICE OF FRIENDSHIP

Poststructuralist philosophers of deconstruction have demonstrated that there is no longer an 'I,' a white European Christian, who is the point of reference. Quite the reverse, there is always the Other who precedes this 'I.' The apparent constancy of the world has collapsed together with the realisation of the fact that I am the other concurrently. Sławek illustrates these words with Derrida's reformulation of Descartes' famous statement:³

3. See: Tadeusz Sławek (1997: 12).

I think, therefore I am the other; I think, therefore I need the other (in order to think); I think, therefore the possibility of friendship is lodged in the movement of my thought in so far as it demands, calls for, desires the other, the necessity of the other, the cause of the other at the heart of the *cogito*. (Derrida, 2005: 224)

Thus, the presence of the other is indispensable in human life. Each act of thinking opens an opportunity to establish a new friendship. Every chance should be used: friendship, after all, is 'the synonym of existence,' 'the source of being' which is not just 'pretence and delusion' (Sławek, 2001: 151).

The first step on the long path leading to the achievement of such a state and the establishment of cross-cultural friendship is to admit to oneself that one is actually *willing* to make an effort and try tuning in to Another's perspective. Gadamer says: 'You cannot understand, if you do not want to understand' (Sławek, 2001: 148). However, to gain such a perspective, 'a series of cultural changes (at the level of linguistic, legal, religious, media, and economic reforms) that would mediate self-other relations and facilitate less appropriative relations between individuals in contemporary life' are needed (Deutscher, 1998: 170). The process requires the destabilization of all the certainties and axioms that rule one's life, which is why it often proves so difficult (Sławek, 2001: 148). The effort is not futile, though. What can be gained in return is a new world order governed by such rules as mutual respect, and recognition of the other's value, and not the appropriation of or hegemony exercised over another. As Sławek explains, friendship implies the movement towards, not for the other, with neither intension of taking possession of the other nor any sign of aggression (Sławek, 1997: 3). Thus, friendship is always characterized by '*wanting the other to be equal.*' At that, friendship by no means demands unanimity or total agreement on how problems should be dealt with. 'For friends it is enough to agree that some problems, which are disregarded by others, are in fact really important. They do not have to agree upon how to solve these problems, though' (Staples Lewis, 1968: 60).

On the whole, the cultural and philosophical differences, apparently insurmountable, should be treated as different ways leading to the achievement of the same goal, solving problems and finding

the truth (Szymańska, 2003: 169). None of the worldviews can claim that theirs is the only legitimate way: such a lack of judgment has resulted in colonialism, slavery and other forms of oppression—not necessarily grounded in sheer economic need. Since we are Others to our Others, our existence *obliges us* to be mutual friends. Acknowledging this obligation, we take the first step towards a new order of the world. The order of friendship.

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