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Murray Pratt

THE END OF DIALOGUE

The first time I encountered Ross Chambers was through his work. Devouring *Story and Situation* many years ago as an eager young lecturer at the University of Warwick preparing to teach a narrative course, I was fascinated by Chambers's approach to the "point" of storytelling, through attending to transactional, literary, and ultimately philosophical contextualization and analysis. Along with the work of other theorists (I think of Roland Barthes, but also Mieke Bal and Peter Brooks) exploring ways to think about interpretation, or considering our unending quests to make stories mean and meaningful, Chambers's text proved incredibly fertile in animating approaches to the novels and short stories we studied in the Forms of Narrative course. More than this though, I was also struck by the precision and acuity of his writing, his concern with building a compelling and logical argument, and yet also the delight he took in meandering and digressing when there was more to be said, suggested, or savored.

When, later, I had the privilege of meeting Ross in person, it was a real pleasure to encounter, in his approach to conversations and engagements with the world around him, the same intellectual precision, sparky curiosity, fondness for digression, and above all gentleness, I had found in his writing. I remember a few moments in particular, when I was able to attend lectures he gave, or to share a moment in his company, sitting in the shade in café terraces, on occasions when he returned to Australia and we met up at conferences of the Australian Society for French Studies (ASFS). Indeed, Ross had been instrumental in my decision to accept a position at the University of Technology Sydney, enthusiastically describing both the academic and urban landscape I would call home for eight years, when I mentioned that I was considering the offer after a lecture he gave at the University of Bristol, a lecture I still remember well for his thoughtful exploration of *La Haine* as a meditation on lived cityscapes.

His influence on my own modest academic expeditions has been significant. In his approach to AIDS writing I found once more a careful and politically charged (precisely in that his readings were always full of care) model for thinking about Hervé Guibert's extraordinary writings on the edges of the epidemic. Ross was kind enough to support Jean-Pierre Boulé and me in our work on organizing a symposium and volume on AIDS in France, and

his generosity in encouraging our engagement with Guibert and other writers was instrumental in the success of this project. The emphasis on deferral and mediation as the conditions for narrative context and interpretation that Chambers makes in his earliest work on narrative theories reappears in his elaboration of the concept of accompaniment in this context, and again, as he developed the notion of the loiterly. Many of these contributions became the focus of attention during the ASFS events, both in the contents of papers given (I think of some of the outstanding work of H el ene Jaccomard and Joe Hardwick in particular, although many of the regular delegates would often draw on Chambers's ideas), but, significantly, also in the conversations that continued beyond the lecture hall.

This year, leading a class on Ali Smith's *Autumn* as part of the Seven Masterpieces course at the University of Amsterdam, I once again found myself looking around for a theoretical angle that would help steer students toward considering the point of the novel. Reading together the opening chapter of *Story and Situation* brought the spark to the class that it needed. "What you reading?" Daniel, the elderly man whom she visits in a hospice asks the protagonist, Elisabeth. He asks this only in her memories though, as, for the duration of the text, while she does indeed read to him (Ovid, Huxley), he remains in a coma until its very final pages. As accompaniment, the time Elisabeth and Daniel share is creative, precious, communal. More than this, the question he asks (and the fact that he does so in her memory) is the key to unlocking the narrative's hard-hitting points about the value of art in making connections, opening up perspectives, making our lives meaningful for ourselves and each other, even across generations and in ways that confront our mortality, particularly so in the pre-post-Brexit world characterized, for Smith, as "the end of dialogue." "What are you reading?" is a question that Ross would also ask, or "What are you working on?" with a genuine interest and readiness to engage in dialogue, to prompt, encourage, dissuade perhaps, but above all to explore together with his interlocutor. Like Elisabeth's memories of Daniel, my recollections of meeting Ross are filled with moments when he attended, in the fullest sense, to me and to others, and for this reason, I remember not only the tremendously inspirational academic but also the kindness, integrity, and sparkle he brought to his encounters and that inspire me even more.

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