

FRIENDSHIP IN WASHINGTON SQUARE

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ABSTRACT: This paper considers definitions of friendship found in Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship* and Montaigne's essay "On Friendship". These definitions are then used to analyse friendship in Henry James's novel *Washington Square*.

RESUMO: Esse artigo faz reflexões sobre as definições de amizade contidas no livro de Derrida *The Politics of Friendship* e no ensaio de Montaigne "On Friendship". Essas definições são usadas para analisar a amizade no romance de Henry James, intitulado *Washington Square*.

Friendship consists in loving [...] it is a way of loving.

Derrida

In a discussion at the Centre for Modern French thought, at the University of Sussex, on December 1st, 1997, Jacques Derrida stated that according to Aristotle there are three types of friendship. One is based on virtue, and has nothing to do with politics. It must be a friendship between two virtuous men. Women, as we shall see, cannot be friends according to the classical definition. Perhaps, for the ancient, women cannot be virtuous, not even in language. The second type of friendship is based on utility and usefulness, and this is political friendship. The third type of friendship is based on pleasure, which the ancient Greeks traditionally sought among young people. Young men, of course, for we must remember women cannot be friends in the opinion of ancient Greeks.

Derrida wonders how one can address people as friends, and then goes on to say that there is no such thing as a friend. And I wonder why Derrida writes at all. But that is not a matter for investigation here, for I am more precisely concerned with friendship in the novel *Washington Square* by Henry James. But to talk about friendships in *Washington Square*, I must define what friendship might be, what forms it can take. In order to do that, I shall be reading Montaigne's essay "On Friendship", and also

Derrida's *Politics of Friendship* out of which I take the quote "O my friends, there is no friend," which Derrida attributes to Aristotle. I shall take their definition of friendship, and try to find out if any of the characters in Henry James's work could possibly enjoy such a thing.

But what is enjoyment? Does it matter? Perhaps not –for, as I have already stated, right from the start, there is no friend in *Washington Square*. So whether or not there is enjoyment in friendship, there still is no friend in *Washington Square*, and therefore no enjoyment from friendship in Henry James's work. Or is there? I will be focusing on friendship, on friends, on a friend. But what kind of friend am I talking about?

Given Aristotle's definition of friendship, or rather, Derrida's description of Aristotle's three types of friendship, it is possible to say that Aristotle does not negate the status of friendship to any of the types described. This negation, if negation it be, appears in Montaigne, "O my friends, there is no friend". But that phrase, which Montaigne tells us was Aristotle's habitual phrase, might not be Aristotle's at all, for, as Derrida points out: "[t]his is a cited quotation (...) of a saying attributed, only attributed, by a sort of rumour or public opinion (...) [it] is a declaration *referred* to Aristotle." (DERRIDA, 1997, p. 2) Moreover, is Aristotle's quoted quotation really a negation, or an affirmation? Is it affirming the existence of friends ("O my friends") or denying it ("there is no friend")? Is it affirming one type of friendship and denying another? For Montaigne, the latter possibility seems to be the case. Montaigne is setting his friendship apart, saying it is like no other, or rather, he is saying one such friendship is "so complete and perfect that its like has seldom been read of, and nothing comparable is to be seen among the men of our day. So many circumstances are needed to build it up that it is something if fate achieves it once in three centuries." (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 92). Perhaps, then, one could say Montaigne is saying something like 'O my friends, there is only one friend', which is again paradoxical, or antithetical. If there is only one friend, how can one address 'friends' in the plural? More properly, perhaps, Montaigne is saying 'O my friends, there is only one type of friendship'. This would not exclude the possibility of a plural, the possibility of more than one friend. And since Aristotle describes three types, which type is Montaigne referring to?

Curiously enough, when Montaigne quotes Aristotle, he does so to illustrate only one possible type of friendship, which is not the friendship he wants to talk about, it is not the perfect friendship which he is trying to describe. After all, how could Montaigne

say “there is no friend”? He is saying precisely the opposite, he is saying that there is one friend, his friend, and that his friendship can be compared to no other, he sees few or no examples of it in literature, or certainly nothing like it amongst his contemporaries. Aristotle’s quotation, Montaigne would say, describes another type of friendship, it describes “other friendships”, those that are also animosities of some kind. They are the everyday friendships:

In these other friendships one must go forward, bridle in hand, prudently and with precautions; the knot is never so secure that one has not reason to distrust it. ‘Love him’, said Chilo, ‘as if one day you may come to hate him; hate him as if you may one day come to love him.’ This precept, abhorrent though it is in this supreme and perfect relationship, is sound when applied to commonplace and everyday friendships, to which we must apply Aristotle’s habitual phrase: ‘O my friends, there is no friend!’. (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 99)

So perhaps Montaigne thinks that Aristotle means to say ‘O friends, I call you friends today, but tomorrow you could be my enemies, because there is no friend’. A very different sentence, Derrida would argue, but then again, Derrida would also ask if that is a sentence at all.

For Montaigne, perhaps, there are no friends, there is only one friend: his friend, Étienne de la Boétie. Other types of friend do not count. And according to Montaigne there are four types described by the ancients, not just the three types Derrida tells us about: natural, social, hospitable, and sexual. But Montaigne says that none of these types, “separately or in combination”, come up to his friendship with de la Boétie. For Montaigne,

[...] all those relationships that are created and fostered by pleasure and profit, by public or private interest, are so much the less fine and noble, and so much the less *friendships*, in so far as they mix some cause, or aim, or advantage with friendship, other than friendship itself. (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 92)

Montaigne also discards the ‘natural’ type of friendship by stating that “[t]he feeling of children for their parents is rather respect” (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 92). The natural friendship is “imposed upon us by natural law and obligation, there is less of our own choice and free-will in [this type of friendship]” (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 93). He even mentions that philosophers such as Aristippus have also “disdained this natural tie. When someone insisted on the affection that he owed his children, since they came out of him, he began to spit, saying that this came out of him too, and that we also breed like and worms” (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 93).

Montaigne's friendship cannot be compared with "the affection we feel for women" either. He recognises this relationship is born of our own choice, and that it is more "active, hotter and fiercer. But it is a reckless and fickle flame, wavering and changeable (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 94)". There is also the additional impediment in the fact that, according to Montaigne, "[t]here has never yet been an example of a woman's attaining to [a fuller and more complete friendship], and the ancient schools are at one in their belief that it is denied to the female sex." And it is perhaps unfortunate that "[women's] souls do not seem firm enough [...] [for] if that were not so, if [...] a relationship could be established in which not only the soul had its perfect enjoyment, but also the body took share in the alliance". In a relationship between two men, the option to have the body share in the enjoyment is "permitted by the Greeks", but "our [Montaigne's] morality rightly abhors it" (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 95). Montaigne makes it clear, however, that his friendship is not like any described by the Greeks.

What about numbers? How many friends? Would Derrida ask 'does that count?'. This is what Montaigne has to say about the amount of friends that could share this perfect friendship of which he talks about:

Eudamidas [...] had two friends, Charixenus [...] and Aretheus [...]. Being a poor man, and his two friends being rich, when he came to die he made his will in this form: 'To Aretheus I leave the task of supporting my mother and providing for her old age, and to Charixenus the duty of finding a husband for my daughter and giving her the biggest dowry he can afford; and in case of either of them should die I appoint the survivor to take his place.' (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 100)

And then we're told how, after Charixenus's death, Aretheus takes care of both the mother and the sister. Greatly impressive though this friendship may be, it still falls short: "[t]his example is quite complete but for one detail: the number of friends. For this perfect friendship of which I speak is indivisible." Other friendships, the common ones, are divisible. But this singular relationship that Montaigne wants to describe, "possesses the soul, and rules over it with singular sovereignty". How would one reconcile contradictory requests from two friends, or keep a secret for one friend to the detriment of the other? Indeed, that would be impossible, for a "unique and dominant friendship dissolves all other obligations." (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 101)

Montaigne's friendship is perhaps so singular that it fits only his relationship with de la Boétie and no other. His definition of friendship is too strict to fit any other model, any other two people, whether they be fictional characters in a story, or students legally enrolled in an institution of higher learning. It is interesting, nonetheless, to know how Montaigne defines this friendship (or 'ideal' friendship), and I can certainly investigate the presence of this type of friendship in "Washington Square". But then I would too quickly arrive at my initial statement, that there are no friends in "Washington Square".

The type of friendship Montaigne means to divulge may be very idiosyncratic, but it is ultimately derived from Aristotle's description of a 'friendship based on virtue', which may seem to divergent from Montaigne's notion of ideal friendship in quite a few aspects. But Aristotle's expressed notions of 'virtue friendship', however idiosyncratic, in many ways resemble Montaigne's own notions of 'ideal friendship', even though Aristotle represented his own culture, with its associated peculiarities (Montaigne, after all, also represented his culture in his essays, and it had its own peculiarities). These peculiarities of ancient Greek culture are reflected in some notions Aristotle has about the likelihood of people of different ages forming a relationship. These, in particular, diverge from Montaigne's notions, for his friendship to de la Boétie was formed when both men were mature, so it is rather predictable that Montaigne will discount Aristotle's idea that between young and elderly people friendship arises less readily, inasmuch as they are less good-tempered and enjoy companionship less. Montaigne tells us the opposite: that he met de la Boétie when both were "grown men" and they had "no time to lose" and therefore their friendship did not "conform to the regular pattern of mild friendships that require so many precautions in the form of long preliminary intercourse" (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 97).

Another peculiarity of Aristotle's notion of friendship is not disputed by Montaigne at all, but confirmed by him (as I mentioned above): it concerns his exclusion of women from this type of 'virtue friendship'. But, of course, let us not forget that two other types of friendship are described by Aristotle, and they have already been mentioned: the 'pleasure' friendship and the 'utility' (or usefulness) friendship. They will be of some use, but I'm more concerned with the 'virtue friendship', for that is what I will later try to find in "Washington Square". Perhaps Aristotle's definition of the three different types of friendship, particularly the 'virtue' friendship, would be too strict to use here also, since we would base our search on the

premise that women can never attain a friendship. This would eliminate some considerations about the characters in “Washington Square” and their relationship to one another. Properly speaking, I would only be able to discuss the relationship between Dr. Sloper and Morris Townsend, and I wish to look briefly into other relationships that have attracted my attention, namely those that also involve the female characters.

While Aristotle and Montaigne agree women cannot have the experience of friendship, be it with another woman or with a man, Derrida is not so quick to exclude them. In his discussion in 1997 at the Centre for Modern French Thought, he states that this concept of friendship is “phallogocentric or phallogocentric” but this doesn’t mean that

[...] the hegemony of this concept was so powerful that what it excluded was effectively totally excluded. It doesn’t mean that a woman couldn’t have the experience of friendship with a man or with another woman. It means simply that within this culture, this society, by which this prevalent canon was considered legitimate, accredited, then there was no voice, no discourse, no possibility of acknowledging these excluded possibilities (DERRIDA, 1997, p. 76).

I shall not exclude the women in “Washington Square”, though I recognise the phallogocentric nature of the society and culture in which they live. It is a society and culture that does not give women much of a voice. Dr. Sloper, a man who has little regards for women, finds in his wife a rare example: “[s]ave when he fell in love with Catherine Harrington, he had never been dazzled, indeed, by any feminine characteristics whatever” (JAMES, 1996, p. 23). Having lost his first child, in his view a boy of extraordinary promise, he ends up losing his wife in exchange for a disappointment of a girl, who bears her mother’s name. Perhaps the girl is more a disappointment for being a girl than for lacking qualities of her mother that were worthy of admiration, for Dr. Sloper’s daughter was “an infant of a sex which rendered the poor child, to the doctor’s sense, an inadequate substitute for his lamented first-born, of whom he had promised himself to make an admirable man” (JAMES, 1996, p. 21). She can, of course, not be made an admirable man, and she is also doomed to fail as a substitute for her dead mother, for she lacks her charm and beauty, not to mention she also lacks the intellect of her father or even Morris Townsend.

Mrs. Penniman, Dr. Sloper’s sister, is no substitute for Mrs. Sloper either, but is nonetheless given the incumbency to make a clever woman out of Catherine, another

task that is doomed to failure. Neither woman is highly regarded by Dr. Sloper, so it is perhaps fitting they should be placed together. But their relationships to Dr. Sloper are, of course, different, though arguably of the same type (Montaigne would say it is a ‘natural’ friendship). His daughter, at least in the beginning, feels a peculiar sort of admiration, perhaps awe, and a constant desire to please him:

She was extremely fond of her father, and very much afraid of him; she thought him the cleverest and handsomest and most celebrated of men. The poor girl found her account so completely in the exercise of her affections that the little tremor of fear that mixed itself with her filial passion gave the thing an extra relish rather than blunted its edge. Her deepest desire was to please him, and her conception of happiness was to know that she had succeeded in pleasing him (JAMES, 1996, p. 26).

Mrs. Penniman might share some of the fear for Dr. Sloper that Catherine feels, but for different reasons. For one, she lives in her brother’s house and is perhaps financially dependent upon him. But there is also the fact that, in his presence, she refrains from posing as a fountain of instruction, a designation that her brother might consider to be off the mark.

So both women, related by blood as they are, do indeed have some kind of familial bond that could have been described as a friendship to Dr. Sloper, were it not for the fact that they seem, in another level, very distant from him. Mrs. Penniman’s relationship to her brother seems more properly grounded on utility, as Aristotle might have put it; and Catherine’s relationship to her father is arguably grounded on pleasure (or enjoyment?), if one assumes, with Derrida, that “there is a place for rejoicing in loving” (DERRIDA, 1997, p. 12).

Mrs. Penniman’s relationship to Catherine is not exactly that of a mother and daughter, even though Mrs. Penniman was put in charge of Catherine when the girl was about ten years old. It is a relationship that involves some level of respect, though it develops and changes with time, as the story progresses. But in that aspect it is not different from the relationship the girl has with the male characters in “Washington Square”, which also changes as the story progresses. Catherine’s love for her father is not reciprocal, and even though he tries to hide it from her, the girl seems to be aware of it. Her love for Morris Townsend is not reciprocal either: she might rejoice in loving him, but his love, his *philia*, seems to be directed towards the money she will inherit,

and of which he plans to make use. If their relation could be described as a friendship, on his part we could say it is based on usefulness.

Morris Townsend's friendship with Mrs. Penniman could be described in a similar manner, that is, it is also a relationship based on usefulness. It is clear enough that Morris Townsend is a friend of Mrs. Penniman only as far as she can be useful for him. She is his ally and he associates with her in the hope she will be able to help him get to Catherine. Her *philia* is not the same as Catherine, as the narrator insistently points out throughout the text, though here and there one can find certain passages which suggest Mrs. Penniman might be jealous, or at least she might be toying with the notion that Morris Townsend would have made a better husband than the one she once had. But she is only in love with her idea of romance, and she finds in Morris Townsend the possibility to engage in a game of creating fantasies of a romantic life for Catherine that she might have wanted for herself, and which she is unable to experience directly. Mrs. Penniman might not believe in Morris Townsend's sincerity, but she does think he might make a perfect husband for her niece, or rather, she thinks he would have been a more suitable husband for herself than Mr. Penniman was. Perhaps because she cannot have Morris, and with him the romantic life of which she dreams, she decides instead to have Catherine act out her romance.

While Mrs. Penniman performs this 'confidant friend' role with Morris Townsend, Mrs. Almond performs her confidant role with Dr. Sloper. Mrs. Almond is Dr. Sloper's favourite sister, and he seems to derive more pleasure from this relationship with her, than with his relationship with his own daughter. Towards Catherine, he is dismissive right from the beginning. He did not

[visit] his disappointment upon the poor girl [...], [o]n the contrary, [...] he did his duty with exemplary zeal, and recognized that she was a faithful and affectionate child. Besides, he was a philosopher [...]. He satisfied himself that he had expected nothing, though, indeed, with a certain oddity of reasoning. "I expect nothing," he said to himself, "so that if she gives me a surprise, it will be all clear gain. If she doesn't, it will be no loss. (JAMES, 1996, p. 27)

Perhaps the surprise Dr. Sloper eventually gets from his daughter, has to do with Catherine's stubbornness, or obstinacy, and not with a pleasant surprise he might have had if the girl had turned out to be rather cleverer than he presumed at starting.

As for the friendship between Mrs. Almond and Dr. Sloper, I find it difficult to argue that this might at all be based on virtue. Dr. Sloper might be virtuous enough, and the same applies to Mrs. Almond, but there are two points to consider: the first is that she is his sister, and that more properly belongs to a different category of friendship, one which Montaigne might call ‘natural’, that is, one based on obligation or familial duty; the second is that Dr. Sloper might also consider this relationship for its usefulness, since his sister acts not only as a confidant, but also, at times, as an advisor.

One piece of advice she gives him is that he should go and see Morris Townsend’s sister, Mrs. Montgomery, and confront her about her brother’s intentions. She seems to be a virtuous woman, if such a thing is possible (let us keep in mind what Aristotle and Montaigne have to say about this, not to mention the fact that the word ‘virtue’ comes from the Latin and its root means ‘man’). But Dr. Sloper thinks of her virtue, it seems, in a rather demeaning fashion:

Mrs. Montgomery was evidently a thrifty and self-respecting little person--the modest proportions of her dwelling seemed to indicate that she was of small stature--who took a virtuous satisfaction in keeping herself tidy, and had resolved that, since she might not be splendid, she would at least be immaculate. (JAMES, 1996, p. 82)

Not much later, Dr. Sloper bluntly divulges to Mrs. Montgomery one of the notions he has about women in general:

You women are all the same! But the type to which your brother belongs was made to be the ruin of you, and you were made to be its handmaids and victims. The sign of the type in question is the determination--sometimes terrible in its quiet intensity--to accept nothing of life but its pleasures, and to secure these pleasures chiefly by the aid of your complaisant sex. Young men of this class never do anything for themselves that they can get other people to do for them, and it is the infatuation, the devotion, the superstition of others, that keeps them going. These others in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred are women. What our young friends chiefly insist upon is that some one else shall suffer for them; and women do that sort of thing, as you must know, wonderfully well.” The Doctor paused a moment, and then he added abruptly, “You have suffered immensely for your brother! (JAMES, 1996, p. 87)

It would be fair to say, from what we have seen of Dr. Sloper, that he does not precisely think much of women, and that certainly prevents him from developing with them a higher form of friendship (one based on virtue). Morris Townsend, in that respect, is in agreement with Dr. Sloper. And if they agree, let us say, ‘politically’ about women, their affinities do not stop there. Dr. Sloper himself points out to Mrs. Montgomery that he does not dislike [Morris] in the least as a friend, as a companion:

He seems to me a charming fellow, and I should think he would be excellent company. I dislike him, exclusively, as a son-in-law. If the only office of a son-in-law were to dine at the paternal table, I should set a high value upon your brother. He dines capitally. But that is a small part of his function, which, in general, is to be a protector, and caretaker of my child, who is singularly ill-adapted to take care of herself. It is there that he doesn’t satisfy me [...] (JAMES, 1996, p. 87)

Here Dr. Sloper reminds me of Montaigne: “[a]s familiar company at table, I choose the amusing rather than the wise [...] and for serious conversation, I like ability even combined with dishonesty” (MONTAIGNE, 1958, p. 102). It seems evident that both men have similar ‘virtues’: their appreciation of women, or lack thereof; and their presumed intelligence. But still, Dr. Sloper finds Morris lacking in other kinds of virtue, that of being honest and sincere, for example. It is at this point, after having looked for a virtuous friendship in “Washington Square” and failing to find it, that I return to the beginning, and repeat Derrida quoting Montaigne quoting Aristotle: “O my friends, there is no friend”.

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