


In praise of *In Praise of Risk*

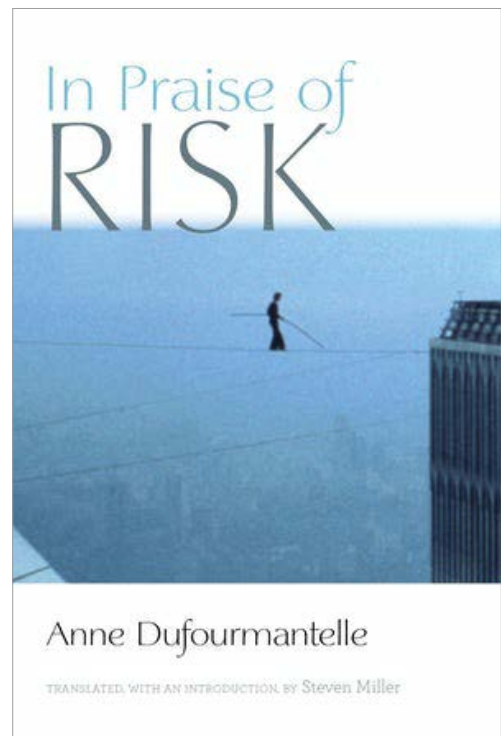
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Anne Dufourmantelle, *In Praise of Risk*, trans. with an introduction by Steven Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 240 pp.

How to review a book that tears open the seams that keep together the illusion of subjectivity? In short chapters, Anne Dufourmantelle lays bare the exilic condition of human beings, as she calls it. Being exiled from the body, inhabiting the space of desire – the space of possible speech. To take the risk of being free, we risk truth. Carefully avoiding useless tropes of the hero sacrificing thought in order to come to a grand conclusion, Dufourmantelle asks whether we have the audacity ‘to take within ourselves the responsibility for a difficult freedom that can be risked only to the extent that it’s in danger?’ (p. 51)

In Praise of Risk by Anne Dufourmantelle opens up a lot of different registers. From her experience as a psychoanalyst and as a philosopher she brings up stories and insights, thoughts both contemporary and historical, but always personal. She relies on the commitment of the reader to take on this task that she has set herself – to question the foundation of what it means to be human. A human being that is always related to the *other*, which is the Levinassian



other that comes before Being as well as Go(o)d – both in its absent and present forms. Universal themes are outlined, but the strength lies in each carefully crafted sentence. She is not afraid to take her time. Moulding the clay, breaking away illusions and hopes that linger on even after they are cast aside. Using examples from psychoanalytic situations, a tapestry is slowly built, in which there is no destination, no

ultimate truth. Yet throughout there is the overall search for what it means to be human – beyond secular notions, she asks for something that is more fundamental than anything that can be known. ‘Prayer is a state of waiting for a word that you know will not come, but that, at the same time, is there inside you, deposited there from time immemorial’ (p. 40).

Overall the book seems to be offering a paradox, both in content and form – they are intrinsically linked – as can be expected in a work of contemporary French continental philosophy. *In Praise of Risk* is asking questions while at the same time showing how these questions cannot really be asked. Can we risk forgetting the singular when we turn everything into a universal, without foreclosing the possibility of hospitality? (p. 164) How do we not give up all hope, when all hope is defeated? (p. 104) Can we take the risk of seeing, without looking as revelation, but as gravitation? Perhaps this is what Dufourmantelle offers us in this book. The shortness of the chapters provides a space to gravitate in and out of the text, to take a breath, to take stock of the layer that was both added and dissected. It is impossible to know where you are going, where one is going to end up, and the more one advances the more one realises that the initial question wasn’t really understood. To ask about risk, to praise risk, is not to be confused with the risk that the author took in trying to save those children at that beach in the south of France, now three summers ago, which resulted in her death. For this is a risk in order to live, not to fetishize the notion of death. The risk itself is the start of life, is that moment in which life steps out of that moment that starts in obscurity. An instant in which an *other* time is invoked, begotten, begun. It is not a leap into a free future, free from restraints, but instead a rupture that dismantles any fatality that is

included in the past. Risk is not a calculation towards death, but the only way to relate to any future. Dufourmantelle opens up the question of ‘taking the risk of *not dying*’ (p. 4, emphasis in original). And she thereby criticises the contemporary world that tries to foreclose risk, future and presents the illusion of freedom as the desired outcome of the Western democratic world. She asks us to do better, to relate to the Good that is there before there is any Being. ‘We can always recover from pain, catastrophe, or mourning, but evil will always claim a share. We will never be saved in advance’ (p. 35).

Dufourmantelle allows herself to say everything at once, to connect the dots between desire, life, capitalism, the body – and thereby illustrating the risk that lies in writing itself. How can we become accustomed to that which defies habit? She allows for the faculty of thinking being a place of lack, outphasing the illusion of delusion. She breaks away from the rules of philosophy, and follows in the footsteps of those who have thought before her while staying true to the impossibility that is writing and thought. ‘The gesture of writing resembles a disenchantment, an oath of fidelity – but to whom?’ (p. 135) By laying out a meandering path using nothing but words, Dufourmantelle manages to perform what she is advocating... depriving the ‘I’ that is the reader ‘of its orientation and imaginary consistency; and this is how it discovers the disrobed – that is, truly dark – darkness of habit’ (p. 136). Whoever is interested in reading an analysis of the risk that is life, will be put to the test. Will you be able to give up heroic ideas of sacrifice that are so firmly joined in the idea of risk? We are not Orpheus, who is risking life to obtain his status of poet, but instead we are Eurydice, who wanders forever, risking death in order to return to life.

But it makes no sense to try to summarise a point that needs 200 pages of carefully crafted words to be instilled in the reader's mind. Yet one thing becomes clear as one reads and rereads the sentences that meander towards something that lies outside of understanding. It reminds me of what Dufourmantelle said to me in the last meeting we had. She said: 'what you're actually searching for is faith, isn't it?' And it is clear now that she recognised in my own work the search for grace in a secular world: because she had been looking for the same. Moving between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Lévinas, Søren Kierkegaard, Elie Dering and Henri Bergson, Dufourmantelle poses the question of the other, which is among other things also 'the possibility of turning savagery into grace' (p. 21). She asks about the spiritual affliction of anxiety – the unquenchable desire, our spiritual hunger (p. 64). She questions whether passion, an intensity that is impossible without risk, can 'designate another event that gestures, amidst humility and betrayal, toward another possibility of the most sacred, that evokes acquiescence to an absolute elsewhere?' (p. 21) Faith, not just Christian faith, is the ultimate paradox – that clearing of taking a leap where there is 'no possible rational continuity' (p. 111). As such it is a philosophical position Dufourmantelle explores, not a psychological or theological one. Positing belief in the current secular world – in which belief is both the engagement and the disengagement with order – Dufourmantelle asks about the reality, the truth of belief, which can only be verified if lived. And she ties this in with her work as a psychoanalyst: she sees this desire at work in the patient who does not expect that 'the unforeseeable might appear, arise, manifest itself and come to transform her life' (p. 112). But if we take this risk, we shatter all possible reality, 'rendering it obsolete,

useless, or vague' (*ibid.*). And something else, unfathomable as it may be, is opened up. And that is why we believe, why we surrender to the unbelievable – not to risk our life, not to sacrifice ourselves on the altar of economics, but in order to first of all live. ■

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