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Everyday Speech

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MAURICE BLANCHOT

## Everyday Speech<sup>1</sup>

### The Everyday: What is Most Difficult to Discover

In a first approximation, the everyday is what we are first of all, and most often: at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence. The everyday, then, is ourselves, ordinarily. In this first stage, let us consider the everyday as without a truth proper to itself: our move then will be to seek to make it participate in the diverse figures of the True, in the great historical transformations, in the becoming of what occurs either below (economic and technical change) or above (philosophy, poetry, politics). Accordingly, it will be a question of opening the everyday onto history, or even, of reducing its privileged sector: private life. This is what happens in moments of effervescence—those we call revolution—when existence is public through and through. Commenting upon the law regarding suspects during the French Revolution, Hegel showed that each time the universal is affirmed in its brutal abstract exigency, every particular will, every separate thought falls under suspicion. It is no longer enough to act well. Every individual carries in himself a set of reflections, of intentions, that is to say reticences, that commit him to an oblique existence. To be suspect is more serious than to be guilty (hence the seeking of confession). The guilty party relates to the law to the extent that he manifestly does everything he must in order to be judged, that is, in order to be suppressed, brought back to the void of the empty point his self conceals. The suspect is that fleeting presence that does not allow recognition, and, through the part always held back that he figures forth, tends not only to interfere with, but to bring into accusation, the workings of the State. From such a perspective, each

1. Translated from Maurice Blanchot, "La Parole quotidienne," in *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), 355–66.

governed is suspect, but each suspect accuses the one who governs and prepares him to be at fault, since he who governs must one day recognize that he does not represent the whole, but a still particular will that only usurps the appearance of the universal. Hence the everyday must be thought as the suspect (and the oblique) that always escapes the clear decision of the law, even when the law seeks, by suspicion, to track down every indeterminate manner of being: everyday indifference. (The suspect: any and everyone, guilty of not being able to be guilty.)

But, in a new step, the critique (in the sense that Henri Lefebvre, by establishing "the critique of everyday life," has used this principle of reflection<sup>2</sup>) is no longer content with wanting to change day-to-day life by opening it onto history and political life: it would prepare a radical transformation of *Alltäglichkeit*. A remarkable change in point of view. The everyday is no longer the average, statistically established existence of a given society at a given moment; it is a category, a utopia and an Idea, without which one would not know how to get at either the hidden present, or the discoverable future of manifest beings. Man (the individual of today, of our modern societies) is at the same time engulfed within and deprived of, the everyday. And—a third definition—the everyday is also the ambiguity of these two movements, the one and the other hardly discernible.

From here, one can better understand the diverse directions in which the study of the everyday might be oriented (bearing now upon sociology, now upon ontology, at another moment upon psychoanalysis, politics, linguistics, literature). To approach such a movement one must contradict oneself. The everyday is platitude (what lags and falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse); but this banality is also what is most important, if it brings us back to existence in its very spontaneity and as it is lived—in the moment when, lived, it escapes every speculative formulation, perhaps all coherence, all regularity. Now we evoke the poetry of Chekhov or even Kafka, and affirm the depth of the superficial, the tragedy of nullity. Always the two sides meet: the daily with its tedious side, painful and sordid (the amorphous, the stagnant), and the inexhaustible, irrecusable, always unfinished daily that always escapes forms or structures (particularly those of political society: bureaucracy, the wheels of government, parties). And that there may be a certain relation of identity between these two opposites is shown by the slight displacement of emphasis that

2. N. B. It is by this title that Henri Lefebvre published a first book in 1947 (*Critique de la vie quotidienne* [Paris: Grasset]); then, in 1958, as a preface to another edition of this first essay, a second study of different orientation. A third volume once again took up all these questions in a new light (Paris: Editions de l'Arche). Since publishing this volume, Lefebvre has continued to extend his reflections still further. See *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962); *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

permits passage from one to the other; as when the spontaneous, the informal—that is, what escapes forms—becomes the amorphous and when, perhaps, the stagnant merges with the *current* of life, which is also the very movement of society.

Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secret, but perhaps also the site of all possible signification. The everyday escapes. This makes its strangeness—the familiar showing itself (but already dispersing) in the guise of the astonishing. It is the unperceived, first in the sense that one has always looked past it; nor can it be introduced into a whole or “reviewed,” that is to say, enclosed within a panoramic vision; for, by another trait, the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday.

Hence the exigency—apparently laughable, apparently inconsequential, but necessary—that leads us to seek an always more immediate knowledge of the everyday. Henri Lefebvre speaks of the Great Pleonasm. We want to be abreast of everything that takes place at the very instant that it passes and comes to pass. The images of events and the words that transmit them are not only inscribed instantaneously on our screens, in our ears, but in the end there is no event other than this movement of universal transmission: “the reign of an enormous tautology.” The disadvantages of a life so publicly and immediately displayed are henceforth observable. The means of communication—language, culture, imaginative power—by never being taken as more than means, wear out and lose their mediating force. We believe we know things immediately, without images and without words, and in reality we are dealing with no more than an insistent prolixity that says and shows nothing. How many people turn on the radio and leave the room, satisfied with this distant and sufficient noise? Is this absurd? Not in the least. What is essential is not that one particular person speak and another hear, but that, with no one in particular speaking and no one in particular listening, there should nonetheless be speech, and a kind of undefined promise to communicate, guaranteed by the incessant coming and going of solitary words. One can say that in this attempt to recapture it at its own level, the everyday loses any power to reach us; it is no longer what is lived, but what can be seen or what shows itself, spectacle and description, without any active relation whatsoever. The whole world is offered to us, but by way of a look. We are no longer burdened by events, as soon as we behold their image with an interested, then simply curious, then empty but fascinated look. What good is it taking part in a street demonstration, since at the same moment, secure and at rest, we are at the demonstration itself, thanks to a television set? Here, produced-reproduced, offering itself to our view in

its totality, it allows us to believe that it takes place only so that we might be its superior witness. Substituted for practice is the pseudo-acquaintance of an irresponsible gaze; substituted for the movement of the concept—a task and a work—is the diversion of a superficial, uncaring and satisfied contemplation. Man, well protected within the four walls of his familial existence, lets the world come to him without peril, certain of being in no way changed by what he sees and hears. “Depoliticization” is linked to this movement. And the man of government who fears the street—because the man in the street is always on the verge of becoming political man—is delighted to be no more than an entrepreneur of spectacle, skilled at putting the citizen in us to sleep, the better to keep awake, in the half-light of a half-sleep, only the tireless voyeur of images.<sup>3</sup>

Despite massive development of the means of communication, the everyday escapes. This is its definition. We cannot help but miss it if we seek it through knowledge, for it belongs to a region where there is still nothing to know, just as it is prior to all relation insofar as it has always already been said, even while remaining unformulated, that is to say, not yet information. It is not the implicit (of which phenomenology has made broad use); to be sure, it is always already there, but that it may be there does not guarantee its actualization. On the contrary, the everyday is always unrealized in its very actualization which no event, however important or however insignificant, can ever produce. Nothing happens; this is the everyday. But what is the meaning of this stationary movement? At what level is this “nothing happens” situated? For whom does “nothing happen” if, for me, something is necessarily always happening? In other words, what corresponds to the “who?” of the everyday? And, at the same time, why, in this “nothing happens,” is there the affirmation that something essential might be allowed to happen?

What questions these are! We must at least try to hold onto them. Pascal gives a first approach, which is taken up again by the young Lukàcs and by certain philosophies of ambiguity. The everyday is life in its equivocal dissimulation, and “life is an anarchy of clair-obscur. . . .

3. See Edgar Morin's *L'Esprit du temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1975); *New Trends in the Study of Mass Communication* (Birmingham, England: University Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1968). In this book, Morin does not deal directly with the problem of information, but studies what he calls Mass Culture: “that is to say, produced according to the large-scale standards of industrial output; distributed by techniques of mass circulation; addressed to a social *mass*, that is, to a gigantic agglomerate of individuals seized before and beyond the internal structures of society (class, family, etc.).” It is indeed a question of a culture with its myths, its symbols, its images. It “tends to erode, to break down other cultures. . . . It is not the only culture of the 20th century. But it is the truly massive and new current of this century.” Morin sometimes opposes this culture to others, for example to humanist culture—wrongly, it seems to me. I mean that the importance of “mass culture” is to put into question the very idea of culture by producing it in such a manner as to expose it to view.

Nothing is ever completely realized and nothing proceeds to its ultimate possibilities. . . . Everything interpenetrates, without discretion, in an impure mix, everything is destroyed and broken, nothing blossoms into real life. . . . It can only be described through negations. . . ." This is Pascalian diversion, the movement of turning this way and that; it is the perpetual alibi of an ambiguous existence that uses contradictions to escape problems, remaining undecided in a restless quietude. Such is quotidian confusion. Seeming to take up all of life, it is without limit and it strikes all other life with unreality. But there arises here a sudden clarity. "Something lights up, appears as a flash on the paths of banality . . . it is chance, the great instant, the miracle." And the miracle "penetrates life in an unforeseeable manner . . . without relation to the rest, transforming the whole into a clear and simple account."<sup>4</sup> By its flash, the miracle separates the indistinct moments of day-to-day life, suspends nuance, interrupts uncertainties, and reveals to us the tragic truth, that absolute and absolutely divided truth, whose two parts solicit us without pause, and from each side, each of them requiring everything of us and at every instant.

Against this movement of thought nothing can be said, except that it misses the everyday. For the ordinary of each day is not such by contrast with some extraordinary; this is not the "*nul moment*" that would await the "splendid moment" so that the latter would give it a meaning, suppress or suspend it. What is proper to the everyday is that it designates for us a region, or a level of speech, where the determinations true and false, like the opposition yes and no, do not apply—it being always before what affirms it and yet incessantly reconstituting itself beyond all that negates it. An unserious seriousness from which nothing can divert us, even when it is lived in the mode of diversion; so we experience it through the boredom that seems to be indeed the sudden, the insensible apprehension of the quotidian into which one slides in the leveling of a steady slack time, feeling oneself forever sucked in, though feeling at the same time that one has already lost it, and is henceforth incapable of deciding if there is a lack of the everyday, or if one has too much of it. Thus is one maintained in boredom by boredom, which develops, says Friedrich Schlegel, as carbon dioxide accumulates in a closed space when too many people find themselves together there.

Boredom is the everyday become manifest: as a consequence of having lost its essential—constitutive—trait of being *unperceived*. Thus the daily always sends us back to that inapparent and nonetheless unhidden part of existence: insignificant because always before what signifies it; silent, but with a silence that has already dissipated as soon as we keep still in

4. Georg Lukács, *L'Âme et les formes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), as cited by Lucien Goldmann in *Recherches dialectiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959); Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971, 1974).

order to hear it, and that we hear better in idle chatter, in that unspeaking speech that is the soft human murmuring in us and around us.

The everyday is the movement by which the individual is held, as though without knowing it, in human anonymity. In the everyday we have no name, little personal reality, scarcely a face, just as we have no social determination to sustain or enclose us. To be sure, I work daily, but in the day-to-day I am not a worker belonging to the class of those who work. The everyday of work tends to keep me apart from this belonging to the collectivity of work that founds its truth; the everyday breaks down structures and undoes forms, even while ceaselessly regathering itself behind the form whose ruin it has insensibly brought about.

The everyday is human. The earth, the sea, forest, light, night, do not represent everydayness, which belongs first of all to the dense presence of great urban centers. We need these admirable deserts that are the world's cities for the experience of the everyday to begin to overtake us. The everyday is not at home in our dwelling-places, it is not in offices or churches, any more than in libraries or museums. It is in the street—if it is anywhere. Here I find again one of the beautiful moments of Lefebvre's books. The street, he notes, has the paradoxical character of having more importance than the places it connects, more living reality than the things it reflects. The street renders public. "The street tears from obscurity what is hidden, publishes what happens elsewhere, in secret; it deforms it, but inserts it in the social text." And yet what is published in the street is not really divulged; it is said, but this "is said" is borne by no word ever really pronounced, just as rumors are reported without anyone transmitting them and because the one who transmits them accepts being no one. There results from this a perilous irresponsibility. The everyday, where one lives as though outside the true and the false, is a level of life where what reigns is the refusal to be different, a yet undetermined stir: without responsibility and without authority, without direction and without decision, a storehouse of anarchy, since casting aside all beginning and dismissing all end. This is the everyday. And the man in the street is fundamentally irresponsible; while having always seen everything, he is witness to nothing. He knows all, but cannot answer for it, not through cowardice, but because he takes it all lightly and because he is not really there. Who is there when the man in the street is there? At the most a "who?," an interrogation that settles upon no one. In the same way indifferent and curious, busy and unoccupied, unstable, immobile. So he is; these opposing but juxtaposed traits do not seek reconciliation, nor do they, on the other hand, counter one another, all the while still not merging; it is the *vicissitude* itself that escapes all dialectical recovery.

To the above it must be added that the irresponsibility of rumor—where everything is said, everything is heard, incessantly and interminably, without anything being affirmed, without there being a response to anything—rapidly grows weighty when it gives rise to "public opinion,"

but only to the degree that what is propagated (and with what ease) becomes the movement of propaganda: that is to say, when in the passage from street to newspaper, from the everyday in perpetual becoming to the everyday transcribed (I do not say inscribed), it becomes informed, stabilized, put forth to advantage. This translation modifies everything. The everyday is without event; in the newspaper this absence of event becomes the drama of the news item. In the everyday, everything is everyday; in the newspaper everything is strange, sublime, abominable. The street is not ostentatious, passers-by go by unknown, visible-invisible, representing only the anonymous "beauty" of faces and the anonymous "truth" of people essentially destined to pass by, without a truth proper to them and without distinctive traits (when we meet someone in the street, it comes always by surprise and as if by mistake, for one does not recognize oneself there; in order to go forth to meet another, one must first tear oneself away from an existence without identity). Now in the newspaper, everything is announced, everything is denounced, everything becomes image.<sup>5</sup> How then does the nonostentation of the street, once published, become constantly present ostentation? This is not fortuitous. One can certainly invoke a dialectical reversal. One can say that the newspaper, incapable of seizing the insignificance of the everyday, is only able to render its value apprehensible by declaring it sensational; incapable of following the movement of the everyday insofar as it is inapparent, the newspaper seizes upon it in the dramatic form of a trial. Incapable of getting at what does not belong to the historical, but is always on the point of bursting into history, newspapers keep to the anecdotal and hold us with stories—and thus, having replaced the "nothing happens" of the everyday with the emptiness of the news item, the newspaper presents us with history's "something is happening" at the level of what it claims to be the day-to-day, and which is no more than anecdote. The newspaper is not history in the guise of the everyday, and, in the compromise it offers us, it doubtless betrays historical reality less than it misses the unqualifiable everyday, this present without particularity, that it contrives in vain to qualify, that is, to affirm and to transcribe.

The everyday escapes. Why does it escape? Because it is without a subject. When I live the everyday, it is anyone, anyone whatsoever, who does so, and this any-one is, properly speaking, neither me, nor, properly speaking, the other; he is neither the one nor the other, and he is the one and the other in

5. Photography—mobile, immobile—as exposition: the bringing to the fore and the preparing for appearance of a human presence (that of the street) that does not yet have a countenance, that one can neither approach, nor at which one can look full in the face. Photography, in this sense, is the truth of daily publication where everything is to be put in the limelight. See Roland Barthes's study "Le Message photographique" in *Communications*, vol. 1 (1961):127–38; "The Rhetoric of the Image," in a collection of his articles entitled *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Hill and Wang, 1978), 32–55.



their interchangeable presence, their annulled irreciprocity—yet without there being an “I” and an “alter ego” able to give rise to a *dialectical recognition*. At the same time, the everyday does not belong to the objective realm. To live it as what might be lived through a series of separate technical acts (represented by the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, the refrigerator, the radio, the car), is to substitute a number of compartmentalized actions for this indefinite presence, this connected movement (which is however not a whole) by which we are *continually*, though in the mode of discontinuity, in relation with the indeterminate totality of human possibilities. Of course the everyday, since it cannot be assumed by a true subject (even putting in question the notion of subject), tends unendingly to weigh down into things. This anyone presents himself as the common man for whom all is appraised in terms of good sense. The everyday is then the medium in which, as Lefebvre notes, alienations, fetishisms, reifications produce their effects. He who, working, has no other life than everyday life, is also he for whom the everyday is the heaviest; but as soon as he complains of this, complains of the burden of the everyday in existence, the response comes back: “The everyday is the same for everyone” and even adds, like Büchner’s Danton: “There is scarcely any hope that this will ever change.”

There must be no doubt about the dangerous essence of the everyday, nor about this uneasiness that seizes us each time that, by an unforeseeable leap, we stand back from it and, facing it, we discover that precisely nothing faces us: “What?” “Is this my everyday life?” Not only must one not doubt it, but one must not dread it; rather one ought to seek to recapture the secret destructive capacity that is in play in it, the corrosive force of human anonymity, the infinite wearing away. The hero, while still a man of courage, is he who fears the everyday; fears it not because he is afraid of living in it with too much ease, but because he dreads meeting in it what is most fearful: a power of dissolution. The everyday challenges heroic values, but even more it impugns all values and the very idea of value, disproving always anew the unjustifiable difference between authenticity and inauthenticity. Day-to-day indifference is situated on a level at which the question of value is not posed: “il y a du quotidien” [there is everydayness], without subject, without object, and while it is there, the “he” [“il”] of the everyday does not have to be of account, and, if value nevertheless claims to step in, then “he” is worth “nothing” and “nothing” is worth anything through contact with him. To experience everydayness is to be tested by the radical nihilism that is as if its essence, and by which, in the void that animates it, it does not cease to hold the principle of its own critique.

#### CONCLUSION IN THE FORM OF A DIALOGUE

“Is not the everyday, then, a utopia, the myth of an existence bereft of myth? We no more have access to the everyday than do we touch this

moment of history that could, historically, represent the end of history. — That can, in fact, be said, but opens onto another meaning: the everyday is the inaccessible to which we have always already had access; the everyday is inaccessible, but only insofar as every mode of acceding is foreign to it. To live in the way of the quotidian is to hold oneself at a level of life that excludes the possibility of a beginning, an access. Everyday experience radically questions the initial exigency. The idea of creation is inadmissible, when it is a matter of accounting for existence as it is borne by the everyday.

— To put this another way, everyday existence never had to be *created*. This is exactly what the expression “il y a du quotidien” [there is the everyday] means. Even if the affirmation of a creating God were to be imposed, the there is (there is already when there is not yet being, what there is still when there is nothing) would remain irreducible to the principle of creation; and the there is is the human everyday.

— The everyday is our portion of eternity: the eternality of which Laforgue speaks. So that the *Lord's Prayer* would be secretly impious: give us our daily bread, give us to live according to the daily existence that leaves no place for a relation between Creator and creature. Everyday man is the most atheist of men. He is such that no God whatsoever could stand in relation to him. And thus one understands how the man in the street escapes all authority, whether it be political, moral, or religious.

— For in the everyday we are neither born nor do we die: hence the weight and the enigmatic force of everyday truth.

— In whose space, however, there is neither true nor false.

Translated by Susan Hanson