Experiencing the Otherness

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Abstract One of the most prominent figures of ethical literary criticism, Martha Nussbaum, claims, that literature allows us to enter other, alien worlds, and by encouraging empathetic re-experiencing with otherness, it can make us ethically richer. On the other hand, literature is also an example of an encounter with otherness in terms of deconstructionist philosophy, that is, an encounter with unappropriable, inaccessible absolute Other, to which we do force, if we "understand" and "relive" it—that is, if we reduce it to our own experience. From the perspective of deconstruction, the ethical attitude toward the Other is to respectfully leave it in its otherness. For the theoretical mind, this duality undoubtedly holds an uncomfortable conundrum. The article tries to elucidate this conundrum with the help of Borges' literature.

Keywords Ethical literary criticism; M. Nussbaum; Deconstruction; Borges; Otherness

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Borges' short story "God's Script" is about the priest Tzinacán, who is cruelly tortured and imprisoned by the Spanish conquistadors under Pedro de Alvarado.[1] He

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spends many years in prison, accompanied by a jaguar in the neighbouring cell. Tzinacán is convinced that his deity Qaholm, whose temple was burned by the conquistadors, has not abandoned him. His reasoning goes as follows:

> The god, foreseeing that at the end of time there would be devastation and ruin, wrote on the first day of Creation a magical sentence with the power to ward off those evils. He wrote it in such a way that it would reach the most distant generations and not be subject to chance. No one knows where it was written nor with what characters, but it is certain that it exists, secretly, and that a chosen one shall read it. I considered that we were now, as always, at the end of time and that my destiny as the last priest of the god would give me access to the privilege of intuiting the script. (Borges 204)

For many years he patiently searches until he realizes that the message must be encoded in the patterns on the jaguar's skin. It could be quite brief, yet all-encompassing, for "even in the human languages there is not a proposition that does not imply the entire universe; to say *the tiger* is to say the tigers that begot it, the deer and turtlers devoured by it, the grass on which the deer fed, the earth that was mother to the grass, the haven that gave birth to the earth" (Borges 205). Finally, he experiences "the union with the divinity, with the universe (I do not know whether those words differ in meaning)" (Borges 206) and the message is deciphered. This is how he reports it:

> It is a formula of fourteen random words (they appear random) and to utter it in a loud voice would suffice to make me all powerful. To say it would suffice to abolish this stone prison, to have daylight break into my night, to be young, to be immortal, to have the tiger's jaws crush Alvarado, to sink the sacred knife into the breasts of Spaniards, to reconstruct the pyramid, to reconstruct the empire. Forty syllables, fourteen words, and I, Tzinacán, would rule the lands Moctezuma ruled. (Borges 207)

However, he does not pronounce these words. He explains it as follows: "Whoever has seen the universe, whoever has beheld the fiery designs of the universe, cannot think in terms of one man, of that man's trivial fortunes or misfortunes, though he be that very man. That man has been he and now matters no more to him" (Borges 207).

Borges' short story is a paradigmatic example of an "interpretation machine" because it opens many meaningful themes. The idea of a secret record that can

only be deciphered by the chosen one at the end of time is reminiscent of Eco's *Foucault's Pendulum*. The passage about the tiger summarizes one of the key topoi of the poststructuralist linguistic paradigm, according to which the ultimate meaning of statements is unattainable, because the statements always carry with them traces of all their contexts, present, past, and future. The otherwise pantheistic narrative is also perfectly suitable for religious interpretations. However, it is obvious, that its subject matter and motifs also place it in the realm of ethnological, intercultural, colonial, or postcolonial studies, as well as ethical literary studies, that is, in those areas of research that deal with, among other things, cultural otherness or alienness. It is to this topic that I will devote my attention in the following.

Positivist research has already shed light on the ethnological and historical background of the narrative. Borges almost certainly obtained the material for it from the *Popol vuh* and from some sources dealing with this sacred book.[1] The misleading mention of Moctezuma in the narrative has led many scholars to misidentify Tzinacán as an Aztec priest.[2] However, he was a Mayan priest, leader of the Cakchiquel (Kaqchikel) people in the region of present-day Guatemala. At first, he was an ally of the Spanish in their battles against neighbouring peoples, but in time, with this people as his allies, he himself rebelled against the Spanish. The Spaniards defeated him and destroyed his city along with its sanctuary.

This factual background provides a wealth of material for intercultural or (post)colonial studies. However, "The God's Script" is not only interesting with regard to the material and motivic background of the narrative. It seems to me significant above all because of its interesting thematization of otherness, one of the fundamental topoi of postmodern ethics. The constellation I have in mind is condensed in the scene with which the narrative concludes: Tzinacán deciphers the divine script and becomes omnipotent, just as he wished. Now he could not only take revenge and rebuild his kingdom, but also become young and healthy again, something he had longed for in his dungeon reveries. But surprisingly, he does none of these things.

This non-activity can be interpreted in many ways. The psychological or psychoanalytic explanation might be: When the desire is fulfilled, it dissapperas. A person longs to achieve something and imagines the state of fulfillment of the desire as a state of bliss. But when his or her desire is fulfilled, he or she becomes—just like Tzinacán—a different person, at least in the sense that he or she is no longer a

1 See the exhaustive treatment in Balderstone 1993, 69 cc.

2 His original name Ahpozotzil (he was only baptized as Tzinacán by the Spanish), which means "Guardian of Bats"—but in Aztec!—probably contributed to this misidentification..

person who wants something specific and for whom the fulfillment of that desire would be bliss. It turns out that the condition of bliss was not really the fulfillment of the desire, but that it is hidden in the very nature of the desire itself (as an attitude toward the assumed bliss). When the desire is fulfilled, that is, when it passes away, this blissful attitude also passes away and is no longer present. To desire and at the same time to have already fulfilled that desire are two states of mind that are mutually exclusive.[1]

However, the psychological aspect does not interest me here. In this image, I see the embodiment of one of the fundamental dilemmas of that branch of ethical literary studies,[2] which is theoretically based on philosophies of otherness. On the one hand, literature allows us to enter other, alien worlds, and by encouraging empathetic re-experiencing or at least familiarity with otherness, it can make us ethically richer. On the other hand, literature is also an example of an encounter with otherness in terms of deconstructionist philosophy, that is, an encounter with unappropriable, inaccessible absolute Other, to which we do force, if we "understand" and "relive" it—that is, if we reduce it to our own experience. From the perspective of deconstruction, the ethical attitude toward the Other is to respectfully leave it in its otherness. For the theoretical mind, this duality undoubtedly holds an uncomfortable conundrum. I will try to elucidate this conundrum with the help of Borges' literature.

In the context of different theories, philosophies and ideologies, the question of the relationship to the Other/other or alien[3] has different meaning, attitude, and

1 This situation recalls the paradox of the anthropologist who attempts to study a community that has not yet been touched by the anthropologist's gaze, as well as the "paradox of xenology" as described by Waldenfels: "The paradox of every xenology consists in the fact that not only every speech of the *alien*, but also every experience of the *alien* refers to the *alien*, *to which* it responds without grasping it. If experience grasps the alien, then the alien is no longer what it is supposed to be" (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 109).

2 For a detail account on and original approach to ethical literary studies, see Nie 2024.

3 I use the terms as synonyms. Although Waldenfels in several places in his works explicitly distinguishes between the other and the alien, what he conceptualizes as *alien* overlaps to a good extent (although not entirely) with what is thought of as the *Other/other* in the philosophy of the last decades. That is why he easily finds affinities with the eminent thinkers of otherness Derrida, Blanchot and Levinas. Otherwise, he himself is aware of the related understanding of the two concepts in modern philosophy, when he casually observes: "We often speak of 'otherness' when we mean 'alienness.' In other Western languages that do not have the rich semantic field provided by the German word fremd, the question of alienness is usually treated as the question of the Other or as la question de l'Autre" (Waldenfels, *Phenomenology of the Alien* 72).

weight. There is a wealth of texts on this subject that I cannot cover here. I merely want to use Borges's prose to point out the central theoretical and philosophical dilemmas that I believe remain unresolved, often even unnoticed, and to show how literature can point to a way out of these conundrums.

Let me begin with a simple observation—vividly illustrated by Julija Kristeva and Bernhard Waldenfels, among others—that a person encounters the phenomenon of the other/alien already within himself. To give a simple example from everyday life: If I look in the mirror in the right mood, I may see some other person, an alien. This situation—described by Waldenfels as *a mirror phenomenon* (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 147) —has already been depicted by many writers (for example Proust and Pirandello). A version of this inner otherness/alienness is articulated in almost philosophical terms by Borges when—in the parable "Borges and I," in which he speaks of himself and that other Borges, that other I that Proust and Pirandello unexpectedly see in the mirror as an alien—, in accordance with the philosophical distinction between *idem* and *ipse*[1], he writes: "I shall remain in Borges, not in myself" (Borges 282). The story ends as follows: "[…] I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him. / I do not know which of us has written this page" (283).

In the conclusion, the short stories "The God's Script" and "Borges and I" articulate a similar, though not quite identical, relationship of otherness within the same person. The self that changes is other than the self before the change ("The God's Script"), and the *self*, the *I*, is often simultaneously other than it*self* ("Borges and I"). But at the same time (perhaps paradoxical from the standpoint of pure logic, but true to life) there remains between what is so vividly distinguished an inseparable bond that transcends mere physical continuity, however ambivalent that bond may be. Despite the emphasis that he "*has been* he," but now he is no more, the "other" I, who tells about the "First" in "The God's Script", nevertheless speaks throughout of the First as of "himself." Even the last sentence of the parable "Borges and I" shows that the dividing line between the I and the Self paradoxically does not prevent them from remaining indistinguishable in their separation.

This ambivalence—separateness and at the same time connectedness—which everyone can already perceive at the elementary level of the other-within-himself, remains also in the relation of himself to other others. It has also been captured by the philosophy of alterity. For Derrida, according to whom there is always an aporia or paradox at play when it comes to the Other, the relation to the Other, which is

1 The distinction has been, of course, most famously formulated by P. Ricouer; Waldenfels also draws attention to it; see Waldenfels 1998, 31.

an ethical relation, is an impossible relation or—G. Spivak likes to repeat this formulation—an experience of the impossible. That is: this experience is not possible, and yet we have a kind of experience of this impossible experience. Waldenfels uses Husserl's formulation "the accessibility of the originally inaccessible" in this context (Želo tujega 245). All these oxymoronic formulations attempt to express this paradox of otherness: The core of otherness can only be absolute, radical otherness (for if it is not, it is not really otherness); but absolute otherness cannot be thought or defined, not even in an oxymoronic formulation, because then it is no longer absolutely other. As Heidegger shows in his interpretation of a Hölderlin hymn: When the unknown is given a name ("unknown"), it is no longer unknown. Whichever way we turn it, we are dealing with a paradox that grapples with the intractable problem of how to think the unthinkable.

Intercultural studies often seem to fall victim to this paradox when they try to solve aporias one-sidedly. Let me illustrate the possible solutions with the example of the controversy between Gayatri C. Spivak and Martha C. Nussbaum. There are many affinities between the literary and ethical projects of the two theorists, both in life practice (both are humanitarian activists, and the work of both in this field is closely related to India) and in literary pedagogy. In her later works (*The Death of Discipline*, *Other Asias*, *Aesthetic Education*), Spivak develops, at least at first glance, a similar model of "aesthetic education" as in some books (besides *Love's Knowledge* also *Poetic Justice* and *Not for Profit*) Nussbaum. Both argue for the teaching of ethics through the reading of literature, which should make the reader a responsible social being, or, more generally, for greater consideration of the humanities, which can contribute to the improvement of society. However, this common understanding is based on completely different theoretical starting points in each case. Spivak is one of the (albeit controversial) theorists of radical otherness, while Nussbaum is skeptical of the concept of radical otherness (and of ethics as an impossible relationship). The central idea of her literary, ethical, and aesthetic education project is that it is necessary "to work through the major alternative views about the good life, holding them up, in each case, against our own experience and our intuition" (Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* 173-174). The formulation in this elliptical form may seem unproblematic, but it leads to a conclusion that is not acceptable to Spivak. The difference between the two theorists can be illustrated by the concept of imagination, which plays an important role for both with regard to the ethical dimension of literature, but differently for each. For Nussbaum, imagination—or "narrative imagination"—is "the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader

of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (Nussbaum, *Not for Profit* 95–96). Imagination enables us to extend the cognitive potential of emotions from self-knowledge to knowledge of the emotional and general inner lives of others. It thus enables us to empathize with the feelings of others, to sympathize with them (not entirely spontaneously, but enriched by a rational, detached judgment), it releases empathy and sympathy, and finally understanding. According to Nussbaum, this is crucial for ethical reflection. Because of their singularity and dependence on context, ethical situations cannot be grasped by the means of universalistic, abstract, logical, and positivistic understanding. They are accessible—with the help of imagination—only through the emotions of empathy and sympathy, which also have a cognitive function (and are not just a relationship). The otherness of the other is thus—in contrast to G. Spivak's conception— accessible.

In contrast, Spivak in *Other Asias* has thus truncated the way in which Nussbaum understands the role of imagination and empathy in the ethical impact of literature:

> Nussbaum certainly believes in the "value" of "education" and "literacy," but these are contentless words for her. She also believes in the virtues of the literary imagination, but her idea of it is a sympathetic identification, a bringing of the other into the self (PJ 31, 34, 38), a guarantee that literature "makes us acknowledge the equal humanity of members of social classes other than our own." (Spivak, *Other Asias* 567)

In other words: Nussbaum's project, according to Spivak, does not break with what she calls in *Critique of the Postcolonial Mind* the "axiomatics of imperialism," because instead of a responsible attitude toward the absolutely Other (alien), she propagates its "domestication," appropriation, "selfing." This is also motivated by the fact that, according to Nussbaum, the central motive for empathic and compassionate experience of others is ultimately the egocentric and selfish need to refine one's own personality.

This fundamental opposition between the views of Nussbaum and Spivak (I have presented them here very schematically) points to one of the basic problems of modern philosophies of otherness and so-called postmodern ethics. It is about the opposition between two extremes: between radical otherness, which must be respected, because, if we stay at the level of logic and leave ethics aside, any disrespect naturally eliminates it, and between understanding, empathic relation to

otherness, which, according to Spivak, also means appropriating and domesticating, i.e., subordinating it. Modern theories of otherness usually take this extreme opposition and the value relation between them as fact. But it seems to me that this self-evidentness needs to be somewhat problematized. Reading of literary works shows that the opposition is not as absolute and irreconcilable as it appears at first sight.

First, I would like to draw attention to the logical aspect of the critique of the appropriation of the Other/other, as expressed from the standpoint of radical otherness. Theorists of radical otherness often criticize Gadamer's hermeneutic concept that, although he starts from a dialogue and emphasizes the role and importance of the other for understanding and self-knowledge, he ultimately amounts to appropriation of the other, since his hermeneutic process ultimately aims at *understanding* the other—the understanding that culminates in the notorious *Horizontverschmelzung*, melting or the fusion of horizons, which implies a kind of adaptation of the other to the self. This, of course, contradicts the demand for absolute respect for the otherness, which leaves the other untouched in its otherness, outside one's own horizon. But there is an aporia in this demand that eventually leads Gadamer's critics to the attitude they criticize. The “non-appropriation of otherness” is not a supra-personal, supra-horizonal, supra-subjective and supra-cultural objective norm of the mind, purified of all appropriative features, but a logocentric, Enlightenment-derived concept, and when we stand in such a non-appropriating relationship with the other (when we let it be absolutely other; more tongue-in-cheek would be: when we *assign* it this place), we actually appropriate it. We understand and define it according to our own concept of otherness, and thus in the end, we are not so far away from the Gadamer's concept of understanding!

The concept of radical otherness/alienness is not only logically untenable (which is why deconstructionists and phenomenologists of otherness describe it as a paradox), but also ethically problematic. The dilemma is not only theoretical but also, and more fatally, practical. And it is indeed a conundrum that does not allow for clear, straight-forward practical decisions and judgments. Let me illustrate this with two telling examples from the field of literature. Novels by African women writers that addressed female circumcision sparked a sharp controversy between Western and African theorists (see Marinšek 2007). Western critics condemned the practice, but engaged African women rejected this condemnation precisely on the grounds of respect for radical otherness. Another example is the evaluation of older canonical works of world literature in terms of their ethics from the perspective of contemporary ethical standards. In this case, engaged critics do not hesitate to call

Shakespeare a racist, an anti-Semite, and a misogynist, and to diminish the artistic value of his works because of their ethical inadequacy. I have chosen these two examples because a similarly oriented theoretical mind acts differently, i.e. contradictorily, in two similar cases of confrontation with otherness/alienness. In one case it stands respectfully *before* the otherness, in the other it claims all rights *over* it.

My point is not to lament this inconsistency. I only want to point out that the question of the relation to the Other does not allow for simple, easy and all too principled answers. Is respect for the otherness of the Other an absolute ethical imperative, or does it also have its limits? Are these the limits of culture, of the historical epoch, or something else? Is there a universal measure that excludes radical otherness, for example, between people? For example, does violence against a helpless being fall under the rubric of "(absolute) otherness," which we must therefore correctly and respectfully tolerate (because we do not really understand it anyway; we can only conceptualize it in our own way, within our own horizon, even if this is the theoretical horizon of respect for otherness), or under the rubric of "common humanity," which, if I am ethical, requires me to act? And, does understanding necessarily imply owning, "selfing," to use Spivak's term? When, as Nussbaum assumes, I empathically empathize with literary characters while reading a literary work, do I only violently appropriate otherness, or is there something left beyond the violence? Do I always measure the Other with my own yardstick, or does the empathic encounter with the Other affect and change my yardstick?

All these dilemmas are difficult to resolve conceptually. Therefore, as mentioned above, Derrida resorts to aporetic constructions that attempt to transcend unequivocal extremes and insurmountable differences. Absolute otherness is not properly conceivable rationally; it can only be given in experience. This is an experience in which "the other appears as such—that is to say, the other appears as a being whose appearance appears without appearing" (Derrida 232).

The attempt to define this impossible relationship is similarly tackled by Waldenfels, who takes as his starting point Husserl's formulation "the experiential accessibility of the originally inaccessible" (Waldenfels, Želo tujega 3). Like Derrida, Waldenfels is concerned in his own way with the paradoxical *relationship* and *experience* (rather than conceptualization). Waldenfels, too, does not want to deprive the foreign of its alienness by one appropriation or another, but at the same time he does not want to renounce the experience of the alien, which for him means a mediation, an *inbetween* between the own and the alien. This is what he tries to reflect with the concept of responsiveness or "responsive rationality" (Želo tujega 24). The experience of the alien is given in *responding* to the alien, in *responding* to

its call. Only when we ourselves are not the source and the initiative, but react, respond, do we not appropriate it, do we not bring it back to us (as source), but allow something else to touch us. Again, this response must not be within the framework of what is already known (for that would again be appropriation), but must be productive, so that a new meaning emerges. This is the "paradox *of a creative response, in which we give what we don't have* […] Where new kinds of thoughts arise, they belong neither to me nor to the other. They are created between us" (Waldenfels, *Topographie des Fremden* 53).

The "problem" with Derrida's and Waldenfels' descriptions of this central aporia is that despite their excellent understanding of it, philosophical discourse condemns them to conceptualization, however soft and nimble. They offer figures of thought (paradox, aporia) but not the *experience* they address. Philosophy, theory, and literary studies, in my opinion, search in vain for an appropriate language to describe this impossible relationship. They will not give up this search, even if it is a "mission impossible" for them. But although any *understanding* of this relationship is problematic, this does not prevent access to the *experience* of it. Many literary works (perhaps even anything that can be called artistic) can give us such an experience, including Borges' "The God's Script." This short story enacts and gives us an experience (certainly *also* thanks to our capacity for non-appropriating empathic reading, which, it seems, we must not eliminate too quickly) of this impossible relationship through Tzinacán's experience, which does not remain as alien and other to the reader as the Mayan priest to himself.

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