

SKEPTICISM AND THE IDEA OF AN OTHER

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1. INTRODUCTION

One point at which the concerns of philosophy and literary theory have intersected is in both parties' interest in the idea of otherness. Some of us might approach otherness by way of the problem of other minds, others by way of the idea of radical alterity, and if certain regions of philosophy and cultural studies are not cured of their current obsessions, for many the problem of otherness might soon become a chapter in the study of Zombies. Whatever else makes otherness philosophically and literarily interesting, it at least has to do with the fact that the idea of an Other is unsettling, and it is unsettling because it calls into question the ability of our language and ultimately our community to reach out fully to those around us. The idea of a genuine Other is the idea of someone with whom our shared tongue cannot be shared, at least not fully, authentically, or without one of us changing in a quite basic way. One would like to think that the things we have the greatest chance of knowing would be the things most like us, namely, other people; that our intimate biological likeness should entail a kind of epistemological familiarity. If philosophical skepticism is unsettling because it raises the possibility that reality is ultimately beyond our reach, the idea of an Other is unsettling because it makes imaginable the possibility that certain humans, despite presumably sharing in our kind of body and mind, can in effect remain as unavailable to us as the fabled thing-in-itself.

There are many ways of thinking about otherness, and few terms have been given such a vast array of senses in philosophy and theory of the past fifty years. In some traditions of thought otherness is cast as an inescapable and constantly encountered fact of social life: the other as whatever is not I, that is, anyone I might happen to meet. While there are reasons for speaking of otherness in such a way,¹ it has the unfortunate consequence of making it impossible to draw a meaningful distinction between one being Other and simply another, and so it fails to isolate that very particular phenomenon essential to many of the forms of oppression and denial the feminist, philosopher of race, postcolonialist, and many others besides, bring to our attention. This is the phenomenon that shall interest us here. As it will concern us, otherness designates an exceptional – though not for that uncommon – kind of experience. To play on Levinas' terminology, it is not the Other we encounter in the face-to-face but the Other as one in whom we do not quite see a human face at all.² It is this

¹ This would be the sense of otherness that has figured in certain strands of the phenomenological tradition, used to designate, for instance, a primitive relationship between the self (or ego) and in effect everything that is experienced as external to it. This is the sense of the "other" that contrasts not with the familiar but with the "same", and indeed the same/other pairing is basic to much work in the phenomenological tradition.

² This is a condition – the condition of not seeing a "face" in another – that Levinas at times equates with "war". See, for example, "Freedom and Command" in Levinas (1998) and the various reflections on the face and the experience of the Other's humanity in Levinas (2002). For an excellent general discussion of the face and its

queer capacity we possess, certainly on occasion, to look at another and see something alien, incomprehensible, inhuman – something *other* – that we are interested in here, a capacity that underwrites a great many of our stories of tragedy, fictional or otherwise. How does one pass from a state of mere otherness to one of genuine otherness, and what are the conditions of mind and culture that make such a passage possible?

The work of Stanley Cavell is especially helpful for thinking through these issues, and it would be good for both philosophy and literary theory if his work on the conditions of, as he often puts it, “human separateness”³ occupied a much more central place in thinking about otherness. Cavell’s work can show us how to tame the concept of the Other, focusing it such that it reveals why the idea of otherness is both inescapable and deeply problematic. As we shall put him to use here, Cavell can help us to see two very different ways in which the idea of otherness is significant. One, we shall argue, is significant in a wholly negative sense: otherness as a result of a skeptical stance we take towards other people, the result of which is often to banish them to a state of impenetrability because we make a rather big deal of the ways in which they differ from us. The second sense of otherness is more interesting. It concerns a way of conceiving otherness that has been immensely popular in certain corners of literary theory but that Anglo-American philosophy has almost entirely ignored: the conception of otherness that arises with special clarity in the discussion of the so-called “postcolonial subject,” though its significance extends far beyond the postcolonial. It is interesting not only because it helps us see what is vicious in the skeptical conception of otherness; it also brings to view a genuinely *non-skeptical* way of thinking about otherness, that is, of understanding otherness not as inevitably a projection of the skeptical imagination but as a kind of lived condition to which one can very much bear witness. These two conceptions of otherness, we shall argue, are essential for understanding the representations of the unfamiliar so central to what one might just as well call the modern novel of otherness. In Anglophone literature this novel begins to appear in the early nineteenth century with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* (1818) and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), it develops into the troubled and troubling vision of the colonized we find in turn-of-the-century works such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* (1901), and in ever more complex terms it is now being written by authors as diverse as Jean Rhys, Chinua Achebe, George Lamming, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, and J.M. Coetzee, among, of course, many others.

2. THE SENSE OF SEPARATION

Cavell’s thought cannot be understood without first getting clear about the basic philosophical story he tells about skepticism and human separateness. What we need to understand is that for Cavell the sense of separation arises from something deeply paradoxical about the human situation. The very thing that brings us into a shared world can also provoke in us a sense of alienation from that world, even an urge to withdraw from it. And as we will see, the casting of one as an Other can amount to one such mode of withdrawal.

Cavell often explains this paradoxical human situation in terms of language and the peculiar way in which we inherit it. One thing language does is hold out the promise of community – of a

relevance to both philosophy and literature, see Bernie Rhie (forthcoming).

³ See especially Cavell (1979), 491-496.

mutually intelligible way to “word the world together”⁴ – but of course there are no assurances that this promise is actually kept. The skeptical impulse begins to appear when we ask how we *know* that the world is as our inherited language presents it to us, that those shared “linguistic criteria,” as Cavell often puts it, actually count the objects in the world aright, getting them as they are.⁵ We experience, at least in our skeptical moments, the very things that give us access to a common world as barriers to that world, seeing language, even our form of life, as empty of whatever it is we think necessary to establishing a satisfying connection to that world. For Cavell, without the intervention of another stance – that of acknowledgment – the sense of separation the skeptical voice prompts in us runs the risk of becoming a sense of *comprehensive* isolation and, ultimately, of undoing meaningful ways of being invested in the very world we wish to know.

But there is also something odd about the kind of disappointment with our condition the skeptic registers. The skeptic experiences whatever it is that grounds our relation to the world not as a point of entry but as a limitation, an obstacle, and this reveals something uncanny about the skeptic’s stance. Consider the following passage from *The Claim of Reason* (and for our purposes one might replace talk of “mind and world” with that of “ourselves and others”):

The gap between mind and world is closed, or the distortion between them straightened, in the apprehension and acceptance of particular human forms of life, human “convention”. This implies that the sense of the gap originates in an attempt, or wish, to escape (to remain a “stranger” to, “alienated” from) those shared forms of life, to give up the responsibility of their maintenance.”⁶

And another, this time from *Must We Mean What we Say*:

Philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expressions. [Wittgenstein] wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge.⁷

The idea of feeling “chafed by our skin” is powerful. As with Socrates, who at times speaks of death as necessary for the attainment of knowledge, in this mood the body unfortunately makes knowledge impossible: the skeptic in effect experiences the fact of *embodiment* as an obstacle to be overcome. The skeptic is right that my flesh, as it were, presents a kind of barrier to what is external to me. This is hardly surprising. But then again, without our skin we wouldn’t have much of a chance of experiencing anything at all, and so we find ourselves in the strange position of regarding that which grounds the possibility of having a purchase on the world (cultural, linguistic, or even personal embodiment) as making us “powerless,” as Cavell puts it, to penetrate into that world, in this respect feeling very much chafed by our skin.

⁴ Cavell (1988), 126.

⁵ See Steven Affeldt (1998) for an excellent discussion of the role of criteria in Cavell’s philosophy.

⁶ Cavell (1979), 109.

⁷ Cavell (1969), 61.

It is here that the philosophically familiar picture of a “gap,” of a division in kind, between mind and world, language and reality, indeed between another and an Other, can begin to appear, though in a problematic and suspicious form. What is troubling about this picture is that we soon find that not just the objects of knowledge — this makes it sound merely epistemological — but nearly the entire range of objects of human concern, of *value*, can be placed on the other side of this gap. It doesn’t matter if one is Bishop Berkeley wondering skeptically about the existence of physical reality or Othello about Desdemona’s fidelity. What this picture does is place the objects to which we wish to be brought closer in a kind of elsewhere, and it makes impossible the satisfaction of conditions for knowing precisely what is happening there. How do I *know* that reality is as I think it is, that morality demands what I understand it to demand, or that my friends are really that? This picture of separation can strike us as inescapable because “the sense of the gap,” as Cavell puts it, is conjured up by the very act of asking the skeptic’s question. For we can always wonder whether the world and those in it are as we think they are. And to realize that nothing can voice an assurance that they actually are is to experience our relationship to these objects as disappointing, because shot through with a sense of insurmountable distance.

How we might overcome this — always imperfectly but effectively enough to keep our relationship to the world intact — is the topic that occupies much of Cavell’s thought. What is unique about Cavell’s work on skepticism and acknowledgment is that he insists that the taming (if never conquering) of this sense of separation cannot be carried out in the same tenor of mind that prompts it. We might recall Wittgenstein’s claim that “knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgment.”⁸ For Cavell, as for Wittgenstein, acknowledgment holds near with one hand what the skeptic in us pushes away with the other. It is through our various acts of recognition and acknowledgment that we keep the objects of human concern tethered to us *here*. This shows us something important about our relations to others, and for his part the skeptic helps us see this. In Cavell’s own words, “our primary relation to the world is not one of knowing (understood as achieving certainty of it based on the senses). This is the truth of skepticism.”⁹

Acknowledgment is not a *response* to skepticism, if by this we mean that it answers the question skepticism raises, at least on the skeptic’s terms. It rather acts as a kind of corrective, or countermovement, to the motion of mind that gives rise to the skeptical question itself. As Cavell often puts it, acknowledgment is an *inflection* of knowledge, not a separate route to arriving at its objects.¹⁰ If we do not hang our knowledge on the appropriate hook of response, to this extent we create the conditions that give rise to the feeling of distance between ourselves and those regions of the world that interest us, for we inevitably experience them as “queer,” removed. As such, we experience them apart from the ways in which they can make a claim on us and so bring us into a kind of community with them.

⁸ Wittgenstein (1969), §379.

⁹ Cavell (1972), 104.

¹⁰ As Cavell puts it, “Acknowledging is not an alternative to knowing but an interpretation of it. Incorporating, or inflecting, the concept of knowledge, the concept of acknowledgment is meant, in my use, to declare that what there is to be known philosophically remains unknown not through ignorance (for we cannot just not know what there is to be known philosophically, for example that there is a world and I and others in it) but through a refusal of knowledge, a denial, or a repression of knowledge, say even a killing of it.” (Cavell, 1988, 51).

Of course, we can always make mistakes, acknowledging what should be avoided and believing what turns out to be false. The point is that the further skeptical error, both epistemic and moral, is to allow local mistakes and failures of knowledge to give rise to a generalized sense that the world and others in it might be systematically beyond us, at least, as the skeptic says, “as far as we know.” It is at this point that skepticism can become “world-annihilating,” removing the conditions under which we can experience it as *ours*. Put differently, the problem with the skeptic is that the kind of stance he takes towards the world makes it impossible to *hear* the various claims to community the world issues; these invitations can be received only when we take the world to be an object of *interest*, concern, and care, and not as a mere object of knowledge. Skepticism of this sort is, in its most terrible manifestations, tragic, as Cavell shows us when he looks to Shakespeare to achieve a sense of what it means to *live* skepticism,¹¹ leading us as it can to undo our connection to those to whom we most wish to be brought closer: Cordelia, Hermione, Desdemona, and all the other unfortunate characters who suffer because they find themselves on the receiving end of the skeptic’s question.

3. THE SKEPTICAL CONCEPTION OF OTHERNESS

One lesson is obvious. The problem of otherness is both insoluble and vicious if cast skeptically, that is, as a problem of *knowledge* of whether others are as we are. One does not experience a sense of otherness of the philosophically interesting sort if one is merely skeptical about some feature of a person, say his or her love for us (though this can pave the way to this comprehensive sense of estrangement). If the idea of otherness is to register something more than the dull fact that other people can conceal their beliefs, desires, and histories from us – and everyone can, the Other and the mere Another alike – it must mean something more than this. To be interesting, it must give voice to a more thorough sense of concealment, not the sense of some one truth another might hide from us but some grander thing that shakes our confidence in the possibility that another could be understood even if perfectly forthcoming about who she or he is. Skepticism interprets the sense of an Other’s impenetrability as a kind of *cognitive* impenetrability, imagining all others as in some sense inscrutable to a mind like one’s own. If this is not quite tantamount to denying the humanity of another, it does, as skepticism generally does, create the conditions for tragic avoidance, for regarding another *as though* fully alien.

A work whose title perfectly expresses this skeptical conception of otherness is Primo Levi’s *If This is a Man*, and note that in the original — *Se questo è un uomo* — one hears not only a doubt about whether one is a man but, lingering behind it, a human. Much of what Levi does is recount the forms of madness that not only gave rise to the question but that allow us to respond to it as though we have discovered its answer. One thinks here of Levi’s coming to understand that many acts of humiliation in the camps were not, or not just, forms of torture; they were a kind of training. To make one eat on all fours like a dog is to make it possible to see another as an animal and so as other than human, in this way creating the condition of mind that makes the question “if this is a man” seem intelligible, legitimate, and even as clearing the ground for a kind of revelation. A homegrown example of this is James Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” which represents lynching as a horrible but effective social ritual, at least in an oppressively racist culture. The members of the

¹¹ See the essays collected in Cavell (1987).

(white) community pack picnics, dress in their Sunday best, gather their children, and meet in a shared social space to watch a man be castrated and set aflame, until the body no longer bears the mark of the human, as if to say, “behold the answer to our question; this is *not* a man.”

It would be unfair to say that philosophers and theorists who interpret the problem of otherness as a *skeptical* problem are always on the side of the devil, though Levi and Baldwin might wish to disagree. There are, after all, many who appear to cast the concept of otherness skeptically and then go on to try to derive a powerful ethics from it. (There is good reason to doubt that Levinas does this, though many of his commentators seem happy to regard him as going about his business this way.¹²) But what Cavell helps us to see is that the worry here lies not in the prospect of answering the skeptical question negatively. We go astray with the way we ask the question itself. This is why the concept of acknowledgment is not enlisted as a *response* to the skeptic’s question but as indicating what we must do to prevent ourselves from succumbing fully to its all but inevitable pull: from allowing it to give rise to the sense of overwhelming separateness that places an impossible burden on our capacity to recognize others as *fellow*, at least in such a way that they could make a claim on our response. Interpreted skeptically, otherness is never discovered; it is never found, as it were, in the world itself. It is generated by the queer and potentially annihilating question the skeptic in us raises. In this respect *we* create the very conditions of mind and culture that permit another to pass into a state of otherness.

4. OTHERNESS WITHOUT SKEPTICISM

It would be to err in the opposite direction to dismiss the idea of otherness on account of these arguments, as though Cavell’s reveals that the notion is inherently confused and can be disregarded. Indeed, the denial of otherness would indicate just a different kind of failure of acknowledgement, not the skeptic’s but the crank’s. But what might it mean to acknowledge otherness non-skeptically, and how do we respond to otherness so conceived?

Recall that the skeptic generates the sense of separation by his very question and the realization that no answer is forthcoming. It isn’t that the world stands up and says “I am not as you think I am.” This is why it is skepticism: it is created by a doubt we raise and not some item in the world that claims to be otherwise than we think it is. Put differently, on the skeptical interpretation there is nothing that really *bears witness* to the gap we sense running between ourselves and others. But when one looks beyond philosophy to those corners of the humanities that study otherness as a kind of literary and cultural phenomenon, one can find an exception to the skeptical way of conceiving otherness. We find examples of a kind of subject who on account of usually terrible social facts *is* precisely in a position to *bear witness* to this; in this sense, we find an example of something in the world standing up and pointing to the distance between ourselves and them.

We can see something that amounts to this in certain strands of feminist and Marxist thought, and critical race theory, among many others. And we see this perhaps most perfectly in the idea of a postcolonial subject and the critique of the colonial imagination. The colonial here can often be read just as the embodiment of the skeptical sense of otherness, of the very stance that gives life to Levi’s question: of the native as Caliban, capable only of swearing and expressing the desire to sleep with the daughters of Europe; of terrible and incomprehensible savagery existing beyond the

¹² See Michael Morgan (2007) for an excellent discussion of Levinas and skepticism.

final colonial outposts, and so on. In the various forms of postcolonial ‘writing back,’ one often finds the attempt, carried out as though guided by a moral imperative, to unravel the skeptical imagining of the colonized subject *yet* doing so by embracing and indeed insisting upon the distance between the two worlds. One thinks here of Franz Fanon waging war against the Western canon in his own mind.¹³ Among other things, this is a struggle to achieve a kind of authentic and free expressivity – of *voice*, as Cavell might put it – that is premised on the knowledge that this cannot be done, at least not exclusively, in the colonial language. What all this gives us is a feel for the sorts of situation – political, sexual, and cultural – in which one can be compelled to say “I am not as you think I am, and your words can’t be mine,” and to say so sincerely, as a kind of testimony.

What Cavell helps us see is that a legitimate idea of otherness might be reserved for cases such as these, cases in which the sense of distance and incommensurability is too significant to be got at by speaking vaguely and sloppily of “cultural difference” or “diversity of lifestyles.” In this respect, the notion of otherness designates the point at which we can’t undo the sense of difference simply by speaking to one another in a common tongue, at least not without one of us changing in basic and significant ways. The idea of otherness one gets from this is not a skeptical worry about zombies. It is in effect a conception of otherness as a problem of specific *opacities of embodiment*, cultural, linguistic, religious, ‘racial’¹⁴ and otherwise, without the *a priori* skeptical packaging. It is the obvious possibility of being specifically embodied differently that gives the truth to the idea of otherness, for the sense of separation this provokes can at times be thorough enough to undermine the prospect of any sharable community.

The kind of communication that is impossible here has little to do with the conveying of discrete bits of information – we can translate ‘facts’ of the everyday sort and share them with the other – and it would be silliness to speak baldly of the impossibility of making ourselves understood to an Other, so conceived. But as Cavell helps us to see, when we speak we do not simply utter words that bear ‘cognitive’ meaning; we attempt to conjure up a very precise environment of thought and feeling in which our words are meant to be received. We attempt to convey a sense of the world as textured with aesthetic, affective, moral and perhaps spiritual qualities: as expressive of routes of interest and concern, of how and why what we say *matters*. This is a fundamental respect in which what I can say can constitute an act of acknowledgement. The sharing of all this, more than anything else, is what makes language capable of establishing community, since it is here that we create a space we can potentially share with others, as well as enact a sense of how one is that can be issued as an invitation others might accept or refuse. The sense of separation that otherness provokes in us arises from the awareness that our words can at times fail to establish this, that at present our words are idle in *this* respect: the words I am bound to use will not suffice to bring you any nearer. The mere expressing of propositional attitudes and stating of facts-of-the-matter are not especially helpful here, and so while this kind of factual communication is possible with an Other, it fails to help us confront the sense of separation we wish to overcome.¹⁵

¹³ See Fanon (1967) and (1968).

¹⁴ We put “racially” in scare quotes because the very notion is deeply problematic. See Paul Taylor (2005)

¹⁵ It may be interesting to note that ethnology, the very discipline that studies foreign cultures, often assumes a similar picture of the problem of communication with the other (or what amounts to it), at least if we follow the lesson of Michel Leiris and James Clifford. Their ethnological model emphasizes writing as construction rather than as representation, and it seeks to demonstrate that when one is trying to capture the foreignness of a culture, what

5. THE TWO FACES OF OTHERNESS

We can see both senses of otherness at play in a great many colonial and postcolonial literary works, and indeed writers have arguably done more than philosophers to think through them, study their manifestations, and attempt to understand their entanglements. For it is arguable that each is part of our experience of the unfamiliar: otherness as problem of skepticism and of embodiment. At any rate, consider as illustrations of the skeptical interpretation of otherness these two famous passages taken, respectively, from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In the former, the readers, along with Jane Eyre herself, are introduced for the first time to Mr. Rochester's Jamaican and creole wife, Bertha Mason. The passage is long, but it is worth quoting in full:

He lifted the hangings from the wall, uncovering the second door: this, too, he opened. In a room without a window, there burnt a fire guarded by a high and strong fender, and a lamp suspended from the ceiling by a chain. Grace Poole bent over the fire, apparently cooking something in a saucepan. In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. [...]

"Ware!" cried Grace. The three gentlemen retreated simultaneously. Mr. Rochester flung me behind him: the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek: they struggled. She was a big woman, in stature almost equalling her husband, and corpulent besides: she showed virile force in the contest -- more than once she almost throttled him, athletic as he was. He could have settled her with a well-planted blow; but he would not strike: he would only wrestle. At last he mastered her arms; Grace Poole gave him a cord, and he pinioned them behind her: with more rope, which was at hand, he bound her to a chair. The operation was performed amidst the fiercest yells and the most convulsive plunges. Mr. Rochester then turned to the spectators: he looked at them with a smile both acrid and desolate.

"That is MY WIFE," said he.¹⁶

The description of Bertha Mason exemplifies the extent to which the construction of the colonial subject and indeed colonialist rhetoric itself were predicated upon the skeptical idea of otherness. Bertha Mason embodies the most widespread stereotypes of the colonial subject as bestial, inhuman, instinctual, wild and indeed in need of physical and moral restraint. The choice of deictic in the last line – "that" instead of "this" – to refer to the woman, who is tied to a chair and in full view of those present, reinforces with brilliant literary simplicity the insurmountable distance between the two cultural worlds represented in the work, despite, or precisely on account of, their physical proximity.

In Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, written at a time when the very idea of colonization was coming under intense scrutiny, we see a more complex reflection on the same felt sense of separateness between colonizer and colonized, embodied especially in the figure of Mistah Kurtz.

one is ultimately just left with is a translation of that foreignness into your own language, your own body, your own resources of tradition and modes of articulation. Leiris's ground-breaking *L' Afrique fantôme* (1934) is still essential reading on this topic. See also Clifford (1988) and (1997).

¹⁶ C. Brontë (1865), ch. 26.

Examples abound in the text of natives constructed as “black shapes”, as “barbarous” and “savage”, but one of the most deeply troubling and literarily complex moments is when Marlow recounts the death of his helmsman:

The man had rolled on his back and stared straight up at me; both his hands clutched that cane. It was the shaft of a spear that, either thrown or lunged through the opening, had caught him in the side, just below the ribs; the blade had gone in out of sight, after making a frightful gash; my shoes were full; a pool of blood lay very still, gleaming dark-red under the wheel; his eyes shone with an amazing lustre. The fusillade burst out again. He looked at me anxiously, gripping the spear like something precious, with an air of being afraid I would try to take it away from him. I had to make an effort to free my eyes from his gaze and attend to the steering. [...] We two whites stood over him, and his lustrous and inquiring glance enveloped us both. I declare it looked as though he would presently put to us some questions in an understandable language; but he died without uttering a sound, without moving a limb, without twitching a muscle. Only in the very last moment, as though in response to some sign we could not see, to some whisper we could not hear, he frowned heavily, and that frown gave to his black death-mask an inconceivably sombre, brooding, and menacing expression. The lustre of inquiring glance faded swiftly into vacant glassiness.¹⁷

What is troubling about the helmsman’s gaze is the allusion that it seems to make to the existence of a shared language between the European man and the African man, as if there were something deep – that we might call human nature – bringing them together. Later in the text, in fact, Marlow explicitly states that he “had to look after him” and that there was “a subtle bond” between the two of them, and this is clearly meant to debunk the prejudice that the helmsman was “of no more account than a grain of sand in a black Sahara.” Most significantly, he says that he cannot forget “the intimate profundity of that look he gave me when he received his hurt [...] like a claim of distant kinship affirmed in a supreme moment.”¹⁸ Yet, despite his critical attitude towards colonial imperialism, Marlow is not ready to embrace the consequences of such an acknowledgment, an acknowledgement that would ultimately signify the demise of his world and his civilization. At any rate, what Conrad’s text captures well is the troubled consciousness that colonialism faces in turn-of-the-century Europe and America and the growing interest in finding new ways of understanding and making sense of otherness. Above all else, this work explores the entanglement of the two visions of otherness discussed here: the skeptical one and what in this context we might simply call the postcolonial conception of otherness. In passages such as these one can witness a consciousness shift, often chaotically and violently, between these two ways of grasping otherness, as though to say that the experience of otherness for the colonizer is destabilizing, mad, and carries with it the potential for both annihilation and liberation.

The South African novelist J.M. Coetzee is arguably the contemporary author whose treatment of these issues is among the subtlest one can find in either recent literature or philosophy. In Coetzee’s fiction, otherness is thematised as a central moral and political issue, and it reveals itself in a continuous struggle to acknowledge alterity without recourse to the stereotypical representations of colonialist discourse exemplified in the works discussed above. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980)

¹⁷ Conrad (1995), 118-119.

¹⁸ All quotations in this paragraph are of Conrad (1995), 124.

and *Foe* (1986) are each exemplary in this respect. In these novels we find a thorough exploration of the issue of unspeakable otherness, otherness that cannot be bridged by words or language or the establishment of a shared life, and yet these books speak, as works of art, of the inevitability of such explorations in order to make sense of our world, echoing in this respect Cavell's own views on skepticism.

Coetzee's treatment of otherness in these works tallies to the positions the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak exposed in her essay "Three Women's Texts": "No perspective *critical* to imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolute Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self."¹⁹ In other words, the category of the other in postcolonial discourse can only be explored through and in the other's own language, a language that is radically different from the colonialist one and its core values and that enables the absolute other to speak outside of what is considered the accepted and canonized modes. The characters of Friday in *Foe* and the Barbarian Girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians* well exemplify this idea of the irreducible otherness of the postcolonial subject. They make demands on the reader simply by being there: they become inescapable and call out for an act of recognition. In Derek Attridge's words, they are "two figures of alterity who respond to the task of conveying their resistance to the discourses of the ruling culture, and also find means of representing the claims they make upon those who inhabit that culture."²⁰

In *Foe*, Friday – unlike the original Friday in Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* – cannot be tamed, trained, or educated. His tongue has been removed, therefore he can neither speak nor tell his own story. But, more than that, he seems to be totally indifferent to Susan Barton's language (English), despite her efforts to educate him, as well as to her displays of human affection. Friday's missing tongue becomes *the* central problem of the text.

Friday has no command of words and therefore no defence against being re-shaped day by day in conformity with the desires of others. I say he is a cannibal and he becomes a cannibal; I say he is a laundryman and he becomes a laundryman. What is the truth of Friday? You will respond: he is neither a cannibal nor laundryman, these are mere names, they do not touch his essence, he is a substantial body, he is himself, Friday is Friday. But that is not so. No matter what he is to himself (is he anything to himself? – How can he tell us?), what he is to the world is what I make of him.²¹

What Susan Barton is trying to do here is turning Friday's radical otherness into something familiar – what Spivak refers to as "turning the Other into a self" – and with which she can establish a relationship along the master-servant lines. She is trying to make Friday intelligible to her and her potential readers, shaping him into a domesticated Other.

Textually, Fridays' incommensurable separateness is signified by the complex narrative structure of the novel *Foe*, by an ambiguous use of inverted commas at the beginning of each paragraph, and, most importantly, by the prose poem that occupies Part IV of the novel that forces us to re-read the book as a whole. In a poetic prose reminiscent of Caliban's lyricism when celebrating the sounds of the islands to Stephano and Trinculo in Shakespeare's *Tempest* (Act 3,

¹⁹ Spivak (1985), 253.

²⁰ Attridge (2004), 12.

²¹ Coetzee (1986), 121-122.

Scene 2), Part IV closes the novel with Friday's "faraway roar"²² and leaves the reader wondering about the secret meaning of that roar. "This is not a place of words," we read at the end. Instead, "This is a place where bodies are their own signs. It is the home of Friday."²³ Friday's story, when it finally gets told, is not given through an abstract system of signs. It is delivered, instead, through his body, to an audience that can only try to understand him by finding a way to acknowledge the humanness of his body and the signs it bears:

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.²⁴

That is the story that Susan Barton most wished to hear and write about. But, as Derek Attridge points out, "[f]or her, there can be no assurance that all silences will eventually be made to resound with the words of the dominant language, and to tell their stories in canonized narratives."²⁵ We are left, then, with the act of bearing witness to otherness, not as a skeptical projection but as, quite literally here, the problem of embodiment, in the form of Friday sending out his song not, as it were, to but upon Susan Barton.

5. CONCLUSION

We have had much to say about how the two senses of otherness we have explored are generated and very little to say about how they are overcome. A good story is owed here, and we don't have a good story to tell about this. But if one were to look to Cavell to find a hint, we suspect one would find it not just in his writing on skepticism and avoidance but perhaps especially in his work on moral perfectionism, and that this would be an excellent way of putting Cavell in touch with those areas of literary theory that explore otherness.²⁶ That is, we suspect that understanding how we form a community with the other is for Cavell in certain key respects akin to understanding how we form it with ourselves. We've known since romanticism that alienation is not simply from nature or others but that it can be internalized such that we experience *ourselves* as foreign, as, in effect, Other — and that the world does its part to make this a constant threat. For Cavell the self is not a kind of thing but a sort of achievement, and we come to possess it by engaging in a certain project, Emersonian at root. For Cavell there is no ideal specifiable in advance, no rule to guide us, when we pursue selfhood. It is a kind of improvised, fragmentary, exploratory affair in which we constantly test and push against whatever provokes a sense of being unfamiliar, even unavailable, to ourselves. It strikes us as reasonable to cast the attempt to create community with another in at least some of this light. If we

²² *Ibid*, 115

²³ *Ibid*, 157.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 157

²⁵ Attridge (2004), 82.

²⁶ For his work on moral perfection see Cavell (1992) and "Themes of Moral Perfectionism in Plato's *Republic* in Cavell (2004).

take it to be an unscripted project of good will and not an attempt to render another in terms already intelligible to us, we at least diminish the chances that at the end of our project we'll have inevitably done another harm by, as it is said, totalizing or rendering the other as the same. The story will be infinitely more complex than this, of course. But it would be productive to look closer at Cavell's work on moral perfectionism to figure how to tell this story.

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