Otherness

A Multilateral Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

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'Nobody – that's my name'

– Homer, *The Odyssey*, IX

Self and other: indelibly divided, irrevocably united

The Delphic injunction to know thyself, to understand oneself as self, paradoxically entails alienating self-reflection and the awareness that the limits of any entity, hence its individuation, are determined by what lies outside these limits – otherness. As the necessary limit against which the self can be defined, otherness has been inseparable from human identity and affairs from time immemorial – the birth of subjectivity ineluctably implicates the birth of its concomitant and allegedly dark twin. But where is this schism between the I and other located? In what ways are their complex relations constructed and discerned? In spite of the explanatory chasm between, as well as our age-old concern with, these wrinkled interdependent twins, the longevity of their pertinence does not diminish nor has the critical attention it acutely demanded in recent years abated. In undertaking to debate otherness from new angles and agendas, this collection has been consciously compiled as work written in and to a contemporary world continuously struggling with the issue of otherness. It supposes a space for dialogue in which new considerations of otherness across interdisciplinary boundaries can be opened and remain active. Traversing scholarly and cultural boundaries, delving into diverse media and genres, it is both diverging and converging, both theoretical and practical, both interdisciplinary but also quite focused on its pertinent subject matter.

Existing since ancient times, various forms of otherness are unsurprisingly already inscribed in Odysseus's violent contention with the Cyclops, Polyphemus. This tale offers an early and exemplary account on the process of forging otherness, sameness and their precarious interdependence and interpenetration; a fig-

uration which anticipates the problematic of our contemporary world where the cultural logic of homogenisation and diversification are found to be mutually dependent. The exceptional stature, singular eye and cannibalism of this mythic monster constitute markers for recalcitrant alterity. His name, signalling polysemy, aptly characterises the plural and heterogeneous nature of otherness. Otherness in its multifarious forms is all too often rendered dark and suspect, provoking reflexes dominated by disavowal and fear, and with reason, since otherness may take on the exacerbating form of being integral to subjectivity itself. Correspondingly, Odysseus's encounter with Polyphemus unfolds the uneasy complicity between self and other: not merely a monster or savage, the Cyclops is humanised by his linguistic abilities and affection towards the sheep he tends. His inauspicious choice of flesh conveys not only a radical difference but also the collapse of the distinction between self and other: by appropriating the status of an agent consuming and thus converting another self into an object, he is framed as both subject and utterly other making any neat opposition between self and other untenable.

Indeed, the tale of the Cyclops features a disconcerting otherness that is construed less in opposition to selfhood than as a constitutive element intrinsic to the formation of subjectivity; a principle that has also been prominent in various critical discourses of late. Deconstruction and Lacanian theory, for example, articulates how the imposition of language radically displaces yet enables the emergence of the subject. Derrida's coinage, *différance*, epitomises this contradiction: the absence inhabiting the signifier, as a result of its imbricated traces to other signifiers that ceaselessly defer meaning, ensures that the subject mediated by language is likewise always already absent to itself and attended by an irrevocable internal difference and chronic incompleteness even if the latter are constitutive of identity (see also Derrida 1973, 129-160). Consonantly, Lacan's Symbolic register, radically and unassimilably Other in the sense that its universal and anonymous field renders its irreducible to the subject, instates subjectivity yet nevertheless also deconstitutes its integrity, since the Symbolic is hindered from fully representing one's being. 'I identify myself in language', Lacan says, 'but only by losing myself in it like an object', which results in the subject's 'lack-of-being' or 'lack-in-being' (*manque à être*) (94). Whereas Polyphemus is to a certain extent civilised by his mastery of language, Odysseus's self can be said to be undermined by the very same ability. Odysseus ultimately escapes his

adversary by wordplay: specifically, by naming himself *Udeis*, literally: 'nobody' or 'no-one', preventing forthcoming aid from the Cyclopes community when Polyphemus yells that 'Nobody' has attacked him. Yet with this double-entendre, as Adorno and Horkheimer contend in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Odysseus's 'self-assertion, as in the entire epic, as in all civilization, is self-repudiation' (53). Adorno and Horkheimer understand the pun on nobody as rupturing an arbitrary breach between acoustic signifier and mental signified that Odysseus, as an exponent of a semantic discourse, can discern in contrast to Polyphemus. As a result, the signifiers that constitute Odysseus's symbolic identity are no longer underpinned by the bedrock of their signifieds. Although Odysseus's manipulation of the arbitrary nature of signification ensures his survival, it comes at the painful cost of self-repudiation, of forfeiting a constituent of his being; thus, his self-designation 'Nobody' proves inadvertently appropriate. Since the signifier substitutes the thing it references, it implies the absence of the latter; it becomes the tombstone engraving the death of, since unable to account for, the individual's fleshy particularity. Hence, Lacan's famous dictum: 'the symbol manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing' (114). Any gesture intended to establish and secure a stable identity painfully betrays itself as an act of identicide – the self-effacement yet grounding of the speaking subject. We are not only intimate with alterity but also extimate to ourselves.

The other constitutive of the self and their incongruous conjunction is rendered literal by the motif of the double; and it does seem that an uncanny identity exists between Odysseus and his nemesis. Rick M. Newton finds that 'Odysseus becomes himself a metaphorical Cyclops', since his return home to Ithaca echoes the incidents in the Cyclopean cave: like Polyphemus, Odysseus slaughters the strangers that have invaded his home, infringed the norms of hospitality and availed themselves of his goods (142). The chapters by Olu Jenzen and Susan Yi Sencindiver also take the form of a metaphorical Cyclops in that they discuss how improper bodies and sexual otherness, as also exemplified by Polyphemus's excessive size and deviant physiognomy, pertain to the *doppelgänger* motif. Jenzen's 'Same, Same but Other: Over-sameness as Sexual Otherness' explores the uncanny trope of the double as manifested in the figure of the narcissistic lesbian couple. The queer uncanny, she suggests, affords new ways of thinking about otherness and facilitates a critique of heterosexist epistemology that presumes a particular relation to the other. By approaching the mutual affinity between the

doppelgänger motif and the pregnant and parturient woman, Sencindiver, in 'Pregnant Doppelgängers: Lived and Literary', addresses the internal other in terms of both a fetal other physically embodied and literally within and an inherent yet excluded otherness, the unacknowledged maternal body, which seems to escape the *doppelgänger's* and Lacan's specular realm yet makes possible and sustains their very frame.

The complex union between self and other is likewise treated by Steven Bond who, in his essay, 'From Alterity to Transcendence: Dedalus the Dub to Hamlet the Dane', writes that the twentieth century turn to alterity as subjectivity was inspired by a set of literary/philosophical odysseys that developed through Shakespeare to Descartes to Joyce, reaching a point of Levinasian radicalism by the time modernism had reached its peak. Modern transcendence, it seems, is the subject's transcendence of itself. The sense of otherness that was once held as divine by the Romantics has been reshaped in the form of the secular but equally illusive 'self'. Thus, Bond claims, the final act of Stephen Dedalus in the Ithaca episode of *Ulysses* is a rejection of Leopold Bloom and *Ulysses* ends with Stephen, alone. The two figures had almost achieved a kind of fusion: becoming 'Stoom and Blephen.' The relationship with the other in *Ulysses* is thus an incomplete one, which ruptures intentionality. As Levinas avers in *Ethics and Infinity*: 'The relationship between men is certainly the non-synthesizable *par excellence'* (1985, 77).

Self and other, as noted, are indelibly wedded; however, can the other be approached as irreducibly other, in other words, defined by and for itself without recourse to the self? Since otherness is conventionally defined as the polar opposite of sameness and selfhood, and therefore in some correlation with and relative to the latter, does this mean that otherness is invariably translated into an alter ego within the economy of the self-same? Or framing the distinction in Lacanian idiom, how can we distinguish between '*o*ther' phenomena, a mere mirrored projection of the ego, from the '*O*ther' as genuinely alien, autonomous and unknowable? Significantly, figures of otherness do not only form a part of our literature, art and critical theory but also of dominating Western political rhetoric. A key strand outlined in, for instance, the thinking tissue of Luce Irigaray and Edward Said exhorts the importance in differentiating and retaining the difference between the heterogeneous iterations of otherness.

In contrast to Simone de Beauvoir's premise in *The Second Sex* – which contends that femininity has been formed by relation to, and differentiation from, a male standard, thus entailing the construction of woman as the quintessential other of man (175) – Irigaray insightfully adds that not only is the subject masculine, as Beauvoir argues, but its mirrored other is masculine as well: woman is the unthought and absent sex in a self-enclosed male monologic circuit, yet in this very system she is falsely represented as man's other. In other words, Irigaray distinguishes between woman as measured against a male yardstick and woman as conceptualised beyond this standard.

In a similar vein, a post-colonial lens alerts us to the othering of vast numbers of the world's population by colonial thought, the function of othering as a mirror to stabilise the colonialist's inverted self-image and how the alterity of the non-European subject in colonial discourses constitutes a discursive reality: a self-same otherness that erases actual and ultimately unknown Otherness. This further prompts the question of how we can ethically relate to and represent the inaudible voices of the subaltern, marginalised others and historically dispossessed embedded in the materiality of everyday existence without distorting them into the echoes of our own fantasies. Is it possible to narrate absolute Otherness *qua* ontological category as opposed to otherness *qua* construct? In various disguises the Other and Otherness terms for what cannot be incorporated into known forms of perception, experience and knowledge. In more recent thinking – in philosophy, gender studies, psychology, psychoanalysis, post-colonial and other types of cultural studies – a paradox has become evident: the moment the Other has been conceptualized in positive terms, Otherness is displaced or vanishes. Svend Erik Larsen attends to this paradox from the point of view of narrative practice and theory by asking: 'How to Narrate the Other?' His answer is simple: We cannot narrate the Other as Other, only our encounters with it can be narrated. In his chapter he advances certain narrative forms that shape this encounter and evaluates their importance in today's globalized culture.

Hosting the other

Encounters with strangers often breed suspicion, hostile mistrust and denigration; however, it can also result in the recognition of the open arms of hospitality – representing the most elementary of ethical self-other relations. In the abovementioned Homeric tale, a narrative preoccupied with hospitality and host-guest rela-