The Face of the Other
in Anglo-American Literature
The Face of the Other in Anglo-American Literature

Edited by

Marija Knežević
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INTRODUCTION

MARIJA KNEŽEVIĆ
AND ALEKSANDRA NIKČEVIĆ BATRIĆEVIĆ

Meeting for the sixth time at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Montenegro, in Nikšić on September 30-October 2, 2010, international scholars of Anglo-American studies aimed at reassessing the paradoxical concept of the other, reconstructing the ways by which we know the other, and considering the possibilities for approaching the other without preconceptions.

The topic of our conference was “Facing the Other in the Absence of Theory.” To some this title may seem contradictory or excessively daunting, as human cognition starts with the very opening of the eyes. Even if we accept the idea that our approach to the other is always unavoidably a matter of semiotics, and if we make an attempt to naturalize phenomenology (like the one made by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who points to the corporeity of consciousness as much as intentionality of the body), it still appears that even our most negligible attempts to face the other reveal our cultural being or our habitual ways of being (Cf. Iris Young, *Throwing Like a Girl*, 1990, 2005). However, many thinkers (for example, novelist D. H. Lawrence and philosopher Luce Irigaray) have claimed that we know by touch and intuition. The papers collected in this book examine our approach to these issues in an essentially post-theory world, particularly enquiring into whether or not twentieth century theory has left us with clear directions for new ways of understanding and representing the phenomenological.

The way the other exists in the consciousness that, as Hegel said, always pursues its death, becomes especially interesting in the context of Anglo-American studies in the post-postmodern world, which sees the West as a changeable cultural (and geographical) concept that incorporates a multiplicity of others. Yet, at the same time, a number of contemporary Anglo-American writers insist on the prolonged effects of colonialism in the modern world, in which outbursts of violence and hatred aimed at the other prove that the modern world still cannot approach it without bigotry.
In his key-note lecture titled “Theory and Biography: The Other as Somebody,” Professor Adrian Frazier from Galway National University discussed the issue of the other as a provocation for us, as both scholars and humans, noticing how the other pervades our human existence to the point at which we ask ourselves about our very own otherness. Relying on Emmanuel Levinas in his critique of over-intellectualism and his conception of the primal face-to-face encounter of self and other, Frazier discusses two late twentieth-century theorists, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who propose a narrative concept of the self and whose pragmatic criticism, as Frazier says, tries to locate autonomy, seriousness, and responsibility within the person.

The absence or inadequacy of theory is not the only obstacle to acknowledging and understanding the other; there is also the absence of will or a simple lack of perception. In her paper on the archetypal reflection of the Brontë’ heroines, Milica Nenezić calls her approach non-theoretical; the text stands alone for her as reader. Since Simone de Beauvoir's writing, however, the female quest to define itself as Subject has been one of the primary challenges of feminist thought. De Beauvoir suggests that no man has been deprived of the freedom of choice to establish himself as the subject and the essential, and to thus relegate women to the non-essential and the other. Considering otherness as subject, both literally and metaphorically, Nenezić concludes that otherness has gradually become the face female authors keep seeing in the mirror. Mirrors are of course symbolic, and Nenezić refers specifically to Virginia Woolf’s metaphor of woman as the looking-glass held up to man; men are actually what women reflect them to be. Archetypal visualization reveals the unrefined desire to create objects of adoration, yet never to accept them fully.

In her paper “Facing the Other through the Power of Language: A Post-colonial Perspective,” Ana Vlaisavljević, from the University of Belgrade, sees the power of language as the central instrument of cultural domination and the most important issue of postcolonial studies. However, since language in itself does not possess power but reflects power relations within a certain social context, Vlaisavljević aims at investigating the linguistic domination of European languages in former colonies through the prism of both the colonial past and neo-colonial hegemony of the Centre. By drawing parallels between the colonial and postcolonial contexts, Vlaisaveljević focuses on the three forms of linguistic power of dominant languages, namely pragmatic, symbolic and signitive, which are all inextricably linked.
Sandra Josipović’s paper titled “A Chinese Immigrant Family Facing the Otherness of its Emerging American Self in the Work of Gish Jen” observes that the twentieth century has produced more migrants, refugees, displaced persons and exiles than ever before in history, most of them the result of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts and of changes in economic and political situations and the balance of power. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness and inability to conform to that existing social order. These people exist in a “no-man’s-land” between the old and the new, between the old empire and their ancestral heritage and the new state and new rules and conventions; their condition thus articulates tensions and contradictions.

Because there are so many migrants, refugees and displaced persons today, Edward Said is right when he claims that no one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American, or Chinese American are nothing more than starting-points, which are quickly left behind when one considers actual experience for only a moment. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems to be no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separateness and distinctiveness, as if that could explain all of human life. Surviving and living in fact are about connections. Gish Jen advocates exactly this point, thinking that no one should be seen strictly in terms of groupings, colours and classifications, and that multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity mean that a person has much vaster experience to draw on when solving life’s problems.

Arguing that the main concern of post-colonial literature is the way the presupposed superior culture of the colonizing countries responds to the encounter with the other, the colonized, the oppressed peoples, Tanja Obradović believes that the “first” was unable to properly deal with the other and, therefore, attributed inferiority to it and imposed on it stereotyped and distorted images. Obradović discusses the following historical plays: Savages (1974) by British author Christopher Hampton, which deals with genocidal practices against Brazilian Indians; Venus (1996) by American author Suzan-Lori Parks, which deals with the destiny of a South African girl exhibited in freak shows around Europe at the turn of the 19th century; and Maria Kizito (2003) by American author Erik Ehn, which deals with the case of the nuns of Sovu who provided gasoline which burnt alive seven hundred people. In dealing with different
continents and periods of time, these writers present us not only with shattered images of the other, but also the self.

Faruk Bajraktarević, from the University of Sarajevo, addresses the self as other in Nadeem Aslam’s novel *Maps for Lost Lovers*, which also directly attacks religious fundamentalism. Surveying the traumatic events of 9/11 and 7/7, Bajraktarević starts from the premise that there is nothing inherent in Muslim/Pakistani identity that justifies isolation or violence and rather sees those problems as defined in a complex web of historical and socio-political relations between the host society and immigrant groups. His paper further argues that the practices of constructing the other in the host society and the immigrant community portrayed in Aslam’s novel do not differ and are both founded on fear of destabilization in the face of diasporic encounters and exchanges, leading some individuals to undertake extreme measures to prevent the other from crossing the borders separating it from the world of the self.

Jeanine Belgodere, from the University of Le Havre in France, examines possibilities for arriving at an insider perspective on the culture of some New Mexican pueblos. In her paper “Facing the Pueblo Indian Culture and Dance: the Emic and Etic Perspectives,” she uses the word theory in its broad sense, as explanatory narrative accepted by a culture, in contrast to the scientific sense of theory as speculation and cultural hypothesizing. Therefore, instead of speculating on Pueblo dance, she turns to the indigenous conceptual and moral framework, key cultural values and worldview. Belgodere first recalls the unique obstacles presented by Pueblo culture, which survived by keeping the insider’s view secret. Moreover, Pueblo Indians who do reveal inside information are generally shunned or censured within the tribe. Most individuals only share information after a long process of establishing trust.

Using Derridean deconstruction, which aims at breaching and re-examining binary oppositions (in which the preference for one always excludes the subordinate), Mirjana Danić, from the University of Belgrade, observes the other in Toni Morrison’s recent novel *A Mercy* (2008). Danić shows examples of how Toni Morrison calls into question the racial and gender stereotyping of the early Americas and also deconstructs the hierarchy of dominant values. The novel deconstructs the binary couplets black-white, European-African, men-women by a re-examination of the historical facts and circumstances which gave rise to slavery. Toni Morrison without mercy analyzes faces of European settlers who, directly or indirectly, made a large profit through slave trade, and illuminates the fact that slave trade was enabled by intra-racial, i.e. inter-tribal conflicts on the African continent.
Daničić’s analysis is followed by papers that more explicitly discuss the other in gender studies. Aleksandra Žeželj Kocić deals with the issue of representation of the female other in Anita Desai’s novels *Cry, The Peacock* and *Fire on the Mountain*. She shows how possibly unified female agency presupposes numerous specificities that defy stereotyping, while, at the same time, underlining their otherness. The voice of womanhood erratically breaks the silence in its *talking back* and its refusal to stay reduced. At times, women’s oppression is due to their entrapment between tradition and modernity, which can be overcome in the utter subversion of dominant forces, including even death. Female subjectivities’ mysterious illnesses are (not) resolved, while women are forever entangled in the circle of violence and harassment. Thus, facing the female other becomes one of the pivotal challenges in reassessing postcolonial circumstances.

Jelena Basta, from the University of Niš, discusses female identity in the auto/biographical novel *The Orchard* by Australian writer Drusilla Modjeska. Australia underwent a distinctive process of colonization in the nineteenth century, being first inhabited by one of the most ancient races in the world, the Aborigines, and then becoming an English penal colony. Since the first colonizers were exclusively men, monolithic patriarchal structures were inevitable, and the idea of women as other was imposed upon Australian society as the fundamental social norm. An androcentric culture legitimizied and validated the male by opposition: what was masculine was positive and superior, what was feminine was negative and inferior. In such a social milieu women were encouraged to find their identity in their reflection of another, i.e. to see themselves as others see them. Love affairs and marriages were perceived as dances of domination, submission and control. In this dance of domination, agency was ascribed to the masculine, and passivity to the feminine. Women were treated and loved as objects, which revealed the male refusal to enter the realm of the spiritual reality or personal identity of the other. Basta’s paper presents Drusilla Modjeska’s novels as attempts to oppose the superimposed knowledge of the self and to undermine dominant power relations. Her paper reveals the social structures that keep us all, both men and women, far away from our authentic identities, from our authentic selves. The novel also illustrates many possibilities for subverting the crippling human trait of living life in accordance with other people’s expectations and definitions.

“Paired Characters in Samuel Beckett’s Plays,” by Loran Gami from Tirana University, develops the argument that by enclosing his characters within themselves and distancing them from the influence of their
surroundings, Beckett observes them with a solipsistic eye—the self within the self. Krapp in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, Hamm in *Endgame* and Henry in *Embers* are stuck in this position. One can hardly assume that the steadfast waiting at the same place by Vladimir and Estragon, nor the almost purposeless wanderings of Pozzo and Lucky in the ‘world’ of the play, can be taken as cracks in that solipsistic shell. Gami concludes that in Beckett’s plays characters are faced with unknown realities that confront them with relentless indifference.

In their co-authored paper “Death by Water: Eyedentity and Other in Two Novellas by Joyce Carol Oates,” Tijana Parezanović and Milan Marković explore the versatile identities of Oates’ characters. They discuss *Black Water* (1992) and *Zombie* (1995), the two novellas which represent unmistakable expressions of the author’s ambidextrous mind: the former is written from the viewpoint of the twenty-six-year-old heroine Kelly Kelleher, whereas the latter gives us clear insight into the disturbed mind of its hero Quentin. Both Kelly and Quentin are characterized by distorted perspectives on reality, reflected in impairments to their literal vision. Kelly’s condition of strabismus and her binary focus are reflected in the confusion about her stereotypically imposed self and the true self, while Quentin’s astigmatism, which reflects his inward-directed point of view and a personality which is radically self-centred, yet not completely independent or self-contained. Living in a sort of cocoon, both Kelly and Quentin try to overcome the pressing claustrophobia of their existences by affirming and (re)establishing their individuality, yet their struggle results in actions which are ultimately either deservedly punishable or undeservedly punished.

To the group of the socially marginalized belongs the protagonist of Iris Murdoch’s novel *Under the Net*, discussed by Peter Preston in his paper “The Quarrel with Theory in Iris Murdoch’s *Under the Net*.” According to this analysis, Jake Donaghue is a characteristically 1950s fictional character: rendered homeless on the first page of the book, he sleeps most nights at different locations, and he engages in extraordinary and bizarre escapades. Nothing is said about his parentage, family or social background, although he is clearly well-educated and widely-read; and as the novel opens he earns much of his living by translating the work of a contemporary French novelist—in itself a typically nineteen-fifties pursuit. Yet his style of life in no sense conforms to that of an educated man with literary interests. He remains an outsider to settled bourgeois society, rootless, unsettled, classless, vaguely bohemian, given to drifting, both physically and intellectually, unwilling to take much responsibility, either for himself or for other people, and uncertain as to whether or how to
commit himself. As he searches for truth, understanding and authenticity, he finds it difficult to identify the place he might occupy in Britain’s post-war social order.

While Preston demonstrates how new fictive modes fight against the imposed generic conventions, Marina S. Ragachewskaya, from Minsk University, Belarus, argues in “Fiction in Search of Theory: Ian McEwan’s Enduring Love” that theory (in a rather broad sense) is an integral part of any work of fiction. Implicitly or explicitly, almost any novel will contain a specific theory that can be spelled out as a doctrine. As Lisa Block de Behar attests, “there are but a few poets, playwrights, novelists who in recent times have not been tempted by theory.” As they examine issues and mysteries of human nature, a number of British writers today demonstrate an undeniable talent not only for creating or re-making their own and commonly known tales, but also for philosophy and theory. In de Behar’s words, a novel opens the door to theory.

The paper “The Other Seen through the Prism of the Glasses” by Ljerka Jeftić (East Sarajevo University) also develops the idea of textual otherness. Drawing from the assertion that literature is a communicative domain for creating and contemplating (alternative) worlds (Beaugrande), Jeftić’s thesis is that literary texts involve both the text producer and text receiver as social and cognitive agents, that is, whole human beings within a cultural setting who engage in discourse interaction. It is the cognitive set in the reader that determines the ways in which the text is analyzed and interpreted (van Dijk), one of the factors being the specific task or problem the reader has when reading a text. Jeftić’s paper explores the ways the other is seen in the discourse of Salinger’s Glass family. Interactions of the participants and their roles are explored by means of discourse analysis.

The last three papers take as their subject the phenomenon of the other in literature written in Serbian and that literature’s relation to various literary models of the west. “Authenticity and Otherness in Contemporary Poetry” by Tatjana Bijelić (University of Banja Luka) argues that readers who advocate linguistic postmodernism in contemporary poetic expression still seem to view authenticity as a traditional notion built upon the old Greek word authentēs, with the meaning of a (single) master or perpetrator. They see authenticity as bound to traditional concepts of a single truth, single reality, or a single unitary self and describe it as “seeming,” fictive and illusory, thus almost discounting the potential for multiple meanings of authenticity in contemporary social contexts. Critics tend to view postmodernism from socio-historical perspectives, and poets themselves sense the necessity of adapting the meaning of authenticity to the realities of everyday living. In a brief reference to diversities of voices
now present in two rather different poetic scenes, Bosnia and Great Britain, Bijelić attempts to offer a new definition of authenticity in relation to the notion of otherness.

Dubravka Đurić’s paper “Feminissance—Recent Essentialist-Anti-essentialist Debate in American Women’s Experimental Poetry, and What Happened in Serbia, as a Country in Transition,” examines the connections between feminism and globalism. Her interest in this topic is defined by the geopolitical space from which she is speaking, i.e. a second world country, a part of former Yugoslavia, a socialist country, which after 1991 began the process of transition under the conditions of war. In such circumstances, reinstating feminism as an important social movement, a value system, and finally an academic discipline, revealed the impact of the imperial West, especially the US, on post-socialist countries, Đurić draws on two important arguments: Teresa de Lauretis’ claim that feminism is withdrawn at universities when it is no longer a political project and Hélène Cixous’ observation that, because of differing political circumstances, the cultural histories in different parts of the world do not coincide. (Cixous expressed surprise when at a conference students from a Third World country asked about her famous text “Medusa’s Laugh;” Cixous, believed the text was outdated.) Coming to Serbia for the third time in 90s, feminism has had political consequences in two ways. At one level, it has played an important part in the anti-war movement. Feminists have organized protests, worked with refugees, dealt with war trauma, and worked to reconcile different sides in the Yugoslav wars. Also, women of different generations who entered feminist organizations became more emancipated and sensitive to gender issues. Many women poets were active in the feminist organizations of the period, and feminism became an important issue in their work.

Vesna Lopićić and Milena Kostić from the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Niš, Serbia, attempt to clarify identity confusions deepened by disjointed times in Serbian novelist and playwright Svetislav Basara’s re-working of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. “Who’s Who in Basara’s Hamlet? Performing Hamlet in Serbia” deals with the performance of the modern version of Hamlet by the National Theatre Group of Niš, under the direction of Dejan Krstović. Contemporary Serbian Hamlet, unlike his literary predecessor, is a gloomy fatalist who does not have a moral dilemma about how to take action in a corrupt world without contaminating himself. In his opinion, the contagion of the world cannot be healed by moral deeds. In order to emphasize the fact that not only Denmark, but the whole modern world is a prison, Hamlet is constantly being informed about the rotten state of various countries—England,
Spain, France, Turkey, etc., which adds to the fatalistic feeling of the meaninglessness of any kind of change. This idea of global helplessness and confusion is further illustrated by Hamlet’s family. During the performance, the audience is exposed to shocking revelations and role reversals. In contrast to Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet in this play is an illegitimate son of Polonius, Ophelia is the only daughter of the old Hamlet, Claudius is an illegitimate son of the old Fortinbras. The notion of family as an essential element of society is further problematized by the author’s insistence on the portrayal of the erotic/carnal sphere: Hamlet is impotent, Ophelia is a nymphomaniac, Claudius is a Moslem and Gertrude is his seventh wife. There is even a suggestion that Claudius is a Moslem fundamentalist; however, he himself explains that he embraced Islam in order to legally possess all his women. Special attention is given to the twentieth century American military pilot, who is assigned the role of a fool, since no one can account for his appearance at that specific time in Danish history. Hamlet’s premonition that Europe will soon be governed by fools whose main task will be the general slaughter of a population left with a “democratic” choice between being dead or alive, as well as the intoning of the American anthem before the Mousetrap, are direct references to the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999.

We hope that the papers collected in this book, which approach the topic of the other from diverse cultural, ethnic, gender, psychological, and textual perspectives, will contribute meaningfully to the on-going discussion of the ambiguities inherent in the concept of the other.
Theory and Biography: The Other as Somebody

Adrian Frazier

1

First of all, I have to congratulate Alex and Marija on the title of this conference.

It is a triumphant provocation—a call to look into the future, to look at ourselves as scholars, and at one another as humans.

To face the other in the absence of theory, cannot be, of course, to face it without thinking, without conversation, and without responsibilities to and for one another. If, like characters on a bare stage in a play by Beckett, we knew no more than that we face one another in this place, we could nonetheless over the next several days see just what such knowledge might amount to.

And Montenegro is hardly a bare stage. For guests and hosts, a symposium is a ceremony that belongs to the good life. We can share food, and drink, and talk, before we say farewell on Saturday.

2

For everyone, there have been times when we could have said, I am the Other.

In September 1979, 29 years old, I arrived in Nanjing, the ‘southern capital’ of China. That was three years after the death of Mao. The trial of the Gang of Four was just beginning. China had cast out the Soviet experts, and brought in American ones. I was one of those.

With wife, 4 year old son, and 3 year old daughter, I had walked in to the city centre, and now we were trying to board a bus back to the University. It was a boiling afternoon. People wore blue shorts, sleeveless t-shirts, and flip flops—nearly everyone in the same dress. The queue to the bus was not a queue, just a wide surging wave of humanity, trying to pour through a hole. We found ourselves heaved up into the bus. Its
interior was full to the rooftop with flesh. We were the first outsiders many on the bus had ever seen, their first ‘Big Noses,’ as Europeans were called. Naturally, they stared.

Pressed up in front of me, and against me, was a young woman. I could feel her warm breast against my breast, breathing in and out, and the little legs of her son—held high over her shoulder—against my shoulder. Embarrassed, she struggled to turn her back to me.

In doing so, however, she brought her little boy face to face with me. His cheek grazed my beard. Few Chinese people grow facial hair, apart from very old men, who might have a few long wispy silver and black whiskers. The child let out a terrified scream, and then another, and another. The passengers looked at me as if I had done the child some harm. To those all around me, I tried to express by my face my innocence, my helplessness, my helpless bewilderment. I shook my head to signal, No, no, then remembered hearing that a nod does not have that meaning for the Chinese.

Over there was a young man with glasses. His eyes sought out mine. In English—he must have been a university student—smiling, he explained, ‘The boy is saying, “It’s a ghost, it’s a ghost.”’ Very funny!’

(In China, I learned later, ghosts are depicted as old white-skinned men with beards.)

What did you say to the foreigner, others asked the student of English. Then they began to chuckle too.

-Zài jiàn,yéyé, ‘Goodbye, grandfather,’ one laughed, when the doors opened, and we all poured out.

3

This episode is reminiscent of the mise en scene imagined by Emmanuel Levinas. In his critique of over-intellectualism, Levinas roots the ethical life, and our apprehension of the more-than-physical, in a primal face-to-face encounter with a stranger. To summarise very briefly, and in plain language, he stages, or hypothesizes, an historical, or maybe it is a paradigmatic, encounter of one Self and one Other.

I first see the Other on the horizon, and think, I could kill him, or Please, don’t kill me! But as we come face to face, and I take in the very nudity of his face, or her face, I cannot kill him, I cannot rape her. Instead, the possibility opens up to treat this Other as a neighbor, indeed, as more than
that, as a visitor from ‘an ultimate strangeness,’ a messenger of God. [AF summary/paraphrase]¹

Obviously, this scenario makes clear to us that Levinas has learned from that other great Jewish thinker of the 20th century, Martin Buber.

Buber set forth three kinds of relationship that the Self can have with others: I/It, I/You, and I/Thou.² You can treat another as a thing, as an equal, or as a being that is more than a thing and more than an equal, as a divinity.

Levinas and Buber may seem apt guides for us when we aim to face the other in the absence of theory, but like Moses, they can take us just so far and no further. Part of my resistance to these two admirable theologians is that ultimately they wish to lead me into the Promised Land of Monotheism, and I don’t believe in the theory that such a place exists, or rather, I don’t believe that such a single divine being exists. If we want holiness, we must seek it, I think, in our natural life on earth.

4

Once I was in a position very like that of the little boy on the bus in Nanjing. When I was about three years old, or maybe two, I was taken by my mother to meet Santa Claus in a St. Louis, Missouri, department store. We waited a long time in a queue, and then when it was my turn, I was lifted onto the lap of an overweight man in a red outfit, wearing a long white beard. He had the usual Santa costume, but also a dew drop of snot slipping from his nostril. I reached quickly to take hold of that beard, just to see what it really was, but not quick enough. Santa saw what I was up to. It is hard enough for an alcoholic to make a few dollars in America; he was not going to let one middle-class brat unmask him. With a snap, he bit my little hand, not too hard—just enough for one to feel the teeth. I let out a horrified, indignant wail, and clambered down, pleading to my mother that Santa had bit me, Santa had bit me. Embarrassed, she said, “What a silly little child,” and, as much to those around us, as to me, “Santa doesn’t bite children.”

But this one did. He was a fake, all of them were fakes, and dangerous. Thus was born, I fear, a little atheist.

Our problem now, however, as post-humanist intellectuals, is not a problem of too much belief, but of too much skepticism. It is not just God and Santa Claus in whom we do not believe. To the degree that we keep faith with Theory, we don’t believe in Truth, in Reality, in the Self, in Reason; we don’t even believe in Unbelief. We speak in a language of clerks that is incomprehensible not just to ordinary educated people, but to our colleagues in other disciplines. When we do make ourselves understood, our colleagues are bored and irritated by what we have to say.

Why? Because it is annoying—it’s impolite—it’s absurd—in an institution dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, to doubt the existence of the selves of our neighbors, to accuse them of being naïve for thinking they have any true knowledge of their fields. We allow no appeal to evidence. We offer no benefit to humanity. We don’t agree with one another on what is valuable work in our own field, and what is not.

As a result of Theory, the status of departments of literature, languages, and philosophy has fallen throughout the global university.\(^3\) Decades after they were new, Theory’s lessons are repeated ad nauseam, like a gospel; children are taught to recite them in First- and Second-Year university courses, when many are not yet competent to read novels or write essays. For Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we have Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Paul de Man.

- The Self is not unified,
- Everything is a Text,
- Authors are fictions that limit the meanings of texts,
- Truth is just a mask for Power, etc. etc.

What lowers our standing in the eyes of our colleagues is our departure from the ordinary canons of the pursuit of knowledge since Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* in the 17th century. Here are eight of those rules of method over which we have ridden roughshod:

1. The actual world is the overriding object of study (as opposed to the metaphysical realm). It can be approximately registered by our senses and measured by instruments.
2. The only valuable hypotheses are those that can be disproven.

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\(^3\) Michele Lamont, *How Professors Think* (Harvard UP: Cambridge, 2010).
3. For an hypothesis to be worthwhile, there must be evidence relevant to its confirmation.
4. Experiments should be capable of being repeated by competent colleagues, with the same results.
5. Conclusions should be communicated in plain language.
6. Self-contradiction is a flaw in a proof.
7. The archive relevant to a demonstration should be preserved.
8. Evidence both for and against the conclusion drawn should be presented clearly.

It is not news to you that since the skeptical turn in the Humanities since the 1980s, theorists have set their faces against many of these rules.

- Theorists have gloried in paradox, striving for insights that have a status somewhere between a joke, mysticism, and nihilism.
- Theorists have voluntarily dressed thoughts in obscure language, and thus needlessly obstructed the young in pursuit of understanding.
- We/They have shown little interest in the world as we find it, or in the ordinary persons who inhabit it, their needs, their pains.
- We/They have not spelled out tests by which our conclusions can be shown to be correct or incorrect.
- We/They have given up the pursuit of small truths, and have simplistically proclaimed again and again that there is no One Truth.

Although the end of the 20th century was a period for intellectuals of skepticism and relativism, paradoxically, it was also an idol-worshipping period. The young were urged to be credulous of what Bacon called “Idols of the Theatre.” These he characterized as due to mimicking highly-placed scholars as if they were stars of the stage, and their systems like stage plays, systems that were incapable of demonstrating the usefulness of their axioms in this world. Those systems failed the first test of pragmatism. They didn’t work.

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4 Francis Bacon, *Novumorganum; with other parts of the great instauration* (Open Court: Chicago, 1994).
Levinas may help to lead us at least part of the way out of Theory’s blind alley in that he accepts the reality of other people. It is central to his thought. For citizens of the republic of knowledge, solipsism is a character flaw; whatever about its epistemological justification, the insistence that we can only know our own notions of other spirits shows a want of common courtesy.

Levinas also writes stirringly in his phenomenological descriptions of the Other. The Other is “stripped,” “shivering,” “distressed,” “defenceless,” “vulnerable.”5 The face out of its “nudity” “supplicates”; it straightforwardly appeals to us in its look. He also names as a problem that when we appropriate a part of the earth, and claim our own “place in the sun,” we may—inadvertently, or openly and self-righteously—“oppress” or ‘starve’ others, drive them out into a third world, exiles, victims of murder, all that we may have our homes to ourselves. 6 This phenomenological descriptiveness by Levinas in his account of the face-to-face encounters between Self and Other is all very moving and relevant to the history of our species.

But in his critique of over-intellectualism, he over intellectualizes. There are no specific “other” individuals in his Other. He himself does not openly appear as the face of the Self. Obviously, simply to conceive of society and ethics in terms of the binary, the Self and the Other, is to reduce others, who are many, to just one Abstract Other, and all selves to one Self.

Levinas makes the admirably sensitive argument that to seek to comprehend another utterly, we negate that person, and intellectually murder them. There is a time not to theorize, and to forgo conceptualization as part of a continuing openness to experience. Intimacy, for instance, requires a “non-comprehensive,” “non-subsumptive” relation to one’s companion.7 A person is not, indeed, a theme. A person is not a concept—more like a story, or many stories, or better yet, the source of many narratives.

But Levinas tells no stories. He criticizes the reductiveness of our regard for the other, but in a reductive way, one that leaves behind only a trace of the Hebrew God. He says that our means of understanding another are “in the framework of his history, his surroundings, and habits,” one

7 Levinas, Basic Philosophical Writings, 1-2.
might add, also his body and face, what he speaks, and what he leaves unspoken, and what others report of his life. However, according to Levinas, that which escapes such means of understanding is just what constitutes the self of the other, his being. “To grasp [the Other] in the horizon of Being in General” is to negate that person. This step in the thinking of Levinas does away with too much of our specific natural being in the search of a supernatural being.

When I am on the Nanjing bus, and the young student of English sees me as not just a weiguoren, literally, an “outside the country person,” but as a person pure and simple, not as a ghost, but as a living source of selfhood, I am grateful for the implied affirmation of what Samuel Johnson called the “uniformity in the state of man”: the fact that “we are all prompted by the same motives, all deceived by the same fallacies, all animated by hope, obstructed by danger, entangled by desire, and seduced by pleasure.” He has seen that we together share what Karl Marx calls our “species-being.”

Yet my Chinese friend is also seeing me as one particular instance of humanity, in the framework of my coming from a formerly hostile nation, open to learn from his culture how to be, alone, the father of a kind of orphaned family at the mercy of a populous nation, and thus he extends to me, to me in my specificity, on behalf of all those in that bus, their hospitality, and I receive it with relief and gratitude.

In the lineaments of the prose style of Emmanuel Levinas, we find tenderness, feeling, care, concentration, urgency, and reflectiveness—many virtuous attributes—but we also see that something is being withheld. Why does this man speak of the other as shivering, as the widow, the orphan, the stranger? Why must his archetypal encounter with the Other be attended by so much affliction?

Just that Levinas was a Jew born in Lithuania in 1906, that he moved to France in 1923, and between 1928 and 29 studied under Husserl in Germany. He then joined the French army during World War 2. During the Occupation of France by the Nazis, he was made a prisoner of war. His wife and children went into hiding, and escaped the Holocaust. After the war, he became director of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, and

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8 Levinas, Basic Philosophical Writings, 9.
9 Samuel Johnson, Rambler, n. 60, ‘On biography.’
published significant works of Biblical commentary in addition to his works on ethics and metaphysics.

On the slender and inadequate basis of these facts, it is tempting to speculate that when Levinas speaks of the Other as shivering, a supplicant looking into the face of the strong, he is imagining a Lithuanian refugee facing a Russian, or a member of the Resistance dreaming of mercy from a member of the Gestapo, and receiving it. Why was mercy shown? Perhaps because of a single face to face encounter. After the War, when Levinas writes of the way the self’s desire for a place in the sun can cast others out into the wasteland, it is not hard to think of Palestine, though there are no individual Palestinians that I have come across in the writings of Levinas, nor any descriptions of strife in the historical Promised Land.

But maybe it would be better if there were. It is not easy to know what this man’s story is.

8

For those seeking ways out of Theory’s blind alley, two potentially helpful late 20th century theorists are Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, pragmatic thinkers who propose a narrative concept of the self. In *After Virtue*, MacIntyre writes,\(^\text{10}\)

> I am what I may justifiably be taken by others to be in the course of living out a story that runs from my birth to my death: I am the subject of a history that is my own and no one else’s, that has its own peculiar meaning.

Critics have pointed out that that just as Theory is skeptical that a narrative can be reduced to a single meaning, so it knows a single experience can be represented by more than a single narrative. Thus, skepticism, relativism, and multiplicity are not successfully fended off by a “narrative conception of the self.”\(^\text{11}\) But these two philosophers are certainly not so naïve as to propose that each self comes up with just one story, or that the story of a self has but one interpretation, or that any interpretation is required at all. They are just trying to locate autonomy, seriousness, and responsibility within the person.

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In the title of Taylor’s book, one can see what is being proposed: Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity. The self not only has sources (in class, heredity, history, education, gender, etc.), but a human is itself a source and the self is a work in progress. To an ineradicable degree, it has the freedom—if not always exercised—to invent a portion of its identity, the story it wishes to inhabit. And this is not just a psychotic condition, in which a self cuts itself loose from the reality principle, but a public achievement involving practice and will. The philosopher Alexander Nehemas developed an approach to selfhood along the same lines in his 1987 book on Nietzsche, Life as Literature, with its acceptance that a degree of untruth is a condition of life, and its emphasis on how, nonetheless, one can become what one is. Achieving an identity means mastering a style of self-narrative.

This partly authored self must be, naturally, a life’s work. But the self has a source much earlier.

9

Indulge me in one last autobiographical excursus. It is important to test our ideas against our experience.

Just before coming to Montenegro, a new daughter arrived in our household. Last winter, eight or ten weeks after realizing she was pregnant, my wife Cliodhna became aware of the first flutterings of movement within her womb. This is the experience known in English as the quickening. The quick are the opposite of the dead: they are endowed with life, and have become self-animating. These are simple facts, but also profound. Cliodhna more and more became conscious that there was another within her. She and the unborn infant were, for instance, on different cycles of sleep and wakefulness.

It happened that Cliodhna had a medical history involving “pre-eclampsia.” This is a little understood but very serious condition. The mother’s body suddenly develops an immune response to the placenta, and rejects the infant within her as a foreign body. The only cure for the resulting toxemia is a quick delivery of the fetus by caesarian section; otherwise, the mother will die. The mother’s body is saying with a fatal emphasis, this is not a part of me; it is something else, something other.

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In late August, Cliodhna had a serious attack of pre-eclampsia. We live near the university hospital, and the baby was safely delivered, though seven weeks early, healthy, but a poor little scrap of only 1.7 kilograms. Cliodhna herself had to go to the intensive care ward for several days, so she was unable to see her baby daughter. Although still ill with the slowly diminishing symptoms of pre-eclampsia, it was her longing for her child that made her most forlorn. Finally, I was permitted to push her in a wheelchair over to the infant intensive care unit, where little Delia, our daughter, lay in an incubator. As Cliodhna gazed at the child, tears poured freely down her face, tears of joy. Then she said, “Feel my breasts… They are so hard.” Her breasts stiffened and stood out from her body. Milk sprouted from them, and made her nightdress wet.

What is fascinating here, in the context of our deliberations, is that there was no physical contact between mother and child, no agitation of the breast—just the sight of the child, and the surge of motherly feeling. “Look at her,” Cliodhna said, “such long fingers, such long toes. She’s so beautiful.” And certainly, little Delia—just out of the womb, and who by rights was owed another two months’ shelter there—was already her own person, with features that would to some degree shape her fate.

She was already the source of all the self she’d make, something new that had never before existed, and with a future that lay beyond our imagining, our control, or our complete protection. A human.

When theoretically-oriented critics address the subject of life-writing, whether biography or autobiography, they tend to insist that “the written self can never coincide exactly with the lived sense of self.”14 But who ever said that a text and a person, or a text and an interpretation, were, or could be, exactly the same? What is crucial is not the fact that representation and reality cannot perfectly coincide, but the degree to which an interpretation can be answerable to a person. While a single truth, a complete truth, is not possible or even desirable, we can aim to achieve small accuracies; we can live at enmity with untruth; we can when they are discovered correct our mistakes; we can strive to be fair to another, and to offer justice, justice without her sword. Effectively, a biographical way of knowing involves an effort to enter imaginatively into what can be known of another place, another time, another life.15

Certainly, ethical issues arise in daring to write of oneself or others. Levinas, as explained earlier, raises one of the most profound objections to a biographical way of knowing. He believes that once we have comprehended all the available facts about a person, the self is just what has escaped our grasp; the self’s being lies in the remainder, inaccessible, and infinite. But isn’t this partly a question of technique? Could one not take care to write of oneself or another in a way that, while constructing a narrative from facts, preserved the mystery of the subject’s being, and solicited a reader’s awareness of its motions and its scale?

Virginia Woolf advises writers when they set out to create a narrative, first to consider themselves, and their own complex subjectivity.16

You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexities of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder. Nevertheless, you allow the writers to palm off on you a version of all this, an image of Mrs Brown, which has no likeness to that surprising apparition whatsoever.

A real human life is, indeed, a surprising and unpredictable apparition, partly apprehensible, partly incomprehensible.

This is one of the key differences between the art of fiction and the art of biography. The difference is nicely articulated by Robert Louis Stevenson in a letter to the scholar Edmund Gosse:17

Of course [a biography] is not really so finished as quite a rotten novel; it always has and always must have the incurable illogicalities of life about it... Still, that’s where the fun comes in...

Most fiction is governed by general lifelikeness as opposed to a particular life, and that means probability. Readers think it a fault if something improbable occurs in a novel; a fault if unity is not achieved; a fault if the ending does not answer to the opening. However, in biography, the “reality effect” is achieved by the forcible departure from cliché in writing and from stereotype in character. And those qualities are won by careful attention to documents, to places, to sequence in time, to multiple points of view, to the very words that were spoken in the past, and the tone

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in which they were spoken. Whenever a nonfiction writer is tempted to change something to make a story better, that is, more like a novel, the writer is actually making it less real, less true, less interesting. Individual lives are romances of improbability. It is only groups that are governed by probability.

There are biographers who have played the part of character assassins, the sort Oscar Wilde had in mind when he reflected, “Every great man nowadays has his disciples, and it is always Judas who writes the biography.” A biography may just be trying to make a dollar out of someone’s death, by being the first in print with the life of a celebrity or a politician.

But the proper spirit in which to write of another is humility. Someone’s life has been delivered into your hands, or maybe you have seized upon it without permission. You aim to publish that person’s hitherto secret story to the world. It is a terrible responsibility. Even the dead are sufficiently alive to suffer. They lived to create a name. From birth to death, they were a source of something new to the world, an unpredictable origin of conduct. They made themselves the subject of a history that is their own and no one else’s, that had and has its own peculiar meaning. According to the law, you can’t libel the dead, but still it matters what one says about a dead person in print. They can be traduced, diminished, not given their due. It is obviously wrong to imagine that had you been in another’s condition, you should have lived, or written, better than they did. If one has not been able to suggest by means of style and narrative what was irreplaceable or understandably incomprehensible in another, one has let the subject down. If one has luckily “enchained the hearts of readers by irresistible interest,” as Samuel Johnson put it, one has possibly not entirely failed as a writer in one’s double duty to the subject and to readers.

To bring to a close these reflections on facing the other without theory, I must try to put briefly my main point. It is really that to speak of the Self with a capital S, and the other with a capital O, is to engage in a metaphysical inquiry, and one that will inevitably be plagued with skepticism. But to attempt to tell the truth about one’s own experience, or to inquire into the nature of one particular somebody, is to embark on a project where we can take steps toward a fuller knowledge of life on earth, and of a kind that may be interesting and useful to the species that exists on its face.

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Before concluding, I must also take care to make plain what I am not saying. It would not be desirable for all of us to give up our current forms of learned inquiry and write biographies of one another, ourselves, and our neighbors. Biography itself depends for its health on the health of philosophy, history, literary analysis, social science, etc. My critique of “Theory” pertains chiefly to one conceptual aggregate from the 1970s and 80s that goes by that name, and may now be found in many textbook anthologies and summaries, and the expectation that we must repeat and apply to all subjects those ideas, rather than theorizing ourselves, reanimating earlier historical models of speculative inquiry, or making observations on the one another and the sensible world.

When I emphasize, against Theory’s skepticism and metaphysical though nihilistic turn, the reality of the world and of other people, I might just as well instead underline the reality of a poem, a novel, a speech-act, a cultural movement, a concept in transmission from one person or place to another. Perhaps one final way of summarizing my point is to say that, if Western philosophy is an extended conversation between Plato and Aristotle, it is time we humanist intellectuals took up a bit more of Aristotle’s line of argument. It is with his words I shall end:

All humans by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves.

Indeed, we could say the same thing about our fellow creatures, couldn’t we? Apart from their usefulness, they are loved for themselves.

Works Cited
