

Excursions into the Literary Territories of the Other

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Our analysis of the act of reading leads us to say rather that the practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. In this sense, narrative exercises the imagination more than the will, even though it remains a category of action. ... But ... reading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently.
(Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* 3: 249)

... in books of fiction, they look not only for more entertainment, but, at bottom, even for more reality, than real life itself can show.... It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie.
(Melville, *The Confidence Man* 190)

For some time now, globalization, cultural exchange, and postcolonialism have been catchwords in literary studies, and ethnic, postcolonial, and “foreign” literatures are promoted in the literary marketplace and university curricula alike. Against this background, I propose to take a closer look at how “traveling” might serve as a trope, not only for how literary texts themselves traverse cultural borders when launched into and promoted in the global marketplace, but also for how this literature is received and read across cultural boundaries. In other words, the “traveling” of my topic does not concern travel writing or other types of narrative accounts of journeys in physical space, but relates to traveling within the imaginary territories opened up in encounters with the literary or textual Other. Accordingly, the territories I will refer to are not the landscapes of foreign lands, but the imaginary worlds—or mindscapes—that a literary text may open up for the reader. While the examples of “literary territories of the Other” that I will refer to are those of Native American literature, the comments and observations I will make should apply equally to excursions into the literary territories of other indigenous, ethnic, postcolonial, or “foreign” literatures.

What I propose to do, then, is to take a closer look at questions related to the encounter with the textual Other: What is the relation between literature

and culture? Should we regard the reader's excursion into the textual territories of the Other as an innocent pastime, or do such adventures into unknown territory present the reader with specific challenges? To what extent might the textual Other constitute an inspection point for our preconceptions, encourage dialogue across cultural boundaries, and open up for new perspectives? Conversely, to what extent could our reading the Other be construed as a (neo-colonialist) project that might ultimately serve to reaffirm and consolidate preconceived ideas? Finally, does it make sense to talk about an ethics of reading the textual Other, just as there are ethical codes guiding our excursions into foreign lands that we visit?

The argument I will put forward rests on three basic tenets which I would like to present at the outset. First, I would like to repeat the obvious notion that, as cultural representations, literary texts bear the stamp of their cultural-historical moment. This stance does not imply sidestepping the author, nor does it imply a call for authorial authenticity, but it is meant as a reminder that as cultural representations, literary texts are historically produced and historically contingent.¹ Second, I would like to submit that literature matters. Precisely as literary texts are culturally produced, they also—in their own way—produce culture. In other words, narrative constitutes in itself a mode in which humans make an effort to understand and interpret the world and the human condition. Third, reading matters, and all reading involves an ethical stance, either implicitly or explicitly. Especially when approaching the textual Other, I would argue, the reader faces special demands regarding a responsive—and *responsible*—reading.

If literary texts are products of culture, bear the stamp of their cultural origin, and are conditioned by time and place, it follows that any study of literature involves at the same time a study of culture. This applies, one might add, even when we concern ourselves with literary aesthetics, since literary conventions are also culturally contingent. More importantly, in reference to the interest among literary scholars over the last couple of decades in literature as a site for the study of culture, it is worth noticing that this kind of interdisciplinarity can also be found within other fields of study. Social anthropologist Michael Fisher, for instance, includes readings of literary texts in an essay entitled “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory”—a study that in many ways approaches that of a literary scholar who reads literary texts with attention to how ethnic or cultural belonging has a formative influence on, is embedded in, and can be traced in literary texts.

If we apply the perspective of hermeneutic interpretation, we might say that in the process of reading, the text brings into play the cultural horizon of its origin. True, according to hermeneutic interpretation, all reading stages an

¹ That is, rather than focusing on ethnic or cultural identity of the writer, which would feed into what might be called the “authenticity debates,” I would emphasize the cultural or ethnic markers embedded in the texts themselves.

encounter with a “textual Other,” and this “textual Other” is known to the reader only as it is inserted into the reader’s own horizon of interpretation. However, it is precisely the ways in which a text inscribes and brings into play the cultural horizon of its origin that it may open up for new worlds, and for new ways of seeing. Obviously, the culture-specific aspects of a text are most apparent when the reader approaches a text produced at a time, location, or cultural setting different from the reader’s own. It is exactly that kind of imprint left by a distinct cultural heritage that Louis Owens points to in his *Mixedblood Messages* when he argues that, “What sets Native American fiction apart ... is among other qualities an insistence upon the informing role of the past within the present, a role signified by the presence of Native American myth and history reflected in both form and content” (22). Similarly, Jace Weaver, in *That the People Might Live*, proposes that, “What may distinguish any people’s literature from that of any other group is ... worldview” (26). When Weaver claims that “worldview” represents the distinctive features of any people’s literature, it is, as mentioned above, because narrative in itself constitutes a mode in which humans make sense of the world and the human condition. By the same token, a difference in culture—or worldview—presents what Weaver calls “a barrier to crosscultural understanding” (27). However, while the distinct cultural coding of the textual Other could present a “barrier,” as Weaver suggests, it is also possible to take a slightly different, or differing, view, and talk about the challenges that such cultural coding may present. In other words, rather than focusing on obstructing barriers, it should be possible to highlight the potential that these narratives of the Other might hold, in their capacity to make readers see “other-wise” than they are accustomed to, thereby expanding their horizons. In this sense, the “resistance” that a text presents could actually be considered to be conducive to “crosscultural understanding.”

If literature holds an informative, and even enriching, potential, it follows that literature, reading, and writing are invested with singular importance. Tony Morrison states in *Playing in the Dark* that, “Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power” (15). If the writer is endowed with this ability to “familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar,” then this power will be ingrained in the text, which in its turn will have the power to affect the reader. Literature has the capacity to generate imaginary worlds—mental landscapes, or mindscapes—that the reader is invited to visit and to explore. To the extent that the vistas that literary texts open up to constitute foreign or unfamiliar territory, literature may have the power to transform the reader, just as our journeys through the external landscapes of foreign lands may have the power to transform the traveler.

Paul Ricœur has written on the significance of narrative in various contexts. In an essay entitled “Life in Quest of Narrative” he repeats Socrates’ maxim that, “an unexamined life is not worth living” (20), the implication being that different forms of narrative—fictional as well as autobiographical and historical narratives—serve the task of examining the “life ... worth living.” In the following I will pursue the idea that narrative presents—and not only re-presents—a *quest* which involves the exploration of “life ... worth living,” and that such a quest has significance not only for the individual quester, but ultimately for the community and the world we inhabit and share. In this connection, a personal statement made by Native American writer Janice Gould is instructive. She professes that to her “writing is an act of survival,” which has significance at the collective as well as the personal level. She states: “I feel that writing is an act of survival. But there is more than my own survival that is at stake. These days I feel a kind of urgency to reconstruct memory, annihilate the slow amnesia of the dominant culture, and reclaim the past as a viable, if painful entity” (52). Accordingly, a study of the kind of stories that Janice Gould writes might take account of how they relate to the world they originate from, and might examine the sense of cultural belonging and communal memories that they convey. That is to say that her stories and the stories of others may offer evidence of the ways in which we—as humans—construct our world through our narratives, our stories, our fictions. Narrative constitutes, in other words, in itself a way in which humans make sense of the world and the human condition.

Ricœur, in turn, talks about the centrality of the concept of “narrative” in an interview entitled “The Creativity of Language.” In his response to a question about the significance of a “narrative continuity with the past,” he touches on the importance of precisely the kind of connection with a cultural heritage that Janice Gould writes about when referring to the collective memory of her people. Ricœur says:

A society where narrative is dead is one where men are no longer capable of exchanging their experiences, of sharing a common experience. The contemporary search for some narrative continuity with the past is not just nostalgic escapism To give people back a *memory* is also to give them back a *future* The past is not *passé*, for our future is guaranteed precisely by our ability to possess a narrative identity, to recollect the past in historical or fictive form. (“The Creativity of Language” 28)

To Ricœur, then, narrative constitutes a fundamental human activity that serves to create existential meaning. But narrative is not generated out of nothing; what might be called the raw materials of narrative consist in the meanings that are already at hand, produced by culture, inscribed and accessible in myths, stories, assumptions, norms, values—in short, what we usually refer to as the cultural tradition, worldview, or ideology. Or, as Ricœur puts it, “The referent of narration, namely human action, is never raw or

immediate reality but an action which has been symbolized and resymbolized over and over again” (“Creativity” 23–24). Hence, the meaning of existence is intimately linked up with what he terms “a shared *imaginaire*, a common symbolic heritage” (“Creativity” 28), or what he in another context refers to as “the *imaginary nucleus* of any culture” (“Myth as the Bearer” 36). “Every society,” he says, “possesses, or is part of, a socio-political *imaginaire*, that is, an ensemble of symbolic discourses” (“Creativity” 29). We have no direct access to this “hidden *mytho-poetic nucleus*,” but it can be recognized in “what is said (discourse),” “how one lives (praxis),” and “by the distribution between different functional levels of a society” (“Myth as the Bearer” 37).

We may be reminded here of Louis Althusser’s redefinition of ideology, which directs attention to unconscious processes in the way humans conceive of their situation in the world. In “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses” Althusser formulates his well-known “thesis,” which proclaims that, “Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (*Lenin* 162; see also *For Marx* 232–34). A parallel to Ricœur’s “socio-political *imaginaire*” or “*mytho-poetic nucleus*” might also be found in Fredric Jameson’s *Political Unconscious*, where ideology, redefined as the “political unconscious,” is not immediately accessible, but has to be “(re)constructed” through the act of interpretation. Hence, textual interpretation, Jameson says, involves:

the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that “subtext” is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. (81)

With reference to what Weaver says about worldview presenting a potential “barrier to crosscultural understanding,” as cited above, one might add that in Jameson’s terminology, the reader faces an additional challenge in his or her endeavor to reconstruct the “subtext” embedded in a literary work that inscribes a conceptual horizon radically different from his or her own.

When meaning is created in narrative, then, one might talk about a double mediation—where the narrative is twice removed from life experience or “reality”—and narrative representation constitutes what might be called a second-order representation. Accordingly, narrative represents, in Ricœur’s words, “a redefining of what is already defined, a reinterpretation of what is already interpreted.” And, he adds, “Thus narration serves to displace anterior symbolizations on to a new plane, integrating or exploding them as the case may be” (“Creativity” 23, 24). When Ricœur suggests that in the process of narrative representation a “common symbolic heritage” may be “integrat[ed]” or “explod[ed],” he points to the way in which narrative in itself

constitutes what Jameson would call “a *symbolic act*” (see 76–83); that is, narrative represents an ideological intervention—as the “political unconscious”—in its own right. A literary text may thus serve to reaffirm or subvert received conceptions, myths or ideology, which is to say that it may serve an oppressive as well as liberating function, and it may open up for new ways of seeing. We may also be reminded of Morrison’s assertion that writers have the power in their writings to “familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar.” Finally, then, narrative might be said to have a world-making or world-changing function, not only in its capacity to mediate—and meditate on—the world we know and inhabit, and what might be referred to as of collective memory or cultural heritage, but also in its capacity to envision alternative or transformed worlds and possible futures.

This brings us to the third of my tenets, which concerns the questions of why reading matters, and why the literary traveler who ventures on excursions into the literary territories of the Other should be reminded of reader responsibility. While it goes without saying that no reading is innocent, it has not always been taken for granted that reading also entails an ethical moment. In an essay whose title poses the following question: “Aesthetics and Ethics: Incommensurable, Identical or Conflicting?” Lothar Bredella explores the relation between literature and ethics. In his conclusion he warns against conflating the two, but he also stresses the importance of both when we discuss literature: “The tension between ethics and aesthetics can prevent us from becoming complacent. However, such a tension presupposes that we neither reduce one to the other nor erect an unbridgeable gap between them” (51). Bredella’s warning is to the point, and I would not propose a model of reading that would make narrative subservient to ethics. What I would like to submit, though, is that reader response—or, rather, reader responsibility—be given prominence when readers enter foreign literary territory in their encounter with texts from cultures different from their own.

Discussing the relation between life and narrative fiction, Ricœur sees the completion of the narrative in the moment of reading. He writes in “Life in Quest of Narrative”:

My thesis is here that the process of composition, of configuration, is not completed in the text but in the reader and, under this condition, makes possible the reconfiguration of life by narrative. I should say, more precisely: the sense of the significance of a narrative stems from the *intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader*. The act of reading thus becomes the critical moment of the entire analysis. (26)

We should note that what is suggested here is not the same as the standard type of reader-response theory. In highlighting the intersection of life and narrative, Ricœur invests the act of reading with an ethical dimension, which

is obvious in the sentence that follows: “On it [the act of reading] rests the narrative’s capacity to transfigure the experience of the reader.” Ricœur relates this capacity to hermeneutic theory, and, more specifically, to Gadamer’s notion of a “fusion of horizons,” in suggesting that, “To appropriate a work through reading is to unfold the world horizon implicit in it . . .” (26). Thus, according to Ricœur, mediation is realized at three distinct levels, all involving an experience of the literary text which reaches beyond the text as such. These levels are: “the mediation between man and the world is what we call *referentiality*; the mediation between men, *communicability*; the mediation between man and himself, *self-understanding*” (27).

As already suggested, the hermeneutic idea of a fusion of horizons in the process of reading takes on an added dimension when our reading takes us across cultural borders. In his *Mixedblood Messages* Owens notes that Native American writers asks of their non-Native readers, “that they venture across a new ‘conceptual horizon’ and learn to read in new ways” (4). The ethical imperative is obvious here; Owens requests that readers take reading seriously, and that they steer away from what he calls “a kind of literary tourism” (e.g. 42). What a lot of readers want, he says, is “not literature that challenges them to think and feel in new ways but literary works that provide a comfortable, easy tour of colorful Indian Country” (42). Emphasizing the importance of dialogue across cultural boundaries, Owens joins his fellow Native American writers in “insisting that rather than looking to this literature for reflections of what they expect to see—their own constructed Indianness—readers must look past their mirroring consciousness to the other side” (24).

As we may infer from this statement, if Owens requires hard work from his readers, he also becomes prescriptive in asking that Native American writers steer away from rehearsing received stereotypes of “Indians” and “Indian Country.” In fact, he criticizes a number of fellow Native American writers for being complicit in the fabrication and re-presentation of the kind of stereotypes that he would like to see subverted and challenged: “It is our responsibility,” he says, “as writers and teachers, to make sure that our texts and our classrooms are not ‘safe’ spaces from which a reader or student may return unchanged or unthreatened.” And, he adds, “Literary terrorism is preferable to literary tourism” (46). He condemns Native American texts that invite the reader to embark on an easy tour of “‘Indian Territory’—a literal and imagined space constructed to contain and neutralize Indians” (42), which offers a “touch of the exotic” (44). As an antidote, he recuperates the trope of the “frontier,” which, he says, is “multidirectional, uncontained, unstable, and always plotting return visits” (43), and which might serve well as a counterpoint to what he calls “the kind of essentializing necessary for the subsumption of Indian identity into the national metanarrative” (45). In other words, the optimal site for a literary excursion is a space where the reader is challenged, and is confronted with a different “conceptual horizon”

and with an-Other way of seeing and imagining the world and the human condition. Both literature and reading are thus invested with singular importance. Literature sets the stage for cross-cultural dialogue and exchange—in tune with the humanistic tradition that knowledge engenders greater insight, an insight which in turn has ethical consequences for the reader.²

Owens may very well make us feel uncomfortable as an advocate for prescriptive norms and values. We may be reminded, though, of the more familiar categorization of literature into the literary canon and the “great works of art” as opposed to popular literature that delivers sheer entertainment. In the final analysis, what Owens does is to make an appeal to his fellow writers not to contribute to the fabrication of popular literature that repeats and reinforces stereotypes, but to create works of greater literary and aesthetic merit. We might also draw a parallel to the similar hierarchy that rules within the world of travel. While the regular tourists—and in particular those who sign up for packaged tours to the watering places of modern-day mass tourism—are frowned upon by travelers who embark on journeys that take them on less-trodden paths, it is the explorers—headed for the uncharted territories of more distant corners of the worlds—who represent the “nobility” among travelers. When traveling is used as a trope for reading, the implication is that literary tourism has little to offer beyond light entertainment, whereas literary traveling, or, even better, literary explorations that take the readers into unknown territory, holds the potential of opening up for new conceptual worlds.

The notion that literary travel may have a mind-changing potential is also in line with what Ricœur says about narrative and reading, as for instance when he says in *Time and Narrative* that,

Our analysis of the act of reading leads us to say rather that the practice of narrative lies in a thought experiment by means of which we try to inhabit worlds foreign to us. In this sense, narrative exercises the imagination more than the will, even though it remains a category of action.... But ... reading also includes a moment of impetus. This is when reading becomes a provocation to be and to act differently. (*Time and Narrative* 3: 249)

The final point that Ricœur makes here is that the act of reading does not leave the reader unaffected, but functions as a channel for experiences with cognitive and ethical dimensions, which in their turn have consequences

² This would be in line with Edward Said’s comments on humanism in his Preface to the 25th anniversary edition of *Orientalism*: “I have called what I try to do ‘humanism,’” he says, and explains that this is “a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the term by sophisticated postmodern critics. By humanism I mean first of all attempting to dissolve Blake’s mind-forg’d manacles so as to be able to use one’s mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure. Moreover, humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods ...” (xvii).

beyond the reading situation. As he puts it in *Oneself as Another*, "... there is no ethically neutral narrative. Literature is a vast laboratory in which we experiment with estimations, evaluations, and judgments of approval and condemnation through which narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics" (115). A parallel can be found in Bredella's statement when he says that, "Ethics needs art in order to prevent us from becoming imprisoned in rigid and stereotypical concepts of reality and from becoming insensitive to the claims of the other" (51). In other words, literature has the unique potential power to interrogate and contest rather than repeat and reinforce preconceptions and stereotypes, and the reader's attention to these mechanisms has ethical import.

But how do we as literary scholars react to the ethical imperative of Owens, or to the calls of those who with him—like Ricœur and Bredella—would place the burden of ethics on literature? Let me suggest that if literary criticism and theory of the twentieth century lend themselves to be imagined as an arena for quarrels concerning the aesthetics or "literariness" of literature as opposed to the politics of literature, ethics can be imagined as an instance of the return of the repressed, re-emerging towards the end of the twentieth century, and embraced by both parties of the quarrel. However, while some critics choose to remain within the discursive field, others insist that the ethical imperative of narrative and reading directs us beyond the world of textual idealism, into the world of experience, action, and "lived life."³

Rather than setting out on a journey through the landscapes of foreign lands, the literary traveler sets out on an excursion into the mindscapes opened up by the texts of the Other. The literary marketplace promoting "global literature" may invite us to take an "easy tour of Indian Country," to again borrow Owens's expression, promising light entertainment and a safe return to our familiar world of liberal pluralism, which will remain intact and secure. When we select our reading from the displays of the literature of the Other, let us instead be prepared to embark on a journey of exploration into literary frontiers and border-countries. Let us risk being challenged by what Owens calls "literary terrorism," let us answer to the calls of what Bredella calls "the claims of the other," and let our excursions into the literatures of the Other take us to what Ricœur calls the "vast laboratory" where "narrativity serves as a propaedeutic to ethics," and where we might be encouraged to do some radical rethinking about the world we inhabit.

³ In his introduction to a special issue of *Publication of the Modern Language Association* devoted to the ethics of literary study, Lawrence Buell observes that, "as *ethics* has become a more privileged signifier it has also become an increasingly ductile and thereby potentially confusing one" (11). See also Bredella.

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