

Introduction: Attending to Others

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The figure of ‘the Other’ has loomed large in Anglo-American critical theory since the late 1980s; the imperative to acknowledge and preserve alterity in all its forms has come to inform every single discourse in the humanities and social sciences. In Peter Hallward’s sceptical formulation, ‘Perhaps nothing is more orthodox today than a generalized reverence for the other *qua* other.’¹ This critical obsession with the Other has a dual origin. First, Hegel’s dialectic of the master/slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—mediated through myriad readings in mid-twentieth-century France—plays a dominant role in contemporary understandings of intersubjective relations.² Second, critical theory has been galvanized by Levinas’ rebellion against a Hellenic ontology of the Same in favour of a Hebraic ethics of the Other: the subject is, before anything else, summoned by the Other and so responsible for the Other. Repeated (with variation) in the work of Derrida, Spivak, Irigaray and many others, the priority of the Other and the resultant theory of difference it generates are now central to theoretical concerns. These concerns have, moreover, fitted snugly with theology’s pre-existing interest in transcendence. The infinite qualitative difference of God from the world is read as a traditional synonym for otherness.³ In consequence, the critical theory of the last two decades found an ally in the theological tradition—both its ways of conceptualising transcendence and also its means of articulating it, whether apophatic or analogic.

And yet, the figure of the Other has increasingly come under attack. In the wake of Derrida’s death, a new critical idiom has surfaced which is far less keen on

acknowledging alterity. The popularity of Deleuze, Badiou and ‘the speculative turn’ has given rise to a new concern for *immanence* at the expense of alterity.⁴ Emblematic is Badiou’s claim, ‘The whole ethical predication based upon recognition of the other must be purely and simply abandoned. For the real question—and it is an extraordinarily difficult one—is much more that of recognising the same.’⁵ Badiou advocates an ethics that would be ‘indifferent to differences’⁶, that would galvanise subjects in the name of a collective, revolutionary truth. In consequence, for Badiou, ethics is precisely that which does away with the Other.

This new attitude has begun to seep into critical theory: two examples (Hallward in postcolonialism and Le Doeuff in feminism) are illustrative. Hallward’s postcolonial theory is premised on the claim that Anglo-American critical theory has systematically misread French philosophy as proposing philosophies of difference governed by the figure of the Other, instead of (what is actually the case) philosophies of the singular without others.⁷ Hence, ‘the most precious sacred cow of contemporary philosophy—*the other*’⁸ is in fact a fiction based on a misreading of critical theory’s sources. Deleuze, not Levinas, becomes emblematic of the structure of the subject, for Deleuze’s philosophy moves into ‘those regions where the Other-structure no longer functions.’⁹ What is more, the Other is not just a fiction, it is a pernicious fiction. This is because there are two pathways open to a postcolonialism of alterity and both lead theorists awry. First, the theorist can merely designate a group as purely, intrinsically Other—independently of any specific characteristics. This, however, is both a dangerous abstraction and also a failure to discern any concrete differences at all. This invocation of the bare Other ends in homogeneity, precisely what a philosophy of difference hoped to avoid. The second path leads

towards an endlessly proliferating recognition of concrete differences. This too, however, is problematic. Hallward writes,

If the heyday of ‘fully’ postmodern readings—that is, readings explicitly allied to the postmodernity preached by Lyotard and Baudrillard—appears by now to have come and gone, it is because such readings have had real trouble meeting the challenge posed by this call to particularization. Pure contingency, incommensurability or fragmentation do not lend themselves to anything but an ad hoc specification.¹⁰

In other words, to theorise the particular as absolutely particular is to achieve nothing but pointing¹¹—that is, ‘ad hoc specification’ or a list of empirical properties. Theory breaks down:

The supremely theoretical bias of what might be called ‘high postmodernism’ has, in critical practice, converged almost to the point of indistinction with what was once the explicitly anti-theoretical bias of empiricism [and] pragmatism.¹²

It is for such reasons that Hallward abandons the Other in the name of a postcolonial theory of singularity.¹³

While Michèle Le Doeuff is not directly influenced by recent trends in French philosophy to the same extent as Hallward, her work self-consciously resonates with that of Deleuze and her increasing visibility in Anglo-American feminism is in part due to these changing fashions.¹⁴ Ever since her 1980 *The Philosophical Imaginary*, Le Doeuff has been trenchantly critical of appeals to the Other. They are, she suggests

in that work, a mere foil for the superiority of what is considered 'the Same' (philosophy, rationality, masculinity).¹⁵ In *Hipparchia's Choice*, Le Doeuff applies such criticisms to feminisms of difference in particular. To define women as the Other is to advocate an abstract difference between man and woman at the expense of the differences that exist between particular women and the differences that sometimes do not exist between particular men and particular women:

To look for a language in which 'women can speak their sex' is, in fact, to reduce this diversity [between women] to a sameness, to speak in terms of a single femininity... Unsurprisingly [such language] led to a return to pre-1940s fashions, crocheting, jam-making and motherhood considered as a fine art. One may like jam and knitting and think that motherhood is indeed only justifiable if it can become one of the fine arts, but it is a big step from there to accepting even for a moment that every woman should conform to this model. And then many men have started to enjoy devoting part of their lives to jam or children: to want this type of 'difference' would mean forbidding them these choices.¹⁶

As Le Doeuff continues, this is not just a problem for feminism, but for all theories of the Other:

The ideology of difference... arises from a contradiction. It starts by assuming that the existence of difference is valued, but then, by concentrating on one particular difference, it turns against its original programme, suppressing all differences which might exist on either side of the great dividing line [between same and other] which it has drawn. The only

consistent way to give value to the fact of difference is to uncover differences by their thousands.¹⁷

Le Doeuff looks to Simone de Beauvoir as a means of overcoming the hegemony of the Other: Beauvoir's commitment both to 'the ideal of reciprocity'¹⁸ (where mutual recognition is a fact to be presupposed and not, as in Hegel, an ideal to strive violently for) and also to a thinking 'tied to the factual' meant she 'pluralized' and ultimately 'undermined' the category of the Other.¹⁹

If such are the current critiques of the Other gaining ground within critical theory, what are the implications for theology? The problem is stark: unlike many other discourses, theologies are committed to the concept of the Other; there are no positive religions which are able to completely give up on transcendence. For orthodox theology, absolute immanence is not an option.²⁰ Hence, theology cannot follow prevailing trends as painlessly as other disciplines in the humanities. The result is (or should be), I contend, a fruitful one: instead of a paradigm shift, here emerges a fault line across which immanence and theology rub uneasily against each other. In short, this state of affairs should give rise to a mutual interrogation—immanence becomes a critical tool to sound out invocations of the Other, and *vice versa*.

What is needed then is renewed attention to concrete and specific ways in which alterity is produced, but also concealed and exploited—and this is something only possible *after* Levinas, *after* Derrida, *after* the speculative turn. It involves, above all, paying attention to particular texts (and, in particular, literary texts) which represent the Other differently. *A history of the representation of others* is now possible. It should be a *history*, since the search for alternative dialectics of same/other will involve reading texts outside of the Hegelian or Levinasian tradition

by, for example, returning to earlier historical periods. It should be a history of *others*, since this search for alternatives will transform the bare, monolithic Other into a plurality of diverse but concrete others.

Crucial then to the prospects for a theology of the Other after the turn to immanence is critique and, more specifically, critical attention. A history of the representation of others is only possible through careful and sustained focus on the particularities and singularities of the same/other relation as it is played out in specific texts in history. This focus is what Goethe invoked with the phrase ‘delicate empiricism’²¹; it is what Raimond Gaita has recently called a method that ‘leads us *towards reality*’²²; it is also the central concept in a tradition of ascetic realism that passes through Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. Murdoch defines attention as ‘a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality... the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent.’²³ When one’s vision is disciplined by both ‘moral imagination and moral effort’²⁴, then one is able to dispel illusion and distortion for the sake of clearly seeing things as they are. Attention is ‘obedience to reality’²⁵—and it is what is required to overcome abstractions, like the bare Other, in the name of a history of concrete, particular others.²⁶ Hence, the title of this special issue: *Attending to Others*.

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The following essays were first presented at the fifteenth biennial conference of the International Society of Religion, Literature and Culture held at St Catherine’s College, University of Oxford, between 23rd and 26th September 2010 under the title, ‘Attending to the Other: Critical Theory and Spiritual Practice.’²⁷ The subtitle

indicates precisely the uneasy relation between current critical attitudes to the Other and religious discourse outlined above. A wide range of papers were given in nineteen different panels; this special issue represents a selection from the sessions devoted to Critical Theory, German Idealism, Judaism, Literature, Postcolonial Theory and Visual Arts. The six papers that follow have very differing concerns, and their authors may not fully agree with the project of a history of the representation of others that I, as guest editor, have presented above. It is a difficult, and often contrived, task to find coherence across such a vast plane of difference. But then, as conference co-organiser, it was clear from the outset what we hoped the conference might achieve in re-thinking notions of Otherness. And thus, I have purposely selected all six papers because, in my view, they were outstanding examples of how we might rethink otherness—that is, reappraise the representation of others in religious and literary texts in the wake of increasing critique of the figure of the Other.

The issue begins with essays exploring alternative readings of two canonical figures at the heart of recent discourse about the Other. First, Aaron Rosen reads Levinas ‘against the grain’ by setting his more appreciative comments on individual works of art against his hostility to visual art in general (or at least, on Rosen’s reading, to some tendencies of it). The result is an account of an interfaith hospitality towards works of visual art which parallels the recent movements towards interfaith study of scripture. Andrew Hass then turns to the second major source for contemporary interest in same/other relations, Hegel’s master/slave dialectic. Hass points specifically to the significance of Hegel’s language of *poiesis*, bringing out the richness of a heterodox Hegelian vision of the artist. The artist negates herself as an other and negates the other as herself.

The next two essays return to the early modern period to unearth alternative conceptions of the same/other relation. Jayme Yeo examines the mix of mysticism and politics in the poetry of Richard Crashaw in order to show up how the resultant discourse of alterity both resembles and diverges from contemporary critical concern. Crashaw exemplifies a different logic of the Other by rigorously thinking through the consequences of mutual suffering. Jacqueline Cowan's study of Bacon's *New Atlantis* again recovers a different attitude to alterity in early modernity. She traces the dependence of utopian texts (like Bacon's) on New World travel writing, marvelling at the otherness of recently discovered land. Bacon mimics the latter's 'rhetoric of marvels', but in the name of a future ideal which will one day be assimilated. Alterity is posited only to be neutralised—and here Cowan puts her finger on a crucial temporal aspect of this representation of others.

The final two essays end the issue by problematising aspects of contemporary discourse about the Other. Marianne Schleicher interrogates the legitimacy of turning the Other into a site of subversion. Focusing in particular on the treatment of sexually ambiguous individuals in Jewish scripture, she meticulously charts the effects of various uses of these Scriptural figures on the inclusion and exclusion of readers. Finally, Ben Morgan initiates a dialogue with Toril Moi's advocacy of the 'adventure of reading'²⁸ by launching a critique of the Other as such. He uses the findings of philosophy, psychology and literary texts to argue that it is ethically unhelpful and factually mistaken to articulate intersubjective relations through the categories of 'same' and 'Other'. In so doing, he implicitly lays the groundwork for new theological projects that will presuppose a community of collaborators, rather than a deadly struggle of combatants.

¹ Peter Hallward, 'Translator's Introduction' to Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), p. xxii.

² G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §178-96. See further Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

³ Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 22. This convergence of critical theory and theology is critically documented by Pamela Sue Anderson ('The Other' in *The Oxford Handbook of Theology and Modern European Thought*, ed. Nick Adams, George Pattison and Graham Ward (Oxford, Oxford University Press, forthcoming)).

⁴ For more on this shift and the concept of the 'speculative turn', see Levi Bryant, Graham Harman and Nick Srnicek, 'Towards a Speculative Philosophy' in Bryant, Srnicek and Harman (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Realism and Materialism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 1-18; Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler, 'What is Continental Philosophy of Religion Now?' in Smith and Whistler (eds.), *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), pp. 1-25.

⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁷ 'If a *specific* individual is one which exists as part of a relationship to an environment and to other individuals, a *singular* individual is fundamentally self-individuating, beyond relationality as such. In the absence of others, the singular properly creates the medium of its own existence (its own *expression*, in Spinoza's sense). The singular is aspecific. Much of what passes for 'specific' in recent philosophy and literary criticism—most notably in certain fields of French philosophy – should rather be understood and evaluated as singular or singularizing.' Peter Hallward, 'The Singular and the Specific: Recent French Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy* 99 (February 2000): 8.

⁸ Peter Hallward, *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 92.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 282. It should be pointed out, however, that Hallward does also attempt to reread Levinas as a philosopher of the singular ('The Singular and the Specific', p. 15).

¹⁰ Hallward, 'The Singular and the Specific', p. 7.

¹¹ And even such pointing is impossible (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §105-8; Hallward, 'The Singular and the Specific', p. 6).

¹² Hallward, 'The Singular and the Specific', p. 7.

¹³ See further Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

¹⁴ For more on Le Doeuff's relation to Deleuze (and her alternative model to the Hegelian master/slave dialectic), see Daniel Whistler, 'The Abandoned Fiancée, or Against Subjection' in Pamela Sue Anderson (ed.), *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion; Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010), pp. 128-30.

¹⁵ See Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, trans. Colin Gordon (London: Continuum, 1989), p. 6.

¹⁶ Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy etc.*, 2nd ed., trans. Trista Selous (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 227.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 133.

²⁰ Hence, Badiou conceives of a critique of the ethics of the Other as a critique of theology *tout court* (*Ethics*, pp. 22-3).

²¹ J.W. Goethe, *Maxims and Aphorisms*, trans. Elisabeth Stopp and ed. Peter Hutchinson (London: Penguin, 1998), §509.

²² Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 173.

²³ Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 34.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁶ For examples of such attention to moral and religious phenomena, see Joseph Carlisle, James Carter and Daniel Whistler (eds.), *Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs: Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²⁷ Toril Moi's keynote at the conference, 'The Adventure of Reading: Literature and Philosophy, Cavell and Beauvoir' (which was also the second annual *Literature and Theology* lecture) was published in the June issue of the journal (*Literature and Theology* 25.2 (2011): 125-40). See also Heather Walton's Introduction to the issue (*ibid*, p. 123-4).

²⁸ See note 27.