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Borderlives and Borderlands: Two papers

This small booklet contains two papers that I delivered in the Autumn of 1994 and the Summer of 1995. "Borderlives and Limits: Autobiography's Crossing and the Prodigal's Tale" was presented at Sostrup Slot in Denmark at the second of two Nordic Ph.D. seminars, entitled "Textual Analysis: Transformation of Genre and World Fiction." "Islands: Literally and in Literature" was presented at the Association of Commonwealth Language and Literature Studies' tenth triennial conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Both papers comprise some of the main questions of concern that I presently work on in my Ph.D. research project. In my work, I draw on the literary material and cultural expressions found in the area of postcolonialism, focusing on the possibility of a referentiality of both self and space in order for the colonial histories to be told again, and from different positions. My interest is not so much in the politics of the re-telling, though the political implications are hard to avoid, rather I am searching for the particularity of the stories being told by voices that are often described as displaced, exiled, even lost or perhaps rather forgotten.

Postcolonial theory has drawn attention to questions of the poetics of identity and to questions of ethics in an oppostion to the proposition of literature and art as possessing a position of aethetic autonomy, but, although these questions undoubtedly have had an importance for the so-called marginal literatures and arts, the theoretic discussions often reach a polemically dead end. The oppositions become too clear cut when the lines of conflict, necessarily related to, are attained within a logic that can easily be deconstructed, though not easily substituted.

In the two papers, I attempt instead to exemplify a possible method of approach that both enacts and defamiliarizes the frontiers of lines and borders without trying to resolve the obliqueness of difference.

Borderlives and Limits: Autobiography's Crossing and the Prodigal's Tale
Sostrup Slot, November 1994

What does it feel like to encounter the "other", the complete and unknown otherness? What do you do? I mean, do you feel intrigued, excited, scared, or curious? Or perhaps I should ask, what does it mean to encounter the "other" in the first place?

These are not meant as questions that prompt the traveller, the anthropologists or psychoanalysts. In this position I am not any of these. Nor am I oblivious of the concepts of Orientalism, the manichean allegory, or political correctness. Rather I ask these questions because they have become quite an important part of my work as a literary critic in these postmodern times. And, also, because I have been following the recent debate on postcolonial theory and reading practice, since I, in my research project, have drawn on material from the postcolonial, or commonwealth, literatures in English.

Postcolonialism (in this case understood in part as a continuation of Commonwealth studies) is a difficult term to define, because it covers an immense portion of the literatures and theories written in English, but it applies in part to the historical void in the former colonies created by European imperialism: In reaction to the violation of colonial voices, postcolonial studies have made room for a possible regaining of spoken and written words from these often silenced "others".

In extension to my former questions, it remains, though, that the experience of marginalization of the individual as "other", and its literary manifestation, is not a phenomenon purely postcolonial. In other words, how do we define and describe the experience of displacement and loss, and what is its history?

The questions I have posed thus have two purposes: 1) to avoid what I consider to be the deadlock the debate on postcolonial theory and practice often reaches in its continuing attention to or inversion of the destructive dichotomies of Western culture, which the colonizing principle is seen as being built upon. And 2) to suggest and point to an opening, an imagining which is not without limits, but not cornered by its limits either.

To illustrate my first point, I'll draw on Said's reading of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and to unfold my second point I'll return to two texts that in different ways both foreground and dislocate the deadlock of an oppositional stance: The first in its structural enunciation: Ashley Thompson's essay, "Oh Cambodia! Poems from the Border", from 1993, and the other in its stylistics: Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, from 1982.

In an essay from 1983, Said describes Conrad's fiction as great both in what it represents and in its presentation, because Conrad saw the problematic conflict in his attempt to find a correspondence between the written words and their meaning; the more he tried the greater the difference. Conrad dramatizes this problem in the construction of a narrative telling of the story, that is, in a setting that both motivates the telling and incorporates a narrator and the presence of an audience, which means that the narrative, in Said's words, "embodies the transformation in the act of taking place." (Said 1983, p. 94) At the same time, the subject of the narratives is often illusory or dark, which reflects exactly the contours of what the narrative reveals. That is, Conrad's text comes to represent the rift between the wish to speak with an intention and the absence in the words to express this intention; a rift which Conrad himself represented as a writer and which the reader connects in his or her attention to both sides of the

divide. In short, Conrad's form is thus presented as an oral form, even though he writes, and his aim is to move towards a visual comprehension, which penetrates past the written words, in a depiction of the discrepancy between intention and actuality.

In his recent book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Said adds to his reading that *Heart of Darkness* is effective because its politics and aesthetics are imperialistic. Or put in another way, if we cannot possibly understand the experience of the "other", we are dependent on the dogmatic authority which Marlow performs as the narrator, and which as a consequence is similar to the power that Kurtz exerts as a white man in the jungle. That means that the imperialistic system in itself has eliminated any non-imperialistic alternative; made it unthinkable, because the narration the same way as imperialism has monopolized the system of representation. Only the consciousness as an outsider, and being not in complete correspondence with the system, will allow the understanding of how the system works: Someone like Conrad, a Polish who lived in exile and wrote in his third language. And Said does recognize that Conrad was highly critical of the imperial system. Conrad's narrative form created a perspective from the outside by pointing to its own construction, or rather, Conrad demonstrated how ideas and values are constructed and deconstructed by dislocating the language of his narrator. In this sense, he created a discrepancy between the official idea of the empire and the disruptive actuality in Africa, and as such he unsettled not only the idea of empire, but as well our sense of reality. Said says that Conrad in his writing knew that his own narratives could never be completely true or secure, and that like the empire they would have to end, but he also says that Conrad never actually imagined an alternative to the empire, because he was, alas, a creature of his time.

Here is where the deadlock appears: It might well be that Said has to—he simply must—insist that Conrad didn't get *far* enough, both in order not to get trapped in those, though reversed, binary oppositions that represent Said's main attack on colonial, or western, thought, *and* in order not to accept the actuality of western imperialism. In answer to a frequent criticism that his work is only negative polemic, Said writes in his article, "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors", that no structure of knowledge, nor any institution or epistemology can ever be free of its sociocultural, historical or political context, that there is no vantage point outside the actualities of relations. This seems to be his way out of the deadlock of a postmodernism that rejects the existence of a referent beyond the discourse, because postmodern theory in effect stands free of its own history in its retreat to the politics of textuality.

But where does this leave Said? In the beginning of his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said describes the book as an exile's book belonging on both sides of the imperial divide, and, whether a bridge for crossings or new alignments, that position seems at least to give him the vantage of critiquing both the new nationalisms of the postcolonial world *and* the postmodern theory of the West.

Assuming that reality is not an independent, stable unity, but constituted discourse, it could be that Marlow's narration is established exactly *on* the structure of reality and its referent, in a way similar to the way Marlow navigates the steamboat safely down the river by paying close attention to the surface of things. (Conrad, p. 49) At some point during the telling, when Marlow is no more than a voice in the darkness of the night, and the listener feels faintly uneasy with the narrative, the tale still lures the listener to enter the darkness, to float along. But all that darkness reveals in the tale are Kurtz's whispering words, "the horror, the horror," which Marlow at first interprets as some sort of affirmation of success ("He wanted no more than justice" (Conrad, p. 101)), but later also lies about to Kurtz's Intended, although Marlow at an early stage of the telling states that he appals lies, because they remind him of the things in the world that he wants to forget. (Conrad, pp. 38-39) It appears that his interpretative act rather than the interpretation itself of Kurtz's last words is necessary in order for the imagining of values of truth and justice to exist. That is how it is possible for Marlow to reject the totalizing authority of imperialism and of his own narrative without jeopardizing a belief in ethics.

Some of the implications of this perspective, Derrida in part addresses in his article "Otobiographies." Without going into detail, I shall just briefly point to a few of the issues dealt with in the article. Derrida more or less asks how it is that a text is disclosed to conflicting interpretations, in this case the Nazi interpretation of Nietzsche. On the one hand, the risk of a misreading is not only accidental, but the condition of the iterability of language. As he writes, "there is nothing absolutely contingent" (Derrida, p. 31) in the Nazi reading of Nietzsche. On the other hand, this does not give license to a rhetoric of interpretative game-playing; otobiography, a pun on autobiography, entails the risk of sending and entrusting one's text to the ear of the other, but Derrida also implies, although he doesn't present it as a solution, that the text itself cannot be ignored nor the desires for a standard of truth. The drawing of lines are never clear cut, nor is "the *dynamis* of that borderline between the "work" and the "life," the system and the subject of the system." (Derrida, p. 5)

Recently, I gave the students in my class four texts that shared in theme and genre Cambodia and autobiography. One of the texts was an essay with the apostrophical title, "Oh Cambodia! Poems from the Border", by Ashley Thompson, an American who from 1988 to 1990 taught English to the Cambodians in a refugee camp, called Site 2, situated on the border between Cambodia and Thailand. Her text is clearly cut in two: The first section being a historical background of the events in Cambodia, which led to the appearance of the refugee camps on the border, and the other section being an autobiographical account of her own experiences. The first section seems to be an attempt, through a position from the outside, to situate the people in the camp, to give them a place, or more specifically the people writing the poems displayed in the second section, while admitting that such an attempt runs the risk of reducing the people to figures. The second section describes the camp as incomprehensible, because it was built in the hope of its own destruction, as

something which is not there, something displaced. Or "thirteen years and five quare miles of saying goodbye [...] the gesture of goodbye frozen, fixed between a past and a future, on the line between two nations." (Thompson, pp. 533-34)

The class gave a split response to the text. On the one side, the text had a very crude, perhaps even unsophisticated, structure, and on the other, its pathos was honest and appealing. The text I had thought the most uncomplicated was discussed the longest; it had the strongest effect. I cannot say whether the lack of a response towards either thumbs up or down was caused by some unsettling business in the text, except for its compassionate tone, but at least the reaction itself commented on the text's attempt to effectuate what it is like to be *on* the border.

And Ashley Thompson is standing on the border. In her personal account she sees and observes, but she cannot understand, because the reality of Site 2 is neither imaginable nor speakable. She foretells that if she crosses the line to comprehension she has lost herself and the others, the people of the camp. Thus, it could be that her historical outline as an opposite to her memories of the experience is too crude, and that her attempt to visualize and make visible, to foreground her inability to actually recite her lack of understanding, has already failed. But when her writing disconnects, or cleaves, meaning both to split and attach, the "real" from its referent, the relation between the two is questioned, and as such her text reflects the displacement of the people living on the border. And the people living on the border, "between a past and a future", have to maintain the memory of the past in order to maintain the possibility for a future. Some of them start writing poetry in English, and to Thompson the transgression of language boundaries comes to represent both the transgression of boundaries between literal and figurative language, and it constitutes, for the poets, a passage from the real to the imaginary (see Appendix A for a few of the poems included in Thompson's text). Likewise, Thompson uses the passage from her memories to her actual text, but by speaking from a declared autobiographical position, she draws attention to herself, while placing herself in other contexts.

The first time I read Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, I was lying in a hammock five steps from a small lake, a cool wind chilling my butt bulging through the net fabric of the hammock. The second time I read from the bible, and the third time I accompanied my reading with gulps of gin and tonic and tried to cook real string hoppers (see Appendix B).

Michael Ondaatje left Ceylon when he was eleven, was educated in England and settled in Canada. After twenty-five years, he returns to the island of his childhood, collects fragments of his parents' lives through interviews, talks, gossip, books, letters and inscriptions on the church floor, and presents a fictionalization of it all seasoned with numerous cross-references, poems and personal notes. *Running in the family* pays close attention to details which is where the real telling takes place: "You must get this book right," his brother tells him, "You can only write it once." "But the book again is incomplete," the autobiographer replies. (Ondaatje, p. 201)

I, in turn, do not want to violate the fabric of details and have instead chosen to select some of the stylistic gestures in *Running in the Family*, by way of which I will, in this the last part of my paper, fall back on some of the topics already discussed. My selection is thus an interpretative act that concerns itself with the openness of the surface of the book.

The narrator describes himself as a foreigner, but also as the prodigal who hates the foreigner, and one of the main chapters is titled "The Prodigal." This alludes both to the parable of the prodigal son, and to the prodigal, recklessly extravagant living of his parents' generation: A life of gambling on horses and cards, of eating endless meals, especially oyster, and of drinking, champagne and gin. "Most Ondaatjes liked liquor, sometimes to excess" (Ondaatje, p. 57): his father died drunk. It was by the end of the colonial era in Ceylon; an empire was literally disappearing, being spent.

This is where the bible comes in. I'll quote from Luke, Chapter 15:

> Another time, the tax-gatherers and other bad characters were all crowding in to listen to him; and the Pharisees and the doctors of the law began grumbling among themselves: "This fellow," they said, "welcomes sinners and eats with them."

He answered them with three parables of which I'll read from the last:

> There was once a man who had two sons; and the younger said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the property." So he divided his estate between them. A few days later the younger son turned the whole of his share into cash and left home for a distant country, where he squandered it in reckless living. He had spent it all, when a severe famine fell upon that country and he began to feel the pinch.

After some time of starving and poor living, he decides to return to his father's house.

> But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him, flung his arms around him, and kissed him. The son said, "Father, I have sinned, against God and against you; I am no longer fit to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Quick! fetch a robe, my best one, and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us have a feast to celebrate the day. For this son of mine was dead and has now come back to life; he was lost and is found." And the festivities began.

In *Running in the Family*, though, the prodigal is the stranger, he is not the one who is the sinner or the one lost. Rather he has lost the father who lived lavishly. The narrator's journey is not in line with the pattern of the *Bildungsroman*, home-away-home in an extension of the Christian belief in paradise lost, paradise regained. The narrator longs for the moment in the play when Edgar reveals himself to Gloucester, but it never happens. He wants to say: "I am writing this book about you at a time when I am least sure about such words." (Ondaatje, p. 180) "But the book again is incomplete:" The father died before the grown-up son returned.

The narrator's reconciliation with his past does, however, perform some kind of transformation carried through by the leitmotif of eating. The transformation of consumption, similar to chewing, swallowing, fermenting, digesting, and shitting. The son literally eats and drinks his way through the search for the lost father, both fearing to be like his father and, simultaneously, reaching for a palpable image. I have listed a few of the food passages in Appendix C, here I'll quote just one of them:

> Sir John's breakfasts are legendary, always hoppers and fish curry, mangoes and curd. A breeze blows magically under the table, a precise luxury, and I stretch my feet to its source as I tear apart my first hopper. My sandal is wrenched off and goes flying down under the length of the table, luckily not in the direction of Sir John. My foot tingling. While everybody else eats I lean back and look underneath and there is a small portable fan a few inches from my toes ready to tear into the flesh this time. I could have lost a toe during one of the breakfasts searching for my father. (Ondaatje, p. 158)

What started the search: "What began it all was the bright bone of a dream [he] could hardly hold onto." (Ondaatje, p. 21) And The Bone is the title of the subchapter on a story, no longer a dream, about his father that he cannot come to terms with. Just as the book again is incomplete, the father is "one of those books we long to read whose pages remain uncut." (Ondaatje, p. 200) The bone is left-over from a meal, a remnant not easily digested. Bone, skeleton, ghost: "What's a ghost? Unfinished business is what," it says in Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, that is, unfinished business from the past. Also, in extension to the imagery of the book, the narrator recognizes in the depiction (in a biology textbook) of the small bones in the body the shapes and forms of his first alphabet, Sinhalese: "The bones of a lover's spine." (Ondaatje, p. 83)

Another connotation of eating, though not an overt figure in *Running in the Family*, is of course cannibalism. A pregnant word not easily digested either, or easily reduced to neutral meaning. Here, briefly, I'll lean on the Belgian scholar, Hena Maes-Jelinek's reading of the way the Guyanan writer Wilson Harris uses the trope of cannibalism exactly in order *not* to reverse, literally or metaphorically, the notion of cannibalism to the dominant perpetrators. Instead Harris tries to show the cross-cultural creative potential inherent in cannibalism. One example is that what plenty of societies fear the most can be found in the very heart of their own culture—for instance the Christian eucharist. Another example is that of the Carib bone-flute:

> The Caribs used to carve a flute out of the bones of their cannibalized Spanish enemies and eat a morsel of their flesh in order to enter their mind, sense their adversarial hate, and intuit the kind of attack they might wage against themselves. It would seem that the Caribs also saw in the bone-flute the very origins of music. The flute was therefore the seed of an intimate revelation [...] of mutual space they shared with the enemy [...] Harris's description of the flute as a bridge of soul [...] upon which the ghost of music runs, moves between the living and the dead,

> the living and the living, the living and the unborn." (see Appendix D for a European renaissance vision of cannibals in South America)

Inherent in cannibalism lies the fear of consumption and of dispersion, the fear of loss of identity in the body of the other. In *Heart of Darkness* Marlow is both afraid of losing his sanity, which is connected to his cultural identity, but he also shows some "fantastic vanity" in his consideration of whether the cannibals on board might find him appetizing. (Conrad, p. 59)

Harris stresses that a dispersion of identity does not entail giving up one's identity to a dominant power. Instead the notion of cannibalism translates the potential for a cross-cultural meeting. And he focuses precisely on a cross-cultural meeting, and not a multicultural meeting which only shows pluralistic tolerance, but lends no place for changes. To Harris multiculturalism is a perverse cross-culturalism in its insistence on cultural separation or purity of cultures. Neither the one nor the other are absolutes in themselves, as light and dark in *Heart of Darkness* are not distinct; by maintaining a separation between the two the necessary revision is blocked, or the interpretative *act*, which is necessary in order for the imagining of values of truth to exist, is barred, because great adversaries at times greatly resemble one another. Or as Derrida puts it:

> An interpretive decision does not have to draw a line between two intents or two political contents. Our interpretations will not be readings of a hermeneutic or exegetic sort, but rather political interventions in the political rewriting of the text and its destination [...] The one can always be the other, the double of the other. (Derrida, p. 32)

And to flavour this last note of conceptualizing, I'll present one more literary example from memory: In Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Shadow Lines*, the grandmother living with her family in Calcutta, India, is going to revisit her childhood home in Dhaka. It is the first time in many years, and, though the city has since then become the capital of Bangladesh, she keeps referring to her journey as going "home." The younger part of the family jokes about her wording and corrects her. Since she has to cross a border she cannot be going "home," she must be going "away."

As such, the grandmother's confusion of the confines of "home" and "away" is reflected in the novel itself: In mirror-images and unorthodox drawings of maps, the established structures of borders and divisions are constantly displaced and displayed both in the experiences of particular, individual histories and in the history of a regional place, the Indian subcontinent. The shadow lines may be the lines of the numerous borders both imagined and concrete, but what lies on either sides may not so easily be distinguished: "The 'looking-glass border' attempts to create a mirage of otherness but only sees itself reflected." (Mukherjee, p. 266)

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Appendix A

Fifty meters from my house is the getting-rice-room.
The whole room has three pictures,
but I enjoy the picture of the sea-side best.
In that picture are several coco-plants at the beach.
And behind it are many gray rocks.

I looked and looked
for a long time at that picture.

Suddenly it became a real picture.
It seemed I was standing alone
on the gray rock at the beach seeing
the big blue waves...very happy.

Kheama Oun

When I was sleeping I dreamed of
going to the ricefield.

When I arrived I saw lots of cows
eating grass
And I rode along the ricefield dike
very very happy
And there were many people transplanting.
At that moment I saw a man take his
flute and go towards the hills.
He was very sad because his ox had died.
And I walked along the ricefield dike.
I saw a lion roar
And it was playing the flute under a tree.

So Vantha

After that I walked singing a song for
a race with the birds. Then a lark that was
hiding under the rice stalks flew with a very
fleeting noise that made me wake up and just then
I know I'm in Site Two.

Appendix B

Appendix C

from Michael Ondaatje, *Running in the Family* (London: Picador, 1984):

This is a drink which smells of raw rubber and is the juice drained from the flower of a coconut. We sip it slowly, feeling it continue to ferment in the stomach.

At noon I doze for an hour, then wake for a lunch of crab curry. There is no point in using a fork and a spoon for this meal. I eat with my hands, shovelling in the rice with my thumb, crunching the shell in my teeth. Then fresh pineapple. (p. 26)

The thalagoya has a rasping tongue that "catches" and hooks objects. There is a myth that if a child is given thalagoya tongue to eat he will become brilliantly articulate, will always speak beautifully, and in his speech be able to "catch" and collect wonderful, humorous information.

There is a way to eat the tongue. The thalagoya is killed by placing it on the ground, doubling its head under the throat, and striking the nape with a clenched fist. The tongue should be sliced off and eaten as soon as possible after the animal dies. You take a plantain or banana, remove the skin and cut it lenghtwise in half, place the gray tongue between two pieces of banana making a sandwich, and then swallow the thing without chewing, letting it slide down the throat whole [...]

The thalagoya has other uses. It has the only flesh that can be kept down by a persistently vomiting patient and is administered to pregnant women for morning sickness. (pp. 73-74)

We are having a formal dinner. String hoppers, meat curry, egg rulang, papadams, potato curry. Alice's date chutney, seeni sambol, mallung and brinjals and iced water [...] It is my favourite meal—anything that has string hoppers and egg rulang I eat with lascivious hunger. (p. 137)

Avoid eating certain foods in lonely places, the devils will smell you out.
(p. 190)

Appendix D