OTHER

DISCOVERIES OF THE

Alterity in the Work of **Leonard Cohen, Hubert Aquin, Michael Ondaatje, & Nicole Brossard**

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Introduction:
Discoveries of the Other

Exploring the relationship between self and other as textual figures of the unknown in a number of Canadian and Québécois works of fiction, I could not but agree with the first sentence of Tzvetan Todorov's study, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*: 'My subject – the discovery *self* makes of the *other* – is so enormous that any general formulation soon ramifies into countless categories and directions.' Besides conveying a sense of consolation, however, this opening of the first chapter, 'The Discovery of America,' addresses at least two aspects of alterity that I shall be dealing with. On the one hand, the emphasis on a self-reflexive medium of discovery in conjunction with the other envisions a praxis of knowledge that is relational: it evokes potential alterations of both parties involved, announcing both the internal otherness that comes with self-reflection and the role of such a medium as condition for perceptions of the other. These reciprocal alterations, on the other hand, imply relationships that are measured on the scales of power and control. The term 'discovery,' in both Todorov's chapter title and his beginning, thus contrasts markedly with the term 'conquest' in the title of his book, posing the question of how closely the former is related to the latter. Do discoveries of the other inevitably motivate attempts at an imposition and extension of the self and of the same? Beyond the kind of moralistic overtones evoked by such an inquiry, a related question arises in the area of the possible epistemological strategies and choices that are played out in any encounter of knowledge with its limits, for which geographical discovery has provided many metaphors. To what extent may any exploration, even (and in particular) those searches that do not aim at the recognition of previously identified items, operate in the manner of an ambivalent 'apprehension' of the unknown other – in the various senses of that word? Are discoveries mainly or exclusively structured, and perhaps obstructed and

foreclosed, by needs for certainty (and fears of a disorienting loss of control) that impose the known categories of assimilation and eclipse the specific difference of the other?

Before relating the issues of discovery and subjectivity to concerns in the area of language and to more specifically Canadian and Québécois cultural grounds, let me offer a short preliminary sketch of two perspectives on the other, followed by a brief discussion of an example of the kind of text that has motivated this study. In a formal perspective that begins with what seems closest, the category of the other appears derived from a notion of the self and of identity. In a circular model of discovery and of identity, the movement of the self that lacks its complement (or is interrupted in its habitual knowledge or perception) leaves its known sphere to take cognizance of the other, and returns into its element. The optimism and intention that are implicit in such a model positing an identity of the unknown with the knowable – a model that seems to underlie most of our current praxes of knowledge – also suggest a narrative of progress from darkness to an even, unrestricted light. Discovery, however, does not necessarily imply an identification of the other. While we may think of discovery as the appearance of the other in the clear light provided by the categories of our knowledge, a further 'discovery of the other' may also remind us of the incongruity and difference that establish otherness as such. In contrast with a perspective that seeks to 'come to terms' with the object of its understanding in an adequation of its own thought with the being of the other, Emmanuel Lévinas, for instance, brings a different intention to the fore, one that 'precisely, *understands* [*entend*] the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other' (34).[1] The opposition between these two perspectives – which I will attempt to render, in a moment, more precisely as the distinction between the 'thetic' and the 'heterological' – can be seen to animate the textual strategies of discovery in the works I shall discuss, and provides one motive for the plural of my title. No discovery appears final here: the question of the other constitutes the opening or gap of knowledge that sets these texts in motion; it also seems to return, however, in some form at their conclusion. And these unfinalized discoveries of the other are doubled, in a further plural, by another series that resembles the first. Since the erstwhile subject of the quest for knowledge, in its discoveries of the other, finds it difficult to return to a secure position, the supposed object of the inquiry begins to induce discoveries of a self that is also altered, time and again, by its discoveries of the other.

This study began (or so I would like to think, in order to mark a point of reference in the realm of reading) with the experience of fascination and uncertainty conveyed by the relationship between the narrator and the main

character in Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*. We are invited to witness a project of discovery that seems to concentrate on Buddy Bolden, a figure based upon the historical jazz cornet player by that name. Images of the New Orleans musician begin to appear. But the picture that at some point surfaces out of the acid tray under the eyes of a photographer and a detective (who appears here often as both a *mise en abyme* and a parody of the novelist in search of his story) is said to move in the opposite direction from the musician it portrays, who has disappeared in silence: 'Watching their friend float into the page smiling at them, the friend who in reality had reversed the process and gone back into white, who in this bad film seemed to have already half-receded with that smile which may not have been a smile at all, which may have been his mad dignity' (52–3). The enigmatic expression on Bolden's face and the aura of the photograph, readable in several ways yet not yielding their truth to discovery, are symptomatic. Eventually, the narrator admits that Bolden appeared differently to all those who knew him. Since these are the only views available to understanding, the novel shows the stories about Bolden to point outwards like the spokes of a rimless wheel. But beyond these discoveries of the other, the narrator will pose the question of his own motivation in this search – be it fascination or horror – that would have structured the quest for knowledge, and discovered and revealed moments of the 'I' in the mirror image of the other. The 'I' in *Coming Through Slaughter* traverses, indeed, a moment of specular identity with one of the images of its other. Significantly, however, it imagines Bolden as its other self at the moment of the musician's exit from the public stage, the end of his (narcissistic) self-constitution in the mirroring movement of *his* other – a dancing fan, in this case – and the mirror image of his fame. And while this moment of the end of recognition (and also of its traps) may constitute a recognition and an insight on the part of the discovering self, it is not the 'end' of the text – neither its last page nor its conclusion. Although the 'I' has come through an imagined space and experience in the act of writing, it does not claim completed 'knowledge' either of the self or of the other.

In spite of this inconclusiveness – or maybe because of it – the reader is invited to participate in a process of fascination that produces as many open-ended questions as answers. *Coming Through Slaughter* does offer images, stories, documents, and points of view – a kind of knowledge concerning Bolden. But simultaneously, the text seeks to 'produce' the local, specific circumstances of its partial evidence – both of its enunciatory context, and of its very materiality (the tapes, photographs, stories, and texts that appear or are described). In this textual process of discovery, the subject matter is shown to change with each observer, and with the process of understanding and signifi-

cation that links one to the other. The variability of the impressions suggests, on the one hand, the active participation of the observing instance and the angle of perception. But since the text does not – unlike the detective plot it often parodies – pitch story against story in order to exclude false evidence, the eventual 'truth' or knowledge that the textual 'I' attains with respect to the other does not claim to *equal* its object. In Lévinas's terms, there remains a 'non-adequation' of thought to being, and thought – with the incomplete 'object' in which it finds its form – remains in the mode of what he calls 'infinition' (27).

Since the other refers in *Coming Through Slaughter* to a historical figure, these unfinalized and self-reflexive explorations of 'the discovery *self* makes of the *other*' itself constitute in this case a hybrid space that has been discussed as 'historiographic metafiction' (see Hutcheon, *The Canadian Postmodern* 61–77; *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 105–23). While the particular contexts of historical otherness and self-reflexive fiction make up only two specific (though very important) aspects of the wider inquiry into alterity I conduct, the much debated questions of both historiography and metafiction point to the non-transparency, inner logic, and materiality of language on the one hand, and to the discursive situation or context of *énonciation* on the other hand that play primordial roles in the constitution of self and other in language. Todorov's sentence itself offers an example of the former aspect in the difference between its English form and the French original which it has so far been assumed to correspond to unproblematically, yet which reveals a much more direct concern with the latter question. The 'discovery *self* makes of the *other*': through Richard Howard's transposition from the other language that brings its own perspective to bear on what it mediates (in particular by substituting the reflexive 'self' for the pronoun 'I'), the English-language reader thus perceives indirectly Todorov's own opening sentence, which places a greater emphasis on the role of the discovering subject and its praxis of speech: 'Je veux parler de la découverte que le *je* fait de l'*autre*' (11). Although this study will not restrict itself to the relationship between the other and the 'I,' Todorov's emphasis on the 'I,' and on the *use* of language – speech or discourse – proves helpful since the 'I' determines the deictic field of temporal and spatial 'pointing' in which the meaning of the 'here' and 'there,' the 'inside' and the 'outside,' and of the same and of the other are established in language. The 'I' has played, indeed, a primordial role in some of the discussions relevant to the questions I approach. If Todorov refers, in his unfolding of the 'I' and of the 'other,' to Rimbaud's 'Je est un autre' (qtd 3),[2] he points both to 'the other in ourselves' (3), and to the fact that we are not 'radically alien' to that which we perceive 'is not us' (3). But by referring

to Rimbaud's famous phrase, Todorov also evokes the pronoun of the first-person singular as the linguistic transport of that experience. A pronoun, indeed, not only stands in for another name, but represents in fact another kind of noun.

The linguist Émile Benveniste, in his account of the non-lexical nature of personal pronouns, makes the shifting reference of the 'I' explicit. It is linked to the context and the moment of its utterance (*énonciation*): '*I* signifies "the person who is uttering the present instance of the discourse containing *I*"' (218). In his influential essay 'Subjectivity in Language,' he defines this mobile act of self-constitution as the principle of subjectivity as such, 'because language alone establishes the concept of the "ego" in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being' (224). In Benveniste's perspective, subjectivity appears as 'the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as "subject"' (224). In opposition to notions of human 'essence,' Benveniste's concentration on subjectivity as a discursive phenomenon emphasizes the fact that subjectivity is *produced* under specific circumstances (and amenable to change and contextually variable), and provides a useful focus for textual study. But it also poses considerable problems. The far-reaching identification of discursive reality and being – both in the formulation above and in his apodictic equation '"Ego" is he who *says* "ego"' (224) ('Est "ego" qui *dit* "ego"' [260]) – declares itself by definition not concerned with the speaking subject who produces the subject in speech,[3] and thus with concepts of extra-linguistic subjectivity. Furthermore, Benveniste's discursive 'I' has inherited, from a Cartesian philosophical tradition, dominating and subsuming tendencies with respect to that which it is not. Although the discursive 'I' is only possible through the complement of the 'you,' and while each speaker takes up in turn the position of the subject, this 'polarity does not mean either equality or symmetry: "ego" always has a position of transcendence with regard to *you*' (225). If Benveniste refers here to a plurality of subjects, the '"interior/exterior" opposition' (225) of the 'I' and of the 'you' seems, *qua subjectivity*, inevitably dominated by the first term, the perspective proper to the 'I.'

But such formulations of the dominance of the subject in language with respect to its objects or 'complements,' as well as the linguistic concentration on the visible subject in speech, lead to strategies that seek to delineate (albeit in language) the perspectival limit and determination we seem to re-enact with each sentence. Julia Kristeva, for instance, refers to Husserl's term 'thetic' in order to address the notion (implicit in Benveniste's formulation) that the 'I' is produced itself as part of the sentence, together with the 'you' or with the object, by an instance outside language. In Kristeva's reading of

Husserl's judging consciousness, 'the ego as support of the predicative act ... does not operate as the ego-cogito ... rather ... it takes shape within the predicative operation. This operation is *thetic* because it simultaneously posits the thesis (position) of both Being *and* ego' (*Desire in Language* 130). Kristeva's suggestion that '*thesis* [is] above all a thesis of the "I"' (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 36) directs us toward the outside of the thetic act. An error by the translator only points to our almost 'natural' tendency to interpret the possible double genitive – 'thesis of the "I"' – from the ego's point of view. While Kristeva writes, 'Et alors, la question ne doit-elle pas porter sur ce qui produit le "je"' [what produces the 'I'] (*La Révolution du langage poétique* 35), the translation inverts subject and object in the relative clause: 'Therefore, shouldn't the question be what the "I" produces' (36). The continuation of the passage insists precisely on another procedure: 'Far from positing the judging "I" as origin, for us such a question merely places the thetic and the doxic *within the signifying process* that goes beyond them' (36).[4]

While Kristeva proceeds to theorize, from this limit, articulations of the signifying process that are heterogeneous to meaning (the pre-thetic, and what she calls the semiotic chora), I have tried to investigate the movement of the thetic toward its limit from the inside. I have opted for that perspective since I assume that no discursive praxis itself can step outside the horizon that constitutes its limit and reality (at least not without abandoning that minimal denominator of translatability and relational correspondence between different thetic moments that may separate it from schizophrenia). And yet, while this limit cannot be crossed (out) and bridged, it has to be approached and negotiated in each contact with the other. In the pages that follow, I shall use the term 'thetic' (in Kristeva's acceptation) in order to indicate the simultaneous and interdependent production of the 'I' and of the other, as well as the limit and horizon of this process of predication and naming. I have found the term 'heterology' useful in order to refer to textual strategies that (a) question the discursive dominance of the 'I' (i.e., the subject of speech) over its 'complements' or 'objects,' and (b) orient themselves toward that which lies outside the thetic operation – without claiming to determine it.

While the term heterology is directly related to the notion of heterogeneity, its second half refers to a form of logos: speech or thought. The relationship between the two parts of the word, however, allows for different interpretations, and the term has, indeed, recently been used in two different if related ways – the second of which will prove ultimately more important for the perspective chosen in this study. In a first sense, Todorov employs 'heterology,' in his study *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogic Principle*, in order to