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The Community of Others or What is a Humanist Critique of Empire?

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Abstract: The essay argues that the perceived waning of the influence of the Humanities (Literature, Continental Philosophy, Art, and Religion) and their irrelevance to contemporary problems of globalization and environmental issues is due to a limited exploration of the notion of interdisciplinarity. The essay suggests that, insofar as contemporary power relations pose a problem for our conception of human-being, the resources offered by the humanities acquire a renewed value and power for thinking through the era of the anthropocene.

Keywords: humanities relevance; interdisciplinary; literature and philosophy; globalization; empire; other; J.M. Coetzee; The Age of Iron; other community

1. Introduction

What can the humanities offer to the analysis of globalization—margins, financial and political networks, power—that is unique to their own disciplinary possibilities? Wherein lies the specificity of the humanist critique of contemporary imperialism? I raise this question in light of the perceived so-called crisis of relevance faced by the humanities today. Ever since the culture wars of the 1990s died down, the alarm has been sounding about the death of the humanities [1–3], the decline in humanities majors, and the relegation of literature and the English major in particular to the stacks of the expendable. Last October, the NY Times ran an article [4] about the decline of interest in the humanities, and cited Columbia professor Andrew Delbanco as saying “Both inside the humanities and outside, people feel that the intellectual firepower in the universities is in the sciences, that the

important issues that people of all sorts care about, like inequality and climate change, are being addressed not in the English departments.” This might seem odd to those of us who work within what is broadly termed postcolonial studies, who do nothing but discuss the forms and permutations of global inequality, this despite the barrage of criticism we face within and without the humanities for either not being literary enough, or not being stable about geographical and historical borders. Meanwhile, the venerable American Academy of Arts and Sciences has recently issued a report [5] on the Humanities and the Social sciences where they conclude that the top educational priorities must be: increasing “intercultural skills”, language learning, and [deepening] knowledge of other cultures.” Clearly, the call here is for increased multiculturalism, itself a term that can be immune to questions of power and epistemology only at its peril [6]. However, the question remains, what can those of us in the humanities, specifically those of us in postcolonial studies (an academic field largely constituted by humanists) contribute to the debates on contemporary empire or globalization? What are our sources for understanding this term globalization?

I focus here on postcolonial studies within the humanities as it represents a field that, insofar as it performs a persistent interrogation and critique of global relations of power, is essentially interdisciplinary in its mode of analysis. Thus, it deals with the story of Europe’s colonial rule of the global south from the perspective of the colonized, and is therefore necessarily revisionist in its approach to dominant Eurocentric narratives, be they historical, philosophical, political, anthropological, aesthetic, *etc.* Nevertheless, postcolonial studies, is and should be distinguished by its commitment to a relentless self-examination of its own epistemology, while questioning the foundation of any rhetoric of legitimacy and authority.

As a concept or material phenomenon, Globalization has been bequeathed to thought and analysis as a legacy of modern territorial colonialism [7]. We can define globalization as fundamentally a worldwide force of economic-political change that is founded on an ideology of free-market and free-trade neo-liberalism. In other words, empirically speaking, it is the integration (whether even or uneven, equitably or inequitably) of the world’s productive forces into a single system of value generation—a global economy. This economic system has profound political effects insofar as the neo-liberal ideology of the G8 countries with their promotion of free trade oppose the traditional safeguards provided by economically weaker nation states. Thus globalization under the guise of economic development is frequently associated with the erosion and transformation of national sovereignty from a welfare state to what Philip Cerny terms a “quasi enterprise competition state” [8]. In other words, the policy of nation states especially of developing economies increasingly serves the interests of multi-national corporations whose sole mission is the free transfer and accumulation of capital. Consequently, globalization is frequently associated with a transfer of sovereignty from national to transnational institutions and agreements that facilitate units of flow—be they financial, informational, cultural, demographic, and normative—across traditional borders.

2. The Social Science Critique

The most powerful and influential critiques of the globalized political economy, particularly as it affects postcolonial nations have been generated by liberal social scientists challenging the model of development that dominates national economic policy. For instance, Amartya Sen’s criticism of the

emphasis on indices of development (GNP, Per Capita Income) raises the question of freedom and social justice within development discourse by effecting a shift to factors of “human development”, such as life expectancy, literacy and education, enhancement of capabilities, and sustainable growth. In *Development as Freedom* [9], Sen argues for the necessity to treat freedom as the foundation of development as opposed to abstract economic growth. Defining freedom as “the expansion of the ‘capabilities’ of persons to lead the kind of lives they value—and have reason to value” ([9], p. 18), Sen stresses that freedom is always an end in itself, but can nevertheless be broken down into instrumental means such as “different kinds of rights, opportunities, and entitlements [that] contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thus to promoting development” ([9], p. 37). In this view, globalization as a force of development is judged in terms of the freedoms or un-freedoms, the capabilities or the deprivations that it facilitates, thereby generating ever more assertive calls for increased rights and regulations.

For other left of center thinkers, globalization is the source and target of hitherto un-thought forms of grassroots community organizing and political struggle. Thus, for theorists in the humanities, such as Hardt, Negri, Laclau, and Mouffe, the phenomenon of globalization with all its forces of oppression, also generates its own very particularized forms of resistance. Thus we have for the first time in human history a sense of planetary consciousness, environmental awareness that produce grass roots protests the world over against climate change and environmental degradation, and more generally the ability to mobilize across class, race, and national lines against the exploitative forces of multi-national finance capital. For Hardt and Negri, one of the most liberating and exciting aspects of globalization is the production of “immaterial goods and services”. By this they mean the new modalities of production that engage a living being at the level of non-subjective life, a mode of production that enables an unprecedented burgeoning of “ideas, knowledge, forms of communication, and relationships. In such immaterial labor”, they write, “production spills over beyond the bounds of the economy traditionally conceived to engage culture, society, and politics directly. What is produced in this case is not just material goods, but actual social relationships and forms of life” ([10], p. 94). Thus, all those new forms of communication that informational technologies have engendered, such as social networking sites, alternate news and information creation and dissemination, as well as the production of affects—such as those “services with a smile” produced by air stewards, nannies, personal shoppers, *etc.* are all included in the valorization of immaterial production. What these new modalities of production entail, according to Hardt and Negri, is the building up of truly cosmopolitan communities and social relations that have the potential to be progressive and resistant to totalitarian rule and exploitation by capital.

3. Empire and the Humanities

By and large then, the discourse of contemporary imperialism and globalization has largely been defined, defended, and critiqued by social scientists, with post-Marxists and humanists following hard on their heels. While the work done by many post-Marxist intellectuals and others situated in the humanities has not been without impact, my sense is that these critiques are unconcerned with the disciplinary epistemological challenge of what the humanities in their specificity can contribute to the critique of contemporary globalization politics. Do we have anything to say in our own voices or must

we submit to the concepts and discursive limits set by social scientists? In other words, I am wondering with reference to globalization if the humanities, as such, can survive, or stay relevant after their inter-disciplinary engagement with the social sciences. What can our students gain from courses devoted to globalization in literature, religion, or philosophy departments that they could not from the social sciences? How can the humanities contribute to and enrich the discussion of globalization while also nurturing our disciplines in the aftermath of an interdisciplinary encounter? What can we offer as humanists after we have engaged (for engage we must) with the analyses and critiques of social scientists? There is no doubt in my mind that certain humanist scholars (those in postcolonial studies and cultural studies) who began their careers challenging the Eurocentrism of literary and cultural canons by importing political concepts of race, colonialism and imperialism, into literary and cultural analysis, found it incumbent to do interdisciplinary work. Thus many of us in the early 1990s began wandering lightly equipped into departments of sociology, political science, economics, geography and anthropology. The interdisciplinary encounter with historical methods, political science, and critiques of political economy, was not only ineludible, it bore all the exigencies of scholarly necessity. But today in view of the influence of Dependency Theory, World Systems Analysis, Subaltern Studies, Participatory Economics, Critical Geography, *etc.* and the incorporation of critiques of historiography and anthropology, all of which we found necessary, important, and inescapable, are we in a position to turn back to our own disciplines to measure possibilities that lie fallow for the critique of empire? I suggest that as critics of imperialism and colonialism, it is time to redirect our interdisciplinary energies to exchanges within the humanities—literature, philosophy, religion, and the fine arts. For too long now, literature departments have sought to boost their credibility and relevance by aligning themselves with the sciences—biological, cognitive, physical and social.

One of the effects of Empire is the global assault on the humanities. These attacks in the world's market driven culture has caused some deep and fatal cuts to the credibility and teaching of the humanities, and scholars such as Martha Nussbaum, Gerald Graff [11–13] and others have mounted powerful arguments resisting these aggressions. I cannot here review these debates, but as Adam Gopnik [14] points out “defenses and apologies come in two kinds: one insisting that English majors make better people, the other that English majors (or at least humanities majors) make for better societies”. Gopnik's own claim is that “you choose a major, or a life, not because you see its purpose, which tends to shimmer out of sight like an oasis, but because you like its objects”, the objects here being books. Gopnik cites approvingly a professor who claimed to have an “obsessive relation to texts”, which Gopnik interprets as love of books. This is a plausible defense, but it actually runs counter to his concluding statement that “The reason we need the humanities is because we're human. That's enough.” In other words, properly speaking, the distinctiveness of the humanities lies in their being arguably less object-centered than the sciences. No doubt this might be a surprising claim as we are used to thinking of literary artifacts, works of art, or philosophical concepts, as the “things” that we are concerned with. If social scientists take the economy, politics, or society for their objects, we are usually assumed to take works of the imagination, religious, sacred texts, and the processes of reason and speculation themselves as our objects of study. However, at a time of crisis when the need to professionalize our objects is put into question, the truth of our vocation flickers into view. Not utility, not job training, and not even to serve as museum guards of great books and works of art, but the purpose and the spirit of the humanities are devoted to nothing if not to the concept of humanness

itself. For some, this fundamental formulation is interpreted to mean that the disciplines are necessary for the cultivation of humanity. As David Brooks writes “back when the humanities were thriving, the leading figures had a clear definition of their mission and a fervent passion for it. The job of the humanities was to cultivate the human core, the part of a person we might call the spirit, the soul, or, in D.H. Lawrence’s phrase, “the dark vast forest”. Brooks and others like him assume that the humanities hold in their hands a prophylactic against spiritual degradation and inhumanity. They advocate the humanities because it has the power to improve, to cultivate, to refine, and of course what better than Western civilization courses (Homer to Hemmingway) to achieve these lofty aims? Thus stated, we can see immediately the way in which the fractious and wearisome question of canons and identities obtrudes upon us whenever we invest the humanities with the power of secularized religion. Clearly, such defenses based upon the unquestioned preeminence of human beings can do little to secure or advance the cause of the humanities in the face of the contemporary planetary crisis engendered by what ecologists are calling the rise of the “anthropocene” (a term popularized by the scientist Paul Crutzen as referring to the contemporary era when humanity becomes the central and driving force of geological and planetary change.)

Thus, instead of privileging humanity as such, what if (taking a cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s recent essay “Postcolonial Studies and the Challenge of Climate Change” [15]) we were to interpret the notion of the humanities as being devoted to humanness a little differently? What if we shift the emphasis and proffer that it’s not so much the conservation and cultivation of (a self-evident) humanity, to doctor and minister to it that we are in the business, but to aim tirelessly towards a space of clearing, where everything, all presuppositions, all assumptions of value are set aside, where with no objects in hand and no object in sight, we in the humanities can put human-being, here conceived not only as the life that lives in language, but as the life expressed as and through coding and decoding—into question. Here, human-being would be neither an object nor a subject, not *homo sapiens*, a being that knows itself, but a being or life that in discovering the anthropocene enters into an epoch of a new and radical self doubt: the condition of what many call the post-human. Consequently, here in the wake of glimpsing human being as a geological force, to question ourselves would be to question not merely our ways of meaning making—to ask what it means to be a speaking being, a being that acts by and through words. But, it is to inquire into the consequences of our power of making and unmaking planets through information, to inquire into what Gilbert Simondon terms the “technical mentality” [16] and above all to ask once again as if for the first time, what is the place of thinking and affective modalities in a world entirely dominated and ruled by the anthropocene. It is to ask with utmost gravity, urgency, and insistence, in a register divested of the necessity for the conservation of our species not merely what does it mean to be human, but also how to be post-human? How should we live with others that we share this planet with? What is our responsibility to other lives and to the planet?

The relation between these ontological and ethical considerations (with their Heideggerian echoes) to the more overtly practical-political issues of empire, globalization, racism, and power may at first glance seem far-flung. But can we entertain the idea that perhaps it appears distant only due to the influence of the social sciences on our perspective? Can we contend on the contrary that empire, globalization, racism and power provide the occasion to put human-being into question, and that in raising fundamental ontological and ethical questions about being human, we must also, necessarily,

confront the issues of empire in the epoch of the anthropocene? Even more, can we claim that it is only by putting human-being in question, by approaching every scenario of power relations as a question not only of politics but also of ethics, ecology and ontology, that we can grapple with what is essential and true in the scene of empire? Please note, by referring to the ethical and the ontological, I am not alluding to culture, tradition, or heritage, though these are not by any means irrelevant. I mean instead to underline the question of the disjunction between the technical and the affective modalities (traditionally the domain of the humanities)—of technology on one hand and what used to be called essence, beauty and truth on the other.

As you can surmise, I am arguing for more interdisciplinary exchange within the humanities, particularly between literature and philosophy. I suggest that postcolonial critics in the humanities should not shy away from ontological and metaphysical inquiry and that we should turn to more robust engagement with continental and other philosophical traditions rather than with the social sciences. For postcolonial critics, locating ourselves at the cusp between literature and philosophy should be non-negotiable. For no analysis of the relations of power, for that ultimately is what postcolonial studies is all about, can proceed without a self-reflective inquiry into the words and the concepts that drive it. History gives us the facts of empire, but a literature and philosophy together (a *philo-bellelettero-sophia*?) can deliver us to its meaning and its truth.

4. The Ethics and Poetics of the Limit

Given the nexus between human-being and relations of power, I would like to turn now to the residue of that relation: the concept of the Other. The Other has a fairly lengthy genealogy in philosophical discourse referring to the structure of self-consciousness in Hegel, inter-subjectivity in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology and the ethical relation to the wholly other in Levinas. However, of all the various articulations of the concept of the other, the one that became commonplace for critics of imperialism is the one introduced in 1949 by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*: the idea of the other as the opposite of the self, or the norm. Woman as the other of man meant that woman was unequal to man, inferior, deviant, secondary, and deficient. Man was the norm and the standard of humanity against which woman was found lacking. This concept made its way from feminism into postcolonial and critical race studies when the other was also seen as a corollary of power that included the colonized, the non-white, the slave, the stranger, and the poor. In short anyone who did not fit into the standard established by the dominant Western bourgeois culture began to be theorized as the other. Over the years, the place of the other has grown exponentially within postcolonial cultural and gender studies. An ever-expanding cast of others has proliferated, figures such as the aged, the homeless, the disabled, the displaced, the deformed, the animal, the child, the transgendered, and more recently the terrorist, the victim of the terrorist, have begun to populate our classrooms and the pages of our books and journals. This urge to identify the Other concealed in unexpected corners of normative culture has become an unspoken imperative. Thus, the favored terms of analyses and polemic, the terms credited with the greatest legitimacy are marginalization, subversion, resistance, and agency.

Let me be clear, by adopting this Olympian view, I do not mean to trivialize this imperative or suggest that we should overcome it. On the contrary, I suggest that we take the Other very seriously indeed, the Other in all its philosophical and literary uses, and ask ourselves in an open debate why we

persist in detecting the silhouette of the other and identifying the process of othering in even the most commonplace of practices, and above all how we understand or conceive of the future of the other. For instance, should the other be incorporated into the self or the polis, should the margin, as bell hooks suggests, move to the center? A politics of incorporation can be unsatisfactory for those of us who discern the other as a logical residue of any claim to identity. This does not mean that we require a class of people who are exploited or excluded, as the prison system needs its criminals. By this we mean that the other is not and cannot be an identity that can be included, but an element that disrupts the sovereignty, the security, the oneness of identity as such. The philosophy of deconstruction discloses the other as the flaw generated by the norm, the error that haunts the self-same. It is the element that keeps open the closure of terms such as, “us”, “we”, and the “all”. The other is that which persists at the horizon of what is known and knowable, familiar, and homely. It is poised at the limit of being and the living. The Other then is the trace of the promise of death. As the mark of finitude, it is that which challenges and questions the ground beneath our feet. The Other is the very horizon of possibility and ethics as such, whether Ethics is conceived as practical reason (Kant) the attainment of happiness (Aristotle) the imperative of responsibility (Levinas, Patocka), or the thought of community (Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel), ethical thought must begin here where the horizon of humanness ends. By definition then, the Other is whatever hovers at the edge of the human, community, culture, law, and language.

Thus, while ethics can of course deal with the immediate and proximate other, it is the otherness at the horizon of life and perceptible knowing, the figure of radical difference that engages us in an originary way. By this I mean that any rigorous engagement with Otherness will confront us with human-being as an effect and symptom of power—law and language. To open oneself to the Other then is to take a measure of the horizon of our possibility, for it is at the limit of language and community that the question of whether or not to overcome or overstep the horizontal limit, or how precisely to comport oneself and one’s political goals in relation to this limit becomes utterly practical. The Other then is the silent conscience of the community, but can the Other also signal, beckon to a silent community of conscience?

5. The Dis-Membered Community

Community has always been conceived in terms of what is held in common—a common language, common goals, common ethnic origins, or a common institutional affiliation among its members. In short, a community is a unit that works together. It is the site of public transcendence of private particularity into a fraternal union of the like-minded founded on a consensus of goals, values, identities, and procedures. The successful community then counts its members because every member counts. On the other hand, there is something that hovers at the gates of the city, excluded from human community, and it is neither just one nor many. As the unforeseeable and the unknowable, it cannot be counted. The Other then is not simply excluded from human community, but it calls that community into question, and for those who hear that call, it raises the uncanny specter of another community: a community without commonality, fraternity, sameness and union, a community that is non-fraternal, dis-membered, a community of Others. What then is this, (to use the title of Alphonso Lingis’s book) “Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common?” What is a community of others that remains

impervious to institutionalization (as even a hospice or a commune) with its inmates, patients, and members? How should we contemplate such a dis-membered community's relation to law, language, and civil society?

The South African novelist J.M. Coetzee is perhaps the most persistent chronicler of what I am calling here the dis-membered community, or what Blanchot terms as the Unavowable Community. In novels such as *The Age of Iron*, *The Life and Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, *Disgrace*, *etc.*, Coetzee relentlessly probes the futility of community as communion and fusion. Instead, the community that arises in the midst of war and calamity, if it is a community at all, is peopled by those who are not only excluded but are forgotten, uncounted, and dying. Death in Coetzee is not just the physical coming to the end of a life, but an event of inexorable singularity; it is the fact of each person's death as the one event that is truly one's own, an inalienable event that can never be appropriated or mastered, that individualizes the living being. This community in death and of the dying in many of Coetzee's novels, particularly *Michael K* and *Age of Iron* is one that emerges from an ethical relation to finitude—the finitude of law, politics, identity, and even language.

Age of Iron was published in 1990 and set in Cape Town during the period of emergency 1985–1989 when political violence, especially in the black townships gripped the apartheid state of South Africa. More specifically, it can be read as a novelistic response to the notorious episode of the Guguletu Seven—a group of young South Africans from the black township of Guguletu who were systematically framed by the Apartheid government for terrorist activity and brutally killed in a conflagration of violence. The novel is a testimony to the impossibility of witnessing, let alone representing, the dehumanizing violence of the state. The fact that this is an epistolary novel, a mother writing to her daughter in the U.S. who has irrevocably turned her back on South Africa is not insignificant. Mrs. Curren is a retired Classics professor in the terminal stages of cancer, whose letter expects no reply as it is to be mailed only after her death. In fact, it may never reach its destination for it is to be consigned to the care of a vagrant: a dirty, unwashed, and ragged nobody named Vercueil whom she finds drunk and curled up like a pariah dog by the side of her house. Mrs. Curren is made aware of the violence in Guguletu because of Florence (her household help) whose son Bheki is involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. As a moribund intellectual intensely attuned to the political horrors of its times, Mrs. Curren, however, resolutely refuses to validate the dialectics of the struggle. Breaking with all familiar and possible political positions made available by society and the state, the novel through Mrs. Curren sketches instead the contours of what might be called an ethical relation to colonial politics. And this relation, the novel seems to imply must begin with a relation of openness to one's own death. "The news was not good" says Mrs. Curren, "but it was mine, for me, mine only, not to be refused. It was for me to take in my arms and fold to my chest and take home" ([17], p. 4). "The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. To embrace death as my own, mine alone" ([17], p. 6). For Mrs. Curren, who fully assumes her own being-for-death, the truth of the political violence that surrounds her is obscured by the passion of political principles and commitment, a situation that is blindingly clear as a woman who has nothing more to lose. Florence's determined yet proud hands-off attitude towards the violence that she sees her son Bheki and his friends drift towards (beating Vercueil, their self-righteousness, their callousness towards education, parents, elders) her sense that there are no more mothers and fathers, that however cruel the children's behavior they are not responsible for it, that they are good children, leaves Mrs. Curren in utter despair. "And when they

grow up one day, do you think the cruelty will leave them What love will they be capable of?” she asks. “Children of iron”, ([17], p. 50) she thinks. “No mercy.a war without mercy, without limits. A good war to miss” ([17], p. 49). Though she laments the hardening of hearts, the destruction of childhood and the spirit of self-reflection, Mrs. Curren is far from being apathetic or worse neutral about the political situation. At every point in her narrative, her sense of political impotence and helplessness ironically births the ethics of her relationships. Her despair about what she calls “the age of iron” only deepens when in helping Florence look for Bheki she witnesses in the middle of the night the burning down of a black township. Wracked with pain and soaking wet in the rain, and wanting to go home, she is challenged by Florence’s brother Mr. Thabane to say what she thinks of the “crime” being committed. Feebly, she answers:

“There are terrible things going on here. But what I think of them I must say in my own way.”

“Then let us hear what you have to say! We are listening! We are waiting!” He raised his hands for silence. The crowd murmured approval.

“These are terrible sights”, I repeated, faltering. “They are to be condemned. But I cannot denounce them in other people’s words. I must find my own words, from myself. Otherwise it is not the truth. That is all I can say now.”

“This woman talks shit”, said a man in the crowd. He looked around. “Shit”, he said. No one contradicted him. Already some were drifting away.

“Yes”, I said, speaking directly to him. “You are right, what you say is true.”

He gave me a look as if I were mad.

“But what do you expect?” I went on. “To speak of this”—I waved a hand over the bush, the smoke, the filth littering the path—“you would need the tongue of a god”.

“Shit”, he said again, challenging me ([17], pp. 98–99).

Mrs. Curren’s impotence then is not just due to the fact that she is old, that she has no one, and is dying of cancer—alone. Her despair arises from the calcification of language itself, from having no words that are fresh, un-laden by platitude and cliché. To speak the truth of the violence, one would have to reinvent language itself. Thus what is demanded of her now is to divest herself of everything that this corrupt and perverse society deems a prerequisite in order to speak and be heard. Later, after the police raid of her home that kills Bheki’s friend, Mrs. Curren leaves her tainted home to go sleep under the bridge with the bums, the hobos and the homeless. “I was beginning to feel the indifferent peace of an old animal that, sensing its time is near, creeps, cold and sluggish, into the hole in the ground where everything will contract to the slow thudding of the heart.” ([17], p. 158). In this extraordinary scene, Mrs. Curren surrenders every ounce of her claim to being a citizen of South Africa, a rational subject, or even a human being. And the fact that she is dying, has freed her to divest herself of everything—not only her property, and her privacy, but the trappings of personal dignity. Urinating on herself, having her mouth prodded by urchin boys looking for gold teeth, wrapped in a pink quilt, with mad flying hair, old Mrs. Curren has crossed the limits of the polis, of language, and

being human. And to welcome her into this nether-other-world come Vercueil and his dog. Vercueil is her Charon, the ferryman who transports dead souls across the river Styx to Hades. Fittingly, the only thing we know about this “rubbish person” (as Florence calls him) is that he was for a brief time a mariner, and the only memory he shares is that he once found a dead man—a stowaway in a crate he was unloading ([17], p. 187). Mrs. Curren is explicit about her recognition of Vercueil as Charon. She says: “All these days you have known me, I have been standing on the riverbank awaiting my turn. I am waiting for someone to show me the way across. Every minute of every day I am here, waiting.” ([17], p. 179).

What is Mrs. Curren waiting for? Or more precisely, what is the meaning of waiting in a time of war and violence? Perhaps, this waiting in a sense is the essence of Mrs. Curren’s ethics. The fact that this is a first person narrative means that nothing beyond the waiting can be represented. As a speaking being she can only wait. In an extraordinary fictional dialogue that Heidegger wrote in 1945 (and only recently published and translated) [18] he stages a conversation between an old man and a young man at a Prisoner of War camp in Russia. Heidegger’s own sons were missing in Russia at this time. The young man speaks of a great sense of healing that arrives from the forest by the camp. Speaking of the violence and the devastation of the war, they discover that the essence of evil is not simply morality—right and wrong, but it is rather “the devastation of the earth and the annihilation of the human essence” ([18], p. 133) manifested in the “furiousness” and “malice of insurgency”. This evil, this devastation means “that everything—the world, the human, and the earth—will be transformed into a desert” ([18], p. 136). And this devastation, they insist, prevails even “where country and people have not been affected by the destruction of the war” ([18], p. 139). Abandoned by being, the human fills his/her daily routine only with what is necessary expunging all that is unnecessary. Thus, for the two veterans of war the difficulty lies in offering “advice for the long meditation which is required to become familiar with the devastation as an event that prevails outside of human guilt and atonement” ([18], p. 140). What human-being must do then is wait, simply wait. And this waiting is not precisely a waiting for death as death already waits on us (as Vercueil does on Mrs. Curren) but it is the waiting that answers pure waiting. “Waiting” the young man says is “letting come”. ([18], p. 141). The discourse between the two then explores the pure waiting that is implicit in thinking, and thinking as being related to the logos, which gathers towards the all unifying One ([18], p. 146). And this gathering the young man shows is intimately bound to human-being as the being who is mortal, the being upon whom death waits. Human-being then, is in essence a “being for death”. And to come into an authentic relation with this essence is to become one who waits not for someone or something but purely on a letting come of the coming. In this community of those who wait as a letting come, for community is what is implied here, the young man says:

[T]he waiting people would even have to be entirely unusable to others, because of course what always only just waits, and constantly waits moreover on the coming, yields nothing tangible that could be of use for progress and raising the achievement curve, the brisk pace of business.” Older man: and this entirely unusable people would have to become the most elderly people, so that no one concerns himself with it and no one makes use of—and so utilizes and prematurely uses up—its strange doing, which is a letting [be].” ([17], p. 152).

The temptation of nihilism in the scene of devastation is strong as Mrs. Curren testifies when she imagines driving with her car on fire on government avenue, coming to rest “before the house of shame, burning and melting” ([17], p. 113). But the time for grand gestures is past. As her narrative narrows to the last pages, she prefers now to be taken down to the rubbish dump and disposed off ([17], p. 191). In the end, what is disclosed to her is not the impossibility of death, but a strange community: a community of the waiting, the unusable, the unnecessary—the rubbish people. Vercueil and Mrs. Curren have fallen under each other’s care. It is not love, it is not a mutual recognition, it is not a union of the same, for Vercueil is completely empty inside and out, besides as Mrs. Curren recognizes, he knows as little about love and the body, as he does about death. He is a man with no past and no future, a man who doesn’t count in the present. Dry as dust, he embraces her with a “mighty force”. In letting come, and reaching as Heidegger says to a “still concealed dimension of time” she arrives at the releasement [*Gelassenheit*] that reveals what it is to let things return to themselves: to let things be, to be free. Freedom then is not the exercise of the will, rather “Freedom rests in being able to let [*lassenkönnen*], not in ordering and dominating” ([18], p. 149). The thought of the community of others can lead us, if we learn to wait, to think the essence of freedom, not simply freedom from empire, or from exploitation and violence, but the pure freedom to which community comes.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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