

Secretaries of the Invisible

Post-imperial Literature – *Translatio Imperii* in Kafka and Coetzee.

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“There is nothing absolutely dead; every meaning
will experience the holiday of its rebirth”

Mikhail Bakhtin

“Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen”

Paul Celan

Vladimir Biti presents his observations and interpretations along two main aspects: the first is historical, and the second is what might be called “ethical”. The notion and practice of translation, which is to be understood on a range of levels, already foreshadowed by the title of the book, is a central idea that brings together the writings of Franz Kafka and J. M. Coetzee, as well as some of the relevant insights of major theorists whose ideas are recurrent in the book.

In Biti’s view, the distinctive feature of the post-imperial literature discussed in this book is the continuous withdrawal of narrative authority, which entails “an elusive and shifting, ‘translational’ configuration of their fictional worlds” (p. 2). In the background of his analyses, the author seeks to shed light on a specific geopolitical situation and system of relations, the consequences of which can be observed and experienced not only in the areas affected by colonialism but also in our immediate East-Central European regions.

The process of imperial reorganization, defined as a precondition for the formation of the Central and Eastern European nation-states, is paralleled with the development of postcolonial conditions after the Second World War, thus making it possible to coherently treat discourses, whose theoretical and conceptual framework is difficult to approach in historiography alone. The work of Kafka and Coetzee and their literary “alliance”—which represents a distinct poetic and ethical

engagement—is a crucial contribution to this exploratory work. The power and infrastructural reorganization of the Central European empires, with the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in the foreground, is responsible for the development of marginalized communities and cultural conditions whose “excluded dimension” opens up the possibility of mutual (self-)understanding with the peripheral zones of the societies that suffered the years of colonialism. This relationship, however, is recognizable not only in structural analogies but also in the literary attitudes and ethical commitments that both Kafka and Coetzee employ to represent individuals and groups pushed into zones of exclusion. The authors, whose work can also be understood in terms of “minor literature” (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), thus make the traumatic circumstances and consequences of the formation of nation-states accessible to the participants involved, drawing on the historical parallels referred to.

Readings of novels and short fiction by Coetzee and Kafka, not least *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, are followed by insights from thinkers, such as Walter Benjamin, Homi Bhabha, Maurice Blanchot, and Michel Foucault. But equally recurrent references are based on Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben.

The introductory chapter alone would be convincing and sufficiently careful in outlining the author’s main lines of thinking. Yet, the thoroughness of the volume, its meticulousness, dynamism, and attunement, which sheds light on the ethical dilemmas of the responsibility of literary representation (in both senses), calls for a much broader and more heterogeneous approach. Broad, in that it works with concepts that are, by their very nature, complex and difficult to grasp (and not least problematic, if we take the notion of ethics, for example), and heterogeneous, in that it approaches these concepts in a way that respects their differences. One of the strengths of the book lies in the fact that it does not approach the “zone of indistinction,” the phenomenon of marginalization, or differentiation in general, based on ready-made definitions—which would undoubtedly only postpone the awareness and ethical recognition of these phenomena—but on the accounts and theoretical reflections of authors who are themselves “victims” (and, one might add, “actors”) of various acts of differentiation.

This dichotomy, or more precisely the inseparable position of complicity and victimhood, is analyzed by Biti in Kafka’s novel *The Trial* and later in Coetzee’s writing through the characters of Magistrate and Lurie in *Disgrace*. For both Kafka and Coetzee, the ethical operation of authorial responsibility is realized in dismantling their authority, or at least in its continual shifting and displacement. The commitment to the “zones of indistinction” of subjects and contexts displaced by the dominant discourses of language and history thus calls for a revision of ethical relations.

It is precisely along this problem that Biti points out that the ethics in question, as it seeks to be free from the exercise of its coercive power, can be no other than a questioning of itself, that is, ethics in this sense is metaethics.

The volume is divided into three main parts, the first providing a theoretical framework and a broader historical context (*Post-imperial Europe: The Revenge of Peripheries*), the second focusing on Kafka's doubling effect and the question of complicity (*Franz Kafka and the Performance of Sacrifice*), while the third takes into account Coetzee's deterritorializing strategies and the possibilities of identification with the dispossessed (*J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Deterritorialization*). The book's *Appendix* explores the dilemmas inherent in the responsibility of authorial and narrative authority, issues of vulnerability and representation, through a review of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*.

The argument of the book can be described as cyclical, but without perceiving this reasoning as repetition or as a return to an original principle of formula (or "law", if you like). The productive force of this cyclicity is ensured by the functioning of *translatio imperii* and Bhabha's "subversive mimicry" on the one hand, and by the hybrid and complementary juxtaposition of the other-orientedness of the thinkers invoked (their kinship and their prolific differences) on the other. In this sense, the inherent conflict within the idea of revolution discussed in the context of the French Revolution (whether the phenomenon of recurrent revolution is taken as evidence of the indissolubility of the master-slave relationship, or the renewable quality of the "residue" produced in the cycle is taken as evidence of the success of the revolution) can be applied to the organizing principle of the book.

The stakes of the book and the accounts collected in it lie somewhere in this conflict: are the apparent similarities projected here, and the necessary differences of their background, the dismantlers of a potential interconnection, or the necessary basis for one?

Vladimir Biti's book is itself a perceptible effort to challenge the exclusionary mechanism of language and power. This approach can only be faithful to its ethical commitment if it does not elevate the latter to an agenda: if it does not seek to systematize the spheres and possibilities it seeks to "redeem," i.e., the entities that are driven into a zone of indistinction. This kind of engagement also requires a certain deconstructive attitude, whereby the author highlights the potentially self-contradictory nature of the text/thought under discussion. Moreover, one of the common features of the ethical affinities presented here is precisely their willingness to withdraw their authorial power. To this extent, it can be said that neither Kafka nor Coetzee would be caught unprepared by the disclosure of their inner conflicts; moreover, Biti focuses precisely on the voluntary foregrounding of these conflicts as a component of their ethical involvement.

The challenge is to revive and thus in a sense “redeem,” through literary representation and interpretive activity, the exiled *potentiality* of phenomena rendered “untranslatable” by various agential and realized systems (without elevating our *actuality* to the status of redeemers in this attempt).

The first part (*Post-imperial Europe: The Revenge of Peripheries*) addresses the challenge of translation as cultural mediation, revisiting the concepts of Walter Benjamin and Homi Bhabha, and later the ideas of Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault. The first chapter (*Post-imperial Europe: The Return of the Indistinct*) explores the unfolding of the distinctive economy of post-Versailles Europe. The achievements of modernity (communication, transport, and trade infrastructures) introduced in the context of the former imperialism, aimed at strengthening control over the peripheries, set in motion a process that, after the break-up of empires, led to even greater inequalities and migrations. In the meantime, those who suffered the restructuring, the subjects of the newly forming nation-states, inadvertently became open to the realities of their neighboring societies. In Biti’s interpretation, this mutual openness takes on its significance in the form of a “transborder community” open to imagination and possibilities.

“Nonetheless, such subterranean discrimination paved the way for the *emancipating aspect* of imperial modernization. It involuntarily provided the common background against which the provinces could learn their differences and homogenize themselves (Evans, 2006; Cornwall 2006: 174–175). Through traumatic migrations that were induced by this modernization, they got the opportunity to make acquaintances with many other provinces that were hitherto barely known to them.” (p. 33)

The chapter describes several forms of so-called “subversive mimicry” by which the subjects of imperial rule turned the possibilities and means of modernity to their advantage, enabling the emergence of various groups of resistance in the subsequent post-imperial environment. This kind of transnational resistance, however, continued to exist in the indistinct zone of repressed possibilities of the newly forming nation-states. In this sense of *translatio imperii*, the consolidation of homogenizing nationhood creates a new zone of excluded meanings and groups, banished from ‘reality,’ similarly to the former ruling imperial condition. Biti later expounds on the inherent repression within the “universal human” ethos of the Enlightenment project, which is unable to resolve its (own) “otherness” or “animality” within its established system. The author identifies the process of understanding the other as the “infinite task” of exogamous European self-understanding, which already points beyond the bonds of ancestry. He describes the present mission of so-called self-de-identification along the lines of Zygmunt Bauman as follows:

“[U]nlike other cultures that are unaware of being distinct because they are unrelated to the others, European culture ‘feeds on questioning the order of things—and on questioning the fashion of questioning it.’ (Bauman 2004: 12) This ultimately turns it into an infinite task of a consistent self-dispossession.” (p. 40)

In the case of both East-Central European post-imperialism and the postcolonial environment, understanding relations can only be achieved through a process of reviving the indistinct, by delineating the untranslatable “residue”. Moving on to the second chapter (*Translating the Untranslatable: Walter Benjamin and Homi Bhabha*), it is not surprising that the author turns to the translation theories of Homi Bhabha and Walter Benjamin to understand the cultural problematics depicted. The notion of the untranslatable becomes a means of transmitting and preserving displaced meanings and possibilities:

“The untranslatable is the element that offers resistance to the translational mechanisms of victorious history, which promotes Bhabha’s turn to Benjamin as an example of how his ‘insurgent intersubjectivity’ (Bhabha 1994: 230) comes into being.” (p. 44)

At the same time, through the untranslatable, that which is interpreted as being denied by the established order is also associated with the “homelessness” of dispersed Jews, as well as with the subjects of oppression of other historical minorities and subalterns. By this productive association, Benjamin’s notion of untranslatability implies insights in the subsequent part of the book that initiate a dialogue of observations from the previously mentioned thinkers.

The concluding chapter of the first part (*The Ethical Appeal of the Indifferent: Maurice Blanchot and Michel Foucault*) begins with the internal conflict of the concept of revolution noted above followed by an introduction of Blanchot’s conception of writing:

“Blanchot interprets *écriture* as an amorphous and indistinct practice of ‘always going beyond what it seems to contain and affirming nothing but its own outside’ (1993: 259); faceless as it is, it takes place ‘beyond the reach of the one who says it as much as of the one who hears it.’ “ (1993: 212) (p. 61)

What is exiled as something “external” to a given order is traumatized, but later returns as a phenomenon subversive of the institutions of distinction. In Blanchot’s approach, literary representation, if seeking to resist the involuntary elimination of what it represents, must obey the compulsion to speak: “As soon as something is said, something else needs to be said. Then something different must again be said to

resist the tendency of all that has just been said to become definitive [...] There's no rest" (p. 63)—Biti quotes from the Blanchot's book *The Work of Fire*. Foucault's reading of Blanchot reinforces the idea of literature as the disappearance of the speaking subject, which in Biti's thinking presupposes an operation that is essential for the ethical representation of things and beings that rest in the zone of the "disregarded indifferent." At the same time, he also draws attention to the fact that the appeal of indifference seeks to annihilate the human subject in a kind of death embrace, in so far as it displaces the individual, in Emmanuel Lévinas's words, from his or her abode. In the closing part of the chapter, Lacan's notion of the "real" is introduced. The adoption of this notion is a somewhat problematic aspect of Biti's book in that he tends to use it as the broadest category of the zone of indifference in his further argument. Yet, as the historical cases of *translatio imperii* as a starting point show, excluded "realities" and possibilities are not only given in their (real) existence prior to symbolization. Apart from this, the fertile analogy with the logic of Lacan's conceptual framework provides a viable link between the ideas of the authors involved.

While in the case of a reigning regime, the institutionalized order, the beneficiaries of the center and their hierarchy, the "other" of power (subaltern) seems to be easily identifiable, in the intertwined system of language, literary representation, and discourse, the limits of the victimhood of the displaced other are more difficult to discern. This book is concerned with a conception and mode of literary operation that is prepared to explicitly negotiate and expose its own complicity in the mutual trauma of distinction and the return of the indistinct.

The second part of the volume reviews Kafka's deterritorializing practices. Subsequent chapters of the book discuss the functioning of the new infrastructure of power and the literary (and philosophical) recovery of the dispossessed, and the discovery of banished possibilities. The interpretative sections are based mainly on Kafka's novel *The Trial* and his parable *At the Construction of the Great Wall of China*. The latter is a kind of encapsulation of the *translatio imperii* process.

"Beings that are put under the heavy pressure of logical facts try to exempt themselves from the territory of reality as delimited by them into the deterritorialized area of life that reveals this territory's arbitrariness. It is the exploration of this limitless, spectral, and indistinct area, which Wittgenstein envisions for philosophy and literature, and with which Blanchot associates his idea of literature, in particular Kafka's." (p. 73)

In this reading, any interpretation that is reduced to an actualizing truth threatens the silence Blanchot attributes to Kafka's literature. An important observation of Biti's is related to this, namely that Blanchot and Benjamin outlined the idea of "the death of the author" much earlier than Barthes. Amid radical homelessness, Kafka's

literary strategy is to deterritorialize his own authorial self. At the same time, this dispossession is also a strategy to emancipate similarly fated subjects. In the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the transformative potential of art and philosophy, in contrast to the relative deterritorialization (driven by the expansion of modernity and capitalism), brings the “world’s castrated possibilities” back into play in the process of absolute deterritorialization.

By now, the pattern of Vladimir Biti’s work seems relatively tractable. The juxtaposition of different conceptual systems brings into play complementary vectors that make visible an unspoken zone of negative ethical engagement while maintaining its ever-shifting, centerless reality. This commitment is expressed in terms of an immanence that is fatal to law and thus to transcendence, yet not limited to this immanence. Biti draws on Giorgio Agamben’s observation when he points out that Deleuze’s “immanence” (the zone of indistinction) is not essentially fixed but changing, and in this sense also has the quality of transcendence:

“Deleuze derives immanence not so much from *manere* (to remain [within the same] but from *manare* (to flow out or to spring forth [into something else]).” (p. 78)

Following Kafka, the gesture of the abolition of authority returns as a significant process and problem in the work of John Maxwell Coetzee. What makes this authorial auto-deterritorialization not only a mere writer phenomenon but also a problem and (thus an object of criticism) is the recognition that “There is no representation of victims that, in its turn, does not repeat victimization” (p. 132). It is this insight that may have guided Biti to incorporate his experience of Ian McEwan’s writings into the horizon of his present book: “This is the growing complication of the modern condition, the expanding circle of moral sympathy [...] The trick, as always, the key to human success and domination, is to be selective in your mercies.”— Biti quotes from McEwan. The problem of authorial complicity dominates the second half of this volume. A recurring awareness of this inescapable complicity permeates the memorable characters of the Coetzee novels under review: the magistrate (*Waiting for the Barbarians*), David Lurie (*Disgrace*), and the authorial double and title character of *Elizabeth Costello*. According to Biti, this process is also visible in the way the author evenly distributes aspects of his own identity among the characters in the works.

The third part of the book (*J. M. Coetzee and the Politics of Deterritorialization*) consists of a dissection of these three novels by Coetzee, which extends the heritage of Kafka. Biti connects Kafka’s oeuvre to Coetzee’s notions of autobiography and confession through the concepts of hesitation and postponement: just as Kafka’s “truth” can only be expressed in this hesitation before this truth, so Coetzee’s confession can

be outlined in the dichotomy between disclosure and concealment. In this sense, the self and the other, constantly renewed in its porosity, are not mutually exclusive, but are, in the sense of dialogue, mutually presupposed:

“This is what the *translatio imperii* eventually amounts to: the disquieting revival of the ‘excommunicated.’” (p. 148)

In Vladimir Biti’s argument, as writers who are particularly sensitive to the “residue” of history and the ways of being on the periphery because of their origins, Coetzee and Kafka—through the “wise fool” characters and narrative authorities—mobilize the identity technology of empowerment through humiliation. This kind of attitude reflects Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s conception of the poet as a kind of martyr-redeemer who brings to life unrealized possibilities. At the same time, in Coetzee’s secular theory of redemption, the logic of violence inherited from the South African mode of *translatio imperii* (which feeds on the blaming of others) is transformed into violence against his authorial agencies. Coetzee’s narrative authority thus

“[i]ntroduces itself merely through various doppelgangers and their territories, it persistently withdraws from them into the non-position of their excluded enabling domain. It humiliates itself by turning itself into an unprotected leftover of their identities, or a subhuman ‘floating signifier’—in order to finally elevate itself into an all-embracing agency of their protection, or a superhuman ‘floating signifier’” (p. 157).

It is important to note that Coetzee depicts not only “insignificant” persons and animals but also spaces relegated to the peripheral zone of possibility, in which the frontier and its deterritorializing workings play a prominent role. In approaching these spaces and their inhabitants, Biti employs the concepts of in-betweenness and hybridity familiar from Walter Benjamin and Homi Bhabha. The primary means of engaging with the outcast is the so-called “sympathetic imagination,” which offers an alternative to the hegemony of reason.

The answer to the question of why Biti finds Lacan’s notion of the “real” adequate to characterize the dominant organizing principle of Coetzee’s writing is perhaps that of the subversive perspectives validating the world of the exiled from reality in a continuous shift in opposition to the sovereign’s single truth. Incidentally, Biti himself uses a similar procedure: none of the ideas he evokes is either consolidated or ordered in a subordinate/superior relationship to one another: none can designate, utilizing arbitrary and hegemonic taxonomies, categories with which to “grasp” and thus threaten to eradicate that whose existence he seeks to draw attention to. Neither of the concepts presented here is “truer” than the other; nor does their truth derive from their combined persuasive power but from their specific negative capacity to retreat from becoming “the law.”

The book's *Appendix* draws together Biti's findings by discussing Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*. In the constellation of the book analyzed, the traumatic deterritorialization, the loss of the world previously possessed in its familiarity, allows for a glimpse of the otherness of the other/subaltern and, with it, the possibility of an ethical engagement in responsibility. In this sense, it is in the notion of defenselessness that post-imperial literature culminates. Here, Biti's reading points with particular sensitivity to a condition in which the experience of defenselessness is not simply the result of the omission of an act, not just the denial of care, but the failure to recognize the quality and mode of being of defenselessness itself. The author turns to Derrida's notions of hospitality and homelessness and argues for—along the radically undecidable meaning of the literary text—our responsibility towards alterity outside our own world:

“Next to the immediate *political* responsibility toward others inside my given world there is thus this infinite *ethical* responsibility toward the evasive and powerfully resonant alterity outside my world.” (p. 222)

Biti highlights the difficulties of disempowering our own world in McEwan's book, i.e., the challenges of confronting the dispossessing truth and our vulnerability, as well as the possibility of refusing to face it. By exposing this self-deceptive literary practice, the novel points to the necessity of revealing the voices and fates that were denied by history. In the search for exiled truth, we must resort to the betrayal of our world order, Biti suggests. At the same time, the author of this volume argues, this ethically legitimized betrayal remains somewhat unreflected, suggesting (recurringly in his book) that the literary projection under scrutiny has failed to undo the logic of imperialism—not entirely surprisingly, one might add. In other words, it fails to suspend the presence of a post-imperialist and postcolonial “guilt,” which is kept alive, as in the case of Kafka and Coetzee, by the inseparability of victimhood and complicity.

Once again, the central question of Biti's book is therefore: can these literary and ethical strategies resist becoming an enforcing law in themselves? Is it possible to bypass the asymmetry of power? The key lies somewhere in a feeling of shame for being an outcast. But without this shame, can adequate ethical compassion be exercised?

Although Vladimir Biti's conclusion somewhat retains the pessimism that the ethical reconfigurations of literature indicated here preserve authorial agency, it is in this irresolvable conflict that he sees the distinctive feature of post-imperial literature.

Most thinkers represented in this book are natives of some peripheral or marginalized community of history, and Biti carefully weaves their context into his

work. A spontaneous identification with the excluded is a noticeable feature of these authors. Quoting Kafka at one point, Biti demonstrates that the original sin is the tendency to victimhood itself, which can later turn into blaming others, as Coetzee reminds us. The impossibility of justly applying and mastering the universal Kantian ethic is revealed in how the violence of the agent who possesses and seeks to extend this ethic is transformed into the subaltern's violence against oneself. This insight calls into question both the emergence and the communicability of a coherent ethical attitude: “[O]ne cannot expect moral behavior of subalterns whose life is irreparably damaged by their societies’ power distribution.”—writes Biti (p. 134). The authorial strategy and image of post-imperial literature are therefore characterized by a withdrawing and constantly shifting defenselessness.

