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Intersubjective Exorcism and Giving Face to the Dead

Péter Nádas's *Encounter* as Reverse Prosopopeia

Találkozás (*Encounter*, 1979), Péter Nádas's two-character chamber play, displays a complex network of intersubjective relations. Refusing the disjunctivity and exclusivity of their worlds, whereby no common ground would be possible, the characters opt for shared worlds that allow the meeting of characters. By both recognizing and being recognized by the Other, they not only critique the normative script but attain self-transformation. Moreover, since the intertextual embeddings of the drama reveal earlier encounters, the meeting of the woman with the son of her dead lover will bring about other meetings: the son's with his dead father and the woman's with her dead lover. Relational events are multiplied, allowing for this particular intersubjective nexus to act as an echo chamber for other intersubjective recognitions and encounters, and expanding the revelatory meeting of the two into an uneasy triangle of acceptance between all characters, alive and dead. Because of a life turning intercorporeal experience, during which the woman gives the Young Man a ceremonial washing, as if of the dead, she performs a reverse prosopopeia, giving face to the dead lover who had lost his face both physically and metaphorically. Now the Young Man can move on with his life and the woman can die in peace.

This is the drama I will read in my essay, grounding my discussion in intersubjective theory. To set the stage for the critical reading, in the first half of the essay I will provide a historical overview of the relevant theoretical claims which will frame my analysis of the play. I have no ambition to give an exhaustive overview, rather one that introduces the claims that will provide the theoretical apparatus for my interpretation.

As the by-product of subjectivity theories, the concept of intersubjectivity was introduced in Husserl's 1929 Sorbonne lectures, later published as *Cartesian Meditations*.¹ Here Husserl claims that the recognition of other subjectivities provides the grounds for all ethical relations. We can only experience the world objectively if we also realize that others experience it differently, and if we are capable of transgressing the particularity of our perspective. Otherwise we do not perceive the Other as subject but only as object, the object of our perception.

1. Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* [1960], trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982).

In his essay *I and Thou*, Martin Buber describes a “twofold attitude” of man to the world: the *I-It* and the *I-Thou* relation; here the *I-It* relation does not involve “the whole being,” but the *I-Thou* relation does.² While the former sees the Other as object, the latter experiences the Other as consciousness and subject. Buber insists on the reciprocity of this relationship; moreover, it is by this recognition of the Other that the subject comes about: “Through the *Thou* a man becomes *I*.”³

Theories of recognition emphasize the intimate connection between recognition and self-recognition, or recognition and self-consciousness. The self cannot recognize itself without recognizing the Other. Perception, Jenny Slatman claims, is always linked to a particular horizon entailing a particular perspective. But relations can only come about if the horizons meet: if they share a world.⁴ Nick Crossley also identifies the recognition of other consciousnesses as the precondition of self-awareness, self-consciousness. Consciousness, he insists, must decenter itself, “identifying and acknowledging its own particularity as a perspective upon the world amongst other perspectives.”⁵

The self is forged out of dialogical events—both in terms of social and linguistic dialogues, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Social dialogue stems from perception. Only perception triggered by the meeting of two sets of eyes, two gazes, can set off a communication process to culminate in knowing: when I “think” the Other and understand him too. This experience of perception means, he claims, that it brings back the moment when things, truths and good come to be constituted for us, and that this experience provides us with a nascent logos.⁶

Linguistic dialogue also plays a crucial role for Merleau-Ponty. For it is language that forms the “common ground” between the self and the Other in the “experience of dialogue”; it is language that makes up the “common world,” where “our perspectives merge into each other.”⁷ And although I may never be able to fully understand the Other’s perspective, we can construct a common ground in which to communicate. This linguistic common ground emerges out of a pact, Merleau-Ponty insists, as the “interworld” that is the project of both participating parties.⁸

2. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner, 1958), p. 3.

3. Buber, p. 28.

4. Jenny Slatman, “A Strange Hand: On Self-Recognition and Recognition of Another,” *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 8 (2009) 321–342, p. 329.

5. Nick Crossley, *Intersubjectivity—The Fabric of Social Becoming* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), p. 17.

6. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le primat de la perception et ses conséquences philosophiques; précédé de Projet de travail sur la nature de la perception et La nature de la perception* (Paris: Cynara, 1989), p. 67.

7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* [1962], trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 354.

8. Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 357.

This linguistic common ground serves as the repository of cultural scripts. Erving Goffman writes about “abstract standards” or “abstract stereotyped expectations” that the individual learns so that he or she would know what “officially accredited values of the society” to appropriate during the social performances or presentations of the self.⁹ While Goffman defines the self as the “*product* of a scene that comes off,”¹⁰ he also allows for a discursive common ground collecting the social scripts that regulate the dramatic staging of the self.

Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin offer a different perspective on relational events. Writing about “the relational construction of the self,” Chodorow ties the “search for meaningful subjectivity” to the topic of intersubjectivity.¹¹ Refuting the Freudian ideal of individuality defined by separation, Chodorow emphasizes the conceptualization of “the self as inexorably social and intrinsically connected.”¹² While Freud’s model excludes the role of others in the construction of the self, object-relations theory “directs attention to the interrelations of individuality and collectivity or community.”¹³ Benjamin also emphasizes that the traditional psychoanalytic model, valorizing separation and differentiation, is helpful in interpreting relationships of domination only where the separating party realizes his domination over the person he separated from. “The problem of domination begins with the denial of dependency,” she writes.¹⁴ This concept of the subject shows a fundamental difference from that of critical feminist psychoanalytical theory, which posits a concept of individualism that balances separation and connectedness, agency and relatedness.¹⁵ For the intersubjective mode, Benjamin asserts, “assumes the paradox that in being with the Other, I may experience the most profound sense of self.”¹⁶ Breaking with “the logic of only one subject,”¹⁷ Benjamin’s paradigm allows for symmetrical relations between two subjects. According to Benjamin’s “intersubjective view,” “the individual grows in and through the relation-

9. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Doubleday, 1959), pp. 26, 27, 35.

10. Goffman, p. 252.

11. Nancy J. Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 149, 145.

12. Chodorow, p. 158.

13. Chodorow, p. 152.

14. Jessica Benjamin, “Master and Slave—The Fantasy of Erotic Domination,” in *Powers of Desire—The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 280–99, p. 283.

15. Jessica Benjamin, “A Desire of One’s Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space,” in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 78–101, p. 82.

16. Benjamin, “A Desire of One’s Own,” p. 92.

17. Jessica Benjamin, *Shadow of the Other—Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 42.

ship to other subjects”; for “the Other whom the self meets is also a self, a subject in his or her own right.”¹⁸

The most important pillar of Judith Butler’s intersubjectivity model concerns the relationship of agency and intersubjectivity. Going beyond the tenets of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, Butler posits intersubjectivity as an ethical process, a form of critique and agency, with an illocutionary and perlocutionary force. In her Adorno lectures, she connects linguistic context, narrativity, and dialogical relation with the recognition of the Other. Reinforcing the intersubjective claim concerning the linguistic common ground, Butler also emphasizes that the recognition of the Other and being recognized by the Other can only take place in language.¹⁹ Our narrative self is produced as we talk to someone; the self is born out of a web of relations, when one body talks to another. “My efforts to give an account of myself founder in part because I *address* my account, and in addressing my account I am exposed to you.”²⁰ Subjectivity, then, is always relational: “the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself.”²¹ Recognition and self-recognition are, in short, linguistic or narrative acts.

In her most recent book, Butler reflects upon Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body, emphasizing that it is the experience of tactility—or even the “condition of possibility of touch”—that informs intersubjective relations.²² Reciprocal acts of seeing and being seen provide the first step, followed by bodily impression, the chiasmic and intertwining experience of touching and being touched by an Other.²³ The person now becomes a feeling and acting person, endowed with the faculty of knowing. Not only does bodily impression turn out to be “the condition for cognitive knowing,”²⁴ but “all knowing is sentient” and “sentience is the ground of all knowing.”²⁵

Moving on to Nádás’s *Encounter*,²⁶ I see the play as the splendid dramatization of a web of intersubjective relations and events. As if the author wanted to stage the claims made by theoreticians, acting out ideas on entangled perspectives, relational

18. Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love—Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), pp. 19, 20.

19. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 28.

20. Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 38.

21. Butler, *Giving an Account*, p. 28.

22. Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 36.

23. Butler, *Senses*, pp. 51, 56.

24. Butler, *Senses*, p. 42.

25. Butler, *Senses*, p. 51.

26. The play has been translated into English by Judith Sollosy, but only a part has been published (Péter Nádás, *Encounter*, trans. Judith Sollosy, *Asymptote* [October 2013], <http://www.asymptotejournal.com/drama/peter-nadas-encounter/>). My page numbers refer to the unpublished full text version Ms. Sollosy has graciously shared with me. Citations are given with the kind permission of the translator.

events, recognition, linguistic common ground, the relational construction of the self, critique, the intersubjective account of the self-narrating subject, and the experience of tactility.

Constructed of acts of sense-making, the play's plot hinges on the interlocking encounters, performed or narrated, seen or remembered, unfolding as the interplay of actual and remembered events. On the mimetic level, the actual events take place in communist Hungary, probably in the 1960s, in the tiny flat of Mária, a woman of aristocratic descent now in her fifties. Here she is visited by a Young Man, the son of her long dead lover, and the two engage in a slow and painful conversation.

Their respective memories of the dead lover/father constitute the play's diegetic level, opening the encounter between the two characters into an encounter of three, where the woman and the Young Man use—as if in an exorcism—the Other as a medium to reach the third, the lover/father. As such, time levels, embedded in the subtext of the drama, meet through the telling and the showing, as the figure of the lover/father is invoked, widening the dialogue into an exchange between three.

Beneath the love story and the present encounter, yet another subtext emerges: this is the political subtext, which shows their respective entanglements in power. For Mária's lover was a high-ranking officer in the dreaded ÁVH, Communism's repressive agency (the Hungarian version of the Soviet NKVD), which fact remained unclear to the woman for a while, even though their clandestine (and always wordless) rendezvous took place in barren rooms resembling prison cells. Yet Maria is repeatedly taken by the police (most probably to ÁVH Headquarters, 60 Andrassy Ave), where during the routine interrogations she is once confronted by this most powerful man, who is present during one of her beatings too. Realizing that their rendezvous and the beatings take place in the same establishment, she feels pain, the pain of the building too. After their meeting in the interrogation room, the man changes: his vigour fades, his health deteriorates, he loses weight, and his once dazzling complexion now turns pallid and sallow. Moreover, as his secret liaison with an aristocratic woman was exposed, his position within the organization gets severely damaged. Emotionally crippled and politically ruined, he commits suicide by shooting his revolver into his mouth right in front of the woman. As such, he becomes the victim of the institutional power he served, ending not only his life, but the life of the woman who loved him as well. "He put an end to my life," she recalls (71).—These are, then, the events remembered and recalled during the verbal storytelling of the diegetic level; these are the multiple narrative embeddings that weigh down the play's mimetic structure.

The present encounter of the woman and the son make up the actual events on the stage. The Young Man appearing in the father's body (55) triggers the woman into telling her stories, who takes pleasure in remembering. Yet even she gets lost sometimes in this maze of time levels. "These times get mixed up a little" (49), she says, feeling confused. For it is not just times that get mixed up, it seems, but also encounters, making her uncertain of whether it is the father or the son she is having a rapport with. So

while the father acts as a medium between the woman and the son, allowing the living to meet, the two meetings meet too, allowing, once again, the woman to meet her lover through the son in this echo-chamber of relational events.

The Young Man speaks of his own love mostly, but also about the distant father, of whom he has no memories. But seeing that the woman really listens, he feels encouraged to speak. Being recognized by the Other, and registering this recognition, he takes joy in self-presence. “I’m all here,” he tells the woman (20). This recognition-cum-narration brings relief and a sense of freedom for Mária, who feels liberated from the past (“You can’t imagine how good it is talking about it. Just plain good. I’ll be free at last” [50]), allowing her to reach a form of before-death transcendence. Her forgiveness finds its form in a peculiar ritual as she performs on his body—as if on the father’s body—a ritual washing of the dead. Through this ceremonial act, which she performs slowly and methodically, she brings about the purification of all involved. First, as a woman bathing the dead, she cleanses her dead lover of his sins, political (he is a high-level officer of ÁVH) and ethical-religious (he commits suicide), granting him to rest in peace. Second, she purifies the bond between father and son, allowing the son to relate physically to the dead father, to reach, through his body, a lived recognition with the person he always resisted. The son offers his body as flesh, in the Merleau-Pontyan sense, not a thing but a relation, an element of intercorporeality.²⁷ Third, after appropriating to herself the status of the wife, who in several religions has the right to wash the body of her husband, she prepares her own transition from life to death. Having invoked and granted full forgiveness by narrating and ritual bathing, she drinks her red wine mixed with poisonous white powder she prepared for the occasion. She lets go of life, “disappearing slowly into the white space” (72). She goes gracefully and in peace, ready for the final encounter between the two lovers, now both dead.

Recognitions play a crucial role in the play because they go counter to our presuppositions. The possibility of the characters’ meaningful encounter is denied since the worlds they inhabit do not meet: our expectations tell us that no paths of the countess and the secret police officer can ever cross (outside the interrogating room). The son does not wish to build an emotional rapport with the father, whose sins he wrestles with. And, given the clandestine nature of the relationship, he certainly does not want to relate in any meaningful way to the father’s former lover. And yet, contrary to our expectations and the intentions of the characters, all these encounters take place and gain significance. Those who formerly lived in disjunctive worlds that never meet offer mutual recognition to each other.

The father is addressed by an apostrophe that demands response. We could say, relying on Péter Dávidházi’s discussion of Swift’s grave inscription as a form of invitation

27. “[T]he presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh”; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 127; on intercorporeality see p. 141.

and prosopopeia,²⁸ that Mária invites the lover/father to speak through a reverse prosopopeia: as the living speak to him, he is given a voice to speak to the living. Moreover, following Dávidházi's appropriation of Paul de Man's idea of prosopopeia as de-facement, the woman's invocation is nothing less than a reverse ceremony of giving face. And since the father not only "lost face" after the fact before his son for his political involvement but lost his actual face when he shot himself in the mouth, this giving face occurs in both the metaphorical and the physical sense. As such, the face-giving encounter initiated by Mária will finally grant the dead man the grave inscription he was stripped of.

In this emotional climax of the play, the experience of tactility informs the most intense intersubjective relation. While it is meant to reach out to the dead father, the woman's physical touch transforms the Young Man, as if to confirm Merleau-Ponty's tenet that all knowing is sentient. We can also say, adopting another idea by Dávidházi,²⁹ that by a manumission of sorts, Mária performs the act of vindication, liberating the person who, as the metaphorical slave of his oppressive state apparatus, was stripped of his freedom, both political and emotional. This too is part of the grave inscription she is putting together.

Ultimately it is these recognitions and encounters that make the play of intertwining narratives what the author called, somewhat ironically, "the most beautiful love story in the world" (57).

28. Dávidházi Péter, *Menj, vándor—Swift sírfelirata és a hagyományrétegződés* (Pécs: Pannonia Könyvek, 2009), pp. 26–28.

29. See Dávidházi, p. 95.