

INTRODUCTION

. . . l'autre appelle à venir et cela n'arrive qu'à plusieurs voix.

—Jacques Derrida

I BEGIN with this enigmatic epigraph from Derrida's "Psyché: Invention de l'autre" to signal the way this book circles around at the end to try to explain what Derrida means by saying "the other calls [something] to come and that does not happen except in multiple voices."¹

My title is a reference—to a considerable degree counter, original, spare, strange, ironic—to all those ways the concept of the "other" is used in literary and cultural studies these days. Most such uses mean by "other" the racial, gendered, or ethnic other. The word is used invidiously to name the way a hegemonic culture or gender group views different and subaltern ones as exotic or inferior or just plain alien, and therefore as something it would be a good idea to erase or assimilate by some form, overtly violent or not, of ethnic cleansing. As these essays attempt to make clear, I mean by "others" something different, an element of the "completely other" that inhabits even the most familiar and apparently "same," for example my sense of myself or of my neighbor or my beloved, the "alter ego" within my own home or culture, or my sense of my own culture as such, or my sense of literary and philosophical works that belong to my own culture. Those are, I claim, other to themselves, as well as to "me." They are divided, riven, their unity "blotched out beyond unblotching," as Wallace Stevens puts it in "The Comedian as the Letter C."² A self may find its own depths, for example its unconscious, other to itself. Or another person may be other. Or another nation or ethnic group may be other, though not necessarily in a way that sees them as subaltern. Representations of this otherness have had great diversity. Proust's Marcel in *Remembrance of Things Past* finds Albertine's supposed lesbianism bewilderingly, fascinatingly, other. Jacques Lacan, in a celebrated formula, defined the unconscious as "the discourse of the other." The notion of the other has great importance, though with a different meaning in each case, in influential theorists like Jacques Derrida, Emanuel Lévinas, and Jean-François Lyotard. A full repertoire would be more or less interminable.

In all these diverse and conflicting uses of the word "other," as Lévinas and Derrida have argued,³ two different concepts of otherness govern as

the chief alternatives. On the one hand, the other may be another version of the same, in one way or another assimilable, comprehensible, able to be appropriated and understood. On the other hand, the other may be truly and radically other. In the latter case, the other cannot be turned into some version of the same. It cannot be made transparent to the understanding, thereby dominated and controlled. It remains, whatever effort we make to deal with it, irreducibly other. As Jacques Derrida puts this: “Tout autre est tout autre. (Every other is completely other.)”⁴

Just what it might mean to speak of the “completely other” will become clear through the explorations of it in the various chapters that follow. I have from the beginning of my literary study been haunted by the sense of a radical otherness mediated in multiple ways by literary works. In this book I have attempted to come to terms as directly as possible with that “sense.” This can only be done, I hold, through “readings,” not through abstract or conceptual theorizing. This is because the otherness I seek is not a concept but an elusive feature of specific verbal constructs, different in each case. Though all the authors studied here belong to more or less the same epoch, the period that extends from romanticism to the present day, I am skeptical about attempts to historicize my topic, for example by calling this book “Otherness from Schlegel to Derrida.” Of course changes in class, economic structure, and social context during this period can explain a lot about each of the authors treated here, even about the concept of otherness in each case. Nevertheless I hold that the particular way otherness is present in each cannot be predicted from the biography or social position of the authors in question or even by what those authors read of earlier work. If a given literary work were fully explicable in terms of its context, it would not be worth reading. It is worth reading only if it is in some way inaugural, if it is performative in a certain somewhat anomalous speech act sense, that is, if it brings something wholly new into the world, and if reading it gives the reader access to something he or she can reach in no other way. That “something” I am calling the “others.”

In one way or another the wholly other is ghostly and takes the form of an apparitional promise. The tout autre is something already there, a revenant from some immemorial past, and yet heralds or invokes or demands a future, for example a better democracy or a better interpersonal situation to come, like that vague promise detected hovering in the air by the narrator at the end of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*: “‘No, not yet,’ . . . ‘No, not there.’”⁵ This promise of something better to come is a political or millennial dimension in all these texts that may be a specific historical feature to be associated with revolutionary movements from the end of the eighteenth century on in Europe and the Americas, or even

with Marx's "messianic without messianism," as Derrida has called it in *Specters of Marx*.⁶

This book begins and ends with chapters on three theorists of otherness: Friedrich Schlegel, Paul de Man, and Jacques Derrida. I have read these, however, not as the first or last word on the topic of otherness, but as testimonies, each quite different from the other two, of an experience of otherness that is on the same plane of witnessing as that of my various more strictly literary works and authors. These three chapters could have been augmented by chapters on Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Lévinas, both of whom have been important for my thinking about the wholly other. I have wanted, however, to let the testimony of the literary works speak for themselves and not be overwhelmed by "theory." In any case Blanchot and Lévinas, like de Man and Derrida, would each have had a different story to tell, nor would the four of them add up to a homogenous theory of the "tout autre."

Literary works in the conventional sense have always more interested me than theoretical works as mediations in various ways, different in each case, offering a glimpse of the wholly other. Each chapter on a literary work in this book attempts to approach my topic through the unique way in which the words on the pages as read serve as mediums, in more than one sense of the word, of the wholly other. The inclusion of chapters on two works by the same author, Conrad, is meant to indicate that it is risky or unwise to generalize for a given author. Individual works, even those by the same author, must each be read as a unique testimony to otherness.

I have used the plural in my title, "others," to avoid the implicit personification in speaking in the singular of "the other," as well as to avoid the assumption that the other is, whether a person or not, necessarily and ascertainably unified, single, whole. When one says "the other" and means the "wholly other," it is almost impossible to avoid thinking of that other as a person or quasi-person, perhaps an old man with a long gray beard, Joyce's mad feary father. Why should we beg the question and assume that the other is "one," and a person to boot? To say "others" disrupts that almost irresistible presumption. It makes of the wholly other possibly a multitudinous murmurous cacophony, like Friedrich Schlegel's "chaos," discussed in my first chapter. This murmur "calls to come" in many overlapping and incompatible voices, such as the voices that speak in the various texts I have read in this book. I have read them with all the respect I could muster for the way the "others" call through them, in a unique voice in each case, for something to come.

This book is the product of a long-term project in teaching, lecturing, and writing that has allowed me to think out further through readings of

specific examples the problematics of otherness in literature. Now the disjecta membra of that project are brought together in their completed form, assembled from their dispersal into a more or less shapely whole, just as the parts of Osiris's body were gathered by Isis and reassembled. The wholly other, present everywhere in my various texts and yet absent from any direct encounter, perception, or naming, may be figured as that missing part or member Isis could not find. The other is always there and not there, in a species of ghostly semblance, as my readings will show.

NOTES

1. "Psyché: Invention de l'autre," *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 61. For an English translation, see "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, in *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 65. I have in this case made my own translation. My version is a little more awkward but also a little closer to the somewhat strange syntax of the original.

2. Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954), 28.

3. See Emmanuel Lévinas, "La trace de l'autre," *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* (Sept. 1963): 605–23; "The Trace of the Other," trans. A. Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 345–59; and Derrida, "Psyché," 11–61, esp. 58–61. I have discussed these two concepts of the other in more detail in *Black Holes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

4. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 22. I have changed Dutoit's "completely" to "wholly."

5. E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 362.

6. See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993), 96: "messianique sans messianisme"; *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 181. See also Derrida's commentary on his use of this phrase in Jacques Derrida, "Marx & Sons," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's "Specters of Marx,"* ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1998), 250–51.