Budhi

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS AND CULTURE

Of Sanskrit origin,
the Tagalog word "budhi"
(pronounced "bood-hee")
is a global notion that symbolizes
rather than represents,
at one and the same time,
life, intuition,
understanding, discernment,
conscience, and will.

Budhi (ISSN 0118-5942)

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Budhi is published thrice yearly by the Ateneo de Manila University, PO Box 154, 1099 Manila, Philippines.

RATES Philippines: 250 pesos per issue, 650 pesos per year. Other countries: individuals, US$25 per issue, US$35 a year; institutions US$45 a year. All prices include postage. Make checks payable to Budhi - Ateneo de Manila University; send to Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de ManilaUniversity, PO Box 154, 1099 Manila, Philippines.

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Strangers, Gods and Monsters

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Strangers, gods and monsters are the central characters of our story. Their favourite haunts are those phantasmal boundaries where maps run out, ships slip moorings and navigators click their compasses shut. No-mans-land. Lands-End. Out there, as the story goes, "where the wild things are." These figures of Otherness occupy the frontier zone where reason falters and fantasies flourish.

Strangers, gods and monsters represent experiences of extremity which bring us to the edge. They subvert our established categories and challenge us to think again. And because they threaten the known with the unknown, they are often set apart in fear and trembling. Exiled to hell or heaven; or simply ostracized from the human community into a land of aliens.

The figure of the "stranger"—ranging from the ancient notion of "foreigner" (*xenos*) to the contemporary category of alien invader—frequently operates as a limit-experience for humans trying to identify themselves over and against others. Greeks had their "barbarians," Romans their Etruscans, Europeans their exotic overseas "savages." The western myth of the frontier epitomises this, for example, when Pilgrim encounters Pequot on the shores of Massachusetts and asks, "who is this stranger?" Not realizing, of course, that the native Pequot is asking exactly the same question of the arrivals from Plymouth. Strangers are almost always other to each other.

"Monsters" also signal borderline experiences of uncontainable excess reminding the ego that it is never wholly sovereign. Many great myths and stories bear witness to this. Oedipus and the Sphinx. Theseus and the Minotaur. Job and Leviathan. Saint George and the Dragon. Beowulf and Grendel. Ahab and the Whale. Lucy and the Vampire. Ripley and the Alien. Each monster narrative recalls that the self is never

secure in itself. "There are monsters on the prowl," as Michel Foucault writes, "whose form changes with the history of knowledge."[1] For as our ideas of self-identity alter, so do our ideas of what menaces this identity. Liminal creatures of the unknown shift and slide, change masks. We are of the earth, they whisper, autochthonous. We are carriers of the mark of Cain, hobbled by the Achilles heel of a primal unconscious. Monsters show us that if our aims are celestial, our origins are terrestrial. They ghost the margins of what can be legitimately thought and said. By definition unrecognisable, they defy our accredited norms of identification. Unnatural, transgressive, obscene, contradictory, heterogeneous, mad. Monsters are what keep us awake at night and make us nervous during the day. And even when they claim in *Monsters Inc.* that "they only scare because they care," they still scare.

And what of "gods"? Gods are the names given by most mythologies and religions to those beings whose numinous power and mystery exceed our grasp and bid us kneel and worship. Sometimes they are benign, other times cruel and capricious. But whatever their character, they refuse to be reduced to the bidding of mortals. Transcending the laws of time and space, they readily take on immortal or protean status. Gods' ways are not our ways. They bedazzle and surprise us. It is not ours to reason why. But where monsters arise from underworlds, and strangers intrude from hinterworlds, gods generally reside in otherworlds beyond us. Whether it be Jehovah, Zeus or Jupiter, deities inhabit sublime heights. We look up to them, if we dare look at all.

[1] See our discussion in *On Stories* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001, pp. 119-121, 180-181), of the postmodern theories of monsters advanced by Michel Foucault in "The Order of Discourse"(1981) and by Andrew Gibson in "Narrative and Monstrosity"(1999). See also Claude Lévi-Strauss' fascinating analysis of monster myths as "machines for the suppression of time" (and its contradictions) in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963, especially the chapters entitled "The Structural Study of Myth" and "The Effectiveness of Symbols." The basic thesis here is that monsters serve as hybrid creatures operating in terms of structural binary oppositions between Nature (born from one, from the earth, from chaos) and Culture (born from two, human parents, society). By telling stories about monsters we provide symbolic resolutions to enigmas-those of our origins, time, birth, and death-which cannot be solved at the level of our everyday historical experience. In short, monster myths offer imaginary answers to real problems. They signal the triumph of the structural over the empirical, mind over matter.

Most Strangers, Gods and Monsters—along with various ghosts, phantoms and doubles who bear a family resemblance—are, deep down, tokens of fracture within the human psyche. They speak to us of how we are split between conscious and unconscious, familiar and unfamiliar, same and other. And they remind us that we have a choice: a) to try to understand and accommodate our experience of strangeness, or b) to repudiate it by projecting it exclusively onto outsiders. All too often, humans have chosen the later option allowing paranoid illusions to serve the purpose of making sense of our confused emotions by externalising them into black-and-white scenarios—a strategy found again and again from ancient tales of knights and demons to contemporary war rhetorics of Good versus Evil. When menaced by terror or war, as Anthony Storr observes, "many people resort to the so-called paranoid-schizoid stage of development, in which they will follow a guru-like leader whom they invest with magical powers for good, and at the same time find scapegoats whom they blame for the disaster and regard as wholly evil."[2]

In an age crippled by crises of identity and legitimation, it would seem particularly urgent to reinvestigate practices of defining ourselves in terms of otherness, and, specifically, to challenge the polarisation between Us and Them. What new forms do the emblematic figures of otherness take, we may ask, in a society increasingly dominated by simulation and spectacle? And what critical means might we deploy to differentiate between diverse kinds of otherness in a culture where everything has become more and more undecidable—sometimes to the point where we have difficulty distinguishing Self from Other in the first place? Clearly some kind of philosophical questioning is called for if we are to try to understand the enigma of self-and-other or to explore modes of discerning between different kinds of self and different kinds of other.

One of my guiding hypotheses doing this work will be that we often project onto others those unconscious fears which we recoil from in ourselves. Rather than acknowledge that we are deep down answerable to an alterity that unsettles us, we devise all kinds of evasion strategies. Primary amongst these is the attempt to simplify our existence by scapegoating others as "aliens." So doing we contrive to transmute the

[2] Anthony Storr, *Feet of Clay: A Study of Gurus* (London and New York: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 160.

sacrificial alien into a monster, or into a fetish-god. But, either way, we refuse to recognize the stranger before us as a singular other who responds, in turn, to the singular otherness in each of us. We refuse to acknowledge ourselves-as-others.

Sometimes, in our confusion, we have been known to turn the Other into a monster *and* a god. Hierophanies—where the unshowable deity shows itself—are often terrifying. Hence the double etymology of *monstrare*, to show and to warn. Zeus' mutations into a plundering bull or rapacious swan epitomise this paradox. And Kali certainly knew how to scare mortals. Even the generally 'good' biblical God could resort to horror on occasion. As Job realized. Or Abraham when commanded to kill Isaac. Or Jacob when he found himself maimed at the hip after wrestling with the dark angel of Israel. Or Zechariah struck dumb by the angel Gabriel. Not to mention the tales of floods and plagues and conflagrations sent by a jealous God to fill his people with fear. Divine monstrance was not infrequently an occasion of terror. *Fascinans et tremendum*, as the mystics said.

Poets, too, have attested to this enigma of the monstrous God. W. B. Yeats captured this disturbing ambiguity of the sacred, for example, in his apocalyptic image of the "rough beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born." A sentiment echoed by Rilke in his famous opening apostrophe to the Duino Elegies: "Every angel is terrible." And one might also recall here Herman Melville's chilling evocation of the quasi-divine, quasi-demonic whiteness of the whale, recalling at once the horror of Leviathan and the transcendence of Yahweh: "But not yet have we solved the incantation of this whiteness, and learned why it appeals with such power to the soul; and more strange and more portentous—why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind'(*Moby Dick XLII*).

But my purpose in investigating this fundamental paradox of the sacred-savage Other is more than the investigation of certain formative archives in the Western genealogy of the Stranger. My main task is actually to explore possibilities of responding to the problem of the Stranger in terms of some kind of philosophical understanding. Julia Kristeva has suggested that there are three main ways in which we might respond to our fundamental experience of estrangement: *art, religion and*

psychoanalysis. I will be looking at each of these during the course of this study. But I will also be suggesting a fourth way of response: *philosophy.* For if art offers therapy in terms of images, religion in terms of faith and psychoanalysis in terms of a "talking cure," philosophy has something extra (though not necessarily better) to offer. And that something extra, which may usefully supplement the other three, is a certain kind of *understanding.* During the course of these studies, I will be referring to various moments in the history of philosophy which might help us in our search for ways of understanding the Other—from Aristotle's practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and Kant's "reflective judgment" to more contemporary hermeneutic models of narrative comprehension (Ricoeur, Arendt, Taylor). My wager is that if the enigma of the Other has been largely ignored by the mainstream metaphysical tradition—going back to Parmenides and Plato who defined the Other in relation to the Same—it resurfaces again and again throughout our western cultural history in the guise of strangers, gods and monsters who will not go away and continue to command our attention. Concerned with the rules of Reason, most western philosophers since Parmenides have banished the puzzlements provoked by "strangeness" to the realm of Unreason, namely the cultural unconscious of myth, art and religion. And in the process of this estrangement of the strange, the Other passed from the horizon of reflective understanding into the invisible, unspeakable, unthinkable dark. It is my conviction that the Other may be brought back onto the horizon of philosophical understanding again in light of a number of recent explorations of the Self-Other relation in psychoanalytic theory, deconstruction, anthropology and phenomenological hermeneutics. And it is also my conviction that the project of enlightenment will remain unenlightened until it comes to terms with the strangers, gods and monsters that it has all too often sought to ostracise or ignore. It is here that I will be proposing a return movement from philosophy to its others (art, religion, psychoanalysis). Understanding and pre-understanding need to get back into dialogue with each other.

One example of how this might be achieved is, I suggest, a new hermeneutic understanding of "melancholy." If melancholic dread and anxiety is indeed one of the characteristic maladies of humanity, it is incumbent on philosophers to take this seriously. And one of the best ways in which this may be done is by looking at the formative myths

which epitomise this fundamental experience of estrangement. Foremost here is the myth of Saturn, the monster who castrates his father and seeks to devour his own children. Though ignored by mainstream philosophy and metaphysics for centuries, certain thinkers in our own time—from Klibansky and Heidegger to Kristeva and Ricoeur—have sought to revisit the hidden meanings of this mythic monster and remind us how dread before death and loss can veer manically between abjection and elation unless we come to terms with it. Such reckoning implies both an acknowledgment and working-through of this estranging mood so that we may tame the monster and be less "driven" by it. Once again, art, religion and psychoanalysis offer indispensable means of achieving this task. But so, I submit, does philosophy. To go on evading the monster of *Angst* within us is a recipe for obsessional neurosis and existential inauthenticity. To face the Saturnine monster and acknowledge that it is an intregral part of us is to accept the truth that we are strangers-to-ourselves and that we need not fear such strangeness or "act it out" by projecting such fear onto Others.

The story of Hamlet, which we explore below in both its Shakespearean and Joycean retellings, dramatises the options faced by the melancholic soul. Confronting the terrors of death-triggered by the untimely loss of his father, the tortured Dane finds himself vacillating between mania and despair. One moment he apotheosises his dead father as a demi-god (Hyperion), the next he recoils in horror from his ghostly apparition. The anguished Prince is a well-seasoned traveller on the peaks and troughs of strangeness. But what every melancholic—from heroic Danes to existential Daseins—must ultimately accept is this: the lost thing is really lost and the only cure lies in true mourning, that is, in the readiness to let go of the other we hold captive within or scapegoat without. The key is to let the other be other so that the self may be itself again. And one of the best aids in this task, I will be suggesting, is *narrative understanding*: a working-through of loss and fear by means of cathartic imagination and mindful acknowledgment.

Letting the other be other in the right way is, of course, no easy task. Our contemporary culture in particular exploits our deep ambiguity towards the death-instinct, displacing our fearful fascination onto spectacular stories of horror, monstrosity and violence. Julia Kristeva captures this point well in a dialogue we conducted on the subject in Paris in 1991: "The media propagate the death instinct. Look at the films

people like to watch after a long tiring day: a thriller or a horror film, anything less is considered boring. We are attracted to this violence. So the great moral work which grapples with the problem of identity also grapples with this contemporary experience of death, violence and hate." And she goes on to suggest, quite correctly in my view, that this expresses itself in extremist forms of identity politics: "Nationalisms, like fundamentalisms, are screens in front of this violence, fragile screens, see-through screens, because they only displace that hatred, sending it to the other, to the neighbour, to the rival ethnic group. The big work of our civilisation is to try to fight this hatred."[3] Indeed, it could be said that the history of modern western philosophy reads like a litany of refusals to let go. Hegel explores the violent conflict between self and other in his famous master-slave dialectic, Freud in his writings on the uncanny and death-drive, Marx in his analysis of fetishism and false consciousness, and existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger in their detailed phenomenological descriptions of inauthentic existence and bad faith.

With the emergence of a distinctly postmodern preoccupation with *alterity* and the *sublime*, we confront new tasks of thinking about the opposition between self and other. The challenge now is to acknowledge a difference between self and other without separating them so schismatically that no relation at all is possible. This is a genuine difficulty for some post-phenomenological thinkers who externalise the category of alterity to the point that any contact with the self smacks of betrayal or contamination. The attempt to build hermeneutic bridges between us and "others" (human, divine or whatever) should not, I will argue, be denounced as ontology, onto—theology or logocentrism—that is to say, as some form of totalizing reduction bordering on violence. For such denunciation ultimately denies any form of dialogical inter-being between self and other. Hence, in a thinker like Levinas, we find that the experience of irreducible alterity (divine *Illeity*) is at bottom, indistinguishable from the experience of irreducible abjection (atheistic *Il y a*). The high becomes so high and the low so low that they slip over the edge and begin to converge—sometimes to the point of

[3] Julia Kristeva, "Strangers to Ourselves" in *States of Mind: Dialogues on the European Mind* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 13f.

indifferenciation. The God beyond being becomes an abyss beneath being. The Other becomes Alien.

Faced with the postmodern fixation with inaccessible alterity we need to engage in a practice of narrative interpretation capable of tracing interconnections between the poles of sameness and strangeness, of building paths between the worlds of *autos* and *heteros.* We need to chart a course between the extremes of tautology and heterology. For in this way might philosophy help us to discover the other in our self and our self in the other-without abjuring either. We need to develop a hermeneutic model of narrative, resolved in spite of all to say something about the unsayable, to imagine images of the unimaginable, to tell tales of the untellable, respecting all the while the border-limits that defer all Final Answers. I am not, let me make clear at the outset, sponsoring a return to Master Narratives of totality or closure. Nor am I interested in espousing redundant ontologies of the *ens causa sui* or *cogito sum.* On the contrary, I am largely persuaded by the Heideggerean critique of the metaphysics of presence. I fully appreciate the ethical spin given this by recent exposures of the "appropriating" tendencies of human thought (Levinas, Derrida, Caputo, Kristeva, etc). But I am equally convinced that some hermeneutic stitching and weaving needs to be sustained if we are to keep alive the practice of responsible judgement and justice. For how are we to address otherness at all if it becomes totally *unrecognisable* to us? Faced with such putative indetermination, how could we tell the difference between one kind of other and another—between (a) those aliens and strangers that need our care and hospitality, no matter how monstrous they might first appear, and (b) those others that really do seek to destroy and exterminate (as evidenced in genocidal slaughters from Belsen to Bosnia where certain "enemies" are indeed murderous adversaries). Or to take one of the most ancient examples of ethical discernment, how are we to differentiate between the voice from above that bad Abraham kill Isaac and the voice that forbade him to do so? These are urgent hermeneutic matters. For they decide how cultures take the side of murder or compassion.

Not all 'selves' are evil and not all 'others' are angelic. That is why, I suggest, it is wise to supplement the critique of the *self* with an equally indispensable critique of the other. Without such a double critique—which exposes illusory categories of ego and alien—we can no longer speak of any real relation between humans, or indeed between humans

and non-humans (animal or divine). Only by means of such an ambidexterous move, I believe, can we hope to de-alienate some of the forces which pervade our global consumerist culture.[4]

This double critique requires a delicate balance. On one hand, if others become *too transcendent*, they disappear off our radar screen and we lose all contact. We then not only stop seeing them directly but we even stop seeing them indirectly *as* this or that other. The possibility of imagining, narrating or interpreting alterity becomes impossible. And in the field of philosophy, we witness the demise of phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry. The silent dark of sublime unthinkability reigns supreme. We wait in paralytic fear for the return of the faceless repressed. Kratophany replaces epiphany.[5] On the other hand, if others become too *immanent*, they become equally exempt from ethical relation. In this instance, they become indistinguishable from our own totalising selves (conscious or unconscious). The trick is, therefore, I suggest, not to let the foreign become too foreign or the familiar *too* familiar. If certain kinds of apophatic mysticism and deconstruction run the former risk, certain forms of psychoanalytic and New Age immanentism run the latter.

Post-modernism is a contentious and somewhat confused term, but it is, I suggest, a sufficiently capacious umbrella to cover both contemporary extremes—and still have room for alternatives which eschew this polarity. The balance I seek to strike involves an effort to discern the *juste milieu* where a valid sense of selfhood and strangeness might co-exist. The goal of the diacritical hermeneutic I would like to

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[4] Such de-alienation is, of course, not just a matter of critiquing the "imaginary" or "symbolique" of alterity-unravelling the multiple and often covert narratives of its strangers, gods and monsters. It also involves a critique of the material world of economics and politics in which we live out our daily existence: a world where the gap between the income held by the richest and poorest 20% continues to increase dramatically and where 90% of international capital is now used for non-productive speculation rather than trade or long-term investment (cited in N. Chomsky, *Secrets, Lies and Democracy* (USA: Common Courage Press, 1994). But this very distinction between superstructural (cultural-ideological) and infrastructural (material-economic) domains is itself increasingly blurred by the subsuming of the whole economic and monetary order into networks of virtual exchange and communication (see H. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001).

[5] Jean Greisch, 'L'épiphanie, un regard philosophique' in *Transversalités*, No. 78, April-June, Paris, 2001.

explore is to make the foreign more familiar and the familiar more foreign. Or to rehearse the metaphor of altitude, my task will be to let the self walk at sea level with its other, avoiding the inhospitable extremities of vertiginous heights and abyssal depths. My aim, in short, is to open up itineraries between elation and dejection—itineraries both multiple and traversible. So doing, it is hoped that the self might achieve a more discerning readiness to welcome strangers, respect gods and acknowledge monsters.

Philosophy today needs a narrative understanding capable of casting rope ladders and swing bridges across opposing extremes. This requires various kinds of image, analogy and symbol to address the challenge of intersignification. I am suggesting that philosophy might help relocate the subtle cusp or chiasmus linking but not conflating self and other. That a new hermeneutics of understanding might help us learn to knit together again the weaves of transcendent and incarnate existence—an exercise which John Donne called "interanimation," and which he described so movingly in his poem, *The Extasie*:

As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtile knot, which makes us man.

So must pure lovers soules descend
To th'affections, and to faculties,
That sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great Prince in prison lies.

One can find prefigurings of this kind of hermeneutic translation in that labour of "symbolic imagination" which, as the poet Allen Tate has it, "conducts an action through analogy, of the human to the divine, of the natural and the supernatural, of the low to the high, of time to eternity."[6] This is less a question of Hegelian synthesis than of multiple traversals between seeming incompatibles. It does not signal recourse to some speculative metaphysical system that would wrap opposites into some happy ending. Nor does it summon us to the call of a "Last God,"

[6] Cited by Denis Donoghue, *Adam's Curse* (South End, Ind.: Notre Dame UP, 2001), p. 70. Tate is speaking here about Dante in particular.

as Heidegger might have us believe. Nor, finally, need such translation revert to a model of scholastic compromise, setting out middle-range rules and then settling for the median mark. It is more a matter of gracious affinities. Constellations. Interlacings of alterities.

The quest is not new. It did not begin with Hegel or Levinas or Derrida. The conundrum of the Other goes back to the beginnings of western metaphysics in Parmenides and Plato. And in a way we might say that the three figures of Strangers, Gods and Monsters are three different names for the experience of alterity. Plato approaches this alterity in terms of wonderment (*thaumazein*) and terror (*deinon*). And while he and other Greek philosophers acknowledge such experience as the very source of philosophising, there is a deep ambivalence from the outset. As Socrates suggests in the Phaedrus, strangers, gods and monsters belong to the realm of myth, not philosophy. Philosophy proper should be able to transcend mythic imaginings in favour of more rational pursuits. "I look not into them (myths)," says Socrates, "'but into my own self: Am I a beast more complicated and savage than Typhon, or am I a tamer, simpler animal with a share in a divine and gentle nature?" (*Phaedrus, 230e*). The question is doubtless rhetorical. Socrates, in spite of his modest doubts, has clearly decided for the latter option. But the either/or is telling; as is the specific mention of Typhon as alternative to the "divine and gentle" philosopher.

Typhon, Hesiod tells us, was a "fearful dragon"(*deinos drakon*) with a "hundred heads" (*Theogony, 823-825*). The child of Earth and Tartarus, born after Zeus had driven the Titans out of heaven, Typhon stayed on as a reminder of our wild terrestrial origins. Mad voices sounded from his multiple heads, his serpent eyes flashed fire which shook mountains and his breath produced whirlwinds that destroyed ships and sailors. But while some of his voices cried like savage animals, others were so "wonderful to hear" (*thauma akouein*) that they were immediately understood by the gods and seduced both mortals and immortals alike. The power of this dark creature soon came to threaten the gods themselves however, until Zeus waged a mightily battle against Typhon and cast him into Tartarus, the abyss below Hades where the other Titans and giants had been banished from the world of light.

The fact that Typhon is the particular beast that Socrates chooses to define himself against qua philosopher is, I believe, highly significant. It implies that it is only by exorcising this last and most atavistic of

monsters that one can "know oneself" according to the light of reason. Moreover, the fact that this creature is, as the adjective *deinoteron* suggests, wonderful *and* terrible betrays the fact that it is both akin to the gods (who readily comprehend its speech) and uncanny, strange and fearful to men. Not surprisingly therefore, Socrates is full of puzzlement about his double origins—as quasi-terrestrial and quasi-divine. And he seems determined to follow Zeus in combating mythic and chthonic forces in order to ascend to the higher realms of metaphysical insight and civility.

Plato, like Parmenides before him, can generally be said to mark a transition from the mythology of monsters to the metaphysics of reason. But just as Typhon survived the initial expulsion of Titans from Olympus, so too it seems he is wont to somehow remain on in the world of humans, revisiting even enlightened sages like Socrates. The eternal return of reason is repressed. Perhaps this accounts for a certain ambiguity, as witnessed in *The Symposium* where Socrates is compared by Alcibiades to a Silenus or Satyr (strange monstrous figures) even as he is hailed as the most rational of beings![7]

By thus linking the origin of philosophising to a certain pathos of wonder and awe (*thaumazein/deinon*), Plato appears to acknowledge that if Reason is predicated upon the expulsion of its monstrous Other, it is never wholly freed from it. Indeed the very notion that the contemplative quietude of metaphysical reasoning might be provoked in the first place by something as turbulent as a *pathos* reminds the logic of the Same that it always carries traces of its spectral origin and that this origin can never be fully purged or controlled. In short, Socrates can never step entirely out of his shadow. Anymore than he can escape his daimon. Which accounts for the fact, as Arendt reminds us, that philosophy always begins and ends in speechlessness.[8] This is one good

[7] Plato, *Symposium*, 221d. The emblematic relationship between Socrates and monstrosity has been touched on by John Sallis who argues that for Plato there is "a bit of monstrosity" hidden in every philosophy which exceeds nature in the pathos of wonder ("...A Wonder That One Could Never Aspire to Surpass" in *The Path of Archaic Thinking*, ed. by Kenneth Maly (Albany, New York: SUNY UP, 1995, p. 253).

[8] Hannah Arendt in "Philosophy and Politics"(Social Research, 57, no 1, 1999) and Jacques Taminiaux in *The Thracian Maid and the Professional Thinker: Arendt and Heidegger* (Albany, New York: SUNY UP, 1997) make some intriguing comments on the ambivalent role of *thamazein* in the genesis of philosophising, and in particular on the paradox that the pathos of "wonder" as source of metaphysical reasoning is itself

reason why if philosophers are indeed enjoined to *know themselves* they do well to continue concerning themselves with this inaugural and abiding enigma of the monster within.

But Socrates' reckoning with the spectre of Typhon in the *Phraedus*, and subsequent preference for metaphysics over myth, is not the only moment when Plato confronts the problem of the Other. It is no accident that in *The Sophist* Plato puts the interrogation of otherness into the mouth of the Eleatic Stranger (*xenos*). This involves establishing the existence of an "other category"(*heteros genos*) beyond being. For if being is all that exists and there is nothing other than being—e.g. a non-being in which words, images and things might also have some part—then one cannot explain the possibility of falsehood or error (which confounds what is and what is not). Nor, if this be the case, could strangers or foreigners justify their own right to exist in so far as they are other than the self-identical order of being itself. In the Parmenidean regime, non-resident aliens need not apply. The Stranger argues accordingly, against Parmenides, that "the kinds blend with each other and that what-is and the other run through each and every kind, that the other shares in that which is and, because of that sharing (*methexis*), is; but (since) the other is different from that in which it shares, being other than what-is, it is most clear and necessary that what-is-not is"(*Sophist*

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something that "befalls" or "overcomes" us and that is thus beyond our ken and control, stemming from and culminating in "speechlessness." Another recent thinker to advert to the paradoxical mix of mythos and logos in Plato is William Desmond: "Logos in *aporia*, logos at an impasse: these are constitutive for the Platonic sense of philosophical thinking. It is as if the wonder that is said to be the originating pathos of the philosopher reappears after he has done his best job in giving a determinate logos. The indeterminate perplexity reappears, wonder resurrects itself, in a different sense of being at a loss, now at the limit of logos itself" (*Perplexity and Ultimacy*, SUNY, Albany, New York, 1995, p. 34). Indeed from this perspective it is telling that Thaumas is related to a river whose nature begins and ends on the borders of the unspeakable. See also Charles Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus* (New Haven: Yale UP,1986), where he notes that Socrates' reflection on the need for a "rational account" of strange, portentous and monstrous things (*teratologon* and *atopiai* such as Chimaeras, Hippocentaurs, Pegasuses, Gorgons etc) leads ultimately to the invocation of the Typhon motif in the Phraedrus- a motif which raises the enigma of the rapport between "complex hubristic madness on the one side, and simplistic sophrosyne on the other; between unintelligible and ungovernable eros and law-abiding reasonableness..."(p.42). I am indebted to my doctoral student, David Bollert, for bringing many of the above references and comments to my attention.

259a-b). Moreover, in order for being to have its own being, the Stranger insists, it must, for its part, share in the other so that it can be itself and, therefore, other than everything else.

Whence the conclusion of the Stranger that discourse, as the statement of truth or falsehood—i.e. a confection of being and non-being—is only made possible by the splicing of one form with the other *(ton eidon symploken. Sophist 259)*. The implications are wide-ranging. The complete separation of same (*autos*) and other (*heteron*), of being and what is other than being, would be the obliteration (*apophansis*) of all speech (*Soph. 259e*). Nothing less. And, consequently, it would eliminate any means of distinguishing between true and false. It would make the Other, quite literally, unspeakable and, by extension, unrecognisable.

For the Eleatic Stranger the other is other, finally, only *in relation to* the same. The Other as a distinct class is not comprehensible unless it is considered *relative* to some Other (*pros heteron*)(255d). In so far as it differs from the known order of being, the Other is always relative. Or more simply put, any relation with the Absolute makes the Absolute relative (*Parmenides 133-135; 141-142*).[9] It is this fundamental distinction between what is absolute (*kath'auto*) and what is relative (*pros alla*) (255c) that proves decisive for subsequent controversies in western philosophy. This definition of alterity in relation to sameness is revisited by the modern movement of phenomenology, as noted above. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel historicises the problem in terms of a master-slave dialectic. Here, he argues, the self only expresses itself as a sovereign subject in so far as it struggles with, and is eventually recognized by, its Other(*das Andere*). But it is Husserl who brings this phenomenological dialectic to its logical conclusion in the *Fifth Cartesian Meditation* when he claims that the other is never absolutely alien but is always and everywhere recognized as other precisely as other-than-me, that is, by analogy and appresentation. Here the other manifests itself as *alter ego*. And this position is further radicalised by Heidegger in his portrayal of the other in terms of the being-with (*Mitsein*) of ontological self-existence (*Dasein*).

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[9] These and analogous passages from Plato's *Parmenides* are commented upon by Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969, p. 50), and by Robert Bernasconi in "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien" in *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God*, ed Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham UP, 2000, p 64f).

Now it is just this notion of relative otherness which Levinas and certain other contemporary thinkers resist. Levinas himself rejects such a notion unambiguously in *Totality and Infinity*. The Other, he states, does not manifest itself in relation to the ego's horizons of consciousness or subjectivity but "expresses *itself*."[10] In this phenomenological turn-around, the Stranger is at root *kath'auto*, not *pros heteron*. Absolutely not relatively other.

Absolute versus relative otherness. This problematic informs, I am suggesting, the entire metaphysical paradigm of self-and-other running from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and the modern philosophy of consciousness. The rejection of relative otherness in favour of absolute otherness, by Levinas and other thinkers of radical alterity, marks a decisive "break" between thought and language. And in the final analysis, Levinas opts for what Derrida calls the 'unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond Being and Logos."[11] By this reasoning, the positive plenitude of infinity can only translate into language by "betraying" itself in a negative term (in-finity). Though often ambiguous on this complex issue, Derrida seems to side with the Eleatic Stranger when he criticizes Levinas for trying to keep the infinite Other absolutely separate from the ontological order of phenomena, that is, for refusing to mix beyond-being with being. Levinas' idea of absolute alterity presupposes the very phenomenology of speech and appearance it seeks to transcend.[12] But, to be fair, Levinas is aware of this. And he is well capable of retorting that Derrida has a similar predicament with his own notion of the other. Plato's Eleatic Stranger who argues for the mixing of being and non-being, Levinas would doubtless oppose the "ethical" Stranger of the Torah: the Other of Psalm 119 who declares, "I am a stranger on earth,

[10] *Totality and Infinity*, p. 50.

[11] J. Derrida analyses the Levinasian rupture between thought and language in "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978, pp. 114f). On this point, see also Bernasconi, op. cit. pp. 74f. There is also the question of Levinas's Judaic belief in this regard-for example, his statement in *Difficult Freedom: Essays in Judaism* (trans. By S. Hand, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 15): "For a Jew, Incarnation is neither possible nor necessary." Commented upn by D. Donoghue in *Adam's Curse*, p. 57.

[12] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 111f. It is telling that in commenting on Levinas' efforts to think infinity positively, Derrida himself resorts to the term used in the Sophist to describe non-being (méon)-*aphtheggon te auto kai arréton kai alogon (238e)*.

hide not thy commandments from me." My response will be that the two Strangers are not mutually exclusive. They need to negotiate a new alliance.

In steering a winding path between ontological and ethical categories of Otherness, between Eleatic and Biblical strangers, I propose, not speculative fly-overs or viaducts, but tentative foot-bridges and rope-ladders reaching across the chasms separating old ontologies from new heterologies. The method I propose is a *diacritical hermeneutics.* This I distinguish from both *romantic* and *radical hermeneutics.* Romantic hermeneutics sponsors the view—endorsed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer—that the purpose of philosophical interpretation is to unite the consciousness of one subject with that of the other. This process is called "appropriation" which in the German, *Aneignung,* means *becoming one with.* Schleiermacher explored this retrieval of estranged consciousness in terms of a theological reappropriation of the original message of the Kerygma. Dilthey, for his part, analysed it in terms of the historical resolve to reach some kind of "objective" knowledge about the past; even though he distinguished sharply between the objectivity of the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and that of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) where hermeneutic understanding properly applies.[13] And Gadamer, finally, pursued the idea of a reconciliation between our own understanding and that of strangers in terms of a "fusion of horizons." For all three, the purpose of hermeneutic understanding was to recover some lost original consciousness by way of rendering what is past contemporaneous with our present modes of comprehension.

By contrast, the "radical" hermeneutics of Caputo-inspired by the deconstructive turn of Derrida, Blanchot and Lyotard-rejects the model of appropriation, insisting on the unmediatable and ultimately "sublime" nature of alterity. In defiance of a community of minds, this uncompromising stance holds out for irreducible difference and separation. To this end, Caputo promotes the "hyperbolic hypothesis" of Levinas and Derrida, defined as an "unphenomenological model" in which "an invisible infinity comes over me and demands everything of

[13] See Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), and John Caputo, More Radical Hermeneutics (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 156f).

me, the food out of my mouth"-a model "for the friend and for politics, which have always been understood in *egalitarian terms*."[14] In this light, radical hermeneutics invokes an irreducible dissymmetry of self and other. It proposes that human friendship should not be conceived according to the Greek and metaphysical paradigm of intimacy, comparison and consensus but rather in terms of infinite alterity. The friend is no longer to be taken as the 'other' of the "same": one who is of an analogous mind or soul, as in Aristotle's *homonoia* or Husserl's *Paarung* and *Einfühling*. The hyperbolic hypothesis resists the idea of a community of similars. It flouts the virtue of equality. The friend is always more than my fellow, which effectively means that "friendship is caught up in the infinite disproportion of a gift without exchange, in which the other, appearing without appearing, comes from a place of structural superiority and invisible [15] imminence." So friendship between one self and another is, Derrida insists, not yet actually possible but is something—like democracy or justice—that is always still to come. Friendship-to-come will not, we are told, be signalled by the "good sense" of equal, autonomous selves but by the "madness and nonsense of heteronomy."[16]

The *diacritical* hermeneutics I propose, by contrast, is committed to a third way beyond these romantic and radical options. And it is my contention that this middle way (*metaxu*) is in fact more radical and challenging than either. Obviating both the congenial communion of fused horizons and the apocalyptic rupture of non-communion, it will help us to explore possibilities of inter-communion between distinct but not incomparable selves. The diacritical approach holds that friendship begins by welcoming difference (*dia-legein*). It champions the practice of dialogue between self and other, while refusing to submit to the reductionist dialectics of egology governed by the *logos* of the Same. Between the *logos* of the One and the anti-*logos* of the Other, falls the *dia-logos* of oneself-as-another. The basic aim of diacritical

[14] More *Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 70.

[15] Ibid., p. 71. For Maurice Blanchot there is an unbridgeable, uncrossable gulf separating me from the other (cf. *Friendship*, trans. by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997, pp. 290f). Blanchot's position is commented on at length by Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, (trans. by George Collins, London: Verso, 1997), and by J. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, pp. 60-83.

[16] *Politics of Friendship*, pp. 68, 232 and *More Radical Hermeneutics*, p. 83.

hermeneutics is, I suggest, to make us more hospitable to strangers, gods and monsters without succumbing to mystique or madness. We have too often demonised the "other" in western culture out of fear. But if we can become more mindful of who the other is—and is it not a primary task of philosophy to foster such mindfulness?—we will, I am convinced, be less likely to live in horror of the dark. For the dark is all too frequently a mask for the alterity of our own death and a screen against the advent of strangers unbenownst and still unknown to us.

Perfect love casts out fear. A sentiment echoed in many wisdom traditions East and West, including this Tibetan verse:

If this elephant of mind is held on all sides
by the cord of mindfulness,
All fear disappears and happiness comes.
All enemies: all the tigers, lions, bears,
serpents, elephants...
and all the keepers of hell; the demons and the horrors,
All of these are contained by the attention of your mind,
and by the calming of that mind all are calmed,
Because from the mind are derived all fears and unmeasurable sorrows.

A final advantage of the diacritical hermeneutics I am endorsing is its hospitality to other disciplines. Thus while striving to remain loyal to the demands of philosophical lucidity and coherence, our dialogue proposes to also reach across strict disciplinary divides and engage in a cross-hatching of intellectual horizons. And in this respect I fully approve the generous definition of hermeneutics offered by Rudiger Bubner:

> Hermeneutics has become more and more of a key word in philosophical discussions of the most varied kind. It seems as if hermeneutics creates cross-connections between problems of different origin. In linguistics and sociology, in history and literary studies, in theology, jurisprudence and aesthetics, and finally in the general theory of science, hermeneutic perspectives have been successfully brought to bear. In this way, the traditional philosophical claim to *universality* is renewed under another name.[17]

[17] Rudiger Bubner, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics" in *Modern German Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 45).

I would simply want to preface the term "universality" with the qualifier "quasi," thereby retaining the claim as a wager rather than a presumption. And to add that if hermeneutics extends horizontally across disciplines it also extends historically across temporal horizons, reinterpreting the myths and memories of our past in the light of future hopes for a more mindful and compassionate understanding of our Others. By sounding out certain borderlands separating Us from Others we may become more ready to acknowledge strangers in ourselves and ourselves in strangers.