

The Ethics and Poetics of Alterity

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*New Perspectives on Genre
Literature*

Edited by

Maylis Rospide and Sandrine Sorlin

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7202-4

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7202-7

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INTRODUCTION

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Try to imagine a new colour, or a new smell. Try to wrap your mind around something you have never seen, never experienced before. Perhaps the colour you have in mind is like orange, but not quite. Maybe you came up with a smell which is iridescent. This is basically what genre literature strives to do when it stages encounters with alterity, be it human or alien. It points towards an unattainable other which remains out of reach but still demands to be laid down on paper. By summoning exotic worlds and creating fantastic landscapes, genre literature dramatizes what mainstream fiction inconspicuously does: through language it conjures whole worlds.

Several scholars have tried to expose the stylistic cogs that make the science fictional machine go round. For Damien Broderick, the term *science fiction* itself reflects its very workings by conjoining two terms that are traditionally opposed the better to recombine them and create a new entity¹. This zeugma is also called “syllepsis fiction” in Broderick’s analysis², a term which defies logic and transcribes ideas of epistemological miscegenation, yet explains part of the internal organisation of the genre. While Broderick tries to unearth the tropes that would encapsulate the nature of science fiction as a genre, Walter E. Meyers focuses on the possibility of tearing *science* away from the field of natural sciences³. His take on science fiction is that of the linguist who scrutinises the plausibility, the nature and the functioning of the language of science fiction. Alien tongues feature prominently, but human languages made strange also appear throughout his pages to remind us of the strangeness of words. Without ever circumscribing science fiction to one single trope, Meyers treads the fine line between completely unintelligible languages and all-too-familiar tongues, a dichotomy which reads like a new spin on the readerly/writerly dyad by Roland Barthes. In *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), David W. Sisk

shows that if science fiction has often circumscribed the necessity to build plausible future language (through linguistic clichés like the “universal translator” or by having alien races speak perfect English⁴), modern dystopias have no other choice but to put language at the heart of their enterprise if they want to plausibly reflect the major social and technological shift they are portraying. In the later dystopias unexplored by Walter E. Meyers (*Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood or Suzette Haden Elgin’s *Native Tongue*), language continues to play a paramount role. Although the language of the future as depicted by Russell Hoban for instance may be said to lack linguistic plausibility (given the time distance, it should be much more corrupted than it actually is), it still powerfully manages to bring us close to what a post-apocalyptic world would resemble⁵. In this volume, Jean-Jacques Lecercle highlights the shortcomings of invented languages and, by contrast, the linguistic imagination of such modern dystopias. Recently, the study of language in science fiction has shifted from the assessment of the plausibility of invented exotic dialects to more cognitive approaches. In *The Poetics of Science Fiction* (Essex: Pearson Education, 2000), Peter Stockwell adopts this new critical stance which allows him to enhance the importance of the reader’s experience in creating, building, nourishing and maintaining science fictional worlds and experiences. By exploring the use of deixis (be it perceptual, spatial or temporal) and branching out towards synecdoche, litotes and metaphors, Stockwell pinpoints the demetaphorising principle at work within science fiction.

Whether they conduct a micro- or a macro-analysis of the language of genre fiction, all the scholars mentioned above acknowledge language as a force to be reckoned with, be it as an object or a means of representation; however, many questions are left unanswered. Indeed, picking up the trails left by Meyers and Stockwell, the interdisciplinary nature of this volume wishes to confront different approaches of the ethics and poetics of alterity by remapping genre literature through genre analysis, stylistics, and philosophy. But once the pivotal role of language in genre fiction has been established, many issues still haunt the pages of those books and these of the present volume.

Although Meyers’s, Stockwell’s, Broderick’s or Sysk’s books are openly grounded within one or two genres (usually science fiction and fantasy or dystopia) none offer a definite answer as to what genre literature is. This difficult taxonomic task is at the heart of genre studies⁶ which more often than not conclude on the near impossibility of defining each genre, as does Rosemary Jackson in the opening pages of *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London and New York: Routledge, 1981): “Its

association with imagination and with desire has made it an area difficult to articulate or to define, and indeed the ‘value’ of fantasy has seemed to reside in precisely this resistance to definition, in its ‘free-floating and escapist qualities’” (Jackson 1). Science fiction is no stranger to this taxonomic aporia either, as evinced by Veronica Hollinger:

The sheer diversity of these readings, however, demonstrates a lack of consensus about sf which is frustrating, fascinating (at least to me), and, no doubt, inevitable: is sf a narrative genre? a field of discourse? a mode of thinking? a body of literary texts? the compendium of mediatized entertainments which have grown up around the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* franchises? Where exactly are its borders (does it have borders)? Is there something like an sf effect? When, if ever, should we call it science fiction, speculative fiction, sf? What do we do when we read sf? And what’s it got to do with anything outside itself?⁷

The difficult task of defining genre literature will not be addressed here, but the interdisciplinary nature of the following chapters will work around and through the notion: by weaving a tight interdisciplinary net, this volume aims at defining genre literature implicitly through its relationship with alterity. To paraphrase André Compte-Sponville, what is gained in pinning down and explaining away a norm is lost in terms of its scope⁸. It could be argued that genres are the literary equivalents of norms, and that in refusing to pin down their exact prototypical traits, the different essays in the collection manage to encompass a wider range of phenomena and in the same breath reach an unspoken consensus. Although this volume accommodates papers from different scholarly traditions, most of the chapters in this book⁹ owe a debt to Darko Suvin’s cornerstone concept of *cognitive estrangement* (sometimes the better to question it) and have found a common ground. An echo to the Russian formalists’ *ostranenie*, Suvin’s leitmotiv is poised between the domestication of what is strange (cognition), and the strangeness of what is known (defamiliarisation, or in Suvin’s term, estrangement), thus allowing unheard-of worlds to unravel. Nicholas Royle, in his study of the uncanny, underlines that defamiliarisation is the opposite of taming what is represented, it reaffirms the power of literature, and by extension, that of language, to make people see anew¹⁰. In asserting the potency of cognition in science fiction, Suvin both defines science fiction, and by contrast, fantasy: the latter seems to defy any graspable cognitive process and always tips on the side of strange and defamiliarised phenomena. Even though this distinction comes in handy to draw the line between the different components of genre literature, the dichotomy is not so crystal-clear according to Rosemary Jackson. Drawing

from Todorov's analysis of the fantastic, Jackson stresses the protean and slippery nature of fantasy¹¹, which makes it even more difficult to distinguish it from neighbour genres. Regardless of the differences between science fiction and fantasy, both genres seem to be perfect backdrops for alterity through a gamut of subgenres and modes. What will be argued throughout these pages is that genre literature finds a common substratum in its working of alterity.

The situations in which the subject is faced with different or alien beings are studied here in novels and screen adaptations of the English-speaking world, ranging from the nineteenth century to ultra-contemporary creations and belonging to the genre of utopia/dystopia, science fiction, fantasy, etc., as the so-called "genre literature" embodies a heuristic model that exacerbates encounters with alterity, featuring exotic, subhuman or posthuman beings that defy human knowledge (in SF and fantasy especially). Genre literature has often been regarded as an entertaining or escapist field that does not lend itself to ethical and poetical reflections, limiting its investigations to a hollow and servile repetition of the genre codes¹². Nevertheless, the process of defamiliarisation, which is prominent in Suvin's and Jackson's work, is often associated with the stylistic, poetic and ethical force inherent in fiction, but in its attempt at meta-conceptualizing the relationship between language and reality, genre literature seems to problematize and enhance these phenomena by making them more easily perceivable. Thus not resting content with merely questioning the mechanism of estrangement, genre literature explores the confines of readability and the break-point between the readerly and the writerly.

Indeed, through its encounters with alterity, genre literature unveils different strata of language-related issues: how can human language represent things that have no known referent in the reader's world of experience, and how can genre literature do justice to radical alterity and its language? The narratives about the Aztecs are among the first illustrations of a tendency to project pre-conceived expectations onto the other: "One would seek to transpose it into a familiar cognitive scheme in order to make it understandable and thereby at least partially acceptable"¹³. Although Broderick mentions *zeugmas* and *syllapses* as central figures in science fiction, what relationships do these tropes of fusion entertain between self and other? How effective are other figures of speech in their depiction of the other? Can tropes be said to be a product of an all-powerful Reason reducing alterity to the same? In *La Raison classificatoire* (Paris: Editions Aubier, 1996), for example, Patrick Tort indeed recalls that the two major classifying systems of human thoughts

rely on metaphor and metonymy. Or, on the other hand, can tropes be said to ensure a speculative and prospective exploration, producing non-sense effects that are capable of upsetting the classifications through which we have been trained to perceive the world? Can stylistic problems like focalisation or reported speech—that are often a privileged way to access the other’s conceptual schemes—be seen as anthropocentric blows dealt to alterity? Can the other be sketched out through lexical and syntactic inventiveness without its portrait being entirely tamed or harnessed? The issue here is to measure the ability of language to map or fail to map the other’s radical difference. If representing alterity forms the core of a theoretical crux, the language of alterity also raises questions of its own.

Walter E. Meyers’s panorama of the interconnection between linguistics and science fiction summarises the difficult middle-ground genre literature tries to reach in representing alien languages: “if there is little change in the language the characters are using, the reader has no trouble understanding it; if there is a great difference in the language, then the writer simply states that his characters are speaking in Old High Martian or the twenty-fifth-century development of a present tongue, and writes his dialogue in the English we know. But midway between these two extremes lies difficult ground” (Meyers 33-34). Can this middle ground really be reached by genre fiction or can it be assumed that making something accessible to the reader is already akin to taming alterity? Is there such a thing as a “rhetorical ethics” that could give us access to the other? Does reaching the breaking point of unintelligibility guarantee the birth of the other in its radical alterity? Can reducing alterity to the categories of the same or resorting to the other as a foil to reinforce the self (the other then being everything the self is not) be said to be part of the more conservative trend in SF as opposed to more subversive trends of the genre (what Broderick calls allographers along Terry Dowling’s coinage “xenographies”) or of fantasy?

In its attempt at conjuring foreign planets, monsters and distant futures, genre literature morphs into a heuristic mode to explore alterity and do justice to otherness, thus introducing the notion of ethics and that of the relation between self and other. A Levinasian understanding of ethics posits the subject as always already in relation with the other¹⁴, and this other subject remains irreducibly different from the self. In *Totality and Infinity*, the other cannot be absorbed by the self, as it remains absolutely other. This imperious respect of and call from the other’s Face is a demand to not reduce alterity to sameness. This particular definition of ethics, which has been popularised by the ethical turn, is thought through and interrogated in this volume because the unveiling of posthuman and alien creatures

(which might not have a Face) calls for a careful negotiation between same and other. From an analysis of conservative and anthropocentric figures of speech that are mired in the language of men and cannot do justice to otherness to that of the upsetting breach in communication brought about by experimentation, the relationship between self and other, sameness and alterity is explored. By creating a tension and a dialogue between these two opposite poles, and sometimes by going beyond this dichotomy, this volume tries to find new grounds from which genre fiction can be circumscribed.

The opening part entitled “Otherness: From Philosophy to Politics (and Back)” starts with Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s interjection “Bleghbe’chugh vaj blHeh!” which, unless you are a Star Trek and Klingon language’s lover, is unintelligible. This is the radical alterity of invented languages that the author questions here, summoning different philosophers and thinkers on his way (Levinas, Hegel, Marx and Deleuze among others), as he comes to the conclusion that what can pass as radical alterity is in fact an expression of our alienated self. The unintelligibility of Klingon is resolved through translation (Surrender or die!) and nothing remains of its alterity. By contrast, the literature of nonsense or novels written in an altered form of English display a dialectic of otherness and sameness through which the reader becomes aware of the alienation that lies at the heart of language. Finding fault with the levinasian ethics presupposing the transcendence of the other who, in its radical alterity, is said to be nevertheless entirely communicable and intelligible (through epiphanic revelation), the author advocates a replacement of “rhetorical ethics” by what he calls “a politics of style”.

Following a similar philosophical approach, Rok Benčín’s chapter entitled “All Too Inhuman: The Limits of Ethical Imagination” re-analyses the “political metaphors” of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*. Questioning the theories of a posthumanist ethics of otherness (like Margrit Shildrick’s for example), the author explains why monsters should be apprehended as metamorphoses—and not just as metaphors, if they are to generate “new forms of existence”. The question of this being possible is raised as regards today’s mute fictional zombies who, transformed into individualistic consumers, are the modern, post-class struggle avatars of Frankenstein’s speaking monster that stood for a class-conscious proletariat. Benčín shows that the invention of fictional “monsters” relies on the elaboration of an all (too) human ethics that is in fact borne by humanist values. He illustrates his point by drawing examples from the TV series “Star Trek”, but also “True Blood”, showing that here the resort to abnormalities tend to blur the line between the human and inhuman displaying “comical abundance

of overrepresentation”, verging on irony. The author concludes on a possible definition of the ethics of literature that would not be an ethics of alterity but an ethics of truth.

Philosophy, Politics and Stylistics are also intertwined in the final paper of the first part, written by Simone Rinzler. “A Political Philosophy of Stylistic Defamiliarization or What is Really Translated in James Kelman’s *Translated Accounts*” draws on the Spinozian ethics of “adequacy”, what is adequate for a body to do when it is put to severe testing, as it is here in this post-apocalyptic novel. Kelman’s *Translated Accounts* falls within what Lecercle calls a politics of style: the patchwork of texts that composes it, written in “weird English”, marked by fragmentation, repetition and mumbling, reflects the linguistic resilience of ordinary “invisible” people living precarious lives. As if abiding by the Spinozian ethics, they manage to go on, producing positive “glad affects” by creating new ways of living with the other, even if it can only be through a lacking language or be bodily communicated. Expressing themselves in a style that partakes of the “Neutral” as Roland Barthes defines it, they both fail to name and succeed in capturing the harshness of the world surrounding them. Unnamed heroes depicting unnamable conditions, they are still able, in a most Beckettian manner, to say something about the unsayable. In this sense, Kelman’s style is close to Coetzee’s in *Disgrace* or Saro-Wiwa’s in *Sozaboy*.

The second part entitled “The Stylistic Techniques of Representation: Potentialities and Limits” highlights the stylistic devices used by authors in their depiction of alterity and the potential shortcomings of the representation. Working on a corpus of science fiction texts ranging from the 1890s (Wells) to the 1930s (Huxley and Lewis), Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay analyses the stylistic strategies of the representation of otherness, from the most “anthropocentric” techniques resting on the comparative mode or the conceptual approximation as “default strategy” to the most daring approaches through the use of hypallage or synecdoche. *But paradoxically*, the defamiliarisation at stake here *does not concern extraterrestrial aliens but alien-looking humans, depicted in very uncanny ways*: indeed the novels of the corpus all explore the “unstable territory” of the human perceived as alien *and unheimlich* by the various observing travellers *that often begin to question the stability of their own human status*. Rather than dwelling on the potential limits of representation, the author chooses to emphasize the heuristic power and imaginative *and poetic* force of the genre of science fiction that is particularly apt to make darkness visible.

It is also humanity as we know it that is defamiliarised in Octavia Butler's short story "Speech Sounds" here analysed by Sandrine Sorlin: in this post-apocalyptic story, a virus has deprived humans of their ability to speak and read, bringing the species back to prelinguistic animality. The author looks into the stylistic techniques used by the writer to bypass the implausibility of a story written in human language to depict wordless humanity. Indeed, drawing on Text World Theory and cognitive stylistics, she shows that Butler's dystopia can be said to be based on metonymic cognitive processes which are characteristic of the genre (Stockwell, 2000). What this short story aptly exemplifies are the ethical implications of language loss: not only has the socio-economic superstructure collapsed on itself but ethical care for the other has been replaced by violence and indifference.

If Sorlin acknowledges the conservative power of science fiction (as opposed to fantasy that seems, according to Rosemary Jackson, to go beyond metaphor all the way to complete metamorphosis¹⁵) while still emphasizing its cognitive potentialities, Maylis Rospide is more radical in her article entitled "Of Chimeras and Men, or the Impossibility of Representing Otherness", focusing more precisely on Will Self's science fictional texts: in her corpus, the encounter with alterity is reduced to taming it into sameness, as it tends to flatten out difference and the very defamiliarising power of science fiction. She indeed shows that the empiricist conundrum (what has not been experienced cannot be construed) impedes the power of fiction, and the chimera—that alien Other—is a mere juxtaposition of known parts, before concluding that this failure should not be construed as a flaw but as what is inherent to science fictional works.

The third part entitled "The Language of Fantasy" gives an English and an American instance of the experimentation of language within the genre. In both articles, the defamiliarisation takes place within language itself: what is experienced by the reader is indeed language as other or the otherness of language. In the fantasy fiction described here by Linda Pillière in her paper entitled "Language Variety in Terry Pratchett's Fantasy Fiction", we could have expected encountering dwarfs, trolls, wizards, or vampires and zombies speaking a strange, invented language. There is not even an outside visitor here to the fantasy world. What the English writer's work proposes is more like a parody of the fantasy genre deflating its traditionally elevated or archaic style. The writer is in fact exploiting the very possibilities ordinary words offer, thus inviting the reader to pay more attention to the very language s/he uses every day. The literal meaning of metaphors for instance is reactivated, rendering the

metaphor more “active” as the source domain stands out in a new light. But Pratchett’s language does not merely refresh semantics, it also reactivates syntax, morphology and typography in a reinvigorating way. Otherness is thus not embodied here by weird and alien beings speaking an invented language, it is to be found within language itself.

Blamed for being overwrought and suffering from “adjectivitis”, H.P. Lovecraft’s style seems to abide by the often archaic stylistic code of fantasy. But in his article “The Abysmal Style of H.P. Lovecraft”, Christopher Robinson shows that the American writer’s surfeit of adjectives and modifiers is the linguistic expression of affects and sensations that precede sense, with narrators who are more possessed by language than they really possess it. Rather than taking the leap over the breach of language between the semiotic and the symbolic, thus undertaking what Giorgio Agamben calls an *experimentum linguae*, Lovecraft’s abysmal style reveals the breach itself, bringing to the surface the “monsters under the words”, what lurks beneath language, as Paul de Man puts it about Ferdinand de Saussure’s experimentation of hypograms. Lovecraft’s haunted language presents itself in its most brutish matter, as it is deconstructed into pure affect and noise. By means of ruptures in syntax and the (ab)use of dashes or parentheses, the breach of language is exposed rather than bridged, giving a “troubling counter-example” to Agamben’s *experimentum linguae* and an illustration to what Deleuze and Lecercle call “a dereliction of sense”.

The final part deals with the crossing of frontiers, the frontier between pure fiction and pure science but also between genres themselves. In “Describing (Post)human Species: Between Cognition and Estrangement”, Elaine Després criss-crosses scientific descriptions (drawing on Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and especially Linneus’s *Systema Naturae*) and science fiction texts depicting post-human species (in the works of H.G. Wells, Olaf Stapledon, Brian Aldiss and Margaret Atwood in particular) in order to show how scientific the depictions of post-human creatures in science fiction could be and conversely how poetic scientific descriptions of new species sometimes are. Indeed, drawing on pragmatic and reception theories, the author highlights the stylistic and epistemological similarities between the fictional and the scientific narrative. In the naming, categorizing and describing process, science gives an existence to species just as writers do in fictional narratives. Just as the first scientist who described *Homo sapiens* was also a human, thus being both observer and object, the fictional narrator is almost always a member of the human species: his descriptions of posthuman species often prove to be mere “metaphors for humans”. The objectivity of science is thus questioned by

Després as she shows that it is not rare for scientists to ‘include themselves’ in the narrative of their experiments.

This is beyond the confines of genre literature that the postmodern writer Jeanette Winterson wishes to go, adopting the strategies of science fiction in her 2007 novel entitled *The Stone Gods* while refusing its label. In “The Poetics of the Human in J. Winterson’s *The Stone Gods*”, Hélène Machinal explains that what Winterson dislikes in science fiction is the tendency of the genre, according to her, to produce a “closed” world. Her own novel is based on a circular open process (the future turning into a prehistoric past that is close to our own future), because for the writer closure is on a par with silence. In reaching beyond the genre boundaries, she also reaches beyond the disappearance of the human. Indeed Winterson’s post-human novel offers a reflection on the nature of the human as humanity has been modified through technology, but it does not proclaim an ‘effacement’ of humanity to use Foucault’s phrase, as human loss seems to be counterbalanced by the evolution of robots towards consciousness. When reading the novel, the uncanny feeling created by the proximity of defamiliarisation *and* estrangement through both radical alterity and relative identity leads to a thrust beyond dichotomies. Besides, the writer presents words and story-telling as the ultimate force of resistance against entropy and total fragmentation: “words are the part of silence that can be spoken”.

Notes

¹ “A *zeugma* is the rhetorical yoking, apparently unnatural or at least against the grain, of two quite different terms into one condensed and startling figuration. In this book I mean to consider—to tease into parts, then to recombine those severed parts, not once but several times, not in one way but by various paths—a popular but still despised *zeugma*: sf or ‘science fiction’” (Broderick 2000, 10).

² “A related rhetorical gadget is *syllipsis*, in which a single word is applied simultaneously to two quite distinct topics; perhaps sf or SF is a form of *syllipsis* fiction” (Broderick 2000, 41).

³ Walter E. Meyers, *Aliens and Linguists: Language Study and Science Fiction*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980.

⁴ In this volume Maylis Rospide points to the “Star Trek problem” as evoked by the English writer Will Self which states that English has always been the *lingua franca* among alien creatures, even if this sometimes deflates the reader’s necessary suspension of disbelief.

⁵ For an analysis of the language of twentieth-century dystopias, see also Sorlin, “Twentieth-Century Linguistic Dystopias: A Continuum between Commitment and Autonomy”, Jean-Michel Ganteau & Christine Reynier (eds.), *Autonomy and*

Commitment in Twentieth Century British Literature (Montpellier: PULM, coll 'Present Perfect 5', 2010): 203-211.

⁶ The fact that genre defies definition is at the core of Alastair Fowler's study of genres: "However, these attempts to apply speech act theory do not take us far. This is partly because of the limitations of the theory itself [...]. But in part—and this is what we need to notice—the reason is that the fictional genres resist definition" (Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Oxford: OUP, 1982, 7). Karl Canvat draws the same conclusions in "La problématique des genres littéraires : Bilan des recherches et nouvelles orientations", <http://www.fltr.ucl.ac.be/autres_entites/ILIT/textecanvat.htm>.

⁷ Veronica Hollinger, "Contemporary Trends in Science Fiction Criticism, 1980-1999", *Science Fiction Studies* 26.2 (1999) <<http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/78/hollinger78art.htm>>.

⁸ André Comte-Sponville, *Dictionnaire de la philosophie* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2000).

⁹ Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay, Sandrine Sorlin, Maylis Rospide, Elaine Després and Hélène Machinal all rely, at one point or another on Suvin's take on science fiction, sometimes the better to question it.

¹⁰ "Russian formalism (at least evidences in the work of its best known practitioner Victor Shlovskys) was impelled not by a desire to domesticate, order and control that strange stuff called literature, but rather by a desire to register and affirm the power of literature (especially poetry) to make strange, to defamiliarise, to make unfamiliar all sorts of familiar perceptions and beliefs" (Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003, 5).

¹¹ Jackson 1-2.

¹² Adam Roberts echoes this traditional take on science fiction when he describes its colonial roots: "we can argue that SF as a distinctive genre comes to cultural prominence in the Age of Empires precisely because it is a necessary part of the official ideology of empire-forming that difference needs to be flattened, or even eradicated. SF, in other words, figures as the expression of the subconscious aspect of this official ideology" (Roberts 49). Nonetheless, he laments the lack of experimentation in genre fiction or its formulaic nature and calls for a bolder embodiment of the genre: "Many fans of SF seek out the comfort of the familiar and mask that desire under the illusory rhetoric of difference, of 'catlike mrem' and their like" (Roberts 13).

¹³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Morales de l'histoire*, Paris, Grasset, 1991, p. 41, our translation.

¹⁴ "The subject can no longer be conceived of as closed up in itself, set in a structural opposition to the world onto which it peers out and of which it constructs a knowledge or representations. Such a conception of the subject is now outmoded, an abstraction or illusion. The subject must rather be understood as always in relation in the first instance, from the start" (Gibson 27).

¹⁵ "Part of its subversive power lies in this resistance to allegory and metaphor. (...) It could be suggested that the movement of the fantastic narrative is one of *metonymical* rather than *metaphorical* process: one object does not *stand for*

another, but literally becomes the other, slides into it, metamorphosing from one shape to another in a permanent flux and instability” (Jackson 1981, 41-42).

**OTHERNESS:
FROM PHILOSOPHY
TO POLITICS (AND BACK)**

CHAPTER ONE

BLEGHBE' CHUGH VAJ BLHEGH! FROM AN ETHICS OF ALTERITY TO A POLITICS OF STYLE

JEAN-JACQUES LECERCLE

UNIVERSITE PARIS OUEST NANTERRE LA DEFENSE

1. Two questions

The editors of this volume ask, among others, two questions which I shall try to address:

Question 1: Is there such a thing as a “rhetorical ethics” that could give us access to the other?

Question 2: Does reaching the breaking point of unintelligibility guarantee the birth of the other in its radical alterity?

The first question is tentative, as appears in the inverted commas around the phrase “rhetorical ethics”. For if we reduce the phrase to “rhetoric” and provisionally forget the word “ethics”, the answer to the question is immediate and positive, even if it turns out to be unsatisfactory: for is it not in the nature of rhetoric, as core of the technique of judicial or political oratory, to give us access to the other in the form of persuasion? The unsatisfactory character of the answer lies in the fact that we may be indulging in sophistry—the object of the exercise is no longer to aim towards the Good and the True, but towards the tactically convenient. It is the introduction of the word “ethics” in the phrase that turns what is always-already an answer into a question, as we may wonder whether ethics is really compatible with rhetoric: can we imagine an ethical sophist blunting his argument in order to be fair to his opponent, or simply to save his opponent’s face?

The second question takes us into the domain of the invented languages of genre literature, where intelligibility, at least at first sight, there is none, the speakers of such languages being irretrievably alien. But its formulation

presupposes that intelligibility comes first, and moves towards its breaking point, as it does when the psychiatric patient lapses into delirium, when he or she leaves the linguistic furrow. And the question suggests that it is this break up of communication or of sense that gives us access to the other in its (rather than “his”) radical alterity. The problem of course is: what kind of access is this, if unintelligibility is total? How can I go beyond an immediate awareness of an alterity so radical that there is no possible point of contact with this radical other?

And there is a third question implicit here: can we articulate questions 1 and 2, and if so how? This is probably the question that is of the greatest interest to us, as it is the question of the function of nonsense in invented languages and more generally in fiction. Is literature, with its focalisation on *écriture*, which includes a recourse to rhetoric, a proper site for an ethics of alterity, and can such an ethics emerge from the contact between our common language (common to author and readers of the text) and an unintelligible language inserted in the text? We might re-formulate this third question in the two following provisional theses, which it will be the aim of this paper to assess and modify: (i) the invented languages of fiction give us an access to radical alterity and (ii) access to radical alterity is a question of ethics.

2. Enter the Klingon

Here are three sentences in an invented language:

- (i) bleghbe'chugh vaj blHegh
- (ii) pIHoHqu'vIpbe'
- (iii) SutPhtaHvIS chaH DIHlvpù

I think you will grant me that such sentences are, to most of us, utterly unintelligible. And it is easy to spell out the reasons why. First, they are un-utterable for the average speaker of a natural language, the script being totally foreign to us, for instance in its lavish use of capital letters in unusual places (but I find myself in roughly the same situation when confronted with a text in Gaelic). Secondly, it is impossible to recognize a single word or morpheme, and in the case of (ii) even to recognize that this is indeed a sentence (but again, I have had a similar experience while trying to read the menu in a Hungarian restaurant). Thirdly, it is impossible to break up those sentences into recognizable words with their suffixes and prefixes, and tentatively to ascribe parts of speech to them (but again, I find myself in the same situation when attempting to read a text in a Native American language). I am indeed at a loss.

Perhaps translation will help:

- (i) Surrender or die!
- (ii) We are not afraid to kill you!
- (iii) While they were negotiating, we attacked them.

The three sentences are written in Klingon, the language of the Klingon Empire in the cult television series of the sixties, *Star Trek* (remember Mr Spock and his pointed ears?). And I have quoted them from Mark Okrand's *The Klingon Dictionary* (Okrand 1992). He is the linguist who created this alien language for the series, and his task was obviously to make the language as alien as possible. In those days of a still icy Cold War, the Klingon Empire was the military imperialist empire of a race of humanoids bent on domination and conquest, against which the democratic Federation, meaning us, was intermittently at war. Hence the strange script, the strangeness of which is meant to suggest an alterity that is not only racial, but political.

And it is indeed clear that, in this case, "radical alterity" must be understood in its ideological sense of rejection of the alien, an incitement to radical xenophobia. For it is only too obvious that this language is a language of war, domination and naked power, as appears in the examples that illustrate the grammar of Klingon, from which my three sentences are taken. Here are other examples (I spare you the Klingon): "officer who hit her" illustrates the relative clause in Klingon (Okrand 1992, 63); "If you do the wrong thing, I will kill you" (if clause) (Okrand 1992, 52). And here is a list of words taken at random from the English-Klingon lexicon that is the core of the book (they are all words beginning with "gh", a notoriously unpronounceable sound in Klingon): "diplomacy, serpent, diplomat, dominate, be rough, midnight snack, consent, nose necklace, be messy, scare, exile, court-martial, vacation, ethics" (Okrand 1992, 86). This vocabulary, if you allow me the expression, has a one-track mind. And the language is, as is natural, the expression of a culture, except that this is a culture of conquest and domination, witness the inclusion in the grammar of a section on "clipped Klingon", a reduced form of the language used for barking orders. Or again, witness the lack of plain civility in this culture, as we learn in the introduction to the grammar that Klingon has no words for greetings: barked orders are obviously how they address one another. So that the presence of the word "ethics" at the end of my list must be taken as ironic: there is no ethics compatible with this form of rhetoric, the only function of which is the domination (discursive or otherwise) of the interlocutor who is always-already an enemy (there is no word for "tenderness" in the lexicon, and the Klingon word for love is

“bang”, which will suggest the wrong idea in the English-speaking reader). No wonder they attack those who negotiate with them.

This, therefore, is a language of the exclusion of the Other as alien, what I would like to call, if you pardon me the coinage, a *desperanto*, a language devoid of hope or cooperation: a language for imperialists.

And yet that alterity is not as radical as it seems, in that this is undoubtedly a *language*, an instrument of communication with other races. What we have is not merely a number of utterances in Klingon in the television series, but a whole dictionary of the language, complete with grammar and elementary phrase-book for eager intergalactic tourists (for instance, “Where is the bathroom?”, “Will it hurt?”, “Go to jail!”, and other useful phrases) (Okrand 1992, 170-1). And the grammar of Klingon has the same structure as an average grammar of English or French: sounds, parts of speech, morphology, syntax. Better still, a closer look at Klingon syntax will show that it ought to be entirely familiar to us. Thus, we learn that the “basic structure” of the Klingon sentence is Object-Verb-Subject: “puq legh yoS” means “the officer sees the child”, while “yoS legh pugh” means “the child sees the officer”. We don’t need to be subtle linguists to realize that this is an inverted form of English and nothing else.

So our first conclusion must be that Klingon, far from being the expression of radical alterity is a thinly disguised form of English. So we are not surprised to learn, in the introduction to the grammar of the language, that for purposes of communication, the Klingons themselves prefer English. The language of democracy, our language, is the language of intergalactic globalisation: “Although Klingons are proud of their language and frequently engage in long discussions about its expressiveness and beauty, they have found it impractical for communication outside the Klingon Empire. For intra- and intergalactic communication, the Klingon government, along with most other governments, has accepted English as the *lingua franca*” (Okrand 1992, 10).

The question therefore is: is this a feature of this particular invented language, or are all invented languages, in so far as they are languages, constitutively unable to give us access to alterity? For the immediate objection to my analysis of Klingon is that I have chosen a caricature: a language of exclusion, going back to the period of the Cold War, with no utopian aims. So let us take another look at the evidence.

3. Enter the Vrilya

There is one classic Utopia in which a whole chapter is devoted to the language of the alien race. Bulwer Lytton’s *The Coming Race* (Bulwer

Lytton 1995) was published in 1871 and obviously influenced by Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre*, published in 1864. But whereas Verne's tale is what is known as a "ripping yarn", full of adventures and dangers overcome, the hero's visit to the land of *vril*, a mysterious substance or force which not only provides light and energy, but heals and kills at will (it has survived in the English language in the brand name Bovril), is strangely devoid of action. After the first few pages (they describe the hero's entry in the land of the *vril-ya*) the novel turns out to be a systematic and quasi-scientific description of their civilisation: of their mores, beliefs, foreign policy, and of the economic structure of their society. And chapter 12 is entirely devoted to a description of their language. It starts with a quotation from Max Müller, the Oxford linguist, on the typology of languages. The language of the *vril-ya*, being inflectional, belongs to the most perfect type of language. The main roots are described, as in most 19th century grammars (Max Müller it was that introduced the concept of "root" into the science of language), together with the rules of word creation and word derivation, and the meaning of inflexions. There is even a table of cases, the word "man" being systematically declined, as in a Latin grammar.

What we have, therefore, is a perfect language, but hardly an access to radical alterity, as there are two recognizable sources to its perfection: it is a kind of Esperanto, a created language rid of the defects of complication and exception that plague natural languages; and its structure is the best, being based on "the Aryan or Indo-Germanic" type of languages. In other words this perfect language is a reflection of the linguistic ideology of the period. And this is coherent with the rest of the tale, an a-critical utopia which is a thinly disguised image of the actual perfections of an imperialist but parliamentary monarchy, practising religious tolerance: you have recognized Victorian Britain.

So we are back at exactly the same point: both the language of the evil Klingon Empire and of the perfect race of the *vril-ya* (who will nevertheless one day invade our superficial earth and destroy our civilisation, hence the title of the novel) provide us with pictures of ourselves, not of alterity, be it radical or mild. The suspicion grows in us that images of alterity are in fact images of our own alienation, and that as long as we are within the ambit of language there is no escaping the self. Let's try to reach out to radical alterity, if not in literature, at least in philosophy.

4. Enter Levinas

The philosopher of radical alterity is undoubtedly Emmanuel Levinas: his *Totalité et infini* is an explicit attempt to think radical alterity around the twin concepts of *Autrui* and the Face (*le Visage*) (Levinas, 1990). And indeed, the reference to a rhetorical *ethics* and the possibility of opening up to radical alterity place us in the centre of the problematic of *Totalité et infini*.

Let us, therefore, for a moment suppose that our “other” is the Levinasian other, not merely the Other of the Same (*l’Autre du Même*) but the Other Self of the Self (*Autrui par rapport à Moi*)—that Other who is the source of transcendence in the epiphany of the Face, the source of ethics, an ethics based on the radical alterity of the revelation of the infinite in *Autrui’s* face.

Levinas’s philosophical style, with its characteristic of assertive *ressassement*, of unceasing repetition, is highly coherent: what we have is an articulated system of concepts, or rather of contrasts between concepts, which can be captured in the form of a systematic correlation, the beginning of which is given in the very title of the book. The following table reconstructs this correlation:

| | | | | | |
|----------|-------|---------------|----------|-------------|-------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| Infinite | Other | <i>Autrui</i> | Ethics | Eschatology | Metaphysics |
| Totality | Same | Self | Politics | History | Ontology |

| | | | |
|---------------|--------|------------|------------|
| 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| Transcendence | Face | Separation | Expression |
| Immanence | Things | Belonging | Exchange |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 11 | 12 | 13 |
| Epiphany of meaning | Face to face interpellation | Speech (<i>Parole</i>) |
| Construction of meaning | Rhetoric and Anti- language | Product (<i>Oeuvre</i>) |

In my reconstruction, I have privileged what concerns language, because it is of prime importance in Levinas’s problematic, the access to *Autrui* by way of his Face being steeped in language (but language for him is speech, the direct address of *parole* rather than the system of articulated *langue*). And the access to the radical Other is given in an epiphany of meaning (*donation de sens*) which contrasts with the slow and painful

construction of meaning in articulated language: expression (of the Face) is the order of the day rather than the exchange of communication, and the relation between the participants (*Autrui* and Self) is not one of equality, even if it occurs face to face, but of interpellation, of hailing (I answer *Autrui*'s call and I issue my own call to Him—question and answer rather than cooperative exchange of information). The articulated language of cooperative exchange is plagued by the possibility of using rhetoric, an inauthentic means of persuasion, and of falling into the anti-language of non-communication and epiphanic failure, the best example of which for Levinas is the language of the witches in *Macbeth*.

Where does this leave the possibility of access to radical alterity through the invented languages of genre literature? And where does this leave the possibility of a rhetorical ethics? The answer, I am afraid, is “Nowhere” in both cases. In this problematic, the phrase “rhetorical ethics” is contradictory, as “rhetoric” and “ethics” belong to different and opposed lines in the correlation: there is no possible ethical stance in rhetoric, which is dealt with in a section entitled “*Rhétorique et injustice*” (Levinas 1990, 66-9). Rhetoric is the domain of lying and sophistry, and its result is akin to the situation created by the systematic lying of Descartes’ *malin génie*: “Situation que créent ces êtres ricanant, communiquant à travers un labyrinthe de sous-entendus que Shakespeare et Goethe font apparaître dans les scènes de sorcières où se parle l’antilangage et où répondre serait se couvrir de ridicule” (Levinas 1990, 92).

Of course, anti-language here involves much more than the witches’ incantations (“Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble”): it concerns the oblique language of the oracle that is meant to deceive Macbeth, but I am afraid our invented languages must be taken as forms of anti-language, as not deserving an answer in so far as they are not the occasion for a *donation de sens*. Levinas’ main thesis is that radical alterity presupposes transcendence: *Autrui* is another name for God, even if He appears in the shape of the naked helpless Face calling for ethical responsibility. He appears in an epiphany of meaning, not in unintelligibility, albeit radical. For Levinas, the archetypal form of language is *parole*, not Saussure’s concept but rather a form of contact based on oral speech, in face to face interaction. Language as we capture it under Saussure’s *langue*, the code or system, is on the side of *oeuvre*, a human product, not the expression of the transcendent Face. All the more so if what we have is a written form of language, as we must have in literature: even if the words bear the trace of a real presence, they are at best traces, with loss of epiphanic revelation. Invented languages, in so far as they are literary products, project the

wrong type of alterity through their (apparent) incommunicability onto what was an entirely communicable, although radical, alterity, the alterity of the transcendent Face. In fact, there is no such thing as unintelligibility in Levinas: *Autrui's* expression, although pre-linguistic, is utterly intelligible (this is the epiphanic revelation of meaning): natural languages bear traces of this epiphany (this is their glory), but they are also capable of betraying it by reducing it to *oeuvre*, an immanent human product. Invented languages only increase such betrayal: they provide no access to alterity, they are merely antilanguages.

There are two problems here. One is local: in spite of the words we have used (ethics, radical alterity), our problematic cannot be a Levinasian one, in which case we might wish to alter our terms. But the second is more general: do we have to accept Levinas's position as a *philosophie première*, given that it is a hardly disguised form of religious thinking? If we do not, we might wish to keep our terms and go beyond Levinas.

5. Exit Levinas, pursued by a Marxist bear

There is no disguising the importance of Levinas's position: it is an attempt to think together radical alterity and language, which is exactly what the two questions we started from incite us to do. So we might be inclined to do with Levinas what Marx famously did with Hegel: put him right way up. In this case, this would take the form of inverting the lines of the correlation, turning the negative terms into positive ones. Thus, we would move from "infinity rather than totality, etc." to "totality rather than the infinite, politics rather than ethics, history rather than eschatology, immanence rather than transcendence." In other words, we would move from a Levinasian to a Hegelo-Marxist problematic (and the possibility of such move is already present in Levinas, in so far as his main philosophical opponent is Hegel, the philosopher of totality).

But the move has its own difficulties. Not all columns may be readily inverted (for instance, the question of alterity would be replaced by the question of identity: the Same rather than the Other), and merely inverting the terms of a problematic does not take us out of it. So we would have to do more than invert the lines: we would have to modify the columns.

For instance, a Marxist position will do without column three, *Autrui* vs Self. For a Marxist, *Autrui* is another self, with whom one engages in cooperation through communal work and its concomitant language. We need to contradict Levinas' thesis, "*Autrui ne fait pas nombre avec moi*" (Levinas 1990, 28), as the other does take part in this community of work and language on an equal footing with myself. Which means that we shall

have to invert columns 10 and 11, and prefer linguistic exchange to the epiphany of expression in *parole*, and the slow construction of meaning in such exchange to *donation de sens*. We shall ignore column 8, as the concept of the Face is of no particular importance in the cooperation of work and linguistic exchange. We shall deny that there is a valid contrast in column 13 (written language, as human *oeuvre*, as inscription of memory, is as important as speech in face to face interaction). And as a culmination of this process of revision, we shall replace column 9 by turning the contrast between separation (between immanent Self and transcendent *Autrui*) into a dialectics of alienation, in which Self is exteriorized as an Other and appears as alien to himself. This is the point where we finally leave Levinas' problematic: not radical alterity (*Autrui* as Face), but alienation (otherness issuing from self and oppressing it). So the unintelligibility of our invented languages will be interpreted not as the incommunicability of radical alterity but as a result and symptom of a process of exteriorization of the self into alienation.

Alienation, as we know, is a controversial Marxist concept (Is it still a concept in the mature Marx? Is it a characteristic of human essence or of the capitalist mode of production? Does it involve the alienation of the subject in the object or the loss of the object and the production of an abstract and empty subject?) (Sève, 2012, Fischbach, 2009). Its origin is to be found in Hegel and especially in Feuerbach, where it is the centre of a critique of religion. Religion for Feuerbach is the inscription of the relation of Man to himself as another being. Man contemplates his own essence as another being and worships it—radical alterity emerges not from transcendence but from the self. In Marx, religious alienation is an ideological representation of the alienation of the commodity from the worker that produces it.

Here is a classic formulation of the Marxian “drama of alienation”, taken from Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (for Lefebvre, the concept of alienation is central to such a critique):

Au cours de son effort pour dominer la nature et créer son monde, l'homme fait surgir pour lui une nouvelle nature. Certains produits humains fonctionnent vis-à-vis de la réalité humaine comme une nature impénétrable, non dominée, pesant du dehors sur sa conscience et sa volonté. Bien entendu, ce ne peut être qu'une apparence ; des produits de l'activité humaine ne peuvent avoir tous les caractères des choses brutes et naturelles. Et cependant, cette apparence est une réalité : la marchandise, l'argent, le capital, l'Etat, les institutions juridiques économiques et politiques, les idéologies fonctionnent comme des réalités extérieures à l'homme. Et en un sens, ce sont des réalités, avec leurs lois. Et cependant, ce sont uniquement des produits humains.