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Being Taught Something World-Sized

'The Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith' and the Work of World Literature

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ABSTRACT: This paper reads 'The Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith' (2016) as an exemplary demonstration of the work of world literature. Smith's story articulates an ethics of reading that is grounded in the recipient's openness to the singular, unpredictable, and unverifiable text of the other. More specifically, Smith's account enables the very event that it painstakingly stages: the encounter with alterity and newness, which is both the theme of the narrative and the effect of the text on the reader. At the same time, however, the text urges to move from an ethics of literature understood as the responsible reception of the other by an individual reader to a more explicitly convivial and political ethics of commitment beyond the scene of reading.

KEYWORDS: Ali Smith; anagogy; ethics; Refugee Tales; singularity; world literature

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In ‘The Detainee’s Tale as told to Ali Smith’ (2016), the narrator (whom we are encouraged to identify with the author herself) recollects her encounters with a Ghanaian *sans papiers* asylum seeker in Britain, and later on the same day with a young Vietnamese who is held in indefinite detention in a removal centre.¹ These are not chance meetings but organized interviews prearranged by a refugee relief group. A person named Anna, who is a member of that relief organization, accompanies the narrator through the maze-like corridors of the university, where the first interview takes place, and later through the numerous security checks at the detention centre. Anna is also present

1 Ali Smith, ‘The Detainee’s Tale as told to Ali Smith’, in *Refugee Tales*, ed. by David Herd and Anna Pincus (London: Comma Press, 2016), pp. 49–62. Subsequent citations given in-text.

during the interviews. The text that ensues is a meticulous account of these two encounters. The speaker/author constantly addresses the man from Ghana as ‘you’, so that the report as a whole reads like a letter to that person — a ‘letter’ written with the hope that the addressee will approve of it as a token of the writer’s faithful documentation of all that has been said, but also as testimony to the writer’s responsible reading of the detainee’s tale.

‘The Detainee’s Tale as told to Ali Smith’ is part of a slim volume titled *Refugee Tales*, edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus in 2016. While Ali Smith, especially since the ‘four seasons’ quartet on Brexit Britain comprising the novels *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer*, requires no introduction, David Herd and Anna Pincus are not likely to be household names. Herd is a professor of Modern Literature at the University of Kent, Pincus is a civil rights activist working with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group. She may well be the ‘Anna’ character in Smith’s report. Their project, *Refugee Tales*, offers an occasion to engage with both the vexed issue of world literature and, more specifically, with the ethico-political implications of the notion of the literary work as event.

WORKING WORLD LITERATURE

Smith’s text lends itself easily (perhaps deceptively so) to multiple readings as world literature according to the different criteria elaborated and proposed by influential actors in the arena of current world literature studies. If, as David Damrosch suggests, world literature is primarily defined by its capacity to open ‘multiple windows on the world’,² then Ali Smith’s exposure of/to the excruciating

2 David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 15.

plight of the asylum seeker can obviously be read as an ideal example of such an opening that allows us ‘a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own’.³ In this respect it cannot be denied that the specifically powerful appeal of ‘The Detainee’s Tale’ may to some extent derive from its subject matter: after all, the predicament of *sans papiers* refugees is clearly an urgent ‘world theme’⁴ that puts the literary text under the ethical pressure ‘to find an adequate representation’.⁵ Nor is this obligation a matter of the world-literary text alone but just as much an effect on the reader; indeed, one could argue that the dialogic structure of Smith’s text, and the very sincere urge of the white privileged narrator to ‘reach out’ to the illegalized asylum seeker, is designed as a staging of Gayatri Spivak’s agenda to conceive of world literature as an exercise in ‘suspending oneself into the text of the other’, ‘striving for a response from the distant other, without guarantees’.⁶ If thus no ‘guarantee’ ensures that a responsive encounter of reader and text will occur, the possibility of failure looms large here marking the putative point at which the irreducible alterity of the other appears to put a limit on all translational expectations, which all the same remain the driving impulse of any world-literary preoccupation. Reading, therefore, has to proceed from what Emily Apter has called ‘a dispossessive ethics’⁷ that not only eschews the appropriative and accumulative stance of the collector of worlds but

3 Ibid., p. 281.

4 Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, *Mapping World Literature: International Canonization and Transnational Literatures* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 138.

5 Ibid., p. 114.

6 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 23.

7 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 329.

actually engenders processes of actively unlearning proprietorial logics. Perhaps this imperative resonates with the idea put forth by Stephen Heath who suggests that world literature be conceived of as the effect of a particular kind of reading that unmoores and unsettles the reader, enabling her to read ‘migrationally and impurely’: ‘to read with [...] a migrant’s-eye perspective, which is another definition of “world literature”’.⁸ No doubt, Smith’s narrator undergoes such a process of ‘dispossession’ (Apter) or ‘unmooring’ (Heath) in the course of her exposure to the detainees’ tales, effectively disidentifying her with the status of citizen/subject that the text of the other has so forcefully revealed as exclusive privilege rather than universal right. World literature in this sense works as ‘an ethical project because, like the larger project of cosmopolitanism to which it belongs, it asks us to imagine or act out an ethical relation to the world as a whole’.⁹ Pheng Cheah, in a similar vein, suggests that ‘world literature must work toward receiving a world or letting it come’: ¹⁰ a process that Smith’s text, again, virtually stages by tracing the narrator’s insight into how, in the course of her exposure to the refugees’ accounts, she is ‘being taught something world-sized’, without any self-congratulatory claim that she has adequately ‘learned’ this lesson, or ever will.

I am aware that my configuration of ‘The Detainee’s Tale’ with a range of snippets from contemporary propositions on world literature is criminally loose and has done

8 Stephen Heath, ‘The Politics of Genre’, in *Debating World Literature*, ed. by Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 163–74 (p. 174).

9 Bruce Robbins, ‘Uses of World Literature’, in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 383–92 (p. 391).

10 Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 211–12.

justice neither to literature nor to theory, neither to Ali Smith's text nor to the critical models that I have merely referenced here but hardly unpacked. All the same this is not meant to be a wilful assemblage but a pointer toward one of the dominant problems of current engagements with the work of world literature. For what hopefully emerges from the above configuration is how all these discrepant voices have one crucial concern in common, namely, their preoccupation with the *ethical* dimension of world literature, if not of the literary as such. In this sense they can be read as indicative of how intensely the practice (both literary and critical) of world literature is involved in what Michael Eskin has dubbed the 'turn to ethics' in literary studies in general.¹¹ Among the major protagonists of this 'turn', Eskin identifies Derek Attridge, who indeed has, for the past two or three decades, influentially and consistently argued for a very specific ethics of reading. Sketching the basic outlines of his theory may help to clarify the potential and potential limitations of the 'ethical turn' in (world) literature studies.

Attridge highlights the singularity, alterity and inventiveness of the literary text, which he posits not as a fixed object but emphatically as an event. He is concerned with the radical newness of 'something extra' that the literary text qua singular event imports into the routine procedures of the everyday. As in Alain Badiou's delineation of the irruptive 'truth-event', this event cannot be deliberately forced but is 'something that happens without warning to a passive, though alert, consciousness'.¹² More specifically,

11 Michael Eskin, 'The Double "Turn" to Ethics and Literature?', *Poetics Today*, 25.4 (2005), pp. 557–72 (p. 557).

12 Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 26.

the text-as-event '*happens to the reader*' as an event '*for the reader*'¹³ in their strictly individual historicity for which Attridge coins the term 'idioculture':

The term 'idioculture' refers to the embodiment in a single individual of widespread cultural norms and modes of behaviour. [...] Idioculture is the name for the totality of the cultural codes constituting a subject, at a given time, as an over-determined, self-contradictory system that manifests itself materially in a host of ways.¹⁴

Idioculture thus comprises the specific and idiosyncratic appropriations and articulations of historically available cultural resources by/in the individual. It is into this idiocultural continuity that the text as event of reading erupts, effecting an immanent break (to adopt a term from Badiou's theory of the event) inasmuch as the encounter with the other re-calibrates the reader's idioculture and thus 'remakes the actor'.¹⁵ As a consequence, 'the norms of my idioculture' are by the literary event 'so freed up that the truly other finds a welcome'.¹⁶ What is that 'other'? It is certainly not a property of the text as object nor some unconscious substratum already latent in the reading subject; it is instead the hitherto unheard-of, the theretofore '*unencounterable*',¹⁷ which in the event of reading is allowed to emerge on the condition that the reader to some extent abandon their 'intellectual control': 'The coming into being of the wholly new requires some relinquishment of intellectual control, and "the other"

13 Ibid., p. 59; p. 45.

14 Ibid., p. 22.

15 Ibid., p. 126.

16 Ibid., p. 24.

17 Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 55.

is one possible name for that to which it is ceded.¹⁸ As a result, something may emerge that — again translated into Badiou's terminology — had no significance in the dominant language of the given situation: 'The other, the unprecedented, hitherto unimaginable disposition of cultural materials comes into being in the event'¹⁹ as a pure singularity — a singularity that, for all its intense inventiveness, emphatically concerns no one but the individual(ized) reader to whom it happens. In short, the event cannot be shared or communicated *as event*. It is first and foremost the encounter with the other as singularity, where 'singularities are sites of resistance to the universal'.²⁰

It is precisely because of this emphatic uniqueness that the literary event attains a dissident character, on the condition however of its being categorically incommensurate and, indeed, ultimately irreconcilable with meaning as such. Attridge makes this clear when he contrasts 'literature' with 'allegory': while the latter 'deals with the *already known*, [...] literature opens a space for the other. Allegory announces a moral code, literature invites an ethical response'²¹ whose appropriate technique is 'literal reading', that is to say: 'a reading that defers the many interpretive moves that we are accustomed to making in our dealings with literature, whether historical, biographical, psychological, moral, or political'.²² Literal, moral, allegoric: the very terms collated here make it well-nigh impossible *not* to associate Attridge's theory with the age-old tradition of

18 Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature*, p. 24.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

20 Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, p. 133.

21 Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 64.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

patriotic hermeneutics, whose fourth level of interpretation, though, is conspicuous in its absence: the anagogic, which traditionally was the locus of the *sensus communis*. As I will try to argue later on, the recuperation of this dimension (whose omission is definitely not specific to Attridge!) might be a worthy project for an ethico-political practice of world literature. To be very clear, such recuperation can only come about as a substantial redefinition of the anagogic itself. To some extent, ‘The Detainee’s Tale’, and the *Refugee Tales* project to which it is a contribution, may serve as a concrete example pointing in that direction.

REFUGEE TALES

Refugee Tales is the extension of an outreach event that has been organized by the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group annually since 2012. The multiple-day group walk is intended to publicly express solidarity with migrants and refugees seeking asylum in the UK: those who either are involuntarily living a life on the run, or worse, are incarcerated in the limbo of indefinite detention. It is especially the latter issue which has sparked significant civil-society protest and campaigning all over the UK, including the *Refugee Tales* project, which has constituted itself primarily as an attempt to enact a counter-logic to the established procedures of indefinite detention. For in fact the UK is likely, at the time of writing, to leave the European Union as the only (ex-)member state that practices the indefinite detention of non-passport holders, i.e. ‘illegal’ immigrants. What is impossible even in Hungary or Slovakia is indeed daily routine in the land that boasts of having given the world *habeas corpus*: in Britain, and only in Britain, is it possible to lock away refugees, migrants, and asylum

seekers without time limit, sometimes for periods of years, with no indication of whether and when they will be released or whether and when their case will be decided. It should be added that detention centres are profitably operated not by the state, but by multinational corporations, with little transparency or meaningful accountability. The Brook House 'immigration removal centre' at Gatwick Airport, for instance, is operated by the multinational G4S corporation on behalf of the Home Office, while Yarl's Wood, arguably the most notorious of Britain's ten detention centres, is run by the Serco Group, which has faced recurrent charges of sexual abuse, unlawful detention of minors and children, and numerous cases of suicide.

Herd and Pincus's *Refugee Tales* project is part of the sustained and substantial protest that has been raised against such practices in Britain. It is an activist intervention but its activism is first and foremost literary. While it unabashedly harnesses literature to a political cause, it simultaneously insists on its status *as literature*, and to being received as such. In close collaboration with the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group and the Kent Refugee Help initiative, Herd and Pincus further developed the idea of the public solidarity walk by adding a literary dimension to the walking demonstration. Modelled on the mythical founding text of English Literature — Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* — the event combines walking with storytelling and is meant thereby to re-enact and re-appropriate Chaucer's poem for the immediate present. Moreover, the multiple-day walking-and-storytelling tour through mythical 'Chaucer country' is intended to recode the landscape of southern England from a hostile environment into a space of welcome; but most fundamentally, to reclaim the work of literature as an act of sharing and

conviviality. In the words of Ali Smith, patron of *Refugee Tales*:

The telling of stories is an act of profound hospitality. It always has been; story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world. Story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a hospitable meeting of the needs of others, and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal.²³

Setting out from Southwark in a series of walks to Canterbury, a group of participants including asylum seekers, pressure-group activists, writers and sympathizers from all walks of life rehearse the pilgrims' progress as told in Chaucer's poem. By the mere act of walking, they produce a public and political performance in its own right, 'crossing part of the country that is integral to a certain sense of English cultural identity, and that is also now the first sight of the UK for those who arrive via the road, rail and ferry routes between Calais and Dover'.²⁴ Clearly the idea is not just to raise awareness about the outrage of indefinite detention but symbolically and performatively to instantiate a solidary and hospitable Britain 'to come' as an alternative to the then Prime Minister Theresa May's vision of a 'hostile environment'. 'As the project walked', recalls David

23 Ali Smith, 'Welcome from Ali Smith' <<https://www.refugeetales.org/about>> [accessed 22 September 2019].

24 Tom White, 'Lives Suspended: An Essay on "Refugee Tales" and "Refugee Tales II", edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus', *Glasgow Review of Books* (21 September 2017) <<https://glasgowreviewofbooks.com/2017/09/21/lives-suspended-an-essay-on-refugee-tales-and-refugee-tales-ii-edited-by-david-herd-and-anna-pincus/>> [accessed 22 September 2019].

Herd, ‘it reclaimed the landscape of South England for the language of welcome and everywhere it stopped it was greeted with hospitality and enthusiasm.’²⁵

The general principle of the project consists of a tandem structure in which the ‘walk in solidarity’ is two things at once: first, a publicly visible manifestation of a community underway not just towards Canterbury but towards a more welcoming Britain, ‘walking towards the better imagined’²⁶ as the slogan of the project has it; and second the occasion to tell and listen to tales en route. It thus is both ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’:

Real as the walk is, and acutely real as are the experiences presented in the tales, there is a significant sense in which Refugee Tales is also symbolic. What it aims to do, as it crosses the landscape, is to open up a space: a space in which the stories of people who have been detained can be told and heard in a respectful manner. It is out of such a space, as the project imagines, that new forms of language and solidarity can emerge.²⁷

It is important to point out that these ‘stories of people who have been detained’ are presented not by those experts-by-experience themselves but by established writers, many of them leading figures on Britain’s literary scene — from Jackie Kay to Marina Warner, Iain Sinclair to Evaristo, Ben Okri to Kamila Shamsie. It would, at one level, be misleading to call any of these literary celebrities the *authors* of these stories, since these are obviously stories

25 David Herd, ‘About Refugee Tales’ <<http://refugeetales.org/about-refugee-tales/>> [accessed 22 September 2019].

26 Refugee Tales <<http://refugeetales.org>> [accessed 22 September 2019].

27 David Herd, ‘Afterword: Calling for an End to Indefinite Detention’, in *Refugee Tales II*, ed. by David Herd and Anna Pincus (London: Comma Press, 2017), pp. 113–25 (p. 115).

that ‘belong’ to somebody else. The Chaucerian titles indicate this by way of grammar: ‘The Arriver’s Tale’ — ‘as told to Abdulrazak Gurnah’; ‘The Dependant’s Tale’ — ‘as told to Marina Lewycka’; ‘The Lorry Driver’s Tale’ — ‘as told to Chris Cleave’ etc. The involved writers have been told ‘a tale’ beforehand, in extensive dialogue with a person immediately affected by or involved in the issue of refuge and detention in Britain: (former) detainees as in Ali Smith’s case, asylum seekers, immigrants, lawyers, clergymen, support workers. The tales are in that sense the outcome of a close collaboration between the person whose story it is, and the writer they are working with and who gives that story a specific shape. In the best of cases, the writer succeeds in translating the ‘tale’ into literature in the emphatic sense insisted on by Derek Attridge, but the ensuing event is meant to exceed the strictly circumscribed horizon of idioculture.

‘The Detainee’s Tale as told to Ali Smith’ from the first volume of *Refugee Tales* opens *in medias res*: ‘The first thing that happens, you tell me, is that school stops’ (p. 49). The opening sentence not only marks the beginning of the ‘tale’ — the ‘first thing that happens’; it also establishes a text-as-dialogue structure that allows the narrator to recurrently address her interlocutor directly, even if in retrospect, as ‘you’ — namely the detainee whose tale she is processing, reflexively, cautiously, but not preciously. Moreover, the abruptness of the two alliterative monosyllabic words — ‘school stops’ — that terminate this first sentence conveys the non-negotiable finality of the occurrence they denote. This finality of something having been terminated has its effect on the subsequent paragraphs of the text: the detainee’s tale is blocked for the time being and what immediately follows instead is a detailed establishment of

the setting within which the prearranged meeting of the two dialogue partners takes place — ‘in a room in a London university so that you can tell me, in anodyne safe surrounding, a bit of your life so far’ (p. 49). It is only one and a half pages further down that the narrator interrupts herself: ‘Here’s what you tell me. It’s all in the present tense, I realise afterwards, because it’s all still happening’ (p. 50).

This, then, is neither a report (even though we were led to expect this) nor even a ‘tale’ (as the title of the text misleadingly announced); instead of the belatedness that both reports and stories as ‘past-tense’ forms have in common, the ‘tale’ comprises a number of narrative fragments that, even while *re-collected*, urgently point to the fact that they refer to something on-going, even if the informant himself has escaped some of these ordeals for the time being. But inasmuch as this story is not only an individual’s story, all that is being related is ‘still happening’, as if eternal, and therefore incompatible with the preterit so typical of storytelling. Hence, nothing in the following account allows for the expectation of that putatively consoling resolution that narrative closure appears to guarantee according to narratologists like Peter Brooks, Frank Kermode, or Walter Benjamin. This withholding of narrative pastness is particularly disorienting since the text configures the static eternity of the ‘all still happening’ not only with the incompatible act of posterior recognition of this eternal present (‘I realise afterwards’) but, more strikingly, with the attempt to reconstruct a chronology at least at the level of the individually biographic:

You arrive at the farm when you’re six and you run away when you’re 21. That’s not the first time you run away. The first time you’re fifteen. Hunger. Beatings. Headaches. You have a headache, you have it quite often, and you have to have

the right medicine or leaves for it or you hit the ground. (p. 51)

After his escape from the farm, the informant gets trafficked to Britain where he is kept imprisoned in ‘a shut room. The shut room is all mattresses on the floor and there are six others and you in the room’ (p. 53). From the room the illegals are transported every morning at four a.m. in a van to work in a warehouse:

Room, van, warehouse. Warehouse, van, room.
Four in the morning. Nine at night. Packing
shoes. Ladies bags. Sorting dresses. Cleaning
microwaves. [...] Room, van, warehouse.
Warehouse, van, room. Five years. Most weeks all
week, 18 hours a day. You sit in silence now, with
me. (p. 53)

The absence of verbs intensifies the sense of stasis, the scrambling of time that continues since, as we have been told at the outset, nothing of this is over — ‘it’s all still going on’ — even while being rehearsed ‘now’ in an interview in a room in some London university *and* read by me in a text that I have happened upon by coincidence at some indeterminate point in time. Whatever is being conveyed here thus attains a permanence that is as indefinite as detention itself. Later in the account, the informant finds some assistance and is encouraged to inform the Home Office about his situation as a victim of human trafficking and present-day enslavement. As a consequence, he is first arrested and imprisoned for six months as an illegal immigrant and then detained for two years, then released but re-detained after six months, then released again. But ‘any moment now they can arrest you again’ (p. 54). Detention, whether actually inflicted or ‘only’ a threatening potentiality, becomes eternal: ‘It’s all like still being in detention. Detention is never not there’ (p. 55).

READING NOT ALONE

Regardless of its passionate involvement and topical immediacy, ‘The Detainee’s Tale’ is not in the first instance mere testimony or documentation, let alone a political call to action, even though it is all that too. Its primary affordance is to enable the very *event* that it painstakingly stages: the encounter with singularity, alterity, and newness. For this encounter is both the theme of the narrative and the effect of the text on the reader. The narrator/scribe is here pretty obviously functioning as a surrogate reader trying to decode and reconcile with her idioculture what her interviewee relates. This input, however, exerts an extraordinarily immense pressure on the recipient to ‘do justice to’, to responsibly receive, such a narrative. It is something that effects or requires an abandonment to the ‘eye-opening novelty’²⁸ of what is being told, and it is this abandonment that Ali Smith’s narrator testifies to when she acknowledges: ‘A mere hour or two with you in a university room and I’m about to find out that what I’ve been being taught is something world-sized’ (p. 55). If temporality is again out of joint here, it is now not the infernal eternity of recurrent or potentially recurrent iterations of the always-same (whether as excruciating work routine, as dehumanizing detention, or as the general plight of refugees) but instead, the expectation or anticipation — ‘I’m *about to* find out’ — of something extraordinary erupting. It might be misleading, though, to speak of an eruption here: the expected insight to come will not be epiphanic but laborious, not instantaneous and yet compressed into a conspicuously incongruous timespan. It does not come as a flash but a lesson, again in scrambled time: ‘what I’ve been being taught’.

28 Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, p. 196.

This ‘what’ remains a *je ne sais quoi*, an *Unverfügbarkeit*, an irreducible singularity; it ‘includes the provocation of what cannot be fully understood by being situated back into its historical context’.²⁹ But at the same time, this world-sized ‘what’ spells out an imperative to be translated into something that would have consequences beyond its mere acknowledgment as singularity and alterity: while the text aspires to a responsible reading — to be received as hospitably as the narrator receives the account of her interviewee — it ultimately hopes to transcend the horizon of the idiocultural.

This thrust manifests itself in two (para)textual moves. First, the detainee does not allow the interviewer to get away with her responsible reception. Indeed, the text works towards an understanding of hospitality that goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of the other’s singularity. As *literature* it demands more than being responsibly ‘received’ as a literary work. It takes the risk, in other words, of dispelling at the very end the appeal to an ethics of reading by an appeal to a politics of social transformation without fearing to lose an iota of its literariness. The scrambling of time and tenses goes on (even as the narrative resorts to the past tense now) but more importantly a shift in appeal occurs:

On the train home, and all these weeks and months later, I’ll still be thinking of the only flash of anger in the whole of your telling me a little of what’s happened to you in this life so far. It was a moment of anger only. It surfaced and disappeared in less than a breath. Except for this one moment you’re calm, accepting, even forgiving — but for these six syllables, six words that carry the weight of a planet [...]

²⁹ Ibid., p. 141.

But when I came to this place, when I came
to your country, you say.

I sit forward. I'm listening.

You shake your head.

I thought you would help me, you say.

(pp. 61–62)

With this ending, ‘The Detainee’s Tale’ poignantly stages how all attentive openness to the singularity of the other (‘I sit forward. I’m listening’), all intention, all responsible attempts to be a good reader can only ever be ‘the beginning of things’, and how from that beginning the actual work of conviviality has to proceed. Perhaps this work is no longer the work of literature in the strict sense but rather the transfer of the ethics of reading to an ethics of the interpersonal, if not the social. This would roughly correspond to Gayatri Spivak’s notion of the ‘teleopoietic’, where the lesson of responsible reading is ultimately meant to prepare for responsible action in the world; or, in other words, where reading figures as ‘an imaginative exercise in experiencing the impossible — stepping into the space of the other — without which political solutions come drearily undone into the continuation of violence’.³⁰ In this understanding, the work of literature would consist in making it, if not impossible, then at least harder, for readers to feel comfortable with being *only* good readers. Herewith the event of literature need not primarily be grasped as an intervention into the idioculture (Attridge) of an individualized reader who precedes the event and gets recalibrated by it. Rather it would provoke what Spivak refers to as an ‘*uncoercive* rearrangement of desires’³¹ in the course of an encounter that, as Sara Ahmed puts it, does ‘not presuppose a meeting

30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Terror: A Speech After 9-11’, *boundary 2*, 31.2 (2004), pp. 82–111 (p. 94).

31 Spivak, *Other Asias*, p. 17.

between two already constituted beings' and can better be thought of 'as collective in its very singularity'.³²

This, it seems, is the horizon that Ali Smith opens up in her second move, which is a strictly paratextual one. For importantly, in her mission statement on the *Refugee Tales* homepage, Smith frames the notion of hospitality in a way that lodges it not (only) with the reader but, prior to reception itself, with the story and its teller: before the reading it is the *telling/writing* of stories that is an act of 'profound hospitality and generosity', a welcoming-in, a hospitable meeting of the needs of others. In this light it is first of all the detainee whose generosity constitutively enables a reception that, it is true, is then no less generous. But the latter could not have happened without the former, without, that is, the story-teller's prior act of 'welcoming-in'. Before the work comes as an arrivant, therefore, it has already taken the recipient in, unconditionally, that is, with no guarantee that that reader will behave responsibly. Moreover for Smith, the telling of stories re-instantiates a text-event that is not an encounter between a work and an individual reader; instead the work here becomes a contact zone in which the boundedness of the individual reader is overcome: 'The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal'.³³

Thus, while Attridge rests his ethics of reading on the literal (as distinct from the moral and the allegorical), Smith takes recourse to the communal, thereby reintroducing the level of textual engagement that, for traditional hermeneutics, used to demarcate the ultimate horizon of interpretation. Even though Smith does not mention

32 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Postcoloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 143; p. 179.

33 Smith, 'Welcome from Ali Smith'.

'meaning' here; and even though the 'open and communal' status of literature does not appear to reside in anything that has to do with shared meanings at all, I find it nonetheless useful to link Smith's assertion with the time-worn hermeneutic tradition of the *sensus communis*, that emerges in the anagogic phase of exegesis.

Medieval Christian and Judaic systems of interpretation converge, as it were, on the idea that the (sacred) text opens itself in four distinct tiers of significance. These four levels are not to be confused with distinct textual properties: Scripture was believed to hold a unified total meaning which, however, disclosed itself only in distinct 'steps' due to the limitation of human understanding. Patristic hermeneutics does not assume four distinct 'meanings of the text but modes of "understanding" and "interpreting"'; its concern is, in short, the four-fold exegesis of the text according to the historical, the allegorical (in the narrower sense), the moral, and the anagogical approach.³⁴ While the *sensus literalis et historicus* pertained to the *res gestae* that the text literalizes, the second (allegorical or typological) level of understanding was supposed to name the 'meaning' of that historical narrative, often by way of typological cross-references to other biblical or Talmudic passages. The third level of interpretation, the *sensus moralis*, concerns the individual soul and its edification, while the ultimate step of interpretation, anagogy, refers to the eschatological dimension of the text's significance for the whole world. It is not particularly forced to translate the first three levels of this medieval edifice into interpretative paradigms that would be easily acceptable in various

³⁴ Marius Reiser, *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift: Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), p. 114; my translation.

nooks and crannies of secular criticism today. In such a transfer, the literal level would become plain referential analysis including, for example, the narratological dissection of story and plot elements etc., while the allegorical level would cover all kinds of procedures that colloquially go by the name of ‘interpretation’ proper. The *sensus moralis* could be secularized into the manifold psychological modes of inquiry that focus on the effect of the text on the reader, whether empirical or not. What is more difficult, obviously, is to envisage an equivalent of the anagogic in modern conceptions of exegesis: partly because anagogy requires that the textual event be placed within the context of a ‘total’ world, and partly because anagogy’s *sensus communis* emerges not at the site of the individual reader that is so central to Western notions of literature but instead as a communal event. Of course, the notion of a ‘total’ world must appear simply incompatible with a prevalent doxa that ‘rejects any idea of pretraced destiny, whatever name is given to it — divine, anagogic, historical, economic, structural, hereditary, or syntagmatic’.³⁵

All the same, secular critics like Fredric Jameson or Edward Said, among others, have repeatedly brought up propositions as to how to recuperate some kind of anagogic dimension of literature. Jameson translates the transcendental figure of a divinely ordained universal order into an unabashedly universalist Marxist metahistory — no doubt a strong claim to some ‘pretraced destiny’ — according to which ‘the human adventure is one’ so that the task of interpretation consists in the rewriting of individual textual events as so many ‘vital episodes in a single vast unfinished

35 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 14.

plot'.³⁶ 'Unfinished' but somehow unified, history is thus a series of events that, for all practical purposes, can only be approached by way of prior textualization; it is therefore accessible only as a 'continuous sign-chain'³⁷ made up of event-fragments that anagogical readings will articulate as elements of a coherent 'plot'. In this perspective, then, individual texts are tributaries to an encompassing social text to which they contribute 'vital episodes'. Similarly, Edward Said suggests 'that texts are worldly, to some extent they are events'.³⁸ As such they should be grasped, according to Said, as 'significant forms, in which worldliness, circumstantiality, the text's status as an event having sensuous particularity as well as historical contingency, are incorporated into the text, an infrangible part of its capacity for conveying and producing meaning'.³⁹

The event here figures clearly as an antidote to the reifying tendency of conceiving of texts as fixed structures that can be retrospectively extricated from the historical dynamics that inform not only their production or creation, but also each individual moment of reading. Texts are events inasmuch as they are part of a world that consists of nothing but events; while in turn, that world is itself linguistically constituted as a 'huge whispering gallery' (pace *Middlemarch*) resulting in a 'worldly textuality'⁴⁰ as the necessary mirror image of that 'textual worldliness' in whose name Said had embarked on his theoretical ruminations at

36 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 19.

37 Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 40.

38 Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 4.

39 Ibid., p. 39.

40 Ibid., p. 41.

the outset. This, then, engenders a virtually holistic world-view in which a continuous ‘chain of humanity’ is enacted and maintained through the iterated ‘transmission of actual speech’.⁴¹ Jameson and Said thus attempt to recover the anagogical by way of envisaging a social world whose continuity is that of an undelimited, open-ended, dynamically unfolding, and internally conflicted text, in which no symphonic cooperation but polemical dissonance prevails such that a ‘polemical common world’ emerges.⁴²

Such attempts at re-appropriating the *sensus communis* for and in a horizon of ‘worldly’ criticism resonate strongly with Ali Smith’s evocation of narrative as an essentially communal event in which the individual reader who is so central to Western notions of literature — the ‘individual selves we all are’— may transform into ‘something open and communal’. What is at stake here is a rethinking not only of ‘the subject’ but also of literature as such. This rethinking could arguably be the prerogative of world-literature studies, as soon as one assigns to that ‘discipline’ the capacity (and the task) to pluralize the possible/permissible ways of conceiving of literature both as an institution and a ‘species-wide faculty’.⁴³ Such a project would probably proceed from Aamir Mufti’s observation that the term ‘*literature*’ may ‘now provide the dominant, universalizing, *but by no means absolute* vocabulary for the comprehension of verbal-textual expression worldwide’.⁴⁴ From there it could begin to take into account

41 Ibid., p. 44.

42 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 151.

43 Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 78.

44 Aamir R. Mufti, ‘Orientalism and the Institution of World Literature’, *Critical Inquiry*, 36 (2010), pp. 458–98 (p. 488).

that in fact manifold alternative concepts and practices of multiple forms of ‘verbal-textual expression’ have existed in history and continue to coexist with ‘literature’ even today. This holds true for traditional non-European terms like the Chinese *wen* or the ancient Egyptian *medet nefret* that are routinely translated as ‘literature’ even though they do not really coincide with the term at all.⁴⁵ With respect to the Sanskrit-derived lexicon of modern Hindi and adjacent North Indian languages, Anand observes that the word *sahitya*, which has been widely accepted as the equivalent of ‘literature’, in fact resonates with entirely different connotations and associations that converge with Ali Smith’s emphasis on the collective dimensions of storytelling rather than the strictly individualistic exclusivism of mainstream understandings of literature:

While ‘literature’ of English deals with letters, language, compositions expressed through writing etc., ‘sahitya’ of Sanskrit denotes a social activity. The Sanskrit dictionary gives approximately the following meanings to sahitya: To be together; joining together various dharmas in one deed; participation of a large number of people on equal basis in one act; a kind of kavya. We see that the first set of meanings talk about a collective activity involving different kinds of people with different roles and attributes.⁴⁶

Obviously, whether to speak of ‘literature’ or of ‘sahitya’ is not merely a question of nomenclature but of an entire worldview. The becoming-dominant of ‘literature’ worldwide is therefore one of many instances of the expansive

⁴⁵ See David Damrosch, *How to Read World Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 7.

⁴⁶ Anand [P. Sachidanandan], ‘What is sahit in sahitya?’, *Indian Folklife*, 1.3 (2000), pp. 12–14 (p. 12).

globalization of modern Western paradigms at the expense of all other epistemologies, increasingly occluding the ‘diverse ways of being human’ that actually coexist and persist on the planet.⁴⁷ Responsible, ethical reading that is attentive to the singularity of literature is a first and indispensable step in such a project. This is precisely the step that Ali Smith’s narrator takes, suspending herself in the text of the other without guarantees: a demanding and risky venture for sure and yet only a first step. For the detainees’ tales demand from their listener not only the virtual self-effacement of attentive ethical reading but also the cultivation of an ethics of commitment — an ‘infinitely demanding ethics’ that, as Simon Critchley puts it, ‘moves the subject to action’.⁴⁸ Ali Smith’s rendition of the detainees’ tales and of her narrator’s/her own struggle with the infinite demands that these tales exert may be a particularly promising starting point for such an endeavour.

47 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 254.

48 Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 130.

Dirk Wiemann, 'Being Taught Something World-Sized: 'The Detainee's Tale as told to Ali Smith' and the Work of World Literature', in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson, *Cultural Inquiry*, 19 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 149–72 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19_07>

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