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To What Extent Can Ethics Be Critical?

A Practice-Oriented Approach to the Relationship Between Literary Studies, Critique and Ethics

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Abstract

If we approach ethics as a demanding practical orientation, we must realize that, since criticism necessarily creates distance, it practically reflects itself out of the Levinasian proximity, whereas ethical relation, by comparison, requires to stay with or in the company of the other. Ethical encounter preserves the difference between participants, but instead of asserting or constructing a critical stance of my own, I am exposed to the impulses of the other and I learn to attune myself to them through gestural resonances. My proposal called practice-oriented physics conceives of literature not as texts, contexts or socio-historical construction, but as living gestures of attention in the time(s) of literary writing and reading. This paper explores these theoretical and practical problems in a short story by Ádám Bodor, extending the critical "extendance" of the "Saying" beyond the "Said" to the rhythmic dimensions of practical orientation.

Keywords

Ethical proximity, critical detachment, practical orientation, Ádám Bodor, Robert Eaglestone, Rosi Braidotti, Rita Felski

In this paper, I propose to examine positions of ethical criticism while reading literature in order to answer the question posed in the title. First, I follow in the footsteps of Robert Eaglestone, who in his seminal 1999 essay examines the authoritative alternatives in ethical reading at that time, and develops his own position based on his assessment. In the second half of the study, I examine Rosi Braidotti's recent post-humanist concept in order to show the ethical limitations of radical criticism. In my arguments I try to integrate current

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research on practical contact-making as object-oriented ontology, Bruno Latour's theory of actor-network theory, and Rita Felski's warning about the inadequacy of criticism, which has become an exclusive paradigm in literary studies. As a field of experimentation, I chose Ádám Bodor's short story entitled "The Forest Ranger and His Guest," which, in my reading, seeks possible routes through the different kinetic spaces of practical orientation.

1. Responsible Reading and Writing?

In Ádám Bodor's story, a lost novice hunter arrives at the forest ranger's hut. Not only has he not managed to shoot anything, but he has also been badly bitten by the ranger's dog. The host welcomes the stranger, tends to his wound, and the next day shows him the way to the bus station, but they continuously talk at cross purposes. The stranger resists the help of the local, who seems experienced as regards life in the forest, and the story ends with the ranger saying goodbye: "If you stayed for another couple of days, we may have become friends."[2] But the guest leaves and they will probably never meet again.

What does writing and reading such a literary story have to do with ethics? Martha Nussbaum would suggest that we should see the virtual situations of the story as moral tests, putting ourselves in the position of the characters (Nussbaum 1983).

> "Don't you leash it?" asked the stranger [glaring at the dog, which continued to be a threat to him].
> "I'm not in the habit of leashing it."
> "Leash it."
> "I won't," said the ranger quietly and started walking towards the hut.[3]

Nussbaum would ask first: "If you were the ranger, would you leash the dog?"; and then: "If you were the hunter, would you ask the ranger to leash it?" We can argue against a moral-philosophical reading on the grounds that it does not take into account the linguistic construction of the work of art, but reads the text

[2] "Ha marad még pár napig, lehet, megbarátkozunk." (Bodor 2003, 33. Quotations from the short story are translated by Yvette Jankó Szép.)

[3] "– Nem köti meg? – kérdezte az idegen.
– Nem szoktam megkötni.
– Kösse meg.
– Nem kötöm meg – mondta az erdész csendesen, és elindult a kunyhó felé." (Bodor 2003, 30)

transparently, and refers to its own interpretations as quasi-ontological situations, not seen as interpretations. But we can also argue against a deconstructivist, rhetorical reading on the grounds that it does not take into account the gestures of enunciation and the action or event, but only the text. Writing and reading have to do with our practice and behaviour, as well as our language.

It is true, however, that when I read the beginning of the story several times to my students and then ask them to schematically sketch the main components of the scene and the characters – what is where, and in relation to what – they usually produce very different drawings. I warn my fellow readers that the ranger could address his words to us, as he said to the hunter who had complained about him: "You'll remember everything as you want" … "In whatever way you wish."[4] So, as Hillis Miller (1987) says, we are all bound to misread the text. There is no need to compound this fact by forgetting it. As a reader, it is my duty to read the text, which conceals as much as it reveals. It should be added, however, that this is our duty only as rhetorical readers; or, as rhetorical readers, we have only this duty. As gesture readers (we shall see) we have quite different duties.

Miller elevates Derrida's warning to an ethical imperative: the text is not a transparent window onto another world to which we can ascribe ontological status; we must also pay attention to the "production" of the glass. Just as we should reckon, I suggest, with the fact that literary writing and reading are more than textual activities: their refined and intense gestures of attention take place in a very wide range of kinetic – not merely rhetorical – spaces. It is true that the ranger and the guest always read the events in very different ways. While the hunter "remembers" that the ranger set his dog on him, the ranger considers the incident an accident, for which he blames not the dog but the inexperienced hunter. But this is no longer an interpretation of the text, it is a practical orientation regarding responsibility.

Robert Eaglestone also finds Miller's conception of ethics inadequate: merely a set of textual rules, imperatives and laws, as if Miller could deconstruct ethics itself. While it is true that the text cannot be grasped unambiguously, as Nussbaum would have it, neither is it merely the object of a constantly deferred interpretive desire, as Miller suggests (Eaglestone 1999, 81–82).

Emmanuel Lévinas, in his ethico-phenomenological study of language, speaks of the way in which the "Said" immobilizes language by fixing the essence and denying any "transcendence" beyond its own interpretation. The "Saying," on the other hand, always undermines the essence, overflowing the subject it marks. It is a

[4] "Maga majd mindenre úgy emlékszik vissza, ahogy akar ... Ahogy éppenséggel jólesik." (Bodor 2003, 32)

moment of unfolding, of committing oneself to the other, which in turn only exists through language, through the Said, which always betrays the transcendent Saying. Thus, while the Said imposes completeness – as well as limits – this finitude is at the same time disrupted by the Saying, like knots disrupting the continuity of a thread (Lévinas 1981, 25, 105, 165–71). Rescuing a text from its "book-misfortune" (Lévinas) is the uncanny moment when we free the text from being lost in what is Said in the book. While Lévinas regards this as the task of philosophy, Eaglestone, following Maurice Blanchot, adopts it as the ethics of reading.

According to this, we are expected now to show the flaws in what has been said so far about Bodor's narrative – problems that, like a knot in a thread, prevent continuing interpretation. If we want to give a definitive answer to the questions that have arisen in our experimental reading, we run into trouble, because the ethical status of the characters is constantly changing according to the various inquiries. Bodor's narratives are not only unpredictable, they are also untraceable stories: they constantly undo what has been said before, because we encounter aporias in them, which knot all fluid interpretations and prevent their closure. We have to ask the question: Are these characters flesh and blood, or are they rather confusing answers through which the narrator fulfils his philosophical responsibility in the Lévinasian sense? The characters do not do what we would expect them to do based on their previous actions or the thoughts and emotions attributed to them: they remain different and alien to each other, as well as to us. The moment we recognise this we feel that we are not at home in the text and in ourselves. We do not find ourselves in the other world of virtual life, but neither do we complain about our misinterpretations of the text. According to Eaglestone, it is in such moments of disruption in our understanding of ourselves and our relationship to the Logos that the ethics of literature becomes most clearly visible. "These moments of fragmentation are a testimony to the irreducible otherness of the other and to our responsibility." (Eaglestone 1999, 84)

Bodor's narrative opens us up to hearing the Lévinasian Saying by shattering the assumptions, preconceptions, or philosophy behind the Said we have already grasped in our interpretation. Or, as Blanchot says: "philosophy, which puts everything into question, is tripped up by poetry, which is the question that eludes it" (Blanchot 1986, 63). Eaglestone argues that "this tripping up …, this putting into question, this ceaseless inspiring insomnia [i.e. the impossibility of reassurance], is the ethical imperative behind any form of criticism" (Eaglestone 1999, 85).

It seems to me that in his paper, Eaglestone places critique and ethics themselves in the Lévinasian relation of Saying and Said: although critique is the Said and the ethical imperative is the Saying behind it, it remains clear that ethics is always the saying and doing of criticism. If, however, according to a non-critical but rather ethical reading of Lévinas, we conceive of the ethical space of Saying behind the Said as the reader's or writer's practical orientation in making contact with others by writing or reading gestures, then Eaglestone's thesis that the Saying is the ethical imperative behind the forms of critique appears as one in which ethics is Said but criticism is at work. Let us not forget that the impulses behind the Said can be various: not just those of critique or responsibility. They are not ethical in the sense that they are always dictated by the ethical imperative itself, but in the sense that they lead to the exercise of reading (distinguished from interpretation). Of course, practical orientation is at work in each exercise, and this impulse can be seen as an ethical imperative, but it can in no way be reduced to the encouragement of ever new attempts to question or constantly disturb interpretation or understanding.

This compulsive orientation not only makes us sleepless in the sense of "inspiring insomnia" (sometimes we can sleep in any sense of the word; Nussbaum, for example, is content with a moral-philosophical interpretation), but leads us at every moment to responsible practical choices. We have to decide whether to continue to sleep or to wake up, just as we have to decide whether to conform to Eaglestone in the practice of reading, or to follow the impulses of the artistic writing practice at any given moment, and to become skilled in a variety of practices that surely exceed the boundaries of criticism. This is not to say that they cannot be made subject to critique, but subjecting them to (or making them the Said of) criticism, is quite different from learning to connect with their rhythms during literary reading.

As Bodor's story shows us, in our world there seems to be no possibility of real contact: forest rangers and their guests can never understand each other, nor can literary scholars and their fellow scholars. But what if, for once, we agreed to spend a couple of days making friends, as the ranger proposes? It is true that the Bodor story is about the guest who wanders into the ranger's kinetic space and does not learn to orient himself there. But the passage between different kinetic spaces does not take place there, but happens in the practice of the narrator, who follows the gestures of the hunter, the gestures of the ranger and the gestures of the dog precisely: both the way someone gets lost in, and the way someone gets familiar with, the mountains. This narrator can move between different kinetic spaces, and

becomes highly skilled in each of them. Thus we, too, can learn to pay attention to events that we would miss if we did not follow the attentional cues of artistic writing, just as the novice hunter from the city misses them.

When a city dweller sets out into the wilderness, it is clear that he can easily get into trouble. And even with the help of someone more experienced than himself, he still has to learn his way around, not only in terms of taking directions, but also in befriending a dog, or its owner or the place where they live. He can also learn, for instance, to pick up the subtle movements and signs of that place. When smoke rises above the trees, it is caught in the breeze above the stream (there is always a breeze above streams). When the sun goes down and only the clouds are glowing, the air turns bluer near the stream. It may turn out that honey is good for an open wound and should be applied in a thick layer. If you are sitting by the fire, it is a good idea to peel potatoes on your feet, so that when you are finished you can just kick them into the fire. It is also possible to tell whether the colourless liquid in a bottle is water or brandy without smelling or tasting the contents of the opened bottle: it is enough to shake it. (The difference lies in their beading, but the narrator here will not tell you what it is exactly. If you are curious, take a bottle of water and a bottle of brandy and shake them to see the difference for yourself). And let us not even broach the subject of whether it was just a whim on the part of the ranger not to leash his companion in the mountains. If we take the trouble to be the narrator's guests, we can learn to orientate ourselves in his attentive practices through similar gestural resonances as he follows his characters. My proposal, called practice-oriented physics (Berszán 2016), conceives of literature not as texts, contexts, or socio-historical constructions, but as living gestures of attention in the time(s) of literary writing and reading. To read a novel or a poem is to follow refined and intense gestures of attention that the art of writing induces through practicing them.[5]

[5] A mini-glossary of introduced terms:

- *Practice*: precise gestures of attention tuned to a rhythm (e.g. singing, swimming, playing kendama, riding a horse, calculating quantities or literary reading).
- R*hythm*: the *observed rhythm* appears as the recurrence of regular patterns, but the *followed rhythm* means practical connectedness of gestures.
- *Temporality*: any distinguishable rhythm has its specific time. We define temporality as the rhythmic space of a movement/happening/practice or, in short: *kinetic space*. There is no way to find the rhythm of a practice in the kinetic space of another: in order to get into the rhythm of a practice, one has to get out of the temporality/kinetic space of all others.
- R*hythmic dimensions:* beyond the only extended time dimension (projected usually on the axis of numbers) I propose to take into account the complementary rhythmic dimensions of happenings as well. Introducing more than one time dimension entails the supposition of independent time directions. Practice-oriented physics defines occurrences with different rhythms as time directions. If rhythm is time direction, changing the direction in time means changing the rhythm.
- *Time projection*: we can follow a happening/practice in the rhythmic dimension according to its own time direction or we can follow it as a time projection to another rhythmic dimension. *Practical orientation*: practical decisions that allow us to remain within the kinetic space of a certain rhythmic dimension or to tune into another rhythmic dimension by changing the rhythm of practice.

If the ethical proximity between the self and the other is conceived as an irreducible, ultimate relation, from which everything else can be derived and which cannot be derived from anything else, then Lévinas may be read in a critical way. The critical force of his major works (*Totality and Infinity* [1979], *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* [1981]) lies in the reduction of previous critical horizons or all other critical horizons to responsible subjectivity – ethics can be critical to this extent. But ethics cannot be limited to criticism; the critical relation creates distance, but the "element" of ethics is infinite proximity or closeness. The other cannot be critically conceived, integrated or suspended, nor can it be critically transcended. The only adequate ethical relation to the other is the Lévinasian radical passivity as sensitivity and obedience beyond all knowledge: the Abrahamic self-exposure: "Here I am."

But this surrender to the imperative or impulse of the proximity of the other also means exposure to many others, to which Lévinas seeks to respond with the critical knowledge of justice that is necessitated by the entry of the third party (Lévinas 1979, 82–101). At this point, I am more inclined to a Derridean reading of the scandal of responsibility, where the insoluble paradox of the forceful sacrifice of choice between multiple responsibilities remains. Derrida sacrifices his only son, deconstruction, to establish a connection with the *mysterium tremendum* of responsibility (Derrida 1995, 53–81). There is no way to connect the time of one practice with the time of another – each practice is totally different. If I fulfil my absolute duty to one Other, says Derrida, I betray my duty to the other Others. In the same way, I cannot practice myself in two practices of different rhythms at the same time. There is no way to enter the time of one practice in the time of another different practice. Temporality means that practically there is no simultaneity (not even in the sense of a network of intercrossing between different happenings), but there is a passage from the time of one occurrence to the time of another. This is what Ádám Bodor's writing invites us to do: to find ways to pass into and discover passages between different kinetic spaces through our gestures of attention.

As a practice-oriented physicist, I define ethics as a demanding practical orientation in time(s), and propose the introduction of complementary rhythmic dimensions into the study of artistic practices in order to discover their multiple temporalities and the rhythmic differences between them.

2. Posthuman Critique Versus Post-Historicist Ethics

And yet, despite all my arguments, and as a counter-argument, the close link between radical critique and ethics has remained in force until today. Rosi Braidotti, a powerful voice in posthumanist thought who rejects humanism, calls for a rethinking of ethics to make it worthy of our age, marked as it is by great technological transformations (Braidotti 2013). Since, contrary to Lévinas's admonitions, historical progress as *becoming* is considered more intrinsic than the I–You relationship, ethics and subjectivity must be adapted to technological innovation. Braidotti proposes a vitalist monism that transcends the dialectical confrontation of otherness, and prioritizes the relational structure of intelligent, self-organizing matter. The zoe-egalitarian turn, she argues, "encourages us to engage in a more equitable relationship with animals, earth, and machines" (Braidotti 2013, 71). The nature-culture continuum replaces the Lévinasian ethical relation with networks of hybrid, cyborg identities, as described by Donna Haraway (1991), or multiple assemblages, as proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in order to explore what we can become in the current, dizzying state of technologically mediated subjectivity. The ethic of becoming claims historical superiority over responsibility to one's neighbour and all previous forms of subjectivity, as if ethical orientation itself were based on the principle of innovation. "One of the most pointed paradoxes of our era is precisely the urgency of fostering new and alternative moods of political and ethical agency for our technologically mediated world and the inertia of established mental habits" (Braidotti 2013, 58). For my part, I am confronted with another paradox: when subjectivity is reduced to the self-organization of a Spinoza-inspired vital substance, we arrive not only at an alternative posthuman subject that invests its ethical hope in technology, but also at a renunciation of the ontological status of the subject, i.e. to mere vital operations. Let us reexamine the positions in this debate by reading Bodor again.

On Braidotti's side, one could argue that in Bodor's minimalist prose we witness a regression of narrator-subject and character-subject, so that the story is followed not as a pursuit of separate identities, but as a relational flow that transcends the humanist episteme. We never read about what anyone (including the narrator) thinks or feels, only about specific interactions. Thus, the participants in the story have no identifiable or explicable substance, and consist only of their dynamic relations. None of them is a fetishized or devalued – in Braidotti's terms: sexualized, racialized, and naturalized – Other, but rather a possible version in the nature-culture continuum. There is no dialectical juxtaposition between them, but rather configurations or assemblages of hybrids and cyborgs. 'Guest' is not the only relational term here,

since 'ranger' does not refer to an identity as such either, but rather a relation to the forest or his guest. Similarly, the dog, as a culturally constructed animal, is half biological and half socio-technical in nature. The human component also appears, this time as an element "embedded" in the cyborg of wilderness management (I mean the ranger), or as a semi-foreign, semi-local experimenter, characterized by the binary hybridity of novices, a newcomer or guest (I mean the city-dwelling hunter). Around them, the mountains, dotted with cleared forest, also form a continuum of culture/nature as cultivated land.

Instead of separate entities, we find everywhere sliding transitions and relational variations: the urban hunter – being technologically mediated – has a gun and a shop sweater, a Basque cap instead of a hat, a side bag instead of a rucksack. The ranger, because of his different technological mediation, has a hut with all the necessary equipment (bunk bed, open fire, froe, torch, cooking utensils). In this combination (but only in this combination) the rucksack cannot be replaced by a bag. The dog has a master, a guardian function and a human name (Laci). It is as if Bodor were interested in precisely what happens to relationally constituted assemblages, which can be extended to pairs traditionally understood as dialectical and hierarchical opposites, such as master and dog, native and guest, or host and alien intruder. Here, each appears as part of the complex collectivity to which all other participants belong – mountain, town, stream, authority, shelter, clearing, forest, bus, trail, tools, morality, rights and sunset.

The story, of course, begins with a description of this web: who/what is where in relation to whom/what and how they relate to each other. The "plot" unfolds, not as a process that arrives at a resolution or finality, but as a rhizomatic sequence of interactions of the participants in relation to each other, in which we as observers are periodically involved until we are drawn into something else by other assemblages, when we stop reading. The Bodor story can best be described as a "narrative case study" plotted on a relational network. There is no single narrative point of view to explain everything, only variations and changes, ultimately the differentiation of self-organizing matter and its resulting new assemblages or articulations, as in the power triangle of the ranger, the hunter, and the dog, the shingles split from logs with a broad blade, or the light of the clouds after the sun has set. Such rhizomes of interaction, says Braidotti, are made of a self-organizing and structurally relational matter. And she hastens to add: "Critical posthumanists take the experimental path" (Braidotti 2013, 39) – "they search for new forms of subjectivity" (Braidotti 2013, 45).

Are the "traditional" intersubjective contacts between individual creatures developed over thousands of years less intense than the relationships within and outside of posthuman subjectivity that form today's cyborgs? It seems to me, even in this story, that despite all post- and transhuman aspirations, singular creatures cannot be abstracted from what happens to them or to us. In Bodor's narrative, we follow the story not only at the level of the relational flow, but also at the level of the gestures of the parties, who weigh, evaluate, and influence each other in many ways. It is true that subjective gestures, such as thoughts or emotional responses, are not directly visible, so Bodor never makes them explicit. But they are implicitly unavoidable; we cannot think of them as humanistic biases. When a hunter's gun is taken and hidden, the aggrieved party objects not only on the grounds of their hunter's license, but also emotionally. If the dog sees a stranger near the hut, it will attack him viciously, and if it bites his leg, the stranger will try to take revenge on the dog. As calm as the ranger remains despite the incident or the guest's accusations, he is also disturbed by the failure to make friends. Practical contact-making cannot be adequately modelled by relational interactions, because the latter – not only in Braidotti, but already in Deleuze and Guattari (1987) – can only have explicit effects, which are always what they are, being ultimately materially objective. But intersubjective relations never cease to be implicit. For example, when the ranger and the guest converse like this:

> The stranger was looking at the dog.
> "Listen" he said then. "What do you think, would this dog come with me?"
> "You mean, whether he would make peace with you? If you gave him something, for sure. He would go with you for a while."
> "I'd be curious."
> "You must have many bullets," said the ranger.[6]

The ranger at first translates the hunter's question in a seemingly unsuspecting way, but implicitly grasps the hunter's implicit intention, just as he implicitly knows the expected reactions of the dog. He foresees that a reconciliation with the dog is not impossible if the hunter gives him some food, and also that the dog will only follow him in the hope of more food, and will not go with him for a long time.

[6] Az idegen a kutyát nézte.
– Figyeljen ide – szólalt meg aztán. – Mit gondol, ez a kutya velem jönne?
– Hogy kibékülne-e? Ha ad neki valamit, biztos. Magával menne egy darabig.
– Kíváncsi lennék.
– Sok tölténye lehet – mondta az erdész. (Bodor 2003, 31)

Of course, it is implicitly foreseeable that this would be enough for the hunter to use the bullet intended for him. There is no way of knowing, any more than the ranger knows, whether the hunter has many bullets. The explicit replication, "You must have many bullets," does not implicitly refer to the number of cartridges, but indicates that the ranger knows why it would be so important for the hunter to take the dog away with him, far from its master. All this implicit following and precluding are impossible to avoid, precisely because we can never look directly into the other subject. Consequently, the subject remains just as implicit when it is expressed in concrete numbers and definite instructions:

> He disappeared somewhere next to the house, then reappeared with the gun and hung it back on the tree bark from where he took it in the evening.
> "It's hanging over there. And there goes the road."
> "So do I walk for three hours?" asked the stranger and he started.
> "For three." The ranger holding the dog's head between his legs looked after him. "If you stayed for another couple of days, we may have become friends."[7]

As if the guest were suspicious, he repeats in a question what has been said before. How can he know, and how can we readers know, whether it really takes three hours to get to the bus? Or whether this road really leads to the bus stop? Implicitly, there is the possibility that the ranger is deceiving his guest, thus taking revenge on him because, despite his hospitality, the hunter has been grumpy all along.

Why does the ranger hang the gun on the bark of the pine tree from which he took it the night before, instead of giving it to the departing hunter? And why does he hold the dog's head between his knees as the guest leaves? Is he not implicitly saving the dog from the bullet intended for him? Before the hunter could pick up his gun, the dog was safely between the ranger's knees. By keeping it there, the master also prevents the dog from giving in to the temptation of another good bite, and from accompanying the stranger armed with a gun and a desire for revenge. Further on, the host implicitly signals to his guest that he does not trust him to have regrets about or forget yesterday's implicit intentions by today. But he also implicitly trusts him that he would not shoot the dog held between his knees, thus risking also

[7] Eltűnt a ház mellett valahova, aztán megjelent a puskával, és visszaakasztotta a fa kérgére, ahonnan az este elvette.
– Ott lóg. Mellette visz az út.
– Szóval három órát megyek? – kérdezte az idegen, és elindult.
– Hármat. – Az erdész lába közé fogta a kutya fejét, úgy nézett utána. – Ha marad még pár napig, lehet, megbarátkozunk. (Bodor 2003, 33)

shooting the owner. And did he not also implicitly trust that the departing guest would implicitly realize all this?

This time it is not only about the pitfalls of interpretation, nor only about the rhetoric of misunderstanding – which is as much limited to the operation of an immanent discursive medium as Braidotti's monistic materialism to an intelligent, self-organizing matter – but about intersubjective gestures. These are never just the operations of an immanent medium, but rather the reactions of participants who exist in a singular way, who cannot be reassuringly traced back to any material process, and who are transcendent in relation to each other. Regardless of whether (and to what extent) the possibilities of friendship are fulfilled, the intersubjective connection is always between individual creatures, and happens in practical gestures. I have consistently used the term "creature" to refer to the participants, in order to indicate that this is not about the restoration of the humanist subject as fully self-aware or self-constituting, but rather about those mysterious beings that long predate the ideology of the Enlightenment and have been discussed after humanism as agents in actor network theory (Bruno Latour [2014]), as withdrawn objects in object oriented ontology (Graham Harman [2017] or in Timothy Morton's *Being Ecological* [2018, 75] as a quantum-like "ontological jump between a thing and its parts," "a deep feature of reality, that it's jumpy because things are distinct and unique").

It is problematic, both theoretically and ethically, to claim that historicist, vitalist, and materialist monism is "more advanced" than all other thought, and that subjectivity must "grow up" to its actual insights stemming from the unprecedented technology of our time. This is still and recognizably the Enlightenment rhetoric of the coveted "coming of age," (Kant 1992 [1784]) but without the phenomenological claims of Kant's philosophy. The radical unveiling of humanism retains the supremacy of critical distancing, and thus provokes alienation from the rhythm of subjective practices that are supposed to be overcome. In fact, they are reduced to their time projections in the kinetic space of an absolutely immanent horizon of materialistic monism. If we are to grasp the incomparability of the "posthuman predicament" supposed by Braidotti, we cannot ignore this narrowing tendency that ignores many ancient and current practices of subjectivity.

It seems that critical posthumanists are the only experimenters. As if, in the second third of the 20th century, Ádám Bodor could not be an equivalent researcher in the artistic research of subjectivity. The posthuman materialism and technologism of *Zoe* seeks to usurp something much broader than itself: we cannot limit experimentation with subjectivity to the initiatives of the *Cyborg Manifesto*.

The implicit gestures behind explicit acts (such as the ranger's deliberations while holding the dog's head between his knees) presuppose someone behaving in a particular way – not just a self-organizing substance. The former is no less real than the latter. Braidotti herself often makes it clear in her book, where her subjective choices differ from anti-humanist or feminist discourses with similar claims. At some level of organization, one must reckon with new emergent regularities that cannot be captured or reduced to the previous, say, material level. The problem with the substrate-reducing, or to use Graham Harman's term, "undermining"[8] approach is that it loses sight of everything that does not occur as the operation of the immanent regularities of the substrate. If we try to understand the atmosphere at the level of the air molecule, we will learn nothing about the hurricane or the hole in the ozone layer. Similarly, to take a strict view of the objective material basis of relational interactions is to lose sight of art along with the individual subject. There is no art without implicit, intense individual gestures that cannot be replaced by operational functioning.

How do we read the last sentence with which the ranger ends the story? What kind of gesture is it? Would he hold the guest back just because he is bored? Does he think he can teach the ungrateful newcomer a lesson in a few days? Or is he bothered by the unresolved feud? Does he implicitly prefer to make friends? If we as readers find this ethically preferable to rivalry, is it because of the unprecedented technological innovations of our time, or is the narrator implicitly appealing to our several thousand years of moral sense, called, in Andrei Pleşu's more sophisticated phrase, our "moral talent" (Pleşu 2000, 42–49)? Speaking of upgrading at all costs, one might ask: are the latest technological innovations more likely to develop our moral talent than the artistic narrative and the literary reading it inspires, which can be traced back to prehistoric times?

The reduction of materialist subjectivity to informational codes has the unintended side effect of narrowing the kinetic spaces of living beings at least as much as it is intended to expand the ontological and epistemological latitude of matter. "Posthuman subjects are technologically mediated to an unprecedented degree" (Braidotti 2013, 57). It may be more urgent to consider this actual state of affairs, with its miseries (e.g., the technological mediation of teenagers who shoot their classmates and teachers in mass shootings, while also making a video of the deed), than to posit it as a point of reference, or even a value preference, as the most valuable outcome of experimental subjectivity. Apart from that, Braidotti's

[8] Harman defines undermining as the tendency to reduce an object to the components of which it is made (Harman 2017, 41–47).

statements are more significant as symptoms of a technological bias than as guiding insights. "I will always side firmly with the liberatory and even transgressive potential of new technologies" (Braidotti 2013, 58). The "always" here makes it clear that it does not matter what alterations or changes of direction technological innovation entails. Instead of debating and judging this, we make it the guiding principle of our ethics as a postulate. If subjective practice is to be equated with technology, why is it that the technologically advanced gun (compared to the ancient spear) did not also make the ranger's guest an experienced hunter? It seems that technology is an extension of practice, while at the same time withering practical skills. Is it ethical to make people dependent on surrogates while diminishing their own abilities? Is it really enough to praise the efficiency of the technologically mediated human being without raising the ethical problem of reducing him to a component of a cyborg machinery?

Braidotti has an answer: "I am less inclined to panic at the prospect of the displacement of the centrality of the human, and I can also see the advantages of such a development" (Braidotti 2013, 64). The problem with such a posthuman turn is that its stakeholder tends to "mix" with technology rather than establish a practical relationship with other life forms. Braidotti's theory of becoming-animal can be written and followed without ever meeting an animal. It seems sufficient to replace them with cyborgs like Dolly, the cloned sheep, because they can be conceptualized as products of genetic engineering (whether viable or not). We no longer establish an intersubjective relationship with them (according to Braidotti, this is a case of the oedipal relationship that denies the equality of animals [Braidotti 2013, 68–70]), but we do violence to them down to the genes, and this is seen as a new zoe-egalitarianism at the level of intelligent matter.

"Post-anthropocentrism is marked by the emergence of the 'politics of life itself'. Life, far from being the exclusive property or the unalienable right of a species, the human, it is posited as process, interacted and open-ended" (Braidotti 2013, 60). Can this post-human politics of life itself encompass life? What about the art of life? What about its ethics? We cannot reduce these to politics any more than subjectivity to functional operations. It is not enough to say something new – compared to Lévinas, for example. It also matters whether we can say what we say. And not only must the new find its place and legitimacy in the web of logical relationality, but we are also ethically responsible for whatever we say. It makes no difference if we say something "new" or if we want what we say to be seen as an innovation. Our responsibility inevitably remains – regardless of any arbitrary definition we choose

for it. Responsibility is not a cultural, historical, or technological construct, but an irreducible reality of subjectivity that is inescapable for any cultural, historical, or technological construction. We need not claim that this is what makes us into subjects, as a critical reading of Lévinas suggests. It is enough to accept that since we have become subjects, our post- or transhuman ambitions cannot exempt us from ethical responsibility – simply because of our responsiveness.

Posthumanism, which replaces all previous thinking in a similar way as the earlier versions of historical critique based on Foucault's archaeology did, mistakes radical critique for thinking itself, while defining it as the only valid way to relate to any uncritical or insufficiently critical alternative transformed into subjects for critique. But despite its academic success or dominance, there are still some sensible literary scholars today. Rita Felski, in her subtle work, offers enough arguments to state calmly: "Critique turns out to be, as scholars announce with a hint of satisfaction, an infinite task. But what if critique were limited, not limitless; if it were finite and fallible; ... we might admit that critique is not always the best tool for the job" (Felski 2015, 8). Reading practices that replace critical detachment with resonant connections may not only be naive, uncritical ideas, but also experiments that maintain the need for an ethical turn towards the other, as an "unhistorical" Lévinasian proximity in both pre- and post-critical encounters.

In challenging the legitimating dominance of self-righteous historicism, Felski invokes the cross-age agents of actor network theory and its time conception, which challenge the privilege of our own age: "Latour's claim that we have never been modern does not deny that our lives differ in obvious ways from those of medieval peasants or Renaissance courtiers. He insists, nonetheless, that these differences are exaggerated and overdrawn, thanks to our fondness for stories about the disenchantment of the world, the radicalism of modern critique, and other testimonies to our own exceptional status" (Felski 2015, 158). The declaration about technological mediation as the ultimate frame of reference in philosophical and ethical orientation, or in contemporary possibilities of subjectivity, is undoubtedly a self-approving critical witness. But there are other witnesses as well: in addition to actor network theory, Felski invokes object-oriented ontology, post-historical literary studies, and affective hermeneutics. As a practice-oriented physicist I join them, together with Ádám Bodor's artistic experiments. It is revealing that at the end of the mountain story, which invites us, twenty-first-century readers to relearn our relationship to different temporalities, the ranger refers not to history but to the time spent with some kind of practice. From an ethical point of view, historical

becoming has no absolute value; the practical choice has greater stakes, by which we attune ourselves to different rhythms. There is a time for everything under the sun: a time for critique and a time for making friends.

In conclusion, the inclusion of ethics in literary studies cannot be limited to the construction of a new critical horizon maintaining critical practice as a paradigm for both literature and its research. We must supplement the critical reading of ethics with an ethical reading of criticism, which does not reduce contact-making to the functioning of any immanent medium — such as discourse, social context, cultural and technological media, or the historical being of an intelligent, self-organizing matter — but makes the proximity of the other unavoidable. I contribute to this project through research into practical orientation in time(s) presented by artistic experiments.

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