Strangers: The Social Construction of Universality and Particularity

Zygmunt Bauman

Most of our contemporaries are strangers. Little do we know of their life, less still do we understand. We assume that, were we to communicate with them, we would need to overcome mutual misunderstandings — an obstacle arising from the unclarity, or perhaps even the impenetrability of signs that denote each side's intentions. We can imagine this kind of difficulty if we use a foreign language as a metaphor, or if we recall a visit to a land where a foreign language is spoken. The difficulty with reaching agreement as to the proper form of life, which provides the substance for the image of stranger, is patterned after the difficulty of understanding an unfamiliar language. As Wittgenstein suggested, to understand is to know how to go on. This is why hermeneutical problems, which arise when the meaning is not unreflectively evident and when this meaning has a "topical relevance" for one's conduct, are experienced as annoying. Unresolved hermeneutical problems mean uncertainty as to how the situation ought to be read and what response is likely to bring about desired results. At best, uncertainty is felt as discomforting; at worst, it carries a sense of danger.

Social organization can be interpreted as the sedimentation of a systematic effort to reduce the frequency with which hermeneutical problems are encountered and to mitigate the vexation generated by such problems. Probably the most common problem is the method of territorial and functional separation. Were this method applied consistently,

hermeneutical problems would diminish as physical distance shrank and interaction expanded; the chance of misunderstanding always entailed by the phenomenon of strangeness would not materialize, or would cause but a marginal disturbance when it occurred. The designation of others as strangers involves ideally the "restriction of interaction to sectors of assumed common understanding and mutual interest."[1]

Territorial and functional separation works both outwardly and inwardly. Persons who need to cross into a territory where they are likely to be seen as strangers actively seek enclaves marked for the use of visitors and the services of functional mediators. Tourist countries, which expect a constant influx of large quantities of strangers, set aside such enclaves and train such mediators. This territorial and functional separation is both a reflection of existing hermeneutic problems and a powerful factor in their perpetuation and reproduction. With segregation closely guarded, there is little chance the probability of a misunderstanding (or at least the anticipation of such a misunderstanding) will diminish. Interpretative agreement is a function of an intense interweaving of biographies, which this segregation effectively prevents. Thus the phenomenon of strangeness can be seen as simultaneously the cause and the effect of boundary-drawing efforts. As such, it tends to perpetuate itself.

The phenomenon of *strangeness* encompasses a wide range of situations. One pole includes strangers who reside in *pratically* remote (i.e., rarely visited) lands. They are thereby limited in their role of setting limits to familiar territory (the *ubi leones* written down as danger warnings on the outer boundaries of the Roman maps). Exchange with such strangers is set aside from daily routine and normal interaction as a function of a special category of people and a special occasion for the rest. Both territorial and functional means of institutional separation easily protect strangeness — hence the daily irrelevance — of strangers. Thus it obliquely reinforces the secure hominess of the territory.[2]

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1. Frederick Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Bergen: Universitet Ferlaget, 1969), p. 15.

2. Contrary to widespread opinion, the advent of television, this huge and easily accessible peephole through which the strange ways of the strangers may be routinely glimpsed, has neither eliminated the institutional separation nor diminished its impact. McLuhan's "global village" has failed to materialize. The frame of a cinema or TV screen staves off the danger of spillage more effectively still than tourist hotels and fenced-off camping sites; the one-sidedness of communication further entrenches the strangers on the screen as, essentially, *incommunicado*. The most recent invention of "thematic" shopping malls, with Carribean villages, Indian reservations and Polynesian shrines closely packed together under one roof, has perfected the old technique of institutional separation to a point reached in the past only by the zoo.

The Social Structure of Strangeness

Territorial and functional separation do not work in the case of the stranger who, in Simmel's sense, is "the man who comes today and stays tomorrow."[3] In other words, it does not work with a person who refuses to go away and hence defies spatial or temporal segregation. The fact he has come at a point in time that can be determined, he did not belong "initially," "originally," "from the very start," "since time immemorial," makes his presence an event in history, rather than a fact of nature. His passage from the first to the second would infringe on an important boundary on the existential map; such a passage would amount to the admission nature is itself an event in history and, therefore, appeals to natural rights deserve no preferential treatment. Being an event in history, having a beginning, the presence of the stranger always carries the potential for an end. The stranger has the freedom to go. He may be also forced to go or, at least, forcing him to go may be contemplated without violating the order of things. However protracted, the stay of the stranger is temporary: another infringement on a division which ought to be kept intact and preserved in the name of a secure, orderly existence.

This is not, however, where the incongruity of Simmel's stranger ends. The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance. He is physically near while remaining spiritually remote. He brings into the inner circle the kind of difference and otherness anticipated and tolerated only at a distance. The stranger represents an incongruous and hence resented "synthesis of nearness and remoteness."[4] His presence is a challenge to the reliability of orthodox orientation points and the universal tools of order-making. His proximity (as all proximity, according to Levinas[5]) suggests a moral relation, while his remoteness (as all remoteness, according to Erasmus[6]) permits only a contractual one: another important opposition compromised.

The practical incongruity follows the conceptual. The stranger who refuses to go gradually transforms his temporary abode into a home territory, all the more so as his other, "original" home recedes in the past and perhaps vanishes altogether. However, he retains (if only in

3. Georg Simmel, "The Stranger" (1908), in: *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 143.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

5. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Phillippe Nemo*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1982), pp. 95-101.

6. See Charles I. Erasmus, *In Search of the Common Good* (New York: Free Press, 1974), pp. 74, 87.

theory) his freedom to go, and so he able to view local conditions with an equanimity the native residents can hardly afford. Hence another incongruous synthesis obtains, this time between involvement and indifference, partisanship and neutrality, detachment and participation. The stranger's commitment cannot be trusted, since it comes complete with a safety valve for an easy escape most natives often envy yet seldom possess.

Simmel's stranger, the one who comes not in order to go, is therefore incurably afflicted with multiple incongruities. Indeed, he may serve as a crown example of Sartre's *le visquex* or Douglas' *the slimy* — an entity sitting astride an embattled barricade (or, rather, a substance spilled over the top of it making it slippery both ways), blurring a boundary line vital to the construction of a particular social order or a particular life-world. No classification deployed in the construction of order can fully overlap with an essentially non-discrete experience of reality. Thus enforcement of any classification means inevitably the production of anomalies (i.e., phenomena are perceived as "anomalous" only in so far as they span categories whose separation is the function of the order); "any given culture must confront events which seem to defy its assumptions. It cannot ignore the anomalies which its scheme produces, except at risk of forfeiting confidence."[7] In the case of the stranger, the reactive strategy amounts to an effort to break apart the many syntheses the stranger represents.

The first choice is, of course, a radical cutting-through of the tangle of incongruencies by forcing the stranger to leave; to re-establish original order by bringing together, so to speak, personal and spatial strangeness. This most consistent of measures is not, however, always feasible — the absence of the stranger's "natural abode" being an extreme case. The stranger who is not just out of place but, in addition, homeless in the absolute sense, may become a tempting object of genocide.[8] Short

7. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 39. One can hypothesize that somewhere between the stable and unthreatened order and its total destruction or replacement lies an area in which "the slimy" presents the most horrifying challenge and arouses the most pugnacious reactions; within this area, the vehemence of response seems to be roughly proportional to that fall in self-assurance and self-confidence which usually accompanies the weakening grip of the *ancien regime*. Again, the hosts' reactions to the influx of strangers coming to stay indefinitely may be compiled in a standard catalogue of responses to "sliminess" as such. Most items in such a catalogue refer to natives' attempts to defuse the "slimy" by depriving it of its "sliminess." All such attempts follow the logical, yet implausible strategy of separating again what the anomaly, pregnant with semantic ambiguity, blends.

8. In Ozick's pungent summary, "[t]he German Final Solution was an aesthetic

of such a radical solution, one may dump the anomaly into one of numerous variants of *Naartürmer* or *Naarshiffen*,[9] and thus achieve congruence between inherently incongruous "exterritorial territory" and equally incongruous "translocal locals." Tribal reserves, native homelands and ethnic ghettos are the most notorious of such variants.

If radical or nearly-radical solutions are either impossible or inconvenient, a cultural fence is available as a second alternative. If the stranger cannot be made non-existent, he is at least made untouchable. Social intercourse with the stranger is severely reduced, and whatever communication is permitted is surrounded with a cumbersome ritual whose main function is to set the stranger outside the realm of the ordinary and disarm him of any possible source of normative influence. "The stranger has his own strange ways, let him keep them but remember that they fit only him and do not suit us, normal people." Strict prohibitions of *connubium*, *commercium,* and commensality are the most common methods of cultural isolation and limitation of contact. Together they define the stranger as "the other" and protect the ambiguity of his status from polluting the clarity of native identity.

Keeping the stranger apart does not, however, suffice to neutralize his inherent and dangerous incongruity. He remains a permanent "slimy," always threatening to wash out the boundaries vital to native identity. The danger must be posted; the natives must be warned and kept on alert lest they succumb to the temptation of compromising the separate ways that make them what they are. This can be attained by discrediting the stranger; by representing the outward, visible and easy to spot traits of the stranger as signs of less evident, yet truly dangerous qualities. This is the social institution of stigma Goffman elaborated a couple of decades ago.

In its original meaning "stigma" stood for bodily signs signalling inferiority of character or moral wickedness. The concept can be applied more widely to all cases when an observable feature of a certain category of persons is first made salient by being brought into the focus of public attention, and then interpreted as a signifier of an *imputed* iniquity or moral turpitude. An otherwise innocuous trait becomes a blemish, a sign of affliction, a cause of shame. A person bearing this

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solution; it was a job of editing, it was the artist's finger removing a smudge, it simply annihilated what was considered not harmonious." See Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardour*, (New York: Dutton, 1984), p. 165.

9. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (London: Tavitstock, 1967), pp. 7-13.

trait is easily recognizable as less desirable, inferior, bad and dangerous. His partners are forewarned of the possible consequences of carefree interaction. They are also armed with information about the *virtual social identity* of the members of the stigmatized category — an identity difficult to be subsequently disproved, however hard the stigmatized try to demonstrate the *actual identity* as defined by themselves.[10]

Stigma seems to be a convenient weapon in defence against the unwelcome ambiguity of the Simmelian stranger. The essence of stigma is to emphasize a difference in principle beyond repair. Indeed, the outward signs of an allegedly morbid interior usually selected are those not likely to be easily hidden by human cosmetic skills. In the modern world, with its belief in the omnipotence of culture and education, constant exhortations to self-improvement and the axiom of individual responsibility for self-construction, stigma remains one of those few "natural" residues the re-designing and engineering zeal exempts and leaves in their reputedly virgin state. Stigma marks the limit of the transforming capacity of culture. The outward signs may be hidden, but cannot be eradicated. The bond between signs and inner truth may be denied, but cannot be broken. With such qualities, the institution of stigma is eminently fit to the task of immobilizing the stranger in his identity of "the other." Were the stranger merely a person as-yet-untrained in local habits and not properly adapted to native conditions, the practical threat of his "multiple incongruity" would leave the native defenseless. More dangerously still, the inherent brittleness of identity will be blatantly exposed. An identity anyone can acquire through diligence and effort is an identity which can be shed at will — a foundation much too weak to sustain the group's secure existence. The acceptance of the merely cultural essence of the stranger's idiosyncrasy means the renunciation by the group of its passport-and-visa issuing authority and of its right to control the border traffic. And an unguarded border is, for all practical purposes, a contradiction in terms. Stigma staves off all such dangers. It is a cultural product which proclaims a limit to the potency of culture. In stigma, culture draws a boundary to the territory it considers its task to cultivate, and circumscribes an area destined to lie fallow.

Since the signs of stigma essentially resist manipulation, a category may cease to be stigmatized only if the signifier of stigma is re-interpreted

10. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 12.

as innocuous or neutral, or completely denied semantic significance, and thus made socially invisible. In modern society there is a constant pressure to do exactly this. The pressure cannot be easily neutralized. It comes from attributes quite central and constitutive of modern society, like the principle of equality of opportunity, the freedom of self-constitution, responsibility of the individual for its own fate — and may not be effectively countermanded without contradiction and without generating new incongruities. After all, modernity is a rebellion against fate and ascription in the name of the omnipotence of design and achievement. Stigma cannot but be a thorn in its flesh; it restores dignity to fate and casts a shadow on the promise of limitless perfectibility. It is, therefore, at odds with everything modernity stands for and everything modern society must believe in to reproduce itself in the only shape it knows and is trained to cultivate. However, the principle of self-constitution, if pursued to its logical consequences, clashes with the requirement of collective identity which modern society must attempt to satisfy, even if it has failed to develop original, specifically modern means for the task. In fact, the question of collective identity reaches in modern conditions a gravity it never had before. Collective identities, which once upon a time were given "naturally" and matter-of-factly, are now, so to speak, artificially produced. This makes them more than ever precarious, an object of close attention of the designing-engineering-gardening modern powers.[11] There is, therefore, a genuine contradiction in the heart of modernity. Its presence precludes the possibility of satisfying both, equally pressing, needs at the same time. Beyond a certain point, the means deployed to meet one become damaging from the viewpoint of the other.

In modern society, stigma is located in the very center of this contradiction. It is, in an important sense, illegitimate, and in many cases leads a clandestine life. At the same time, it is practically indispensable. There is a paradoxical symmetry between the situation of the stigma and of the categories it stigmatizes. Both live under attack; both must hide their true identity and seek deceitful legitimations. Both work under conditions which make their actions self-defeating or at least sharply limit their effectiveness.

Liberalism, arguably the most authentically modern of policies, suffers from similar tensions reflecting one of the central contradictions of

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11. More on this topic in Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987).

modernity. On the face of it, the liberal message sounds a death knell to stigma, as its saps the strongest of its foundations: the ascriptive nature of inferiority. Liberalism extends a standing invitation to all to take their fate in their own hands and make it as good as they can. It proclaims a universal right to claim and attain the highest, most worthy and hence most coveted values. It offers not just hope but the clear recipe of its realization: the best values, in the charmingly circular formulation of J. S. Mill, are those recognized and practiced by the best people.

On closer scrutiny, however, liberalism's offer reveals an inner contradiction, which renders the offer as misleading (and in the end frustrating) as it is tempting. But it is a contradiction liberalism can ill afford to abandon. To be effective as legitimation, liberalism must insist the values possessed by the "best people" are indeed universally available — their possession is evidence of the superiority of those who possess them. In the unlikely case, however, that the offer is taken up on a massive scale, the very superiority it was meant to prove will have been washed away. One may say liberalism can make its offer without fear only because a great number of successful applicants is most unlikely and thus the offer's deception is unlikely to be exposed. To look at it from the other side, liberalism may preach this offer so confidently only because it believes that taking it up is much too tall an order for most of the "less than best" people. The most important function this offer fulfills is to make it possible to "blame the victim": if you find yourself at the bottom, you have no one but yourself to blame. And if you blame yourself, the odds are you'll stay clear of mischief, while at the same time adding to the glory of the dominant values which, so you believe, remain omnipotent and elusive. And if you refuse to admit your guilt or ineptitude, reverting to stigma would be a most sensible and hence most probable response. Paradoxically as it may seem, liberalism may use the declaration of war on stigma as a legitimizing device only if it expects the war not to be fought to the bitter end; and, if fought, never to be won.

In no other field is the inner contradiction of the "liberal solution" more visible than in the treatment of ethnic, religious, or — more generally, cultural strangers. Determinants of "strangeness" are in these cases eminently pliable; man-made, they can be in principle man-unmade. They can be also un-made (by definition of the "merely cultural," as distinct from economic, political, or indeed *social*) with the least expenditure of such resources which may be scarce or unavailable for reasons of someone else's monopoly. The un-making calls only

for a change in orientation, a shift in communal commitment, an honest effort at self-cultivation and self-refinement, or religious conversion — all things evidently within the individual's power. This is why the field under discussion provides the most obvious testing ground for the liberal program, and the site where this program (though not necessarily the intention which gave it birth) most commonly meets its defeat. Ethnic-religious-cultural strangers do vest their hopes of emancipation with the liberal vision of the benefits which come with self-improvement and self-transformation. All too often, they go out of their way to suppress everything that makes them distinct from the "best people" and hope a devoted emulation of the superior ways will render them indistinguishable from the hosts. The harder they try, however, the more the finishing line seems to be receding. When finally it seems to be within their grasp, a dagger of racism appears from beneath the liberal cloak. The rules of the game are changed; or, rather, only now the earnestly "self-refining" strangers discover that what they mistook for a game of emancipation was in fact the game of domination.

Gilman has written about the "conservative curse" which hangs over the liberal project: "The more you are like me, the more I know the true value of my power, which you wish to share, and the more I am aware that you are but a shoddy counterfeit, an outsider."[12] And Dench has the following advice for strangers about to fall into the trap of the liberal promise: "By all means declare a belief in future justice and equality. This is part of the role. But do not expect it to materialize."[13] The meaning of the liberal offer is the affirmation of the superiority of that site in society from which the offer has been made. To take the offer at its face value (and worse stlll, to act on it) means to reinforce that meaning.

To define the problem of the "domestication" of the stranger as a question concerning the decency and industry of the stranger's effort at assimilation-through-acculturation means to take the inferiority, undesirability or out-of-placeness of the strangers's form of life as an axiom. Therefore, the stranger is guilty and it is up to him to prove himself innocent. His guilt is beyond dispute; it is only the irreversible removal of such attributes which constitute guilt that remains to be proven. The stranger must demonstrate the absence of old abomination. He must, magically, force it in retrospect never to exist *in the past.*

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12. Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred: Antisemitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press,1986), p. 2.

13. Geoff Dench, *Minorities in the Open Society: Prisoners of Ambivalence* (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 259.

Displaying the presence of new rectitude is not enough. The stranger cannot cease to be a stranger. He can only become a *former stranger*; a person constantly under pressure to be someone other than he is, told to be ashamed of his guilt of not being what he ought to be.

To prove an absence is an endemically inconclusive task (to unmake the past is downright impossible). The effort is unlikely ever to end. Even less likely is the attainment of a state where no suspicion can be raised that the rehabilitation, however spectacular, is still incomplete, superficial, or a sham. After all, what the "cultural strangers" are called to attain through self-refinement is ultimately the elimination of their origin (even the origin of their distant ancestors). This is the ultimate limit of domestication-through-acculturation, but not its only difficulty. Acquisition of native culture is a thoroughly *individual* affair, while the production of "cultural strangeness" is always *aimed at a collective*.[14]

From the perspective of a native majority, "all strangers are the same." As Simmel observed, in societies where taxes for the natives were differentiated according to wealth and status, the "Jew tax" was the same for every member of the community. The individuality of the stranger is dissolved in the category; it is the category, not its individual members, which is set and seen as the genuine, supra-personal carrier of cultural difference. The individual stranger is cast metonymically as a microcosm of the category at large. He carries, so to speak, his category on his shoulders. He is unlikely to shed this burden as long as the category itself remains alive. Indeed, the person attempting to escape the stigma of the stranger alone and by individual effort soon finds himself caught in a double bind. "If the most able and successful members of the minority are morally tied to the least successful, participation in competitive areas of social life becomes for them something of a three-legged race."[15] If they wash their hands and refuse all track with "cultural inferiors," socially defined as their brethren, they invite accusations of neglect of duty and, indeed, of complicity in the perpetuation of the collective guilt. If they devote their efforts to the arduous job of lifting their brethren from their misery and act as the agents of their collective elevation, this is immediately taken as proof (if one was needed) of their continuous membership in the selfsame category of strangers from which they tried to escape. The continuing existence of the category of strangers is used as an argument against the

14. See Zygmunt Bauman "Exit Visas and Entry Tickets: Paradoxes of Jewish Assimilation," in *Telos* 77 (Fall 1988), pp. 45-77.

15. Dench, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

authenticity of individual conversion. But so is any individual attempt to assist the emancipation of the category as a whole. If you do something, you lose. If you do nothing, they win.

As has been frequently observed, once caught in this quandary individual victims of the liberal temptation tend to develop self-hatred — the phenomenon of the *inner demons of assimilation*. The torment caused by the inner demons often turns into aggression against the category of origin, which serves as their prototype and is perceived as their embodiment. But it also leads to the queasy aversion to one's own self, as if incurably infested with a bacillus of a contagious and shameful disease.

The notorious restlessness of the stranger, construed by native opinion as evidence of an erratic, neurotic personality, is socially produced. It may serve as a textbook case of the self-fulfilling prophecy. It is not the outcome of cultural difference, but an affliction caused by an attempt to efface it: an endemic malady of cultural assimilation. One may conclude that defining the strangeness as a cultural phenomenon is the starting point of a process which leads relentlessly to the "revelation" that strangeness has foundations much more solid and much less manipulable than "merely cultural," transitory and man-made differences in life-style and beliefs. The more successful the practice of cultural assimilation, the quicker this "truth" will be "discovered." The growing contradictoriness and incongruity (and hence strangeness) of the culturally assimilating stranger is precisely the artifact of his assimilation. The inherent *impossibility* of implementing the "self-refinement" program is then construed as the stranger's inherent *inability* or *uwillingness* to self-refine: evidence of a tribal conspiracy or an ineradicable genetic flaw. There is no mystery, nor is there a logical inconsistency, in the natural destiny of race coming into favor in the wake of the eye-opening cultural successes of liberalism.

The Self-Constitution of the Stranger

Even if the phenomenon of strangeness is socially structured, the assumption of the status of "stranger" carries attributes which have to be constructed, sustained and deployed in the psychical process of self-constitution. Like all other roles, this one needs learning, the acquisition of knowledge and practical skills.

Being a stranger means, first and foremost, sundering the primeval union between the self and the world, and hence bringing both into focus. Both the self and the world become clearly visible; both are articulated as problems; both call for constant examination and both

need, in the end, to be "operated on," "handled," *managed*. In all these respects the stranger's stance differs drastically from the native way of life, with far-reaching consequences.

The concept of *clean slate*, once popular among educators and cultural missionaries, must have been conceived by the extrapolation of the stranger's experience. Most certainly, it poorly reflects the condition of the "native" born into the community and growing inside it without much challenge from outside. His is the state of "being situated" or "tuned" (Heidegger), which can feed nothing but the *relativ-natürliche Weltanschauug* (Max Scheler): i.e., the viewing of conditions otherwise circumscribed, confined to this place here and now, as "natural" and thus beyond discussion. Being a native member of any community of meanings is tantamount to being supplied with guaranteed, "objective" criteria of relevance, and a "graduated knowledge" (Alfred Schutz) which ranges from shallow to dense, together with the relevance of its objects. But it is also fraught with deep holes of ignorance, often only thinly covered with the lids of "taken for granteds."[16] Whether such knowledge may seem incoherent and inconsistent to a logician, or indeed to any *stranger* not "tuned in"' or tuned imperfectly, is neither here nor there. The only thing which truly counts is that it "takes on for the members of the in-group the appearance of a *sufficient* coherence, clarity and consistency to give anybody a reasonable chance of understanding and of being understood." It is thanks to this limited, yet crucial, sufficiency that "(f)or those who have grown up within the cultural pattern, not only the recipes and their possible efficiency but also the typical and anonymous attitudes required by them are an unquestioned 'matter of course' which gives them both security and assurance."[17] Security and assurance is something one can ill afford to surrender lightly. To the extent to which they depend on the "matter of fact" posture, one would expect the in-group members to defend jealously the non-negotiable, immutable, indeed absolute character of their world-view constructed from shared, graduated knowledge.

The existential situation of the stranger is radically different. He is denied the luxury of smugness or self-oblivion. His is an opaque, not a transparent existence. The stranger is his own problem. His identity has been de-legitimated; its determining, "tuning" power has been declared at best demeaning and, at worst, criminal. The peculiarity of the

16. Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers*, vol. 1 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1967), pp. 9-12.

17. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 95, 102.

stranger's situation *vis-á-vis* the natives is not, however, confined to the obvious condition of not being "tuned" the right way and the resulting absence of relevant knowledge and skills. Not being so confined, it cannot be removed simply by learning and self-training. The difference, in fact, reaches much deeper: the knowledge which serves so adequately the life functions of the natives may well prove useless to the strangers even if conscientiously absorbed and assimilated. Indeed, it is not the failure to acquire native knowledge that constitutes the outsider as a stranger; it is the existential constitution of the stranger which makes the native knowledge unassimilable.[18]

The first reason which renders the self-annihilation of strangeness impossible is exactly the "naturalness" of the native state. One is either "situated" or not, either "tuned" or not. One cannot "situate oneself" or "tune oneself in." Or, rather, the very fact that "situating" and "tuning" are performed consciously and deliberately deprives them of exactly this "naturalness" which makes them what they are and effective as they are. The idea of "self-tuning" is, for all practical purposes, an oxymoron. The condition of "being situated" or "tuned" persists only as long as it is not brought into focus and does not become an object of manipulation. Yet this is precisely what the stranger can never avoid. He is a newcomer to the group in a literal sense, and what seems obvious to the natives looks hardly obvious to him. What the natives do not give any thought to is for him a target of intense reflection; or, the lifting of the "graduated knowledge" from the grey area of "evidence" to the level of self-awareness is performed for the stranger by the native group itself. This happens as the native group questions his natural right to partake of what the in-group members are, i.e., simply and unproblematically "in." Because of his ignorance, or because of the knowledge forced upon him, the stranger cannot but call into question most of the things the native group considers, or unthinkingly treats as, unquestionable. He solidifies and renders tangible the mode of life effective only in so far as it stays transparent, invisible, uncodified.

Another reason reaches deeper still. The stranger cannot just adopt

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18. The very constitution of the host population as "the natives" — one conceivable only in as far as there is a vantage point which is *not native* — already reveals the corroding, relativizing gaze of the stranger. Obliquely, it reinforces the strangeness of the latter. The stranger confirms the dominant definition of himself by the sheer acceptance of the other model as "native" and, consequently, as a model wielding authority to define the rules of the behavioral game and the meaning of properly human existence.

the native culture as it stands without first attempting to revise some of its precepts — perhaps even such precepts crucial for the native state of security and self-assurance — and this for the simple reason that the native culture defines him and sets him apart as an alien and contains no means to accomodate him as a native. The stranger is assigned no status "inside" the culture he may wish to make his own. His entry will, therefore, signify a violation of that culture. Indeed, the very act of entering will constitute such a violation. By the act of his entry, real or intended, the natives' life-world that used to be a shelter is turned into a contested, insecure and problematic ground. By the same token, the very good will of the stranger turns against him. His effort to assimilate sets him further apart, bringing more than ever his strangeness into relief.

One cannot knock on a door unless one is outside; and it is the act of knocking on the door which alerts the residents to the fact that one is indeed outside. "Being outside" casts the stranger in the position of *objectivity*: an outside, detached and autonomous vantagepoint from which the insiders may be looked upon, scrutinized and censored. The very awareness of such an outside viewpoint (epitomized by the stranger's status) makes the natives feel uncomfortable, insecure in their home ways and truths. Besides, entry is always a passage, a changing of statuses; and this transformation more than anything else puts the "yesterday stranger/prospective native" in conflict with the world he wishes to enter — a world which draws its confidence (and its attraction for the stranger in the first place) from the assumption that no one moves and no one finds himself ever outside. The fact of entry brands the ostensibly "former" stranger forever — as a *changeling*, a person who can pick and choose, who has the freedom natives as such do not possess, whose status can never have the same degree of finality and irreversibility as the natives. The loyalty simply taken for granted in the case of natives (and then understood not as an act of loyalty, but as commonality of fate), calls for a suspicious and vigilant scrutiny in the case of yesterday's stranger; and it will be forever so, since his commitment has been compromised from the start by being freely chosen. Whatever has been chosen may be rejected. The stranger's loyalty will always remain doubtful. The very zeal he identifies with the new home casts him apart. His insistence on being at home is taken as an admission of guilt.

The *objectivity* of the stranger is the most serious of charges the native community holds against him. Indeed, it is through this grievance that

the native form of life may best sustain and reproduce its *naturalness*, its inwardness, its self-centrism — all the most solid pillars of its identity. In the native world-view, the essence of strangeness is homelessness. The stranger is not simply a new-comer, a person temporarily out of place. He is an eternal wanderer, homeless always and everywhere, without hope of ever "arriving." The "objectivity" (read: cosmopolitanism, non-patriotism, non-commitment) of his view consists precisely in his inability to make a distinction between the stations of his unstoppable pilgrimage: as far as he is concerned, all of them are just sites, confined in space, bound to become the past in the future. Passed by, and sooner or later left behind, they all look alike: they are all identical in their *negativity* as none of them is a home.

The natives may view the freedom they impute to the stranger with genuine horror, with a jaundiced eye, or (most commonly) with a mixture of both. To the stranger himself, however, freedom appears first of all as acute uncertainty. Unmitigated by at least a part-time availability of safe harbor, it tends to be experienced as a curse rather than a blessing. Freedom in the undiluted state is lived as loneliness. As a chronic condition it is virtually unbearable. In the extreme case it verges on madness. But even in mild versions it tends to be medicalized as a mental problem.[19] In each case, it is a state in which its occupier would not wish to remain permanently — not by his own will, anyway.

It is mainly for this reason that the liberal offer is such an alluring proposition for the stranger. It promises what the stranger misses most: an unambiguous placement, safe harbor, home. The missing magnifies the attractions of what is missed. One would therefore expect from the stranger a degree of commitment and emotional identification seldom found among natives. One would also expect a tendency to proclaim the aspired-to identity loudly and publicly. One would anticipate the praise of the symbols and the articles of faith of the aspired-to community to be lavish and flowery. All this follows naturally from a need to convince the audience of having *acquired* a quality other people — simultaneously viewers and actors — *possess* by right. But to those other people all this may seem excessive, "in bad taste," ludicrous

19. See, e.g., Gilman's penetrating study of the history of *neurasthenia* — a psychiatric concept which in the late 19th century integrated into one disease-unit the heightened restlessness, frantic self-criticism and obsession with success and social acceptance, observed or anticipated among various categories of people poorly defined in terms of the accepted social categories or weakly anchored in the existing social divisions. Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 129-30, 162, 214-15.

or duplicitous. In each case, what they see will tend to disprove the very point the stranger zealously tries to prove.

Like the liberal offer, the strategy that follows it has its limits. More often than not, it is self-defeating. If anything, it renders the strangeness of the stranger yet more obtrusive and vexing. Unfailingly, it reveals this strangeness as irredeemable — the quality the liberal offer attempted to hide. The stranger had been promised that full "domestication" would follow cultural reform; that refinement of manners, containment of passion, correct and etiquette-conscious public demeanour, careful avoidance of everything vulgar would suffice as the membership ticket to the exclusive club of the native trend-setters. The bluff of this promise is called the moment it has been taken seriously and matched with a behavior it ostensibly demanded. The real obstacles guarding entry are now revealed. They are economic, political, and above all social; and none of them is likely to be as malleable or as amenable to subjective intention as the "merely cultural" obstacles pretended to be. It becomes apparent that social divisions are neither caused nor sustained by differences in the degree of civility and cultural polish. The etiquette consists precisely in the tacit acceptance, by those who gain and those who lose alike, of the prohibition to reveal the true grounds of distinction and privilege. At the same time, when the grounds of inequality are exposed as tough and inflexible, their favorite defenses are exposed as sham. No wonder that acting on the liberal offer tends to trigger off defensive reactions of the native community, ranging all the way from the re-introduction of ascriptive criteria of difference (albeit in a modern, "rational," racist garb), through the medicalization of otherness up to the annihilation of obstreperous otherness through the eviction or destruction of the stranger. If recourse to racism seems the natural way of salvaging the end of liberalism in the wake of the bankruptcy of its ostensible means, so the retreat into "strangedom" as a substitute home of rootedness and confidence seems an equally natural way of salvaging the purpose of assimilation once the means suggested by the liberal program have proved ineffective.

Hardly ever was a program of such a retreat so blatantly spelled out as in the work of the Russian-Jewish philosopher Lev Shestov (Schwartzmann), who in his later life was a professor at Sorbonne and one of the pillars of religious existentialism. Branded with the stigma of the despised and resented minority, he excelled in the very activity in which the despising and resenting majority prided itself as the sign of its superiority

and excellence. Having passed with flying colors all entrance examinations, yet refused entry to the temple of wisdom which defined itself as absolute, universal and hence alien to all parochial difference, Shestov[20] responded with a frontal assault against what he set about to prove was an incurable *parochiality* of the very search for the absolute in general, and the *absolutely superior values* in particular. The philosophers' search for the ultimate system, for the complete order, for the extirpation of everything unknown and unruly, stems from the dream of having a firm soil and a secure home, and leads to closing down the obstinately infinite human potential. Such search for the universal cannot but degenerate into a ruthless clamp-down on human possibilities. "The solid ground sooner or later escapes from beneath man's feet, yet man continues to live without ground or with but a shaky ground under his feet, and then he stops counting the axioms as truths and instead calls them lies." The bitter experience of the stranger chased away from the door on which he knocked is thinly veiled in Shestov's own philosophical program: "The settled man says: 'How can one live without certainty about the day to come, how can one sleep without a roof over his head!' But an accident threw him out of his home forever, and he spends his nights in the woods. He cannot sleep: he is afraid of wild animals, of his own brother the vagabond. In the end, however, he entrusts his life to contingency, starts living the vagabond's life and even, perhaps, sleeps quietly at night." The task of philosophy, in sharp contrast to an entire philosophical tradition, is "to teach men to live in uncertainty"; "not to calm down, but to disturb." "Everywhere and with every step, on each or without any occasion, with or without reason, it is necessary to ridicule the most firmly accepted judgments and to state paradoxes. And then — one will see what happens."

In an early display of the "black is beautiful" posture, Shestov does not deny the valor of all those things dominant thought made into symbols of superiority. Philosophical orthodoxy stands accused of failing to deliver on its promise, of scoring miserably by its own standards. The promise and the standards are not questioned. On the contrary, Shestov insists that only his way of doing philosophy may do justice to both. Truth found inside a tightly sealed home is hardly useful outside; judgment made inside a room which for fear of draft is never aired, is blown away with the first gust of wind. The universality of truth and judgment born in confinement is but a cover for that constraint which

20. Lev Shestov, *Apotheosts of Rootlessness: An Essay in non-Dogmatic Thought* [in Russian], (Paris: YMCA Press, 1971), pp. 27, 32, 41, 49.

feeds on the lust for domination and fear of the open space. A non-counterfeit universality may be born only out of homelessness. "As long as the truth is sought by the settled men — the apple of the Tree of Knowledge won't be eaten. The task can be performed only by homeless adventurers, by natural nomads . . ." The table has been turned. It is now the stranger who can find the truth the natives are vainly looking for. Far from being a mark of shame, the stranger's incurable foreignness is now a sign of distinction. The power of the homeowners is but a sham. The powerlessness of the homeless is but an illusion.

After Shestov, few new ideas may be gleaned from Mannheim's accolade of the *freischwebende Intelligenz*. Like in Shestov, the lack of social acceptance turns into a condition of undistorted communication — the outcast becomes a hero, the incongruous is revealed as objectivity. In Natanson's apt commentary, the advantage of Mannheim's intrepid truth-trapper is his "nomadic existence": "Bound by no formal commitments, he can move lightly through traditional formulations of social causation, control, and prediction." It is thanks to his perpetual and irreparable homelessness that Mannheim's "free-floating intellectual" becomes an "unmasker, penetrator of lies and ideologies, relativizer and devaluator of immanent thought, disintegrator of *Weltanschauungen*."[21] Indeed, he is an awesome corrosive force: a creator who draws his strength from his power of destruction. If reality is so many fenced-off and tightly guarded private plots, claims to truth remain but excuses for exclusion and eviction orders. One needs to break the fences first. The philosophers of the Jewish exile, after all, taught for centuries that the destruction must precede the advent of the Messiah; that redemption "cannot be realized without dread and ruin;"[22] and that this liberating destruction and the construction which will come in its wake is the meaning and the mission of exile, the unique chance and the purpose of homelessness. It is by their works that exile "healed the sickness of the world and reunited the scattered fragments. In fact, he alone would bring about this unification."[23]

Point by point, Mannheim disavows every single property of the "settled" from which they have drawn their pride, contentment and

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21. Maurice Natanson, *Literature, Philosophy and the Social Sciences* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1962), p. 170.

22. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 13.

23. Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi, The Mystical Messiah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 44-45.

sense of security. Thus any well-integrated group is self-centered and hence selectively blind: "not every possible aspect of the world comes within the purview of the members of the group, but only those out of which difficulties and problems for the group arise." The solidity of roots is a recipe for parochial narrow-mindedness: "It is clearly impossible to obtain an inclusive insight into problems if the observer or thinker is confined to a given place in society." The distrust with which the group treats the "unfit" testifies to the group's own disabilities, rather than to the sins of the stranger. It is the outsiders' ability "to attach themselves to classes to which they originally did not belong," the fact that they "could adapt themselves to any viewpoint . . . because they and they alone were in position to choose their affiliation" that the well-settled groups cannot stomach. "Should the capacity to acquire a broader point of view be considered merely as a liability? Does it not rather present a mission?"[24]

The modern intellectual is a perpetual wanderer and universal stranger. No one truly likes him for this very reason; in every place, he is out of place. The continual rebuffs received everywhere and from everybody need not, however, result solely in the fanaticism of desperation. Rejection may as well open the eyes of the rejected to the meaning and value of the very position (or, rather, the "un-position") which has been the source of suffering. Rejection means, after all, freedom from obligations. Eviction means group loyalties need not constrain vision anymore; and thus "the narrowness and the limitations which restrict one point of view" may be "corrected by clashing with the opposite points of view." Exile is a blessing: the outcasts have been banished to the only site "from which a total perspective would be possible." They are now ripe for the role of decision-makers (or, more precisely, *good decision-makers*), as "[t]he formation of a decision is truly possible only under conditions of freedom based on the possibility of choice which continues to exist even after the decision has been made."[25]

While making a bid for the unique and superior status of the modern intellectual, Mannheim draws on the popular fear of the awesome power residing in the no-man's land outside the safe and habitual family or community plots. He embraces the finality of the native verdict, the perpetuity of exile. He also accepts the native suspicion that the stranger will never become like the native and will never see the world

24. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1968), pp. 26, 72, 141, 144.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 143.

through native eyes. Finally, he agrees with the worst of the native's suspicions: that estrangement breeds enmity to all local values. But he reforges the stigma of shame and the legal justification of the eviction order into a militant, defiant bid to superiority. To paraphrase Goffman, "instead of leaning on his crutch, he gets to play golf with it."

Only on the universal foundations he proclaims on behalf of the intellectual stranger may truth be built; and universality, as any native would accept, arises out of estrangement. The standpoint of the exile is the only cognitive determinant of universally-binding truth. Well-entrenched and self-centered groups inflate their narrow opinions to ostensibly universal proportions with the help of thought-constraints and the banishment of dissenters. By so doing, they prevent themselves from finding what they sought, and on the way discredit the very purpose of their search. The banished must protect the supreme value of universal truth from all further harm. They will do what those who exiled them failed to achieve. They will prove against all odds (and particularly against the dominant opinion) they are the staunchest, most loyal and most reliable defenders and promoters of the dominant values. This they can do as long as they refuse to efface their difference and insist on *remaining strangers*. It is through their estrangement they serve the values the group needs and wants to possess. The liberal program may well have failed to secure unification, but it was a false unification it offered in the first place. The real one will be attained precisely by those whom liberalism failed.

The process of self-construction sets the stranger ever further apart from the native group with which he still wants to ingratiate himself now as much as at the initial period of the assimilatory dream. The stranger offers a unique blend of universalist program and relativist practice. In order to secure true universality of the form of life — a purpose he shares with the native group (with *any native group*) — he must expose as false, and thus undermine, the security of values the native group (*any native group*) has grown to consider absolute. The stranger aims at the effacement of all divisions which stand in the way of uniform, essential humanity. This is the last hope he entertains to efface his own outsidedness. To the native group, however, his thrust for universality means more than anything else a confrontation with the decomposing, corrosive power of relativism.

Excursus: Franz Kafka, or the Rootlessness of Universality

The Jews have been Europe's prototypical strangers. In the continent

of nations and nationalism, they were the only reminder of the relativity of nationhood and of the outer limits of nationalism. They were the very danger against which nations had to constitute themselves. They were the ultimate incongruity: a *non-national nation*. Their strangeness was not confined to any particular place; they were *universal strangers*. They were not visitors from another country, for there was no such "another country" — indeed, no country where they could claim not to be visitors or strangers. Jews were the very embodiment of strangeness, the very essence of homelessness and the absence of roots — an unexorcisable spectre of conventionality in the house of the absolute, of nomadic past in the era of settlement.

As the universal and hence most radical of strangers, European Jews fathomed the full depth of the stranger's experience. The universality of their strangeness endowed their particular experience with universal value. It is not that Jews embraced universality more avidly and with more abandon than anyone else. It was, rather, that their experience, through its unique features, articulated the very pattern of universality. Strangers of all walks of life could look at this experience as a mirror and see the blurred and vaguely conveyed details of their own likeness. It was Kafka's painfully lived, tormented Jewishness which permitted Camus and Sartre to glean from his work a parable of the universal predicament of the modern man. It allowed Camus to read Kafka as an insight into the incurable absurdity of modern life, into "the strangeness of human life"[26]; it allowed Sartre to find in Kafka the very definition of the stranger: "The stranger is a man confronting the world . . . The stranger is also man among other men . . . It is ultimately me in relation to myself."[27]

Like his nameless heroes, Kafka experienced guilt without crime, along with its consequence: condemnation without judgment. He lived in a "world in which it is a crime to be accused," in which the paramount skill for all those who did not want to be convicted of the crime was "to avoid the accusation."[28] However, this was the very skill impossible to obtain. There was no escape from the world where it was a crime merely to be accused. One carried that world with oneself wherever one went. "My imperfection is . . . not congenital, not earned" — confides Kafka in his diary.[29] It is neither natural nor man-made; neither

26. Pierre-George Castex, *Albert Camus et L'étranger* (Paris: José Cortez, 1986), p. 56.
27. Brian T. Fitch, *L'étranger d'Albert Camus* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1972), p. 94.
28. Adrian Jaffe, *The Process of Kafka's Trial* (London: State University Press, 1967), p. 29.
29. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-23*, ed. by Max Brod (London: Penguin, 1964), pp. 18-19.

fate nor deed. It is as incongruous as the position of the stranger among the natives, as impossible to fight as the other incongruity. Indeed, where would one find the home of the imperfection? "The reproaches lie around inside me." "I myself," as it were, "am perhaps the best aid of my assailants. For I underestimate myself, and that in itself means an overestimation of others" — the outside is inside, the two intertwine, interpenetrate, merge.

One of Kafka's most quoted self-diagnoses is the verdict he pronounced in a letter to Max Brod on the generation of Germanized (or were they just Germanizing?) Jews to which he belonged: " '[T]heir hind legs were still mired in their fathers' Jewishness and their thrashing forelegs found no new ground. The ensuing despair became their inspiration." Reality was an exact opposite of the liberalist utopia and the proven utter irrelevance of the main strategic principle of the assimilatory drive ("Be a Jew at home, a man in the street"). In Robert's pungent summary, "at home the young Jews of Prague lived, thought, and wrote like Germans apparently resembling other Germans, but outside of their neighbourhoods no one was deceived, the 'others' recognized them instantly by their faces, their manners, their accent. They were beyond a doubt assimilated, but only within the restricted area of their borrowed Germanism; or better still, they were 'assimilated' with their own uprootedness."[30] The most perceptive among the members of that generation, Kafka understood what the others barely, and only grudgingly, noticed: that he, like them, "was Jewish even in the way of not being Jewish."[31] Assimilation spawned the reality to which one strived to assimilate; the only reality to which one could hope to assimilate. Assimilation fed on itself and came to be its own sole purpose. It led away from the world left behind, but not closer to the world ahead.

By the dawn of the current century, when the self-defeating tendency of assimilation became ever more strongly felt,[32] the *Ostjuden* were gradually lifted from their recent unenviable role of the *inner demons of "Western" assimilation*[33] in which they kept reminding their civilized Western cousins there was little hope of ever consigning the past to

30. Martha Robert, *Franz Kafka's Loneliness*, trans. by Ralph Mannheim (London: Faber & Faber, 1982), p. 35.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

32. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, *op. cit.*, p. 174: "The value system they borrowed not only was never theirs in its entirety, but always contained elements inimical to them. The German always saw their adoption of it as merely a mask behind which glowered the unregenerate Jew. Sadly, for the German Jew the mask was the only reality."

33. Bauman, "Exit Visas and Entry Tickets," *op. cit.*

oblivion. Somewhat unpredictably, the *Ostjuden* were promoted to a new role of "fulsome persons," which embodied everything the Western Jews most badly missed and belatedly regretted abandoning. "The Eastern Jews are a people with a strong sense of life and joy in it" — Nathan Birnbaum waxed wistfully in 1912. Martin Buber did more than anyone else to substitute the myth of the Eastern Jew as the symbol of cultural wholesomeness and health for the old myth of the *Ostjude* as the relic of the pre-cultural savagery which formalized Protestant ethics in alliance with the Enlightenment cult of civility set about to extirpate. At the same time, he inadvertently disclosed the sham of what had been trumpeted as a sudden reversal of the *Ostjude* fortune and the *Westjude* policy.[34] Hardly ever did the Jews borrow a majoritarian ideology which contained more "elements inimical to them . . ."

Kafka's own brief, yet intense and stormy encounter with the *Ostjuden* in the shape of a Mr. Löwy, Mrs. Tschissik and other actors of a Yiddish travelling theater constituted arguably the most dramatic single event in his life. For the first time, he saw "people who are Jews in an especially pure form because they live only in the religion, but live in it without effort, understanding, or distress."[35] These words in which love, admiration and envy are recorded, express also the sad wisdom of a hopeless reality. Those pure Jews were pure only because they *did not understand* their purity. It was ignorance which made them so complete and perfect, so carelessly happy. They did not know what Kafka did and what he could not unlearn. Their purity, and any of those traits which made them so alluring, were not for him. There was no way back into the past; or, rather, there was no past in Kafka to which he could return. In the course of his daily conversations with his new friends and mentors, it occurred to him that for the Jews the word *Mutter* is not just the name for mother but a *German* name for mother, which "makes her a little comic." For a Jew, *Mutter* "unconsciously

34. As George L. Mosse convincingly argues, the discovery of a "new and improved" version of the *Ostjude* was another link in a long chain of borrowings from the dominant culture, always prompted (overtly or subconsiously) by the urge "not to differ," "be like them," and thus "be admitted." Mosse found a truly striking similarity between Buber's sentimental account of the East-European ghetto and the ideology of Paul de Lagarde and other spokesmen for the budding German *Volksgemeinschaft*. Buber's favorite words were *Blut, Boden, Volkstum, Gemeinshaft, Wurzelhaftigkeit*. His favorite prefix — "Ur-." See Richie Robertson, "Antizionismus, Zionismus: Kafka's responses to Jewish Nationalism" in *Paths and Labyrinths: Nine Papers from a Kafka Symposium*, ed. by J. P. Stern and J. J. White (London: Institute of Germanic Studies of the University of London, 1985), pp. 29-31.

35. *Kafka's Diaries*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

contains, together with the Christian splendor Christian coldness also, the Jewish woman who is called '*Mutter*' therefore becomes not only comic but strange." So perhaps "Mama" would be a better name for a Jewish mother? It certainly would — "if only one didn't imagine '*Mutter*' behind it . . ."[36]

With insight added by malice, Richard Wagner once wrote of homesick, irredeemable Jewish strangers who, having arrogantly destroyed their relation with previous companions in sorrow, always find it impossible to create a new connection with that society to which they pretend to belong. And so Kafka, in Robertson's words, felt that Western Jews like him "were trapped uncomfortably between a sheltering Jewish community to which they could never return and Western society which would never completely accept them."[37] Gruesome as it was, this suspension in an empty social space was still the lesser evil. Much more macabre and grisly was the fact that the void was not "out there," but *inside* the man who tried in vain to reach the two equally elusive supports. Lacking all socially recognized authority for self-definition, lacking even the language of which identities are made, the victim could exist only *through this emptiness*, in the indescribable, unnamed gap between a lost and an unfound reality. Kafka found curiously unsatisfying his friend Max Brod's story, the *Jüdinnen*. Seeking an explanation, he noted in his diary: "The *Jüdinnen* lacks non-Jewish observers, the respectable contrasting persons who in other stories draw out the Jewishness so that it advances toward them in amazement, doubt, envy, fear and, finally, is transformed into self-confidence, but in any event can draw itself up to its full height only before them. That is just what we demand, no other principle for the organization of Jewish material seems justifiable to us."

The Jewishness of the Western Jew cannot assert itself on its own. Even in his Jewishness — which, after all, he does his best to hide in the secure darkness of family closets — the Jew depends on Gentile authority. It is they, the non-Jews, who are "respectable persons," who have the authority to define the meaning of being a Jew. It is they and they alone who decide on the principle which enables the Jew to set the bits and pieces of his "Jewish material" into a meaningful pattern. On their own, the Jews simply do not make sense. A story of the Jews on their own reads like a lie — and as a hermetically impenetrable one at that.

Perhaps more telling still is the un-self-conscious ease with which

36. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
37. Robertson, "Antizionismus, Zionismus," *op.cit.*, p. 28.

the vantage point then shifts in Kafka's entry: "In the same way, too, the convulsive starting up of a lizard under our feet on a footpath in Italy delights us greatly, again and again we are moved to bow down, but if we see them at a dealer's by hundreds crawling over one another in confusion in the large bottles in which otherwise pickles are usually packed, then we don't know what to do."[38]

Seeking to prove his first impression of the *Jüdinnen*'s congenital fault was correct, Kafka must leave the perplexed mind of the insider and view the world through the discerning eye of the "respectable person" himself. His is the authority, and in his mind alone all proofs may be begotten and made binding. And what Kafka sees through the eye of a rich tourist or a pet-shop customer looking at the lizards is that, once heaped together and left to their own company, the Jews are ridiculously meaningless, incongruous and unappetizing. Like lizards in a pickle jar, Jews locked in their own company must be seen as out of their element, as thrown into an *unnatural* state. Like a lizard on a stony Italian gorge, the Jew "makes sense" (to those whose sense counts and whose look endows things with sense) only individually, when constituted by the tourist's curiosity as a tourist attraction. The *natural* state of the Jew is to be singled out in order to be examined, assessed and evaluated. A verdict will then be passed — the only verdict that sustains the order and meaning of his existence. Like the other lizards in the jar, other Jews do not matter. As Arthur Schnitzler observed, no Jew really respects another — no more than prisoners of war respect each other, especially when they have no hope. They may hate or adore, or even sometimes love each other. But they will never respect each other. All their emotional relations develop in an atmosphere of spiritual serfdom and ensuing duplicity in which respect is bound to be stifled.

A universal stranger himself — and perhaps the most insightful among universal strangers — Kafka unraveled and spelled out the universal traits of the stranger, that one and only hero of all his literary work. To be a stranger is to be rejected and to surrender the right to self-constitution, self-definition and self-identity. It is to derive one's sense from the relation with the native other, and from the other's examining gaze. It is to forget the skill of making a meaningful pattern out of the inherited "material." It is to surrender one's autonomy and, with that, the authority to make one's life meaningful. To be a stranger means to be able to live only a vicarious life of dissimulation.

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38. *Kafka's Diaries*, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

By himself, the stranger is devoid of all attributes, a true *man without qualities*. As Gilman has observed, the Jew was expected to be different from both Jews and non-Jews. Whatever qualities may give him a body and thus draw him out of the void are graciously bestowed and may be withdrawn at a whim. In his absence of substance, the stranger is the archetype of universality: weightless, insubstantial, ineffable unless injected with other people's contents; nowhere at his "natural" place; the very antithesis of the concrete, the specific, the definite. The stranger is universal because he has no home and no roots. Rootlessness relativizes everything concrete and thus begets universality. In rootlessness both universality and relativism find their roots. Their hotly denied kinship is thus unmasked.

The Intellectuals' Neolithic Revolution

The neolithic revolution consisted in the shift from a nomadic to a settled life or, what amounts to the same thing, from gathering the fruits of nature to growing plants nature itself failed to produce. If this were the essence of the neolithic revolution, then its intellectual equivalent occurred in the years following Mannheim's depiction of the *intelligentsia* as the category of strangers who re-forge the bane of their homelessness into the weapon of universal truth.

In the 1980s, "colleagues have replaced a public, and jargon has supplanted English" — writes Jacoby. "American Marxists today have campus offices and assigned parking spaces." Indeed, "to be an intellectual requires a campus address." Under such new conditions, "the Marxist theoretical 'explosion' has the force of a seminar coffee break," while "a critical vision is itself evidence of personal failings."[39] Debray has defined each successive period in the last hundred years of French intellectuals' history by reference to the type of abode they occupied at the time (e.g., universities, publishing houses, mass media) — all different, but all equally homely, well-furnished, safe, warm, accomodating and often even hospitable.[40] If they have ever been nomads, intellectuals are no longer that. They have arrived. They have settled. They have their own plots to till.

Indeed, an enormous distance has been travelled since that *milieu artificiel* of aggrieved, militant and resolute draftsmen of the *Grand Design*, who — in Cochin's opinion — made their own a "society" in which "the

39. Rusell Jacoby, *The Last Intellectuals* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), pp. 172, 180, 203, 220.

40. See Régis Debray, *Le Pouvoir Intellectuel en France* (Paris: Ramsay, 1979).

participants appear to be free, freed of all ties, of all obligations, of all social function."[41] The scientific-technological revolution promoted by a panoptical state exploded that quasi-society built of discussion and opinion — and sucked in the debris. The free intellectuals of yore have now turned into university professors, government consultants, experts and functionaries of warfare and welfare bureaucracies. Their thought emerges out of its estrangement. It has found the many homes it inhabits cozy and comfortable. The knights of universality are now the defenders of hospitals, colleges, opera houses and research institutes — of funds and jobs, salaries and statute books. They ceased long ago to draw their ranks in a solidary opposition to the society which made them into strangers. Hardly ever do they draw their ranks together at all — unless the very right of the expert to rule within his own realm of expertise is at stake. Apart from this one issue on which they are all united, there is much to divide them and so little to unite.

Mannheim's free-floating, estranged and inward-looking intellectual did not disapppear altogether, though most certainly he is now an exception. But he is at war not so much with parochial society as with the parochiality of his better established, sated and self-satisfied colleagues. It was that parochiality Adorno, the most prominent, prototypical free-floater, construed as the staunchest enemy of the miscarried "attempt to change the world": "What differs from the existent will strike the existent as witchcraft, while thought-figures such as proximity, home, security hold the faulty world under their spell. Men are afraid that in losing this magic they would lose everything, because the only happiness they know, even in thought, is to be able to hold on to something — the perpetuation of unfreedom."[42]

Looking at the rational world in which expertise and power merged and knowledge ceased to be the power of the powerless, Weber did not see much of a future for Adorno's and Horkheimer's position: "The problem which besets us now is not: how can this evolution be changed? — for that is impossible, but . . . what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parcelling-out of

41. Augustin Cochin, *La Révolution et la libre pensée* (Paris: Plon, 1924), p. XXXVI.

42. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), pp. 3, 33. His companion, Horkheimer, agreed: "Among the vast majority of the ruled there is the unconscious fear that theoretical thinking might show their painfully won adaptation to reality to be perverse and unnecessary." See Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), p. 232.

the soul. From this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life."[43] Long before Mannheim raised the specter of the Last Judge and universal stranger, Weber composed his funeral dirge for the free soul: keeping free a portion of mankind was the most he felt entitled to hope for. Adorno and Horkheimer represented such a portion. They were strangers many times over: unattached scholars in the world of well-accomodated academics; Germans in a society which thought of them as Jews; exiles from a society which never fully became their home to a society they never wished to make their home; European philosophers thrown into a land of philistine anti-intellectualism.

Their only companions and reference were other strangers like themselves. Theirs was the life of exile, with (in Robert Michels' memorable description) its "brisk exchange of ideas on unoccupied evenings, the continued rubbing of shoulders between men of the most different tongues, the enforced isolation from the bourgeois world of their respective countries, and the utter impossibility of any 'practical' action."[44] Soon the impossible turned into the undesirable: what cannot be done is not worthy of doing. One can as well derive pride from one's impotence: deafness of the world testifies to the power of the message. With relish, Adorno and Horkheimer found in Paul Deussen's translation of *Upanishad* what they were groping for: a testimony of the irrevocable incompatibility between critical, uncompromising thought, and an effort aimed at mobilizing popular consensus leading to practical action. To make such an effort, the idea needs to develop into a neat theoretical system. In the process, it cannot remain uncompromising for long; soon it stops being critical.[45] An active role in life is not compatible with the salvation of the soul; the search for logical cohesion such an active role requires is not compatible with emancipatory critique. *Upanishad* (unlike Vedic religion), Cynics (unlike their Stoic successors), St. John the Baptist (unlike St. Paul) — all refused to produce cohesive, harmonious, academically respectable systems, as they stoutly refused any track with politics in whose fetid atmosphere the unbound spirit cannot breathe.

As estranged and marginalized intellectuals became fewer and more exotic in the world of a well-settled, practically engaged knowledge class, the more radical and otherworldly becomes their commitment

43. Quoted after J. P. Mayer, *Max Weber and German Politics* (London: Faber & Faber, 1956), p. 128.

44. Robert Michels, *Political Parties* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1919), p. 167.

45. See the note attached to the Herder & Herder American Edition of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming.

to the universal and the absolute. They are strangers not just in relation to the "natives" and their dominant values. First and foremost, most blatantly and poignantly, they are strangers in relation to the *fellow members of the knowledge class*. They are traitors to their class loyalty, heretics to their Church orthodoxy. The universality they seek is forged out of the opposition to that particularity for which their own knowledge class (the class they reject and by which they are rejected) serves them as the prototype. It is the "academic science," the "established wisdom," the "bureaucratized knowledge" that stands for the sin of surrender to selfish, parochial interests. It is against those tropes of fall that the wrath and the most poisonous arrows are aimed.

The arrows, of course, never reach their intended targets. With knowledge effectively translated into institutionally entrenched expertise, Mannheim's vision of the homeless intelligentsia (an image which, even in the best of times, smacked of theoretical contrivance), looks increasingly nebulous. Experts are anything but rootless; nor can they be validly accused of *trahison des clercs*. They cannot betray commitments never undertaken. Theirs are specific tasks arising from specific problems. Set in a clear-cut, institutionalized section of an overall division of labor, they have no time for the ancient *querelle* between the locals and the universalists, no use for the battle between eternal truths and the scepticism of the modern Pyrrhonians. Their praxis as experts generates neither lust for certainty nor relativist inclinations. If anything, it invalidates both and, above all, the conflict between them and the need to choose. Unlike the huge, society-size gardens eyed greedily by free-floating intellectuals, each of the little allotments the experts cultivate can accomodate quite considerable authority inside, without considering their own confining boundaries a problem. With the urge to expand, the lust for universality fades. With wilting interest in the neighbor behind the partition, the horror of relativity peters out.

It seems that the cognitive perspective of the knowledge class, split as it now is into a multitude of loosely connected expert sections, favors neither universalism nor relativism, and cools down considerably the controversy between the two. No wonder the most popular philosophies of today are those which humbly admit localized, communally-based *boundaries* of truth, while at the same time striving to secure the possibility of distinguishing between right and wrong *inside* the accepted borderlines. One can say that in such philosophies communities (or forms of life, traditions, languages) have become synonymical with the idea of "objective truth": community is the area in which a

which a truth may be agreed as objective and binding, while truth is objective and binding so far as there is a community which accepts this and thus makes it into a reality inside its boundaries. Community and truth are two rhetorical figures which refer to each other, each one legitimizing itself through the other in the world of experts and compartmentalized truth.

The Universality of Rootlessness

The "neolithic revolution" of the spiritual elite, the wondrous transformation of rootless intellectuals into the established knowledge class, is just a more spectacular (perhaps more deeply felt because of being "closer to home") case of a wider process which may be called *the privatization of strangeness*. A paradoxical corollary of privatization is the *universality of strangeness*: the mode of "being a stranger" is experienced, to a varying degree, by every member of contemporary society with its extreme division of labor and compartmentalization of functionally separated spheres. If members of the knowledge class live through such an experience, they do so as members of a society at large, rather than as scientists, technologists, thinkers or artists. In these latter capacities, their specialized activities, firmly anchored with the help of productive and distributive companies, institutionalized reward systems, "networks," "circles" and "pegs" (like coffee-houses, clubs, journals) on which their group-identity is fastened[46] and which sustain, control and service them, are factors of integration and belonging, rather than estrangement. However, in their private capacities — as individuals — members of the knowledge class share in the universal existential mode of which the experience of estrangement is a ubiquitous and important component.

As Luhmann has convincingly argued, "with the adoption of functional differentiation individual persons can no longer be firmly located in one single subsystem of society, but rather must be regarded *a priori* as socially displaced."[47] That is, the individual is a "displaced person" by definition: it is the very fact that he cannot be fully subsumed under any of the numerous functional subsystems, which only in combination constitute the fullness of his life process (the fact, in other words, that he does not belong fully to any of the subsystems and no

46. Cf. Warren O. Hagstrom and Charles Kadushin's contributions to *Production of Culture*, ed. by Richard A. Petersen (London: Sage, 1976).

47. Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 15.

subsystem can claim his sole allegiance) that makes him an individual. In relation to each of the subsystems, the individual is a *partial stranger*; in relation to none of the subsystems, is he completely a native. One is tempted to say he is "fully at home" only with himself. Indeed, as Luhmann would say, for the contemporary individual the ego becomes the seat and focal point of all inner experience, while the environment, split into fragments with little lateral connection, loses most of its contours and much of its meaning-defining authority. And yet, this mode of "being at home with oneself" is highly problematic. It may come to be, if at all, only as an achievement of protracted and tortuous effort. The poor coordination between subsystems is reflected in the heterogeneity of the self. Partial estrangements are incorporated and experienced as the self's resilience to integration. The self is burdened with the impossible task of rebuilding the lost integrity of the world; or, more modestly, of sustaining the production of self-identity, doing on its own what was once entrusted to the native community. In fact, it is now inside the self that such a "native community," as the frame of reference for self-identity, must be construed. And it is only within the self's work of imagination that such a community has its necessarily precarious existence.

In terms of his biography, the contemporary individual passes a long string of widely divergent (uncoordinated at best, contradictory at worst) social worlds. At any single moment of his life, the individual inhabits simultaneously several such divergent worlds. At the end, he is "uprooted" from each and not "at home" in any. One may say he is the *universal stranger*. His is a social modality once pioneered and fully explored by Jews lost amidst rising European nationalisms. In this sense, *now we are all Jews*. What used to be, in the era of High Modernity, a communal Jewish experience, increasingly acquires universal value. The dilemmas of Jewish estrangement appear in retrospect prototypes of a much more universal condition.[48]

In another respect, however, the new and universal experience of strangeness (precisely for being universal, rather than confined to a selected category) represents a true novelty. Because of its universality, it is quite distinct from the passionate Jewish effort to raise to a level of

48. In Scholem's words, it is the fact that the assimilating Jew who "was not really at home, however much and emphatically he might proclaim himself to be" is today sometimes "accounted to his glory, in that it is taken as an image of the *condition humaine*." See Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 83.

"civilized existence" that elusive and unattainable yet tempting target clearly drawn over the line of the horizon. Cuddihy has suggested the key to the Jewish 19th-century predicament was a necessity to apologize to the triumphant Protestant civil etiquette for their belated medievalism; and a continuous individual and collective, behavioral and ideological, though ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to do just that, and to have one's apology accepted.[49] This might or might not be true, particularly in the radically reductionist form in which Cuddihy put it. But the fact one knew to whom one needed to apologize to attain redemption from one's abominable strangeness is hardly in doubt.

The absence of such an address to which the apology could be sent is one of the most conspicuous and consequential features of the present era. Today, modern individuals have mostly their own private lives to turn to as the only place they may hope to build a home amidst universal homelesness. However, their hope is dashed. "(O)ver and over again, the cold winds of 'homelessness' threaten these fragile constructions. It would be an overstatement to say that the 'solution' of the private sphere is a failure; there are too many individual successes. But it is always very precarious."[50] And so far as the experience of estrangement is concerned, it is the fact that they are endemically precarious, even if they do not fail, which counts. Today's world does not abolish strangeness. But it does not offer any hope the stranger can be redeemed. And as the prospect of redemption grows increasingly dim, the emancipatory urge peters out.[51]

There is a substantive difference between being a stranger in a well-settled native world, and a stranger in the world on the move. In the first case, misery comes complete with the hope — and a program — of its termination. The apparently clear-cut hierarchy of native values and norms defines what is to be done and defines it with uncontested authority. The natives embody the human universal, which renders the stranger's form of humanity parochial and shameful. It is easy (perhaps natural) to confuse then the effort of assimilation to the dominant native standards with the promotion of universal truth; to

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49. See John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Lévi- Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

50. Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 168.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 145: "A world in which everything is in constant motion is a world in which certainties of any kind are hard to come by . . . What is truth in one context of the individual's social life may be error in another. What was considered right at one stage of the individual's social career becomes wrong in the next."

define the malaise of a particular strangeness as the deformation or paucity of universality; to identity the urge to efface a specific difference with the need of clearing the site for the uniform and absolute rule of universal standards. In the second case, however, though the strangers remain strangers, they do not live any more among the natives; indeed, there are no such natives in sight. In the absence of uncontested standards — of such standards as may sensibly claim or aspire to ascendancy — strangeness does not feel as a *temporary* condition. Much less than before does it feel as an *unbearable condition*, one from which one has the *duty* to redeem oneself. Now difference bears no guilt; and the shame of being guilty of difference no longer prompts the culprit to escape from estrangement.

The vision of universality is born of rootlessness; but its supplies are being replenished only as long as the rootlessness remains a particular condition, a handicap, a disprivilege. Once rootlessnes itself turns into a universal condition, particularity has been effaced, though not in the way seen in the dreams of the rootless. Relativity becomes now the great equalizer: it is through peculiarity that one escapes the stigma of difference. It is only through setting oneself apart that one can share in the predicament of others and participate on equal footing in the universal human condition. Strangeness has become universal; or, rather, it has been dissolved which, after all, amounts to the same. If everyone is a stranger, no one is.

It remains to be seen to what extent the widespread aversion to grand social designs, the loss of interest in absolute truths, the privatization of redemptive urges, the reconciliation with the relative — merely heuristic — value of all life techniques, the acceptance of the irredeemable plurality of the world, etc. are a lasting consequence of that *abolition* of strangeness attained by raising it to the level of a *universal human condition*. These are the worrying, yet exhilarating trends usually subsumed under *postmodernity*,

What the inherently polysemous and controversial idea of *postmodernity* most often refers to (even if only tacitly) is first and foremost an acceptance of the ineradicable plurality of the world — not a temporary state on the road to the not-yet-attained perfection, sooner or later to be left behind, but the constitutive quality of existence. By the same token, postmodernity means a resolute emancipation from the characteristically modern urge to overcome difference and promote sameness. Indeed, it reverses the signs of the values central to modernity, such as uniformity and universalism. Once perceived as irreducible and unlikely to

converge, neither to be dissolved in one life-form aiming at universality nor degraded by one form aiming at universal domination, a variety of life-forms is not merely grudgingly accepted but lifted to the rank of a supreme positive value.

Once the difference ceases to be an oppression and is not construed as a problem calling for action and resolution, peaceful coexistence of distinct forms of life becomes possible. The principle of coexistence replaces the principle of universalization, while the precept of tolerance takes the place of those of conversion and subordination. The presence of mutually exclusive standards neither offends the desire of logical congruity nor triggers a remedial action. In the plural and pluralistic world of postmodernity, every form of life is *permitted on principle*; or, rather, no agreed principles are evident which may render any form of life impermissible.

In the absence of such principles, one can expect the disappearance of one of the paramount grounds of the destructive urge. The self-assertion of different forms of life loses the character of a zero-sum game. Room for new forms can be found without vacating the space occupied by the extant ones. The most important reason for the rhetoric and practice of destruction loses thereby a good deal of its past cogency. So also does the romantic heroism of revolutionary novelty. Revolutions retain their appeal only as long as the experience of difference remains intolerable. The acceptance of relativity defuses the attraction of radical and condensed change; indeed, it renders revolution meaningless. If there are no standards to be preserved at the expense of others, there are no standards which need to be moved out of the way to enable others to exist. The strategy of innovation entails a strategy of destruction only if the novelty is meant to displace.

The acceptance of the permanence of differentiation (and of the plurality of the coordinated actions which support it) leads to the demise of grand designs of social engineering. This amounts to the erosion of the gardening or surgical stance, which throughout the modern age characterized the attitudes and policies of institutionalized powers. Modernity proclaimed the essential artificiality of the social order and the inability of society to attain an orderly existence on its own. It also proclaimed that the establishment of a social order requires the a-symmetrical distribution of agency — dividing society into actors and objects of their actions. The exclusive right of elected agencies to define order as distinct from chaos was articulated in the ideology of reason's superiority over passions, rational conduct over irrational drive,

knowledge over ignorance or superstition. Opposition between such abstract values both generated and reflected practical social divisions. Most importantly, it serviced the perpetual condensation of autonomy and choice on one pole of the social division and delegitimation of the autonomous will of the other. By the same token, this opposition loses most of its cutting power once the impulse of domination melts in the atmosphere of coexistence and (chosen or enforced) toleration. It is unlikely to survive for long the fading of the engineering ambition that was its meaning and reason. It derived its sense from missionary projects and crusades; it can hardly outlive them.

The memory of the opposition prompts one to conceive its absence as the rehabilitation of irrationality and the surrender of reason. What is perceived in such a way, however, is merely the sudden and yet not fully grasped meaninglessness of the distinction at a time when the planned fate ceased to differentiate between forms of life anointed to govern and those marked for colonization or extinction. Irrationality is the waste turned out during the self-production of rationality. It is this nameless "beyond" for which the dominant powers that identified themselves as reason have no use. It is a by-product of designing ambitions, in the same way as weeds are the products of garden designs. It has no other meaning than someone's refusal to tolerate it; or, rather, once the empirical solvents have evaporated and only hard crystals of value are left, all its manifold meanings turn out to be that difference with which someone, somewhere, refused to live.

There are, as Higgins suggested a decade ago, *cognitive* and *post- cognitive* questions. The first have lost much of their allure; the second are asked with growing frequency. Cognitive questions stemmed from the axiom of the current or prospective oneness of the world. In the one and only world, a world that suffers no alternative to itself, the task is to fathom what this world demands of those who wish to find their place in it. The questions are, therefore, "How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?" Post-cognitive questions do not enjoy the luxury the old axiom offered. They have hardly any axioms they may use as a confident start, nor do they have a clear address. Before they turn to exploring the world, they must find out what world(s) there is (are) to be explored. Hence: "Which world is it? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?" — in this order.

Projecting back later discursive usages, McHale renames Higgins' questions as, respectively, *modernist* and *post-modernist*.[52] He observes as

52. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 10.

well that, according to orthodox philosophical divisions, the first belong to epistemology, while the second are primarily ontological; thus "post-cognitive" questions are not *cognitive* at all, at least not in the strict sense. They reach beyond the boundaries of epistemology; or return to the fundamental issue of being, which is to be settled *before* epistemology may approach its task in earnest, and which most epistemological questions asked during the modern era assumed settled. And so the typically modern questions are, among others: "What is there to be known? Who knows it? How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?" The typically postmodern questions do not reach that far. Instead of locating the task for the knower, they attempt to locate the knower himself. "What is a world? What kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?" Even when sharing concern about knowledge, the two types of inquiry articulate their problems differently: "How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?" as against "What happens when different worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?" Note that postmodern questions have no use for "certainty"; not even for "reliability." The one-upmanship of modernist epistemology looks hopelessly out of place in that pluralist reality to which the postmodern ontological inquiry is first reconciled and then addressed. Here that overwhelming desire of power which animated the search for the ultimate (and which alone could animate it) raises little passion. Only eyebrows are raised by the self-confidence which once made the pursuit of the absolute look as a plausible project.

It seems in the world of universal strangeness the stranger is no longer obsessed with the absoluteness of what ought to be; nor is he disturbed by the relativity of what is.