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# The Limits of (Be-)longing: An Ode to the Edge of Gender

**Yael Klangwisan**

Othryades, en pointe
blue, the radiant pools of
Eden, a dream that arrives
feel the caress, of a goddess's fine
boned hand
this concrete vision
stone, elusion
don't recline and expire, soldier
a feast for the birds[1]



Othryades, the mortal condition is strange and arcane. I see you recline, as if tossed upon the vicissitudes of life, exposed without any reserve. A study of the soldier, or a soldier whose line has been softened with a queer touch and offered up. A libation, my sister, my brother. I feel our strangeness, Othryades, abandoned to violence in a harsh topography of a world, populated with a wilderness of strangers, we are "forlorn as children lost in the woods."[2] As Kafka will suppose when he writes to Oskar, "what do you know of the griefs that are in me and what do I know of yours?"[3] I am my very own strangeness. Whatever I am it is a poignant work of strange flesh, a queer being, a member of an exotic cast. Esoteric and other. How difficult then the encounter of two speaking creatures of this world when one falls at the other's feet to confess such glittering secrets, to finally be exposed as quite utterly alien. Almost a sin to understand this kind of "coming out" as ideological without robbing it of its final vestiges of frail and real human dignity. Yes, this is the truth as I know it, an indecent theology

[1] A poem, inspired for me by the legend of Othryades, represented in sculpture by Johan Tobias Sergel, "Le Spartiate Othryades expirant," 1750-1800, Louvre, Paris, and David D'Angers, "Othryades," 1810, Musée des Beaux-Arts d'Angers, Angers; and the ballet performance "Blue Bird" performed by Christopher Olwage in the theatre spectacle *Heavenly Bodies* (dir. Emma Herbert Vickers; Civic Theatre, Auckland: 12 March 2020).
[2] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers*. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors* (1977), 9.
[3] Kafka, *Letters*, 9.

and as if to make blithe the statement, "hell is hot."[4] So how can this face-to-face moment of revelation, an utterance made from the materials of my flesh and my soul, be understood as more than the confusing maze of veils and screens thrown up by language—all smoke and mirrors, genres, locales and all centred on the body and its relation to a capricious world with its contrary laws. This moment of revelation, in the world, an already flagging prospect of coming face to face with a certain outré creatureliness and with it that shadow of mortality: the voice inside that says, "You might kill me with your eyes." Hiding my longing-for-belonging behind children's stories. The wall is between me and the absolute truth of my existence, that vulnerability, the only opening a small door with a shoddy but resilient lock. I desire the invisible, acceptance, in a word, in pureness or impurity. For I am desperate for birdlike joys, the vagaries of gratification and a desire that concocts itself as voluptuary.[5] I know it is the rare traveller who hasn't taken a turn in this wilderness of the Self, a land marked by buttery flesh. Othryades, to experience that fantasised forfeiture of self-worth instead of the feeble thirsts, and a life that has been up until now in fragments all realised upon that single moment on speaking.

This act of reaching out and being somehow clasped for a moment in return, the nameless bliss of having been seen, whole. Wait! Come back, Othryades! The world and its carnival of creatures have fled like dreams. Every dawn I take a deep breath and will them back once more.[6] I have grieved endlessly, sadness as the constant companion of this human existence. I don't resent it, "mourning of this kind is the 'condition of the possibility of accepting the world's beauty'."[7] And you, you are truly beautiful, my sister, my brother, my friend.

Sleep Hemaphroditus
rest the question in your eyes
I see you entire, every soft line
I see you entire, every uncompromising slope
the billow of your flanks
and sinuous cast of your calves

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[4] Kafka, *Letters*, 9.
[5] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.
[6] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments*, 22.
[7] Zornberg. *Bewilderments*, 22. (Citing Stanley Cavell who, in his *In Quest of the Ordinary* (172), attributes this idea to Sigmund Freud, in his essay "Transience".)

I see you entire[8]

This first story about encounter is a beautiful tale staged in the most luscious of settings. It is a magnificent *mise-en-scène* at the beginning of time: blue, feathered, and bright. In the garden, in that first most primordial of beginnings, the first creature sought in vain amongst the carnival of beings for another like them.[9] This creature sought in vain for another in whom they might find an ease for their restlessness. In this reverie the creature cried out to the invisible limit for which they might have even been prepared to die. Like any other creature afterwards, they perceived within, all kinds of chafing deficits, nostalgias, desolations; as wide and voluminous as the Deep. To close the breach, the homesickness, the creature was driven out of their unthinking totality of being. The creature now knew the self as unseeable, erased, and rootless. There was no one to return their gaze. Their existence was merest echo. No one could counter their existence in that most satisfying of asymmetries, that is, in a gentle, reciprocal return. This was a princely creature that had been made by the very hands of God,[10] and yet this one became overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness and the degree of their desire for the unthought-of-other meant they would give up eternity for the chance. The creature could not have known, and yet they searched, explored, mapped and named the whole of creation. It seemed too late for this nameless quest, for one who might perceive them entire, a witness, one like the creature but who was not them. This quest was for one who could hold the creature in that tableau, to hold them tethered there with a tender regard. The creature was utterly alone in a world full of life and at the mercy of the preternatural vastness that pressed upon them. This queer creature was never more homeless in the uncanny light of the dawning world until that last moment, when this other finally arrived on the scene. When the two came face to face, the princely creature was so overwhelmed by this sudden, spectral satiation of their sublime hunger[11] to be seen, they cried "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh."[12] And, from that moment on, the ancient book tells that all creatures willingly choose to leave kith and kin. This leaving is for a chance to cleave with another,

[8] A poem I based upon the sculpture "Hermaphroditus Endormi," 1-150CE (Roman Imperial), Louvre, Paris.
[9] Gen 2:18-20 JPS.
[10] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Beginning of Desire*, 17.
[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 22.
[12] Gen 2:24 JPS.

demarcating the edges of gender, going to the limits of longing,[13] and once more, trying to come home.

> Arm barred against the invisible
> staving off the merciless gods
> the savage mysteries of old
> statue of a woman crouched
> or perhaps a young man
> with beautiful hair
> a strange beauty not one nor the other
> something else[14]

A small truth might be that, on encountering the strangeness of the other, the strangeness that is I, is brought to the verge of my queered flesh each time and while sometimes I experience a mutuality of sacred rest, also sometimes, perhaps more often, I don't or at least never for long. That further alienation can be malignant, the beginning of a kind of psychic harm. Existence is a growing weariness in this respect. And each day I commit to living again, I "whose life will have been so short … no lighthouse and no book … crossing between these two phantoms of witnesses who will never come down to the same."[15] I aspire, I pray, I invoke, I entreat, I promise, I confess:[16] "In weariness we want to escape existence itself, and not only one of its landscapes in a longing for more beautiful skies. An evasion without an itinerary and without an end, it is not trying to come ashore somewhere."[17] So it is not an insignificant thing to turn away from the question of the fleshed reality of the other, the embodied-ness of the queer other, their organic reality, the seemingly gaping incompleteness of that creature within me that reaches out with yearning to be fathomed, to be acknowledged, to be finally made whole, to live or to die in the blink of an eyelash. To refuse the creature of the other sitting across from us, to refuse that sacred ground, would be a peculiar cruelty. Thus, one tries to bind and touch, with inadequate words, and with the defensive intention of a half-open heart. One must leave that place that "offers itself to or resists

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[13] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Rilke's Book of Hours* (trans. Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy; New York: Riverhead), 111.
[14] A poem I based upon the sculpture, "Aphrodite Accroupie," (Roman Imperial), Louvre, Paris.
[15] Derrida, "Circonfession," in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (trans. Geoffrey Bennington; Chicago: U of Chicago P), 314.
[16] Derrida, "Circonfession," 314. I imitate Derrida's diction and style here.
[17] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 25.

possession" and one must cross the great swathe of distance marked by foreboding alterity.[18] There is no we in the world. There is the strange self and the stranger Other, "over whom I have no power, who is continually escaping my grasp."[19] Which of us is really queer? There is only language to mediate and maintain the complicated abyss of I and you and mark the memory of our meeting into history.[20] Still, how does one resist and reject the plea, whispered in my ear that calls to my very soul. The still, small voice that weeps: "At times I don't know who I am in this strange world."

I am my own
and free to be
all that I've learnt
harnessed, stepped
on a path or stage
not better nor worse
to present or to represent
I am here[21]

The creature is a being torn between heaven and earth.[22] The first creature was created little lower than the angels and was suspended between "incompatible universes of being."[23] Like all who dwell in this place, still believing, hoping, dreaming that fortune will attend our every pursuit kindly and being devastated anew when it does not.[24] Never fully able to be at home in one's body, driven out of oneself, to continually search for that other who can bear to bear witness. And for that moment, to be held in the eyes of the other. For a moment, entire, before being seared by the fire of apprehension and dissipating into a cloak of sweet smoke. This cataclysm of encounter is spiritual in form. This dimension of sacred encounter is not restricted to lovers nor to the

[18] Levinas, *Totality*, 38.
[19] Levinas, *Totality*, 39.
[20] Levinas, *Totality*, 39.
[21] My poem inspired by the sculpture, Dionysus Hermaphrodite, 1-200CE (Roman Imperial), Louvre, Paris. This poem takes the form of found poetry, utilising words from an Instagram post by performer, Christopher Olwage, *Chris Oh! Official* post (response to comment) on Instagram https://www.instagram.com/p/CM-7idgjI7X/?igshid=dahbkw6behfu. Accessed, 30 March 2021.
[22] Zornberg, *The* Beginning, 17. He reflects upon Kafka's theological musings on human being in Kafka. *Parables and Paradoxes*, 31.
[23] Zornberg, *The Beginning,* 17.
[24] Zornberg, *The Beginning,* 17.

penitent. It is the infinite moment of encounter between I's. It rejects the foisting of a screen of sameness on the other, but relishes in a certain tortuosity, a queering. This coming face to face clothed in similarities and strangeness, the unique and sacred regard of the other, for this moment. This encounter is an ethical and irreducible relation that must eschew the twin dramas of salvation and damnation.[25] The strange prince comes to us, from the other side, and as our sister, is no less holy. The limits of the flesh, the limits of gender and the body's longing is a lived truth. The space between us, this sinuous swathe of welcome is, for me, "the very presence of God."[26] The Other comes to me blazing like the sun, and in a single moment my borders, my creativity, and my self-determination are stretched taut with transformation.[27] It is a queering that is the conflagration of death and rebirth.[28] At that moment I lean over the abyss of my soul, and moonlight embraces the world with a shimmering ascent.[29] In a precious moment, warm and bright, I mirror the other's immensity, my sister-brother. The question, a queer encounter, offering retreat and respite from journeys in this wilderness, and an invitation to enter, for a scant moment, into a hallowed convalescence, where recognition is mutual, communal and discourse is the heart's own assignation. It is a kind of ephemeral return to that primeval garden of paradise where we might "stand before one another as reverently, as reflectively, as lovingly, as we would before the entrance to hell."[30]

* * *

I imagine this work might be read as with the lightness one approaches poetry. The hope or affect desired is that the reader may experience something of the search for meaning undertaken by the one coming out, that always unique journey towards authentic self-expression and belonging. I imagine the reader might be inspired to watch a hyper-

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[25] Levinas, *Totality*, 79.
[26] Levinas, *Totality*, 291
[27] Levinas, *Totality*, 303
[28] Levinas, *Totality*, 51. "To approach the Other in conversation is to welcome his expression, in which at each instant he overflows the idea a thought would carry away from it. It is therefore to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be taught."
[29] Rilke, *Book of Hours,* 71.
[30] Kafka, *Letters*, 9.

gender performance like the ballet, "Blue Bird", and be moved as I was to explore again, edges and limits. This dance performance called to mind some of the gender blurring/crossing of Greco-Roman statuary of the Louvre and prompted a poetic articulation of the limits of gender as a timeless thing and constantly in flux. The queer experience of being oneself in society is still a contested and challenging space, requiring remarkable courage. This work is in honour of that courage and perhaps why this writing begins with the legend of the beautiful Othryades, the last Spartan of the 300.

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stranger, place and displacement, home and travel, and the nature and significance of memory and identity.

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