
Mihaela DUMITRU (BACALI)
Constantin OPREA

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs.2015.0302.03

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://lumenjournals.com/philosophy-and-humanistic-sciences/

Published by:
Lumen Publishing House
On behalf of:
Lumen Research Center in Social and Humanistic Sciences
Two Stances of Otherness:  
the Parable of the Good Samaritan and the fairytale  
The Old Woman’s Daughter and the Old Man’s Daughter,  
by Ion Creangă

Mihaela DUMITRU (BACALI)¹  
Constantin OPREA²

Abstract

The relationship with the other is the key to the notion of “otherness”. This relationship is placed in the center of two different works with respect to the formal completion: one is a parable, The Parable of the Good Samaritan, the other is a fairytale, The Old Woman’s Daughter and the Old Man’s Daughter. What they have in common is the presence of a character that contradicts the idea of selfishness, specific for the ordinary people, and the notion of negative devaluation of the unknown person, highlighted by anthropologists. Both works place in the center the notion of “otherness” and they highlight two possible attitudes connected to this: that other person can become “a limit” or “an object” in the fulfillment of the existential adventure. In other words, that person can be a step towards moral perfection or, on the contrary, a limit in the way of personal development. The two “spiritual creations” (the parable and the fairytale) put into question a moral problem, that of the person next to us or “the Other one”, they both comprise a debate on ethical matters and they are built on the relationship I – the other one, placing in the center the same type of character: “the good man”, gifted with a high ethical sense, the one who, in his journey through life, shows no indifference, but he constantly relates to the person next to him – “the other one” whom, most of the times, is seen in opposition with or they have a conflictual relationship. At the same time, both works comprise the subject of “the road”, that of “the journey”.

Keywords: Otherness; Parable; Fairytale; The Other; Road.

¹ PhD, University of Bucharest, Romania, mihaela_bacali@yahoo.com.  
² PhD, University of Bucharest, Romania, oprea_constantin2000@yahoo.com.
Who is the person next to us? To what extent are we able to see it, how do we manage to get out of our ego, of our fundamental selfishness? What does it mean to see the other? Is it not to exceed the boundaries of one’s ego, to get out of one’s shell? Once these limits are annulled, Man looks at first towards those he feels a connection with by kinship, clan, tribe, caste, as different forms of organization of otherness, thus accepting to relate to The Other. Such a way out of one’s self is compassion, a turning of one’s look not only towards the person next to him/her, but also towards the one who is faraway. The existential absurd ceases the moment Man looks towards The Other, but this relationship is mediated, most of the times, by the transcendent.

There is a tendency, mostly unconscious, to devaluate the other. Psychologically speaking, this attitude probably draws from a state of placing the self in the center of the personal emotional universe, actually in the center of the world. Self-centeredness is a feature of Man from the beginning of Time, it is not a mark of the “primitive” man or of the “modern” one; selfishness was always there. Its opposite, the selflessness, presupposes a “re-connection” with the others, with The Other, who has a significant role in our defining ourselves. Relating to the other gives our life a meaning. But the road from self-awareness towards the awareness of the other, a road of knowledge and of wisdom, is filtered through the transcendent.

The relationship with the other is the key to the notion of “otherness”. This relationship is placed in the center of two different works with respect to the formal completion: one is a parable, The Parable of the Good Samaritan, the other is a fairytale, The Old Woman’s Daughter and the Old Man’s Daughter. What they have in common is the presence of a character that contradicts the idea of selfishness, specific for the ordinary people, and the notion of negative devaluation of the unknown person. Both works place in the center the notion of “otherness” and they highlight two possible attitudes connected to this: that other person can become “a limit” or “an adjunctive” in the fulfillment of the existential adventure. In other words, the other can be a step towards moral perfection or, on the contrary, a limit, an obstacle in the way of personal development. How is the notion of “otherness” defined by anthropology, by philosophy, by ethics?

Anthropology (gr. anthropos – man, gr. logia – knowledge) studies the human being in its whole; it is a science of sciences. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1978) states that it is a social science of Man, as well as a cultural one, and that it combines three domains: ethnography, ethnology and anthropology.
Anthropology has always taken an interest in human unity, paradoxically in connection with cultural diversity. It drew up and developed the notion of “Man” as “an objective entity” (Mihăilescu, 2007, p. 16). One of anthropology’s study issues is the relationship with The Other (a generic Other). This one doesn’t only become “a practical problem of choosing between change and war, hospitality and hostility, inclusion and exclusion”, but also “a problem of the Other as Human” (Mihăilescu, 2007, p. 16). Man only exists by reflecting his image in The Other, despite all this paradoxical opposition between unity and diversity.

How can the difference be conceived? The habits, the codes vary from one society to the other, types of education and models, hence “the avatars of the anthropological gaze” (Mihăilescu, 2007, p. 47). The anthropological gaze (the term to gaze is preferred to that of to see, which correspond in French to regarder and voir, although in Romanian the difference is not so obvious) is the wish and the art of imagining oneself in another person’s place. There is a fancied image of this other person and the first spontaneous reaction in front of a stranger is to see him as an inferior being; in primitive beliefs and not only, the other one is devalued (Slavonians call Germans nemec – dumb; the Aztecs too called strangers nonualca – dumb; Pliny the Elder’s Historia Naturalis is full of examples that reflect this tendency of seeing strangers as true monsters: androgynous, scipiods, cynocephali). This tendency of devaluation of the other is present all throughout the history of mankind. This other one is, in the eyes of common people, someone different, and the difference is felt as inferiority (the cause might be a mentality based on oppositions – good-bad, beautiful-ugly etc.).

But there is also a duality of the human being, which Durkheim notices: two beings co-exist within Man: an individual one, centered on the body, with limited activities, and a social one, which represents the superior moral and intellectual reality in us. Relating to the transcendent is the attitude that can save Man from his self-centered attitude, and that is not only the point of view of religion, but also that of philosophy. Lévinas defines The Other as “beyond being or other-in-relation-to-the being” (Lévinas, 1999, p. 59). “If transcendence has a meaning, all it can mean for the event of the being – for esse – for essence is to pass to another-in-relation-to-the being” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 23). So, esse means inter-esse. “The inter-esse of the being is dramatized in the stances of selfishness that fight against one another, all against all, in the multiplicity of the allergic stances of selfishness that are at war one with the other” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 26). In other words,
the transcendent is the one that facilitates this “inter-esse” reality, the reality of communication and communion, while the immanent remains an annexation of stances of selfishness. “The immanency is formed by the adherence of the self to the self, by the selfishness of the ego which inevitably results in conflict with the adherence of another self to itself.” (Lévinas, 2006, p. 27)

The look towards the other, relating to him is, in the cited philosopher’s view, an attitude that relies on a few “stairs”, which would be, in an upward gradation, the following ones: proximity, kindness, responsibility and suffering. The first attitude subsumed to alterity is proximity. It represents the distance between you and I, in reality an exteriority that doesn’t entail the profound level of the being, defined by the author “either as an obstacle for freedom, intelligibility or perfection, or as a term that confirms by recognition a finite, mortal being, unsure or itself, or as a slave, a contributor or as the merciful God” (Lévinas, 1999, p. 53). The second quality, kindness, is even more – it’s “an alterity in relation to the being”, a superior manifestation of proximity. Its thoroughly exceptional nature consists precisely in this rupture between the being and its story.

But the human subject is called to climb these stairs of virtues and the next step is responsibility, the one that surpasses one’s own liberty. It presupposes a commitment, a decision – hence, it represents an upper stage in the ascent towards moral perfection. Responsibility is the capacity to take the other under one’s care, to constantly overcome the boundaries of one’s self. But subjectivity opposes responsibility because it sees in it a kind of “non-freedom”, a way of submitting to The Other. As Lévinas states, this responsibility comes “despite my own will”, “making me replace the other as hostage”. Responsibility is also an answer to a challenge; this attitude comprises “the intention for the other”, which culminates in “towards the other”, in “a suffering for his suffering”. (…) The Suffering for The Other, commonly referred to as mercy, is therefore the highest step in the path from the Self towards the Other, the peak of the stairs whose first step is proximity, stairs that actually connect the earth and the sky. The Suffering for The Other becomes an attribute of the human being, only as a deified person, as a superior being, whose astonishing attribute is the lack of limits, of boundaries, etc. between itself and the world.

The contrary of this attitude which sees in the other an “addition” to the being is the one that sees in him “a limit”, which is called selfishness in ethics and in psychology. This is ethically defined as “putting one’s own
wellbeing or interest before anything else” (Singer, 2006, p. 559). Psychology states that we are all more or less selfish, if not apparently, at least in our depths, because our behavior, subsumed to our own convictions and desires, is always directed towards what we believe to be our absolute wellbeing. We are all selfish as far as our actions are motivated by our own interest and wellbeing, by personal concerns, by our welfare, our happiness and our prosperity.

Different from this ethics of the common sense is the religious ethics, which is based on natural morality. The Golden Rule of “the religious view” is: “Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them” (Matthew, 7: 12) – in other words, there are no limits to the love for our neighbors and neither to forgiving their faults. Jesus’s ethics is different, if not opposed to the common ethics. The divine law can be summarized in two precepts: “Love God and thy neighbor as thyself”. The love for our neighbors implies duty (responsibility) for the other, not as a result of his qualities as an individual, but thanks to his humanity, created according to the image of God. This attitude doesn’t necessarily imply reciprocity, but simply the capacity to put oneself in the neighbor’s place. It’s not a question of what you would want if you were in his place; what matters is the service you do to your neighbor.

In the sermon on the mountain, Jesus passes to the people the essence of His teachings or “The Beatitudes”. They are pieces of advice for the attainment of moral perfection, to which few are called for – mainly those who belong to the monastic orders and who are sworn to poverty, chastity and obedience. The rest of the people must follow the basic ethical precepts. The Beatitudes are, therefore, “a kind of Christian life course that can be attested by a diploma of excellence or by a passing grade” (Singer, 2006, p. 129). The ethics of the common man is most of the times different from that of the deified man, especially considering the point of view stated above: he is the only one capable of exceeding the limits of his own self and of gaining access to a “non-limited” state in relation to the Other, able to become an adept to this, through suffering.

After these theoretical considerations we will try to analyze the two “spiritual inventions”: the parable and the fairytale, taking into consideration the fact that they both put into question an ethical problem – that of the neighbor or The Other, the fact that they both contain an ethical debate. Although different as formal composition, what they have in common is that they are built on the relationship I – the other, they contain moral and
ethical values, highlighting the highest virtue: love. Also, they both place in their center the symbol of “the road”, of “the journey”.

The parable (Luke 10, 29-37) has a “preamble”: a “teacher of law”, therefore a learned person, asks Jesus what to do in order to “inherit eternal life”. As if trying to test him, Jesus asks him in return “what is written in the law”. The man, apparently trying to prove his knowledge, responds in one breath: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself”. Probably satisfied with the quick answer, Jesus confirms its validity, but seeming to sense that behind the learned man’s knowledge there is no practice, He tells him: “Do that and you shall live!” But the teacher, in order to “justify (in other translations, “to straighten”) himself”, asks the question that will mark the spiritual history of mankind from now on, a question that surprises by its unusual depth: “And who is my neighbor?” The dialogue is very intense and the position of the two interlocutors stand out among the rows. The parable is an answer to this question. Linguistically speaking, the noun used to indicate the other (“the neighbor”) is also full of “hidden meaning”: it expresses the idea of proximity. Because if we usually call “neighbor” objects and this reference is made in the concrete, physical space, this time we are talking about a reference on the human level and it imposes a different approach, one connected to the being.

If up until now we have been focusing on a dialogue, this is the moment where the narrative part intervenes. A man is coming down from Jerusalem to Jericho and, as he walks on, he is attacked by thieves that rob him of everything he owned, “leaving him barely alive”. Wounded, he remains on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite pass him by and they don’t “see” him. Only the third character, the Samaritan, helps him, takes him to “a guest house” and pays for him to be well taken care of.

Regarding the relationship with The Other, we notice not only that he sees him (proximity), but he also places himself in relation to him through mercy, suffering, therefore through responsibility too. The explanation of the symbols can offer us a key for interpretation: the man that was “coming down from Jerusalem” is the “fallen” man (Jerusalem can be identified with the sky and the “descent” as a fall, maybe even “the fall”, “the expulsion from paradise”, the man who loses his attributes as a divine being), the attack of the thieves can be interpreted as the attack of evil on the fallen human being.
Although the wounded man is the character around who the entire story is built, left “barely alive” by the thieves, this wounded man has no clear identity or a social status – he is just a man and that’s all. Even though he is individualized to such a little extent, he will become “the center”, according to who the other characters will be defined, namely the three characters that pass him by: the priest, the Levite, the good Samaritan. Only the latter seems to “see” the man; the others pass by with indifference. Who are the three characters whose reactions define the relationship of “neighborhood” (or “distance”)? Why were they chosen to illustrate the different types of reactions towards the wounded man?

The Levites were “descendants of Levi” (Foiu, et al., 2006, p. 166). Their role was that of “religious people”; in Deuteronomy they are priests whose service included even the ritual sacrifice and sharing the teachings from Torab (Court, Court, 2010, p. 305). In time, “the influence of the Levites grew, they were not only singers or ushers, but also scribes, judges and teachers.” (Foiu, et al., 2006, p. 166)

The priests had as a main task to serve as God’s servants, especially to “feed divinity with different animal sacrifices and other kinds of offerings (...); priests were responsible, naturally, for the supervision of the sanctuary. They were also the ones who taught the law (Deuteronomy, 33, 10), judged cases and isolated contagious patients in order to protect the public health (The Book of Leviticus, 13) (Court, Court, 2010, p. 493). Both categories were part of the worship people and through them Jesus criticizes the priests of His time, believing they are unworthy of the responsibility they had been given, incapable of showing true sympathy, as they were prisoners of formalism. They are actually representatives of the religion of The Old Testament, built on ritual sacrifices, and not on love. Jesus replaced this cult of the sacrifice by His death on the cross, being, at the same time, “a victim and Great Priest and offering God His own self-sacrifice” (Court, Court, 2010, p. 493).

The third character, the good Samaritan, is the symbol of the good man, who “sees” his neighbor’s suffering. His portrait will enter later on in folklore and thus we will also meet him in the cited fairytale. But who were the Samaritans?

Samaria was a town in the northern part of Israel, 100 kilometers away from Jerusalem, representing the capital of the northern kingdom, destroyed by Assyrians in 721. In The Old Testament, this was the symbol of the kingdom of Israel, just like Jerusalem was the symbol of Judas’s...
kingdom. The image that the Jews had of the Samaritans was a rather negative one because of the idolatry that their sovereigns had imposed, especially Ahab, who built a temple for Baal, and Jezebel, his wife, who invited the prophets of this cult to her table. “The devaluation also came from the lack of devotion and from the immorality that reigned in that city” (Foiu, et al., 2006, p. 248).

The hostility between Jews and Samaritans was kept alive even in Jesus’s time. Despite this, Jesus choses a Samaritan as an example to illustrate the care for one’s neighbor. This way, He demonstrates His tolerance; He doesn’t show the depreciation attitude towards the other that anthropologists noticed. Each of the characters is the symbol of a certain step of spirituality. The priest and the Levite belong to the introvert way of thinking, defined by selfishness, while the good Samaritan shows aperture, an integration ability. He represents the moment that I becomes the others, the moment that the neighbor becomes “an addition” of the being.

If in the parable we find a series of three characters defined in relation to alter, to The Other, in the fairytale we have a succession of events that make up an epical texture with a very deep symbolism, probably owed to the fact that the fairytale, even under the signature of an author, has a mythical and symbolic underlayer. Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks about a primitive mind, which organizes knowledge in pairs of binary oppositions that are connected with mythical realities: sky-earth, light-dark, life-death. In our fairytale, they acquire a moral connotation related to the opposition good-evil. “The ambivalence”, as a main trait of the mythical frame of mind, the organization of the world in binary opposition appear right from the beginning, even from the title: “the old woman’s daughter and the old man’s daughter”. Therefore, we have “the hero” and “the anti-hero”, couples that are organized in pairs, built on the alternation good-evil, the primordial duality, “the primordial pair” (Lovinescu, 1996, p. 97-98).

Let us briefly remember the content of the fairytale: “an old man” and “an old woman” – a couple as you can only see in the countryside, with old people that remarry, each having a child from a previous marriage – had, each of them, a daughter. The two were completely different: the old man’s daughter was good, hardworking, while the old woman’s daughter was, on the contrary, lazy, selfish. Here we come across the theme of the step-mother, very frequently met in fairytales. “The old woman” was treating the old man’s daughter very badly, which triggers the girl’s
departure from home. On her way (another theme very frequently met in fairytales) she meets a barren pear tree that asks her to clean it, a well and an oven that ask her the same thing, and a lady dog. She interrupts her journey and gives a helping hand to the one in need. The end of this initiatory journey is Saint Sunday’s place, where she is submitted to another trial: to wash “Saint Sunday’s children”. She manages to pass this test very well and she is given her reward: out of a multitude of coffers, she has the right to choose one. She chooses the smallest and the most insignificant coffer. She returns home and discovers that there was a treasure in it. Jealous, the old woman’s daughter also leaves, following the footsteps of the old man’s daughter, and she meets the same characters that ask for her help. She moves on, indifferent to their suffering. At Saint Sunday’s place she too is given the possibility to choose. Her coffer is the biggest and the most beautiful one. Once she arrives home and opens it, snakes come out and they swallow her, and the old woman as well.

The story *The Old Woman’s Daughter and the Old Man’s Daughter* shows us two couples of opposing characters: the old man and the old woman, the old man’s daughter and the old woman’s daughter. The theme of the old man’s daughter who sets off into the world is present in all our fairytales; here intervenes the role of the road, that of the journey, during which the hero must pass several tests. The originality of this fairytale is the fact that these tests have a more significant moral character. They are also organized in stages of spiritual development, whose purpose is also the moral ideal of absolute love, represented by “the good Samaritan” (meaning Christ). Right from the start we notice that she chooses “the right path”, the one that leads her to Saint Sunday (Lovinescu sees the latter one as a “spiritual center”, and the halt at her place “a return to one’s ancestry”), a personification of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Then, the test-characters she meets on her way are symbolic ones and they can represent the four elements: water = the well, fire = the oven, the animal kingdom = the lady dog and the vegetal kingdom = the pear tree. They are also organized in pairs, fire-water, vegetal-animal. The fairytale has a symbolic nature – the characters are no longer humans, hence the animism of the story: the other / the neighbor no longer appears under a human shape; we are dealing with characters from the animal kingdom – the lady dog, the vegetal one – the pear tree, and these form a first couple, while the second is made out of: the oven – the fire, the well – the water. All these characters symbolize in corpore the real / physical world, while Saint Sunday / dragons, another opposing
couple, defines the spiritual world. Here we have the same organization pattern, in opposites: Saint Sunday – good / the dragons – evil.

Thus the old man’s daughter crosses the physical, material world, and in the end she reaches the spiritual one, represented by Saint Sunday. In contrast with the Good she represents, the dragons – Saint Sunday’s children – are embodiments of evil. The test the old man’s daughter is submitted to is to wash them. She passes this test too, overcoming her fear and disgust. All the tests she is submitted to are part of an initiatory mythical scenario, over which overlaps the Christian meaning, the absolute truth of Christianity, that of attaining love; they represent the stairs that the human soul climbs until gaining access to the supreme virtue: love. The coffer she must choose can be a symbolic representation of the soul. The fact that she chooses the smallest one illustrates once again a moral value she had to gain: modesty. So, the girl crosses an initiatory path, passing through the physical world with all its forms in order to reach the final point, represented by the spiritual world. In order to gain access to it, she must amass the virtues, out of which mercy, or the suffering for the neighbor, is the highest. The divine reward appears without delay.

The anti-hero – meaning the old woman’s daughter, doesn’t succeed in passing the tests and, therefore, she doesn’t gain the virtues. That is why she falls under the weight of her own actions; she is killed, eaten by the dragons she herself had brought home, in the huge coffer. Keeping to the ethics, they can be a symbol of the passions, the vices that grow inside her. If the human mind is generally structured in opposing categories, homo religiosus, meaning Jesus, exceeds this limit, this duality, as well as the I – the others one. In the Gospel mankind is compared to the “members” of a body, and the deep meaning is that, by reference to divinity, the boundaries between I and you no longer exist; there is only one collective we, in which we are all included, side by side in front of God. So, the divine facilitates this relationship of communion, of “togetherness”.

The transcendent starts where the ego ends, the moment when the relationship I – the other is no longer antagonistic, but it becomes a relationship of adjacency (I in the other) when one sees the other one.

Although the two literary works apparently have different subjects, we notice the existence of an ancient mythical and symbolic underlayer which makes themes that first appeared in sacred texts enter into the signed literary works, after passing through folklore literature. This kind of topoi, like that of “the journey”, symbolizing, at a first look, the existential path, on a
more profound level – knowledge, and in the Christian vision proposed by the analyzed fairytale – moral perfection, or that of “the good man”, the saint, themes that fueled a rich hagiographic literature, become archetypal images, present in texts that are so distant temporally speaking.

The characters discussed here, the good Samaritan and the old man’s daughter, become illustrative for this moral type: they experience an otherness relationship not only with a human Other, but also with the physical world and especially with that Alter of divine essence. Practically, their “un-boundedness”, as lack of limits between themselves and the world, also works in their relationship with the transcendence. Thus, they are a representation of the notion of otherness, a concept that can overcome, as we have previously seen, the strict linguistic meaning and it can acquire a moral one, becoming a stage in the existential development.

Acknowledgement

This paper was financed by the contract POSDRU/187/1.5/S/155559, by a strategic project Competitive Multidisciplinary Doctoral Research at European Level (CDocMD), co-financed by the European Social Fund, through the Sectorial Operational Programme for the Development of Human Resources 2007-2013.

REFERENCES

The Holy Bible (2001). The anniversary edition of the Holy Synod, I.B.M. Publishing House of the Romanian Orthodox Church, a version corrected according to Septuaginta, written and annotated by Bartolomeu Valeriu Anania, Archbishop of Cluj


