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Play and Cultural Differences

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Play and Cultural Differences

A world of limitless cultural diversity has many attractive qualities. The multiplicity of ways of being and seeing evident in different cultures testifies to our capacity to extend and alter ourselves. One productive consequence of human being's lack of a predefined essence is our ability to conceptualize and pursue an infinite variety of forms of life. As Wolfgang Iser notes, "if what is, is not everything, then it must be changeable" (282). But the irreducibility of cultures to one another's categories and conventions raises a number of difficult dilemmas as well. If the ways of seeing in different communities are in conflict because their interpretive practices reflect incommensurable presuppositions about human being, can they understand each other? Or are cultures windowless monads--communally solipsistic entities in which only those who share the same conventions can make sense to and of one another, with everything outside the culture's walls either ignored or relegated to the status of error? Can one culture use its own

terms to say something about another culture without engaging in a hostile act of appropriation or without simply reflecting itself and not engaging the otherness of the Other? Is any attempt to theorize about the field of cultural differences doomed because it will invariably remain captive of one position within it? But without such generalizations can we ever escape our provincial islands and navigate between worlds?

If only as an ethical ideal--that is, as a goal to orient our actions as interpreters without necessarily hoping to attain it--contemporary criticism needs a model of trans-cultural understanding which respects alterity without rendering it inaccessible and which would allow worlds to communicate without sacrificing their integrity, their defining difference. I want to suggest what such a model might entail by evaluating a critique of the failure to achieve an adequate interpretation of cultural difference--Edward Said's Orientalism, a powerful and deservedly influential indictment of the cultural prejudices of Western scholars of the Near East. Said's text recommends itself because his argument about how knowing other cultures can participate in the imperialist domination of them suggests the political dangers of ethnocentric epistemological self-enclosure. My question will be whether Said's critique of Orientalism demonstrates the inevitability of trans-cultural opacity or implicitly projects an ideal which is the reverse of the mistakes it discloses.

Before I begin, I should say a word about what I mean by the

term "culture." I use it in a flexible manner to designate any community of belief. Any group with shared presuppositions and conventions which generate a coherent, distinctive way of understanding constitutes a "culture" in this sense. The problem of cross-cultural communication (or opacity) extends from the disputes between interpretive communities like psychoanalysis or Marxism to the more global cultural conflicts which can pit the Occident against the Orient, one ethnic group against another, or the masculine against the feminine (a cultural rather than biological problem to the extent that differences in the social construction of gender give rise to opposing interpretive and linguistic conventions). If such conflicts raise the question of whether communication and understanding are possible across cultural boundaries, this is because the participants belong to incommensurable communities of belief. The problems of exchange and mutual comprehension which interest me arise whenever groups, whether large or small, have irreconcilable presuppositions. A culture need not be homogeneous, and indeed one reason why members of different cultures can communicate is frequently that they share conventions of a particular kind (are members of a common culture) which gives them a ground for discussing and assessing the beliefs and values which divide them (and make them members of different cultures). Cross-cultural understanding is an important issue for the theory of interpretation because it highlights questions about the possibility or impossibility of negotiation, agreement, or compromise which arise any time

communities with opposing presuppositions find themselves in interpretive conflict.

The ethical ideal which will emerge from this inquiry will have much in common with the notion of "play" which is central to Wolfgang Iser's recent work on the fictive and the imaginary. Although some games are aimed at "achieving victory (establishing meaning)," Iser argues that play also includes an opposing, "ever-decentering movement which resists closure" and seeks to continue and renew itself (252). According to Iser, "oscillation, or to-and-fro movement, is basic to play, and it permits the coexistence of the mutually exclusive" (255). In his view, unsynthesizable difference is what makes the back-and-forth movement of play possible, unpredictable, and potentially ever self-renewing. Iser proposes that the act of representation be understood as a form of play because it typically stages interactions between values, conventions, and ways of seeing which otherwise might not encounter each other. The results of these acts of staging are not necessarily a resolution of differences but a playful, inconclusive, back-and-forth movement between them. This sort of to-and-fro movement between mutually exclusive positions "allows us to conceive what is withheld from us," Iser argues, without collapsing the differences which constitute the play-space (261). What we need in order to allow cultural differences to engage each other in a mutually revealing manner is, I will argue, a hermeneutics of play.

1. "Orientalism" versus Non-Coercive Self-Representation

Said defines "Orientalism" as the systematic, persistent claim of Western scholarship to such an authoritative knowledge of the mysteries and customs of the Near East that it did not listen to the Other and refused it the right to speak for itself. Instead of playing the sort of open-ended game which recognizes the Other as an equal and irreducible partner in an unpredictable encounter, the Orientalist sought the repeated victory of an established set of assumptions which thus developed "the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system" (70). To summarize, the four "principal dogmas of Orientalism" are, according to Said: 1) the assertion of an "absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior"; 2) the methodological assumption that "abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical' Oriental civilization, are preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities"; 3) the belief that "the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself", and 4) the feeling that "the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation wherever possible)" (300-1).

Thus reduced to a list of dogmas, "Orientalism" might seem so patently bogus that no serious scholar could be imagined to

have engaged in it. Although Said's anger does on occasion flare into polemics, one merit of his book is that it takes the Orientalists more seriously than he thinks they took their subjects. Orientalism is not a playful book because Said thinks of himself as fighting a battle for the side which has repeatedly lost, but he reproduces and analyzes in brilliant detail a wealth of materials which any summary of dogmas cannot do justice to and which shows him listening to the Orientalists (although he doesn't hear them the way they would want to be understood). Said's summary indictment of Orientalism is important, however, not only for what it says about a failed tradition of trans-cultural scholarship but also for its argument about the relation between knowledge and power: "To have such knowledge of a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it. And authority here means for 'us' to deny autonomy to 'it'--the Oriental country--since we know it and it exists, in a sense, as we know it" (32). The point here is not only that a scholarly enterprise can be complicit with imperialism (although that too is Said's claim--that knowledge, as a form of power, can be part of the apparatus of imperial domination). The point is also that knowledge, often conceived of as a quest for mastery and authority, can go wrong because of the very will to power which motivates it. If knowing the Other becomes mastery and domination, then the epistemological authority of the expert closes off the to-and-fro exchange between different worlds. The openness to alterity of play and conversation is replaced by the repetition of an

established meaning which cannot be challenged by an Other whose autonomy and authority it denies.

One reason for this hermeneutic self-enclosure is that power can easily undermine various tests for validity interpreters commonly invoke to check and revise their hypotheses (see Armstrong 12-19). One such test is the pragmatic question of effectiveness: Does an interpretation work? Said's critique of the complicity of Orientalism with imperialist administration suggests, however, that the instrumental bias of the pragmatic test may make it more a gauge of power than of knowledge. "The vindication of Orientalism" was, he says, "its later effectiveness, its usefulness, its authority" as a tool for colonial bureaucracies (123), but this very political triumph casts doubt on rather than confirms its epistemological value. The effectiveness of a hypothesis may be a sign of its ability to manage a situation but not of its adequacy as a response to and recognition of otherness; quite the contrary, it may "work" effectively by silencing and suppressing rather than disclosing the other world.

The test of inclusiveness--the ability of a hypothesis to organize evidence coherently, without anomaly--is similarly liable to being corrupted by power. Said complains about the self-validating tendencies of "discursive consistency" (273). A set of assumptions may generate mutually reinforcing statements whose coherence is a result of the homogeneity of the beliefs behind them rather than proof of their range of applicability and

their capacity to fit details together in meaningful patterns. The internal consistency of a discourse may be an engine for assimilating otherness to one's own presuppositions rather than evidence of their ability to make reliable because coherent sense.

The test of intersubjectivity is perhaps most vulnerable to political subversion. Said's indictment of Orientalism as a discipline, a tradition, an enduring and influential scholarly institution suggests that consensus can be blinding and coercive. Although interpreters frequently judge a hypothesis by its persuasiveness, its ability to win adherents may not be proof against solipsism. The very force of agreement between like-minded interpreters may lock them into a self-reinforcing blindness to another community's way of seeing. The oxymoron "communal solipsism" may seem like an impossible self-contradiction, but it is one of the main obstacles to trans-cultural understanding precisely because another's agreement can seem so persuasive as support for one's own beliefs.

The simple response to all of these failures might be to say: Let the other culture speak for itself. But in what language, if the lack of equivalence between the terms and conventions of cultures is responsible in the first place for their mutual misunderstandings? And what if a community's own language is not adequate to describe its situation? Disagreement about what counts as an "adequate" interpretation is frequently what is at stake in cross-cultural conflicts.

Said wonders "how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective" (24). And surely the tests for validity go wrong in the ways I have described because what Said calls "the principle of inequality" (151) between knower and known prevents otherness from challenging, questioning, and overturning the hypotheses which claim to have mastered it. The "to-and-fro" movement of play depends on the equality of the interacting positions. But equality is not the same as identity, and it is the difference between a community's self-understanding and another culture's interpretation of it which makes the validity of each an issue and also generates the possibility of back-and-forth exchanges between them. Said is right to complain about the "sense of irreducible distance separating white from colored, or Occidental from Oriental" that "kept the Oriental-colored to his position of object studied by the Occidental-white, instead of vice versa" (228). The right to reverse roles by investigating the investigator would assert the principle of equality (what is an object can also be a subject, and vice versa), and such reversals also keep play open. Said complains as well that "from the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the Orient could not do was to represent itself" (283). The right to author descriptions of oneself is certainly important as an assertion of a culture's irreducible autonomy and as a counter to the domination inherent in being taken as another community's object. Nevertheless, a serious drawback to insisting on the

privilege of self-representation is that it would confirm boundaries instead of allowing them to be crossed. It would not solve the problem of how to achieve non-coercive understanding of another world but would instead leave communities self-enclosed and unengaged.

Self-representation may also not be sufficient for liberation. One reason why a culture is oppressed may be that it lacks a language adequate to expose and protest its conditions of domination. When Gayatri Spivak warns against "the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves," she has in mind two dangers: not only that "the benevolent Western intellectual" may be yet another version of "the ethnocentric Subject . . . establishing itself by selectively defining another," but also that the oppressed people may not possess a perfect understanding of themselves or a satisfactory means of expressing their concerns ("Subaltern" 292). The traditional goal of hermeneutics of understanding the Other better than he understands himself may mask a potentially blinding will to power, but it also anticipates the insight of the various modern "hermeneutics of suspicion" (to borrow Paul Ricoeur's term) that a claim of privilege for self-understanding may be a mask or a delusion. Even more, one culture may find in the languages and ways of seeing of another culture the means it would not otherwise have at its disposal for resolving its own problems and realizing its possibilities. To pursue its own interests and aims, one

community may need hermeneutic and linguistic resources available only by borrowing from another world. Trans-cultural learning of this kind requires a back-and-forth movement between different worlds which questions rather than assumes the sufficiency of the self-representations of each player.

The closure of a culture upon itself is an example of vicious hermeneutic circularity. One way of phrasing the question posed by Orientalism is a classic paradox of hermeneutics: How can the unfamiliar be understood if the familiar provides our only access to it? How can one manage not "to cancel, or at least subdue and reduce, its strangeness" (87) if a community can only make sense of the new and anomalous by grafting them onto what it already knows? Said charges generations of Oriental scholars with prejudice, and that claim in itself would not be so interesting if it did not also call attention to the epistemological dilemma that without presuppositions and expectations an interpreter cannot understand anything at all. If, as Gadamer argues, prejudgments (Vorurteile) are necessary to understanding because "truth" is not simply a given waiting for reason to reflect it accurately, how can we know without the self-fulfilling preconceptions Said condemns? Can one distinguish clearly and unequivocally between a legitimate presupposition and a blinding bias? According to Said, Orientalism let its set of available types run roughshod over the particularities of individuals: "We must imagine the Orientalist at work in the role of a clerk putting together a

very wide assortment of files in a large cabinet marked 'the Semites,' and "the human being was significant principally as the occasion for a file" (234). But no individual can be understood without some reference to types--to kinds which explain its relations to other entities according to various classifications of similarity and difference. The power of the notion of "Orientalism" is indeed precisely its value as an explanatory type.

A major reason for the vicious circularity Said rightly complains about is that Orientalism's presuppositions are never put at risk by its encounter with the Other. Said notes that "it is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness" (67). Orientalism is an example of the tendency of cultures "to impose . . . transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be": "what the Orientalist does is to confirm the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions" (67, 65). Disorienting and bewildering the interpreter by frustrating preset convictions is, however, the only way to expose their deficiencies and persuade their holder of the need to abandon or revise them. Only if Occidental prejudices about the Orient are invoked and then not satisfied can they be altered or overturned. Simply doing without presuppositions in order to make one's mind a more faithful mirror of its object is not epistemologically possible. Holding

oneself open to the challenge of bewilderment is an ethical imperative if one would avoid being captive of one's beliefs.

Because of the dominance of the knower over the known, however, Said's Orientalist is not sufficiently vulnerable to experience a potentially enlightening disorientation. Only by self-consciously curbing the power of one's prejudgments can one make possible a self-changing testing of presuppositions which will otherwise rigidify and endlessly replicate themselves. The principle of equality between knower and known is hermeneutically necessary because it acts as a check on the powers of an interpreter's beliefs and encourages a posture of vulnerability, of openness to reorienting experiences of surprise, frustration, and disappointment. Such openness to change is the only difference between a legitimate prejudgment and a blinding prejudice.

The philologist Leo Spitzer describes the hermeneutic circle as a "to-and-fro movement" (19-20, 25) between guesses about the overall configuration of a text and the details they attempt to fit together. Such an endless, reciprocal, back-and-forth motion is implicit in the paradox that one can understand the parts of any text only by projecting a sense of the whole, even if one can also only grasp the whole by working through the parts. The resonances between Spitzer's formulation of the hermeneutic act and Iser's notion of play are not accidental, I think, because only a playful interaction between hypotheses and evidence can allow them to be mutually formative while preventing the power of

the interpreter's beliefs from forcing otherness into preset patterns. Interpretation must be playful to move beyond simple self-replication of the assumptions with which one begins. As Spitzer and Iser describe it, a playful attitude includes a willingness to let one's presuppositions and hypotheses be challenged and changed by the encounter. A playful relation between interpreter and text implies a principle of equality which allows revisions and reversals to occur. Respect for the integrity and the unpredictable alterity of the partner in play is necessary for the interaction to be potentially self-changing, for it to generate something new which neither participant could predict or produce by themselves.

Said blames the blindness of Orientalism on its "binary" structure: "'We' are this, 'they' are that" (237). "The result" of such differentiation, he warns, "is usually to polarize the distinction--the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western--and limit the human encounter between different cultures" (46). In Said's view, Orientalism could not see similarity because it was blinded by difference. Its insistence on cultural opposition prevented a recognition of common humanity: "Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience" (328). As René Girard has argued, demonizing and scapegoating the Other by insisting on its radical alterity is a dangerous and all too easy way for a community to achieve solidarity (see 1-67). Many resemblances and overlaps no doubt often exist between cultures which a claim

of complete incommensurability would be blind to, and such commonalities are important for allowing different worlds to recognize one another as potential partners in a game of give-and-take. But play requires difference as well as similarity, and homogenizing the "human" would close it off. As Spivak argues, "knowledge is made possible and is sustained by irreducible difference, not identity" (Worlds 254). Asserting the common humanity of the players is a move which could put an end to their interaction. Binarism is inherent in the "to-and-fro" movement of play.

A homogeneous notion of "humanity" would limit rather than enhance the exchange between different cultures by preventing recognition of the otherness of the Other, the defining differences which give another world its identity as something more than a repetition of what we already know. The goal of the play between cultures should not be the eradication of differences, a move which would stop the game just as surely as the insistence on the primacy of a single opposition would. Freezing the opposition between worlds into a single form and insisting on their underlying uniformity would both result in stifling or at least constricting the to-and-fro movement between them. Rather, invoking a principle of reciprocity which respects differences without collapsing them, the aim of cross-cultural play should be to acknowledge the otherness of different ways of seeing and being in a manner which keeps the encounter between them open to ever new developments. If there is a "common

humanity" which play discloses, it is the lack of an essential nature to human being, a lack which allows a diverse array of forms of life to emerge.

2. The Epistemology and the Politics of Play

How "play" facilitates knowledge of the Other may become clearer if we compare it to a similar proposal for how to think about difference. Luce Irigaray suggests that "wonder" could be the foundation of "an ethics of sexual difference" (124) because it makes possible a non-coercive, non-reductive appreciation of otherness. "Who or what the other is, I never know," she says. "But this unknowable other is that which differs sexually from me. . . . One sex is never entirely consummated or consumed by another. There is always a residue" (124-25). "Culture" could be substituted for "sex" and her point would remain (Said claims, indeed, that "Orientalism is a praxis of the same sort . . . as male gender dominance, or patriarchy" ["Reconsidered" 103]). The value of wonder, Irigaray contends, is that it acknowledges the irreducible difference of otherness without seeking to master or control it or subsuming it under some more encompassing homogeneity which would drown it out. "Wonder . . . sees something as though always for the first time," she argues, "and never seizes the other as its object" or tries to "possess or subdue it" (124). Irigaray consequently imagines that "wonder might allow [the sexes] to retain an autonomy based on their difference, and give them a space of freedom or attraction, a

possibility of separation or alliance" (124). It might, in other words, allow them to play--that is, to experiment with different forms of self-assertion or combination. The accomplishment of wonder is to create a play-space where differences can relate to each other without seeking domination or fearing engulfment.

If "wonder" were made an end in itself and did not give rise to play, it might seem passive and unproductive. A danger of wonder is that it could deteriorate into paralyzed mutual fascination instead of creating possibilities for new forms of practice out of the differences it discloses. Wonder alone could lapse into exoticism--a self-indulgent cultivation of otherness as escape or entertainment which does not take it seriously as a co-equal way of being. For wonder to support an ethics, as Irigaray desires, it must be supplemented by a principle of activity, a notion of what to do with the differences it discloses so that both parties benefit, and that supplement can be found in play.

According to Iser, play allows a "doubling" which might otherwise seem impossible--"the simultaneity of the mutually exclusive" (272). When two opposing communities of belief try to communicate with or interpret one another, the asymmetry between the explanations they offer need not simply result in pointless talk at cross purposes (although that can happen, and contact will soon break off in frustration). If mutual recognition can prolong the encounter, their asymmetry can bring about an oscillation, a back-and-forth movement, which can usefully inform

and change both parties (and perhaps give them pleasure, not merely the aggravation customarily associated with conflict).

I have in mind what happens to both Marxism and psychoanalysis when Marcuse plays them off each other in Eros and Civilization, or how both psychoanalysis and phenomenology are transformed when they meet in Ricoeur's Freud and Philosophy. These are texts which try to hold "mutually exclusive" ways of thinking together with the result that the boundaries separating them are crossed without being obliterated. In neither text does psychoanalysis collapse into the opposing perspective which engages it. Instead, to borrow Iser's description of the doubleness of play, "the coexistence of the mutually exclusive gives rise to a dynamic oscillation"--"a constant interpenetration of things that are set off from one another without ever losing their difference" (272). Marxism becomes a way of disclosing the unique, perhaps otherwise less evident characteristics of psychoanalysis (especially the social consequences inherent in Freud's assumptions about the opposition between Eros and Thanatos). But the revisionary concepts Marcuse proposes (in particular "surplus repression" and the "performance principle") in turn reveal the distinctiveness of Marxism by translating instinctual terms into the language of labor. Similarly, in Freud and Philosophy, the oscillation between the perspectives of phenomenology and psychoanalysis does not bring about a synthesis but rather a variety of mutually revealing transformations--the need for phenomenology to dislocate the

cogito as the home of meaning by recognizing the distorting pressures of desire, for example, or Freud's complementary need to invoke semantic categories in his supposedly purely libidinal explanations because meaning is irreducible to force. In both cases interchanges between mutually exclusive perspectives bring about useful changes in both without leading to a synthesis or to a hostile takeover or to a solipsistic breakdown in communication.

"Doubling" does not overcome differences but can make them meet productively. "Doubling" perspectives will not necessarily unify them (it does not promise the dream of monistic "truth" some pluralists hope will be realized by amalgamating different points of view), although it can disclose potential alliances or common ground between opposing cultures which neither side had previously suspected. Nor will "doubling" generate a transcendental position from which the entire play-space can be understood in a univocal, uncontestable manner. In lieu of the impossible dream of an indubitable foundation for knowledge, "doubling" describes how encounters between different worlds can occur, but it is also not a logic which restricts or governs such meetings. Because a transcendental observation post and a universal logic are not available, acts of "doubling" opposing perspectives within a field of play are the most we can hope for in our effort to get outside ourselves. Difference is not overcome in some grand, universal synthesis but instead generates ever new versions of itself precisely because the doubleness of

play is potentially endless.

Doubling perspectives can have a variety of outcomes. What happens when we double our perspective with another world is that we cross boundaries that ordinarily limit us because we engage a different way of thinking and being, but we engage it as ourselves, with our own presuppositions and interests, and thus bring along the world whose horizons we are stepping beyond. "Doubleness" consequently characterizes not only our relation to the other world but also our own relation to our own assumptions and aims to the extent that they are questioned and denaturalized by encountering something radically different from themselves. According to Iser, the back-and-forth movement of play between worlds brings about a shifting of "focus" and "frame" (see 254-61). The Other becomes a focus for my interpretation from my frame of reference, but that frame is itself the focus of the Other's interpretation, and it can therefore emerge from the background and become a theme for my own thinking. This shifting of focus and frame can result in mutual self-disclosure which would otherwise not be available to either participant in the encounter. When "two types of discourse" play off each other, Iser explains, "their simultaneity triggers a reciprocal revealing and concealing of their respective contextual references," and such doubling "allows us to see ourselves as that within which we are entangled" (271, 283). The presuppositions and interests which are otherwise invisible to me precisely because I am so caught up in them can thus come into

view. The natural attitude of being convinced by one's convictions can be suspended and challenged by coming up against opposing conceptions of "nature"--different assumptions about what is obvious and goes without saying and consequently is usually not noticed precisely because it is so pervasive and common.

The ability to observe our own interpretive habits and question our otherwise indubitable assumptions which the doubling of play makes possible is already a transformation of ourselves. The revelations opened up by the shifting play of focus and frame allow us to step outside of our previous self-definitions and cross boundaries which customarily limit us. Some skeptics argue that doubt is impossible because we are always convinced by our beliefs (see Knapp and Michaels). Acting against such a self-imprisoning fixation of belief, the doubleness of play opens up a distance between interpreters and their assumptions which allows not only self-scrutiny but change. The possibility of wedging difference into the self-identity of one's beliefs--of being able to play with them as if they were not inevitable--is a precondition for extending and altering the given and not forever remaining trapped by our starting point.

Encountering another community of belief may not cause an interpreter to convert to its ways of seeing and behaving, but the very meeting between worlds is rich with the potential for semantic innovation. The differences between them contain possibilities for generating meanings which are the unique

consequence of the to-and-fro movement between the opposing positions. The encounter may therefore create meanings which would not be accessible to either world alone, novelty which in turn may persuade the players to extend and alter themselves accordingly, revising their beliefs and goals in light of the previously unforeseen possibilities which the new meanings generated by their interaction suggest. The outcome of the game may not be the same for different players--indeed, it probably will not be, inasmuch as they will understand the novelty generated by their encounter from different perspectives and see its significance differently because for each it will disclose and challenge a different set of assumptions, conventions, and aims. What both players will share is the mutual advantage of having been able to get beyond otherwise constraining boundaries because of their encounter, but this will mean something different for each because the given each oversteps is not the same.

The obvious objection to my model of cross-cultural understanding is that "play" itself is a Western, ethnocentric concept. And indeed, especially in aesthetic theory, the idea of "play" has enjoyed a long, rich tradition in Western thought (see Spariosu). One could argue, further, that the whole question of whether cultures can communicate is ethnocentric, the result of Western preoccupations with individuality and consciousness, a legacy of Cartesianism which even haunts contemporary language philosophies through their very efforts to get beyond it. Hall

and Ames point out, for example, that "in Confucian social theory, a person is irreducibly communal," with the consequence that "solipsism" is never a problem for Confucius because "experience is, ab initio, intersubjective" (160). But they also note that "one always begins to think where one is" (12): "We have no choice but to attempt to articulate the other tradition by seeking out categories and language found in our own tradition that . . . can be reshaped and extended to accommodate novel ideas" (14). This is true of their recent book, Thinking Through Confucius, which acknowledges the irreducibility of ancient Chinese philosophy to Western categories of thought even as it uses those categories to make an unfamiliar culture's ways of thinking accessible. Their project is interestingly paradoxical in its insistence on difference and its desire to overcome it, and the paradox here is that of "doubling" and "play"--setting in motion a to-and-fro exchange between familiar categories and unfamiliar ways of thinking in the hope that the encounter will transform both (by making Confucius comprehensible to the West without sacrificing his distinctiveness, and in the process revealing and challenging, if not overcoming, the limits of Western concepts).

The notion of "play" as a way of engaging cultural differences may be Western, but proposals for mediating between different worlds can only come from within those worlds. There is no transcendental ground from which the conflict of interpretations can be described and negotiated because any

representation of it is itself an interpretation subject to conflict (see Armstrong 151-57). What must mark proposals for inter-worldly mediation is not universality but respect for alterity and openness to further negotiation and change through the encounter with the Other. Although I would not want to rule out in advance that varieties of "play" might be found in many different cultures, what recommends it as a mediator is not that it can claim universality but rather, first, that it embodies a principle of equality which acknowledges the irreducible integrity of the partners in the exchange and, second, that it is open to endless transformations. Built into the openness of play is the possibility that the encounter with the Other may change the terms of engagement. "Let's play" is an opening gambit which one culture can offer another, and the response may be "What do you mean by that?" or "Let's do something else instead," and "play" as "doubling" or "to-and-fro movement" would allow the legitimacy of those responses and enable a reciprocal negotiation and exploration of possible modes of relationship which neither side alone could anticipate. Although the proposal to play may be a beginning move, the terms of play do not dictate that it be where the game ends. The possibility of self-transformation is inherent in play itself, and that open-endedness makes play a Western notion of relatedness which can disclose the Occident and the Orient to each other because it does not insist that the encounter proceed or end on Western terms.

One move which a hermeneutics of play would exclude is

terror. When, in recognition of the irreducibility of difference, Lyotard seeks "an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to . . . consensus," his example of unequivocal evil is "terror"--that is, "eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game" (66, 63). "Terror" is a radical violation of the mutual recognition on which reciprocal exchange between worlds depends. There is an element of terror in Orientalism inasmuch as "the muteness imposed upon the Orient" as Europe's "silent Other" precluded an exchange between them ("Reconsidered" 93). Terror cannot easily be exorcized, however, because power is involved even in de-centered play. The to-and-fro movement between positions can easily turn into combat which seeks to close off the encounter by a master-stroke or a devious strategem which would secure dominance for one side. The role of power in the back-and-forth motion of play poises it ambiguously between de-centered, open-ended reciprocity and the quest for victory which would terminate the exchange and, much like terror, refuse equal recognition to the losing side (the violent overtones of a term like "sudden death elimination" are all to the point). Something like "terror" is always present as a possible move which play itself may tempt the parties to try.

This ambiguity is intensified when the parties to the exchange seek to decide through it whether some games are more worth playing than others. Such evaluations are often what participants in cross-cultural encounters seek. Said argues that

there is something "combative" in the very notion of "culture" as the best that has been thought and said because "the assertively achieved and won hegemony of an identifiable set of ideas . . . over all other ideas in society" eliminates or at least threatens the right of alternatives to assert their claims (World 10). The shock of picturing Matthew Arnold as a terrorist suggests that coercion and suppression may be more a part of "culture" than we like to think. The problem here is that being convinced of one's convictions includes believing that they are worth being believed. It is this belief which is usefully tested and held in check by cross-cultural encounters, but those exchanges must then be governed by an ethics of play based on a principle of equality which opposes the inherent tendency of either side to think most highly of its own presuppositions and conventions. Play as an ethical norm requires that the participants agree not only to use power but also to limit it, and nothing can guarantee that such mutual consent will not give way to one party's decision that its best interests (for example, the vindication of its own assumptions and values) will be served by resorting to overpowering tactics. The interests of knowing otherness will be violated by such refusals to accept mutual constraints on power, but those are not the only or the most pressing interests a group may have. They are the interests, however, on which interpretation, as the effort to understand the Other, must be based.

In yet another ambiguity of the kind which ethics welcomes,

however, some acts of violence or disruption and some quests for power may be justified by the ideal of de-centered, reciprocal play itself. When mutual recognition or equal power do not exist, then a struggle to redefine the terms of the encounter may be more important than "play" and may even be required to clear the ground for it. In order to construct a play-space, various power-struggles may be necessary to break down hindrances to reciprocity and negotiation and to allow an oppressed, hitherto silenced Other the right to speak on equal terms. In such instances, "play" provides a norm against which to measure deficiencies which could justify political action, including fights which are not playful but which seek to make play possible. Said's "determination not to allow the segregation and confinement of the Orient to go on without challenge" ("Reconsidered" 95) is an act of moral courage which is justified in terms of an ethics of play. Criticism defined as the unmasking of oppression and domination (see World 29) is not an end in itself but is a preliminary battle for power which aims to allow play to emerge. The necessary contradiction of such criticism is that it seeks the achievement of victory through a game which aims at closure only in order to open up play which resists hierarchies and ends.

A final objection to a hermeneutical ethics of play might be that it is yet another version of co-optive liberal pluralism. To some leftist critics, my plea for including the Other through mutual recognition might seem like the "repressive tolerance"

(Spivak, "Subaltern" 112) of liberalism which, in the guise of recognizing difference, actually constitutes "an appeal for cohesion" and would stifle dissent and "basic change" (Bercovitch, 644, 645). My condemnation of terror might seem yet another "form of exclusion which . . . denies its own exclusivity" (Weber 45) in a typical liberal tactic which, through a gesture of all-encompassing inclusion, disallows radical opposition to the existing order: "The only things that can be excluded are things that would exclude"--i.e., any fundamental alternatives to the way things are (Wills 318; see Rooney 1-63).

On the first point, "doubling" where both parties put their assumptions at risk is not simply repressive tolerance. A to-and-fro exchange in which the presuppositions of both communities are tested and can be overturned and through which their conventions can be denaturalized and exposed for critical examination is the opposite of a self-preserving defense against otherness. Because of the challenges and transformations play makes possible, it can be subversive--an engine for change, not a means of preserving the same by assimilating and denying difference. Play is not taking place if the Other is merely tolerated and is not taken seriously as a co-equal way of being whose differences call into question the naturalness and legitimacy of one's own categories and conventions. An ethics of play requires that differences not only recognize but also engage one another, and it is therefore not the same as indifferent

acceptance which can be a strategy for prolonging suppression of the Other.

The charge of excluding exclusion misses the mark inasmuch as play as a way of staging encounters between incommensurable worlds is based on the inevitability of exclusions. I have proposed "play" as a way of mediating (but not transcending) cultural differences precisely because worlds can exclude each other and no generally persuasive version of "truth" can be found which would be acceptable to all communities of belief.

"Exclusion" as the irreducibility of difference is what makes play possible and necessary. Nevertheless, "exclusion" as the violent refusal of recognition to otherness is something I do reject (as do Said and Spivak and many other critics on the left), and my reason has been both ethical and epistemological--namely, that only a principle of equality and reciprocity between cultures can allow pursuit of the ideal of a non-coercive understanding of the Other which escapes the self-enclosure of hermeneutic circularity. The mutual exclusiveness of communities with incommensurable beliefs makes it imperative that we seek modes of interaction which avoid the dangers of communal solipsism and suppression of otherness. Because irreducible differences in categories and conventions can divide worlds, it is all too likely that mutual opacity or violent conflict in pursuit of hegemony will prevail. The question which the charge of excluding exclusion begs is how interpreters from different, mutually exclusive communities can find ways of relating to one

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another which avoid solipsistic self-replication or a destructive battle for power. A desirable alternative to solipsism and violence is, I think, play.

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