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On The Border: Barriers, Passages, Journeys

A border is a place of encounter, a place as encounter.¹ Powerful encounters, interesting conversations, political and cultural tension take place on the border. To be on the border is to be at the edge, on the brink, in a place via which one passes to another place. In terms of extent, too, the border is a critical concept. It is a limit that divides the refined from the crude, laughter from gravity, the permitted from the forbidden.

Both formally and esthetically, then, the border sets up two poles representing a dichotomy of values in which worse is less good and saner is less mad. We can express this dichotomy in behavioral-experiential terms if we understand the border as signifying containment – the border as a halt, an obstacle, a last restraint before an outburst, a perversion, a distortion, or the loss of wits. It follows that the border is supposed to be on the edge, the tip of the tongue, on the verge of. It is a state of transition involving loss and liberation, release and trance, digression from the usual, familiar self. As such, a border not only lies outside, between things, but is also internalized socially, psychologically, and intellectually.

In what way does the phrase “being on the border” differ from simply “the border”? There are always borders, barricades, walls, and crossings. To be on the border, in a borderline state, however, is a rare experience; at least, the awareness of it is rare, perhaps because it requires great concentration, greater than in situations far from the border. Being on the border carries the risk of ejection from the soothing waters of the usual.

We tend to construct and maintain borders that we do not inhabit. On the contrary, they distance us from ourselves, by surrounding us, delineating a horizon, forming a conceptual skeleton around which we create a world and wrap ourselves with it, live in it as within an enclosed sphere, rather than on the brink of empty space. Alfred Schutz, in the manner of his teacher Edmund Husserl, described this imaginary, shared world as a universe of meaning, perpetuating itself as self-explanatory, a “taken-for-granted-world,” endowed with a patina of familiarity covering or even permeating realness and restraining, habituating, and domesticating it.²

Sometimes the habitual order is disrupted, as when people find themselves on opposite sides of a border that was suddenly brought to the fore. The border may have always been there, but it is now exposed, overriding anything else. It overwhelms the existing routine and becomes the focus of the relationship; every action, every

1 This essay is an abridged English translation of a chapter in Hebrew that appeared in *Al Hamakom* [On Israeli and Jewish Place] (Tel Aviv: Am-Oved, 2007).

2 Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*.

utterance veers towards the border, touches it, agitating all that is involved. The border becomes an electric fence. Tolerance and patience are pushed to the limit.

Constant electrification of the borderline constitutes a chronic state of conflict, like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The political, cultural, religious, and historical borderline widens and hardens, until nowadays it has taken on the physical form of a separation fence made of solid concrete. The border is the emblem and the crux of all aspects of the dispute. Its history is also the history of the place, because the place is constantly on the border, electrified; the slightest touch startles it along cracks and fault lines that have become familiar over the border's long history.

Reaching the border may trigger a significant moment of friction, fear, curiosity, concentrated energy, an outburst and explosion; it is the opposite of being at home. At home, a person wishes to be as far as possible from the border, away from an electrified fence, unlike a soldier on the border who carries a rifle and is alert, in touch, his eyes sensitive to every minute detail or movement. In war, this is heightened, as the border becomes the site where the conflict reaches a climax. In Hebrew, the word for battle, "*krav*," shares the same root with the word for close, "*karov*." On the front, the most distant is the closest; the terrible paradox of closeness and distance is played out to the death.

At the same time, the border can be seen as a seam. The Hebrew term "seamline," which refers to the fuzzy region between the West Bank and Israel, stresses in particular the frayed edges of the area, charged with suspicion, infiltration, and violent encounters.³ The more reparative function of the seam is to hold the border together, preventing the rift from widening and gaping open. It can even join and heal by mending, bonding, bridging, ferrying, or tunneling. The acrobat Phillip Petit crossed from the old to the new city of Jerusalem, from Arab to Jewish neighborhoods on a thin rope suspended over the Ben Hinnom Valley. In so doing, he created an artistic installation of a seam that metaphorically sews up the gap between the two opposing sides.

According to Lacan, the subject himself is merely a seam, a "suture," at once rupture and reparation, presence and absence, a fabric threatening to unravel.⁴ In a three-dimensional space, the seam is like the knot tying and sealing a sack or balloon, treasuring and keeping (a secret) within it.

³ For discussions of the sociology of Israel's borders, see Adriana Kemp, "Hagvul kifnei Yanos: Merhav vetoda'ah leumit beyisrael" (The border as a Janus face: space and national consciousness in Israel) and Danni Rabinowitz, "Borders and their Discontents: Israel's Green Line, Arabness and Unilateral Separation."

⁴ Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture."

1 Identity and “Who-ness”

The phenomenology of being on a border may be described schematically in two ways. I call the first a “thick border,” which separates the similar from the different, mine from not mine, myself from the other. It defines both sides as complete entities, moving them as on a horizon, providing (making) a name, limiting and separating worlds. The second, which I call a “thin border,” means being on the border rather than on one or the other side of it. The thick border encloses and the thin border opens up; the thick border answers and the thin border asks; the thick border thickens, lays to rest, calms, whereas the thin border disquiets and challenges.

This distinction between thick and thin is not binary but rather spectral. It indicates vectors of motion and change between which the border is blurred, in one case, thickening and spreading out, in the other, thinning and tightening. The thick border can never be traversed entirely, either personally or collectively. It is never possible to completely “go native,” as anthropologists call it, or to leave one world behind in order to enter another, to undergo a transformation of worlds, to erase the past and begin afresh. On the other hand, it is also impossible to remove all otherness and make the border disappear, and to exist as a pure, whole self, at one with itself and with its place, unmarked by anything outside it.

What we call “identity” is, actually, two contradictory and not necessarily well-balanced motions of thickening and thinning. The thick border implies a place, an identity, whereas the thin border implies non-place, being on the edge of place, in a state of hesitation. Being on the thin border is thus being in a state of limbo, which Victor Turner called “betwixt and between,”⁵ a liminal state between two categories, no longer belonging to the first but not yet having reached the second, suspended between before and after, outside of structure, in a confused, contradictory, sometimes paradoxical state.

This condition is analogous to the one described in Mary Douglas’s anthropological study of Jewish biblical texts, in which she highlighted the troubled border between pure and impure and the sense of danger provoked by the mixing, the hybrids that make up that culture. Judaism is a culture of meticulously guarding the limits, the safety fences monitoring the religious rules of separation and differentiation in all aspects of life: between men and women, inside the dwelling place and out of bounds.

One should distinguish between crossing a border in the sense of transformation or conversion and crossing a border while maintaining one’s identity. Commandos or spies who cross borders are, in principle, guarding the thick border between themselves and the world they have infiltrated, subsisting with a threatened identity in this foreign world.

⁵ Victor Turner, “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*.

Guarding the border necessarily involves great awareness of limit, retreat, digression, and the fragility and instability of the border, which requires ever more vigilance. The border guard sometimes serves an institutionalized role, acting as a moral, behavioral, arbitrary “border police” that exists in one way or another in every family, through psychologists and educators’ recommendations for “setting limits,” or insisting that “enough is enough!”

A familiar figure associated with the border is the observer, like the man who stands apart in Cezanne’s “Card Game,” between play and non-play, between the point-in-the-game (winning) and the point-of-the-game (what for?). He stands and watches the game, on the edge of participation, in the game but also outside it, looking at it from its periphery.

Another type of border figure is not concerned with watching and monitoring but with highlighting and signposting it for others, as, for instance, charismatic messengers, shamans, geniuses; they dwell between worlds, between life and the netherworld, sanity and madness, human and divine. The liminality of these figures, who are both here and there, enables them to serve as mediums and go-betweens.

Sometimes exile involves an actual border, living a life on hold, not there and not here, as in Luis Urrea’s descriptions of life on the Mexican-American border.⁶ Or else, it might be Jewish or other exiles, where a dual identity develops, with tremendous sensitivity to the passages between identities and a constant shift between external and internal states necessitated by living simultaneously in different languages, different customs, different and even conflicting allegiances and loyalties that enrich each other and permit a critical perspective on existence. One can find this perspective in the recent anthropological literature on diaspora, an anthropological theoretical concept that has become a critical trope in an age of crossing borders, transitions, migrations, with fault lines everywhere threatening to burst and to rock the stable, fixed world.⁷

The border is thus sometimes a place or a phase, but, generally, it is essential to understanding identity as not only a defined robust entity enclosed on itself, but also as a side among sides. Identity always borders on “otherness.” Otherness, too, cannot be understood except in relation to what or who it is other than. The other is different, in attributes such as color, sex, and nationality and in minute distinctions of individual differences among people. More than just difference, however, otherness indicates a separate being, an independent life set at an irreducible distance, even in the case of identical twins.

In terms of the thick border, otherness is either a residual category of all that is beyond the border, that which is not me, or else it is an independent identity, that which I am not. The first sets the “I” at the center and relegates the “other” to beyond

⁶ Luis Alberto Urrea, *By the Lake of Sleeping Children: The Secret Life of the Mexican Border*.

⁷ James Clifford, “Diasporas,” *Cultural Anthropology*.

the border, to the margins, whereas the second situates the “other” at the center, rendering the “I” as other. The transition from one focus to the other is the beginning of the shift from a thick to a thin border of identity. The border opens up as a real space stretched between me and the other. A shared world and a common language cannot be taken for granted. The silence between us, charged with the complexities of dialogue, rises to the surface.

Moreover, the inception of the concept and the experience of otherness create new possibilities for understanding identity. It is not merely that I am aware that the other sees me as other, but I also see myself as other from my own point of view. Otherness is internalized and with it the border. Becoming both self and other, the “thick border” between entire identities now runs through me. I am on both sides of the border.

This self-awareness, the ability to understand the self from an alien perspective, from the outside, leads to an even more pronounced otherness: not the other as “another me” nor me as “another other.” Rather, the “Other” as that which has no “I.” The Other of I-ness. Human language is one manifestation of this type of otherness. Language is part and parcel of identity. It gives one a name, a means of communication and self-expression; it defines, articulates, and forms. At the same time, however, language is beyond subjectivity and cannot be identified with a particular person. It has no self nor desires of its own.

The same type of otherness can be attributed to a system, whether natural, social, cultural, or symbolic. The body is such a system, a system that has no self. In theology, this otherness is exemplified by transcendence and the idea of the holy as ultimate distance. God is the “wholly Other” as Rudolf Otto put it, not another someone but other than anyone and anything.⁸

The concept of border changes when otherness is turned inwards to split the self, especially when it is the system otherness described above. The thick border defines difference and distance and creates order through that difference. Otherness turned on the self, on the other hand, can no longer keep identities distinct and intact; neither can it preserve the categorical order of the world, where everything is in its place, and clear borders are sustained between things as between people. Otherness, one may say, becomes a fundamental, inner component of identity itself, which cannot be projected onto the other. It is always already within. It is no longer possible to keep the entire self within the bounds of the border and the entire “other” outside it. The self has become the other and the other has become the self.

A notion of a border that is thin rather than thick is usually used to indicate the subtle calibration of appropriate and inappropriate, serious or not, good or bad taste, and so forth. It is a nuanced form of the thick border. Eviatar Zerubavel uses the term “fine line” to show how borders exist in every sphere in life, defining and assigning

⁸ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.

identity, traits, and alternatives, not by an inevitable force of nature or a “natural border” but as the product of social construction that creates distinctions and marks degrees.⁹

In this essay, however, the “thin border” does not refer to the distinction and separation between things, between identities, not even when finely tuned, but rather to an essential, reflexive aspect of distinction both between a person and another and between a person and himself. The thin border is an internal border, an otherness within identity. Both sides of the thick border permeate each other and create internal relations. Finding oneself simultaneously on both sides of the divide, one cannot settle the question of identity and reduce it to some bottom line. If the thick border is premised on an answer, the thin border entails a question mark.

Introducing the border to its thinness creates an external awareness from within, a self-knowledge that is not founded on a central symbol and on identification but rather on alienation, which in Hebrew (*nikur*) shares its root with the word for recognition (*hakara*). The Book of *Zohar*, attributing great significance to the query, states that the question “mi eileh?” (Who are those?) is the secret anagram within the word “Elohim” or God, as opposed simply to “eileh” (those) recalled in the verse “eileh eloheicha Israel” (this is your god, Israel), which was said about the golden calf. This idol constituted an answer, a definite form, therefore a narrow and diminished one, in comparison to the question “mi” – *Who* is God, as the fulcrum point, the divine secret alluded to and encapsulated in the name of God.¹⁰

The distinction between “who” and “this” is similar to the distinction between the current Hebrew word for “identity” (*zehut*) and the word which was initially proposed by Eliezer ben Yehuda but was not adopted into spoken Hebrew: “who-ness” (*mihut*). The word “identity” implies an answer: “ze hu” (this is he! This is it!). By contrast, “who-ness” places emphasis on the question: “who? “Who is it?” In this, it resembles its sister word “mahut” (essence), which is current in vernacular Hebrew (although the question is elided from it). It alludes to the fact that every naming of an essence incorporates a question “ma hu” (what is it?). This question does not disappear even when answered. The question is in the answer.

What we usually designate as identity, then, is its affirmative side; it answers to a variety of questions. It involves an attribution of a name, forming a symbol, a center, a concentration, a place. Borders are drawn defining inside/outside or center/horizon, even if the horizon is not circular but a dim, possibly disrupted line. It inevitably involves, moreover, an act of exclusion, simultaneously defining (who) is and (who) is not. Identity is an exclusive matter. Its play depends on the creation of a national, ethnic, social, religious, and personal imaginative circle as a mode for including the

⁹ Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*.

¹⁰ Introduction to the *Zohar*, 2a.

individual in the group and, in turn, placing the “other” on the other side of the fence. Everyone inside must differ in the same way from everyone outside.

Thus, identity is determined concurrently both positively and dismissively. It cannot declare: “this is” without implying: “this is not” or “this is not it.” The mad define the sane, the corrupt the honest, the gentiles the Jews, the barbarians the Greeks, the secular the religious, Israelis the Palestinians, and vice versa. Thus, in Hebrew, the word “*zulat*” meaning “other,” refers to all the rest, all the others who are not me.¹¹

From within the circle, this ethnocentric otherness is essentially unconscious. The other is noticed and seen as other but not in the full sense of an alternative, albeit distant, world with its focus, values, and authority of reality, and thus it is not deemed essential for a definition of self-identity. This perception always sees the other as marginal. Thus, for the Greeks, the barbarian “babbles” and cannot speak coherently because he is not part of “our world,” “our civilization.” The religious person views the secular one as an empty vessel and the sane views the madman as lacking logic.

Distancing the other into some residual category of otherness happens every day, when we watch or read about some awful deed or disaster that has occurred somewhere else. This “somewhere,” its population walled off by a thick border dividing the reality of there from the reality of here as a sort of insulating partition, distancing ourselves immediately from the events. In this context, the distinction made between victims of terror and of road traffic accidents or illness is telling. Terror aims at the collective and injures the collective body, thus inducing rapid identification by those who are of that collective. Perhaps, this is the purpose of terror, not merely to claim as many casualties as possible but also to disrupt the thick border that is deemed to envelope the group, to bring it to the heart of a city and to turn city dwellers into people who live on the border.

Stepping out of the envelope and realizing that the other is focused on another world and can be recognized and met face to face is a critical moment in the development of the journey of identity. On occasion, it emerges as a confrontation, an agonistic encounter, changing from a circular horizon to a front line dividing this side from the opposite bank. Confrontational otherness creates, in turn, a theory of crossing over, of dialogue, a dialectic—or a theory of recognition. For recognition to persist focused intent is required, although beholding the other’s presence and authority on reality is not merely the result of an act of will and may happen involuntarily, either consciously or, more importantly, unconsciously.

In his famous chapter in *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* on the master-slave dialectic, Hegel refers to this issue of identity when he defines the underdeveloped person who has not yet had to confront another’s identity. He possesses selfhood,

¹¹ K. T. Erikson argues that society deports perverts beyond its borders so that they can serve to define those borders. Thus, social perversion is not only a corruption or distortion but also a vital element in the social morality and order we call “normativity.” See K. T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*.

Hegel argues, but a simple kind of selfhood, of existence as self, which has not achieved self-awareness.¹² In order to attain self-awareness, one must develop a sense of border, at least minimally, to acknowledge the question of “who?,” to recognize that identity has limits, and beyond those limits lies otherness. To deny the other is to limit one’s ability to achieve self-awareness.

This approach incorporates a radical unraveling of conventional assumptions about identity. In opening up the identity equation, “this is it” reveals that it is manmade and insoluble. The question always remains. This understanding has far reaching implications beyond the well-known relativist position, which critiques the egocentric or ethnocentric monologue of a single, exclusive world. The relativist position holds that the solution is found in the plurality or multiplicity of worlds.

The radical approach of internalizing otherness, on the other hand, holds that the idea of multiple worlds is itself problematic because it assumes that each of those worlds constitutes a complete identity. If otherness were internalized, this would be impossible both philosophically and realistically. The relativist position, despite its value as a critique, still lies within the realm of thick borders between separate whole entities. A notion of identity that stresses the thin border diverts attention to the fundamental split and duplication within identity. It throws into relief the recognition that no form or statement of identity can do away with the question: “Who?”

2 Beside-ness, Neighborhood and Walkabout

The division described above, including arrival at the thin border, is, for the most part, transverse. It occurs at the point where two sides, “me” opposite the “other,” or two well-defined identities, sane and insane, encounter each other. There may be a no-man’s land between the two parties, or else a battlefield; or there might be a bridge, a well-marked crossing. There might be a rite of passage in order to move from here to there, from state to state, and between sleep and waking, inside and outside, one age and another, life and death, beyond the Lethe River.

Every transverse crossing assumes the existence of a barrier even if only of time; if there is no barrier, there is no experience of passage. St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, stands on the bank of the river, always ready to carry us across, or perhaps waiting on the threshold of the cold pool of the other world, helping the hesitant to take the leap, to reach the “other side.”

There is, however, a passage along which one neither returns nor reaches one’s destination, but instead always proceeds onward; a passage in which one never steps

¹² G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. For a discussion of the master-slave dialectic in the context of identity, see Z. Gurevitch, “Dialectical Dialogue: The Struggle for Speech, Repressive Silence and The Shift to Multiplicity.”

in the same spot twice, whose perspective lines do not merge at a distant point.¹³ This passage has no closure, no conclusion, as the vanishing point is recast again and again along the way. There is no *fait accompli* or absolute fact; only circumlocution, going round in circles, going and coming back, but never truly arriving, only walking about.

Every passage is both transverse and longitudinal. Every short line incorporates a long line in its very line-ness, its existence as distance, as a passage. On the other hand, long lines, which may take years, stretching over continents, can be thought of as short lines connecting far places or moments in time. Nevertheless, the difference between long and short lines is critical. Transverse passage stresses the short, impatient line that struggles to arrive as quickly as possible at the other side, the goal. The short line implies a shortcut, urgency, being goal oriented and therefore denotes determination, opposition, cutting across other lines, overcoming obstacles, disruptions and distractions.

Crossing the thick border is at the heart of every categorical division or dichotomy between places, concepts, beliefs, and opinions. It is, therefore, also at the heart of every dialogue, dialectic, and discourse. Common language and a common world are necessary; yet, at the same time, vital dialogue requires a space for otherness. The thin border enables one to avoid being drawn to one side only or to content oneself with dialogic bridging or separation. The border is in the heart and cannot be glossed over, dismissed, or shaken off. The thin border is an ongoing state, a long line that is not crossable. The other is already here, everywhere you are. You are always also another.

Otherness, however, can be modulated in another way – by being-beside, where the sides are not face-to-face, but move along the border or space between them. Thus, the movement along the border is doubled in a “with” rather than “against” mode. It is a kind of walkabout, going along side by side with no endgame or endpoint but in an ongoing journey, constantly opening up the double (or multiple) perspective(s) as the conversation or the joint venture unfolds, lending itself to the passage of time, to an open, unrestricted field.

The movement does not have to be a physical walk or travel. Besideness is a mode in any state, as is evident in relations that switch from estrangement, fixed distance, and frontal opposition to dwelling side by side as neighbors. Besideness is the mode of crossing the thin border, along the border not across it. In local, political terms, this is the state we call “peace.” This means transforming the wall, the barrier that fixes the border, into a neighbor’s fence, one which separates but does not alienate, opening up an alternative relationship – not just across from each other but also side by side.

¹³ For an extensive discussion of the vanishing point and of perspective in Western art, see Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze*.

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