

**“THERE WAS A BLACK GAP WHERE THE DE HAD BEEN:”  
DISPOSSESSING DISCOURSE IN AIDAN HIGGINS’  
*BALCONY OF EUROPE***

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**ABSTRACT.** *“There Was a Black Gap Where the DE Had Been”: Dispossessing Discourse in Aidan Higgins’ “Balcony of Europe”.* My paper attempts to explore a novel by Irish writer Aidan Higgins from the perspective of the so-called “ethical turn” in the study of narrative by arguing that both its form and its content explicitly thematise the ethical risks of the first-person discourse when it comes to representing the other. Using Dorothy J. Hale’s notion of the voluntary “self-binding” fiction requires from the “responsible readers,” I examine the strategies through which Higgins pits the narrator’s failure to represent otherness against the imminent disintegration of the European landscape, history and identity under the pressures of a discourse of possession and rigid localisation. To these pressures, the text responds by suggesting the language of fiction has the potential to criticise and counteract possession as a model for identity through the effort it imposes on the readers to simultaneously exert and limit their individual freedom.

**Keywords:** *narrative ethics, linguistic (dis)possession, fictional representation, otherness.*

**REZUMAT.** *„În locul lui DE era o gaură neagră:” deposedarea discursului în “Balconul Europei” de Aidan Higgins.* Lucrarea de față își propune lectura unui roman aparținând scriitorului irlandez Aidan Higgins din perspectiva „întoarcerii la etică” în studiul narațiunilor, pornind de la premisa că forma și conținutul acestuia pun explicit în temă riscurile etice ale discursului la persoana I în ceea ce privește reprezentarea alterității. Utilizând definiția dată de Dorothy J. Hale noțiunii de „autolimitare” impusă de roman cititorilor „responsabili,” lucrarea investighează strategiile prin care Higgins suprapune eșecul naratorului de a reprezenta alteritatea dezintegrării iminente a peisajului, istoriei și identității europene sub presiunea unui discurs al posesiei și al localizării rigide. Textul

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răspunde acestei presiuni prin sugestia că limbajul ficțional are potențialul de a critica și a se opune posesiei ca model identitar prin efortul cerut cititorului de a-și exercita și limita simultan libertatea.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *etica narativă, "deposedare" lingvistică, reprezentare ficțională, alteritate.*

The "ethical turn" in literary criticism took a long time to arrive, but in the age of fake news and the social media, it may need to be here to stay. It is perhaps more necessary than ever, now that we no longer need to prove the fact that there is no speech act devoid of values (whether admirable or reprehensible), or, as Wayne Booth kept reminding us in the face of text-centered and structuralist challenges to the notion of literary morality, there are no speakers, nor are there "listeners" (Booth 1998) whose beliefs do not inform the discourse they are producing and interpreting. Booth never abandoned the idea that "ethical criticism is relevant to all literature, no matter how broadly or narrowly we define that controversial term; and such criticism, when done responsibly, can be a genuine form of rational inquiry" (Booth 1998, 351). As Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe put it,

Ethical concerns are not a supplement because there is no narrative that is free of ethical issues, no reading, viewing, or listening to a narrative that does not require some ethical sensitivity and the exercise of moral discrimination on the part of reader, viewer or listener. (Lothe and Hawthorn 2010, 6)

Lothe and Hawthorn themselves quote Booth's defense of an ethical approach to fiction on the grounds that the former does not have to imply forcing the message of the story into the straitjacket of a particular moral code, but identifying its "overall effect on the *ethos*, the *character*, of the listener." This effect does not restrict itself to the reader's openness to change in values, but "must include the very quality of the life lived while listening" (Booth 1998, 353).

The "quality of the life" produced while reading has been variously defined, depending on the initial critical assumptions of each particular orientation within the field of narratology. It is possible, however, to discover commonalities among the otherwise diverse approaches to the ethics of fiction. In an essay published in 2007 in a special issue of *Narrative* dedicated to the critical legacy of Wayne Booth and entitled "Fiction as Restriction: Self-

Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel," Dorothy J. Hale remarks on the surprising convergence of critical efforts to reassert the ethical significance of novels and novel reading. Even more importantly, this convergence includes theories that explicitly dissociate themselves from the humanist premises of Booth's work. Such junctions rest on foregrounding the "ethical value of the readerly self that is produced from 'within' the novel, through the experience of novel reading" (Hale 2007, 189) rather than unveiling the extratextual, societal pressures addressing or producing subjectivity through ideological discourse. In this view, what makes the novel as a genre inherently ethical is its capacity to produce effects on the world through the demand it places on its audience to accommodate, in the very act of the individual reading, with its uniqueness and unrepeatability, a radical form of alterity. Novels call upon the reader to perform an act of "self-binding" that consists in freely choosing to abandon the comforts of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency bestowed on the liberal humanist subject and expose himself/herself to the irruption of an Other who can never be fully grasped. Exploring the differences between contemporary theories and traditional explanations of the moral function of the novel in the wake of poststructuralism, Hale points at the need to identify "an anti-humanist or post-humanist way of conceptualizing the emotions of the engaged novel reader as a noncolonizing translation of social difference into a positive basis of community and political reform" (190). By voluntarily acquiescing to the rule of the narrative, the *responsible* readers place themselves in the conundrum of having to interpret while being aware that conferring meaning on an event or a character irrepressibly reduces their singularity to a form of all-encroaching sameness. The stakes are provided by the possibility the text opens to welcome "alterity beyond apprehension, as defined by illimitable potentiality" (195). Focusing on the question of difference, rather than categorising identities, carries with it the risk of accepting the lack of grounding of interpretive decisions and ethical judgments, of testing both the possibility and the limits of translatability. The social benefits and practical consequences thus ascribed to narratives consist of the opportunity to rehearse the deliberate binding of the self through the availability to produce the Other by submitting to its laws and allowing its irreplaceable difference to occur.

One illustration of Hale's theory is provided by Adam Zachary Newton's seminal *Narrative Ethics* (1995), whose analysis of first-person accounts as constructions of life stories imbued with important ethical implications, especially in their figurations of otherness, is especially relevant within the context of the resurgence of fictional (auto)biography in contemporary fiction. Following premises borrowed from Emmanuel Levinas,

Mikhail Bakhtin and Stanley Cavell, Newton investigates the ethical nature of narrative seen as performance, enacted both in the act of telling, and during the individual reading. "Performing" the story enables the intersubjective relation to take place, bringing into being the simultaneous freedom and restriction the reader is allotted through the staging of "recursive, contingent, and interactive dramas of encounter and recognition, the sort of which prose fiction both crystallizes and recirculates in acts of interpretive engagement" (Newton 1995, 12). These dramas connect authors, tellers, listeners and audiences in fleeting configurations of appellation and response rooted in the historical concreteness of the situation, but which always end up by placing upon the reader the responsibility of interpretation:

In part, it means learning the paradoxical lesson that 'getting' someone else's story is also a way of appropriating or allegorizing that endangers both intimacy and ethical duty. At the same time, however, one's responsibility consists of responding to just this paradox. (Newton 1995, 19)

Aidan Higgins's novel, *Balcony of Europe*, originally published in 1972, may be read as an allegory of the demands imposed both on the teller of lives (one's own and those of other people), and the reader as a cooperative listener (to use Booth's preferred term) to the story. It takes the discursive shape of an effort by its first-person narrator, Dan Ruttle, a middle-aged Irish painter, to piece together the shattered fragments of the time spent in Spain having an affair with young Charlotte Bayless, a Jewish-American married woman. Ruttle's narrative (if we can call it that) emerges from a series of vignettes and digressions probing the characters' past and present, interspersed with scenes from Spanish or European life and interrupted by the intrusion of various figures making up the picturesque crowd gathered in the sea town of Nerja. What is surprising about the novel's publication history is that the second edition, issued in 2010 by the Dalkey Archive Press, was drastically revised by the author. Higgins eliminated the original framework of the Spain episodes – a prologue set in Dublin and narrating the decline of Ruttle's family, including his mother's traumatic death, and an epilogue set in the Aran Islands – a move he imposed as the condition for the re-publication of a text he had obstinately refused to allow back into print for several decades (see Neil Murphy's "Afterword" to the 2010 edition). Higgins's argument was aesthetic inevitability; through the lenses of an ethical reading, aesthetic necessity is translated into the text's insistence to criticise fixed origins and the "discourse of possession" in favor of a loose, nonhierarchical constellation

of occurrences only impressionistically attributable to the same source. This resonates with the decision to give up conventional plot and replace it with rapidly sketched scenes presented in the shape of memories: "I wanted to dispense with plot, do it that way: tenuous associations that would ramify, could be built upon, would stay in the mind better than the plotted thing – all lies anyway (Higgins, quoted in Beja 1973, 172)."

As with most of Higgins's works, the novel draws heavily on the author's own experience, especially during his self-imposed exile. According to Neil Murphy, Higgins's texts often share an uncertain ontological status due to their attempt "to create universes of highly imaginative flickers of real life, neither fiction nor autobiography in the traditional sense" (Murphy 2002, 38). Thus, especially in the light of the morally controversial facts it presents and of the difficulty to decide on the soundness of the narrator's principles (since his brutal sincerity occasionally reveals estranging instances of pettiness or severe cognitive limitations), the novel raises important questions on the ethical implications of life writing, the relationship between fiction, autobiography and biography, the reader's responsibility during the process of interpretation, and the representational capacity of language. While one might not disagree with Neil Murphy's integration of Higgins's writing into "the critical tradition in Irish fiction because, like Joyce and Beckett, he interrogates the meaning of language, memory, perception and existence in an effort to respond to the debate initiated by Modernism" (38), the text seems to pose insuperable difficulties when it comes to any kind of categorisation, whether one considers its "Irishness," or its belonging to any of the "-isms" of the twentieth-century. A more productive approach could be offered via an ethical reading of theme and form as an indictment of the narrator's claim, and failure, to understand and "possess" his lover (itself an act of betraying the trust of both his wife and her husband).

Adam Newton describes three dimensions of narrative ethics: narrational (having to do with the act of telling and the participants it involves), representational (having to do with the recognition of the values within the story world), and hermeneutic (related to the interpretive endeavors enacted both by selves internal to the text and by readers outside it):

One of the discursive worlds [narrative prose fiction] inhabits is an ethical one, manifesting certain characteristics which resemble features of everyday communicative experience. In the order they appear in my analysis, those characteristics are: first, the formal design of the storytelling act, the distribution of relations among teller, tale, and person(s) told (narrational ethics); second, a standing problematic of recognition, an anagnorisis that extends beyond the dynamics of plot to the exigent and collaborative

unfolding of character, the sea change wrought when selves become either narrating or narrated (representational ethics); and last, “hermeneutics,” as both a topic within the text and a field of action outside it, that is, a narrative inquiry into the extent and limits of intersubjective knowledge in persons’ reading of each other, and the ethical price exacted from readers by texts (hermeneutic ethics). (Newton 1995, 25)

My analysis of *Balcony of Europe* focuses mainly on the first and third levels, whose intertwinement foregrounds the acts of telling and of interpretation. Ruttle’s discourse constitutes both an attempt to represent Charlotte’s life and identity (to “possess” her in language, but also literally, in his sexual pursuit), and an effort to interpret, an invitation at comprehension extended to the reader. One of the most fascinating aspects of the text is the way in which it constantly tempts the reader to accept Ruttle’s version of the events and of Charlotte’s character, only to end up signaling not only his unreliability, but also his ethical deficiency and therefore the necessity to distance ourselves from his account. By the end of the novel, Ruttle himself is turned into a reader – significantly, he is finishing Ford Maddox Ford’s *The Good Soldier*, while, the same time, ending his relationship with Charlotte. “A tale without moral point told by a narrator with moral inertia,” (368) he exclaims, completely missing the point of Ford’s novel. However, pushed into the awareness of the text’s plot mirroring the plot of *The Good Soldier*, the reader is also forced to recognise the limits of Ruttle’s narration, as he becomes contaminated with the failures of Ford’s John Dowell, the narrator who had been incapable of understanding his wife’s deceptions. Interestingly, Ruttle describes the cover of his copy of *The Good Soldier* in great detail, which shows a couple kissing while being observed by “a featureless female who stood close by” (367): “Why did the woman watch so closely? Was it to give herself more pain? Were the others unaware of their being overlooked? Or were they taunting?” (368). It is the voyeuristic gesture of watching which is equated to Ruttle’s attempt to “possess” Charlotte in language, given also his profession as a painter.

Abundant intertextual allusions provide only one of the ways in which the strangeness of the text is emphasised. Notwithstanding the apparent preoccupation with memorialistic authenticity, a closer look at the text reveals it is also intensely aware and deconstructive of fictional conventions. Self-reflexivity manifests itself not only in the awareness of formal dispersion intended to mimic the workings of memory, but also in the fragments specifically focusing on the status of fiction within a disintegrating world of violence, chaos and suppression of freedom. The Baron Alex Leopold von

Gerhar is writing "a novel. An autobiography really. However, I do not anticipate finishing it." (46) The impossibility of completion is explained by the Baron through the imminence of a global catastrophe to be triggered by the Cold War, which would wipe out humanity and turn book writing into "a supremely futile occupation." Presented initially as an intriguing and exotic figure, the baron is soon exposed as a former Nazi, whose expansionist form of autobiography threatens to do violence to the diversity of the world.

*Balcony of Europe* stages and therefore exposes the "passive culpability" engendered by "witnessing, overhearing, even reading" (Newton 1995, 22) about other selves, with their incommensurability. Indeed, it is the very staggering multiplicity of the briefly sketched episodes recollected by the novel's narrator, many focusing on as many diverse characters, that dramatises the solitude of the protagonist and his incapacity to envisage the Other ethically. Ruttle's intense self-isolation, despite his attraction to Charlotte, or his association with the colorful band of artists and holiday-makers, only serves to foreground the failure of any narcissistic, colonising attempt to translate alterity into one's own language, rather than allowing its strangeness to define one's limits. It corresponds to what Morris Beja, in one of the earliest readings of *Balcony*, described as "a world that is insistently claustrophobic," "arising from our imprisonment within ourselves" (1973, 163).

The novel's title, coupled with its protagonist's profession as a painter, ironically captures the erosion of totalising perspectives and the inadequacy of distant vision to function as a metaphor for knowing the world outside. Form and themes conspire to show the impossibility of the authoritative and omniscient position, whose dissolution has left its traces on texts, landscapes and people alike. "Balcón de Europa, formerly Bar Alhambra" (Higgins 2010, 15), the preferred haunt of the English-speaking bohemian residents in Nerja, becomes the symbolical setting of dispersed identities emerging as irredeemably creolised in the vortex of history. In this light, the vignettes appear as geological samples crystallising the flow of the times into unstable, shattering strata informing the choices made by the characters with the arbitrariness and violence of historical shifts. With its allusion to the Muslim conquest of Spain and the traces of European and civil wars culminating in the global catastrophe of the Holocaust, the "balcony of Europe" reveals itself as an uncomfortable territory, despite its apparent privileged station above the maelstroms of the times and landscapes. Erotic encounters between Ruttle ("from [his] tired forty-six Christian Old World years") and Charlotte ("from her bright twenty-four Jewish New Old years") (Higgins 2010, 26-27) take place against the background of the Cold War and are constantly interrupted by the intrusions of Franco's militarised regime. In a world whose contours

are dissolving, where nationhood is represented in conflictual terms, there is no outside, spectator-like position available – or if there is, it is disclosed as a dangerous illusion, eaten away at by swarms of invisible parasites that damage its foundations. This is illustrated as early as Amory’s introductory letters in an ironical and subversive digression explaining the name of the place that provides the title of the novel:

King Victor Emmanuel named this *paseo* the “Balcón de Europa” because of the view. During the Peninsular War it was a Limey gun-site. The Limeys, being no respectors of Catholic churches knocked the top off a church that stood here formerly, to get a better field of fire. The church – most of it – fell into the sea. What was left was reconverted into a poor-class pension, with a colonnade (the old cloisters) for foundations, undermined by a colony of rats. *Su tropel de ratas*. Nowadays, what with the rats, rare tidal disturbances (it can blow here), sea erosion and general wear and tear, not much is left standing. One hears talk of a luxury hotel to be erected on the spot. I’ll believe it when I see it. There’s always talk in Spain: talk of improvements, modernization, urbanization, *progreso* – nothing much comes of it, I’m glad to say. (16)

The seditious insertion of past British violence against the history and geography of Spain (the “Limey gunsite” defined by the destruction of a Catholic church, reminiscent of Irish history itself) does not only hint at the unrest that has brought the European landscape into being, but also it is also a stab at the dubious temptation to turn the outside (both in its temporal guise as the past, and its instantiation as an exotic land visited by tourists) into an object of consumption: the church, a former center of authority and spirituality, is converted into a “poor-class” pension infested by a colony of rats. The use of the colloquial term “Limey” (North-American slang for “British”) points at Amory’s Canadian origins, later to be expanded in the novel, and therefore serves as a reminder of the incessant drive of colonisation, at turning alterity into sameness, that seems to characterise individuals and nations alike. The text counteracts the threat posed by this drive by obstructing the reader’s attempts at closing off the interpretation through the extreme fragmentation of the form, the jumbled chronology, the ceaseless proliferation of digressions and the narrator’s continual failure to understand or master Charlotte – or any other of his companions, for that matter. Moreover, even Amory’s ironical skepticism is further undermined by the information we get halfway through the novel that the modern hotel *has* been built, and the bar “has reverted to its old name, and was now Café-Bar Alhambra, as of old” (194).

Ruttle and Bob Bayless contemplate the neon sign that announces the name of the new hotel: "BALCON DE EUROPA, it said in white light," (194) "BALCON EUROPA it said, the preposition had disappeared, there was a black gap where the DE had been" (195). This is a complex scene, which superimposes the parodic subversion of both Amory's prediction and the persuasive force of the consumerist sign to attract customers over the narrator's feelings of guilt towards Bob Bayless and his unspoken fear of a possible confrontation. The meaning of the words "Balcon de Europa" starts flickering in the manner of a neon light through the inversion of the letter N (a mirror-image suggesting the return of the gaze, or the necessity for self-examination, but also reminiscent of the ancient Greek alphabet, with a reminder of radical strangeness that lies at the very heart of our history), coupled with the deletion of the preposition that suggests a textual equation of geographical origin with possession. The disappearing "de" in the place name counteracts the Nazi Baron's insistence on including the preposition indicating origin in his name: "I am a *von*, he said haughtily, a baron. I come from *Balticum*" (51). The Baron's reprehensible discourse shows the dystopian threat posed by the particle "von," with its insistence on fixed localisation and sense of ownership:

Over-tender humanistic feelings, he argued suavely, would not get one very far. We were on the threshold of the next stage in human evolution. A point had been reached at which the physiological processes were disrupted, and we would have to make physical and functional adjustments, as the animals had already been taught to do; it was at this stage that selection operated. The philosophy of 'Survival of the Fittest,' if applied with sufficient resolution and force, would result in the creation of a new species – this was what National Socialism had understood. In one bold stroke the cancer could be removed, and one would breath a clearer air. The actual squashing process might not appeal to the squeamish, but it could be carried out with only slightly deleterious effects. (52)

To the Baron's ferocity, the novel opposes Charlotte's "strange language" (26), an Americanised version of English that has deviated from the standard; more importantly, it opposes the freedom afforded by fiction, with its transgressive, defamiliarising (lack of) structures:

Charlotte had felt ashamed of being Jewish until she came to Europe. It had taken Christians talking about Jews to make her feel proud about being one. I thought she meant me, talking about Nathaniel West and Babel and Primo Levi; but she did not mean me. Bloom, she said. The invention of a Christian, I said. (118)

This provides further support in favor of the argument that, in addition to – or rather, more importantly than – figuring the workings of memory and subjectivity in modernist fashion, the novel's impressionistic shapelessness, coupled with its critique of the totalising gaze, addresses the issue of the impossibility to fully articulate the Other in the form of holistic discourse. It presents fragmentation as ethical positioning against the expansionism of the discourse of possession by foregrounding the impossibility of narrating oneself and the other and replacing the preposition “of” with interruptions or gaps that configure an alterity perpetually escaping representation. It creates space for a kind of reader willing to accommodate the irruption of the radical strangeness of the text by submitting to the “self-binding” demanded by the possibility of changing their views on the world.

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