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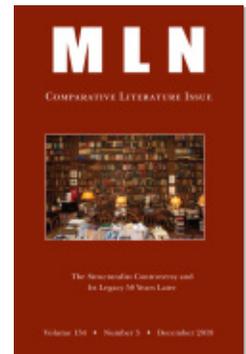
*The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century
Literature* by Corina Stan (review)

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Corina Stan. *The Art of Distances: Ethical Thinking in Twentieth-Century Literature.* Northwestern UP, 2018. 304 pages.

In a day and age where screens are erected between individuals and borders between countries, can one still argue in favor of the ethical, perhaps even political, value of distance? Rather than defending an extreme or unilateral response to this question, Corina Stan's *The Art of Distances* develops a nuanced and incisive argument based on the multiple senses and connotations of the term "distance." As a starting point, Stan builds on the idea expressed in Roland Barthes' 1976–1977 course *Comment vivre ensemble*, according to which we need "a science, perhaps an art, of distances" to guarantee an ideal form of *vivre-ensemble*, of being with others (15). In Stan's title however, the term "art"—which, in its links to the particular and the contingent, was distinguished by Aristotle from the necessity of *episteme*—seems crucial. Indeed, in a world "deprived of shared morality" (12) and in the face of injustice, inequality, or alienation, individuals and collectivities have no choice but to rely on practices and dispositions—such as *phronesis*, or practical wisdom—which cultivate an art of distance. As Stan posits, such an art protects us from the dangers of its absence, as in totalitarianism. It is valuable as it maintains both the singularity and self-respect of the individual, as well as the dignity of others. It thereby preserves the richness of human life and brings us closer to the ideal of a "nonexclusionary notion of community" that remains open insofar as it distances itself from rigid, predetermined, or imposed ideas of commonality (198).

The book is organized into two parts, which track the art of distances in works of anglophone, francophone, and German philosophy and fiction of the past century, spanning from the late 1920s to 2010. The introduction situates Barthes and Adorno among various thinkers and their criticism of the traditional notion of *community*, setting the stage to reveal the ethical value of distance and its neighboring notions, such as delicacy, discretion, "reject," tact, politeness, and so on.¹

Part I traces the emergence of the "field of tension" of an art of distances both public and private in the first half of the twentieth century. In Chapter 1, Stan tackles the question of the "right (di)stance" for the intellectual and analyzes two metaphors which serve to represent the writer's retreat from the world: the leaning tower (Woolf) and the whale (Orwell). Following Lionel Trilling's distinction, she examines George Orwell's critique of English *sincerity*, as well as his self-imposed exile and poverty, which serve to overcome the guilt and distance of social class. She then turns to Henry Miller's model of authenticity in *Tropic of Cancer*, which corresponds to a flight from imposed social, moral, and aesthetic norms. From there, she is able to carry out a comparative analysis of three modes of detachment and of "not being at

¹The art of subtle distinctions which Stan practices here is also central to Barthes' notion of *délicatesse*, which she draws on throughout.

home in one's home" in the work of Orwell, Miller, and Paul Morand (29). From her close readings emerges the contention that unlike Miller and Morand, whose reliance on distance may be considered a lack of understanding, Orwell's "ethnography of proximity," his specific form of sincere authenticity—or authentic sincerity—that combines the exterior stance of the outsider and the direct experience of immersion, creates a form of tact which verges on tactlessness and a paradoxical balance of distance and closeness that aims both to unmask society and write "for it," in the hopes of bringing about change (64). Chapter 2 then examines a second model for overcoming the distances imposed by the everyday, as in Elias Canetti's conception of the "redemptive crowd" (84). According to Canetti in *Crowds and Power*, the experience of immersion in a multitude of people offers a glimmer of hope in a world beset with distances and hierarchies. The crowd overcomes distance through the shared experience of the ordinary and, most of all, of embodiment, creating a common feeling of equality among its members. Social life therefore appears as a disease of distances to which the crowd serves as a powerful antidote. Switching scales and searching for alternative models, Chapter 3 then compares Roland Barthes' and Iris Murdoch's smaller utopian communities which, unlike Canetti, consider distance as a crucial ingredient in the art of living with others. In Barthes' model, the members are guided by *délicatesse* and find the right degree of distance to navigate the everyday "in solitude with regular interruptions" (124). In Murdoch's novel *The Bell*, the loving gaze and attention to particulars allow one to turn their moral attention away from the self and towards others. In drawing a parallel between these models, Stan demonstrates how both communities bring together various forms of closeness and remoteness, which, despite their tension and ultimate "failures," cultivate an art of distances—loving, delicate, tactful, artistic, etc.—that offers a counterpoint to Canetti's conception of a world from which the crowd offers an escape.

The second half of the book turns from the question of moral communities to that of the moral self. Part II examines how the various disruptions of the autobiographical genre, which inject distance at the heart of the self, might fit the Murdochian notion of "unselfing" developed in Part I. By examining the work of Annie Ernaux, Günther Grass, and Damon Galgut, Stan argues that the self—as the "singular plural" subject of autobiography—is redefined in these works of fiction through its being interwoven with the lives of others. In this way, community reemerges as constitutive to the self and the *distantiality* of the everyday, as theorized by Heidegger, is transmuted into an ethical principle of willing exposure and receptivity to the singularity of other people (153–154). Chapter 5 shows how Annie Ernaux, as a twentieth century female figure of the Baudelairian *flâneur*, situates herself on the threshold of various geographical, social, and economic spaces,² and, in order to adequately

²Following the analysis of Chapter 4, which situates Walter Benjamin as the emblematic figure on the threshold of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

express such an “*habitus clivé*,” requires a “writing of distances” (173). The latter is characterized by an affective detachment, absence, or minimalism which brings the narrative perspective close to the Bourdieusian notion of objectifying distance (*distance objectivante*). Rather than cold detachment, however, this neutrality allows Ernaux to bridge the emotional distance which separates one from the excluded through the practice of “discretion,” revealed in her ambition to provide “photographic snapshots” of the reality around her. In this way, a shared vulnerability can emerge from her diary entries, and the act of imagining the lives of others ultimately brings one back to oneself (215).³ Here, the rethinking of the autobiographical corresponds to the constitution of a transpersonal self which includes other lives and lends them a voice, while speaking neither *to* nor *for* them.

Chapter 6 examines more closely the relations between the individual and the collective in Günther Grass’ *My Century*, which similarly performs a “displacement of the autobiographical self though attention to other lives real or imagined” by presenting one story for every year of the twentieth century (198). In this text, the self appears as but one of many interconnected voices, all woven into the first person and forming part of the texture of history. Stan shows how the ethical dimension of the narrative is intertwined with this formal proliferation of narratives: the text’s proximity to the “little people” creates a literature written “from below” (212), constituted of *examples* and attentive to concrete miniatures (Bourdieu once more) which undermines opposing models that cultivate “overblown notions of authorship” (214), confuse the *exemplary* with the typical or emblematic, or succumb to the temptation of the “*grand récit*” (211). This pluralism of perspectives thus reframes distanciality as the “demand for recognition of the human community as constitutive” of us all, and shows how literature can help measure the distance between self and others (214).

Finally, the last chapter turns to the contemporary South-African novel, reading fiction against the background of Stan’s philosophical reflection on community and the plural self. It shows how Damon Galgut’s 2010 novel, *In a Strange Room* pushes the confusion of interpersonal boundaries even further than Grass or Ernaux. Although Galgut’s text is split into three stories centered on the themes of travel, homelessness, and failed relationships, Stan argues that it must be read as a whole if one is to grasp the ethical dimension of the text *as novel*. Not only does moving away from home repeatedly open Galgut’s main character to other forms of community, difference, and homelessness, the depersonalization that permeates the form of the text constitutes a “landscape of subjectivity populated by different selves” and turns the self, by emptying it out, into “a dwelling” for others (228). Unlike Sloterdijk’s work, where the self remains the premise of the global “co-immunism” and the “own” is merely extended outwards, in Galgut’s novel, the circular movement which brings

³In an insightful comment, Stan shows how the distinction between such concepts depends on the degree of distance adopted by the observer.

the narrative voice back to the first person constitutes the *minima moralia* of the text, while still preserving an ethical community open to the lives of others. The impersonal and “emptied out” self which emerges from Galgut’s semi-autobiographical representation is marked by the profound realization of our shared vulnerability and endless suffering. It seems torn between the extreme poles of dissolution and separation, between experiences in which “lives leak into each other” and “boundaries” between the self and the world dissolve, and those in which—sublime experience *par excellence*—the self experiences the limits of its capacity to experience the pain of others (234).

The conclusion strives to preserve the delicate balance Stan maintains throughout the book: on the one hand, interpersonal distance is crucial to the preservation of inner distances, yet on the other, it is distinct from alienation in that it preserves the dignity of others against indifference. In short, the value of distance seems to depend on its *other*—on the object from which it is being taken: governing moral or historical norms, established notions of community, specific individuals or social groups, etc. Although Stan’s readers will not come away with an explicit or univocal definition of “distance”—and one might therefore wonder, if “distance from x” systematically implies “proximity to y,” whether one might reverse Stan’s claim and turn it back into an ethics of proximity—her use of the plural “distances” gives the concept tremendous extension and allows its sense to vary depending on the context. The moral value of distance will vary greatly whether one opposes it to invasiveness, intimacy, or indifference, for instance. From a methodological standpoint, one of the most notable strengths of Stan’s book is that it adopts the ethical stance which it defends, treating the texts with tact and *délicatesse* rather than imposing a sedimented argument onto them. Elegantly navigating between philosophical reflection and close readings, Stan elaborates her own art of distances, preserving a crucial sense of flexibility and elasticity towards her material, constantly varying the degree of focalization and detachment from the numerous authors, positions, and arguments that she studies. In doing so, she achieves a subtle balance between distance as understanding or “getting-out-of-another’s-way” and engagement as love—which, as Orwell reminds us, is always “hard work” (241).