

Comparativist Imagology and the Phenomenon of Strangeness

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Abstract: In her article "Comparativist Imagology and the Phenomenon of Strangeness" Małgorzata Świdorska presents an imagological-hermeneutic conception of the interpretation of national, ethnic, and/or (inter)cultural strangeness in literary works. Świdorska develops her concept of comparativist imagology from the work of Paul Ricoeur's concept of *multiple étrangeté* and from the work of Jean-Marc Moura. Świdorska applies her conceptualization of comparativist imagology to Heimito von Doderer's "Divertimento No I" and *Das letzte Abenteuer. Ein Ritter-Roman*.

Małgorzata ŚWIDERSKA

Comparativist Imagology and the Phenomenon of Strangeness

In the study at hand I present my imagological-hermeneutic conception of the interpretation of national and ethnic strangeness and/or otherness in literary works. In the first part of the article I discuss comparativist imagology against its theoretical and philosophical background and in the second part I illustrate my method with a sample imagological interpretation of two selected stories, "Divertimento No I" (1924) and *Das letzte Abenteuer. Ein Ritter-Roman* (third version 1936) by Heimito von Doderer (1896-1966).

Comparativist imagology originates in the second half of the twentieth century in French scholarship. Imagology or image studies involves research into so-called "national images" in literary works where they may be encountered as the "images of strangers" (members of nations or ethnic groups) often in the form of stereotypes, clichés, or myths. Imagology has developed especially since the 1960s when Hugo Dyserinck modified the theory and when Marius-François Guyard — who understood imagology as research on "images of foreigners" in literature — developed the concept further. Since 2000 one can observe further development in the theory and methods of European imagology (see, e.g., Andraş; Beller and Leerssen; Dukić). I developed my own conception of the imagological interpretation of literary texts which I applied in my doctoral dissertation published in 2001 as *Studien zur literaturwissenschaftlichen Imagologie. Das literarische Werk F.M. Dostoevskijs aus imagologischer Sicht mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Darstellung Polens*. The need to work out this method was motivated by the inadequacy of the traditional terminologies and methods of imagology often too vague and difficult to apply in practice (for a bibliography including studies in imagology, see Salzani and Tötösy de Zepetnek <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweblibrary/travelstudiesbibliography>>). My conception was inspired by Hugo Dyserinck's work, by the phenomenological hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, and ideas developed by Jean-Marc Moura. I decided not to employ Bernhard Waldenfels's phenomenology of strangeness, which serves as a basis of intercultural literary studies developed for example by Michael Hofmann and Andrea Leskovec.

In Ricoeur's conception "ideology" as a form of reproductive imagination constitutes social and cultural traditions and is an expression of the narrative memory of a particular society or social group. "Utopia," as a form of productive imagination, changes society and the world and expresses hopes for the better, "new," or "different" alternative future. They complement each other and are related dialectically. Ideology contributes to the formation and maintenance of the so-called narrative identity; it prevents the appearance of pathological forms of utopia. Utopia serves as a critique of ideology, it corrects its sclerotic forms (see Ricoeur, *Du texte*). Based on this philosophical foundation, I understand mediated literary images of strangeness on the one hand as forms of reproductive or ideological imagination in Ricoeur's sense and on the other hand as forms of productive — that is, utopian — imagination. Literary images of nations or ethnic groups occur mainly as literary characters. The ideological characters serve as a positive or negative contrast to a particular ethnic group, nation, or culture and have a restorative and integrating function: utopian characters challenge the identity of such a group, nation, or culture.

Following Moura, I distinguish two complementary characters of strangers or foreigners, which I call *alter* and *alius*. An *alter* is one of two similar, complementary "others": she/he represents an ideology of a particular group, nation, or culture. An *alius* is also a stranger or foreigner, but she/he is situated outside the world of a particular group, nation, or culture. *alter* characters are constructed mainly as positive or negative ethnic or national stereotypes, while *alius* characters have predominantly symbolic or mythical functions. They are subversive and they question the ideology of a particular ethnic group or nation. These two types of literary characters should be always interpreted in their cultural context. To avoid confusion which might result from earlier terminologies of imagology, I introduce the superordinate concept of an *imagotheme*. A certain "strange" (or "foreign") *imagotheme* can have an ideological or utopian character and is composed of elements which I call *imagemes*. These may manifest themselves as literary characters or as any element of a certain national culture or cultures which appear in the text, for example the names of artists, philosophers, writers, politicians, and other representatives of a certain nation or ethnic group. At the time when I was writing my dissertation — later published as on Dostoevsky — I did not know that Joep Leerssen coined a similar term, *imageme*, which however has for him a different, narrower meaning, because he understands it as a fixed cliché consisting of two

contrasting national attributes. As Leerssen puts it, "most images of national character will boil down to a characteristic, or quasi-characterological, polarity: passion and arrogance in the Spaniards, refinement and immorality in the Italians, gaiety and rationalism in the French, suaveness and pugnaciousness in the English, otherworldliness and ebullience in the Irish, contemplativeness and sensuality in the Flemings, etcetera. The ultimate cliché about any nation is that it is 'a nation of contrasts.' An *imageme* is the term used to describe an image in all its implicit, compounded polarities" ("Image" 344).

In my later research — e.g., "Heimito," "Ritter" and in my 2013 book *Theorie und Methode einer literaturwissenschaftlichen Imagologie. Dargestellt am Beispiel Russlands im literarischen Werk Heimito von Doderers* — I modified and enlarged my imagological method with Ricoeur's concept of *multiple étrangeté*, which manifests itself as the experience of the strangeness of one's own body, of another person, and of one's own mind. In his article "Multiple étrangeté" Ricoeur discusses the problems of the "Self" in its relation to the "Other" and writes about the phenomenon of strangeness, which affects and challenges both the Self and the Other. Ricoeur distinguishes three main elements of the hermeneutical phenomenology of the acting and suffering "Self": 1) The strangeness of our own body (Ricoeur employs the German term *Leib* in Edmund Husserl's sense, which includes the body as well as the mental, psychic world, i.e., the mind): the function of our *Leib* is then to mediate between the different modalities of habitability and strangeness, 2) The strangeness of the "Other," who is similar to me, is like me, and at the same time is external to me, and 3) The strangeness of the *Gewissen* (conscience), the innermost part of our Self which expresses itself in the strange "voice of the conscience."

Thanks to this distinction one may observe a correlation between the different modalities of acting and suffering. The strangeness of our *Leib* manifests itself as an impossibility to speak, that is, to articulate ourselves, to communicate, and to convey our "memories" to others. In Sigmund Freud's sense, it is a form of worrying, forbidden, or repressed speaking. The harm we have caused and inflicted on Others makes our actions appear as uncanny (*unheimlich*). Therefore the ability to do something, to act, is at the same time the ability to exert power over the Other. The last aspect of the strangeness of the *Leib* is the strangeness of the world as a radical contingency of being, that is, of *Dasein*. This contingency articulates itself in the dialectic between habitation and the lust for wandering, or uprootedness. The second kind of strangeness — of the Other — manifests itself in interpersonal and social relationships. Such a phenomenology of the Other can be described as a pairing of acting and suffering. At the levels of acting and narration, such strangeness has a wide span from conflict to cooperation. Finally, the strangeness affecting our conscience — the innermost part of our mind — is immanent, superior, and strange. For Ricoeur, the phenomenology of strangeness culminates in this inner and autonomous voice ("Vielfältige" 17-29). This concept of imagological and hermeneutic interpretation allows for an extension of the traditional methods of imagology for the explanation of the multi-aspect phenomenon of strangeness encountered in literary works. It can also be applied in the analysis of more aspects of strangeness than are perceived in intercultural literary studies, enabling us to interpret different facets of the ideological and utopian (national) strangeness of the fictional world, of the acting and at the same time suffering characters. By means of this imagological method I was able to analyze the essential function — "deep semantics" in Ricoeur's formulation — of images (in my terminology, the *imagemes* and *imagothemes*) of Poland in the works of Dostoevsky and of Russia in those of Doderer.

Next, I present the said method in an analysis of Doderer's two texts. Doderer adopted the new literary term and genre *divertimento* in the 1920s, borrowing it from music because he used to recite his own *divertimenti* in public performances like an artist playing his musical compositions from memory in concert (see Kling; Schmidt-Dengler, "Nachwort des Herausgebers" 499-501, "Nachwort" 103). The plot of "Divertimento No I" takes place in Vienna in 1921 when on 1 December during the so-called "hunger riots" (*Hungerausschreitungen*) in Vienna, Adrian, a young man of twenty-two who comes from Bohemia and studies at the Technical Institute meets a blonde and no longer quite so young woman (5) who has been hiding from the angry crowd next to the Viennese cathedral, her face hurt by shards of glass. Adrian later comes to know that Rufina Seifert is employed as a so-called "stationary cashier" at an elegant coffee house in the inner city. Their accidental meeting evolves into a love relationship, Adrian is happy, and thanks to his love for Rufina he experiences an "inner renewal" and thus overcomes his depression and his melancholic moods. In contrast to Adrian, Rufina suffers from intense feelings of guilt because she is convinced that she caused the riots. She tells Adrian occasionally about her "human

degradation" which must have caused all evil including the riots. Rufina speaks in the Viennese dialect, but her metaphorical way of expression seems to Adrian poetic, fresh, and lively. Once, in the summer, Adrian leaves her alone because he has to pass an evening in the company of his own upper-class circle. During this evening Adrian comes across Sofia Mitrofanov, a young, pretty, well-dressed, and opinionated woman from the upper class and tells her about his love for Rufina. Meanwhile, Rufina, left alone, suffers a relapse of the mental illness whose earlier bout had put her in a mental hospital.

The next day, Adrian, provoked by Sofia and ill-disposed towards his lover, tells Rufina about the previous day's social evening and about Sofia, adding that "there's nothing more beautiful than a highly cultivated woman; you might call a person like that the highest flowering of our culture" (22) ("Es gibt überhaupt nichts Schöneres als eine hochgebildete Frau, das ist sozusagen die schönste Blüte unserer Kultur" [32]). The next day, in the street Adrian and Rufina meet Josefina Pauly, Rufina's friend, in the company of two young men. Josefina, who had been employed as a cashier at a large café close to Rufina's, had been dismissed in the winter just after the riots. These two events — the riots and the dismissal of Josefina — deepened Rufina's feelings of guilt. Soon afterwards, Rufina wrote a letter to her friend's employer, in which she implored him not to give her notice and she set aside part of her own income to give it to Josefina (8-9). Now Josefina insults Rufina in the presence of Adrian, telling her that she will give her back every "lousy penny." Rufina's reaction is an unexpected, sudden escape. She leaps onto a streetcar and disappears (22). Adrian finds her at last in a mental clinic: a physician professor is just displaying Rufina to his students as a case of an incurable mental patient. Adrian asks him how it was possible that his relationship with the mentally ill Rufina brought about his "inner renewal" and the physician responds that this "renewal" may have been the result of Rufina's poetic or strange mode of expression, typical of mentally ill people. There is no difference between a madman and a poet:

There's a certain kind of mentally ill person — and the person you were living with is beyond doubt mentally ill! — whose disorder is characterized by what we might call creativity along poetical lines. That is, the split in their entire being, down to the deepest parts of themselves, which the course of their disease occasions, gives them easy access to a whole series of extraordinary elements — we could almost say "primitive" — capacities which often reveal themselves in quite astonishing forms, among others in the highly novel and vividly immediate ways — I want to say they fly in the face of all triteness — such patients have of making observations and expressing themselves. (26-27)

Eine bestimmte Art von Geisteskranken — und Sie haben mit einer Geisteskranken gelebt! — hat die Eigentümlichkeit einer gewissen dichterischen Produktivität. Das heißt, durch die mit dem Krankheitsverlauf gegebene Aufspaltung des ganzen Wesens bis auf den tiefsten Grund, werden eine Reihe von höchst ursprünglichen, wir können sagen, "primitive," Fähigkeiten locker und dies zeigt sich oft überraschend auch in der neuartigen und — wenn man so sagen kann — jeder Banalität gerade konträren unmittelbaren Anschauungs — und Ausdrucksweise solcher Menschen. (38)

The professor says that Rufina's illness may have been caused by "a bad habit acquired in her youth ... and connected to a woman's whole femininity" which she later called her "human degradation" (27). Adrian leaves the clinic during a severe thunderstorm and hears Rufina shouting out a paternoster and begging for the forgiveness of her sins (28). The story closes with another meeting between Adrian and Sofia during an evening concert. They are listening to an overture, to the same prelude he once listened to at an opera house and which had led him, riddled with melancholy, to philosophize about his life. But now he overcomes his depressive feelings. Sofia falls all-out in love with him and the narrator wishes them "all the very best of what is due them" (3, 28).

The protagonist of the story, Rufina, can be considered as a positive utopian *alius* character. She lives and speaks authentically, she is sincere and compassionate not only towards her friend Josefina, who ridicules her for wanting to become a saint, but towards all poor people, for example to beggars:

that'll never leave me, I know that now — any time I'd walk along Kärntnerstraße it was like that with those beggars how can anybody even understand letting those poor cripples beg like that and lie out on the street and just step right over them so they smell the fine perfume and they're just people with eyes like you and me both but godforsaken they might as well be in the Sahara desert and so often I think something's got to happen, like a judgment ... And what made it all happen? Human degradation — that's what, one's to blame for the other! (12)

das werd' ich schon nimmer los ich seh' schon — so oft ich über die Kärntnerstraße gegangen bin, war es so mit den Bettlern wie kann ein Mensch das begreifen daß man solche arme Krüppel noch bitten laßt und auf der Straße liegen und steigt noch über sie weg, daß er grad' noch den feinen Parfum riecht und is' grad' a so

Mensch mit Augen wie du und ich auch aber ganz gottverlassen wie in der Sahara und ich hab' es so oft gedacht daß einmal was geschehen wird wie ein Gericht ... Und woher kommt's denn!? ... Von der menschlichen Entwertung, Jesus Maria, so ist eins am andern schuld. (20)

Rufina considers herself responsible for and guilty of all the evil in the world, which might be an allusion to the teaching of Father Zosima in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: all people are guilty before others, everyone is responsible for all sins; that is, everyone is to blame for all evil in the world (408 [356]; Świdarska, *Theorie* 206). Rufina's eyes lead "deep inward like tunnels" (22) ("wie Tunnels tief in den Kopf hinein" [32-33]), which means she is able to perceive hidden truth. Doderer later calls such a genuine ability to perceive the world as a "first reality" in contrast to "second reality," a false one perverted with various ideologies and prejudices (see Kleinlercher, 334-35; Löffler 441-49; Schmidt-Dengler, "Nachwort des Herausgebers" 501-02). Rufina can be regarded as an uncanny and strange character in Ricoeur's sense. Her mental illness enables her to be creative and to perceive and express objective, genuine reality not marred by ideology. She thus symbolizes the mystic and mysterious strangeness of the world and of *Leib*. Josefina, Rufina's friend, is an *alter* character standing in contrast to her. She is a representative of the Viennese lower class women: she is mentally healthy and sexually emancipated, but selfish.

The second *alter* character is Sofia. As I have shown in my recent work on Doderer, in "Divertimento No. I" one can find mainly Austrian *imagemes*: apart from the hidden allusion to Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, there is only one explicit strange (or foreign) *imageme*, namely the Russian name Sofia Mitrofanov. Although she is not portrayed as a Russian, the use of her name was perhaps meant to suggest a certain cosmopolitan or sophisticated character of the fictional (Viennese) world of this story and was symptomatic of Doderer's fascination with Russia that began during his captivity in Russia during World War I and the October Revolution (see Fleischer). Sofia is an ideological *alter* character and a contrast to Rufina. She is prejudiced against social inferiors and represents the mentality of her own *haute bourgeoisie*. She is depicted at the same time as an alert person, smelling of fragrant perfume (21) ("klug und wohlriechend" [31]). Sofia also appears in Doderer's early unfinished novel *Jutta Bamberger* (written 1923-24, first published 1968), where she is, as in "Divertimento No I," a negative character in contrast to the positive title character, the lesbian Jewish eponymous heroine Jutta Bamberger (see Świdarska, *Theorie* 130-38). Adrian is portrayed, in contrast to Rufina, as an ambivalent personage. Like Sofia, he is an average *alter* character and can only temporarily acquire some utopian properties — thanks to his love relationship with Rufina — and is able to experience an inner renewal. He can thus overcome his depression and the emptiness of his life. However, Adrian ultimately returns to his previous life, to the world of cliché-thinking Sofia and of her and his own upper class.

It can thus be said that there are two *imagothemes* in Doderer's "Divertimento No I." The first one, the positive utopian *imagotheme*, is personified by Rufina, a holy fool of Viennese folk. She represents creative poetic ability for she speaks and expresses herself like a poet and at the same time owing to her illness she can experience not only guilt for all the evil of the world, but also transcendence and the feeling of unity with the worlds of others. However, from the point of view of the Viennese physician, she is an uncanny madwoman suffering from hysteria, a typical case of psychological disturbance and sexual disorder determined by a catholic upbringing (see Kling who discusses the story from the viewpoint of the psychiatric discourse of the 1920s as a case of gender-influenced assessments of sanity). The second *imagotheme* is a negative ideological one. This *imagotheme* is represented on the one hand by Adrian and Sofia and on the other by Rufina's friend, Josefina. Josefina is a representative of the Viennese lower class, a mentally healthy woman, but flaunting her sexuality. The physician may be also viewed as a part of this negative ideological *imagotheme*, because he represents the patriarchal mentality of the psychiatric discourse of the time.

Doderer's second text I am analyzing here, the chivalric tale *Das letzte Abenteuer*, was also designed as a *divertimento*, but its last version from 1936 became too long for such a short form, thus Doderer subtitled it *ein Ritter-Roman* (see Doderer, *Die Erzählungen* 386-449; see Świdarska, "Ritter"). It was created when Doderer was experiencing an existential crisis: he was still an unknown writer, just divorced from his first wife, and the political situation in Austria was becoming increasingly uncertain (see Schmidt-Dengler, "Nachwort" 101-02). The story is set in the late Middle Ages and Doderer narrates the last adventure of the Spanish knight Sir Ruy de Fanez that ends with his death. Sir Ruy has heard from a mysterious and uncanny troubadour of a

duchess Lidoine from the Castle Montefal and of a dragon living in the forest in its vicinity and decides to go and kill the dragon and marry the duchess. Sir Ruy, an errant knight, is forty years old and lonely, and he would like to find meaning in his life. He rides with his French squire Gauvain through a strange, silent, and beautiful forest and encounters the dragon, but is not able to kill the creature, which is described as gracious and harmless. Sir Ruy can only strike off with his sword a little piece of the dragon's horn. During the fight he looks into the eyes of the dragon and sees his whole life, his past, and his future up to his death:

It was in the dragon's eyes, which had opened all the way. They lay before Sir Ruy like two small pools whose brown, marshy bed, picked out by the sun, shows the whole dizzying depth of the sky it is reflecting. These eyes led deep, deep inward, as if into forests that couldn't be ridden through in days, week, or months, but only in whole millennia. As the forest of Montefal was encompassing this one adventure now, so those eyes encompassed all possible earthly adventures, the whole of life. (12)

Es waren die Augen des Wurms. Sie hatten sich groß geöffnet. Wie zwei kleine Waldtümpel lagen sie vor Ruy, deren brauner, mooriger Grund, durch die Sonne herauftretend, doch die ganze schwindelnde Tiefe des Himmels weist, die er spiegelt. So tief führten diese Augen hinein, und wie durch Wälder, welche nicht in Tagen, Wochen oder Monaten, sondern in ganzen Jahrtausenden nur zu durchschreiten waren. Sie umschlossen, wie der Wald von Montefal hier dieses Abenteuer, so alle auf Erden möglichen Abenteuer überhaupt, somit das ganze Leben. (399)

At the castle Sir Ruy is acclaimed as a slayer of the dragon, but he is reluctant to marry the duchess, a witty, but nasty double widow. Another knight who comes to Montefal is the German Sir Gamuret von Fronau, who has not been able to kill the dragon either, but who presents the piece of its horn, struck off by Ruy's sword and tracked down by his hunting dogs. As things turn out, the German knight will not marry Lidoine either. She chooses for her husband the young Frenchman Gauvain, who has just been knighted and is deeply in love with her. After a few weeks Ruy decides to leave the castle with his new squire, an English boy Patrick. On his way back, he wanders aimlessly in the forest immersed in his reflections on his whole life when he sees the dragon again, but only from afar and comes unexpectedly upon the uncanny troubadour, who once told him the story of the duchess and the dragon. Afterwards Sir Ruy tries to help some peasants who are being held up by a gang of robbers. Finally, after a fight with those robbers, he dies of exhaustion.

All the main characters in this story are described as national stereotypes: Sir Ruy is a sensitive, dreamy dark-haired Spaniard, Sir Gamuret Fronauer a robust, sincere, combative, and light-blond German, Gauvain a Frenchman who always thinks of nothing but his love for Lidoine, and Patrick is a pragmatic and rational Briton. All of their names come from medieval court epics (see Clark <<http://dx.doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2003>> on the chivalric romances of Chrétien de Troyes, which may have been known to Doderer). From an imagological point of view, one may distinguish three *imagothemes* in the story. There is the positive utopian *imagotheme* of the obsolete world of the Spanish knight Sir Ruy de Fanez who appears as a utopian *alius* character: this *imagotheme* consists of Sir Ruy and of such utopian *imagemes* as the dragon and the uncanny troubadour. There is the negative *imagotheme* of the equally obsolete world of Castle Montefal ossified in its medieval traditions: this *imagotheme* consists of such *alter* characters as the duchess Lidoine and the inhabitants of Castle Montefal who symbolize the old Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy, and last but not least of the German and French knights Gamuret and Gauvain. There is also a third, positive utopian *imagotheme* of the future-oriented world beyond the castle, which consists of *alius* characters — the peasants and townsfolk — and of Sir Ruy's new squire, the Englishman Patrick. They all represent the utopia of a better future. This imagological approach may be complemented by Ricoeur's concept of *multiple étrangeté*. The first aspect of that strangeness is embodied by the errant knight Sir Ruy who symbolizes the lust for wandering and who is uprooted and lost in the world. His look into the dragon's eyes and his fear of death, as well as his visions of his past and future give him an insight into the innermost part of his Self and a glimpse of the meaning of his whole life. The other characters are the dragon, which is one of Doderer's favorite (mythical) creatures and that embodies the strangeness of the world and symbolizes the mystical circle of life (see Bernard; Király) and the blond and rugged German knight Gamuret (who might have had a real historical precedent, see Schmidt-Dengler, "Nachwort" 104-05) who contrasts with the sensitive Ruy. The fictional world of Ruy, Gamuret, and of the inhabitants of the castle is also rife with hidden interpersonal, social, and political conflicts. In sum, Doderer's fictional late Middle Ages are described as the breaking era of the new social order and

as the onset of the future. Ruy and the Castle Montefal may be perceived as a symbol of the fallen Dual Monarchy.

In conclusion, I posit that the application of the theoretical framework I present is useful in interpreting the phenomenon of strangeness in literary works. The two texts I analyze are conceptually and stylistically different: "Divertimento No I" is one of Doderer's earliest realistic works, and *Das letzte Abenteuer* inaugurates his late work including his absurd and grotesque short stories of the 1960s and the novel *Die Merowinger oder Die totale Familie* of 1962. The analysis of "Divertimento No I" led to the discovery of the hidden allusion to Dostoevski's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, which characterizes the protagonist Rufina Seifert as a positive utopian character in contrast to the negatively depicted cosmopolitan Viennese upper class represented by Sofia, an ideological *alter* character. The interpretation of *Das letzte Abenteuer* allows me to distinguish different facets of strangeness. First the strangeness of the positive utopian *alius* character Ruy, a stereotypical Spaniard who exemplifies the strangeness of the world as a radical contingency of *Dasein*. Thus I am able to show different aspects of strangeness not only of (utopian and/or ideological) national or ethnic otherness, but also of the hitherto disregarded aspects of the national or ethnic strangeness. I hope that my approach widens and develops imagology.

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