Cosmopolitanism Ethics as an Ethics of Contingency: 
Towards a Metonymic Community

THOMAS CLAVIEZ, UNIVERSITY OF BERN

In what follows, I would like to re-address two questions that, in the extensive debates around the concept of cosmopolitanism that we have witnessed in recent years – if not decades – have not been exhaustively reflected upon, and thus shed a new light on them through the prism of another neglected notion: that of contingency. The first question is: What is it specifically that distinguishes the idea of a ‘cosmopolitan community’ from all other, traditional concepts of the term? The second one is: How have we conceived of this distinction? Taking recourse to some of the classical philosophical texts on community – from Aristotle via Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke to Tönnies and Heidegger – I will argue that 1) the main distinction between a cosmopolitan and traditional concepts of community lies in the fact that the former not only makes the ‘outside’, against which any of the latter have always defined themselves, disappear (or at least problematic), but that, moreover, 2) how we have defined this ‘outside’ – usually through different notions of an/the other/Other – has led the debate into something like a dead end. It is here, I will, argue, that resorting to the concept of contingency might offer the opportunity to veer off the trodden paths, and to rethink a cosmopolitan community in terms that avoid the Same/Other, but also the Universalism/Particularism dichotomies that have haunted the debate for quite some time. Finally, I will argue that another neglected trope – metonymy – might help us gauge the implications and challenges of what would constitute a cosmopolitan ‘community of contingency’, as well as what specifically literary forms it might take – or has taken.

1. Traditional Concepts of Community: Closing off – Against What, Exactly?

… for what ought not to be is what is false and what is not.

Aristotle, Politics 103.

In his 2001 book with the programmatic title Community – Seeking Safety in an Insecure World, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman gives us the following, tongue-in-cheek definition of a traditional community:

…community is a ‘warm’ place, a cosy and comfortable place. It is like a roof under which we shelter in the heavy rain, like a fireplace at which we warm our hands on a
frosty day. Out there, in the street, all sorts of dangers lie in ambush; we have to be alert when we go out, watch whom we are talking to and who talks to us, be on the look-out every minute. In here, in the community, we can relax – we are safe, there are no dangers looming in dark corners…. In a community, we all understand each other, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback. We are never strangers to each other (2001: 1–2).

Just how and why this snuggly feeling is ensured becomes clear in a passage a little later: This ideal community, which is paradoxically both ‘distinctive’ and ‘indistinct’ (or even ‘undistinguished’), in that it a) distinguishes itself from all other groups around it, but b) does not evince any noticeable distinctions within itself, is characterized by the absence of – what, exactly? “[T]here are no ‘betwixt and between’ cases left, it is crystal clear who is ‘one of us’ and who is not, there is no muddle and no cause for confusion – no cognitive ambiguity, and so no behavioural ambivalence” (2001: 12). Both citations should, however, give us reason to pause: Just why should “all sorts of dangers” be related to “whom we are talking and who talks to us”? Why should the “between and betwixt” cases immediately depend on the distinction between “who is ‘one of us’ and who is not”? Why should “cognitive ambiguity” be exclusively be caused by “behavioural ambivalence”? All of the first terms suggest something like an epistemic insecurity, which can apply to all sorts of things; mostly contingencies that we encounter that, according to a standard definition of contingency, “could have been otherwise”. Just why they are then immediately transformed, or metonymically connected, to notions of ‘otherness’ – the “stranger”, the “not-us”, and the “behavior” of “them” – remains a mystery. This mystery fiction – and such Bauman himself admits it to be (“It looks as if we will never stop dreaming of a community, but neither will we ever find in any self-proclaimed community the pleasures we savoured in our dreams” [2001: 5]) – is nothing else than the very topos that has drawn itself through almost all philosophical discussions revolving around the concept of community. And in almost all of those fictions the same phenomenon that we have discerned in Bauman reappears: Instances of contingency and concepts of otherness are immediately collapsed into each other, and thus form – and here I come back to my first question – an imaginary ‘outside’. But what is it exactly that this traditional community wants to close itself off against? Is it exclusively an ‘Other’ of sorts? This question leads us back to Aristotle.

Aristotle opens his _Politics_ with the following words: “The state is the highest form of community and aims at the highest good. How it differs from other communities will appear if we examine the parts of which it is composed” (2000: 7). I do not want to dwell on the fact that, right after this passage, Aristotle defines the micro-unit of the state as “founded upon the two relations of male and female, of master and slave” which already introduces certain forms
of contingency; it is for a reason that John Locke devotes the entire first part of his *Two Treatises of Government* – “The Divine Right of Kings” – to meticulously take apart this basic assumption upon which the entire edifice of Aristotle’s concept of community rests (2015: 161-264). Nor do I want to engage to intensely with the highly problematic concept of a communal telos that informs Aristotle’s thinking – though it might be important to keep in mind as to what it is that might potentially challenge or obfuscate this telos. But the entire famous passage where this telos is mentioned is worth quoting at length for other reasons:

> For what each thing is when fully developed, we call its nature, whether we are speaking of a man, a horse or a family. Besides, the final cause and end of a thing is the best, and to be self-sufficing is the end and the best. Hence it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is either above humanity, or below it; he is the ‘Tribeless, lawless, hearthless one’, whom Homer denounces – the outcast who is a lover of war; he may be compared to an unprotected piece in the game of draughts (2000: 28).

This figure of the *phaulos*, the warmongering outcast, and its role for Aristotle’s philosophy, has been much discussed; most recently by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, who denounces it as an emblematic topos for an ethics of otherness along the lines of Giorgio Agamben and Emmanuel Levinas (2007: 27). What I want to get at, however, is not its strange status as someone “either above humanity, or below it” (2007: 135); but rather two other facts: 1) that he “by nature, and not by mere accident, is without a state”, and 2) due to this nature is both “a lover of war”, but on the other hand is compared to “an unprotected piece in the game of draughts”. The first quote indicates that the *phaulos* has taken a decision in this regard, and is thus not tribeless by accident – that is, through contingency. This decision, however, makes him potentially dangerous on the one hand, vulnerable on the other: a “lover of war”, he also resembles an “unprotected piece in the game of draughts”. He is thus both the cause for potential contingencies (to others), *and* subject to them. Moreover, the fact that he is mentioned right after Aristotle introduces not only his concept of the teleological character of every single being, but the logical conclusion that it is the state’s task to insure that each of its members reaches said “final cause and end”, it becomes rather clear that the danger the outcast poses is that he might obstruct the achievement – individual or communal – of this end. “But he who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god: he is no part of the state” (2000: 29).

Strangely enough, however, the problem is not the warmongering monstrosity of the *phaulos* per se, since Aristotle considers the “art of war … a natural art of acquisition, for it
includes hunting, an art which we ought to practice against wild beasts, and against men who, though intended by nature to be governed, will not submit; for war of such kind is naturally just” (40). That is, not to be part of a community is unnatural, since those who defy being governed constitute a potential threat to community that then serves as a pretext to hunt those elements down according to a (strange) logic that, on the one hand, considers war unnatural if waged by the outcasts, but that, on the other, ‘naturalizes’ the war waged on the former by the community.

Be s/he beast or god, there seems to be nothing at all “behaviourial ambivalent” in this outside/outcast that is Aristotle’s phaulos: S/he is the warmonger exclusively, and as such serves as a pivotal – if illogical – figure of legitimation for a community that is also characterized by another quality: Self-sufficiency. That is why Aristotle warns again and again against a surplus economy, and the barter that grows out of it. And again, he considers such barter barbarian and unnatural, because it exposes community to contact with its “outside” (2000: 41ff.). This argument is taken up with a vengeance by Ferdinand Tönnies in his (thinly disguised) rehash of Aristotle’s Politics in Community and Society. What distinguishes this other “outside” from the bloodthirsty outsider is that it has to offer something else than bloodshed: goods that are missing in the community. This encounter might, however, expose us to contingencies that threaten to entangle us in “unnatural” dependencies, since the “proper” use of a shoe is to be worn, and not to be exchanged (Aristotle 2000: 41). I won’t go into all the Marxian, Heideggerian and Jamesonian implications of this example; suffice it here to say that the contingencies that the exposure to an outside offer need by no means to be exclusively negative.

Rather strikingly, the very self-sufficiency that Aristotle so hails is one that introduces another form of contingency, in that it introduces otherness into the community itself: As he himself states, if “self-sufficiency is to be desired, the lesser degree of unity is more desirable than the greater” (2000: 56); one of the reasons being that “that which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it” (57). Ironically, this means that the common telos – the highest good of the community – is that which gets the least attention; the reason being that, according to Aristotle, everyone takes more care for him- or herself than for said common telos. This, again, is due to the fact that people do actually crave “external

1 Interestingly, Aristotle claims that surplus economy is “unnatural” because it is a “mode by which men gain from one another” (2000: 46). Just what is wrong about such a possibility escapes me. Aristotle’s isolationist self-sufficiency goes as far as to exclude sea commerce: “It is argued that the introduction of strangers brought up under other laws, and the increase of population, will be adverse to good order (for a maritime people will always have a crowd of merchants coming and going), and that intercourse by sea is inimical to good government” (2000: 269).
goods”; those, however, “come of themselves, and chance is the author of them, but no one is just or temperate by or through chance” (259; my emphasis). Again, we see that contingency interferes with the just as defined by Aristotle – with the telos that one should pursue. That is, the pursuit of happiness through directed self-sufficiency stands in stark contrast to the vagaries of exposure to a contingent outside, a scenario in which chance manifests as the actual (and only) enemy of the telos. Even in cases where such contingencies prove advantageous, they go against a concept of ‘the good’ that cannot but define itself in contrast to them.

However, at the end of his Politics, Aristotle finally has to admit that the polis has to integrate as much contingency inside itself (“there must always be in cities a multitude of slaves and sojourners and foreigners; but we should include only those who are members of the state, and who form an essential part of it” [266]), although (or maybe because) that very distinction threatens to collapse: “[I]n an overpopulous state foreigners and metics will readily acquire the rights of citizens, for who will find them out?” (267). Already in one of its first formulations, the mysterious fiction that seems to guarantee the possibility to distinguish between them and us, “cognitive ambiguity” and “behaviourial ambivalence” are right among us, and the snuggly romance of community evinces its first cracks.

2. Contingency Reloaded: From Hobbes via Kant to Heidegger

A specific form of contingency is also at the root of Hobbes’ conception of the commonwealth: that of the perpetual war of all against all. The raison d’être for Hobbes state is, seen in this light, rather simple: It serves to protect those who subscribe to its social contract from the potential anarchy and violence that is the ‘state of nature’. Ironically, the only way to gain protection from the contingency of the wolves that surround us in this natural state, is to subject ourselves to an over-wolf called Leviathan; a subjection so total, as Hobbes sketches it, as to expose us almost totally to its unchecked power:

Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man…. The life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short (2016: 88).

The power of this awe-inspiring Leviathan must needs be greater than that of all the other natural wolves put together in order to work:

Soveraign Power … is as great, as possibly men can be imagined to make it. And though of so unlimited a Power, men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the
consequences of the want of it, which is perpetuall warre of every man against his neighbour, are much worse…. And whosoever thinking Soveraign Power too great, will seek to make it lesse; must subject himselfe, to the Power, that can limit it; that is to say, a greater (144-45).

This, however, creates two problems: 1) What could induce me to trust wolves who have signed a social contract? 2) My subjection and exposure to a power as great as the Leviathan’s increases rather than diminishes the ‘felt’ contingency that the natural state offers. Or, as Roberto Esposito so perceptively puts it in his analysis of Hobbes in Communitas: “The state of nature is not overcome once and for all by the civil, but it resurfaces again in the same figure of the sovereign, because it is the only one to have preserved natural right in a context in which all the others have given it up” (2010: 30).

This is as much as to say that the contingency of the state of nature is overcome only by replacing it with a worse one; the processes of immunization that, again, Esposito uncovers and deconstructs in his book Immunitas, simply do not work because of the almost mathematical fact that, if we define contingency as forces that can only be overcome by forces stronger than themselves, we are entering a spiral of immunizing strategies that can only aggravate the contingencies.

Immanuel Kant’s take on the problem does not differ from Hobbes’, in as far as he also identifies contingencies as the driving force behind man’s evolution as a rational animal:

The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order. By antagonism, I mean in this context the unsocial sociability of men, that is, tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up (“Idea” 1991: 44).2

However, the fact that man has formed a “lawful” order through the state has simply transferred the problem of the war of all against all on a higher level: that of nations now perpetually waging war against each other. That is one reason why Kant actually develops, in both “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” and “Perpetual

---

2 And he adds: “Without these asocial qualities (far from admirable in themselves) which cause the resistance inevitably encountered by each individual as he furthers his self-seeking pretensions, man would live an Arcadian, pastoral existence of perfect concord, self-sufficiency and mutual love. But all human talents would remain hidden for ever in a dormant state, and men, as good-natured as the sheep they tended, would scarcely render their existence more valuable than that of their animals. The end for which they were created, their rational nature, would be an unfulfilled void. Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power. Without these desires, all men’s excellent natural capacities would never be roused to develop. Man wishes concord, but nature, knowing better what is good for his species, wishes discord.” (“Idea” 45). A rather strange idea from today’s point of view…
Peace,” the concept of both cosmopolitanism and hospitality, and that of a League of Nations.
There is, however, a problem located in his approach to transcend the nation state, as it is
based on the assumption that a state has the same rights as a single person: “…to graft it unto
another state . . . , is to terminate its existence as a moral personality and make it into a
commodity. This contradicts the idea of the original contract without which the rights of a
people are unthinkable” (“Perpetual” 1991: 94). While this is in line with a long tradition of
thinking the ‘body politic’, it creates a clash with another assumption of his, which he makes
in a footnote in “Perpetual Peace”:

It is usually assumed that one cannot take hostile action against anyone unless one has
already been actively injured by them. This is perfectly correct if both parties are living
in a legal civil state. For the fact that the one has entered such a state gives the required
guarantee to the other, since both are subject to the same authority. But man (or an
individual people) in a mere state of nature robs me of any such security and injures me
by virtue of this very state in which he coexists with me. He may not have injured me
actively (facto), but he injures me by the very lawlessness of his state (statu iniusto), for
he is a permanent threat to me, and I can require him either to enter into a common
lawful state with me or to move away from my vicinity. Thus the postulate on which all
the following articles are based is that all men who can at all influence one another must
adhere to some kind of civil institution (“Perpetual” 1991: 98 FN).

Here, an important difference between an individual and a state comes to the fore; and that
difference pertains directly to the question of contingency as contiguity in space: While I
certainly may politely or not-so-politely ask a stranger to remove him- or herself from my
neighborhood, in the case of states to comply with such a request might prove rather difficult.

Moreover, the problem of the transfer from the state of war amongst individuals to that
of nations does not solve the power problem inherent in the mathematical sum total of
contingency: To ensure the enforcement of such a League of Nations, the spectre of the
Leviathan – this time on an international scale – looms at the horizon. That is, to keep nations
in check that do not play by the rules and threaten to continue to use violence need to be kept
in “awe,” as Hobbes puts it, by a sovereign whose power, as in the case of the single wolves,
outrivals theirs.

While Heidegger actively tries to leave the enlightened paradigm – starting with
Descartes and the assumption of a reasonable being – behind, and tries to think Being as
always also “Being-with”, he is finally forced to countersteer the very contingency that the
presumed ‘fallenness’ of man and his exposure to the “Man” creates. As the “Man” in the
final analysis serves almost exclusively as an obstacle to the individual’s potential for
authenticity, he resorts to the very suspect notion of the “destiny” that is purely reserved for
the “Schicksalsgemeinschaft” (2008: 368ff.). Again, that is, an Aristotelian telos is being introduced but, through another act of transference, this telos goes by the name of a “destined community”:

But if fateful Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with Others, its historizing is a co-historizing and is determinative for it as destiny [Geschick]: This is how we designate the historizing of the community, of a people. Destiny is not something that puts itself together out of individual fates, and more than Being-with-one-another can be conceived as the occurring together of several Subjects. Our fates have already been guided in advance, in our Being with one another in the same world and in our resoluteness for definite possibilities. Only in communicating and in struggling does the power of the destiny become free. Dasein’s fateful destiny in and with its ‘generation’ goes to make up the full authentic historizing of Dasein (436).

The highly problematic implications of this passage in the notorious paragraph 74 have been intensely discussed. One rather ‘mundane’ aspect that I would like to point out is that our fates cannot be “guided in advance” if we presumably live “in the same world”; it only can if we live in a very specific and circumscribed space – otherwise we would simply all share the same destiny. After all, we ‘fall’ into, and eventually grow roots in, only in a very specific space/place, and can share the “heritage” (that strange term that Heidegger draws out of the hat very late in *Being and Time*) – only with people that we “are-with” in this space/place. Again, I would like to emphasize that, all claims about him being the first to take Being-with seriously into account notwithstanding, Heidegger defines the “Man” as exclusively impedimental to the “authentic potential of being” (2008: 307-16); that is why, so my argument, he has to rein in the sheer contingency of Being-with by means of this dubitable metaphor of a “destined community” – with all the rather unhealthy consequences this entails. Only by introducing it is he able to conceptualize what seems like an oxymoron within his own philosophy: an “authentic potential of being-with”. Thus, while his attempt to take into account Being-with as an all important aspect of Being might make him a pioneer in breaking with the heritage of the Enlightenment, his almost exclusively negative account as to what Being-with entails is still deeply rooted in it.3 *Being and Time* is thus still in line with the

---

story of the Enlightenment – a story that is told as the annals of one project: that of trying to overcome contingency. The question that I would like to raise, however, is:

3. What is Wrong with Contingency?

Said story of the Enlightenment – or rather, said story that the Enlightenment likes to tell about itself – is that human history is a succession of strategies to overcome contingencies, with each strategy proving allegedly more sophisticated than, and thus superior to, its predecessors. In its neo-Kantian variety, this succession usually comprises Myth, Monotheism, and finally syllogistic Reason. However, in face of the fact that the felt contingency of our contemporary world seems to reach ever higher fever pitches, it would seem that this human (his)story is one of a huge failure. Nor can this come as a surprise, after what has been said above: If the power to overcome contingency is only ever measured according to its superiority over the previous one, only more contingency is created. But just why is it that contingency has got such a bad press? After all, a contingency is not ‘bad’ per se; just a short glimpse, for example, in our CVs will show that what they usually comprise is a list of contingencies beyond our control. And said lack of control is basically what is experienced as threatening. In order to exert control, the items in our CV are usually transcribed into a narrative – specifically when we tell someone our story, or in autobiographies – in the process trying to make sense, retrospectively, of what doesn’t make much sense: Our lives could have always also been different; and, as such, they are highly contingent.

This goes to show that storytelling itself is another strategy to overcome contingency; that is, to bring syntagmatic order into a tangled mass of single events, and to introduce some kind of telos into it that turns the person I am now into the logical consequence of the items that constitute my life. Now, this syntagmatic strategy does have a name; it is closely connected to that of metonymy. I am referring here to the well-known distinction that Roman Jakobson makes in his famous essay “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances”. But let us first take a look as to how the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms defines metonymy in contrast to metaphor: Metonymy “involves establishing relationships of contiguity between two things, whereas metaphor establishes relationships of similarity between them” (Baldick 2015: 206). This implies that metaphor by default is not able to work with, or include, otherness. This shifts the problem of definition towards another term: that of contiguity. Contiguity is usually described as two things sharing the same space, being thus contiguous upon each other. While this sounds rather straightforward, it in fact opens up a keg
of worms. In his *V. Book of Physics*, Aristotle, in order to illustrate the concept of contiguity, uses the example of two books whose covers touch each other on a shelf (1934: 3, 227, b 2). This, however, is a rather misleading example, since it actually blurs the boundary between metaphor and metonymy, as the books do not only share a space and are contiguous upon each other, but because they also share the similarity of being books – sharing a third, that is. However, adjacent to a book, contiguous with it, and sharing the same space, there could be anything from a microbe via a toaster to an aircraft carrier – the latter admittedly being a rather rare coincidence. If we transfer this insight to literature, however, this would imply that I could use the microbe, the toaster, or the aircraft carrier to stand in for, and thus to figuratively represent, a book. Chances are that this would lead to a complete communicative breakdown, since nobody would and could possibly understand what I am trying to say when I replace the book – the tenor, in poetic jargon – with the vehicle of the toaster. While thus a radical metaphor might be highly difficult to decipher, a radical metonymy is both unthinkable and indecipherable; the reason being that the book and the toaster are not only contiguous, but also contingent upon each other. Sheer spatial coincidence, that is, cannot guarantee, and is not enough, to let the reader make the connection between them. Thus we have come from metonymy via contiguity to – contingency: a third, and even more troublesome term.

This might explain a strange riddle in Jakobson’s above mentioned essay. There he states that “…the researcher possesses more homogeneous means to handle metaphor, whereas metonymy, based on a different principle, *easily defies interpretation*. Therefore nothing comparable to the rich literature on metaphor… can be cited for the theory of metonymy” (1995: 132, my emphasis). Just why metonymy – which is usually connected to the more prosaic literary forms, while metaphor is usually connected to poetic genres – would “easily defy interpretation”, is a question Jakobson does not address further. And indeed, whereas we have access to numerous metaphorologies, studies in metaphor, etc., nothing even remotely comparable exists with regard to metonymy. The fact that it “easily defies interpretation” encompasses two different realms: One is that – as my example of the toaster has shown – taken to its limit, it obfuscates communication. Moreover, interpretation itself is an exclusively metaphorical act; a fact that Jakobson himself explains by noticing – and rightly so – that any metalanguage (and interpretation is nothing else) is based upon the premise of a similarity, and thus is inherently metaphoric. What interpretation does is that it tries to transform what is seemingly contingent in a text into something that is explicable and
makes sense. This is how David Lodge, in his *Modes of Modern Writing*, explains this phenomenon:

The solution would seem to lie in a recognition that, at the highest level of generality at which we can apply the metaphor/metonymy distinction, literature itself is metaphoric and nonliterature is metonymic. The literary text is always metaphoric in the sense that when we interpret it, when we uncover its “unity” …, we make it into a total metaphor: the text is the vehicle, the world is the tenor. Jakobson himself, as we have already noted, observed that metalanguage (which is what criticism is, language applied to an object language) is comparable to metaphor, and uses this fact to explain why criticism has given more attention to metaphorical than to metonymic tropes (1977: 109).

What is interesting to note here is that the metaphoricity of a text becomes relevant as its unity, for which the text is the vehicle, and the world the tenor; which is as much as to say that the “unity” of the literary texts stands in a metaphorical relation to an assumed unity of – the world. If we, however, consider the world to be not unitary, unified, but as contingent, heterogeneous – would that change anything?

Well, yes and no. If we were to assume that the tenor itself is contingent, non-unified, and that a literary work – metonymical, contingent, and non-unified – were to reflect this aesthetically, this reflection of the metonymic character of the world by a similar character of the literary work would still be – metaphoric; metaphoric in that we assume that there exists a relationship of similarity between the tenor and the vehicle. If we take this problem seriously, it amounts to the sheer fact that even if metonymy existed *either in the tenor or the vehicle*, we simply could not capture it by means of a metalanguage – it would have to remain as undecipherable as the toaster standing in for a book. Indeed, what any reader trying to make sense of such a metonymy would try to do is that he or she would try to find or forge a (metaphorical) connection between the toaster and the book – with different degrees of success, I would assume, considering the fact that he or she wouldn't even know that the toaster is actually designed to stand in for the book.

Thus, we are facing two conceptually distinct problems, which, however, are closely related: First of all, metonymy in itself is impossible; second of all, even if it were possible, we wouldn’t be able to decipher or interpret it but metaphorically; otherwise, a communication breakdown would ensue. Strictly speaking, metonymy is nothing but a

---

4 One of the adjacent problems is that metonymy has always been collapsed into synecdoche – the principle of *pars pro toto*. This trope, however, is in fact nothing but a disguised metaphor, as the tenor (qua *toto*) simply becomes the third. All other relationships of the tenor and the vehicle listed for metonymy – such as name of the inventor or possessor, for the invention or possession; the container for that which is contained; the modifier for modified; the effect for cause; the symbol for the thing symbolized (cf. *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and*
metaphoric (de)cipher(ment) of/for an unrepresentable contingency. One of the problems that would have to be pointed out, however, is that metonymy has always been collapsed into synecdoche – the principle of pars pro toto. This trope, however, is in fact nothing but a disguised metaphor, as the tenor (qua totum) simply becomes the third. All other relationships of the tenor and the vehicle listed for metonymy – such as name of the inventor or possessor for the invention or possession, the container for that which is contained, the modifier for modified, the effect for cause – also presume a third. Metonymy is nothing else but the rhetorical strategy mirroring a way of thinking contingency of relationships that are not necessary – and could be different.

As far as the concept of a cosmopolitan community is concerned, this means that, in contradistinction to earlier times, we do conceive of our immediate neighbor not as “fatefully necessary”, as he or she would have been in pre-modern times: more and more, we experience our neighbors, and all those who constitute our ‘community’, indeed as contingent in the sense that all that connects us is that we are contiguous upon each other. Moreover, due to the absence of a third that might actually explain – fatefully or rationally – why we happen to be neighbors, we are indeed contingent upon each other in a radical sense, sharing nothing but – space; a space that has become global. That is why for nationalists it is of utmost importance to describe this space as meaningful place (the ‘blood and earth’ regime), because that provides meaning for what otherwise remain the empty contingency of and within space.

I would thus argue that we would have to think cosmopolitanism along the lines of a community conceived of as metomynic. And there is a trilogy of books that exemplifies that – with the restrictions sketched out above as to the metaphoricity of any act of reading: It is Amitav Gosh’s *Ibis Trilogy*.

4. How to Write Contingency – The *Ibis Trilogy* as ‘Cosmopolitan World Literature’

Gosh’s *Ibis Trilogy* – which comprises *Sea of Poppies* (2008), *River of Smoke* (2011) and *Flood of Fire* (2015) – reflects, in an exemplary way, the different facets of metonymy, contingency, and what I propose to call ‘metonymic communities’. The latter is embodied, for example, in the group of protagonists that find themselves “exposed” (to use the term of Jean-Luc Nancy) to each other on board of the ship that has given the trilogy its name: the Ibis.

---

5 Here is how Nancy describes “exposure”: “We ‘resemble’ together, if you will. That is to say, there is no original or origin of identity. What holds the place of an ‘origin’ is the sharing of singularities…. I do not rediscover myself, nor do I recognize myself in the other: I experience the other's alterity, or I experience alterity.
This group also constitutes what one could call a “destined community”; one that indeed “shares the world” but in a very un-Heideggerian way, as the different ‘heritages’ of that community, that the trilogy will unwind, show us the very contingency of history that already Aristotle pointed at to distinguish it from literature. While ‘classic’ historiography, along the lines as sketched by Hayden White (1973), tries to impose some generic structural markers onto the tangled mess of historical facts to impose some sense and order onto it, the *Ibis Trilogy* unfolds history as just that: the erratic strives of different political and economic powers, peoples, and effects of fateful (not destined) that cross each other, with both benevolent or malevolent consequences arising out of these encounters.

These erratic encounters are what not only characterizes the people thrown together aboard the Ibis, but also the entire structure of the trilogy, in which the protagonists drift into and out of the narrative, with only a few of them staying in the narrative focus for long. And although one of the main personae aboard the Ibis – Deeti – claims to have previsions as to what is going to happen, she builds her shrine; the trilogy shows that the fateful encounter on the vessel spells quite different fates for the people involved. While one could be tempted to stylize the community among those who are forced onto the ship as a ‘cosmopolitan’ one, and to extrapolate the solidarity that starts to grow among some of them as an ‘ethics of cosmopolitanism’ one has to keep in mind that all of this arises out of moments of contingency and crisis. Indeed, the lascars on board the Ibis are defined exactly along the lines of a ‘contiguity in space’: they have “nothing in common, except the Indian ocean; among them were Chinese and east Africans, Arabs and Malays, Bengalis and Goans, Tamils and Arakanese” (*Sea of Poppies* 2008: 13). Not only, that is, is the community on board the Ibis contingent in the sense of it being ‘not necessary’; the storm that ends the vessel’s voyage is as well.

The most striking moment of solidarity is, consequently, also one of the most ambivalent ones: Then Paulette says: “On a boat of pilgrims, no one can lose caste and everyone is the same…. From now on, and forever afterwards, we will all be ship-siblings – jaházbhais and jaházbahens – to each other. There’ll be no difference between us”, this is only half of the story: It is not that differences magically disappear; some of the “pilgrims” aboard

---

6 “I don’t know […] I just know that it must be there; and not just the ship, but also many of those who are in it; they too must be on the walls of our puja room. But who are they? said the puzzled child. I don’t know yet, Deeti told her. But I will when I see them” (*Sea of Poppies* 2008: 9).

7 That is why it is seems rather strange to have Martha Nussbaum claim that a cosmopolitan literature’s “appeal to world citizenship fails … because patriotism is full of color and intensity and passion, whereas cosmopolitanism seems to have a hard time gripping the imagination.” (1996:15).
the Ibis do lose their caste. Neel is the most visible instance of this and the loss is experienced as traumatic by him. It is important to retain this aspect of crisis, and not to simply wave away any differences in a world that is constituted by them, and that need to be acknowledged rather than hidden under a romantic veil of equality.

That is why Chitra Sankaran’s characterization of Gosh’s work as successful in “holding together a global, ecumenical perspective while focusing on highly individual, often contested and marginalized histories, such as refuges, Indian sepoys under the British Raj, the ‘lower’ caste Othered, and voiceless women” and thus counterpoising “vignettes of human drama that occupy these distinctive locales against epic backdrops that adumbrate global issues of capitalized ‘History’ without taking away the significance of either”, is only partially correct (“Introduction” 2012: xv). The book does not hold together in its entirety. However, it shows that even capitalized “History” can by no means be defined as following a certain plan, as some Enlightenment philosophers would try to convince us. It could have been otherwise for both the people aboard the ship and for ‘History’ as a whole…

One could read Gosh’s trilogy as an extended commentary on the millennial concepts of human history as developed by Kant, Hegel, and Marx. In fact, it might also serve to explain a rather strange incongruence in one of Kant’s central essays on cosmopolitanism. While, in “Perpetual Peace” he strongly emphasizes the right to hospitality (even if only in its “conditional” form, as Jacques Derrida [2010] has pointed out), and also insists that peaceful trade might further such an ethics, he is at the same time aware that even such a “conditional hospitality” might harbor its dangers. In a passage that seems almost prophetic in the face of the first Opium War that would start four decades later, and that forms the main subject of Gosh’s trilogy, he writes:

But to this perfection compare the inhospitable actions of the civilized and especially of the commercial states of our part of the world. The injustice which they show to lands and peoples they visit (which is equivalent to conquering them) is carried by them to terrifying lengths. America, the lands inhabited by the Negro, the Spice Islands, the Cape, etc., were at the time of their discovery considered by these civilized intruders as lands without owners, for they counted the inhabitants as nothing. In East India (Hindustan), under the pretense of establishing economic undertakings, they brought in foreign soldiers and used them to oppress the natives, excited widespread wars among the various states, spread famine, rebellion, perfidy, and the whole litany of evils which afflict mankind.

China and Japan (Nippon), who have had experience with such guests, have wisely refused them entry, the former permitting their approach to their shores but not their entry, while the latter permit this approach to only one European people, the Dutch, but treat them like prisoners, not allowing them any communication with the inhabitants. The worst of this (or, to speak with the moralist, the best) is that all these outrages profit them nothing, since all these commercial ventures stand on the verge of
collapse, and the Sugar Islands, that place of the most refined and cruel slavery, produces no real revenue except indirectly, only serving a not very praiseworthy purpose of furnishing sailors for war fleets and thus for the conduct of war in Europe. This service is rendered to powers which make a great show of their piety, and, while they drink injustice like water, they regard themselves as the elect in point of orthodoxy (“Perpetual” 1991: 106/7).

He have to remember those words – as well as the following, often-quoted words of Marx – when we read the *Ibis Trilogy*:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of Reactionists, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilised nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature (1978: 476).

However, while both Kant and Marx saw these developments as manifestations and symptoms of a millenio-teleological history unfolding itself along a predestined path, Gosh’s works show that it is not only the local histories that seem to be at the mercy of the epic, capitalized ones, but that the latter are themselves prone to a highly contingent flow of times that does not seem to betray any destined direction – let alone a direction toward moral improvement or maturity.

Interestingly, both philosophers see at the root of their ‘driven’ histories very similar ‘motors’: For Kant, human development is driven by the antagonism imbedded in his “unsocial sociability”, as we have seen above; for Marx, it is the perpetual fight around the distribution of the means of production that propels human history. For both, then, the contingencies of antagonisms and clashes form the productive drives of history; backbones that cease to exist once their respective histories have reached their millennial endpoints. It is thus quite telling to have Gosh himself claim, in an interview, that “history itself is … in a novel … not very interesting, except in as much as it forms the background of an individual’s predicaments” (Sankaran 2012: 1). Capitalized “History” I would argue, can only do so if it itself has features of a “predicament”. It may be our task to realize and admit that the
contingencies that drive it – and drive it into no specific direction – are here to stay; and a cosmopolitanism that admits to the challenges – as both crisis and chance – of those contingencies might be a more honest way to go about it. We might admit, then, that we are all “behaviourally ambivalent” in each other’s eyes, without necessarily being warmongering phauloi to each other. The warmongers of one of the first so-called ‘free trade wars’ – which was actually a drug war – were and are to be found elsewhere, as Gosh’s Ibis Trilogy so convincingly shows.

Works Cited


