Caring About Strangers: A Lingisian reading of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*

**RUYU HUNG**
National Chiayi University

**Abstract**

This article explores a significant question, implicit in Kafka’s novel *Metamorphosis*, explicitly asked by Rorty: ‘Can I care about a stranger?’ Alphonso Lingis’s view is adopted to overcome a mainstream belief that there is a distinction between my community and the stranger’s community, or us community and the community of those who have nothing in common. His view is thus beneficial to reveal the in-depth paradoxical meaning in the relationship between the stranger and me: I am the stranger and the stranger is me. Therefore, to care about the stranger is to care about myself.

Keywords: Kafka, Lingis, *Metamorphosis*, Rorty, stranger, strangeness

**Introduction**

Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I found disgusting? (Rorty, 1993, p. 133)

Rorty’s question suggests further enquiries: Is it possible to care about a stranger? Is it necessary to care about a disgusting stranger? Is it worthwhile to learn to care about a stranger, a disgusting stranger? It is a difficulty and challenge for teachers to teach about respect and tolerance of otherness who are thought to be unbearably odd, queer and strange, since mainstream contemporary educational ideas and practices are dominated by the Enlightenment modernist thought. In the Enlightenment modernist tradition, human beings should be treated as autonomous and rational subjects with equal respect and inclusion. Individual idiosyncrasy is seen as irrelevant to the equal respect which everyone should receive. The ruling out of individual idiosyncrasy is to cast aside the embodied difference of individuals. Under the modernist influence, human beings as rational agents must be able to communicate with and understand each other through a common rational language, a universal rational discourse. In this sense, the rational and respectable human beings are those who have something in common. The building of a common and rational community could be seen as a
The rational elaboration of significant symbols transforms our biological specificity, making our species one composed of individuals representative of a universal community. ... The man-made species we are, which produces its own nature in an environment it produces, finds nothing within itself that is alien to itself, opaque and impervious to its own understanding.

(Lingis, 1994g, p. 9)

The members of the rational group are supposed to speak and act as ‘a representative of the common discourse’ (Lingis, 1994d, p. 110). Their speech and behaviour are practised as regulated. Odd speech and acts will not and should not be allowed in this community. Every member of the group should behave as who she or he is—as a representative of the common discourse of rational culture, a role fit for this society. When one talks to another, she does not talk to him simply because they are related biological species but because of their specific social roles. A student or a client, for instance, goes to a teacher or a veterinarian, he or she speaks proper language or asks proper questions: ‘Teacher, can you tell me how to solve this mathematical problem?’ or ‘Doctor, my dog hasn’t eaten in almost a week. What could it be?’ The members of a community can communicate with each other with appropriate language and gestures. Therefore, interlocutions and interactions between members of a community can be understood as confirmation of membership and identity. In Lingis’ (1994d, p. 111) words: ‘What you are doing is checking out whether the person you are consulting might not be an eccentric …’. In such a community, every gesture is performed and every word is said and understood as arranged and ordered—within certain limits. ‘What there is to be said is in the literature available in the public libraries; one is only asking him to efficiently speak as the spokesman for what one could oneself discover in the literature’ (Lingis, 1994d, p. 111). As members of a community, we understand each other because we share the same language, the same system of symbols. We act and respond to each other in the so-called proper way, a predictable way. But there are some people who do not share the same language with us, who cannot be predicted. They are unpredictable, odd strangers and foreigners. Then, how do we—members of the rational community—face and deal with them—those strangers, those eccentrics? According to Rorty (1989, 1993), to be sensitive and sentimental to strangers and others’ feelings could widen our mind and imagination to relate ourselves to strangers and others. Thus he proposes sentimental education as a substitute for the traditional rationalist moral education. Sentimental education could be practised by means of storytelling. This point will be elaborated in the final section.
Franz Kafka asks the same Rortian question in *Metamorphosis* (1961). This story depicts the transformation of Gregor Samsa, a commercial traveller who wakes up one morning and finds himself transformed into a bug, a monstrous insect, a stranger. His family are shocked by his metamorphosis but take care of him at first. With the increasing difficulty of communication and the unintelligibility of his voice, their duty of taking care becomes more and more unbearable and so does their abhorrence towards Gregor. Over the course of the story, Gregor is confined in his room because his appearance repulses all. His family feel offended even at one glimpse of him. Once Gregor’s interruption of his sister Grete’s violin-playing displeases the lodgers and threatens the income of the family. His family decides that he is no longer a human being and deserves no care and respect. Gregor returns to his room and dies at night. His family feel relieved owing to his demise.

Through reading the story an important question arises: Is it because Gregor becomes a monstrous insect, a stranger or an alien that his family abandon him? If so, can we—as ordinary people as Gregor’s family members—tolerate and include the eccentric and the unintelligible people, who could be our beloved family, relatives or friends, in our lifeworld and rational community? Kafka’s reply is, ostensibly, ‘no’. However, this negative answer could direct a most profound reflection of our tolerance of otherness. This story in my view is fundamentally concerned with the nature of life and its deeply implied paradox: life is coexistence with and in the other; every human being lives with and in the inhuman. We embody ourselves in the other and vice versa; human beings are embodied in the inhuman and vice versa. The exploration of the paradox of life in the light of Kafka and Lingis will be taken as the ground for conceiving an ethics of caring about strangers. The discussion will be articulated under the following three notions: denial and exclusion of strangers, embodying strangers, and caring about strangers.

**Excluding Strangers**

The first insight gained from reading *Metamorphosis* is about strangeness and how it is reacted to and excluded. In this story what undergoes transformation or metamorphosis, indeed, is not only Gregor’s body but also the relationship between Gregor and his family members. On the one hand, Gregor, turning from a normal human being into an insect, becomes a stranger, and his family members maintain their status of human beings—as non-strangers. On the other, reactions of his family move from ‘shock, outrage, concern, and grief, through emotional and financial adjustment and a growing recognition of the burden Gregor represents, toward anger at his betrayal of them, disgust with his condition, and finally, complete neglect of him’ (Rowe, 2002, p. 264). The double transformations fabricate the story of Gregor as the ground for us to delve into the paradox of life. Let me briefly summarize the plot of the story first.

At the beginning of the story, Gregor’s family members show much compassion and support, and take care of him. As days go by, Gregor becomes unable to speak and act as a normal human being. The family members start feeling impatient, careless, and annoyed at the trouble of looking after him. Even the sight of his body is
repulsive to them. They clear his room out and take away everything he loves. Gregor’s family do not take him as one of the family. Once his mother faints because she is frightened by Gregor although Gregor does not intend to frighten anyone. After the incident, he becomes abhorrent to all. Gregor is neglected. He is no longer called by his name but ‘the old dung-beetle’ instead. His family become antagonistic and hostile to him. They find that he is not one of them because he has nothing in common with the rational community. He can no longer speak as a representative of the common discourse of rational culture. In Lingis’ (1994c, p. 155) terms, our language, the common words, are the recognition of kinship. The kinship is no longer recognized since Gregor loses his words. He can no longer use the vocabulary in the literature available in the public libraries. The family members explicitly express abhorrence and hatred straightforwardly after Gregor appears in one evening gathering when his sister plays the violin for the lodgers. His appearance displeases everyone and interrupts the violin-playing. Then Grete, his beloved sister, says:

Things can’t go on like this ... I won’t utter my brother’s name in the presence of this creature, and so all I say is: we must try to get rid of it. We’ve tried to look after it and to put up with it as far as is humanly possible .... (Kafka, 1961, pp. 55–56)

Grete says that it is not necessary for her to treat Gregor in a human or brotherly way, or more accurately, in a moral way because she no longer sees Gregor as a human being, let alone as her brother, but rather as an insect. One important message can be found in these words: one who is not (taken as) a human being deserves no humanly treatment. But what a human being is is involved in the definition of humanness or humanity. Besides, there may be a need for the explication of inhumane treatment, e.g. exclusion and cruelty. Let us move to Rorty’s discussion of traditional rationalist humanism to find more food for thought.

According to Richard Rorty (1989, 1993), traditional moral philosophy which is grounded on foundationalism adheres to the notion that human beings are defined by their rationality and only fully rational human beings are autonomous and self-determined subjects. Autonomous human subjects are able to make decisions on their own, for themselves. In contrast, some people whose rationality is incomplete or immature are not fully or half human. These people rely on the fully autonomous rational people to make decision for them. In recorded history, there are instances of those who are judged as non-human beings, such as females, children, pagans, eccentrics, barbarians and ignorant people (Rorty, 1993). They are those, in Rorty’s (1993) term, pseudohumans. One important question is: how do we know someone’s rationality is mature or immature, complete or incomplete? How do we distinguish a rational person from a pseudohuman? How does Grete know Gregor is no longer rational and not a human being? As The metamorphosis shows, the ability to use language is one of the most important criteria.

‘If he could understand us,’ said her [Grete’s] father, half questioningly; Grete, still sobbing, vehemently waved a hand to show how unthinkable that was ...
‘He must go,’ cried Gregor’s sister, ‘that’s the only solution, Father. You must get rid of the idea that this is Gregor. The fact that we’ve believed it for so long is the root of all our trouble. But how can it be Gregor? If this were Gregor, he would have realised long ago that human beings can’t live with such a creature, and he’d have gone away of his own accord …’.

(Kafka, 1961, pp. 56–57)

Gregor’s inability to use language shows his failure to become a member of the moral community. Therefore, his family turn their back on him. As Lingis (1994c) points out, a society is the forms of commitment in which people communicate with common discourse. People make agreements and reciprocal commitments with common language. During the process of making mutual commitment, people recognize and confirm their kinship. As Lingis (1994c) states, ‘When people associate, they identify those outside their agreements as barbarians and monsters’ (p. 157). Moreover, ‘Every discourse among interlocutors is a struggle against outsiders’ (Lingis, 1994b, p. 135). Communication with common language discriminates those who are us from those who are not. This relates to the second part of the message mentioned above: the inhumane treatment, exclusion and cruelty. The unintelligibility and inability to use language lead Gregor to lose his role in the human language game as well as a part in his family. The ‘family’ does not only mean Gregor and Grete’s family but also the whole human society, the moral circle of (rational) human beings. Gregor——this monstrous insect——the pseudohuman——is no longer one of human family and thus deserves no humane and ethical treatment. The reader might doubt how Gregor, who was once the dear supporter of the family, is abandoned so quickly. However, Gregor’s father once felt sorry for his son’s calamity, recollecting that ‘Gregor was a member of the family, despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape, and ought not to be treated as an enemy, that on the contrary, family duty required the suppression of disgust and the exercise of patience, nothing but patience’ (Kafka, 1961, pp. 44–45). The understanding of duty reminds Gregor’s father that he should treat him with care and patience. But the resentment aroused by Gregor is complicated and multifarious. The incommunicability and unintelligibility of his words result in his being an epistemological stranger; his appearance brings forth the aesthetical strangeness. According to Zygmunt Bauman, strangers are those ‘who do not fit the cognitive, moral, or aesthetic map of the world’ (Bauman, 1993, p. 200; Biesta, 2004, p. 313). The monstrous looking Gregor, in this view, is the one who does not fit the entire human family epistemologically, aesthetically and morally. His beetlehood (Nabokov, 1980) justifies his being a moral stranger, an ethical alien. Based on this, it is taken for granted that Gregor’s family (the rational community) should do something with Gregor (the stranger). In addition, the reader can understand why, at the end of the story, the father’s (as well as other people’s) moral sentiment is subdued to the feelings of abhorrence. Gregor is deserted by his family, and by all of us. He is excluded from their morality circle, the community of their own kind.

Exclusion of strangers has become an important part of our society. According to Bauman (1993), two strategies are often used to deal with strangers: assimilation and exclusion (Biesta, 2004). Assimilation can be found in many institutions such as schools and churches. In such institutions savages become civilized; pagans convert
into orthodoxy. Yet not all the strangers can be assimilated. Those who cannot be assimilated are excluded. The process of exclusion includes ‘vomiting the strangers, banishing them from the limits of the orderly world and barring them from all communication with those inside’ (Bauman, 1993, p. 201; Biesta, 2004, p. 313). In addition, as Lingis states,

The community that produces something in common, that establishes truth and that now establishes a technological universe of simulacra, excludes the savages, the mystics, the psychotics—excludes their utterance and their bodies. It excludes them in its own space: tortures. (Lingis, 1994g, p. 13)

According to Lingis (1994b), today torture is even more widespread than ever. It is conducted in ‘secret dungeons by covert-action commandos in the outer provinces of the global scientifcotechnological empire …’ (Lingis, 1994b, p. 145). Its victims were identified as sacrilegious regicides before and now as subversives, fanatics, maniacs and terrorists. Sacrilegious regicides or subversives, fanatics or maniacs, terrorists or aliens, in some sense, all designate the stranger, the one who is unknown and threatening. The repugnance to and the fear of strangers as a potential threat drive us to rule them out of our community. The exclusion is justified for the reason that the stranger is no human being—the stranger is, in Lingis’ words, an animal without language, nothing but rotting flesh. We excluders make every effort to justify our rejection of the stranger and so do Gregor’s family. They abandon him owing to his being an insect, no longer human. This attempt to maintain the purity of our community is to torture the stranger. The distinction between our community and the other community is, in this Lingisian sense, a cruelty.

Kafka’s Metamorphosis manifests the cruelty of exclusion of the other, or the stranger. Even a person who was familiar to us could possibly become a stranger when he or she is unable to communicate with us. He or she no longer belongs to our community. For example, when one grows old, gets ill, or goes to foreign countries or enters into any remote area where people live with different languages, traditions, practices, customs or religions, one cannot speak or communicate well. One finds oneself a stranger. When someone we knew, one of our family, a friend or a relative, loses her or his looks or ability to communicate owing to illness, disease or injury and thus needs long-term care, or whose religion or political belief is converted to the one with which we disagree, do we still keep treating her or him as usual? Or do we ignore him or her and, finally, desert him or her as an indifferent stranger? When a stranger who cannot speak our language comes into our territory, do we take her as an intruder or a guest? Do we treat her with hostility or hospitality, indifference or care? These reflections reveal the significance of strangeness as an issue in life: strangeness, otherness or alterity is an essential part of the living process.

**Embodying Strangers**

The second insight of Kafka’s Metamorphosis that readers apprehend is about the enigma of life: becoming strangers is destined by life itself. Everyone becomes a stranger or everyone embodies oneself strangeness on particular occasions during the
course of life, for example, when one is travelling to foreign places, growing old, getting ill or injured, or dying. As Lingis (1994g, p. 13) states, ‘In the midst of the work of the rational community, there forms the community of those who have nothing in common, of those who have nothingness, death, their mortality, in common’. Ageing, or death, is the inescapable destiny of life. Every life encompasses the moment of alienation, becoming someone who her or his beloved can no longer recognize, becoming something that collapses and decays in the dark. As rational agents, we usually ignore or forget, intentionally or unintentionally, the truth that human beings age and die. We tend to focus on our communal rational life which is comprehended by abstract concepts and ideas so that we forget feelings through our sensory perceptions—the pains of the ill, the pangs of suffering, the grief of lost youth, looks and health, the agony of the abandoned and the misery of the excluded. The physical changes or development of our bodies, feelings and perceptions, in this sense, are inalienable phases of living process. All living beings share the commonality in the way that changes, developments and transformations occur in life. The statement that we and others have nothing common is not merely translated into the assertion that there is not anything in common between us and others, but that we and others share ‘nothing’, i.e. nothingness, or death. Every one of us, or every one of them, is death-bound: ‘Death does not befall our existence by accident or as a catastrophe, but … our existence, of its own nature, projects itself, with all its forces, unto its death’ (Lingis, 1989, p. 109). On this point there is a linkage or a commonality between all living human beings, the understanding of which depends not only depend on abstract ideas and verbal words, but also on non-verbal expressions and corporeal feelings. The understanding of non-verbal sharing and corporeal interaction consists in depth-perception (Lingis, 1994f).

According to Lingis (1994f), there are two kinds of perception of the stranger or the other: surface-sensitivity and depth-perception. Through the former kind of perception others or strangers are taken as objects without being regarded as sensible, emotional and acting subjects as ‘we’. By surface sensitivity, we see the colour of the skin of the stranger as that of a statue without feeling the pain of the wound on the skin; we hear the voice of the stranger as the sound of the wind without listening to the sorrow or the joy in the words. The stranger is merely some ‘body’, a body standing there, bland and dumb, wordless and uninteresting. In contrast, by depth-perception, the stranger can be perceived as a living person, a ‘somebody’, whose face shines with sweats of toil, whose eyes sprinkle with hope, rather than a mere ‘other’. By depth-perception, we not only see, touch, perceive and sense other people as surfaces of physiological and biological depth, but also see beneath the surfaces the tensions, drives and compulsions that wrinkle the brow, tense the fists, focus the eyes.

This perception extends on behind the substance enclosed with these surfaces, to the depth of the world behind it—envisions the road the other has travelled, the obstacles he has cleared, the heat of the sun he is fleeing. Perception perceives through the surface turned to us, into the depth of the organism and into the depth of the world. (Lingis, 1994f, p. 23)
Depth-perception renders inter-corporeality of bodies, organs and feelings possible. I see the other or the stranger as another ‘me’ through the depth-perception; I see her or him as one to have a world—a world of thought, feelings, senses, meanings and memories—as I do. We see strangers as we were in the past, as we are now or will be in the future, in certain places during particular periods of time. We discover ourselves to be strangers through sensing and perceiving the breaths, smells, words and thoughts, from the surface of skin and into the flesh of our bodies. This echoes what Merleau-Ponty has said in his *Phenomenology of perception* (1962), ‘In short, my body is not only an object among all other objects, a nexus of sensible qualities among others, but an object which is sensitive to all the rest, which reverberates to all sounds, vibrates to all colours, and provides words with their primordial significance through the way in which it receives them’ (p. 236). Through the depth-perception of the body, we sense the other or the stranger as ourselves and in ourselves, and vice versa. More importantly, by using depth-perception, we may reflect upon who we really are and how cruel and intolerant we might be. As proud rational agents, we are used to drawing a line between the rational community and the other community—the group of people with whom we cannot and will not communicate, and who we do not understand. We send others, aliens or strangers to places like caring houses, hospitals, refugee camps, shelters, ghettos or mortuaries, and easily forget a truth that, someday, these could be places for us. By depth-perception, we are reminded that the community of us is the community of Gregor’s family. The community of Gregor’s family is the community of Gregor. The community of Gregor is the community of the stranger. The stranger is us. The stranger is me. Based on this understanding, we may be willing to engage ourselves to a heterogeneous community that welcomes people, be they familiar or strangers.

**Caring about Strangers**

Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* reveals the nature of life: that life is inescapably intertwined with strangeness. The understanding that becoming a stranger is destined in the living process can be grasped if we use our depth-perception to feel, sense and reflect attentively upon ourselves, the strangers and the surrounding world. The above reading of *Metamorphosis* helps us to reflect upon the questions of the beginning of this article: Can I care about a stranger? Is it possible that I care about a stranger? It could be plausible, or in Lingis’ term, imperative, to care about strangers since we are strangers and strangers are us. As Lingis states,

> What initiates that other vision of him or her, that sense of his or her surfaces as commanded by another law … is the immediate sense I have of the imperative in him or her. … I find myself afflicted with the imperative that commands the other. I feel its weight as a force that weights on my own understanding. I find myself compelled to see his or her surfaces as ordered surfaces, exposed to me and ordering me, that is, facing me. (Lingis, 1994f, p. 27)

This understanding can be attained by depth-perception, the bodily experience fully engaged with the perception of the other. For educators, it is significant to remind
students to retrieve the deep meaning implied in bodily and sensory experience. The bodily depth-perception connects one and the other, one and the stranger from two sides: the inside and the outside. From the outside, one senses the stranger and the stranger senses one through the perceptual interaction. Seeing the face of the other, sensing the bodily movement of the stranger, one is compelled to live with the stranger. Exclusion of the stranger does not eliminate the fact that there are strangers—even though one tries to encounter strangers as seldom as possible. However, no one has a world secluded from strangers; one inevitably chances to meet strangers. There are unexpected moments of encountering strangers, e.g. the momentary glimpse of the slum children on the streets as one’s car drives by, the momentary dull glint of the beggar’s eyes in the dark as one heads for the restaurant, and the momentary glance at indigenous people during travel (Lingis, 1994f, p. 28). It is a certain self-deception to see oneself as being a member of a purely rational community.

Viewed from the inside, one could be and will be a stranger to oneself, to one’s people and to others (if there is a distinction between my people and others). As mentioned, one is deathbound, one is illnessbound and one is senescencebound. The course of life, someday, somehow, somewhere, transforms one into a stranger whose face one’s beloved no longer recognize owing to illness, injury, ageing or dying. Moreover, the body, which has a reflexive structure, perceives the other—the stranger—from within. According to Lingis (1972), self-perception incorporates the perception of the other; one’s life experience inescapably carries experiences in relation to other people. The conscious life of one’s sensible body can be perceived and so can the conscious life in the sensible bodily appearance of another, since ‘I perceive them [the movements of a body] I have also a reflexive sense of sensibility synthetically united with them. I then do not so much look at the shifting colour patches and the contours; I sense the sensation, the susceptibility, the sensibility, I feel the mobility almost like I feel my own, from within’ (Lingis, 1972, p. 59). There is a reflexive structure in one’s perception of others’ bodies, strangers’ bodies. This makes the perception of one’s own body inevitably intertwined with that of the other’s body, the stranger’s body.

Whether viewed from the inside or from the outside, internally or externally, one person’s encountering and being aware of the stranger is inevitably a part of that person’s bodily experience. Our encounter with strangers does not necessarily bring about the commonality or familiarity. Nonetheless, we—people of a group—and strangers—the outsiders, the foreigners—can still form a new community of those who have nothing in common. The reason why I—as a representative of the us group—care about the stranger is that he or she is a part of me and us, as a biological species rather than as a rational agent. As a biological species, I have a perceptive and sensory body. My sensibility is affected immediately not only by the stranger’s speech but also by her movement, gestures, voice, gaze and even tears. As Lingis says, ‘The alien suffering does not extend at a viewing distance, but afflicts my sensibility immediately. It is felt in my eyes … It is felt in my hands … It is felt in my voice …’ (Lingis, 1994f, p. 30). The sensibility of body which is the basis of the brotherhood (sisterhood) of a biological species should suffice to justify the care about strangers. The brotherhood (sisterhood) is ‘real in the exchange … of the life of different
individuals. The one becomes the brother [sister] of the other when [s]he puts him [her-]self wholly in the place of the death that gapes open for the other’ (Lingis, 1994c, p. 157). One’s affective, perceptive and mortal body is connected with the other mortal bodies with the same destiny but at one’s own specific pace.

In my view, Rorty’s (1993) discussion of sentimentality and sentimental education resonates with a Lingisian reading of Kafka and is helpful for us to regain depth-perception. Rorty argues that the mainstream view of community is based on the concept of the Kantian moral agent. As mentioned, the approach to moral education adopted by the Kantian rational community is to raise people’s moral reasoning and the ability to think logically. Sentimentality is thought to have nothing to do with morality since ‘there is something distinctively and transculturally human called “the sense of moral obligation” which has nothing to do with love, friendship, trust, or social solidarity’ (Rorty, 1993, p. 122). Nonetheless, the Lingisian perspective has shown us the undeniable important role that emotions, feelings and sensibility play in perceiving the consonant transformation in everyone’s life, in having sympathy with others, and in recognizing the fact that everyone is a stranger. Rorty suggests sentimental education as a means to resist the rational and tearless approach to moral education, which can improve our care for those who are taken to have nothing in common with us by sensitizing depth-perception.

‘Sentimental education’, according to Rorty (1993), envisages ‘a progress of sentiments’ which ‘consists in an increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike us as outweighing differences …’ (p. 129). The similarities between us and others lie in the point that everyone, or anyone, can be a human as well as a stranger—or in Rorty’s term, a pseudohuman or an inhuman. As Rorty states,

The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a deep true self which instantiates true humanity, but are such little, superficial, similarities as cherishing our parents and our children—similarities that do not interestingly distinguish us from many nonhuman animals. (Rorty, 1993, p. 129)

The Rortian view of sentimental education reveals a disturbing truth in this world that there are people who might be abnormal or extraordinary in many different ways, such as Gregor, or those who might have disgusting habits like the homeless or foreigners whose cultural practice is repulsive to us, or those who we may not be familiar with, like immigrants or tourists, and yet who we still care about because they are (in part) me and I am (in part) them. To care about myself and my beloved implies caring about strangers. To care about and for strangers involves a tolerance of a wide range of differences embodied in things and people, which are difficult to understand for different reasons, such as differences in religion, tradition, language, custom, character, illness or taste. To care about and for strangers may require that people accept, ‘in different ways, the uncomfortable and sometimes painful possibility of being changed by the other’ (Rosello, 2001, p. 170). To care about and for strangers can bring tolerance of otherness into fuller play than can be achieved by rational persuasion.
Regarding pedagogy, Rorty highlights literary art as the means to render sentimental education by activating readers’ sensitivity and sentimentality. As he (1989) points out, philosophical persuasion is no more a genre than literary art is. Both reveal different truths and different aspects of life. Although, as the non-standard, non-predictable use of words, literary works cannot provide accuracy of representation, they reveal the contingency of language, selfhood and community and the unexpected accompanied cruelty (Rorty, 1989, p. 167). In comparison with rational discourse, literary works such as fiction, novels or poems could enable readers and students sensitively to gain depth-perception of strangers, foreigners and others. Rorty (1989) argues that the contribution of many novelists like Proust, Nabokov, Orwell and Dickens lies in widening and deepening our understanding of humanity and cruelty of life. The inspirational value of literature consists in opening people’s eyes to ‘make people think there is more to this life than they ever imagined’ (Rorty, 1996).

Lingis, in some sense, embodies the spirit of this view. He authors a lot of intriguing works (1994a, 1994e, 1998) with a combination of philosophy and anthropology into storytelling travelogues. These stories describe interesting details of the gestures, voices and attitudes of people in foreign lands or in remote countries. These subtle nuances make visible strangers who could have been invisible before. The stories bring us to face strangers with their sweat and tears, blood and flesh, wrinkles and scars. Therefore, we as readers suddenly come to realize that strangers are human beings. The explication of Lingis’ travelling experiences goes beyond the scope of this article. What I aim to highlight is the pedagogical potential of storytelling of literary art. The description and elaboration of minute details of phenomena as people experience them, of how and what people see, hear, smell, feel, perceive and conceive, convey meanings to those who are not on the scene, to help them ‘to catch sight, beyond kinship of this community in death’ (Lingis, 1994c, p. 157). Storytelling, as Lingis (1994g) observes, makes one exposed and naked to the other. Likewise, storytelling makes the other naked and exposed to me. Most importantly, the stories of others link strangers to us by bringing us to the vivid experiences in ordinary lives, by engaging us in their sufferings and joy, feelings and emotions so that we know: they are not merely them, but us. To capture this, we need to include more strangers’ stories in schools.

Finally, as this article launches a journey of exploration as a response to Rorty’s haunting question: ‘Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is no kin to me, a person whose habits I found disgusting?’ I arrive at an answer at this moment: ‘Because I am the stranger and the stranger is me as we are in our mortality and vulnerability’. The journey continues as long as we live; we keep questioning ourselves as strangers. As T. S. Eliot (1969, p. 156) puts it:

Life you may evade, but Death you shall not.
You shall not deny the Stranger.
(Choruses from ‘The rock’)

Acknowledgements

The author gives her thanks to the editors, particularly Peter Roberts, and reviewers for their very helpful and thoughtful comments.
Note

1. In this article I do not draw a rigorous distinction between the stranger and the other. The stranger, the other, the alien and the foreigner are taken as interchangeable terms. Some authors pay attention to the difference between these terms. For example, readers can find different definitions between the foreigner and the other in Derrida’s Of hospitality: ‘the difference, one of the subtle and sometimes ungraspable differences between the foreigner and the absolute other is that the latter cannot have a name or a family name’ (Derrida, 2000, p. 25).

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