



## Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics

---

Parodic Play and Prophetic Reason: Two Interpretations of Interpretation

Author(s): Susan Handelman

Source: *Poetics Today*, Vol. 9, No. 2, The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric (1988), pp. 395-423

Published by: [Duke University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1772696>

Accessed: 17/11/2013 01:27

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Duke University Press and Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Poetics Today*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Parodic Play and Prophetic Reason: Two Interpretations of Interpretation

Susan Handelman  
*English, Maryland*

That which imparts truth to the known and the power of knowing to the knower is what I would have you term the idea of the good, and this you will deem to be the cause of science, and of truth in so far as the latter becomes the subject of knowledge. . . . The good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence (*epekeina tes ousias*) in dignity and power. Plato, *The Republic* 508e–509b

The place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (103)

The breakup of essence is ethics. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* (14)

To laugh at philosophy (at Hegelianism)—such, in effect, is the form of the awakening—henceforth calls for an entire “discipline,” an entire “method of meditation” that acknowledges the philosopher’s byways, understands his techniques, makes use of his ruses, manipulates his cards, lets him deploy his strategy, appropriates his texts. Then, thanks to this work . . . but quickly, furtively, and unforeseeably breaking with it, as betrayal or detachment, drily, laughter bursts out . . . a certain burst of laughter exceeds it and destroys its sense. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (252–53)

*Poetics Today* 9:2 (1988). Copyright © 1988 The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics. ccc 0333-5372/88/\$2.50.

Modern antihumanism, denying the primacy of human reason, free and for itself is true over and beyond the reason it gives itself. It clears the place for subjectivity positing itself in abnegation, in sacrifice, in a substitution preceding the will. Its inspired intuition is to have abandoned the idea of person, goal, and origin of itself, in which the ego is still a thing because it is still a being. . . . Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being* (127)

### The Alternatives

These epigraphs by Derrida and Levinas represent two different outcomes of the radical critique of philosophy in our era. I will call them here “parodic play” and “prophetic reason” and the contrast between them as alternative models for literary theory is what I wish to examine in this essay.

Needless to say, much deconstructive literary theory over the past decade has modelled itself after the first mode: the “play of the text.” Although a kind of ennui has set in as the infatuation with “free play” wanes, many literary critics continue to be inspired by the other facet of deconstruction, its rigorous epistemological critique. The recent interest in Bakhtin, Foucault, and the New Historicism all indicate a desire to move “beyond” deconstruction, while accepting some of its important critiques of representation, meaning, signification. The “Beyond,” in these cases, of course, is the return to the social and material matrices of meaning.

“Reason” and “ethics,” however, are most often associated with the conservative attacks on deconstruction as nihilistic, self-indulgent, and elitist. Frustrated by these polemics, J. Hillis Miller though, has tried to recoup and articulate “the ethics of reading.” Yet most post-structuralist critics, be they Lacanians, semioticians, New Historicists, feminists, or cultural materialists still suspect any call for ethics and reason as a mask for a discredited bourgeois humanism. Not only are God and the author dead but so too, they would say, is the “subject”—especially as some kind of unified, autonomous center. So what are the choices but anarchic dissemination of signs or analysis of the “codes” determining meaning or demystification of oppressive ideologies by revealing their status as constructs.

Here Levinas’s critique of Western ontology and philosophy—a critique which preceded and inspired Derrida’s—offers what I argue is a compelling alternative.<sup>1</sup> Levinas, too, has worked at the very limits

1. Levinas, in fact, originated the idea of the “trace.” See Levinas (1966). Derrida (1976) refers to this essay: “Thus, I relate this concept of *trace* to what is at the

of philosophy, pondered “the end of metaphysics” and above all solicited the breakup of “totality” by the “Other”—as an “otherwise than being” whose structure turns out to be radically ethical and leads to the infinite and transcendent. Ethics here is not conceived as a determinate set of beliefs or practices but the most original “ontological” structure which is the very “relation to the other.” Levinas, that is, does not abandon reason but opens it to the command of the Other, in a prophetic and ethical call, that comes prior to and makes possible consciousness, representation, knowing, will. “The essence of reason does not mean securing foundations and powers for man, but calling him into question and inviting him to justice” (1969: 88); “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the other ethics” (Ibid.: 43).

For Levinas, the role of critique itself, of “calling into question,” leads neither to self-reflexive undecidability nor to ideology. Critique is indeed the questioning of all foundations as in deconstruction but the calling into question of the same—that is, of a repressive logic of identity—is neither produced by nor results in any free play or arbitrariness of signs. It comes, rather, from the demanding appeal, order, call of the other. In other words, the “call” from the other resounds through the human Other, through whom the “other” of the “other than being” passes: “L’autre c’est L’Autrui.”

The other, moreover, is neither hostile nor a scandal nor a plaything but “the first rational teaching, the condition for all teaching” (Ibid.: 203). To welcome the other leads to a knowledge beyond that of the cogito; it means to be conscious of my own injustice. Philosophy as a critical knowing thus begins with conscience (Ibid.: 86). And calling into question, then, is a calling to account for the other as neighbor in personal responsibility.

#### Levinas’ Background

Despite his celebrity and influence in France, Levinas has not been as well known in America, especially in literary circles. In fact, Levinas brought phenomenology to France with his translation of Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations* in 1931 and became one of the first great interpreters and critics of Heidegger and Husserl beginning with his first book in 1930, *The Theory of Intuition in the Phenomenology of Husserl*. He has continued to produce widely read books and essays up to the

---

center of the latest work of Emmanuel Levinas and his critique of ontology. . .” (1976: 70). In the first of his essays on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida writes: “. . . the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble. At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession” (1967: 82).

present.<sup>2</sup> As he wryly notes in an interview, “But it was Sartre who guaranteed my place in eternity when stating in his famous obituary essay on Merleau-Ponty that he, Sartre, ‘was introduced to phenomenology by Levinas’” (Cohen 1986: 16).

Levinas did not only introduce phenomenology, he radically critiqued it. As Blanchot, a long-time friend, has written: “When Levinas asked if ontology were fundamental . . . [the question] was unexpected and unheard of, because it broke with what seemed to have renewed philosophy [Heidegger], and also because he was the first to have contributed to understanding and transmitting this thought” (Ibid.: 43). Levinas is one of the thinkers who made Derrida and deconstruction possible and Derrida, in turn, has made possible a renewed appreciation of Levinas.

Although my main focus in this essay is the relation between deconstructive parodic play versus Levinasian prophetic reason in light of the present cry for a “beyond deconstruction,” I also briefly want to consider this subject in terms of the relations among theology, Judaism, and literary theory. “Briefly” solely for reasons of space; I assume that most readers of this collection are far more familiar with Derrida than Levinas, so I will need to take considerable time here to outline (albeit roughly) some of Levinas’s key ideas. I will focus here mostly on his ideas of language; I cannot touch on his many other analyses of topics such as temporality, labor, the feminine, history, eros, the body, eschatology, or his talmudic analyses.

Like Derrida, Levinas is a Jew who came to France from elsewhere—in this case from Russia after the Bolshevik revolution and then again after his studies in the late 1920s in Germany with Husserl and Heidegger. There were profound philosophical reasons for his critique of Heidegger but there were also personal and political ones as well—especially after Heidegger’s temporary alliance with Nazism. As a Jew, Levinas himself was a prisoner in a detention camp in Germany during World War II. Although these personal experiences are not overtly mentioned in his philosophical writings, in his Jewish writings he is quite pointed: “It is difficult to forgive Heidegger” (1968: 56).<sup>3</sup>

2. The most complete bibliography of Levinas has been compiled by Roger Burggraeve (1986). It lists approximately 400 items by Levinas himself and about 800 more essays and books written about him over the past fifty years. A recent collection in his honor, *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (1982) contains Derrida’s second major essay on Levinas, along with contributions by Blanchot, Jabès, Lyotard, Ricoeur and others.

3. In an autobiographical essay, Levinas writes that his biography is “dominated by the presentiment and the memory of the Nazi horror” (1928: 177). And he also states: “No generosity which the German ‘es gibt’ is said to express showed itself between 1933 and 1945. This must be said! Illumination and sense dawn only with

His attack on what he calls the neutral impersonal realm of the *il y a* (“There is”) is a critique of Heidegger’s subordination of individual existents to existence or being to anonymous Being.

But Levinas did not view the cry of protest of the personal subject to be the answer—just as he never thought the subjective irrationalism of Kierkegaard could be an effective antidote to Hegel. Existentialism, of course, was superseded in France by structuralism which destroyed the freedom of the personal self as a locus of meaning in favor of impersonal structures and codes. Levinas contested this move but, unlike many others, he did not do so to uphold the personal ego; to him, the ego in its natural state is narcissistic and violent. But he also condemned the “structures” of structuralism as neutral, anonymous, indifferent and oppressive. “Structuralism,” he writes, “is the primacy of theoretical reason” (1974: 58).

Levinas instead defined the existent by its relation with the Other, a relation which is not a subject/object relation, as we shall see. The other is disproportionate to all “the power and freedom of the I” and this disproportion between the other and I is precisely “moral consciousness.” It is not “an experience of values” but an access to exteriority, to Being as other, and finally beyond ontology to the otherwise than being (1978: 183).

At the same time he was writing his later philosophical masterpieces, Levinas was also acting as the Director of the Ecole Normale Israélite Orientale, a Jewish school which was part of the Alliance Israélite Orientale, an organization dedicated to spreading French and Jewish culture throughout Jewish communities in France and its former Mediterranean empire. He was also writing prolifically on Judaism and Jewish life. In fact, his first collection of philosophical interpretations of the Talmud (the massive compilation of ancient Rabbinic law and commentary) *Quatre lectures talmudiques*, appeared in 1968 in the “Critique” series by Editions de Minuit—the same series in which Derrida published *De la grammatologie, marges de la philosophie, Positions* and which also includes the key works of the intellectual avant-garde of France: Bataille, Deleuze, André Green, Irigaray, Lyotard, Robbe-Grillet, Marin, Serres.

---

the existing beings’ rising up and establishing themselves in this horrible neutrality of the *there is*” (Ibid.: 181).

In *Difficile liberté*, a collection of essays on Judaism, Levinas puts this in other terms and writes that Heidegger “inundates the pagan corners of the western soul” (1963: 256). His fascination with the mystery of place and Being is the “eternal seduction of paganism, beyond all the infantilism of idolatry, long surmounted . . . of the sacred filtering through the world . . . Judaism is perhaps the negation of that. . . . The mystery of things is the source of every cruelty in relation to men” (Ibid.: 257).

What his writing shares with the works in the “critique” series is this question of the “other”—the other of philosophy, the disruption of the logic of identity by the irruption of the heterogenous other in the homogenizing same. As Vincent Descombes argues so well in *Modern French Philosophy* (titled in French *Le Même et L'Autre*), this attempt to absorb and then break free of the philosophy of the “three H’s,” Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl and to redefine the relation of same and other is a central aim of all modern French philosophy . . . from phenomenology through post-structuralism.

In one of his most recent and telling interviews, Derrida says that he was fascinated by Levinas because he was “the philosopher working in phenomenology and posing the question of the “other to phenomenology; the Judaic dimension remained at that stage a discrete rather than decisive reference” (Kearney 1984: 107). The relation of “Jew” and “Greek” in Levinas’s thought, however, is one of the main preoccupations of Derrida’s long, admiring essay on Levinas’s first masterwork *Totality and Infinity*. The last paragraph of the essay ponders a split and double identity:

Are we Jews? Are we Greeks? We live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history. We live in and of the difference, that is, in *hypocrisy*, about which Levinas so profoundly says that it is “not only a base contingent defect of man, but the underlying rending of a world attached to both the philosophers and the prophets” (1969: 24). . . . And what is the legitimacy, what is the meaning of the *copula* in this proposition from perhaps the most Hegelian of modern novelists: “Jewgreek is greekjew. Extremes meet.” (1978: 153)<sup>4</sup>

The Greek/Jew conflict/synthesis recapitulates the rabbi/poet conflict Derrida had written of that same year (1964) in an essay on another Jewish immigrant to France, the poet Edmond Jabès. Here the conflict is identified as heteronomy versus autonomy, the poet’s freedom versus the rabbi’s subjection to the Law. And two years later, this dichotomy became the famous “two interpretations of interpretation” which Derrida defines at the end of the essay “Structure, Sign, and Play”: one interpretation nostalgically seeking origin, the other affirming free play. Readers often neglect Derrida’s conclusion that the two interpretations, though irreconcilable, are lived simultaneously—

4. I do not have space in this essay to discuss Derrida’s intricate analyses of Levinas. Moreover, this has already been done superbly by Robert Bernasconi (1985) and (1987). I agree with Bernasconi’s conclusion that “The question remains whether Derrida in being deaf to the ethical voice of saying, does not fail to do justice to all the possibilities of language to which Levinas has introduced us and does not therefore ultimately fail in his description of the necessities governing Levinas’s language” (1985: 40). Bernasconi does not, however, consider the “Jew/Greek” issue.

and there is no possibility of choosing between them. Similarly, at the end of the Jabès essay, he writes that there will *always* be Rabbis and poets and two interpretations of interpretation.

As to the location of his own thought: “While I consider it essential to think through the copulative synthesis of Greek and Jew, I consider my own thought, paradoxically, as neither Greek nor Jewish. I often feel that the questions I attempt to formulate on the outskirts of the Greek philosophical tradition have as their ‘other’ the model of the Jew, that is, the Jew-as-other.” But his project is to find a “non-site beyond both the Jewish influence of my youth and the Greek philosophical heritage” of his French schooling (Ibid.: 107). One of Derrida’s main disagreements with Levinas is Derrida’s assertion that the non-site “cannot be defined or situated by means of philosophical language” (Ibid.: 108). Thus, as we know, Derrida turns to those literary writers and poets who press the limits of language—such as Mallarmé and Blanchot or Genet whom he juxtaposes to Hegel in *Glas*. That, too, is why his own writing style becomes increasingly “monstrous,” an off-centered mixture of philosophy, literature, seriousness and joking.

#### Parody and Otherness

Here is one key to the issue of parody which Alan Megill has insightfully described in his recent book *Prophets of Extremity* (1985): “Derrida is a supreme ironist: undoubtedly the most accomplished ironist of our age. He is also a parodist” (Ibid.: 260)—not the apocalyptic prophet of crisis in the high modernist vein but the very underminer of crisis thought (Ibid.: 266). In the works after *Glas*, “comic catharsis once more becomes possible, for Derrida’s is a post-ethical, aesthetic laughter that knows the limit of the thought of crisis” (Ibid.: 267) a freer and less strained laughter than Nietzsche’s and “less bitter and hysterical” than Foucault’s (Ibid.: 266).<sup>5</sup>

Megill makes the important connection between the strategy of the “double science,” Derrida’s style of repetition and difference in his readings—and parody, which also is a way of doubling another text in a heightened and reflexive way. Parody, though, is by no means

5. I am grateful to David Hoy for this reference. Hoy’s analysis in his essay “Foucault: Modern or Postmodern?” forthcoming from Rutgers University Press in a volume on Foucault edited by Jonathan Arac is also very helpful. Here Hoy contrasts the “lightheartedness” of post-modernism and its attraction to parody and pastiche to the more ponderous seriousness of modernism.

Foucault (1977) also specifies the “parodic” as one of the Nietzschean modes to be emulated in opposing a Platonic sense of history. Citing Nietzsche: “Perhaps, we can discover a realm where originality is again possible as parodists of history and buffoons of God” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 223). This would be the “parodic double” of “monumental history.”

anarchic or nihilistic; it has its own “rules” as Margaret Rose shows in *Parody//Meta-Fiction* (1979). Parody is a species of imitation or quotation—indicated in the etymology of the word *parody*: *para* meaning both “nearness” and “opposition.” The crucial point here is that unlike satire, which suppresses the target text, parody, “makes the object of attack part of its own structure” (Ibid.: 35). It is never torn away and free of it but closely attached. Parody is also a kind of meta-language, self-reflexive and self-critical—not mere mockery” but a “refunctioning” of the target text.

Now if the project of finding a non-site for philosophy to appear to itself as other, to interrogate itself, is central for Derrida, parody is a highly appropriate form. Derrida, like Levinas, views the Hegelian dialectic as ultimately a tyranny of the logic of identity, of the same, a self-enclosed and imperial (as in Derrida’s pun on Hegel’s name as “Eagle” at the beginning of *Glas*) narcissism which mutes other and always returns to itself.

For Derrida, it would not be enough, therefore, to criticize philosophy in its own voice, through its own reason. Nor would it be enough to find a complete opposite—first, because the opposite would still be defined by the same and second, because all discourse takes place in the space philosophical speech has created. But if one could show the *other to be already in the same*, from the beginning fissured, that would be an alterity that could not be reabsorbed. Thus Derrida has to remain extremely close and faithful to the text under analysis as he moves through his readings—and why his is a deeply parodic structure, incorporating the target text in the very structure of his own writing . . . parody as decentered mimesis. And why, too, even when he is less overtly parodic, his own writing is so frustratingly off-centered, indirect, elliptical, dissimulating, digressive.

But the key question is precisely what and who is the “other”? As Robert Bernasconi writes, one of the central differences between Levinas and Derrida is located right at this point. For even though Derrida adopted the notion of the trace from Levinas, “for Derrida the trace is of a text and not of the Other” (1985: 35). Derrida’s use of the Levinasian trace to attack Saussure and Heidegger has more to do with Derrida’s concern for the philosophy of presence “than to do justice to Levinas’ attack on the neutrality of philosophy” (Ibid.: 28). Indeed, post-structuralism, for all its variegated attempts to show the instability of structures—whether linguistic or political—continues to pit one form of anonymous or impersonal force against another.

In a Derridean reading, as Vincent Descombes points out, the vital point is that no synthesis is possible between the two texts, “no fusing into one, for the second is not the opposite of the first, but rather its

counterpart, slightly phased" (1980: 150). The double science shows the duplicity of any text and enacts a duplicitous metaphysics. That is, "It is itself as other. Every metaphysics, being double, is its own simulacrum, a slight displacement, a slight play in the reading sufficient to collapse the first into the second, the wisdom of the first into the comedy of the second." Thus one can never quite tell, says Descombes, whether Derridean deconstruction is a tyrannicide or a game (Ibid.: 151). It is obviously both, a tragi-comedy, entitled "The Death of Philosophy."

But Bakhtin has also reminded us in *The Dialogic Imagination* and his book on Rabelais that laughter and parody are among the most ancient forms of linguistic representation and that "there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse—artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday—that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*" (1981: 53).

In Bakhtin, parody is a "relation to another's word" (Ibid.: 69), again involving the key question of the relation of the same and the other, the ambiguous relation between two intermixed speeches and the contest between them. The relation can be reciprocal, a dialogue, questioning, argument, appropriation, regeneration, illumination, a mix of both reverence and ridicule.

Here again, there is an interesting Jewish undercurrent . . . the pre-eminent philosopher of "dialogue" in our century was, of course, the Jewish thinker Martin Buber. As Joseph Frank reports, Bakhtin preserved his admiration for Buber to the very end of his life and said he thought Buber: "the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century, and perhaps in this philosophically puny century, perhaps the sole philosopher on the scene . . . I am very much indebted to him. In particular for the idea of dialogue. Of course, this is obvious to anyone who reads Buber" (1986: 56 n.2).

### The Other as Ethical Relation and Language

Levinas has strongly disagreed with Buber's idea of the other as a *symmetrical* partner (1967: 133–150). For Levinas, the other is not in a reciprocal relation to the same; rather the other calls, appeals, commands from the dimensions of both height and depth; this is what he calls the "Face" in *Totality and Infinity*. The face of the other is the cry of naked destitution demanding response. But the Other is also the elevation of the "Good beyond Being." For our purposes, the essential point about his complex idea of "face" is that it does *not* mean visual perception. It is a figure which tries to describe a different kind of reflection, cognition, and perception than egoistic

contemplation in solitude.<sup>6</sup> It indicates a kind of immediate relation where one is captured, compelled, taken in, but not in any kind of irrational delirium; the “nakedness of the face” is an exposure which is the “very possibility of understanding” (1963: 21). This vulnerable nudity of the face becomes itself the primordial appeal/command of “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” Later, in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas will define subjectivity itself precisely as vulnerability.

The notion of the face, in other words, describes a self-already-in-relation: an other-in-the-same. The welcome of the face is not a Heideggerian “disclosure” or bringing to a light. For the relation between the same and other is not reducible to *knowledge* of other by the same or even revelation of other to same (1969: 28). The face is prior to every question about the “What” of things, the “What is it?” The face refers to the question, “Who is it,” the question of the other which for Levinas is already present in any question put, for the question is always *put to* someone. The face is the irreducibly prior and given, a “condition of possibility.”

But the face as the “who is it,” the *to* whom of the question, is not the realm of representation or cognition but desire—a desire beyond satisfaction or non-satisfaction, which Levinas calls “metaphysical desire.” This desire is distinguished from need and as desire for the absolutely *other*, alterity, it can never be satisfied. It is not a desire for an “object” but for the “other”; as such it remains separated, not dissolved into the other. The urge behind the very “calling into question” is itself an aspect of metaphysical desire. As other-in-the-same, the face is also the uncontainable excess, the more-in-the-less, or Infinite-in-the-finite. And the relation with the other is the call of the “good beyond being,” a positivity.

It is this *separated* relation between same and other, he claims, that institutes language. “The revelation of the face is language” (1978: 185). Language, that is, connects but does not fuse the separated subject and other. Language as conversation with the other retains the separation and difference necessary for the integrity of other as “other.” “Truth does not undo distance, does not result in the union of knower and known, does not issue in totality . . . [it is] epiphany at a distance” (1969: 60).

The relation with the other shatters the narcissistic unity of the subject—but this is not accomplished through any “anonymous” function

6. James Ponet (1985) argues that Levinas’s sense of the face “is clearly biblically derived,” citing the connotations of the term especially in the Jacob stories; the central biblical blessing, the Blessing of the Face (Numbers 6:22–27); Moses’s veiling of his face (Exodus 34:29–35); God’s hiding His face (Job 12: 24; Psalms 27: 8–9). The Hebrew word for “face,” *panim*, has a dynamic connotation: it comes from the root *panah*, meaning “turn”—a turning to or away from.

of language. The subject is decentered, displaced, traumatized as ego; but this demand of otherness is precisely a claim and demand for *responsibility for the other* and leads to a metaphysical ex-cendence and inspiration. In Levinas, “difference” becomes non-indifference to the other (1981: 166).

How can the Subject be deconstructed, yet still remain ethically responsible? Neither Derrida nor Levinas, of course, are the first to attack metaphysics—Kant did that long before and laid out the subsequent course of modern philosophy. Will aesthetics or ethics, then, be the substitute or alternative left when transcendence is demolished? Or, instead of Heideggerian Being, is ethics as the “relation to the Other” the original structure of transcendence itself as Levinas tries to show.

For Levinas, “Already *ethics of itself* is an optics” (1969: 29), not simply a preparation for transcendence. Steven Schwarzschild notes that this is also the “one perennial differentia of all Jewish philosophical thought—what Kant calls ‘the primacy of practical reason,’ i.e., the metaphysical ultimacy of ethics and its constitutive and functional decisiveness even for the cognitive world” (1985: 252). Indeed Levinas writes, “If we retain one trait from a philosophical system . . . we would think of Kantism, which finds a meaning to the human without measuring it by ontology, . . . and outside of the immortality and death which ontologies run up against” (1981: 129). Since, however, Levinas sees “philosophical systems” as oppressive and totalitarian, he does not accept the call of the other as a universal law; the imperative is not categorical as it is for Kant.

In fact, Levinas’s great attack on “totality” in Hegel, Heidegger, and phenomenology in *Totality and Infinity* itself has a strong Jewish origin: the work of Franz Rosenzweig whose first philosophical book was a critique of Hegel and whose masterwork, *The Star of Redemption* (1921) formulated a radically new Jewish philosophy. As Levinas writes at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity*, *The Star* “is a work too often present in this book to be cited” (1969: 28).<sup>7</sup> Levinas in general, however, avoids overtly mentioning or depending on Jewish sources for his arguments in his philosophical works: “My point of departure is absolutely non-theological. This is very important to me; it is not theology which I do, but philosophy” (1962: 110).

But what kind of philosophy? Writing of the relation between philosophy and life in Rosenzweig’s work and the “end of philosophy”

7. In another interview with Salomon Malka, Levinas says that it is Rosenzweig’s critique of the idea of totality in the *Star* “that I have purely and simply taken over” (Malka 1984: 105). Richard Cohen also thinks Levinas’s use of the figure of “Face” may also come from the end of *The Star of Redemption* (personal interview, July 24, 1987).

which is “perhaps the very meaning of our age,” he emphasizes: “The end of philosophy is not the return to an epoch where it had not begun, where one could not philosophize; the end of philosophy is the beginning of an era where all is philosophy, because philosophy is not revealed through philosophers” (1963: 124). “Theoretical man has ceased to reign” (Ibid.: 125)—that is theory as enchaining, totalizing system. But the result cannot be simple spontaneity or anarchic protest as in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. Aristotle’s “it is necessary to philosophize to not be a philosopher” defines the extreme possibility of the philosophy in the twentieth century, a statement with which Derrida agrees and indeed cites in his essay on Levinas (1978: 152).

Levinas also finds sources for his key idea of the otherwise than being within the history of non-Jewish Western philosophy, most paradigmatically in Plato’s “Good beyond Being” in the *Republic*, in Plotinus’s *Enneads* and in Descartes’s “idea of the infinite” in the *Third Meditation*. In Descartes, this idea of the infinite is an excess, surplus, overflow in the finite mind as it conceives of “infinity” . . . i.e., an idea that comes from a beyond the finite mind, that the mind cannot contain.

As Levinas takes it up, then, the critique of metaphysics, reason, and theory does not become an intoxication with excess as the irrational, a worship of negativity, a fascination with the abyss or schizophrenic and psychotic states, a paralytic self-reflexivity or a political ideology as we have seen in much recent French theory and literature. For Levinas, as for other French theorists from Lacan to Barthes to Derrida to Foucault, the subject as self-enclosed, free, satisfied ego is deconstructed, made a *subject to*. But in Levinas this very movement constitutes the subject as irreplaceable, a unique self called upon to respond to the appeal of the other, constituted as responsible for the other.

In *Otherwise Than Being*, this idea of the subject is radicalized and further defined as the very *substituting of oneself* for the other. By this Levinas also means something as physical as “the duty to give the other even the bread out of one’s own mouth and the coat from one’s shoulders” (1981: 55). Substitution as one-for-the-other is also revealed as the basic structure of signification: A is for B or: A is instead of B. This mode of relation with the other cuts across both the logic of contradiction and dialectical logic where the same “participates in” or is reconciled with the other in the unity of system.

Levinas thus maintains an interhuman relation with the “other”; the subject is deconstructed but not dissolved into impersonal “systems” of signs or “discursive practices.” These forms of impersonality, he claims, are as imperialistic as any other and subordinate the ethical relation. Unlike other French theorists, he does not relocate freedom in some autonomous or anthropomorphized power of “Language” nor is the antidote to totalizing systems the anarchic play of the signifier.

Thus while his work is a radical critique of being and philosophy, it is also “a defense of subjectivity” (1969: 26); the subject is dispossessed but in relation.

### Subjectivity as Vulnerability

Precisely this dispossession enables language to found community because “it offers things which are mine to the other. To speak is to make the world common. . . . Language does not refer to the generality of concepts, but lays the foundation for a possession in common. . . . It abolishes the inalienable property of enjoyment.”<sup>8</sup> Levinas here is pointing to the often unrecognized potential of language to be a gift, an offering, and welcome of the other. In this sense, language as the relation between me and the other as interlocutor presupposes every proof and every symbolism—and not simply because it is necessary to agree on that symbolism and establish its conventions. That is, the relation with the other *already* is necessary for a given even to appear as a sign, a sign signaling a speaker, regardless of what may be signified by the sign or whether it be decipherable. In other words, the one who signals himself by the sign is not the “signified” of the sign; rather, s/he delivers the sign and gives it (Ibid.: 92). Exposure and vulnerability then become the very conditions of communication. Communication can’t be reduced to the manifestation of “truth” and saying is not a simple “intention to address a message” (1981: 48).

Contemporary theories of language, even those which are dialogical and social such as Bakhtin’s, seem to neglect this essential point. Prior to cognition, there is a necessary solidarity of discourse; and that itself depends on a first dispossession of the self to even enable the movement toward the other in language. The primary level of communication, then, is not information or the giving of signs but the self as “the communication of communication, a sign of the giving of signs” (Ibid.: 119). Hence “metalanguage” is neither empty self-reflexiveness nor ideological demystification but openness and responsibility for the other and transcendence. This founds and makes possible the empirical ego who then thematizes, is conscious and cognizing. Communication would be impossible if it began with the ego as a “free subject to whom every other would only be a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution and information” (Ibid.: 119).

Levinas is reminding us that the “relationalism” of structuralism, (the idea that meaning is a function of relations between signs rather than referents to an external reality) is inadequate. Structuralism *synchronizes* all these relations in an atemporal horizontal whole; it is another form of totalizing system—and this critique, of course, has

8. For the relation of Levinas’s ideas about language as performative action to speech-act theory, see Lyotard’s essay on Levinas in Cohen (1986).

been made by many post-structuralists as well. But in Levinas there is an explicit ethical cast to this critique; it is not purely cognitive. “Difference,” diachrony, and temporality as the disruption of synchrony and system are not merely other autonomous, neutral forces or linguistic “effects.” Instead, these are constituted for Levinas in the relation behind all relations: the relation with the other and the *human* other is the place where the “other” passes, questions and interrupts being. Signs are *given* and Levinas takes this quite literally—before being given in impersonal systems, signs are given as offering between interlocutors. This giving is part of the ethical nature of language as relation of same and Other.

In much deconstructive criticism, the phrase “Everything is mediated through language” has become a way of denying connections to—or even the existence of—experiences beyond language and non-textual referents. Derrida in his interview with Kearney expresses frustration at the proliferation of critical commentaries on deconstruction which teach that “there is nothing beyond language, that we are submerged in words—and other stupidities of that sort. . . . It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. . . . The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the ‘other’ and the ‘other of language’” (Ibid.: 123). Deconstruction really shows, he continues, not that there is no referent but that “the question of reference is more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. . . . I totally refuse the label of nihilism . . . Deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothingness, but an openness towards the other. . . . My work does not destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it” (Ibid.: 125).

For Levinas also as we have seen, this openness toward the other is an overflow of the cognitive subject. But in contrast to Derrida, it is an overwhelming command and appeal such that the human ethical immediacy itself founds signification:

It is not the mediation of the sign that forms signification, but signification (whose primordial event is the face to face) that makes the sign function possible. . . . *the being of signification consists in putting into question in an ethical relation constitutive freedom itself.* Meaning is the face of the Other, and all recourse to words takes place already within the primordial face to face of language. . . . [which is] society and obligation . . . the essence of language is the relation with the Other. (1969: 206–7)

Such a signification is “Infinite,” an inexhaustible surplus, overflowing consciousness.

### Ethics and Politics

In both *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, the asymmetrical relation of self and other also involves what Levinas calls the “third

party,” the “other of the other”—the third person who represents the political and social world beyond the pair of self and neighbor. Through the third party, the “whole of humanity” looks out from the destituteness of the face, appeals and commands. Thus discourse as relation with the other demanding justice for all humanity is also “sermon, exhortation, the prophetic word” (1969: 213). And prophetic in the classical biblical tradition of the cry for justice: “To hear his destitution which cried out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself, but is to posit oneself as responsible . . . the Other who dominates me in his transcendence is the thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan to whom I am obligated” (Ibid.: 215). Levinas’s own style at this point becomes itself emphatically prophetic: “Speech is not instituted in a homogenous or abstract medium, but in a world where it is necessary to aid and to give” (Ibid.: 216).

This prophetic strain and the Jewish undercurrent are clearly evident in *Otherwise Than Being* which Levinas dedicates to the memory of those killed by the Nazis, both those “closest” among the six million Jews and the “millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism.” The urgency of the question of the other comes not simply from the legacy of Hegel and Husserl and Western thought but from an attempt to combat the catastrophic hatred and violence in European history resulting from these philosophical systems. “Political totalitarianism rests on ontological totalitarianism,” (1963: 257) for there is an “implicit metaphysics in the political thought of the West” (Ibid.: 221). Western philosophy has “mainly remained at home in saying being . . . the being at home with oneself, of which European history itself has been the conquest and jealous defense” (1981: 178).

In the margins of Western history, though, are the victims of these triumphs and “traces of events carrying another signification” (Ibid.: 178). One is reminded here of Walter Benjamin, another tortured modern Jew, whose solution to the catastrophes of contemporary history was an uncomfortable hybrid of Marxism and Jewish messianism, each of which furnished an eschatology which might recoup and redeem history’s violence.

Levinas, however, did not follow the intellectual trends of post-war France in this respect as well; he was never attracted to Marxism. For him, ethics is irreducible and *prior* to politics just as it is prior to ontology. As Derrida puts it so well, Levinas’s work is a “non-Marxist reading of philosophy as ideology” (1978: 97). Nevertheless, Levinas also recognizes the “ethical” intent and importance of

Marx’s critique of Western idealism as a project to understand the world rather than to transform it. In Marx’s critique we find an ethical conscience cutting through the ontological identification of truth with an ideal intelli-

gibility and demanding that theory be converted into a concrete praxis of concern for the other. It is this revelatory and prophetic cry that explains the extraordinary attraction that the Marxist utopia exerted over numerous generations. (Cohen 1986: 33)

This prophetic cry and quasi-Marxist perspective also underlies much of the new “cultural materialism” in literary studies. J. Hillis Miller insightfully notes that, despite the differences in their reasons for attacking deconstructive linguistic theory, both the political left and the right “resort to moral or moralistic denunciation.” The left claims it is immoral not to be concerned with history and society and only to indulge in the contemplation of language playing with itself; the right claims that the skepticism about language and humanistic tradition is immoral and nihilistic (1987: 283–84).

Levinas would not differ with the New Historicists or political critics about the need for political analysis or action but rather in the position given the political and material vis-à-vis the ethical. He defines the political as the realm of the “moral” as distinct from the “ethical,” i.e., the moral as the rules of social organization, distribution and exchange of power, legislation and mediation of various “interests.” Ethics, as extreme disinterestedness, vulnerability and sensitivity to the other then becomes “morality” when it moves into the political world of the “impersonal ‘third,’” the other of the other—institutions, government, etc. The key point: “But the norm that must continue to inspire and direct the moral order is the ethical norm of the interhuman” (Cohen 1986: 29–30).

In other words, the realm of politics cannot be separated from its origin in the ethical structure of the one-for-the-other or else one justifies a “State delivered over to its own necessities” (1969: 159). This is not an authentic justice but another kind of manipulation of the masses. Without ethics as *first* philosophy, there is not even any way to discriminate among political systems. Moreover, “Equality of all is born by my inequality, the surplus of my duties over my rights” (1981: 159). Since responsibility is for what is precisely “other,” i.e., non-encompassable, these obligations can never be satisfied but grow in proportion to their fulfillment; duty is infinite.

Levinas would then pose a question to all *materially based* movements for human freedom and justice: “The forgetting of self moves justice. [One must then know] if the egalitarian and just state in which man is fulfilled . . . proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for the all, and if it can do without friendship and faces?” (1981: 159–60). Without some primary act of withholding, of self-abnegation, of “passivity,” of otherwise than being, all the alternatives still partake of the violent impersonal realm of being; that is, they are “egoisms struggling with one another, each

against all, in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another” whether the context is politics, psychology, sociology, linguistics (Ibid.: 4).

### The Saying and the Said

Action, in other words, requires first a passivity, a trauma to the willing, enjoying, egoistic self. It requires an oscillation like breathing—between withholding and assertion; withdrawal and expulsion; philosophy and non-philosophy; soul and body; language and what is beyond representation and speech. This latter he will call the “Saying and the Said” (*le dire et le dit*). Thus his striking metaphor “that the subject could be a lung at the bottom of its substance—all this signifies a subjectivity that suffers and offers itself before taking a foothold in being,” exposed and vulnerable (1981: 180).

In *Otherwise Than Being*, he drops the ontological vocabulary, refines and radicalizes his idea of language and changes the focus from the “face” to this idea of the “Saying and the Said.” The saying is this “language before language” now defined as the unrepresentable, anarchic, unknowable aspect of the relation, which necessarily betrays itself into language as the “Said.” This change is partially a response to the Derridean problem of finding, articulating the “other” of language in language. “Saying” is still a linguistic metaphor to describe a non-linguistic realm, thus acknowledging the complexity of our access to it. Levinas will then analyze this oscillation between the Saying and the Said as the very alternation between skepticism and philosophy.

Though the “saying” is non-thematizable, non-representable, beyond the gatherings of history and memory, “an-archic,” (i.e., prior to all *arche*, origins and foundations), it still always must be “said,” “betrayed” in the very language one uses to speak about it. The said, however, retains a “trace” of the saying and Levinas redefines the “phenomenological reduction” precisely as the movement back to the saying from the said. “In it the indescribable is described” (Ibid.: 53); philosophy is “indiscretion in relation to the inexpressible” (Malka 1984: 108).

While this line of thought seems to parallel deconstruction, it then veers away: though “saying” is antecedent to verbal signs, linguistic systems and semantic glimmerings, it “is not a game” and retains the ethical structure of what he now calls the “proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification” (1981: 5). One of his essential theses is that the *orientation* of the terms takes precedence over their content: saying is a pre-original orientation, approach, nearness without abolishing distance between terms, the relation of responsibility. And this orientation, as we have seen, he considers the very ability of anything

to signify, to give itself, to be not only itself but other—for something else.

Saying, then, is the “condition of possibility” of meaning. The subject here is “called,” “chosen before choice,” “hostage” to the other but in a positive way, ordered by the good beyond being. It is not, however, playful: this pre-original saying “sets forth an order more grave than being and antecedent to being. By comparison being appears like a game . . . without responsibility where every possibility is permitted.” But play, Levinas notes, is not itself “free”—it, too, has its “interests” (Ibid.: 60).

Play still partakes of the egoistic structure of being; it is not “disinterestedness”—dis-inter- *esse*, the undoing of *esse*, of essence. Any game or play implies a “comic mask” and such a mask “always implies a self contemplating or expressing itself, playing” (Ibid.: 56). In contrast, the “otherwise than being” is a pure gratuitous disinterestedness, responsibility as substitution, hostage for the other—a giving of oneself over as a “complete gratuity which indicates an extreme gravity, and not the fallaciousness of play” (Ibid.: 60).

Whereas Derrida sees his task as eliciting alterity through a “gratuitousness” of miming, playing, dissimulation, equivocation, Levinas sees the task of philosophy as reducing or “unsaying” the dissimulation and betrayal of the said. This unsaying opens to exteriority, to the transcendence of the other. Yet he also recognizes the necessity of the said, of representation, for signification to show itself. This is not the grim necessity of the “prison-house of language” which one can only try to destabilize from within. Rather, the said, too, involves a positive ethical moment. For both responsibility and justice it is necessary that saying retain a reference to being; there can be no justice without measurement, comparison, correlation, synchronization, representation: “Essence has its time and hour” (Ibid.: 46) but “being must be understood on the basis of being’s other” (Ibid.: 16).

This paradoxical necessity means that the other, the sincerity of saying will signify only through the *ambiguity* of every said (Ibid.: 152). Ambiguity, then, is not paralytic perplexity, dark undecidability, or an anonymous “effect of language.” It is the “sign given of the giving of signs” (Ibid.: 151), the resonance of every language as inspiration, witness, and a kind of prophecy. Ambiguity here becomes the opening to the other, not an autonomous or indifferent self-reflexivity. Instead of turning on itself in emptiness, signification empties itself to turn toward and substitute for the other. And since by definition, the “infinite” or “transcendent” or other cannot be contained in the finite or same, signification will always show itself paradoxically. Indeed, it must interrupt its own demonstration to the point where it is “necessary that its pretension be exposed to derision and refutation” (Ibid.:

152). Skeptical critique is necessary—especially to prevent “ideology and sacred delirium” (Ibid.) from filling the space of this opening to the Other. But equivocations of signs in dissemination or parodic play do not constitute this opening. They are a “being otherwise”—but not an “otherwise than being.”

When Levinas says that “language is already skepticism” (Ibid.: 170), he means that language can exceed thought by “letting be understood without ever making understandable,” a meaning different from that which comes through sign system or logical concepts. But skepticism itself has an ethical structure and philosophy as critique has a double task, though not the doubleness of parodic ruse or playful displacement. Philosophy is both saying and said, indeed the very oscillation between them. It thus always gives birth to and is shadowed by skepticism and it both “justifies and criticizes the laws of being and of the city” (Ibid.: 165). There is, then, no end or closure of philosophical discourse; “Is not its interruption its only possible end?” (Ibid.: 200) “Logocentric, onto-theological” philosophy may have come to an end but speculative practice certainly has not. As Levinas ironically notes: “Indeed, the whole contemporary discourse of overcoming and deconstructing metaphysics is far more speculative in many respects than is metaphysics itself. Reason is never so versatile as when it puts itself in question” (Cohen 1986: 33).

Ambiguity and doubleness mark precisely the place of commitment and call of the other—not the spot of paralytic aporia. Thus the subject put in question by Levinas remains “rational,” “responsible” and “inspired” even as it is “susceptible, vulnerable, wounded, traumatized, obsessed, hostage, persecuted.”<sup>9</sup> If there is a folly of non-sense, it is not the play of frivolity but the “non-sense” of the one-for-the-other, suffering as gratuitous giving, “folly as the confines of reason” (1981: 50). The questioning of reason may appear as folly to the logic of identity and ontology but for Levinas, the result is another kind of reason—a prophetic or ethical reason, not delirium, madness, game, or will to power.

Such an exposed, inspired, subjected subject is by no means an ethereal Husserlian “Consciousness.” “Only a subject that eats can be for-the-other, or can signify. Signification, the one-for-the-other, has meanings only among beings of flesh and blood . . . not a gift of the heart but of the bread from one’s mouth” (Ibid.: 73). The biblical allusion is reinforced here by a direct quote from Isaiah 58. Matter, the material “is the locus of the for-the-other” (Ibid.: 77).<sup>10</sup>

9. As such, Levinas identifies the subject as psyche with the maternal body. Luce Irigaray responds to his thinking about the feminine in her essay in Cohen (1981).

10. Moreover, the body itself is a paradigmatic example of an exteriority not constituted by my consciousness; it permanently contests the prerogatives of con-

But the “place” of saying as “proximity” to the other is not spatial; it is a kind of Levinasian equivalent to Derrida’s “non-site” and thought outside of ontology, cognition, recuperable historical time. In this sense, both the Levinasian and Derridean projects are thus also utopian.<sup>11</sup> This proximity is an “anarchic” relation, prior to all foundations and philosophical principles (Ibid.: 100), which is the very “anarchy of responsibility” (Ibid.: 26) and the “trace” of the Infinite. Thus Levinas’s ethics have no epistemologically certain ground: “the ethical situation is not comprehensible on the basis of ethics” (Ibid.: 120). He does not give a set of prescriptions but rather calls the subject to responsibility, to the Other.

### GreekJew/JewGreek

But the metaphors he uses to describe subjectivity and responsibility are disturbing: trauma, wound, exile, dispossession. They allude to the figure of the Jew in recent European history. On the other hand, the idea of substitution and suffering might appear Christian. But Levinas is opposed to any idea of suffering as “magically redemptive.” The responsibility can be borne by no other; no one can act as a substitute *for me*, can relieve me of my responsibility. It is one-way. I am the unique, elected, chosen. “To say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice! . . . But it is I and no one else who am hostage” (Ibid.: 126).

The description of the subject in *Otherwise Than Being* culminates in the expression *me voici*: “The word *I* means *here I am* [*me voici*] answering for everything and everyone” (Ibid.: 114). Those familiar with the Bible recognize this as the oft-repeated Hebrew phrase *hineni*, the formulaic response of the Old Testament heroes when called by God. Abraham, for example, uses it in Genesis 22:1 when called to

---

sciousness to “give meaning.” The body is the very mode in which a separated being exists—that is, a being in relation with another but distinct (1969: 168). Thus at the end of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas engages in extended meditations on eros, the caress, fecundity, and the family.

11. When asked by Richard Kearney whether his search for a non-site or *u-topos* other than that of Western metaphysics can be construed as a prophetic utopianism, Derrida answers by affirming a positive moment in deconstruction as a response to the call of alterity and says that although he interrogates the classical ideas of *eschaton* or *telos*, “that does not mean I dismiss all forms of Messianic or prophetic eschatology. I think that all genuine questioning is summoned by a certain type of eschatology. . . .” Though he does not feel the kind of “hope” that would allow deconstruction to have a prophetic function—as “exodus and dissemination in the desert” it does have, he admits, certain “prophetic resonances” but as a search without hope for hope (Kearney 1984: 118–119). As Malka points out, there is a somewhat similar strain in Levinas, when he defines Judaism after Auschwitz as a “Faith which is also a fidelity without faith,” a faithful ethic against the absent God (Malka 1984: 76).

sacrifice his son Isaac, as does Moses at the burning bush (Ex. 3:4). Levinas often contrasts Abraham to Ulysses: Abraham must depart his native land and go to a land of which he knows nothing (1966: 37); Ulysses, on the other hand “returns home” and symbolizes for Levinas the course of Western philosophy—that is, the identity, sameness, and egoism of the self which is ultimately protected—not exiled, called outside, broken up.

The “here I am” as the “I possessed by the other” is also the figure of inspiration, obsession, “a seed of folly, already a psychosis” (1981: 142); “for the order of contemplation it is something simply demented” (Ibid.: 113). At the same time it is a “reason” or “intelligibility” beyond the cogito. But the sickness Levinas refers to here in a footnote is a quotation from the Song of Songs, “I am sick with love” (6:8). This biblical text, of course, is a great erotic love song describing the quest of two lovers for each other. And this folly or sickness at the depth of the obligation for the other is “love”—a word Levinas has avoided using to this point. This, then, would be the most profound level of the ethical as first philosophy: “Philosophy is the wisdom of love at the service of love” (Ibid.: 161).

What, then, is the relation of Abraham and Ulysses or Jew and Greek here, the question Derrida perceptively asks at the end of his essay on Levinas. On the one hand, Levinas’s philosophy is a kind of letter to the Gentiles. To subject the subject, put it under accusation is also to bring the philosophy of self, of consciousness and being, to trial—as Derrida puts it: “All the philosophical concepts interrogated by Levinas are thus dragged towards the agora, summoned to justify themselves in an ethico-political language. . .” (1978: 97). This trial is a prophetic indictment of Western philosophy.

Unlike Derrida, Levinas still speaks “Greek,” i.e., philosophical language. He seeks to translate Jewish wisdom into Greek and to use Greek wisdom to understand Judaism: “The work of the 70 [the Jewish tradition of the 70 elders who translated the Bible into Greek 2,000 years ago] is not finished” (Interview in Malka 1984: 106). But this also because: “We have a great task to articulate in Greek the principles Greece ignored. Jewish singularity awaits its philosophy. . .” (Malka 1984: 81).

But who and what is a Jew? The subject as called, elected—the “chosen people” means for Levinas all human beings—not only the Jews. The very end of *Otherwise Than Being* claims that “each individual of all the peoples is a chosen one, called to leave the concept of the ego, *here I am*, to lose his place” (1981: 185): “I am for others. Nothing less is needed of the little humanity that adorns the world.”<sup>12</sup>

12. In one of his Talmudic lectures, he writes: “I have it from an eminent master: each time Israel is mentioned in the Talmud, one is free, certainly, to understand

Levinas seeks to fight the violence—the violence of identity and totality and history—without more violence. He speaks to the smiters in their own language perhaps to purify philosophy, to bring it to account in its own terms. He and Derrida here again disagree about whether there is an ultimate possibility—even utopian—of peace and nonviolence in language and philosophy. Derrida will produce a philosophical style based not on metaphor, as is often thought, but on *catachresis*, the “violent production of meaning . . . an abuse . . . a violent writing . . . a monstrous mutation” (Kearney 1984: 123). And as Derrida also perceptively notes, *Totipotency and Infinity* is not a philosophical treatise; he calls it a work of *art*. Its thematic development “is neither purely descriptive nor purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach, return and repetition of the same wave against the same shore” (1978: 312 n.7)

Again, I would term it less “art” than “prophetic appeal”; Levinas’s style (which I have unfortunately had to reduce here to a set of propositions and do not have space to analyze in depth) itself resounds like that insistent call and appeal from the other that he understands as the essence of language. It comes across as an insistence, a battering, the demand of the alterity Levinas is trying to elicit. Its repetitiveness is a part of a lack of hierarchical ordering. But when waves break again and again, they repeat each time with a difference. In Derrida, repetition is a part of parodic doubling, an off-centering displacement; in Levinas, stylistic repetitiveness expresses the overflow of the Infinite.<sup>13</sup>

This prophetic appeal is not by any means an orthodox theology. “Theology would be possible only as the contestation of the purely religious” (1981: 196 n.19). Theological language belongs to the realm of the said and so “destroys the religious situation of transcendence. The infinite ‘presents’ itself anarchically, but thematization loses the anarchy which alone can accredit it. Language about God rings false or becomes a myth, that is, can never be taken literally” (Ibid.: 197 n.24). The other than being is not theological—“of the logos” or any “ology” or assertion of a God who is the Being behind or beyond beings. Though the Other “resembles God,” the relation to the other

---

by it a particular ethnic group which probably really did fulfill an incomparable destiny. But to interpret in this manner would shrink the general aspect of the idea enunciated in the talmudic passage, would be to forget that Israel means a people who has received the Law and as a result, a human nature which has arrived at the fullness of its responsibilities and of its self-consciousness. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—that is a human nature which is no longer childish.” I am grateful to Annette Aronowicz for this unpublished translation of “Judaism and Revolution” from *Quatre lectures talmudiques*.

13. I am indebted to Annette Aronowicz for this insight about repetition as an aspect of the idea of infinity in Levinas’s style (personal interview, July 7, 1987).

and the assignation from the Good survive the death of God (Ibid.: 123).

On the other hand, Levinas does clearly use the name “God” as a name outside essence; “It precedes all divinity” (Ibid.: 190 n.38). In the very first pages of *Otherwise Than Being*, he states that “to hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and in onto-theology” [Heidegger’s project] (Ibid.: xlii).

Furthermore, all of Levinas’s key philosophical ideas are found in his Jewish writings. To what extent the philosophy “influenced” the Jewish writings or the Jewish writings “influenced” the philosophy is perhaps the wrong question. “Double reading” is perhaps the better term we can borrow from Derrida. Levinas sees himself as a philosopher in his approach to the Talmud, the Bible, the problems of modern Judaism; at the same time, his conception of philosophy as first of all and pre-eminently ethics and prophetic reason is very Jewish.

Not surprisingly, he defines that ethical appeal as the very essence of Judaism. Judaism is the “conscience of the world, justice, witness, martyrdom”—“as if Jewish destiny was a fissure in the shell of impenetrable being, and awakening to an insomnia where the inhuman is no longer covered and hidden by the political necessities it manufactures. . . . The prophetic moment of human reason . . . rupture of the natural and historical constantly reconstituted and, thus, Revelation always forgotten” (1982: 18). Or, in *Difficile liberté*, he writes that the fundamental message of Jewish thought consists in

restoring the meaning of all experience to the ethical relation between men . . . to call on the personal responsibility of man, in which he feels chosen and irreplaceable, to realize a human society where men are treated as men. This realization of the just society is ipso facto an elevation of man to the company with God . . . is itself the meaning of life. To the extent of saying that the meaning of the real consists in the function of ethics; this is to say that the universe is sacred. But it is in an ethical sense that it is sacred. Ethics is an optical instrument to the divine . . . The Divine can only manifest itself in relation to one’s neighbor. For the Jew, incarnation is neither possible nor necessary. (1963: 187)

Levinas does not reject philosophy for Judaism or vice versa. In his view, the modern western Jew must approach Judaism with all the resources of Western tradition—independently judge and question Judaism: “resay it in the language of the University: philosophy and philology” (Ibid.: 75). Yet he has passed through assimilation and through the collapse of European culture in the Holocaust and must bring this culture, too, to judgment.

Here, perhaps, is one answer to Derrida’s question of why Lev-

inas continues to use philosophical language. Levinas is a Jew, a Jew and a Greek who lives both interpretations at once; he prophetically calls Judaism to philosophy and philosophy to Judaism. He can do so because his call comes ultimately from the primary and irreducible interhuman relation to the other. On another level, Judaism is the “other” of philosophy and philosophy is the “other” of Judaism. The call is a call of one form of reason to “an other.” In this way, he interrogates and redefines both the sacred and the secular; he writes neither philosophy nor theology in their traditional senses; nor is he a Greek or Jew in any simple or familiar way. Like Derrida, his work is an uncategorizable hybrid, an often dissonant doubling.

Indeed he describes the interhuman relationship, the relation to the other, with a metaphor of doubleness: “interface.”

The interhuman is thus an interface: a double axis where what is “of the world” *qua phenomenological intelligibility* is juxtaposed with what is not “of the world” *qua ethical responsibility*. It is in this ethical perspective that God must be thought and not in the ontological perspective. . . . as the God of alterity. (Cohen 1986: 20)

Biblical thought, in this sense, has

influenced my ethical reading of the interhuman, whereas Greek thought has largely determined its philosophical expression in language. . . . philosophy can be at once both Greek and non-Greek in its inspiration. These two different sources of inspiration coexist as two different tendencies in modern philosophy, and it is my own personal task to identify this dual origin of meaning—*der Ursprung der Sinnhaften*—in the interhuman relationship. (Cohen 1986: 21)<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, his idea of the “saying” as the otherness which is the excess of meaning in all language and the very *prophetic dignity of language*—implies that all secular literature is related to Scripture. The religious essence of all language may be concretized in the Scriptures but it is something that “all literature awaits or commemorates, that it celebrates or profanes” (1982: 8). This otherness as opening is a call to exegesis. For the book as the “said” retains the trace and call of this saying. Thus the ethical nature of reading and interpretation are not restricted to the reading of “sacred” texts. For language is not merely

14. The reasons for this double reading and double attachment are complex, as we have seen. Levinas’s thought is unique in many ways but also shares trends with other modern Jewish thinkers such as Hermann Cohen in stressing the rational and ethical character of Judaism. Nathan Rotenstreich attributes this trend in part to the influence of Kant. Ethics could remain a realm unchallenged by Kant’s critique, as we have noted. But also, “The ethical interpretation of Judaism makes possible a further, more radical interpretation, that the ethical teaching of Judaism may be meaningful and binding apart from religious attachment. Thus the ethical interpretation can be placed historically on the borderline of the religious attitude and the secular transformation of Judaism” (Rotenstreich 1968: 3–4).

instrumental or cognitive, but “coordinates me with another to whom I speak; it signifies from the face of the other” (Ibid.: 9) and thus calls me to responsibility. Reading itself, then, partakes of the ethical structure of the other than being.

This aspect of reading is missed, for example, in de Man’s mode of deconstruction. He appropriated the epistemological critique of Derrida as mainly a cognitive problem and thus understood the problem of interpretation as undecidability or impossibility. Perhaps for him, that marked the site of the “otherness of language” and one could go no further; there is no “excedence” and certainly no “good beyond being.” Thus there can be no positivity but only impossible aporias. Rhetoric became the “other” of philosophy for de Man but lost its classical sense of language as an *action* or effect on a public audience. Rhetorical tropes are negative epistemological challenges to grammar and logic and must be separated from “performative speech acts” and the “pragmatic banality” of psychology (1982: 19). Similarly, the model for teaching is “not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved” (Ibid.: 3). Despite these rather chilling words, J. Hillis Miller reports that all de Man’s agonies over undecidability and impossibility should not be misunderstood: “I remember de Man looking me in the eye and saying, ‘For me, the most important questions are religious questions.’ So much for ‘nihilism’” (Campbell 1986: 48).

In contrast, the “other” or double of the text for Levinas, what he calls its “second sonority” (1982: 137), is not parody or aporia but “inspiration,” the “more in the less.” Inspiration is the very fact that language can say more than it says; at the hour of its ethical truth, language is prophecy—not prophecy as some type of individual genius or frenzied possession but an “ability of human speech in overflowing the first intentions which bear it,” the very spirituality of the spirit (Ibid.: 141).

Inspiration as this “otherness” or other sense (the “tearing of the Same by the other”) (Ibid.: 138 n.11) is also the ethical beyond of conscience. A critical point here is that the other voice in the voice is *without* any “organized content.” The content is the “meaning of meaning” awakening the listener to the proximity of the other—not stopping at self-reflexiveness. Revelation thus calls to exegesis and “inspiration is the exercise of reason itself” (Ibid.: 141) requiring the participation of the reader.

### The Final Responsibilities of Reason and Play

What can be said, in summary, of the conflict of rabbis and poets, parodic play and prophetic reason? One key issue is heteronomy and autonomy of the subject, an issue also at the center of contemporary

literary theory. The rupture with the egoistic realm of cognition and being in Levinas signifies the relation to the other as heteronomous but not as an enslavement; instead it is a “difficult liberty;” the “paradox of responsibility”: “To be free is only to do what no other person can do in my place” (Ibid.: 172); “human autonomy rests on a supreme heteronomy” (1963: 24–25). But for Derrida, the poet (and by extension philosopher-poet or critic) needs to break the Tablets of the Law to elicit the “other” of language, the play of the text; poetic autonomy thus liberates an otherness which can put philosophy in question.

Yet as Derrida writes, we are both “rabbis” and “poets,” free and unfree, caught always between philosophy and its other. We live both interpretations simultaneously. For Levinas, Judaism and philosophy are the pair that put each other in question; for Derrida, that pair is “literature” and philosophy. Both Derrida and Levinas interrupt philosophy by soliciting its other. But they differ in defining the “call” that originally engenders this putting into question—and the kind of response it requires. As Derrida writes at the beginning of his essay on Levinas, however, the question itself is what they share: philosophy is now a “community of the question about the possibility of the question” (1978: 79).

For Levinas, the very “awakening by the Other of the same” is, finally, “revelation” and opening to transcendence. More than any specific content, isn’t revelation precisely “to think this awakening,” asks Levinas, now sounding Derridean, “to put in question the rationality of reason and even the possibility of the question”? This is revelation as an “incessant questioning of quietude and priority of the Same . . . burning without consummation of an inextinguishable flame.” “Isn’t the prescription of Jewish revelation in its priceless obligation this very modality?” (1982: 180). Yet here is the step beyond Derrida: “Otherwise said, the traditionality of the rupture isn’t it practical reason? Isn’t the model of revelation ethical?” (Ibid.: 176)

For Levinas, then, philosophy is ultimately the servant of the non-philosophical, the good beyond being or as Richard Cohen prefers to explain it, the “better than being.” Levinas nevertheless remains a philosopher; for the truth is found neither in philosophy or its refusal but in the alternation or oscillation of “Concept and refusal of concept” (1981: 126). For this oscillation as ambiguity is the opening of the other.

As Cohen also notes, though, Derrida’s idea of the play of meaning in his differential theory of signs lays waste both transcendence and immanence (Cohen 1983: 245) and in Cohen’s view, the reason/play opposition is too simple. Cohen argues that the answer to the crisis of philosophy is not the opposition between play and reason but a recognition of the bond uniting them; they are both forms of privilege.

The privilege of reason is not the metaphysical privilege of presence “which is rightfully subverted by play, but rather the privileging exigency of *responsibility*.” Reason is not solely the rational but a form of responsibility and “play is reason’s necessary companion if reason is to remain reasonable. Reason has a sense of humor,” and play is responsive to this (Ibid.: 251).

In the end, perhaps, the real challenge to metaphysics is best summed up by the Frankfurt school luminary, Max Horkheimer: “I do not know how far metaphysicians are correct; perhaps somewhere there is a particularly compelling metaphysical system or fragment. But I do know that metaphysicians are usually impressed only to the smallest degree by what men suffer” (1972: 232).

### References

- Bakhtin, M. M.  
 1981 *The Dialogic Imagination*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press).  
 1984 *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).
- Bernasconi, Robert  
 1985 “The Trace of Levinas in Derrida,” in *Derrida and Difference*, edited by D. Wood and R. Bernasconi (Coventry, Eng.: Parousia Press, University of Warwick), 17–44.  
 1987 “Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics,” in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, edited by John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 122–139.
- Blanchot, Maurice  
 1986 “Our Clandestine Companion,” see Cohen, *Face to Face With Levinas*, 41–52.
- Burggraeve, Roger  
 1986 *Emmanuel Levinas: Une bibliographie primaire et secondaire (1925–1985)* (Leuven, Belg.: Center for Metaphysics and Philosophy of God).
- Campbell, Colin  
 1986 “The Tyranny of the Yale Critics,” *New York Times Magazine* (February): 20–48.
- Cohen, Richard A.  
 1983 “The Privilege of Reason and Play,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 2: 242–255.
- Cohen, Richard A., ed.  
 1986 *Face to Face With Levinas* (New York: SUNY Press).
- De Man, Paul  
 1982 “The Resistance to Theory,” *Yale French Studies* 63: 3–20.
- Derrida, Jacques  
 1976 [1967] *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).  
 1978 [1967] “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 79–153.
- Descombes, Vincent  
 1980 *Modern French Philosophy*, translated by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Foucault, Michel  
 1977 “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice:*

- Selected Essays and Interviews*, edited and translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 139–164.
- Frank, Joseph  
1986 “The Voices of Mikhail Bakhtin,” *New York Review of Books* 23 (October): 56–60.
- Jay, Martin  
1972 “The Frankfurt School and the Genesis of Critical Theory,” in *The Unknown Dimension: European Marxism Since Lenin*, edited by Dick Howard and Karl Klare (New York: Basic Books), 225–247.
- Kearney, Richard  
1984 “Jacques Derrida,” in *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 105–126.  
1986 “Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas,” see Cohen, *Face to Face With Levinas*, 13–25.
- Levinas, Emmanuel  
1962 “Transcendance et Hauteur,” *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 56: 89–101.  
1963 *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le Judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel).  
1963 “‘Entre deux Mondes,’ Biographie spirituelle de Franz Rosenzweig,” in *La Conscience Juive. Données et débats*, edited by Éliane Amado Lévy-Valensi and J. Halpérin (Paris: PUF), 121–149.  
1966 “On the Trail of the Other,” translated by Daniel Hoy, *Philosophy Today* 10: 34–46.  
1967 “Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge,” in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman (LaSalle, IL: Open Court), 133–150.  
1968 *Quatre lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit).  
1969 [1961] *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).  
1978 [1947] *Existence and Existents*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff).  
1978 “Signature,” edited and translated by Adrian Peperzak, *Research in Phenomenology* 8: 175–189.  
1981 [1974] *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff).  
1982 *L'au delà du verset: Lectures et discours talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit).  
1985 *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations With Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press).
- Malka, Salomon  
1984 *Lire Levinas* (Paris: Cerf).
- Megill, Allan  
1985 *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Miller, J. Hillis  
1987 *The Ethics of Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press).  
1987 “Presidential Address, 1986: ‘The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base,’” *PMLA* 102: 281–291.
- Ponet, James  
1985 “Faces: A Meditation,” *Orim: a Jewish Journal at Yale* 1: 58–76.
- Rose, Margaret  
1979 *Parody/Meta-Fiction* (London: Croom Helm).

Rosenzweig, Franz

1971 [1930s] 2nd German ed. *The Star of Redemption*, translated by William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston).

Rotenstreich, Nathan

1968 *Jewish Philosophy in Modern Times: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston).

Schwarzchild, Steven S.

1985 "An Introduction to the Thought of R. Isaac Hutner," *Modern Judaism* 5: 235–278.