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Face to Face: Levinas and Voegelin

To whom can I speak today?
Faces have disappeared.
Every man has a downcast face toward his fellows

(Egyptian text, c. 2000 B.C., Voegelin OH-I)

The lion roars, who will not tremble,
God speaks, who will not prophesy?

(Amos 3:8, in Levinas “God and Philosophy”)

Forty Years Ago

That is when I began to study seriously the work of Eric Voegelin beginning with Israel and Revelation in order to teach a seminary course (in Seattle) in fundamental moral theology. Knowing that Jesus was a Jew I thought it imperative to explore more deeply the Old Testament formation of images of God and images of man that must have informed his awareness. At the same time I had the good fortune to meet an Orthodox rabbi, Arthur Jacobovitz, student of the famed “Rav”, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik. From him I learned that there was much more to Judaism than the Old Testament. Namely there was Oral Torah, rabbinic Judaism, the Talmud. In late 1969, still in Seattle, I was able to meet and share a number of hours with Voegelin himself, newly returned to the United States. That was the beginning of a friendship that continued until his death in 1985.

In 1970 I began Ph.D studies in the Graduate School at Yale in Religious Ethics under James Gustafson, successor to his mentor, H. Richard Niebuhr, on whom I had done an S.T.L. dissertation in 1967 concentrating especially on his *The Responsible Self*. I was thus able to welcome in that spirit the newly translated *Totality and Infinity* of Emmanuel Levinas. My dissertation was to be titled: The Face of the Other: Religion as Ethics in the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas. In 1972 I went to Paris and spent six months working with Levinas. I have never been the same. The combination of Voegelin and Levinas has been a tremendous liberation for me. I feel I can still breathe the freedom of their search.

The Primary Experience: The Other and I

From the preceding account I hope you retain the great importance for me as I began my work of the Jewish way, the prophetic and the Talmudic, the Prophets and the Law. We will turn to that area more when I move to the next section. First, here, I wish to deal with the key issue in Levinas with which the present audience, who know more probably about Voegelin matters, might already have some familiarity, that is, the primacy for Levinas of the ethical demand made on each of us by and in what he calls “the face of the other.”

My thesis, is that Voegelin’s views on the emergence of “the other” and anything like ethics in that emergence requires a history. In Levinas’s case it is the history of his Judaism.

Levinas’s efforts from at least the early ‘50s and continuing for more than thirty years almost always stemmed from the primary problem of his teacher Husserl’s 1929 *Cartesian Meditations* of which Levinas was the translator. His French text was the one that served as the basis of discussions on precisely this issue of “the other” between Eric Voegelin and Alfred Schütz.

I will first let the texts speak for themselves but pick up a few of the sentences to comment upon in my oral presentation. The new publication of CW-30 will allow many readers to follow the trail in more detail. The two main letters that I present are not in that volume (Thomas Hollweck, the editor, however, gave me great assistance in translating the ones I deal with here.) We must wait for the great separate collection of the Schütz-Voegelin correspondence and its brilliant accompanying volume on the letters and the friendship by Gilbert Weiss (whose work called my attention to the crucial letter of January 14, 1953) to savor the back and forth between these two great friends, punctuated in October of 1952 by Schütz’s exasperated exclamation: *Aber warum, warum, warum nehmen Sie eine solche monopolistische-imperialistische Haltung ein.* “But why, why, why do you take such a monopolistic-imperialistic position? (Certainly this suggests Voegelin to be a rather non-Levinasian character.)

[Aron Gurwitsch, friend of Voegelin & Schütz and who knew Husserl personally as did Schütz must be mentioned in this regard since we have also Voegelin’s letters to him in CW-30. (See also the letters between Schütz and Gurwitsch, especially those that concern Voegelin, in *Philosophers in Exile*, edited by Richard Grathoff (Indiana 1989).]

TEXTS:

The first two items are from Voegelin book reviews in 1934 and 1944 (CW-13). The last two are from letters to Schütz late in 1952 and early in 1953. What he introduces in the letters with the primary bond of community of being remains through all his later work. It is the point at which we can truly bring him face to face with Levinas.

(1)

From the end of Voegelin's review of Schütz's: *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*

"Husserl's efforts have not to date succeeded in making transparent the constitution of the Thou in the consciousness of the I The solution of this problem in the *Meditations Cartesiennes* is not successful and it seems to me questionable whether it can be solved from the standpoint of immanent-consciousness; the assumption of a direct contact between human existences appears to me indispensable [*unerlässlich*] as the ground on which analyses of consciousness such as those Schütz so excellently gives can then be carried out." [The German word in italics was mistranslated in CW-13, please note.]

(2)

From the end of Voegelin's review of M. Farber's *The Foundation of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy*

"...the reflective method is essentially undogmatic and cannot lead to a metaphysical position, it certainly is compatible with one – and perhaps with more than one. It should not be forgotten that the 'reduction' in the *Meditations* of Descartes, which served as the model for Husserl's, is set in the framework of a traditional Christian meditation, and that the Christian meditation, with all its metaphysical implications, is the root from which the philosophical methods of reduction and reflection grow.

"... The idealistic inclinations of Husserl, however unsatisfactory in their expression, are the last trace of the metaphysical unrest that made possible the Cartesian method of reduction. It may be permitted to suspect that this unrest, which reveals itself openly in the later Husserl, was even in the earlier phase the hidden source of productivity, providing the drive and the pathos of the phenomenological achievement; and it may be feared that with the round condemnation of this unrest, the source of further achievement will dry up."

[These lines I think also capture the spirit of the fifty years and more of Levinas's continuous work in and on and through and beyond Husserl. But his is a Jewish meditation.]

(3)

September 15, 1952
Voegelin to Schütz

...[Regarding Schütz's criticism of Sartre, Voegelin goes on]

.... but I cannot see that Husserl's theory of the problem of the constitution of the Other [Du-Konstitution] can solve [the problem]. My sense is that from the position of a theory of the I and the stream of consciousness it is unsolvable. The bond of being between man and man (as between Man, World and God) precedes the differentiation of the I and the Other. The world (encompassing God, Cosmos, Society and other men) is understood as being of the same kind as one's own, before personal existence within being in its essential traits can be clearly distinguished. The way does not go from the I toward the Other but rather from undifferentiated participation in the being of the personal existences of the others (not yet clearly differentiated) to the differentiation of things and their essences, and especially of the I and the Other. This assertion expresses in my opinion an empirical, historical finding of intellectual history and especially the history of the myth (see, e.g., Frankfort or Kerenyi). The differentiated I can only through a re-submergence in the preconscious participation in being attain the differentiated Other (through living Sacrament, etc.) Here it seems to me lies the meaning of the Platonic and Aristotelian theory of community (community through eros or noetic friendship), in which the knowledge about the primordial participation, even though differentiated into the "philosophical," is still retained. The medieval theory of society stands in this regard still on a secure foundation because the lived presence of the Logos in the sacramental *corpus mysticum* still includes the preconscious participation of humans in the common being. From Descartes on, as I already said, I do not see how one can reconstruct this knowledge from consciousness.

(4)

On January 14, 1953 Voegelin sent Schütz a typescript entitled "The Symbolization of Being and Existence". This text is identical with what under the title "The Symbolization of Order," would be published in 1956 as the Introduction to Order and History.

Dear friend,

Here is a piece in which you will find several things about the Du-Problem. To clarify: it is the introductory chapter of the "History" in which I seek to sketch out the ontological principles of the whole investigation as far as that is possible in brief form. There the Du-Problem will be central, because in the older history all that happened to man, not only the other man, still was experienced as "Du." Subjectivizing with its monadic narrowing of the attitude toward the world to a stream of consciousness is specific to modernity. On this point we are, I think, in agreement. With this chapter, I would believe, lies in principle the concrete solution of the problem that you designate as "a major and serious task for philosophy." It only sounds apparently arrogant then outside of the philosophy that you had in mind when you wrote this line. There is for sure as well the other in which this problem never became problematic; and in that tradition my own research

moves. Husserl, just like Heidegger and Sartre, have very much to the detriment of their philosophizing, ignored the ways classical philology, the study of myth, and the science of religion, in which further, the classical tradition of philosophy lived on.

REFLECTIONS

One might be tempted to add Levinas to Voegelin's closing list: "Husserl...Heidegger...Sartre." My resistance to that temptation is the evidence of Levinas, through his living Judaism, breaking through to a primordial layer in the tension between the three partners in Voegelin that bear the names God, Man, and Society. By the way, nowhere else in Voegelin do I know that he makes it so clear as here that by Society he means not only what will open up the problem of the historical (cf. "Historiogenesis") and of the political within the social but as well and emphatically the abiding presence of the I-Other relationship, the man to man encounter that for Levinas is ethics.

So are "God" and the "Face of the Other" for Levinas only strong expressions of his consciousness formed by Judaism? Or are they already living presences in Voegelin's Cosmos of the Primary Experience? For, one might ask, from where does Voegelin get his "God" and "Man"? Yes, they emerge into the greater luminosity of the tensional mystery in the process of differentiation in history. But what might Voegelin's "hominization" process be, to use a current term for a major problem in evolutionary science?

I offer help to Voegelin from Levinas:

The Hebrew scriptures are not textbooks in evolutionary theory but they may tell us something about what really is "Man" (remember "the Man," (*Adam*) means both Adam and Eve). What follows is my attempt to help Levinas help Voegelin by building on the primacy of "the Question" in the formation of human consciousness-conscience. And I add in a bit of Girard for good measure by emphasizing beyond the original rivalry between the "Man" and God that Voegelin highlighted in the first paragraph of the first chapter of *Israel and Revelation*: ["To establish a government is an essay in world creation," the paragraph begins ... and it ends: "in his creative endeavor man is a partner in the double sense of a creature and a rival of God"] a question about origins: what is first in man's awareness of his humanity, the first development of a human conscious conscience: murder or sacrifice, or murder and sacrifice? Levinas concentrates on the first questions from God to the Man: "Adam, where are you?" . . . "Cain, where is your brother?" And Man's answer to God's question is itself a question (as a first troubled sense of responsibility?): "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Let me suggest something that might be even closer to the core of Levinas. I owe this example to my gracious guide in the region of Veneto, the Italian philosopher and scholar of art, Giuseppe Fornari. My find there with Giuseppe leads me to ask: Is the true birth of humanity not expressed more deeply in the figure of Eve?

At the Museo Canoviano, the Gipsoteca in Asolo-Possagno, with Giuseppe I almost literally stumbled upon what appeared to be a minor piece that actually revealed itself as an exquisite small model for a “Pieta.” As far as I know Canova never turned it into a full-sized marble. A modeling for a classical Pieta with Mary the mother tenderly enfolding the body of her crucified son, Jesus? No. It bore the label: “Eve grieving for Abel”. Perhaps the first truly human awareness is the inner emotion, the movement of the womb, maternal entrails, root of the Hebrew word for mercy, *rehem*, that would express, beyond murder and sacrifice, the true maternal heart of the human.

Israel ... The Prophets and the Law: Metastatic Tension

It may be important to note for our comparative purposes that the 1953 letter to Schütz was written as Voegelin was beginning to plunge into the sources and materials for the great bulk of his first volume, the sections on Moses and the Prophets. We might recall that his full work on the prophets came well after he had essentially completed the “later” volumes on Polis and Philosophy. Israel and Revelation manifests for me the richer Voegelin, that emerged after his exploration of the Prophets. (That may be my Levinas bias that goes back almost forty years, but perhaps not.)

Here I simply want to highlight the profound agreement I see between Voegelin and Levinas in regard to the philosophical meaning of the symbol Israel that will stand for universal humanity. [The page numbers (LSU) where Voegelin develops his similar understanding of this theme: 140-141, 143-144, 163, 430, 438, 464n, 472]. The apparent tendency in Voegelin’s history toward “supersessionism”, i.e., the replacement of Israel by Christianity, will be soon resisted, or at least the problem clarified by him, in his Introduction to OH-II (as well as in his essay “History and Gnosis” on Bultmann). The “clarification” is indeed illuminating in regard to the limitations of St. Paul’s understanding:

“The Pauline method of historical interpretation is defective because it does not take into account the problems of compactness and differentiation However, for the men who live unbroken in the Jewish tradition the problems of this nature do not exist. In the compact order of the Chosen People, the Torah is inseparable from the Berith; and the Berith is the unconditioned act of divine grace, by which Israel is set apart from the nations as the *am Yahweh*, the people of God. The chosenness of Israel does not rest on the observation of the law, but on the act of divine grace which St. Paul apparently did not perceive. The ‘sons of God’ are already ‘the ransomed of Yahweh’ and need no Son of God for their salvation.”

The last sentence on “sons of God” and the Son of God could have been taken literally from the work of Franz Rosenzweig who until he came to that awareness at Yom Kippur in 1913 was about to convert to Christianity as had his friend, Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy. It is to Nahum N. Glatzer, youthful disciple of the dying A.L.S. afflicted Rosenzweig in

Frankfurt, and then a major Jewish scholar in the U.S. and a friend of Voegelin's, that we owe a long footnote on the Talmudic interpretation of prophecy in Israel and Revelation (446). One must read the whole carefully nuanced footnote. I select only some sentences from the end:

"A more immediate problem was the suppression of pneumatic irrationalism within the Jewish community," writes Voegelin. He then goes on quoting Glatzer (in condensed form): "The rabbis pointed out indefinite, vague and more theoretical prophetic terms, which lent themselves to support pneumatic religions, and translated them into concrete demands. Terms like 'Knowledge of God,' 'Covenant,' 'Way of the Lord,' opened the way to uncontrolled religious emotional experience. The Talmud, without losing sight of the deeper issue in the relation of man to God, stresses 'study of the Torah' and 'observance of the Law' as the concrete meaning of 'Covenant' and 'Knowledge of God,' thus demonstrating the common task of prophet and rabbi."

These are major points that Levinas will develop in his more strictly Jewish writings but that also deeply inform his philosophical analyses.

The Hebrew word "*keparah*" (think Yom Kippur) that can be translated "expiation", Levinas told me was becoming more and more central to his philosophical understanding. It certainly expresses the kind of "sacrifice" that the Prophets call for instead of "burnt offerings": the sacrifice of the heart, in service of God extended to the neighbor, and to the orphan and the widow and the stranger. "Is not that what is to know me? – It is Yahweh who speaks." (Jeremiah 22:16)

In 1973 at the Johns Hopkins Levinas let me photocopy his typescript draft of "God and Philosophy". This contained his handwritten additions and revisions, especially to the concluding section "Prophetic Signification". Here we find the Amos text that I placed at the head of my paper. (He suggested I might use the essay as the axis for my thesis.)

[Note: In three of the four English publications of "God and Philosophy" the Amos text is mistranslated in a way that precisely reverses its meaning(!) Only in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* does the translation have it right. (The original French in *Le Nouveau Commerce*, Printemps 1975, had a misprint in the footnote on p. 125 that changed 3:8 to 2:8. This may have sent the translators searching in their English bibles for something in chapter 2 that might fit, like 2:12.)]

Finally, a comment on "Metastasis" in Voegelin. Yes, it can represent "pneumatic irrationalism" as well as the "Gnostic" temptation to dramatic social change or to escape into various utopias. But its origin is in a personal prophetic experience of conversion, of change of heart consonant with Levinas's understanding of the prophetic nature of man.

Voegelin, again from his Introduction to OH-II:

"The leap in being entails the obligations to communicate and to listen. Revelation and response are not a man's private affair; for the revelation comes to one man for all men,

and in his response he is the representative of mankind. And since the response is representative it endows the recipient of revelation, in relation to his fellow men, with the authority of a prophet.” (p.6)

This is near the heart of Levinas’s philosophy. Is everyman in Voegelin called to be a prophet?

Veritas Redarguens et Veritas Lumens:
Luminosity, Intentionality and Language

There is a misprint early in the CW edition of Voegelin’s last work, OH-V, *In Search of Order*. I will use the LSU original, the first paragraph of the third section, entitled “The Complex of Consciousness-Reality-Language”. It is the end of a long sentence, its second half, on which I want to focus. (I added the underlining.)

[The CW turned the last words: “a thing intended” into “a thing tended” (A Heideggerian slip? or just the typesetter’s overlooking the hyphenation of “in-tended” at the end of a line in the original?)]:

“There is no autonomous, nonparadoxical language, ready to be used by man as a system of signs when he wants to refer to the paradoxical structures of reality and consciousness. Words and their meanings are just as much a part of the reality to which they refer as the being things are partners in the comprehending reality; language participates in the paradox of a quest that lets reality become luminous for its truth by pursuing truth as a thing intended.”

We remember that “comprehending reality” (Voegelin’s “It-reality”) indicates the primary complex of God and Man, World and Society announced in Voegelin’s letters to Schütz in 1952 and 1953 where we saw Voegelin recognize the presence of the I-Other reality in the partnership. Now Language finds its place in the partnership.

How extremely important then is Levinas’s insistence that language comes first between persons in ethical relation, even before spoken and written words? It is the “Saying” that must inspire (or be distorted) in all “says,” the first “expression” and the one that is to be understood as commandment in the face of the other, understood also as “Oral Torah” (the rabbinic discourse), the prophetic word inspiring the words of all the books of the biblical tradition. For Levinas it is not only Jewish books, but the ones that are universally human in all great world literatures (He lists in his 1982 “Foreword” to *Beyond the Verse*: Shakespeare, Molière, Dante, Cervantes, Goethe, Pushkin.)

“I often say that books are more interior than interiority, which is not a paradox at all, but supposes a perception of degrees of interiority, and a distrust of untutored fabrications.” (1986) [*Is it Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, p 26]

I return to the Voegelin text to single out and emphasize the words “truth” ... “language” ... “quest” ... “luminous” and “intended”. Luminosity cannot be separated from Intentionality and Language is an essential part of the Quest of Truth. Is it stretching too much to combine Voegelin’s and Levinas’s centrality of questioning in their descriptions of knowing and intentionality? I offer two texts by Levinas and one by Voegelin to illustrate my approach to this issue:

The first may surprise the reader because it reveals Levinas’s being captured by a line from Augustine:

“In Book 10 of his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine opposes to the *veritas lucens* [truth that shines] the *veritas redarguens*, or the truth that accuses or puts into question.”
(p 170 in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*)

Here may be a lesson for Voegelinians enamored perhaps too much or too quickly of the pleasant glow of luminosity. The luminous Truth and its proper language emerge from the searching question, the question not only about being but the one that puts our own being into question. In no way do I think would Voegelin reject Levinas’s emphasis on this heart of human questioning.

To link questioning and intentionality in the Levinas manner, I offer lines from a footnote to “In the Image of God,” according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner’ (pages 214-215 in Levinas’s collection *Beyond the Verse*.)

The footnote might be entitled “Intentionality as Prayer.”

“I am proposing the question in a strictly personal capacity ... whether prayer, before being the saying of a said, is not a way of invoking or searching or desiring, irreducible to all apophatic or doxic intentionality and to all derivations or types of intentionality. It may be wondered whether prayer is not a way of searching for something that cannot enter into any relation as an ending, and where we would thus have to make do with a near-reference. For all that, this near-reference would not just be implicit. The fact that it does not reach an ending would not be a way of sinking into indifference either. As a near-reference to an unnameable God, it would be distinguished not only from thematizing and objectivizing intentionality but even from dialogue’s questioning, for it would in no way be equivalent to the position of an ending. The audacity may be taken to the point of wondering whether intentionality is not already derived from prayer which would be the originary thinking-of-the-absent One.”

How does the sense of this text differ from Voegelin in the “Gospel and Culture”?

“[The Dutch Catechism attempt is...] a first step toward regaining the life of reason represented by philosophy. Both Plato’s eroticism of the search (*zetesis*) and Aristotle’s intellectually more aggressive *aporein* recognize in “man the questioner” the man moved by God to ask the questions that will lead him to the cause (*arche*) of being. The search

itself is the evidence of existential unrest; in the act of questioning, man's experience of his tension (*tasis*) toward the divine ground breaks forth in the word of inquiry as a prayer for the Word of the answer. Question and answer are intimately related one toward the other; the search moves in the *metaxy*, as Plato has called it, in the In-Between of poverty and wealth, of human and divine; the question is knowing, but its knowledge is yet the trembling of a question that may reach the true answer or miss it. This luminous search in which the finding of the true answer depends on asking the true question, and the asking of the true question on the spiritual apprehension of the true answer, is the life of reason." (CW-12, page 175)

The "existential unrest" the "tension" inseparable from the questioning search for truth that is the core of true human "intentionality" cannot be separated from the primary experience of the question that comes from the other in the name of God. It is in the title of the Levinas collection: *Is it Righteous to Be?*

THREE ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR CONSIDERATION:

I.

Levinas in 1948 introduced a Spanish-reading audience in the journal “*Sur*” published in Argentina to an essay on Heidegger that he had essentially written in 1940 but that was only to be published in French in 1949. The French text did not include, however, these very instructive short introductory paragraphs. The last two paragraphs are the only ones that I will translate here. I think that beyond Heidegger the words apply as well to the Levinas’s work on Husserl that was continuous from the late 1920s until well into the 1980s. They also call to mind Voegelin’s essay “Eternal Being in Time”.

Estas páginas procuran mostrar la separación entre lo espiritual y lo eterno con que la obra de Heidegger ha señalado toda la filosofía moderna. Cuando dejan entrever – prescindiendo, en lo posible, de la terminología de escuela – la dimension en que Heidegger descubre la pulsación misma del tiempo, nos permiten presentir, entre el cumplimiento de un acto espiritual y la obra temporal, un parentesco que no es meramente metaforico.

Al ideal de lo eterno a que aspirabe el espíritu y al que oponía las empresas perecederas de lo temporal, asesta Heidegger golpes terribles.

Lo que este ideal contiene de espíritu y de divino está, quizás, comprometido por Heidegger, y no podrá salvarse ni aun al precio de una profundización de su método o por el agregado de un o de diez nuevos analisis. Pero todo esto deberá buscarse, en lo sucesivo, en el tiempo. Y no podremos salir de Heidegger por la misma puerta por donde hemos entrado.

The last paragraphs encapsulate Levinas’s philosopher’s work of a lifetime as “Exodus”:

“To the ideal of the eternal to which the spirit aspires and to that which opposes the passing works of the temporal, Heidegger aim terrible blows.

“That which this ideal contains of the spirit and of the divine is, perhaps, compromised by Heidegger, and cannot be saved not even at the cost of a making his method more profound or by the collection of one or ten new analyses. Because all this has got to be sought, in the successive, in time. And we will not be able to exit from Heidegger by the same door through which we had entered.”

II.

The following very brief Introductory Note by Paul Ricoeur to the collection *Heidegger et le question de Dieu* (Paris 1980) applies to the work of both Voegelin and Levinas although Voegelin is not mentioned by Ricoeur.

Note Introductive

Ce qui m'a souvent étonné chez Heidegger, c'est qu'il ait, semble-t-il, systématiquement éludé la confrontation avec le bloc de la pensée hébraïque. Il lui est parfois arrivé de penser à partir de l'Evangile et de la théologie chrétienne; mais toujours en évitant le massif hébraïque, qui est l'étranger absolu par rapport au discours grec, il évite la pensée éthique avec ses dimensions de la relation à l'autre et à la justice dont à tant parlé Levinas. Il traite la pensée éthique très sommairement comme pensée de la valeur, telle que la pensée néo-kantienne l'avait présentée, et ne reconnaît pas sa différence radicale avec la pensée ontologique. Cette méconnaissance me semble parallèle à l'incapacité de Heidegger de faire le "pas en arrière" d'une manière qui pourrait permettre de penser adéquatement toutes les dimensions de la tradition occidentale. La tâche de repenser la tradition chrétienne par un "pas en arrière" n'exige-t-elle pas qu'on reconnaisse la dimension radicalement hébraïque du christianisme, qui est d'abord enraciné dans le judaïsme et seulement après dans la tradition grecque? Pourquoi réfléchir seulement sur Hölderlin et non pas sur les Psaumes, sur Jérémie? C'est là ma question.

III.

Derrida on the Levinas Style and Language:

From: "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Levinas" (1964
in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago 1978) pp 79-153 and 311-321

In an early footnote (p 312) Derrida reflects on reasons for what he calls his necessarily "partial reading" of Levinas's works especially of *Totalité et Infini* (1961):

But also because Levinas's writing, which would merit an entire separate study itself, and in which stylistic gestures (especially in *Totality and Infinity*) can less than ever be distinguished from intention, forbids the prosaic disembodiment into conceptual frameworks that is the first violence of all commentary. Certainly, Levinas recommends the good usage of prose which breaks Dionysiac charm or violence, and forbids poetic

rapture, but to no avail: in *Totality and Infinity* the use of metaphor, remaining admirable and most often – if not always – beyond rhetorical abuse, shelters within its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse.

By too often omitting to reproduce these metaphors in our disenchanted prose, are we faithful or unfaithful? Further, in *Totality and Infinity* the thematic development is neither purely deductive. It proceeds with the infinite insistence of waves on a beach: return and repetition, always, of the same wave against the same shore, in which, however, as each return recapitulates itself, it also infinitely renews and enriches itself. Because of all these challenges to the commentator and the critic, *Totality and Infinity* is a work of art and not a treatise.

Then on page 90:

This unthinkable truth of living experience, to which Levinas returns ceaselessly, cannot possibly be encompassed by philosophical speech without immediately revealing, by philosophy's own light, that philosophy's surface is severely cracked, and that what was taken for its solidity is its rigidity. It could doubtless be shown that it is in the nature of Levinas's writing, at its decisive moments, to move along these cracks, masterfully progressing by negations, and by negation against negation. Its proper route is not that of an "either this ... or that," but of a "neither this ... nor that." The poetic force of metaphor is often the trace of this rejected alternative, this wounding of language. Through it, in its opening, experience itself is silently revealed.

TRANSLATING LEVINAS

Richard Cohen who wrote a long, fine Introduction to the English translation of Levinas's *Humanism of the Other* (2003) [*L'Humanisme de l'autre homme* (1972)] comments near the end of his Introduction about learning how to read Levinas whether in French or English. Then Nidra Poller, the translator, gives us her own instructions drawn from her attempts adequately to translate Levinas. This as the end of her "Translator's Note":

Richard Cohen

Let the reader beware: Levinas does not read easily either in the original French or in translation. There is a virtue in this, however. When years ago I was worried about the awkwardness of my translation of Levinas's seminal article "God and Philosophy," Bob Lechner, then editor of *Philosophy Today*, where the translation was first published, soothed my anxieties by remarking: "One does not read Levinas, one meditates on him." I think his comment is both true and instructive. Anyone who has seriously read

Levinas's philosophical writings cannot help but be aware of their depth and originality. Almost every sentence includes one or several allusions to other philosophers and thinkers. They are writings thoroughly grounded in and responsive to the entire history of the West. In this sense they are "master" writings. (p. xxxviii)

Nidra Poller

How then are we to honor a great text, a brilliant mind? I think that the challenge lies in finding one's personal point of leverage. And so, within the limits of my intelligence, learning, and experience, I have tried to follow Levinas to the utmost limits of his thought and create an understanding (*entente*) such that every word of the English version is informed by his spirit, and no word is simply stuck on the page as an anonymous mass-produced word. *Se donner, le Moi, la conscience, le visage, en-deça, autrui* ... these are only words. They must not be stumbling blocks to the re-creation of a work that speaks beyond being. Behind these words, written in French because by the force of circumstance, "the accidents of history," Levinas left his native Lithuania and settled in France, behind these words are others in German, Greek, and Hebrew; behind these circumstances are others that brought the line of Levinas from Israel to Lithuania by way of, who knows, Spain, Holland ...? What I bring to Levinas, in the hopes of compensating for inevitable weakness, gaps in knowledge, is my entire life experience, the depth of my own reflections, the possibilities of articulating this experience. For it is so true that it might seem like a commonplace to say that one cannot go any deeper than one's own depth. This or that concept, this or that sentence taken out of context, can be widely debated, and rightfully so. But the intricate dance, the exquisite pathways, the meticulous stitching that shapes and builds and weaves and displays the thought of Levinas is a presence, and I have reached into the depths of his language to bring that presence to life. (p. xlvii)