

3 Levinas and the face of the other

The human face we encounter first of all as the other's face strikes us as a highly ambiguous phenomenon. It arises here and now without finding its place within the world. Being neither something real inside, nor something ideal outside the world, the face announces the corporeal absence (*leibhaftige Abwesenheit*) of the other. In Merleau-Ponty's terms we may call it the corporeal emblem of the other's otherness.¹ But we do not thereby resolve the enigma of the other's face. This enigma may be approached in different ways. In contrast to the later Merleau-Ponty, who tries to deepen our experience more and more, looking for the invisible within the visible, the untouchable within the touchable, Levinas prefers a kind of thinking and writing which may be called eruptive. Many sentences, especially in his last writings, look like blocks of lava spat out by a hidden vulcan. Words like 'evasion', 'rupture', 'interruption' or 'invasion' indicate a thinking which is obsessed by the provocative otherness of the other. They suggest a special sort of immediacy. In contrast to Hegel's immediacy, which is only the beginning of a long process of mediation, Levinas's immediacy breaks through all kinds of mediations, be it laws, rules, codes, rituals, social roles or any other kind of order. The otherness or strangeness of the other manifests itself as the extraordinary par excellence: not as something given or intended, but as a certain disquietude, as a *dérangement* which puts us out of our common tracks. The human face is just the foyer of such bewilderments, lurking at the borderlines which separate the normal from the anomalous. The bewildering effects lose their stimulating force if the face is taken either as something too real or as something too sublime. Although Levinas explicitly repudiates both possibilities, we will see that he has more problems avoiding the latter. He pays

much more attention to the breaking of orders than to the orders themselves. But phenomenologically orientated ethics, approaching the demand of the other, turns into moralism when starting immediately from the other, instead of trying to show that it has always already done so. Similar to Merleau-Ponty's claim that ontology can approach Being only in terms of an indirect ontology, we may assume that ethics can approach the other only in terms of an indirect ethics. What deviates from certain orders and exceeds them will turn to nothing unless supported by something which it exceeds and deviates from. Otherwise the extra-ordinary will turn into another order, and we are still there where we began. So we must be careful not to get into such traps, and Levinas would be the last to deny that.

THE COMMON FACE

Close to certain theological traditions, Levinas initially approaches the face of the other by the double way of *via negationis* and of *via eminentiae*. In his view the human face is *not* simply what it seems to be, and it is much *more* than that. So it may be useful to give a first idea of that manifold pre-understanding which gets transformed by Levinas's philosophy of the other.

What is called 'face' in English is less common than it seems to be. There is no basic face in the sense of Danto's basic actions. Even on the linguistic level the connotations differ from one language to the other. Let us take the languages Levinas spoke. The French word *visage*, like the German *Gesicht*, refers to seeing and being seen. The Hebrew expression *panim*, not unlike the German *Angesicht* or *Antlitz*, emphasizes the face facing us or our mutual facing.² The Russian term *lico* means face, cheek, but also person, similar to the Greek *prosôpon* which literally refers to the act of 'looking at' and which stands not only for the face, but also for masks and roles, rendered in Latin by *persona*.

In general, we may distinguish a narrow, rather common meaning, from a wider, more emphatic, meaning.³ To the ordinary meaning belongs the frontal view, the face-to-face or even the façade of a building. The face itself constitutes the central zone of the body where our eyes and our mouth are located and the play of features takes place. We cannot close our face as we close our eyes, we can only protect it by visible or invisible masks. The emphatic sense of the word comes

forth when the face is understood not simply as something present, but as the other's corporeal self-presence, performed by the gaze or appeal we are exposed to. What we call 'face' is culturally overdetermined, marked by certain aesthetic, moral and sacred features. We are living in the face of the other, seeking or fleeing it, running the risk of losing our own face. In connection with our whole body the face is subjected to all kinds of face preserving, face restoring and face making, including modern techniques of image care. At the same time the face plays its part in acts of facing another, performed on the stage of life.

Although Levinas is looking for 'another scene', as Freud would put it, he does not simply skip the everyday scenes and their cultural equipment. The 'face' is no mere metaphor transporting a figurative sense into a higher sphere, delivering it from its corporeal chains. Levinas's ethics are rooted in a phenomenology of the body, close to that of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, even when he goes his own way. It is the hungering, thirsting, enjoying, suffering, working, loving, murdering human being in all its corporeality (*Leibhaftigkeit*) whose otherness is at stake. The otherness does not lie behind the surface of somebody we see, hear, touch and violate. It is just his or her otherness. It is the other as such and not some aspect of him or her that is condensed in the face. So the whole body expresses, our hands and shoulders do it as well as our face taken in its narrow sense.

But this leads us to the crucial question of how it may happen that the other appears to us without being reduced to somebody or something in the world. At this point where our world, crowded as it is with persons and things, explodes, the common face turns into the uncommon, into the unfamiliar, even into the uncanny (*Unheimliche*). Husserl's *Fremderfahrung*, the experience of what is strange, shifts into the estrangement of experience itself. The positing of the other gets undermined by the deposition of myself. The face we are confronted with can be understood as the turning point between the own and the alien where a certain dispossession takes place.⁴ But the adventure of the other which starts here runs through a long and complicated story. I shall restrict myself to showing in which way the face of the other is figured out in Levinas's two major works, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. As we shall see, there is a clear change of tonality in the

passage from the earlier to the later work, notwithstanding a certain continuity which is maintained from the early sketch in *Time and the Other* up to the last essays. So the topic of the other's face may be seen as a thread running through Levinas's whole work.

THE SPEAKING FACE: THE CALL OF THE OTHER

The ground-plan of Levinas's first major work is marked by a contrast, clearly announced by the title of the book. *Totality* has to be understood as the reign of the same⁵ wherein everything and everybody exists as part of a whole or as case under a law. For Levinas it makes no great difference whether the totality is represented by the archaic form of religious or mythical participation or by the modern forms of rational mediation, achieved by economics, politics and culture. Even under these modern forms nobody becomes him- or herself because everyone is reduced to what he or she achieves in an anonymous way: life and work are nothing more than masks (TI 178). The totality, which forces everybody into certain roles, is based on violence, on a general war which does not end when the individual's striving for self-preservation makes use of rational means. This totality contrasts with the *infinity* of the other whose otherness exceeds the limits of any order whatsoever. Such a sharp contrast would harden into a manichaeist duality if it were not moved by an ongoing process of totalization which is itself balanced by a counter-process of excedence. Levinas presents this double process in terms of a drama, composed of two acts (see chs. II and III). In the first act the self gets separated from the totality by retiring to the *interiority* of an *oikos*, to an enlarged self-sphere where everyone is at home, *chez soi*. Being at home, I am capable of receiving the other whose interpellation originates from outside, from an exteriority which in the end leaves every order behind. As soon as we enter the second act where the totality breaks in pieces, the face of the other plays a central role. 'The glean of exteriority or of transcendence' happens 'in the face of the Other' (TI 24), requiring a new 'thinking *in the face* of the Other' (TI 40).

But what does 'face' mean, and what sort of being should we attribute to the face? First of all, Levinas demonstrates that this traditional way of questioning goes wrong because it just misses the point. If the other's face transcends the ontological reign of more or

less defined entities we are able only to say *what it is not*, or more precisely: we can only show *that it is not something at all*. The list of negations is long and sometimes tiresome. We are told that the face is not something we can see and touch, while moving within open horizons, passing through changing perspectives, transforming it into a content we embrace and manipulate (TI 190, 194). It has no 'plastic' form to be transformed in images; it has no *eidōs*, no 'adequate idea' by which we could represent and grasp it. The face does not fall into the outer world, open the way to an inner world (TI 212), or take hold in a third world of ideas. But what else could we say about that strange phenomenon?

Only that before we speak about the face, 'the face speaks' (TI 66). This simple truth changes the whole situation. Platonists may evoke the conversion (*periagōgē*) of the soul's eyes, mentioned in Plato's *Republic*, and Heideggerians may be tempted to speak of a turning (*Kehre*). But what is decisive for Levinas is neither a change of our own attitude, nor a shift in the history of Being, but my being interpellated by the other. We start far off, subdued by the forces of gravity fields whose centre lies outside us (TI 183). Levinas continues to take the face as phenomenon, but not without redefining it: 'The phenomenon is the being that appears, but remains absent' (TI 181). It originates from a sort of epiphany, as Levinas likes to say, using a religious term.

The new concept of face raises a host of problems. Levinas seems to recast the old definition of the human being. Modifying the old formula we could state: 'The human being is a being which has a face.' Even if we leave more sophisticated questions aside (What do 'being' and 'having' mean?), we are confronted with the problem of how to distinguish between God's face and that of the human other. 'The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face', Levinas writes (TI 78). It is obvious what Levinas has in mind: the way to God passes through the face of the other. But this is no answer to the question of how to distinguish the invisibility of God (see TI 78) from the invisibility of the human face.⁶ Further, there are many faceless beings: there are things (TI 139–40), elements and mythical gods, the last evoking Being without beings, the horror of the *il y a* (TI 142), and there are finally our own works. Whatever sinks down into the anonymous, the impersonal, the neutral, is faceless. What is challenged by this philosophy of the face is the false spell

of a 'philosophy of the neuter' (TI 298). However, apart from the general problem that 'faceless', like *alogon* or 'irrational', gives only a negative qualification, not specifying what it qualifies, we wonder why animals and plants should be omitted. The Cartesian dualism seems to throw its shadow on this philosophy of the face. We recall that Martin Buber's dialogical philosophy, whose shortcomings are not to be discussed here, concedes the role of Thou to all creatures.⁷

But let us ask what the face's speaking really means. The primacy of the face does not depend on the fact that somebody else addresses me, speaking *about* something or *about* somebody. In this case the other would communicate with me on equal terms. A simple philosophy of dialogue or of communication remains faceless because everybody would be reduced to what he or she said and did. Our intercourse would be restricted to the circulation of words, gestures and things. Giving which exceeds such a pure exchange presupposes more: the face 'expresses itself' (TI 51). The face is not the site from which a sender delivers certain messages by means of linguistic tools. Whenever the face speaks to us, 'the first content of expression is this expression itself' (TI 51). At this point we assist the birth of the other out of the Word and the birth of the Word out of the other. The Logos does not just become flesh, it becomes face.⁸ Merleau-Ponty would say that we move on the level of the speaking language (*parole parlant*), not on the level of the spoken language (*parole parlée*), and Levinas would continue: we are concerned with saying, not with the said. Yet Levinas goes a step further. He personalizes the speaking language in terms which sound rather unusual in the ears of Saussurian linguistics.⁹ Sign systems consist of signs, splitting into signifier and signified, and communicative systems consist of processes in which signs are used in order to exchange messages. What Levinas has in mind is nothing like that. He avoids any established linguistic system until reaching the point where the speaking face functions as the primordial signifier. 'The face, expression simpliciter, forms the first word, the face is the signifier which appears on the top of his sign, like eyes looking at you' (TI 153). So the other is the giver of a sense which precedes my own *Sinngebung*. Consequently we learn from the other what we cannot learn by ourselves. Levinas calls it teaching (*enseignement*), in contrast to Socratic *maieutics* (TI 51).

Now, speaking which speaks *to me* before and beyond speaking *about something* takes the features of appeal, call, interpellation, and it privileges grammatical forms like the imperative, the vocative and personal pronouns. Obviously, Levinas picks up motifs which have been developed long ago by the German philosophers of dialogue and their predecessors.¹⁰ But in opposition to any kind of intimacy and reciprocity between I and Thou, Levinas maintains the distance of the other's face. 'The immediate is the interpellation and, if we may speak thus, the imperative of language. The idea of contact does not represent the primordial mode of the immediate' (TI 52).

If we reflect on the fact that the speech of the other's face privileges the imperative, we understand that the face is not something seen, observed, registered, deciphered or understood, but rather somebody responded to. I can only and only I can respond to the injunction of a face (see TI 305); disregarding it would be a response as well. When Levinas obstinately affirms that the relation between the other and myself is marked by an irrevocable asymmetry, he refers to the primary situation of the call which opens a dimension of height (TI 35, 86). The other's voice comes from above, like God's voice at the Sinai. But in opposition to any hierarchization of human relations we must admit that the interhuman asymmetry is a double-sided one. Levinas explicitly states that the other's command commands me to command (TI 213). The obedience he has in mind is a mutual one. We are all 'masters'. This is an unusual idea. We are accustomed to suppose that every order is endorsed by some authority whose legitimacy can and has to be checked. So in the end every order goes back to a law I have given by myself. Since Kant we call this autonomy. But, according to Levinas, things are less simple.

To begin with, the grammatical form of the imperative can be used in different ways. 'Come!' may express an invitation, a request, a demand or a strict command. When Levinas refers to the 'look that supplicates and demands' (TI 75), we must add the look which commands. But in Levinas's eyes these are mere variants which make no great difference. With regard to the genuine speech of the face, the question of legitimation does not yet arise. This question only arises in so far as in the face of the other expressing itself the third party intervenes and as far as through the other's face it is 'the whole of humanity which looks at us' (see TI 213, 305). The face of the other who commands justice for others, dwells itself on this side of right

and wrong, of good and evil. The other's face is not a case of justice, but its very source. Justice, too, has its blind spot which will never be filled by sufficient reasons.¹¹

However, that is not because one demand is not like another. The other's demand culminates in a negative command, facing the extreme possibility of murder and averting it by force of a resistance whose quality is not physical, but ethical. The other resists violence not as somebody belonging to the totality of beings, but as an infinite which is beyond all we can do to the other. The otherness of the other manifests the impossibility of our own possibilities.¹² What Levinas calls the face is just the expression of this lived impossibility. So he writes: 'This infinite, stronger than the murder, resists to us already in the face, it is its face, it is the original expression, the first word: "Thou shalt not commit murder" [*tu ne commettras pas de meurtre*]' (TI 199), or more simply: 'Thou shalt not kill [*tu ne tueras pas*]' (CP 55).

These formulas are full of strange implications which cannot be dealt with by theologization, referring to the seventh command of the decalogue, nor by anthropologization, comparing it to Hobbes's *homo homini lupus*. The speaking face would all too quickly disappear behind traditional *Ideenkleidern*. Leaving many aspects aside, I only want to lead the reader's attention to some central issues concerning the power of the face. First, the quoted command sentences are formulated in the future tense. One may take this future as an especially strong sort of imperative or as a concession to the Hebrew, whose grammar does not allow for a negative imperative such as 'Do not...!' But it seems to me that there is even more at stake here. The quoted sentences are not normal imperatives, uttered by and addressed to somebody, as if the face were the partner of a dialogue or the opponent in a dispute. The resistance which 'gleams in the face of the other' (TI 199) is not directed to our seeing, knowing or doing, it does not affect our *vouloir dire* or *savoir faire*, but our *vouloir tuer* (TI 199). It changes our power (*pouvoir*) to kill into a sort of powerlessness (*impuissance*). 'The expression the face introduces into the world does not defy the feebleness of my powers, but my ability for power [*mon pouvoir de pouvoir*]' (TI 198). This peculiar resistance is not based on what the other says and on the reasons the other gives, it coincides with the very fact that the other addresses me (what the later Levinas attributes to saying in contrast to the said).

We can certainly contradict what the other says because the other is not a dogmatic authority, but we cannot contradict the call and demand of the other's face which precedes any initiative we may take.

Corresponding to that, the nakedness of the face, which is extended to the nakedness of the whole body (TI 74), does not mean that there is *something behind* the masks and clothes the other wears, it rather means that the other's otherness eludes every qualification we may apply. Compared to cultural, symbolic and social roles which mask the face, the face has something of a *visage brut*. Its nakedness is not factual, so that it could be eliminated, but is due to an 'essential poverty' which makes the poor and the stranger equal to us (TI 213).¹³

The drama which takes place between myself and the other does not stop here. The ascension to the other's face has a postface entitled 'Beyond the Face' (see ch. IV). We descend into the limbus of erotics and sexuality, of fertility and generativity. This descent resembles the philosopher's return into the cave described in *Republic* VII. What distinguishes the 'night of the erotic', from the 'night of insomnia', belonging to the faceless *il y a* (TI 258), is the fact that the human lover presupposes the face of the other even if he tries to 'enjoy the Other' as if she (not he!) were a mere element (TI 255). But this up and down, this above and beyond, does not exclude certain ambiguities, inherent to love as such, attaining even the face and leading to a special *fémininité* of the loved face. 'The feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face' by sinking into the 'equivocation of the voluptuous' (TI 260). This is not the place to discuss this odd attempt to gender the face. In any case, the oscillation between the different genders conforms to a general ambiguity ascribed to the face as staying 'at the limit of holiness and caricature' (TI 198), i.e. between the in-formal and the de-formed.

Looking back towards this first presentation of the other's otherness we may ask if the ambiguity of the face is always a good one.¹⁴ Although Levinas emphasizes the transcendence of the face, he also declares that this transcendence does not take place outside the world and outside the economy which regulates our living in the world (see TI 172). But if so, we would better refrain from affirmations like this: 'The true essence of man is presented in his [her?] face, in which he is infinitely other than a violence like unto mine' (TI 290-1). Is it possible to transform the infinite process of othering into a true essence? Has the plurality of beings not to be completed

by the pluralization of the face, following different ways to transcend the order in question? Is it really possible to put the metaphysics of the same and the other on this side, the psychology or psychoanalysis and the sociology (and we add: the cultural anthropology) of the *œuvres* on the other side (TI 228)?

We should contextualize the otherness or – as I would say – the *Fremdheit* as well as the selfhood, not by integrating them into certain contexts, but by relating them to those contexts which are burst apart by the extra-ordinary demand of the other. This pluralization of the face would also undermine the dubious duality of what is faceful and what faceless. With regard to the speech of the face I could further ask if we do not need a broader concept of appeal, of *Anspruch* which includes the gaze, the *Anblick*, referring to a kind of seeing which transcends what is seen. Levinas's allusion to the 'whole body' as constituting the face should be taken seriously in order to develop a sort of responsiveness which penetrates all our senses and our bodily behavior *in toto*.

Finally, what does Levinas have in mind when he proclaims the command: 'Thou shalt not murder' as the 'first word'? Reckoning with the worst when speaking of human affairs is one thing, relying on it is something other. Even the worst may differ from one culture, epoch or age to the other. Besides, why should somebody listen to the voice of the other when the prohibition would be the 'first word'? What about Virgil's *risu cognoscere matrem*?¹⁵ Does this mean anything more than the expression of a primary narcissism, love loving itself? I recommend reading *Totality and Infinity* in a less linear way so that the postface, entitled 'Beyond the Face', would partly pass into a 'pre-face', partly into an 'inter-face', contaminating the pretended purity of the face from the beginning.¹⁶

THE FUGITIVE FACE: THE TRACE OF THE OTHER

Passing to the second major book *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, published seventeen years later, we feel that the tone has changed. Let us begin with the dedication which presents the book as written in the face of certain others or seeking their faces. The first book had been dedicated to Jean Wahl and his wife. Jean Wahl was a French Jewish philosopher to whom Levinas was indebted for his early support.¹⁷ The second book is not dedicated to friends who

are still alive, but to the 'closest' among so many people killed by the Nazis; the dedication is extended to the millions of victims from all confessions and nations, 'victims of the same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism',¹⁸ and it is completed by an address to the 'closest', name by name, written (and for most of the readers hidden) in Hebrew. The polar air of violent death penetrates this book. The faces that the author addresses are already effaced. The 'proximity' evoked by the dedication is a delicate one. Furthermore, 'proximity', one of the key-words of the book, belongs to the occasional or indexical expressions which have to be instantiated from case to case, including recent genocides like those in Bosnia or Rwanda which each has its own singularity. In the dedication, mourning and premonition are interlaced. Finally, the fact that our speaking of the other is preceded by our being exposed to the other's call diminishes the risk of instrumentalizing morals. This risk belongs to a special amorality inherent to morals, depicted by Nietzsche's sharp pen better than by anybody else.

Now, the change of tone reflects Levinas's recasting of his own thinking, following the publication of *Totality and Infinity*. Not unlike the first great book, the second one emerges from detailed studies which are composed only afterwards. Levinas is like a wanderer who sketches his map not in advance but while marching ahead. The recasting of earlier ideas may be characterized in different ways. For me it is especially striking that dualisms like existence (Being) against existent (being) or totality against infinity are replaced with an internal intrigue, transforming opposition into entanglement.¹⁹ Oppositions turn into internal splittings like that of speech into the saying (*dire*) and the said (*dit*). Finally, all of this is accompanied by processes of retardation and dislocation which reinforce our (dis)embodiment. In sum, the later philosophy of the other is much less Cartesian than the earlier one. This has the effect that the exteriority of the other penetrates the interiority of the self, generating certain whirls which are verbally reflected in an endless series of self-referential, paradoxical and hyperbolic expressions – as if everything has been infected by a virus of otherness. In what follows, I shall illustrate this change, still following the motif of the face.

As we have seen, in *Totality and Infinity* the other is immediately present and self-present. Otherness keeps the character of a phenomenon, or more precisely, the other, being separated from the

totality of beings, is the phenomenon *par excellence* whose epiphany includes absence. The 'absence of the Other is just his or her presence as of another', so Levinas puts it in his early writings (TO 93–4). But in *Otherwise than Being* he clearly maintains the not-presence of the other and the non-phenomenality of the face. Does he change only the terms? We will see that much more is at stake here.

First, it has to be noticed that, compared with the earlier work, the motif of the face loses its dominant place and gets much more entangled in different topics, mostly in the central topic of proximity (see OB 89–90). Proximity, as understood by Levinas, does not have a socio-ontological meaning. It does not refer to beings within space, approximating each other when the distance between them diminishes, and touching upon each other when the distance reaches zero. This kind of nearness and remoteness is always relative. Even persons are more or less close to each other, corresponding to their bodily position, to their affinities and to the functions or interests they share. This kind of nearness and remoteness can be observed, compared and even measured by a third party. It belongs to what Husserl calls a *Nah-* and *Fernwelt*, both being sections of the one world, and it belongs to the social world, which in Alfred Schutz's view is divided into *Mitwelt*, *Umwelt*, *Vorwelt* and *Nachwelt*. It is interesting to see that the face-to-face relationship which guarantees the highest degree of individuality and intimacy is defined by Schutz as spatial and temporal co-presence, mediated by the mutual understanding of the other's expression.²⁰ Mundane and social orders leave place only for relative forms of otherness or strangeness. The face-to-face is embedded into the horizons of a common world. Everybody understands everything in his or her own way, but the exchange of positions leads to a reciprocity of perspectives. The social world is ruled by the law of symmetry. Obviously all of that is far away from what Levinas is looking for. The proximity that he has in mind originates from the otherness as such in terms of a *Fernnähe*, a proximity which not only includes distance, but even increases it. Levinas develops this idea along classical topics like time, space, body and senses. In doing so, he leaves, as he often does, many things behind which could be helpful in order to place such eruptive findings in a more satisfying way. To make only one point, when Husserl, Heidegger, Karl Bühler and other phenomenologists distinguish between 'here' and 'there' they certainly do not distinguish between positions within a given space.

The 'there' has no distance to the 'here'. For me, as the speaker, being 'there' means being elsewhere, being there where I am not, and the other is just there where I cannot be. Merleau-Ponty radicalizes this insight by referring to an 'original of the elsewhere'.²¹ This assumption could be corroborated by Paul Celan's appellative poetry to which Levinas explicitly refers, or by Paul Valéry's and Jacques Lacan's reflections on the mutual look which implies that nobody is there where the other sees him or her.

But let us turn to the question of how Levinas introduces the other's face, being 'otherwise than Being'. He prefers again an unusual way, and he is forced to do so. 'Otherwise than Being' does not mean 'something other than Being' by which the reign of Being would only be doubled or multiplied. That is why Levinas's speaking of the other while rising from the other, often sounds so tautological. In order to prevent saying, which is more and other than the said, from turning into pure saying, saying nothing, certain differences are needed. Levinas tends to obtain such differences by a sort of hyperbolic paradoxical speaking which submits the related phenomena (or hyper-phenomena) to an internal iteration and gradation. Frequent formulations like 'trace, past, shadow of itself' or 'more passive than any passivity' or 'immediacy which is more immediate' might spread like a fever of thinking; they should be taken as hints, not as results. Indeed, Levinas himself does not stop there. The royal road towards the withdrawal of such phenomena gets opened by the power of time, more precisely, by a special time of the other which will never be recuperated. 'In proximity is heard a command come as though from an immemorial past, which was never present, began in no freedom. This way of the neighbor is face' (OB 88). A hard text which should not be changed into a soft reading. The term 'proximity' reminds us of the Biblical neighbour who has more to do with the stranger's than with the friend's face. Proximity does not coincide with affinity. Further, 'one hears a command' or it 'is heard (*s'entend*)'. The author uses a sort of medium beyond active and passive. Hearing the command is presented as an event which arrives, not as an act which is performed by individual subjects, the one speaking, the other listening – as if someone who receives the command were already somebody before responding to the command. The event of command is neither a neutral fact nor a responsible act. Instead, it is pregnant with responsiveness and responsibility, provoking our 'response of

responsibility' (OB 142). *Comme d'un passé immémorial*: the immemorial past echoes Schelling's *Unvordenklichkeit* and Merleau-Ponty's reference to the pre-beginning of one's birth.²²

'As though': this strange past is present. It is present, but it is so in the paradoxical way of being more present than ourselves who are always in delay. We are not only too late to begin by ourselves and to fulfil what Kant calls freedom of spontaneity. We are also too late to remember the command in the way we remember what has been possible for us. What Levinas suggests is a redefinition of freedom in terms of beginning oneself, but beginning elsewhere. Without this redefinition things would only be reversed in such a way that my initiative would be exchanged for that of the other whose otherness would finally be abolished itself in want of a counterpart.²³ The passage concludes with a kind of résumé, presenting the face not as something or somebody we can grasp, but as a mere way or mode, i.e. as the other's proximity. In order to characterize this irrevocable proximity which surprises, befalls, occupies us, Levinas often uses terms like traumatism, obsession or even madness. This application of terms, taken over from pathology, remains problematic. We should take this idiom as a hyperbolic *façon de parler*, required by the extra-ordinary character of this 'intrigue'. But we neglect suffering, the pathos of special pathologies, if we simply blur the difference between the normal and the pathological, notwithstanding the fact that both are never separated by clear-cut borderlines.²⁴

The temporal delay which separates the other's demand from our own response explains why Levinas now denies phenomenality to the face. The face is 'the very collapse of phenomenality', not because of some strength or brutality, but because of its 'feebleness', because of its being 'less' than a phenomenon (OB 88). The 'feebleness' of the ethical resistance shrinks into a sort of fading, a withdrawal.²⁵

The absence of the other is evoked by a kaleidoscope of quasi-descriptions. What we find is again the nakedness of the face, its non-form, but now its absence is much more dynamized in terms of self-*abondement*, self-retirement, emptiness, hollowness, abyss, ex-cession. It finds its non-place (*non-lieu*) in its homelessness, its strangeness. Levinas himself becomes aware of certain affinities to the negative theology which he, however, explicitly repudiates (see OB 12). He steers in the opposite direction, considering a 'concrete abstraction' (OB 91). Torn away from the horizons, contexts and

conditions of the world, the face keeps some threads and fringes of the webs and textures from which it is absolved. The face is not at all reduced to an abstract content, abstraction is rather an ongoing process.

This endless process of ab-solution culminates in approximating the face which speaks to the skin we touch and caress. The sense of touching is traditionally defined as *Nahsinn*, as if by touching we could contact reality in a direct manner.²⁶ Once more Levinas takes the opposite direction. 'Because the contact with skin is still a proximity of the face' (OB 90), and because it creates a 'quasi transparent divergency between the visible and the invisible' (OB 89), this skin-close contact intensifies the *Fernnähe*. The closer to the other, the more distant we are. The never completely, yet nearly reached, coincidence between touching and touched produces, so to speak, an electrifying effect.²⁷ In this context Levinas resumes the results of his earlier phenomenology of Eros, but gives it a new switch. Eros beyond the face is transformed into an Eros moving towards the face. 'In the approach of a face the flesh becomes word, the caress a saying' (OB 94). This approximation is not reserved for the touch: 'In every vision contact is announced: sight and hearing caress the visible and the audible' (OB 80). We are invited to treat our whole *sensorium* as a *responsorium*.²⁸ But if this is true we should even more ask if Levinas is right to restrict the 'face' to the human face, neglecting the appeal of things, the call of other living beings.

In the end, Levinas's reflections on the proximity and remoteness of the other's face are focused on the crucial motif of trace. The trace 'shines (*luit*) as face of the other' (OB 12). Being present only as remnant of somebody who has passed, thus referring to an immemorial past, the trace of the other marks and even constitutes the other's face. The high presence of the face-to-face yields to the *ritardando* of a mere after-face. The other enters through a back-door. Levinas emphasizes again the corporeality of the trace. The face is growing old, even while being young; as a wrinkled face, it is a 'trace of itself' (OB 88). It says adieu, à-dieu – or simply farewell. In Levinas's view the mark of interrogation which points to the enigmatic character of the trace cannot be eliminated by changing the other's demand into something we know. 'A face is not a presence announcing a "non-said," which will be said from behind it' (OB 154). But even if the mark of interrogation cannot be eliminated it must be questioned.²⁹

As the trace of the other, the face keeps the ambiguous character of an enigma. This has nothing to do with riddles we have not yet solved. The enigma, as understood by Levinas, is a borderline phenomenon, located between the visible and the invisible, the said and the saying. In his article 'Enigma and Phenomenon' Levinas writes: 'The enigma extends as far as the phenomenon that bears the trace of the *saying* which has already withdrawn from the already *said*' (*BPW* 73). We thematize what is absent, but doing so we inevitably betray what is only present as being absent. So we betray the other's face too. The enigma of the face persists. It functions as a bridge to the third party, to the claim of justice. But this bridge has become more of an expedience than it was in *Totality and Infinity*, where the third and finally the whole of humanity look at us through the other's eyes. The compatibility between the other's demand and the claim of justice has become much more fragile; in a certain sense both are incompatible, being irreducible to each other. The trace of the infinite which 'shines' as the face of the other shows the ambiguous feature of somebody before whom (or to whom) and for whom I am responsible. The enigma of the other's face, its exception, consists in the incompatible fact that the other is judge and accused at once (*OB* 12). Any previous division of roles would spill and even poison the source of justice. The justice which is required by all others of the other takes the paradoxical form of a 'comparison of the incomparables'. 'The neighbour that obsesses me is already a face, both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are visible in the concern for justice' (*OB* 158). Whereas the proximity to the other's face is the source of justice, 'the relationship with the third party is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity in which the face is ef-faced [*se dé-visage*]' (*OB* 158).³⁰ However, we must admit that political, juridical, linguistic or cultural orders are neither created by the other's demand nor by its correction. They require a sort of creative response to the other. Because Levinas simply presupposes such orders without questioning their origin a hole seems to open in Levinas's ethics of the other which should not be papered over. On the other side, the tension between *visage* and *dé-visagement*, between the respect of the other's otherness and the requirements of equality, marks the point where ethics and politics are insolubly entangled without covering each other.³¹

NOTES

- 1 Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 147: the flesh has to be thought as 'the concrete emblem of a general mode of being'.
- 2 On the Biblical background, which is only implicitly present in Levinas's philosophical writings, see M. C. Srajek, *In the Margins of Deconstruction: Jewish Conceptions of Ethics in Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida* (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer, 1998); see ch. 4 which deals partly with the 'Phenomenology of Face'.
- 3 The visual understanding of the common face is well presented in Georg Simmel's 'Soziologie der Sinne' (1907), in *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, Ges. Ausgabe, 8 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993), pp. 276–92.
- 4 Husserl describes the body as 'the point of conversion' (*Umschlagstelle*) from spiritual to natural causality. See *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989), p. 299.
- 5 More exactly we should speak of 'the Self and the Other as the Same'. Levinas tends to blur the difference between same (*même*) and self (*soi*); similarly other (*autre*) can also be understood in a double way.
- 6 Concerning the traditional Jewish and Christian background cf. Edith Wyschogrod, 'Corporeality and the Glory of the Infinite in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas', in Marco O. Olivetti (ed.), *Incarnation* (Padua: Cedam, 1999).
- 7 This problem has been repeatedly discussed by John Llewelyn. See, for example, 'Am I Obsessed by Bobby? Humanism of the Other Animal', in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds.), *Re-Reading Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
- 8 On the theological and philosophical background of this distinction, see Olivetti, *Incarnation*.
- 9 For a comparison between Levinas's philosophy and modern linguistics and linguistic philosophies, see Thomas Wiemer, *Die Passion des Sagens* (Freiburg/Munich: Alber, 1988).
- 10 See Michael Theunissen, *The Other*, trans. Christopher MacCann (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984).
- 11 Cf. my discussion of this problem from a Nietzschean and Levinasian point of view: 'Der blinde Fleck der Moral', in *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).
- 12 See Levinas's debate with Heidegger in *TO* 70.
- 13 Sartre uses the same terms *pauvreté essentielle* to characterize the image of representation in contrast with perception. See *The Psychology of the*

- Imagination*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: Washington Square, 1966), p. 19. This is not the only example for Levinas's use of Sartrean terms, based on a certain Cartesian legacy that they both share.
- 14 I refer to Merleau-Ponty's self-criticism in 1952 in 'An unpublished text', trans. A. Dallery, in James M. Edie (ed.), *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 3–11.
 - 15 René Spitz uses this famous verse as *leitmotiv* for his research on the baby's discovering of the other and on the illness of hospitalism which arises when the primary relation is disturbed. See *The First Year of Life: a Psychoanalytic Study of Normal and Deviant Development of Objective Relations* (New York: International Universities Press, 1965).
 - 16 In this context I refer to Monique Schneider's attempt to counterbalance Levinas's ethical approach by a psychoanalytic procedure; see 'En deçà du visage', in J. Greisch and J. Rolland (eds.), *L'éthique comme philosophie première* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), pp. 133–53.
 - 17 *The Time and the Other* are not the only lectures he gave at the Collège Philosophique at the invitation of Jean Wahl. In 1961 he gave another lecture at the same place on 'Le visage humain', followed by a debate in which Merleau-Ponty took part.
 - 18 On these dedications cf. Robert Bernasconi's penetrating comment, turning around the ambiguous face-to-face of persecution; see 'Only the Persecuted . . . : Language of the Oppressor, Language of the oppressed', in A. T. Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy* (New York/London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 82–3.
 - 19 At this point Levinas comes very close to Husserl's *Ineinander* and Merleau-Ponty's *entrelacs* or *chiasme*. See my essay on 'Verflechtung und Trennung. Wege zwischen Merleau-Ponty and Levinas', in *Deutsch-Französische Gedankengänge*.
 - 20 See A. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. G. Walsh and F. Lehnert (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967).
 - 21 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 254.
 - 22 ' . . . an original past, a past which has never been present': *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), p. 242.
 - 23 See my arguments in 'Response and Responsibility in Levinas', *L'éthique comme philosophie première*, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–52.
 - 24 See further Elisabeth Weber, *Verfolgung und Trauma* (Vienna: Passagen, 1990).
 - 25 Cf. Socrates' ironical response to the question of how he should be buried: 'As you like, he said, if you will really catch me and if I do not slip away from you' (*Phaedo*, 115 c).

- 26 This everyday materialism has been long since undermined by authors like David Katz and Erwin Straus, from whom Merleau-Ponty learned much.
- 27 Merleau-Ponty's reflections in *The Visible and the Invisible* are less far from that than Levinas suggests. Cf. Antje Kapust's excellent exposition and continuation of this debate in *Berührung ohne Berührung. Ethik und Ontologie bei Merleau-Ponty und Levinas* (Munich: W. Fink, 1999). On the initial role of the touch cf. also Edith Wyschogrod, 'Doing before Hearing: On the Primacy of Touch', in F. Laruelle (ed.), *Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1980), pp. 179–203.
- 28 See my chapter 'Leibliches Responsorium' in *Antwortregister* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).
- 29 With regard to the (a-)theological background of Levinas's ethics cf. Hent de Vries, *Theologie im Pianissimo Zwischen Rationalität und Dekonstruktion* (Kampen: KoK, 1989) and John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: the Genealogy of Ethics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), ch. 12.
- 30 Translation modified. Concerning the relation between ethics and politics I refer to the related studies by Robert Bernasconi, Fabio Ciaramelli, Simon Critchley and others.
- 31 Even the role of aesthetics should be reconsidered, including the difference between the sacred and the holy, and the relation between face and mask.