Levinas' Outrageousness as a Grotesque: in Response to Jacob Rogozinski

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Emmanuel Levinas – his philosophy, his world, his ethics – permits, and almost encourages, his depiction through the grotesque.

It is very rare to encounter the genre "grotesque" in the field of philosophy. "The lovers of wisdom" seem to prefer the stuck-up, pompous and inflated maxims, conjoined in heavy, monolithic solemn tractates. This is not the case in literature and visual arts. There, masterpieces can be found in the grotesque style. I'll mention just a few; for example, in painting Hieronymus Bosch, Jericho, Dali etc.; in literature, François Rabelais, Ionesco, Beckett and, of course, the unrivalled Kafka. Everything, which in the apodictic discourse is elevated, spiritualized, deified, reversely, becomes "the other of itself" through the grotesque style – the sacred is reduced to its incarnations, but they are somehow disgusting; ideology is naturalized, but we perceive this type of natural form as more or less misshaped. The grotesque is really hard to take and very often we try to escape the discomfort it causes.

The first feature of each grotesque picture is its ambivalence. It is created by a clash of opposites, typical of the author's attitude towards the object of depiction – in your text such an object became Levinas' legacy. The creator of grotesques, however, projects his own ambiguous attitude towards the topic resulting from mutually exclusive values and evaluations as an appropriate expression of the very problematic objective state. The confusion of the heterogeneous moods and the lack of resolution of the conflict is a distinguished characteristics of the grotesque.

In our case it is true that, on the one hand, we can transform Levinas' body of thought into an oracle where "the said" is immobilized, showing our strict fidelity, our submission to the Master, but on the other hand and simultaneously, we must concede that true fidelity to a thinker involves necessarily some injustice and infidelity. And only when the ambivalence of this attitude towards Levinas is transferred to Levinas' philosophy itself, we can reach the excessive controver-

siality of the grotesque: "*Levinas' body of ideas, while pretending to prohibit all violence, is itself nevertheless committing an extreme violence*". When the caress is literally identified with wounding, we can talk easily in a grotesque style about Levinas' outrageousness.

Emmanuel Levinas himself emphasizes on multiple occasions that the method he has used in his works is hyperbolization. His term "beyond" does not refer to a world, beyond our world but to the travel beyond the borders of any world. "Beyond" is not simply "above" or "over". "Beyond" is the dimension of height, in which every "above" or "over" is situated and becomes relevant. "Beyond" is extraterritorial, while in the grotesque it seems territorial. When the extraterritorial meaning of "beyond" is reduced to the territorial "above" and "over" and claims to take their place, they all come together in "down here" and form a combined whole – the entirety of corporeal, worldly, territorial existence. Thus, for the common perception the result is a totality, but this totality is a heterogeneous formation as when instead of wings, hands are attached to a bird's body. If wings are attached to a human body, this is a sort of uplift, hyperbolization, which turns the human into an angel or an angel-like being. Levinas' ethics wants to show us that my Self, becoming "me", can be elevated, inspired, to fly beyond his attachment to the totality of worldly interests. For Levinas, this happens only when the Self is not merely for-itself, but for-the-Other. Levinas uses hyperbolization for heightening, which should make us understand that everything in connection with morality exceeds our "normal", "average", "reciprocated" relationships. His hyperboles insist on what is "more in less". The contradiction between ethical and ontological spans throughout his philosophy and exceeds tremendously our traditional understandings of humanity. In Levinas' humanism, ontology is subordinated to ethics and every return to the old "ethics in the boundaries of ontology" looks as though turned upside down. Indeed, let's ask ourselves, is it possible to assume without absolutization, without augmentation and enhancement, that *"Nothing is more grave, more august, than responsibility for the other, and saying, in which there is no play, has gravity more grave than its own being or not being*"[1].

[1] Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 46.

The high-flying ethics of Levinas draws with itself also the ontology to such extent that the ontological merges with the morality - the Self becomes itself when and as far as it is for the Other. While in the grotesque portrait of the Levinasian metaphysics ethics is reduced to the level of ontology and to the happening within the horizons of (my) world. In view of logic of being, my Ego has a leading role, because it functions as a beginning. Reversely, according to Levinas' conception, the first one is the Other. Levinas tries to warn his readers on multiple occasions about this possibility for reduction of his philosophy. He insists again and again that the vertical relationship, i.e. the relationship in depth or height between the Other and me, should not be projected in the flatness of being's parameters, but, instead, the terrestrial existence must be elevated to its metaphysical meanings.

Perhaps it is not possible, as Levinas does, to argue without extravagance or amplification that ethics is not reducible to any codes of rules of one or another community as well as any principles, even strictly personal. When the Other is presented in his dimension of transcendence, we must say (though it might seem an exaggeration) that the moral subject is without relax at the service of the heterogeneous appeal of the Other. It is impossible to state without a kind of sublimation, which looks as overplay, that through the face of the Other and his eyes a Good is looking at me: *"A Good in relation to which being itself appears. A Good, from which being draws the illumination of its manifestation and its ontological force. A Good in view of which "every soul does all that it does*"[2]. As if this humanism, for which no other humanism up to now has not been humane enough, this excessive Levinasian humanism, provokes our desire to ground it and take a sober look at what all this means in the categories of being. Exactly the urge for soberness drives us to turn against Levinas and makes us slip on the downhill, which leads to the grotesque.

But once we arrive at the grotesque bottom, the dimensions "up" and "down" disappear. Then, both the existence of such thing as morality as well as the philosophizing about it, also disappear. The bird, which has hands instead of wings, not only cannot fly, but is even devoid of its symbolic or

[2] Emmanuel Levinas. Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other.Translated by Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav. Columbia University Press, New York,1998, p. 200.

metaphorical value to represent the very opportunity of flight beyond. The journey towards the grotesque begins precisely through the grounding of the absolutes. But, in contrast to irony and satire, which also walk this path and which bring down *the Most High* and turn it to an object of mockery, the grotesque is not concerned only with a trade of places for high and low, but also directs its efforts towards diminishment of a distance between them reaching even a sort of platitude and even their full identification.

While the ironist and satirist retain their position of absolute freedom and supremacy over the mocked character, the creator of the grotesque tries to speak as a detached and dispassionate observer, keeping cool even though he himself feels confused and uncertain about the controversy and absurdity of the same situation, in which he has placed the character of his creation. This situation looks grim and fearsome because of the unbalanced proportions of things and the implications that until this moment only habit prevented us from seeing the disproportions and the strangling horror in it. The grotesque claims to reveal the demons that haunt us, to point out the deformations which we ignored previously, and conversely to demonize the dreams in pink, which we created for ourselves; ultimately, it claims to show us that the remedy we habitually take is, in fact, a poison. The aim is to disgust us, to make us turn our heads and refuse the opiates, i.e. the hyperbolizations, which we believed were our salvation. So, the question then is, whether Levinas' ethics is too elevated and by this way intoxicating?

Well, what's so bad about bringing metaphysics down to earth? What happens if we try to defend the unbounded autonomy of the Self? Is it not true that, whether we like it or not, we enclose the Other within the schemes of our own narrow-mindedness? Is it not true that my Ego, and not the Other, is in closest proximity to me? Isn't egocentrism the most reliable coordinate system? In response to these questions, we would like first to note that if this is the case, then, the hierarchy falls apart: "*Il ne peut y avoir de sens dans l'etre que celui qui ne se mesure pas a l'etre*"[3].

The operation of hyperbolizing most commonly uses the ontological terms in ethical sense. But there is such a vast gape between the strictly ethical and the

[3] Emmanuel Levinas. *Humanisme et an-archie. Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Fata Morgana, 1972, p.81.

common ontological meanings that it cannot be compared even to the difference between heaven and earth. For example, passiveness, opposed within a totality of being to activeness, is one thing, and passiveness (more passive than any passiveness) which coincides with vulnerability and subjectivity of the Self, hearing the appeal of the Other, is a quite other thing; similarly, there is incommensurability between the juridical guilt, sought in the court after the deed has been perpetrated and the guilt, which is moral and precedes any deed and makes me more guilty than any other even before I have perpetrated anything; in the same way, there is an enormous distance between our everyday understanding of responsibility and the responsibility, which connects me with transcendence, with infinity, and can never be depleted by the answers I give as a limited, finite being; besides, it is out of the question to compare intimacy, which is moral in its essence and for that is never close enough, and the intimacy, which is carnal and spatial. According to Levinas' philosophy, I could never take the place of the Other, no matter how much effort I make. The Other eludes the range of my capabilities and I cannot catch up with him, no matter how faithfully and dedicatedly I follow the trace, left by him. As if the magnification, which Levinas uses, is so magnificent, that it provokes an opposite reaction and fear of some inappropriate, unreasonable intoxication and something like an ethical delirium. And as a kind of resistance, the creators of grotesques, seeking to avoid the out-of-place sublimity and the exaltation of one extreme, compared to another, so typical in hyperbolization, ignore fully the distance between the extremes and present them as continually blending with one another even to the point of their fusion into a strange, scary, and incompatible combination. However, this combination does not "fly in the sky"; although it looks fictional, it is perceived as the very bodily existence, inseparable from earthly conditions. Because of that the grotesque impact is horrifying and at the same time ridiculous.

In this regard something very important must be pointed out about Levinas' philosophy, which prevents it from being mocked. Tirelessly Levinas reminds again and again not only that there are different levels of descending into the deep, but also that we need a mediating of the Third. Once we have left the field of the ethical relationship (if such a leave is at all feasible as responsibility cannot be escaped), we get into a reflective attitude toward the others and a reflexivity presupposes the presence of a third per-

son. Even though Levinas focuses on the face-to-face relation, which is par excellence the direct relation, he never forgets that the Third is already looking at me with the eyes of the Other (and together with the Third also in principle everybody else). The Thirds must not be ignored, if we don't want to alter or ridicule Levinas' stance. "*Cette troisieme personne qui, dans le visage, s'est deja retirée de toute revelation et de toute dissimulation – qui a passé – cette illeité n'est pas un "moins que l'être" par rapport au monde ou penetre le visage; - c'est toute l'enormité, toute la demesure, tout l'infini de l'absolument Autre, echappant a l'ontologie."*[4]

Levinas needs the series of hyperboles precisely to show us that "bodily contact" is not just given and we could not describe it without over-determining. "*The body is not only image or figure here", "the expression "in one's skin" is not a metaphor for the in-itself; it refers to a recurrence in the dead time or the meanwhile which separates inspiration and expiration… This recurrence is incarnation… In it the body which makes giving possible makes one other without alienating."*[5] According to Levinas, the subject is not in time, but is diachrony itself. In the identification of the Ego there is the ageing of him and it is the diachrony of an election without identification. Uniqueness is without identity. Not an identity, it is beyond consciousness, which is in itself and for itself. The diachrony that one will never "catch up with there again" prevents the one from joining up with itself and identifying itself as a substance. It is the diachrony due to an election that denudes and impoverishes. Without the demand from the Other the ethical (that is human and not naturalistic) meaning of the ageing is lost.[6] The thesis that "*Before tying myself up with others, I have to tie myself up with my flesh, that is to say, with myself*" and that "*it is my primordial relation to myself, to my own flesh, which founds the possibility of my relation to the Other*" is not an antithesis of Levinas' ethics. Concerning this Levinas writes: "*One may in particular wonder whether such a "relation" (the ethical relation) does not impose itself through a radical separation of the two hands, which in point of fact do not belong to the same body. It is that radical separation and the entire ethical*

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4 Emmanuel Levinas. La signification et le sens. *Humanisme de l'autre homme*. Fata Morgana, 1972, p.59.

5 Emmanuel Levinas. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 2000, p. 109.

6 Ibid., pp. 56-57.

order of sociality, that appears ... even in the hand one shakes".[7] The thesis, privileging a leave from the Self, which is not a reply to the appeal, heard from the opposite shore, but a reconstruction of the circling around myself, cannot be acknowledged as a version *in positive*, which uses Levinas' philosophy as its photographic negative; it is rather a transfer of meanings from one field to the other and vise versa, from the non-locus to locus, without a mediator, during which the meanings become the other of themselves and ultimately induce a feeling of absurd: an incapability of the subject to break free from the centripetal wandering around himself as a center. The thesis and antithesis, united in one by the grotesque, even when thought of as the front and back side, can be considered equal only when it is allowed an illegal reduction of meta-language to language, devoid of the dimension of height and overlooking a metaphorical sense. Only in this way immediately (without preserving any distance between them and without an understanding that the suffering within me receives a meaning as a suffering only because of the suffering of the other) the caress and the wound can be perceived as phenomena which are mutually exchangeable and of the same order, and Levinas' language can be dubbed "outrageousness".

As to what regards the perspective in which I see things, I agree with Jacques Ellul, who says in his book *The Humiliated Word*, in view of the extreme violence attributed to language, that nothing is more senseless than the argument, heard thousand of times in today's world, that speech and words are terroristic. It seems he is convinced by personal experience, that the people who say this so easily have not experienced themselves the difference between the violence of the words and the violence of the lash of the whip, between the roaring human mouth and the silent barrel of a gun. In the grotesque these two extremes are merged and make us shiver, for wherever this merge occurs, it is monstrous. One of the lessons from Levinas' books – from the first to the last, including *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being* – teaches us that where the Word is spoken and the Other can be heard, the shooting of guns and revolvers has either been postponed or silenced.

Perhaps this will sound unoriginal, as so many have done already, but

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[7] Emmanuel Levinas. On Intersublectivity. Notes on Merleau-Ponty. *Outside the Subject*. Translated by Michael B. Smith, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1994, pp. 101-102.

I would also like to join the respect shown towards Levinas by Maurice Blanchot: "*In Emmanuel Levinas' book – where it seems to me, philosophy in our time has never spoken in a more sober manner, putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking and even our facile reverence for ontology, we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by entertaining precisely the idea of the Other in all its radiance and the infinite exigency that are proper to it, that is to say, the relation with autrui. It is as though there were here a new departure of philosophy and a leap that it, and we ourselves, were urged to accomplish*."[8]

But at the same time I know very well that the appearance of the grotesque signals the end of some monolithically serious myth. Labeling some belief as a myth already presupposes distance, suspicion, reflection, and end of the faith. The grotesque describes exactly the myth's picturesque agony. And grotesque has as its function not only to demythologize and represent the death of the myth but our liberation from it as well. In this way, it could be a beginning of another style of thinking and quite new culture.

[8] Maurice Blanchot. Knowledge of the Unknown. *The Infinite Conversation*. Translated by Susan Hanson. University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 51.