From the caress to the wound: Levinas's *outrageousness*

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How are we not to commit an act of violence? How are we no to do violence to the Other, to the revelation of the Other, to his kindness, his "rightness" – to the "sincerity" of a face "which could not lie" – but also to his weakness, his destitution, to the nakedness of this face which exposes itself at all times to the possibility of injustice, of outrage, of murder? How are we not to do violence to the face of the Other who summons me? How are we, for example (but this is obviously more than a mere example), not to do violence to this eminent face of the Other, this enigma listening to the name of Emmanuel Levinas, and to his legacy?

If we refuse to take up the role of the disciple, of transforming his body of thought into "an oracle where 'the said'[1] is immobilized", if the true fidelity to a thinker necessarily involves some injustice and infidelity, *how are we not to do violence* to Levinas's work from the moment we attempt to read it? This question is, however, an ambiguous one which can be understood in two ways. At first glance, it asks *how to avoid* committing violence; it takes us down a road leading away from the rages of history, from the struggle to death and the allergy of the other, towards peace and a pacified understanding of the text we want to decipher. In this case, we would be dealing with an ethical question, with *the* major question of ethics. But the question can also be understood differently, as the carrier of a certain indignation, a revolt: *how do I keep myself from* committing violence? Why would I not, here and now, give in to a justified anger towards this body of ideas which, while pretending to prohibit all violence, is itself nevertheless committing an extreme violence? Why would I not do so in spite of this prohibition which Levinas's own line of thought cannot help but violating,

[1] In the French original, Levinas uses the term *le dit*, here translated as 'the said,' as opposed to *le dire*, translated as "the saying".

as if it were constantly flouting the very Law it enacts? Or would I maybe do so precisely *because* of this prohibition, that is, because an ethics of non-violence were bound to be an illusion, because all condemnation of injustice and war would unavoidably bring about *another act of violence* which would, if this expression makes any sense, be the violence of the Good? If we would understand this question as a theme, a meditation on the impossibility of ethical non-violence, on the necessity of passing on to merely "economizing violence", it would lead us back to a domain which was already explored, notably by Derrida. It is not in this direction that I wish to set out. Rather, I will attempt to inquire into the violence of "the saying", which is anterior to all conceptualization and thematization; a *hyperbole* characterizing Levinas's approach which seems to be his peculiar way of practicing the *épochè*. He himself would describe it as "passing on to the superlative", as "sublimation", "exaggeration"[2] , or "emphasis": "exasperation as a philosophical method"[3]. I would rather give it a name which he, errors excepted, never uses: *outrageousness*[4]. For this term, deriving from the word *outrage*[5], designates the act of *moving out of*[6], of passing beyond (*ultra*) a limit, of ex-ceeding[7] it. Such hyperbolic violence alone could uphold all of the excess, all of the immoderacy of a line of thought which claims to lead us beyond the being. Previously testifying to this in *la République*, was the ironic astonishment with which Glaucon received the idea of the *épikeina tès ousias*: "In the name of Zeus, Socrates, there we have a *daimonikê huperbolê*!", a demon hyperbole, a quasi-divine transcendence.

It is this surprise, this sideration, which always inspires me to read Levinas, and notably his last work *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, where the exaggeration amplifies, takes an ever more radical path. How do we receive a saying of such an excessive nature without necessarily

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2 The original, and perhaps more appropriate, French term employed by Levinas is *surenchère*.

3 French original: *l'exaspération comme méthode de philosophie*. Cf. "Questions et réponses", *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Vrin, 1982, p. 141-143.

4 French original: *outrance*.

5 The same term is employed in the French original: *outrage*.

6 French original: *passer outre*.

7 French original: *outrepasser*.

being outraged[8] by it? How are we not to resist, with a violence itself *exasperated*, a line of thought which is so violent, so outrageous that it holds me "guilty of surviving" the other, even already "guilty of existing"; that accuses me "of a mistake that I have not made freely"; charges me with a debt which "increases while being paid off", and even ventures upon an untenable praise of persecution: "without persecution, the I refuses to accept defeat"?[9] Let us clarify that by the term hyperbole is not only understood that range of expressions which is so frequently used in this book where we find the exaggeration of the *more* ("a passivity more passive than any passivity", "the more just I am, the more guilty I am", "more guilty than any other", etc.) or the exaggeration of the *never enough* (a proximity which is "never close enough"). Other than that, our usage of the word hyperbole equally designates a certain way of concatenating motifs through repetition and radicalization which "makes an idea pass on to its superlative, and, ultimately, to its emphasis"[10]; for example, from the uniqueness of the I to its *chosenness*, from the proximity of the other to his *haunting* me, from my exposure to the Other to his *persecuting* me… Or a generic notion is presented as a borderline case: from psychism to *psychosis*; from responsibility for the other to the necessity to take his place, to sacrifice myself for him without reserve. Or, yet in another way, a simple virtuality (sensibility as "vulnerability") is transformed into an effective experience (vulnerability as "haemorrhage", as being "wounded to death"). Those are some of the many hyperboles, passing on to the limit, at the same time sublime and terrifying, and which should be taken seriously, *literally*. Derrida already vividly emphasized this fact concerning the major motif of *Totality and Infinity*: "the face is not a metaphor, it is not a figure of speech. The discourse of the face

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8 The French original, *excédé*, equally plays on the linguistic affiliation with previously mentioned terms such as *outrance, outrage, outrepasser, ex-cès* which all refer to Levinas's philosophical approach of hyperbolization.

9 French original: *sans la persécution, le moi relève la tête*. Cited from the original French of *Otherwise Than Being*, i.e. *Autrement qu'être,* second edition, Livre de Poche-Biblio, 1990, p. 177. All references to this book are from now on incorporated into the text itself.

10 French original: *qui fait "passer d'une idée à son superlatif, jusqu'à son emphase"*.

is not an allegory"[11]. We should come to the same conclusion as for the hyperbole and the collection of motifs developing in *Otherwise Than Being*. Levinas insists on it concerning the expression "mal dans sa peau"[12]: this "is not a metaphor *in itself*", but "the *in itself* of the contraction of ipse-ity". The entire lexicon of stricture, of denudation, of skinning which accompanies it should thus be considered "better than metaphors", "the exact trope of an alteration of the essence". In other words, a trope foreign to all rhetoric, where the linguistic usage would coincide exactly with the thing itself, with the archi-phenomenon of a torsion of the Self, "in itself already out of itself".[13] We are speaking of the marvel of a trope which would also be a *too much* [14], the paradox of a saying which is fully adequate for a phenomenon only because of its inadequacy, its surplus, its infinite excess. As such, the Levinasian "sublimation" seems to go back to the extreme violence of the Kantian sublime. Through the boundlessness, the disfiguration of sensible figures, the sentiment of the sublime presents the unpresentable of the supra-sensible Ideas and of the ethical Law. Through its outrageousness, the Levinasian hyperbole resonates the saying of an ethics without Law.

We could ask ourselves what the status of this hyperbolic saying is, and how it relates to the categories of ontology, to the phenomena which phenomenology attempts to describe. This saying is often presented as an act of rupture, of "interruption", and Levinas sometimes tends to give credence to this interpretation. However, he seems to admit that there is a correspondence, a certain continuity between the approach of phenomenology (and/or ontology) and his own in stating that it is "the over-determination of the ontological categories which transforms them into ethical terms"; that the phenomenological description of the appearance of the other "turns into ethical language"; or that "the tropes of ethical discourse prove to be suitable for certain structures of the description". To put it otherwise, ethics

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[11] Originally cited in French from "Violence et métaphysique", *L'écriture et la différence,* Seuil, 1967, p. 149.

[12] A French expression which is literally translated as "bad fitted in one's skin", and is used when one feels uneasy with or about oneself.

[13] French original: *en soi déjà hors de soi*.

[14] The original French *trop* plays on the formal resemblance with the previously mentioned *trope*.

should *rely* on phenomenological descriptions; Levinas is actually less concerned with breaking with the latter than he is with "over-determining" them by giving them an ethical significance. Several notable consequences follow. First of all, we need to acknowledge that this type of exaggeration does not correspond to a *break* with phenomenology (as for example Derrida claims it to be in his *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*); a fidelity – however infidel – to the analyses of Husserl remains all along. But we should equally concede that the "tropes" of ethics are not to be reduced to pure *prescriptions*, precisely because they still contain a *descriptive* part, or at least a certain "adequacy" to the description. It would thus be a mistake to regard Levinas's thought as a logic of the "prescriptive phrase", as Lyotard did, or to conclude from it that the motifs of obsession, of being held hostage, of persecution, of sacrifice, etc. would have no ontological or existential consistence – that is, would in no way affect our concrete existence. It would be incorrect to think that these motifs merely open up the ultimate horizons of the ethical conditions to us, in their extreme yet non-actual possibilities; that borderline-situations are forever to remain foreign to our experience, merely susceptible of orienting it, in the same way the inaccessible "ideal of practical reason" orients moral action in Kant[15]. Quite the opposite. What is really at stake in the Levinasian exaggeration is the description of experience as if it were already confronted with these extreme situations – or continuously would have to confront them. For this exaggeration is *at the same time* prescriptive and descriptive, it precedes the distinction between *Sein* and *Sollen*, or is situated beyond it. On this level of radicalism, all traditional demarcations fail; it then boils down to the same thing to say either that I *have to* sacrifice myself without reserve for my persecutor, or that I *am only me* if I accept sacrificing myself in this way.

What is the purpose of this hyperbolic outrageousness? Is it only aimed at the categories of the same and the being? Everything seems to suggest that, when radicalizing, Levinas's ethics equally turns back *against itself*, against that which, in its own discourse, tends to *betray* – in every sense of the word – its own violence and confess to a hidden mistake by re-

[15] The author adds that, in his opinion, this is the interpretation currently proposed by J.M. Salanskis.

vealing that it remains under the yoke of the same, that it is still a captive of the discourse and the concepts of ontology. In this way, the approach of *Otherwise Than Being* can be defined as an *hyperbole of a hyperbole*, since this book also attacks – in a more discrete manner – certain major affirmations of preceding works; Levinas somehow *redoubles the violence* by going back over the *already* hyperbolic statement of these works, in order to both intensify and rectify it. The ethical saying is – as we all know – inseparable from an incessant *retracting*[16] of what was said in the past, and Levinas himself acknowledges that, in *Totality and Infinity*, he had contented himself with "simply inversing the terms" of the ontological difference "while privileging that which is"[17] (i.e. the other) "to the detriment of the being"[18]. But this reversal is nothing but the "first step in a movement" of taking ethics "beyond the ontological difference".[19] Attempting to think the self, the Other and their relation-without-relation by freeing them from their secular submission to the being, such will be the vocation of ethics from now on, such will be the stake of this hyperbole which appears to be "more ontological than ontology, an emphasis of ontology"[20]. All motifs of the ethical discourse as well as the style, the atmosphere of this line of thought are profoundly affected by this. Such being the case, the I, which was formerly defined by its selfish *conatus*, by its power of identification and its sensual possession of the world, now gives way to an I without power and without qualities, and that receives its uniqueness and identity entirely from its preassignation to the Other. The hyperbole of the I then amounts to its destitution, its "de-position". As for the face, of which *Totality and Infinity* still praised its "sincerity", its "absolute authenticity" comparable to the veracity of the Cartesian God[21], it is from now on typified by its "ambiguity", that of a "mask" where the trace of the Other "appears and then is erased". One

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16 The French original contains a wordplay opposing the ethical saying (*dire*) to the act of retracting (*dédire*).

17 French original: *l'étant*.

18 French original: *l'être*.

19 Cf. his preface to the second edition of *De l'existence à l'existant,* Vrin, 1978, or his preface to the American edition of *Autrement qu'être*.

20 Originally cited in French from *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée,* p. 143.

21 Op. cit., Nijhoff, 1984, p. 172-176, etc.

more step, one more turn in the hyperbolic trope, and this face which used to be that of my victim (or the eminence of the schoolmaster who teaches me) would become that of my persecutor. The intrigue of the self and the Other would no longer be thought of in terms of a relation of pupil to schoolmaster, of a son to his father, but rather in terms of persecution, of haunting down, of traumatism. And the scene where this intrigue is tied, the site of the encounter would no longer be the same: instead of an unbridgeable separation and exteriority, we would be dealing with an intimate entanglement where the Other manifests itself as *Other-in-the-Same*. These shifts, these turnarounds, these mutations are of such broad scope that it seems to me that we can distinguish a "first ethics" of Levinas (the one of *Totality and Infinity*) from a "second ethics".

It thus seems appropriate to inquire into the evolution of the Levinasian thought, to ask ourselves if this radicalization of ethics does not lead to an impasse; if these hyperbolic motifs do not in the end appear to be inconsistent; if, as was already the case for the I, Levinas's ideas concerning the Other as elaborated in *Otherwise Than Being* do not bring about a *deposition* of the other, his neutralization, his revocation to the benefit of an anonymous alterity. We would then be speaking of a reasoning which is not accidental, but rather the inevitable consequence of the Levinasian exaggerations. As a discerning reader could note, this emphatic *épochè* makes that we are no longer concerned with enabling that which is shown to show itself – i.e. we are no longer concerned with phenomena – but rather with "showing something else" at the limits of the visible: "the superlative, far from rendering more clear, more visible that which it submits to exaggeration, rather profoundly alters it"[22]. It is this *alteration of the Other* – but also of the I and of the relation between both – which should be analyzed. Is the radicalization from one book to the other still a simple prolongation of the same project, the same purpose? Or does the inflection imposed by *Otherwise Than Being* on the contrary bring about a complete reversal of perspective, comparable to this "revolution" Levinas found in the transition from the second to the third *Metaphysical Meditation*? On the one hand, his out-

[22] Originally cited in French from R. Calin, *Lévinas et l'exception du soi,* PUF, 2005, p. 242.

rageousness could only consist of taking things *to the limit*, of developing all implications latent in his thinking, without there being a real rupture. But, on the other, it could also perpetuate itself *beyond* its limit. Let us give an example: in *Totality and Infinity*, it is the nakedness of the face, its destitution, its absolute vulnerability which summon my infinite responsibility towards it; and this summons is so imperious that this pleading face can, *à la limite*, come to haunt me as an obsession. That which chases me relentlessly, which literally *per-secutes* me, thus is the violence of the Good; a certain continuity holds when we pass from the epiphany of the face to persecution. And yet, the direction of this relationship can be inversed, and the same term can come to designate the "maliciousness" of the Other, "the face of the fellow man in its persecuting hatred". The ethical summons, then, is so immoderate – so excessive is the violence of the Good – that it can only properly express itself in terminology evoking the most extreme evil (persecution, hatred, being held hostage…).[23] Consequently, the two adverse poles of the ethical experience become indistinguishable. If they are actually the same terms, are we still speaking of the same violence, the same persecution then? How are we to avoid confusing the face of the humiliated victim with that of his torturer? The outrageousness of Levinas's thought makes it pass beyond a divide, covering an abyss which used to separate two distinct versions of the Other. The implications of such a hyperbole are frightening; having to "respond to the persecutor" (up to the point of having myself accused *in his place*, sacrificing myself for him…) does not have the same scope if this face persecuting me is that of the weak, the poor, the victim, or, on the contrary, that of the SS. If ethics would refuse to distinguish between these two faces of the face, to celebrate the "integral passivity" of the persecuted *in all cases*, it would come to repudiate the revolt of the ghettos.

The same difficulty arises when we consider the relation of the I to the Other. Whereas the first ethics would regard it as an infinite distance, the second on the contrary seems to situate the Other in an overwhelming prox-

[23] The author adds that Ricœur managed to acknowledge "the enormity of the paradox comprised in expressing by means of maliciousness the degree of extreme passivity of the ethical condition" – cf. *Autrement, lecture d'"Autrement qu'être" de Lévinas,* PUF, 1997, p. 24; and already *Soi-même comme un autre,* Seuil, 1990, pp. 390-392.

imity. But this divergence may be illusory, as the reference in *Totality and Infinity* to Descartes suggests – a reference to the "idea of the infinite in me" which makes the relation between I and Other conceivable as an *intimate exteriority* (an "extimacy" Lacan would have said), that is, as a "surplus", an "overflowing" of the Same by the Other, a separation in immediate proximity. We could thus speak of a "transcendence in immanence", some sort of an inherence, a residing of the in-finite *in* the finite[24]. The Other thus announces himself *as the Same*, as a trace left "in" the I, in the depths of my flesh, while at the same time infinitely exceeding me. In reality, the analyses found in *Otherwise Than Being* merely make explicit what was already stated in *Totality and Infinity* by taking into account all of the consequences implied – presumably in response to Derrida's objection emphasizing that the completely Other[25] can only be expressed in the language of the Same while *presenting itself* as a mode of the Same or of the I[26]. From the "first" to the "second" Levinas, continuity still seems to get the upper hand. Or the meaning of this *in* of "Other-in-the-Same" – this transcendence in immanence – would have to change completely in the second ethics… If, before, we could speak of an inflation of the I, of its outpouring *towards the Other*, we are now faced with the exact inverse movement, some sort of a penetration of the Other *in the Same*: a pre-original *injection* which has always pierced the I, even before I was myself. Once again, the apparent homonymy of the terms masks a decisive rupture. It is undoubtedly at this point that the difference with the first ethics is most prominent. In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas insisted upon the necessity for the I to "conserve its secret", to preserve its intimacy against the indiscrete reach of the Other, following a demand which is at the same time ethical and political since "the

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[24] Cf. *Totalité et infini,* p. XIII et 170, et *En découvrant l'existence,* Vrin, p. 172. Sur cette interprétation de l'in-fini où le *in-* signifie à la fois le "non" et le "dans", renvoyons à *De dieu qui vient à l'idée,* pp. 105-106.

[25] French original: *le tout-Autre*.

[26] Cf. "Violence et métaphysique", p. 167-168, etc. The author adds that paradoxically, at the same time when Levinas seems to give way to the Derridean objection by coming to regard the Other as "Other-in-the-Same", Derrida seems to meet Levinas's position when conceding the possibility of a completely Other. In *Faire part* (Lignes, 2005), Rogozinski has given an account of this back-and-forth movement and its consequences for Derrida's thinking.

pluralism of society is only possible on the basis of this secret"[27]. In *Otherwise Than Being*, conversely, he emphasizes our "unfettered exposure" to the Other, "leaving the subject no possibility to withdraw in his secret".

As such, the injection of the Other-in-me has seen me through, has "brusquely exposed me without any possible evasion"; since it traverses me from side to side, since it penetrates me all the way into my interior *conscience*, we can conceive of it as a *perforation* of the I by the Other. What are its consequences? What happens to the Other when his alterity introduces itself in the very heart of the I? Whereas *Otherwise Than Being* devotes long analyses to the effects of this perforation *on the I* – the traumatism, the fission, the torsion of the self it provokes – Levinas nonetheless fails to evoke its consequences *for the Other*. This is so because he straightaway defined this perforation as an "intrigue of the Other in the Same, *which does not boil down to the Other opening up to the Same*" (emphasis mine), as if, unlike the I, the Other could pass this test while remaining *unaltered*, absolutely intact, shut-away from all contact, all contamination by this I which it haunts. The I's agonizing opening up to the Other, its being skinned alive by him, thus would be answered by this enigmatic closure of the Other, who would resist, close himself up to the suffering, to the distress of the I, while at the same time penetrating the I and eroding it into the depths of its flesh. "The darkening of the world never attains the light of the Being"[28]; it is in these terms that Heidegger pointed out (in 1947…) the sacred character of the Being (*heilig*, i.e. always *safe*, unharmed), however great the scale of the disaster affecting man may be. Strangely, it seems that this assertion (should we call it a postulate? a bet? a faith?) that *there is something unalterable* persists if we move, with Levinas, "from the sacred to the holy"[29] – as if, past a certain limit, the "separation" implied in the biblical *kadosh* and the salutary guard of the *Heile* would close up on each other and *nearly* merge. This could put to question the all too easily assumed self-evidence of certain demarcations: the one between the Being and the Other, between ontology and ethics, or between Athens and Jerusalem,

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27 Op. cit., p. 29, cf. aussi p. 93.

28 "L'expérience de la pensée", *Questions* t. III, Gallimard, 1966, p. 21.

29 French original: *du sacré au saint*.

the "two sources" of our occidental religiosity. To put it in Joyce's terms: *Greekjew is Jewgreek – extremes meet*.

In the case of Levinas, this position could certainly be justified ethically as an attempt to safeguard the Other, to protect him "in a motherly way" against all offense, against all outrage from the side of the I. It would be grounded in the absolute dissymmetry of the ethical relation which, while letting the Other infiltrate in me, forbids me to introduce myself in him, to violate him while seeking to "unveil" him, to "understand" him, to lock him up in a concept. "Were you there when I created the world? … Did you, once in your life, command the morning?" … Who am I, then, to dare to ask of the completely Other that he "opens up" to me, reveals me his secret? But, on the other hand, does this prohibition to question the Other not imply renouncing the exercise of thought itself, and notably the questioning of the consequences of the act which injects him in the I? Is it possible for the Other to engage himself in this way in the Same without being altered by it, without becoming the Other *of* the Same, an Other already disfigured by the Same? How far can his intrusion of the Other in the I go? Does it not run the risk of annihilating the I, of dispossessing it completely of the self – of my body, my duration, my ipseity – when it does not even leave it the option to receive the Other, to either respond or not to his call with a *here I am*? The problem when it comes to this motif of "the Other-in-the-Same" is not merely to be situated in the *in*, i.e. the modalities and effects of the Other's injection in me – but equally in *the Other*, the status of this enigmatic alterity which has always been perforating me. Is the *same* name of "other" suitable for naming both the absolutely-Other – infinitely separated from the I – and an alterity with which I am one, up to the point where it cracks me open? This Other-in-me – is he still *another*? Does he still have a face? We could assume that none of this is the case, that we should rigorously distinguish between the epiphany of the face of another, who always approaches me *frontally*, in the directness of the face-to-face, and this pre-injection of an anonymous alterity which haunts me from the depths of myself. But then we would be forgetting that the face is not a visible face; it does not have an a priori assignable place: it gives itself in the ever singular event of its revelation and, in this sense, the entire body can *make up the face* as well as a voice or a hand being stretched out. If the event of the face is measured by

the "disturbance" it provokes – by the interruption of my narcissistic auto-affection – then the traumatic penetration of the Other in the I is eminently, excessively "face", at least insofar as we speak of the encounter with an other as analyzed in *Totality and Infinity*. If approaching the face via face-to-face contact tends to disappear in the second ethics, it does so to the benefit of a *more-than-face*, a revelation without epiphany of a "face" without a visible face, an archi-face which is no longer that of another.

But Levinas would never consent to this. A case of modest self-restraint or rather of blindness? Keeping him from asking such questions is the outrageousness of his thinking which takes him beyond the limits of the delimitated area of every phenomenon when trying to "show something else", to approach the enigma of an *other Other* – but without overtly recognizing this possibility of the Other's division.[30] Carried away by an exaggeration which gets lost in itself, the second ethics indeed tends to identify the Other-in-me with the other, as if these two terms were necessarily synonyms – for example in this passage where the "responsibility for *Another*" is defined as "the *other* at the very heart of myself claiming the Same, the extreme tension of the command exercised by *another* on me in me, the traumatic hold of the *Other* on the Same…" (emphasis mine). It happens to be the case that this identification is not self-evident. If it is true that this Other who haunts me and persecutes me affects me in a pre-original manner, even before appearing to my consciousness, then how would I be able to recognize, identify him *as* an other without doing violence to his indetermination?[31] If we wish to respect his mode of donation, we can do nothing more than to designate him as an Other=X, an anonymous alterity. We are then faced with an imperative which is at the same time *ethical* (respecting the neutrality of the Other while avoiding to violate his secret) and *phenomenological* (describing the phenomenon as it shows up, without imposing for-

[30] The author adds that, on this subject, Lacan's thinking seems to be more open to the different ways in which the "other" gives himself; he could be called more "phenomenological".

[31] The author recognizes here the interrogation of the "unfathomable anteriority" of the Levinasian Other as explained, "in a rather exasperated manner", by M. Haar in "L'obsession de l'Autre"*, Emmanuel Lévinas,* Cahier de l'Herne, 1991, rééd. Livre de Poche, p. 526.

eign determinations on it). Taken literally, however, this imperative forces us to break with a major thesis of phenomenology affirming that "the *first stranger in the self* (the first *non-me*), is *the other me*"[32]; we no longer have the right to determine it in this way. Levinas himself, however, remains absolutely faithful to this assertion of *Cartesian Meditations*, even when he distances himself from Husserl when refusing to assimilate the other to "another *me*", in order to respect, more than Husserl did, the radical alterity of the First Stranger. As such, the entirety of Levinas's oeuvre testifies to his obstinate fidelity to this thesis of his master. But considering the "first non-me" as another is not necessarily the only possibility authorized by Husserl's approach. To this decisive question – *who* is the First Stranger? – the founder of phenomenology has equally given another answer: in certain manuscripts of the thirties, he indeed came to designate l'*Ur-hylè* – the "material" of the primary sensations by which the I is originally affected – as the *Ichfremdkern*, the "core" *in me* of "the stranger in me". The discovery of an Other-in-me thus appears to be neither Levinas's nor Derrida's – except that, in the case of Husserl, we can not speak of an other, but we should consider an alterity *that I myself am*, since the I "is indivisibly one with (*in eins mit und ungetrennt*) its most profound hyletic foundation"[33]. These primary sensations of movement – of displacement and obstruction, of tension and relaxation – and these *Empfindnisse* – these perceptive "sentances" of heat or cold, of ruggedness, of whiteness, etc. – which affect me before I am intentionally directed towards an object, all of this belongs to my immanent life, is one with me – while at the same time *equally* manifesting itself as other than me, as the announcement in me of a stranger-to-me. Faced with the enigma of the First Stranger, it is the whole of traditional demarcations between the Same and the Other, the I and an other, immanence and transcendence, which comes to falter. Previously unobserved questions then crop up. If this Other=X is at the same time mine and foreign, how does this double character manifest itself? Does his foreignness – which is not *abso-*

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[32] "*Das an sich erste Fremde (das erste "Nicht-Ich") is das andere Ich"* - Husserl, *Méditations cartésiennes* §49, Vrin, p. 90 (modified translation).

[33] Cf. texts cited by N. Depraz, "Temporalité et affection dans les manuscrits tardifs de Husserl", *Alter* n°2, 1994, pp. 72-73.

lutely foreign to me – unavoidably bring about a divide, a fission of the I? Is it impossible for me to come to recognize this Stranger as *mine*, as an opaque part of my self? To reconcile with him without merging with him? What relation could there be between this immanent alterity and the transcendence of another? When I encounter another, will I not *project* the alterity of the other-in-me onto this other outside of me; will I not confer certain of its traits to him, identify him with this alterity? An other would then be nothing else than my *double*, the replica or the mask of the stranger-in-me. What would be the consequences in the domain of ethics? If we are to distinguish at least two modes of the Other, two kinds of alterity, that of the face of another and that of the Other-in-me, has the time then not come to put an end to the equivocal uniqueness of the name of the "Other", to abandon the *monotheism of the Other*?

Levinas could not ask himself these questions because he remained faithful to the first thesis of Husserl, the one which defines the original foreignness as an other. This fidelity is maintained throughout all successive exaggerations – first when he identifies an other to the completely Other, and next when he reintroduces the latter in me as an Other-in-the-Same. What Levinas in all cases refuses to take into account is the possibility of an *other alterity*, more radical than that of the other. At some point, he has nevertheless evoked an "other than another, otherwise other, an other of an alterity which is prior to the alterity of another, prior to the obligatory ethics of the fellow man". He specifies that this *otherwise Other* is "different from all fellow men, transcendent up to the point of absence, up to its possible confusion with the commotion of the "*there is*"[34], i.e. with the impersonal "insignificance" of the being[35]. But is this archi-alterity not that of the First Stranger in me, of Husserl's *Ur-hylè*; it is to this alterity that the name of "God" refers. Could it be identical to what he calls the Other-in-the Same? If this were the case, it could lead us back to the classical thesis of a God "more intimate to myself than me myself"… This theological interpretation,

[34] French original: *il y a.*

[35] *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée,* p. 115. The author adds that it is impossible for him in this context to inquire further into this "possible confusion" between the non-sense of the Other and that of the Being, which disconcerts and destabilizes the entire Levinasian foundation.

however, appears to me as erroneous, precisely because Levinas identifies the Other-in-the-Same *with the other*, with an ethical alterity which is distinct from the divine alterity. In spite of everything, the outrageousness of his thinking made him move them ever more close to one another, up to the point of identifying the ethical illeity of the face and the "glory" of the Sinaï, "the language of what is beyond the being" and the name of God. Under the single term of "Other" three different determinations are confused; the difference between them is covered up and denied from the moment it shows.

It is this confusion between different dimensions of the Other – whether it is deliberate or not is not the question – which characterizes the second ethics; under this term Levinas juxtaposes certain traits of the alterity=X (its obsessive proximity, its pre-injection in me) and those of the other as completely Other (his infinite exteriority, his radical separation from the I). This *double condition* of the Other, these two incompatible natures are simultaneously affirmed in such a way that the alterity of the completely Other enters *as such* into the core of the I and makes it burst open. In order to describe this paradoxical situation where the being-self is defined as a fission of the self, as being torn away from the self, he speaks of a "body stripped of its skin", of the "haemorrhage of the haemophiliac". Again, those are not mere metaphors, but rather a bodily inscription of the ethical hyperboles. The body does not represent, but it is in reality "the contraction of the ipseity"; the subject is "of flesh and blood", "bowels within a skin, and thus susceptible of (…) giving his skin"[36]. Once again, we notice a conception of the ego as an "incarnated I" testifying to Levinas's fidelity towards Husserl, to his notion of a self which is originally *Ichleib*, "flesh of the ego".

As such, all motifs of the second ethics could in a similar way be re-registered in the bodily domain where the motif of the *skin* plays a major role. As for the I "bound up with the self", tied to its ipseity, Levinas claims that it "feels uncanny in its skin"[37], tucked in "the tunic of Nessus which is

[36] Original French expression: *donner sa peau pour*: sacrifying oneself for the sake of, dying for the sake of.

[37] Original French expression: *être mal dans sa peau*.

his skin". He describes the Other-in-the-I as a "splinter which burns my flesh", an "other-in-the-skin"; and the vulnerability of the I, his sacrificial exposure to the Other as a "denudation beyond the skin". In this way, Levinas – maybe without knowing it – meets Freud's thesis defining the I as a "projection of the bodily surface", "an I-body", that is, a *I-skin*. But its function is not the same for both thinkers. In the eyes of the founder of psychoanalysis, the "skin" is a *surface of protection* (bodily or psychical), a *Reizschutz* which helps the subject to resist the excitations from the outside world or from the that[38]. In the case of Levinas, it is rather a *zone of exposure* which makes the perforation of the I by the Other possible. Instead of enveloping me, protecting me, my skin makes me suffer some sort of an *evagination* where my flesh turns inside out, exhibiting my most secret intimacy. The "denudation" of which he speaks is one of being skinned alive, a tearing apart which rips me away from myself, and it is actually my "own" skin tearing itself apart: it is almost as if there were "no longer an opposition between having a skin and being flayed or skinned"[39]. All of these motifs reappear in Levinas's new way of looking upon the *caress*. The second ethics defines it as "the non-coincidence of contact", a "dehiscence" where the "discrepancy between the approach and the approached" is revealed; that is, where the irreducible distance between the I and the Other within me is maintained. Describing the caress in such a way, the second ethics appears to continue anterior analyses outlined in *Time and the Other*, and subsequently in *Totality and Infinity*. However, if the caress was already defined there as a "beyond contact" – a "hunger" ever unappeased, an experience of the "ungraspable"[40] – these analyses took into account the non-coincidence, the incessant "evasion" of the caressed flesh by invoking the vulnerability *of the Other*, the "extreme fragility" of the feminine which brings him to shy

[38] For further reading concerning this thesis of Freud, as explained in his essay on *Le moi et le ça*, and its theoretical and clinical implications, see D. Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau,* Bordas, 1985.

[39] J.L. Chrétien, "La dette et l'élection", *Lévinas,* Cahier de l'Herne, p. 271.

[40] Cf. *Le temps et l'autre* (1946), reed. PUF, 1983, p. 82-83, and *Totalité et infini* pp. 233-238. These analyses are without a doubt directed against Sartre, who, on the contrary, conceived of the caress as taking possession of the other, an attempt (doomed to failure) to capture his freedom through incarnation.

away, to avoid all bodily contact as a "profanation" of his reserve. In the view of *Otherwise Than Being*, the caress always proves to a vulnerability, but it is no longer that of the Other, of the Beloved: it is that *of the I* in its devotion, its "immolation" of the Other. While caressing the body of the Other, I hurt myself, I cut myself on his contact; I let myself be lacerated by this body that I caress, be torn apart by it up to the point where I "sacrifice my skin". In reality, this being skinned precedes all caressing, all external contact with the Other, since *I have him in my skin*, he has always perforated me, torn me away from myself. We are faced here with an "exaggeration of tangency", where the motifs slip from hyperbole to hyperbole – from pre-injection to perforation, and further on to being skinned and haemorrhage – up to the point of wounding, "wounding to death", as the truth of the caress and of all relations to the Other. Paraphrasing an author from which Levinas sought to distance himself, but who appears to be closer to him than he thought: *the Other-in-me is the hell*[41].

How would it be possible to escape this hell in the direction of which the outrageousness of the second ethics precipitates us? How are we to think bodily contact without over-determining it throughout a series of hyperboles? By describing it as it is given, neither as a caress, nor as a wound, but simply as contact, as a skin being touched by a skin. In which singular experience is this phenomenon originally given? If we are to believe Husserl, it is given in the act where the touching flesh recognizes the touched flesh as its own flesh – what Merleau-Ponty calls the tactile "interlace", "chiasm". As described in *Ideen II* or in *The Visible and the Invisible*, the most original phenomenon of bodily contact is this self-experience where my flesh *touches itself* while touching. Levinas refuses to take this classical analysis into account quite deliberately, because it supposes the priority of the auto-affection over the hetero-affection, whereas he posits as a principle that the incarnation plays on the contrary "in a broader intrigue than the self-apperception, an intrigue where I am tied to the others before being tied to my body". If one is to accept this postulate, one has to conclude that contact is necessarily altered, disconnected from the self by the alterity of the foreign flesh: "in the contact itself, that which touches and that which is

[41] French original: *l'Autre-en-moi, c'est l'enfer*.

touched are separated, as if the touching creating distance, always already other, had nothing *in common* with me". This is why "the caress lies dormant in all contact" and, in all contact, the wound. In defining the touch as an agonizing exposure of the flesh *to the Other*, in refusing to envisage the eventuality of a tactile *auto*-affection, Levinas once again proves fidelity – even up to his ultimate implications – to Husserl's thesis identifying the First Stranger to the other. Today, it is precisely this thesis which should be questioned. Through the experience of the chiasm, indeed, I discover that an irreducible gap widens between my flesh and itself: I experience a stranger *in me*, an anonymous archi-alterity which does not boil down to the alterity of the Other, whether that of the *alter ego* or of the face of another, or to that which the word "God" names. In me too, that which touches and that which is touched are separated, *as if* my flesh were "always already other" – and yet I discover that this other flesh that I feel is another pole *of my flesh*; that the First Stranger I encounter is a part of my own flesh, which hides from itself and understands itself wrongly as a transcendent Thing. Before tying myself up with others, I have first tied myself up with my flesh, that is to say, with myself.

Such being the case, it is time to return to Descartes, but to another Descartes than the one praised by Levinas: to the Descartes of the second *Metaphysical Meditation*, the one that discovered in the original truth of the ego an element of *resistance* to the hold the Other has on the ego – the Other as this great Deceiver which should finally be revealed as an illusion the ego loses itself in. Let us keep ourselves from disregard: while we are indeed refocusing on the ego, affirming the priority of his auto-donation over all transcendent donation, this certainly does not mean that the vulnerability, the obsession, the traumatism, the entire martyrdom of the Self as admirably described by Levinas disappear as if it were by magic. Rather, their significance becomes profoundly different: if the Stranger haunting me is no-one else than me myself, we can from now on envisage, beyond the wretchedness and the hardship, the possibility of an I-flesh reconciled with itself, having overcome its dreads to a certain extent. From this point of view, the entire dimension of ethics should be reconsidered, since it is my primordial relation to myself, to my own flesh, which founds the possibility of my rela-

tion to the Other; and the alterity of another from now on appears as a projection transcending this archi-alterity which I first encounter in myself. This leaves open the question how – through this screen representation, this specter that I project onto the Other – I am nevertheless to make my way towards him, how I am to approach the others *in truth*, beyond the obsession and the phantasm[42]. Levinas's ethics can from the outset be considered some sort of an antithesis, a version *in negativo* (in the way that we speak of a photographic "negative") of this phenomenology of the I-flesh. It can equally be regarded as one of its privileged *revelators*. In other words our proximity to Levinas is more intimate than it may seem to be at first glance; may our debt towards him "ever increase while being paid off".

[42] See Rogozinski's book *Le moi et la chair, introduction à l'ego-analyse,* Cerf, 2006.