

1 ❖ Out of Love: The Break with Parmenides

*On s'amuse mieux à deux!*¹

Ever since its beginning in the Greek colonies in Asia Minor, philosophy has defined itself, already ethymologically, as an act of love: love of knowledge, love of wisdom, love of truth, according to different suggestions resonating in the word *sophia*. Despite the clarity of the erotic implications, a question remains: Whom has philosophy really loved behind the multiplicity of masks with which its beloved has disguised its face?

The erotic intentions of Levinas's philosophy are disclosed without hesitation in a booklet published under the title *Time and the Other*: "it is toward a pluralism that does not merge into unity that I should like to make my way and, if this can be dared, break with Parmenides" (TO 42). His intentions of love result in an intimation of separation, then. Why is Levinas so vehement? Certainly not for personal reasons, since, as he asserts in *Totality and Infinity*, "it is not the I who resists the system, as Kierkegaard thought; it is the Other" (TI 40).² It is out of love for the other that Levinas embarks on his philosophical project.³ The departure from Parmenidean philosophy does not gratify need, born in the I (Levinas's own self) as an exigency whose possibility of satisfaction confirms the economy of the I (TI 114–15, ToO 350–52)—Levinas's own pride and fame. Rather, it responds to a desire which, in its being directed by the other (the victims to whom *Otherwise than Being* is dedicated), cannot be recompensed by

thought (TI 33–34), thus excluding any possibility of satisfaction.⁴ Despite all possible rationalizations, Levinas's life has remained haunted and "dominated by the presentiment and memory of the Nazi horror" (DF 291). Inspired by a desire that remains infinite, Levinas's philosophy establishes the impossibility of a complete accomplishment of its task, and the necessity of a continuous un-saying of its said. No word about the victims will ever be accurate enough to portray their suffering. In its infinite inspiration, Levinas's love can only be a love that never ends, an infinite love offered as a homage to the victims.

There is more, however, in Levinas's claim of a breach with Parmenides. Levinas's vehemency is not personal also in the sense of the lack of an argument *ad hominem*. It is neither Parmenides (who is never confronted on a textual ground) nor specific philosophers (although they are individually criticized on several accounts) with whom Levinas contends. Rather, his contention is with a recurrent Parmenidean inspiration which permeates the development of Western philosophy and spurs to read being in terms of unity—that is, in terms of a reassembling of differences within the circularity of thought. Levinas indicates Ulysses as the literary model that best expresses the activity of Western thought.

In agreement with a philosophical tradition to which he objects, but which he never disclaims, Levinas identifies the perhaps "too general and rather empty" task of philosophy as a quest for truth (CPP 47). It is the content of such truth that is at stake in Levinas's philosophy. At the origin of philosophy, Parmenides had perceived the philosophical dilemma as a choice between being and non-being, with truth on the side of being and unity. At the farther extreme of that same tradition Levinas reads the great dilemma within which philosophy has unfolded its story as an amphibology between autonomy and heteronomy. On the one end of the dichotomy, truth is understood as the result of a free search, in which the nature of the inquiring self remains the same despite the tantalizing adventures to which it submits. This is the Ulysean itiner-

ary that Western philosophy, Greek by birth and nature, has preferred, thereby solving the amphibology in favor of autonomy, freedom, and identity.

At the other end, truth is understood as “the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes toward the stranger, toward a *beyond*, as Plato puts it” (CPP 47). The path thus suggested is that of the transcendence of the self to itself—transcendence that does not yet mean exteriority, but which reveals a tension toward the ideal, the beyond, the other. Such an “equally ancient” (CPP 53) tradition, although minoritarian and submerged, is not completely absent from the history of Western philosophy. As Levinas readily recognizes (AT 50), it surfaces in Plato’s notion of the Good beyond being; in Aristotle’s remarks on the active intellect coming from outside (TI 49); in Plotinus’ One being located beyond being (ToO 347; 358); in Kant’s categorical imperative signifying independently from the proofs for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (OBBE 129, DMT 70-78); in Bergson’s duration as continuous source of novelty (“Transcendence et intelligibilité” 20–21).

If the first perspective reveals philosophy as ontology, the second defines philosophy as metaphysics.⁵ Abraham is the metaphorical figure which Levinas poses as an escort for the philosophical mind on its path toward heteronomy. Abraham is the model which Levinas claims for himself when, in “The Trace of the Other,” he writes: “to the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring his son to the point of departure” (ToO 348).

What is so peculiar about Ulysses that turns him into not a, but *the*, paradigm of Western philosophy? For Levinas, as for Horkheimer and Adorno before him,⁶ it is the fact that, despite all his roamings, the prow of Ulysses’ ship always points toward his native island, whereas “all of [his] adventures are but the accident of a return” (TH 92). As true already for Parmenides and his identification

of being and thinking, the unity of the project is what is essential also to Ulysses' journey. Levinas retraces the similarity between Ulysses and the philosophical conscience in the monotony of an itinerary whose return is granted even before departure, so that "action recuperated in advance in the light that should guide it—is perhaps the very definition of philosophy" (ToO 347). Socrates' maieutic exercise teaches that in the soul is already present everything that can be experienced, thus establishing the freedom, autonomy, autarchy of the soul. At least since him, consciousness is self-consciousness: immanence of the self to itself, that is, presence to oneself, transparency, atheism. Modelled on the unifying project of self-recognition, philosophy results in a philosophy of identity, which Levinas qualifies as an egology. It is the full coincidence with itself of an I which recognizes itself as same so that "we call it 'the same' because . . . the I precisely loses its opposition to its object; the opposition fades, bringing out the identity of the I despite the multiplicity of its objects, that is, precisely the unalterable character of the I" (TI 126).

The success of the project of self-recognition has its metaphysical cost, however. It is accomplished at the expense of Levinas's infinite beloved, the Other, through a process of neutralization, called representation, which reduces the other to the categories of the same. To proceed in a nonrhetorical manner, philosophy requires an encounter with some other, which is philosophy's object and concern. Yet, in its exotism, an other irreducible to the self⁷ engenders the risk of alienation and dispossession. The self might not remain the same. To check the threat and maintain its own security, the philosophy of identity resorts to an act of wit; in representation it contemplates the other that it needs, but always already as another *from* the self, so that the status of the absolutely other—the metaphysical Other—is neglected in favor of a relative, ontological otherness, an otherness that dialectically remains within the horizon from which it stems.⁸ In the move, the same and the other do not achieve separation. Rather, they constitute a system, share a common totality, like the

Hegelian masters and slaves, who need each other to exist.⁹

Although generalizing, insofar as he neglects most of the medieval tradition, and interprets the Greek legacy in terms of selected texts of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, Levinas asserts that "one can see this nostalgia for totality everywhere in Western philosophy, where the spiritual and the reasonable always reside in knowledge. It is as if totality had been lost, and that this loss were the sin of the mind. It is then the panoramic vision of the real which is the truth and which gives all its satisfaction to the mind" (EI 76). The benefits of totality and system are, for the same, immense: the self remains within itself, maintains its identity as limited by nothing, that is, free; the other, although spurious, is present to the same in a nonreversible determination.

The metaphysical unreality of the other is compensated by the same with the accordance of epistemological existence, by which the other becomes objective, transparent, intelligible. But the concession is subdolous. First, there is fraud: objectivity is not exteriority. It is still immanence of the other in the same, since objectivity is already in opposition to the subject, to which it offers a side—its objectivity—to grasp. Through a process of mediation and recurrence to neuters, which at once are and are not—the quality of the objects for Berkeley (TI 44), the horizon for Husserl and phenomenology, the Being of beings for Heidegger (TI 45, CPP 52-53)¹⁰—the I reduces the distance between itself and the other, and discharges the non-being of the other into its own being. Second, the magnitude of the fraud is augmented by the humiliation of the insult. The apparent alterity of the epistemological other is a service rendered by the other to a same whose cognitive activity gets thereby absolved from the charges of formalism, since thanks to the presence of the other to know is not to enact the empty tautology of "A is A".¹¹ As suggested in the expression "know thyself," under whose auspices Western philosophy is born and develops, the self does not know itself from the beginning. Rather, it needs an activity of self-retrieval that can be per-

formed by the I through the act of representing, that is, of “suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me” (TI 38).

Levinas admits that the other can refuse itself to possession. But he also remarks how in the history of Western philosophy, because of its receiving its determination from what it opposes, such a resistance is merely the reversal of an affirmation of identity and, therefore, still within the domain of identity. Epistemology is thus the cunning of reason, which, because the concession serves the system of identity, within the cognitive arena grants the other what it has already denied to it more powerfully at the metaphysical level. “The *outside of me is for me*” (ToO 345), synthesizes Levinas, thereby retracing in the idealism of the subject the truth of Western philosophy, while legitimizing Descartes’s concerns in the *Meditations* that the world, things, the *res extensa* could be the production of the I, merely its ideas.

According to Levinas’s analysis, the path of the unity of being (and thinking) that Parmenides has indicated leads to the autism of the I,¹² which denies the absolutely other and turns it into a negative always recuperable within the system. Rather than being “a situation . . . where the alterity of the other appears in its purity,” “a relationship with alterity, with mystery” (TO 85; 88), the act of love by which philosophy has proceeded has been a solitary pleasure, an activity of intellectual masturbation in which the beloved figures as a toy serving the onanism of the I. As in Aristophanes’ myth in Plato’s *Symposium* (189e–193d), fusion with the other is nostalgia for one’s own wholeness. But for Levinas love is neither a unifying nor a complementary relationship. Rather, “the pathos of love . . . consists in an unsurmountable duality of beings . . . lies in the fact of being two” (TO 86), whereas “the very value of love is the impossibility of reducing the other to myself, of coinciding into sameness. From an ethical perspective, two have a better time than one” (Face to Face 22). Thus, in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas offers a different definition of philosophy, still erotic in nature, though

inspired by a different kind of eroticism: not love of wisdom, but “wisdom of love” (OBBE 162). To perform its act of love, philosophy “is called upon to conceive ambivalence, to conceive it in several times” (OBBE 162). The first place where the ambivalence is to be conceived¹³ is in the notion of truth to which philosophy devotes itself. No longer the *adaequatio intellectus ac rei*, in which the *res* disappears in its adherence to the categories of the *intellectus*, but “the aspiration to radical exteriority, thus called metaphysical, the respect for this metaphysical exteriority which, above all, we must ‘let be,’ constitutes truth” (TI 29). It is not forgetfulness of being (Heidegger), then, but insensitivity to the other that has characterized Western philosophy. In its Abrahamic inspiration, it is to such an insensitivity that philosophy must now obviate.

Several questions arise at this point, though. If philosophy has to be “wisdom of love,” and to do so it has to “conceive of ambivalences,” how can Levinas conceive of the path of philosophy in terms of antinomies without falling back in the ontological model from which he wants to depart? To love the other, to conceive of ambivalences, Levinas must break with Parmenides, and follow Abraham. And yet, to love the other, to conceive of ambivalences, should not Levinas also love Parmenides? Should not the love of the other also love the same?¹⁴

The question is not otiose. What resonates in it are echoes of a much broader spectrum of questions encompassing the relation between the Greek and Jewish roots of Levinas’s thought, or, more broadly stated, between Greek philosophy and Jewish thinking, or even more broadly, between philosophy and religion.¹⁵ Or, deflecting the question in a different, although related, direction, the issue becomes that of the possible configurations of the relation between Levinas’s own thought, by his admission a philosophy, and the other thinkers in the Western tradition in dialogue with whom Levinas’s own philosophy unfolds, but whom he often criticizes. Levinas recognizes the influence such a tradition had on his own formation when praising Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, Hegel’s *Phenome-*

nology of Spirit, Bergson's *Time and Free Will*, Heidegger's *Being and Time* as some "of the finest books in the history of philosophy" (EI 37). Yet, as he readily admits, not all these thinkers are impermeable to the accusation of ontologism that causes Levinas to break with Parmenides.

Out of love of the other, Levinas's philosophy wants to break with Parmenides and abandon the path of being and identity, which privileges unity and communion over communication and community. Still out of love of the other, however, the departure cannot situate Levinas on the path of a nonbeing implying loss of speech and communication, and resulting into silence, as the Parmenidean dichotomization of the two ways of research (between being and nonbeing) would suggest. Coherently, then, Levinas indicates at several junctures how proximity to the other is precisely through language, defined as "a contact across a distance" (TI 172) in which the other manifests itself in "a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches" (TI 171).

For reasons analogous to those that bring to a rejection of the path of silence, the break with Parmenides cannot situate Levinas on the path of *doxa* (a complication of the path of nonbeing). The doxic route annihilates the I in the night of opinion, legitimizing all rhetorical violence, because rhetoric "approaches the other not to face him [or her], but obliquely" (TI 70). In an act of love toward the other, which is simultaneously an act of love toward Parmenides, Levinas must thus accept Parmenides' indication and move against sheer nonbeing. Accordingly, even if performed by the most powerful mind, no *epoche* from being can completely free the I from the "horror and panic" (EI 49) of existing. "Let us imagine all things, beings and persons, returning to nothingness. What remains after this imaginary destruction is not something, but the fact that there is [*il y a*]. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plenitude of the void, of the murmur of silence" (TO 46), Levinas writes describing the *il y a*,¹⁶ pure being without nothingness, which does not allow for exits or escapes, not even suicide (TO

50).¹⁷ Nevertheless, out of love for the other, Levinas's act of love toward Parmenides cannot duplicate Parmenides entirely.

The ontological status of nonbeing had already been vindicated by Plato who, in the *Sophist*, proscribes the path of pure being because of the *aporiai* and *aphasia*, to which it leads, as illustrated in the *Parmenides*. But Plato, and the tradition after him, love themselves more than they love the other. Therefore, after the spiritual homicide of Parmenides that dignifies (recuperates?) nonbeing within the five *genera* of being, they invent a dialectic of being able to recomprehend nonbeing totally within itself. Multiplicity is thus achieved only as an illusion. Conversely, Levinas loves Parmenides and the other more than he loves himself. Therefore, he accepts Parmenides' proscription of nonbeing; yet, he reinscribes that very nonbeing within the philosophical discourse not as nonbeing, but as otherwise-than-being.¹⁸ Contrary to what Derrida suggests, Levinas abandons Parmenides but without killing him.¹⁹ Multiplicity, denied by Parmenides and his homicides, is thus maintained.

This complex relation toward Parmenides, the Greek philosophical tradition, and the other is described by Levinas himself in *Totality and Infinity* under the name of filiality, which is not only "the converse" (TI 278) of paternity, but the othering of the father in the child through fecundity as seen from the other side, from the side of the other. Filiality, Levinas says, "designates a relation of rupture and a recourse at the same time" (TI 278). As rupture, the child expresses the discontinuity of an otherness that cannot be recapitulated. Out of love for the other, love that gets multiplied infinitely, the other subtracts itself to the same. "Repudiation of the father, commencement, filiality at each moment accomplishes and repeats the paradox of a created freedom" (TI 278)—that is, of a creature that, as in the creation *ex nihilo*, certainly involves a passivity with respect to being, but which is also there, standing on its own, solitude, distance from its creator, atheism, independence in its dependency, otherness (see TI 105).²⁰ How-

ever, the child “is, without being ‘on his [her?] account’” (TI 278),²¹ since the child lives an existence “which still subsists in the father” (TI 278), thus echoing the transcendence of paternity in filiality. In this sense, filiality is a recourse in which its other, paternity, its past “is recaptured at each moment from a new point, from a novelty that no continuity . . . could compromise” (TI 278). Levinas explicitly qualifies filiality as “a way of resuming the thread of history” (TI 278). In this case, the thread is that of the Parmenidean tradition, which is however broken open by filial possibilities exceeding paternal possibilities, and nevertheless remaining possibilities of the father. And, Levinas comments, “I would like to underline the upheaval—that this signifies—of the ontological condition and also of the logic of substance, on the one hand, and of transcendental subjectivity, on the other” (EI 70).

Neither an inclusive *and* which assimilates differences (Parmenides and Levinas), nor an exclusive *or* which precludes discourse between differences (Parmenides *or* Levinas), could not this *and/or*, possibility indicated by filiality and not contemplated by the traditional logic of non-contradiction, in its maintaining contradictory movements, be the way to conceive of ambivalences? The way for philosophy to express its love? But if that is the case, what to do of the opposition between Ulysses and Abraham which Levinas so clearly sets up? And who is Abraham, whom Levinas proposes to the reader as the model of heteronomy under which philosophy should risk its future adventures?

Although the children of Abraham’s child(ren) may be nomadic *ab origine*, neither Abraham nor his child(ren) are homeless wanderers since the beginning of their time, as Levinas seems to suggest. If Levinas’s reading of a nomadic Abraham constitutes the truth of the ethical Abraham, the chronological Abraham (philosophy on its way to become Abrahamitic, perhaps Levinas himself) would be better described as a Ulysses who, after having come back year after year to a home of ontological richness and satisfaction, one day lets himself be othered by the other, wel-

comes the appeal of the other, and abandons his home forever, without nostalgia or hope for a return. In his journey toward the other, Abraham carries on himself the stigma of his origin as the memory of what cannot be remembered, the Immemorable, an other that must not be recuperated, but must be forbidden from memory, even that of his son, in a complete separation between present and past.

In this chronological reading, Abraham is not a non-Ulysses (negation in which the other is constituted in terms of the same), but a Ulysses whose circular nature has been perforated and othered by the insertion of the other, which now ethically constitutes him; Abraham is an otherwise-than-Ulysses. Levinas may have resisted this reading, and proposed to his readers the figure of Abraham *after* his departure has been consummed, as the model of a radical going out toward the other as toward what is not recuperable. But this reading, which also considers Abraham's relation to his past, must be put forth, if Levinas wants to allow philosophy, still Ulyssean, to become Abrahamitic, and yet remain philosophy, that is, at least marked by its Greek, Ulyssean character. As Levinas asserts very clearly, "there is nothing to be done: philosophy speaks Greek" (DVI 137). Out of love for the other and ambivalences, philosophy must love both Ulysses and Abraham, where the *and*, as is the case in filiality, as is the case in *Totality and Infinity*, expresses separation as much as it expresses conjunction.²²

In "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," Levinas confirms the puzzling, ambivalent, paradoxical move between conjunction and separation when speaking of truth as of the place where the two directions of research, the ontological and the metaphysical, Ulysses and Abraham "interact" (CPP 447). The puzzling interaction, the *and* which coexists with the *or*, is reaffirmed by Levinas when he says that he "would maintain, against Heidegger, that philosophy can be ethical as well as ontological, can be at once Greek and non-Greek in its inspiration."²³ Understanding the meaning of the paradoxical interaction is crucial to un-

derstanding Levinas's confrontation with the ontological tradition of Parmenidean descent.

From the Ulyssean side of the interaction—that is, from the side of the ontological tradition, from the *au-deçà*,—Ulysses, in its ontological itinerary, may pursue Abraham. Yet, he will never be able to coincide with him, to bring him back home, because the path on which Abraham moves in its nomadism at the service of the other is tangential, touches the circularity of Ulysses' journey only at one point: that of Abraham's departure, which marks the alterity between him and Ulysses. From the Ulyssean perspective, it can only be Ulysses or Abraham, because to choose Ulysses means to integrate, recuperate, murder Abraham. The ontological tradition of Parmenidean descent cannot renounce its project without renouncing itself. To become Abraham, Ulysses must step radically outside the ontological circle. That is why the tradition lives the choice between Abraham and Ulysses as a dilemma, an ambiguity that requires its solution. And, when he sets up the opposition between Abraham and Ulysses, it is the language of the dilemma that Levinas uses to address the tradition. Levinas must break with Parmenides, philosophy must break with the Greek tradition.

On the side of the other, however, on the side of the metaphysical tradition that Levinas reveals as ethics, and to which he assimilates himself, from the *au-delà*, the situation is more complex: the ambiguity presents itself as an ambivalence, and to conceive of the ambivalence, Abraham must love Ulysses.

Abraham's interaction with Ulysses, however, cannot indulge in memories about his own having been like Ulysses without this remembrance becoming a betrayal of the spirit of his journey, which is not his, but the journey dictated by the other. Abraham is no longer like Ulysses. The conjunction, which may sound as Abraham and Ulysses, for Abraham, too, as for Ulysses, means Abraham or Ulysses, separated by the diachrony of time, by the absence of a common land, whereas the lack of nostalgia distancing Abraham from Ulysses constitutes the asyn-

chronicity of their relation. Again, Levinas must break with Parmenides. And yet, if he does not want to repeat the murderous unity (although this time in the name of the other), Abraham must carry on himself the stigma of his having once been similar to Ulysses as the memory of a past for which there is or can be neither recuperation nor longing for recuperation, and for which, yet, there is responsibility—the immemorial past.²⁴ This time the conjunction remains faithful to its grammatical nature. Therefore, it means Abraham *and* Ulysses, conjoined not by one of them (ontological autism and recuperation within the same), but by the distance that separates them, by the absence of symmetry between them. Levinas cannot reject Parmenides; he must carry the Parmenidean mark as the memory of what must be banned. The lack of a univocal possibility, the presence of an ambivalence in the *and* between *and* and *or*, mark exactly the move outside of fusion and unity.²⁵ The discrepancy between the ambiguity (only possibility affordable by Ulysses) and the ambivalence (faced by Abraham) is a trace of the asymmetry characterizing the ethical relationship.

In his being ethically appealed by a tradition different from the egological path of Western philosophy, Levinas desires the nomadism of the children of Abraham's child(ren). Nevertheless, although convinced that, on an ethical level, ethics is prior to ontology, chronologically, Levinas is an (even if perhaps illegitimate) son of Parmenides. Therefore, it is always Levinas *and* Parmenides, Levinas *and* the Greek tradition, Levinas *and* the Western ontological thinkers, as it is Abraham *and* Ulysses. While philosophy remains a quest for truth, like Abraham it cannot renounce, although it must dismiss, its origin in the ontological tradition, its Greek birth, nature, language. As already recalled, "there is nothing to be done: philosophy speaks Greek" (DVI 137). Yet, in its differing from that father with whom Levinas wants to break, it is also Levinas *or* Parmenides. Parmenides is the home from which metaphysics, like Abraham, should depart, so that Parmenides must be abandoned. Again, however, not to reenact unity

something of the abandonment must be preserved, although not celebrated, because "in Greek philosophy one can . . . discern traces of the ethical breaking through the ontological,"²⁶ and such ethical traces demand to be loved. Yet, since, like Abraham, metaphysics cannot remain attached to the nostalgia for that home whose memory has been banned, the reinscription of the traces within philosophy must do away with the ontological tradition. This implies that, to be faithful to its inspiration, metaphysics must allow for a negative which remains such without recuperation.

Levinas's confrontation with the tradition thus gestures in a direction which does not assume the negative upon itself. In its exposure to the Abrahamitic journey, the traditional notion of truth by which philosophy operates is undone, unsaid, thereby re-defining the very role and nature of the philosophical inquiry.²⁷ In its becoming a performance "at the service of love" (OBBE 162)—that is, at the service of the other—philosophy serves heteronomy, thus abandoning its initial Ulyssean spirit in content if not in expression, which remains Greek as a mark of the absence of the Greek content. In this service rendered to the other, philosophy might be able to accomplish the break with Parmenides, and realize the departure from all sites that not Abraham, but the children of Abraham's child(ren) enact.

Yet, in the break which Levinas not only desires, but also claims to have accomplished, it remains to be seen whether he has had the courage to move radically to the *au-delà* and live the life of the children of Abraham's child(ren). It remains to be seen whether the *and* and the *or* can be extended to all aspects of his philosophy, or whether the *and* and the *or* reach points of effacement of each other, whereas Levinas, turned into an Abraham still nostalgic of his Ulyssean home, remains on the threshold of the *au-delà*, and lets the ontological tradition lurk on the background of his ethical project. In other words, has Levinas really loved the other in all his, her, and its ambivalences? And who is the other whom Levinas loves?

2 ❖ In Love: Ethics as the Meeting Place

According to Levinas, the history of Western philosophy is the story of the unfolding of an identity that, like Ulysses, never gets lost in the adventures that it generates. This description seems to be even more accurate after Descartes, considered by many the father of modernity as subjectivism, the most appropriate appellation for the philosophy of identity. Yet, in accordance with his philosophical love of ambivalences, it is precisely in Descartes that Levinas finds traces of the presence of the other, that neglected existence in the history of Western thought.¹

Descartes's Third Meditation tells an admirable story of misery and splendor. It is the story of the finite in its relation to the infinite. Certain of itself and of its own existence, the Cartesian *ego cogito* is in a situation of despair about the rest of its representations, which might be merely phantasms of a too imaginative spirit. Among the innumerable dubious ideas that crowd its trembling mind, one, however, presents itself as undoubtable. It is the idea of God, an idea that, for its magnitude and nobility, in its glory which signifies the "growing surplus of the Infinite" (CPP 169), cannot be the product of the finite and limited mind of the *ego cogito*. Upon this idea, which functions as an epistemological foundation, Descartes reconstructs his lost faith in the truth of the external world. But, according to Levinas's highly idiosyncratic reading of Descartes,² the idea of God implies more than an epistemological possibility: "the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea" (CPP 55). That is, the idea of infinity

indicates something which remains external, absolutely other, transcendent to the conceptualizations with which the mind tries to imprison it. The idea of infinity comes as a "trauma which cannot be assumed" (CPP 166), as the surprise of a "hyperbolic demand [coming 'from the face of a neighbor'] which at once exceeds [the] response" (CPP 169). And yet, the idea of the Infinite is something that is welcomed (but not contained) in that very mind which it overflows and elevates by opening it up to new possibilities. This formal movement, which Descartes sees at work in the case of God, for Levinas characterizes the relation with the other (CPP 53–55), so that for him "the idea of infinity is the social relationship" (CPP 54). It is the exit from the solipsistic egology defining the ontological I to enter an intersubjective relationship with what remains other.

The social relationship is a relation of a peculiar kind, however, as already suggested by Levinas's description of it as of a "relation without relation" (TI 295): a relationship between the I and the other in which the two terms, confined in their separation, absolve themselves from each other without thereby destroying the possibility of the relation itself.³ Such a demanding situation cannot be realized at the level of epistemology, which inevitably accomplishes a totalization of the other through correlation, representation, intentional consciousness. But the Other escapes epistemological constraints, because, properly, the Other is not the content of any ideas, which he or she surpasses in his or her infinity, thus rendering the very notion of phenomenology impossible.⁴ On the contrary, the Other, in his or her transcendence, possesses an intentionality of his or her own alien to all cognitive analysis. It is the intentionality of desire, "which does not long to return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a land foreign to every nature" (TI 34).

Distinct in this from need, desire, which Levinas qualifies as metaphysical, cannot be satisfied because of the infinite, unbridgeable distance which always separates the desirer from the desired, which makes all adequation im-

possible, and which continuously nourishes the hunger, in the desirer, for the desired. In its peculiar intentionality, desire intends, and maintains, "the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the Other" (TI 34). Further from being what Hegel would call a bad infinite, because for Levinas desire is born in a subject which does not lack anything, the positivity of desire consists precisely in the remoteness, the separation which puts distance between the I and the Other, where "the conjunction *and* . . . designates neither addition nor power of one term over the other" (TI 39), but rather proximity (CPP 115), a spatial dimension made of verticality and height in which the I and the Other can be face to face, without assimilation.⁵

The "space" in which this "relation without relation," characterized by the intentionality of desire, occurs is indicated by Levinas as ethics. Ethics is defined as "a field outlined by the paradox of an Infinite in relationship with the finite without being belied in this relationship" (OBBE 148). Or, in a different formulation, "a relationship between terms such as are united neither by a synthesis of the understanding nor by a relationship between subject or object, and yet where the one weighs or concerns or is meaningful to the other, where they are bound by a plot which knowing can never exhaust nor unravel" (CPP 116n6). The exact place where the mutation of cognitive intentionality into ethics happens is the face of the Other. Ethics, which "situates man's first breath not in the light of being but in the relation to a being, prior to the thematization of that being" (PN 137), is the place of a face to face, of an encounter with an alterity that remains other.

A few words need to be said about the peculiar type of spatiality characterizing ethics. The place of ethics cannot be understood as a neutral field, coextensive or co-present with the I and the Other, in which the I and the Other meet with no danger for either. The resort to a neuter, the weapon by which ontology annihilates alterity, would imply the introduction of a third perspective from which the relation between the I and the Other could be recorded, and thus reunited in a unifying gaze. But "the radical sep-

aration between the same and the other means precisely that it is impossible to place oneself outside of the correlation" (TI 36). The place of ethics is rather the space opened up by the relation itself.⁶ Since the other is located in a dimension of height that is also the anachronistic dimension of a past which has never been present (CPP 68), such a place challenges the coextensiveness of the I and the other in the present, thus realizing a "curvature of space" (TI 291) signifying "the divine intention of all truth" (TI 291)—that is, signifying the exteriority characterizing ethics.⁷ In this curvature of space, which redefines the nature of ontological spatiality, "the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity" (TI 43).⁸ This calling into question is what Levinas names ethics (TI 43): a curved space in which the other can be encountered in his or her majestic exteriority; the space of an intrigue which discovers the I and the Other awoken to a love without lust.⁹

What defines the area of the curved spatiality, of ethics, is discourse which, not a third term but itself the relation, simultaneously resonates with the unicity and particularity characterizing the I and the Other—the Other always speaks to *me*—as well as with the universality of intelligibility—which discourse first makes possible (TI 73)—binding the two together in their separation.¹⁰ It is exactly in the discursive perimeter that the separation of the I and the Other becomes manifest at its utmost degree, since "the relationship of language implies transcendence, radical separation, the strangeness of the interlocutors, the revelation of the other to me" (TI 73). This separation must be present if discourse aims to retain a magisterial quality honoring the Other as teacher, and not be merely rhetorical chatting in which the I folds upon itself in an unrollment of its own convictions. The absolute separation from which discourse proceeds (TI 194) constitutes a challenge to any attempt at viewing the ethical space as the space of a transcendental foundation in which, on the spur of Levinas's claims that "metaphysics precedes ontology"

(TI 42), the Other would function as the ground for the constitution of subjectivity.¹¹ To be ethical, the curved space can allow no foundationalisms,¹² as an analysis of its primordial discursive expressions will reveal. To proceed any differently would amount to duplicating a totalizing structure whose violating features are not diminished by the mere fact of being performed from the side of the other (ethics) rather than from that of the same (ontology).

Levinas offers two formulations of the primordial words by which the I and the Other institute the space of the "relation without relation": "you shall not commit murder" (TI 199), and "here I am" (OBBE 114, and also 145–46). The former expression is the first, primary because principal, word by which the other expresses itself. Properly, this word coming from the other is not a word, a sentence, an act of speech, the manifestation of a form intelligible to the universality of reason by means of its logical structure. For Levinas, the original language is "without words or propositions, pure communication" (CPP 119) of what has meaning immediately, before any attribution of meaning, before any passing of time which would allow consciousness to recover itself and thematize the message. Language is contact, proximity of the other who expresses itself in the self-signifyingness of a face which, the same moment it presents itself, already expresses itself, in a suspension of vision and representation, thus justifying Levinas's claim that "ethics is an optics," that is, "a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision" (TI 23).

The expression "you shall not kill" (CPP 55) is the immediate signification the face bears engraved on itself. Immediacy without reflection, the face is thus a word of honor, a word that guarantees for itself, with no need for external ratifications of its meaning. On the contrary, it is the self-signifyingness of the face that allows other meanings to appear, and with them reason, thought, and all other sorts of semantic and cultural activities (TI 204–6). Although the face can be said to produce "the commencement of intelligibility" (TI 201), in its signifyingness the face

does not speak in the void. The face is a word addressed to an interlocutor, the I, to which it appeals and commands not to proceed on the murderous path of ontology, and to become ethical. This means that the face expresses itself always as a face to face. It is this face to face constituting discourse, and not the face alone, that ultimately “conditions the functioning of rational thought” (TI 204). The Other is not foundational by himself or herself, but only in his or her social relationship with the I.

But what does this signify in terms of a possible foundationalism of the I and the Other? In the desire to break with the Parmenidean tradition privileging the same, the other in Levinas remains completely exterior to the I. Retrieving the ancient tradition of the ontological argument, Levinas reproduces it in terms of the other when he claims that “the exteriority of a being is inscribed in its essence” (TI 196). The Other’s first word cannot be understood as a response to a previous question (not even in the form of a threat) formulated by an I existing prior to the Other. The eyes of the Other, by which the Other obliges and questions the supremacy of the same, have always already appeared,¹³ before the same, before any threat it may pose to the Other, and will always come back, even if the same were to kill the Other, because the Other, in his or her lack of dialectical constitution, in his or her separation, is always beyond. His or her “ethical resistance” (TI 199) is not resistance to something determinate as the I could be, but it is absolute resistance, the suspension of all powers to be powerful. In his or her first word, the Other is absolved from any constraint, menace, or even any observation of his or her commanding.

What happens to the I, however? Is it, in its interiority, exterior to the Other? Or does it owe its constitution to the Other, in an inversion of the imperialism of the same retaining all the totalizing features of its ontological counterpart? Levinas’s answer is very clear. What discourse establishes is “an I . . . capable of society, an I that has arisen in enjoyment as separated, but whose separation [is] itself necessary for infinity *to be*—for its infinitude is accom-