

## Introduction

# Rembrandt's *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, Abraham's Suspended Knife, and the Face of the Other

### I

I begin with a discussion of a painting, idolatrous though that might seem for a book that meditates on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who took very seriously the commandment forbidding graven images. In this book I shall continue to flirt with the idolatrous, that is, with εἰδωλα, images, representations, and I shall offer a way of reading literary texts that is, I hope, true both to Levinasian concerns about graven images and ethical at the same time.

Rembrandt's painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635) hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia (I.1, next page). Rembrandt painted it when he was twenty-nine years old in the same year that his first son was born and then died in his infancy, a fact that perhaps lends a special poignancy to the subject of the painting. In Genesis 22, God orders Abraham to take his only legitimate son, Isaac, to the top of Mt. Moriah and to offer him there as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeys and sets out on a three-day journey. When he nears the appointed place, he commands his two young servants to stay behind, and he gathers wood for the sacrifice, taking Isaac with him. Abraham builds the altar of sacrifice with the wood he had gathered. He binds Isaac's hands and feet, places Isaac on top of the pile of wood, and he then raises his arm to execute God's command. The painting depicts the moment that follows from Genesis 22, specifically verses 10–12:

Avraham stretched out his hand,  
he took the knife to slay his son.



I.1. Rembrandt, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635). Oil on canvas, 193 x 133 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

But YHWH's messenger called to him from Heaven and  
said:  
Avraham! Avraham!  
He said:  
Here I am.  
He said:  
Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,  
do not do anything to him.<sup>1</sup>

The painting dramatically depicts a moment of interruption epitomized by the knife that hangs suspended in the air, a baroque gesture that we do not find in earlier pictorial depictions by Caravaggio in his *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1603) (I.2) or by Rembrandt's teacher, Pieter Lastman.<sup>2</sup> In both the Caravaggio and in Lastman's painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1612) (I.3, next page), which Rembrandt knew, the knife remains firmly in Abraham's hand, whereas in the Rembrandt canvas



I.2. Caravaggio, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1603). Oil on canvas, 104 x 135 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.



I.3. Pieter Lastman, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1612). Oil on canvas (grisaille), 183 x 250 cm. Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam.

it hangs in midair, having been dropped by Abraham, whose right arm the angel has seized, thus interrupting the apparently imminent slaughter. Violence, figured by the suspended knife, is thus dramatically interrupted in Rembrandt's powerful image, painted in the 1630s, at precisely the moment when Rembrandt was proving himself to be a "virtuoso of interruption."<sup>3</sup>

Rembrandt frequently depicted dramatic interruptions—and particularly interruptions by the divine—in his paintings of the early and mid 1630s. Think of *Belshazzar's Feast* (I.4), also painted in (or around) 1635, which depicts the God's admonitory and disapproving interruption—through a mysteriously appearing inscription—of King Belshazzar's excessively sumptuous pagan drinking party in Babylon;



I.4. Rembrandt, *Balshazzar's Feast* (c. 1635). Oil on canvas, 167.6 x 209.2 cm. National Gallery, London.



I.5. Rembrandt, *Danaë* (1636; after restoration). Oil on canvas, 185 x 203 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

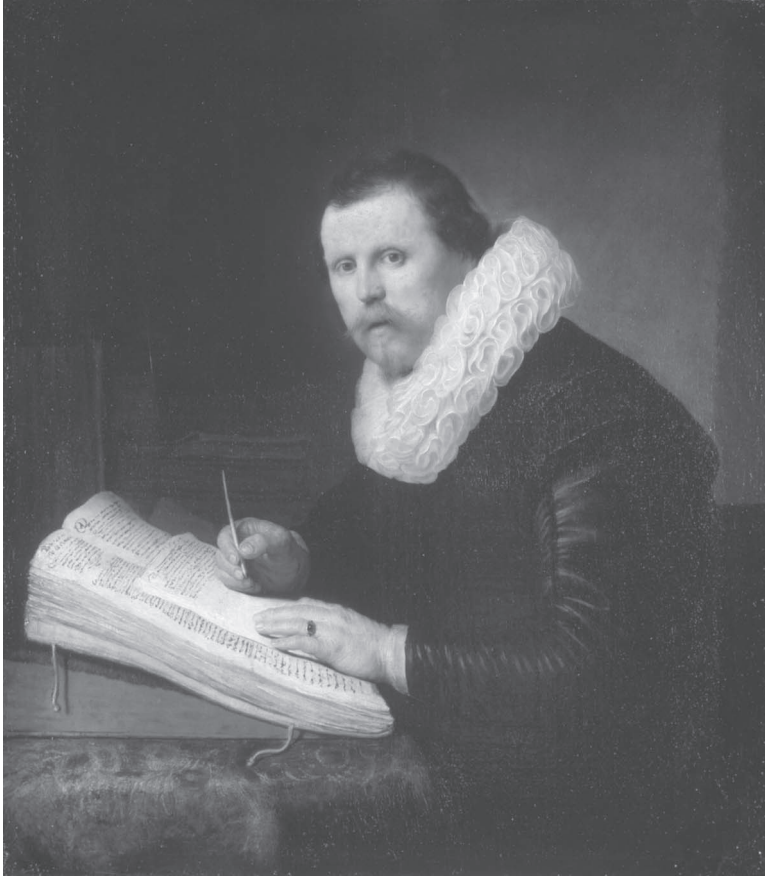


*Danaë* (1636) (I.5), in which the nymph Danaë, bathed in a rapidly approaching golden light, is about to be interrupted by Zeus's amorous presence; the naked Susanna in *Susanna and the Elders* (c. 1634) (I.6), who is surprised by elderly voyeurs; and the 1631 portrait of the scholar in *Young Man at His Desk* who, in the words of the English translation of the Russian caption describing this painting hanging in the Hermitage (I.7), appears to have been “unexpectedly interrupted.” Simon Schama, in commenting on *Young Man at His Desk* and on another portrait of this period of Rembrandt's career, remarks that the subjects of these paintings “appear to have been interrupted in the midst of their personal routine rather than made to ‘sit’ and assume the social mask required for dignified immortalization.”<sup>4</sup>

Rembrandt's 1635 painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is true to the biblical text, which tells of how the messenger of God dramatically interrupts the imminent action with that form of the negative imperative (לא 'al [“do not”] plus the imperative) that, in Hebrew, is especially



I.6. Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders* (c. 1634). Panel, 47.2 x 38.6 cm. Mauritshaus, The Hague.



I.7. Rembrandt, *Young Man at His Desk* (1631). Oil on canvas, 104 x 92 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

reserved for expressing immediately pressing, specific commands: “do not stretch out (אל-תשלח *'al-tisblach*) your hand”; “[and] do not do (ואל תעש *v<sup>e</sup> 'al-ta'as*) anything to him.”<sup>5</sup> At this stage in his career, Rembrandt was interested in rendering the dramatic, human aspect of biblical stories. His paintings from this period were very faithful to the biblical texts that inspired his visual renderings.

In Rembrandt’s painting, Abraham has covered Isaac’s entire face with his left hand, suggesting at least two things. First, the father cannot bear to have the son he loves, his only legitimate son, actually witness his own father raising and lowering the knife that will enter his young

and tender flesh and end his life. For Abraham to allow Isaac to witness the killing, despite the divine source of the command, no doubt filled Abraham with shame, as well as horror. Second, Abraham apparently cannot kill his son so long as he sees his son's face. Indeed, in the account of the threatened sacrifice in the Qur'an, Abraham (Ibrahim, in Arabic), in order to fulfill God's command, lays his son down prostrate on his forehead (لُدجَبِينِ *liljabeeni* 37.103).<sup>6</sup> The implication here is that if Abraham were to look directly at his son's face, he would not be able to kill him. In his commentary on this passage, al-Tabari (839–923) elucidates the significance of Abraham's placing his son face down. According to al-Tabari, who cites a number of authorities, the son—it is unclear, in the Qur'anic account, whether this son is Ishmael or Isaac<sup>7</sup>—remarks to his father: “When you lay me down to sacrifice me, turn me with my face down; do not lay me on my side, for I fear that if you look at my face pity will overcome you and hold you back from carrying out God's command.”<sup>8</sup>

The face, in its vulnerability—as Levinas is fond of remarking—speaks, and it says, “Thou shalt not kill.”<sup>9</sup> For the first time in the narrative, after the two set out together, Isaac speaks to his father, movingly enunciating an otherness, an alterity that makes the apparent imminence of the murder all the more shocking and even unimaginable. Isaac is carrying the wood for the offering, and Abraham the cinders for the fire and the knife. Finally, Isaac breaks the deadly silence and speaks to his father, addressing him with the intimate אבי *'aviy* (my father).<sup>10</sup> His father returns the intimate form of address: “Here I am, my son” (הני בני *hineni v'niy*, 22.7). Isaac then asks his father a very painful question: “Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?” Abraham replies, “God will provide the lamb for the offering, my son” (בני *b'niy*, 22.8), repeating again, for the third time in a very brief space, this intimate form of address, this vocative: not just “son!” but “my son!” As Levinas remarks, “the Other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative.”<sup>11</sup> This passage, then, is framed by three vocatives—“my father” (אבי *'aviy*); “my son” (בני *b'niy*); “my son” (בני *b'niy*)—that are made even more intimate by possessing (in the Hebrew) suffixes (*'aviy/b'niy*) that personalize the address (“my father”; “my son”; “my son”) in a duet of pressing question and immediate response that dramatically enunciates the radical alterity of Isaac and of Abraham's painfully enduring affection for his son, whom he is about to slaughter. After such an exchange, it will be very difficult, indeed virtually impossible, for Abraham to take Isaac's life if he must look his son in the face. Hence, in the Rembrandt painting, Isaac's face is completely enveloped and obscured by Abraham's left hand.



Rembrandt's Abraham, in order to go through with the slaughter, has completely covered Isaac's face.<sup>12</sup> The angel is looking directly at Isaac's covered—or, as Simon Schama perceptively observes, *smoothed*—face.<sup>13</sup> Abraham, who has avoided looking at Isaac's face, now looks directly at the face of the angel, who almost dreamily gazes straight ahead, neither at Abraham nor at Isaac. Who is this angel, this messenger of God who is the subject of Abraham's sudden attention and toward whose gentle face the eyes of the patriarch are abruptly turned? And what is the significance of the interruption? I hope it is not too bold to suggest that the angel or messenger מלאך (*mal'akh*) of God is the face of the Other—in this case the face of Isaac—suddenly commanding Abraham not to kill him.<sup>14</sup> In Rembrandt's painting, the angel seems to be roughly the same age as Isaac, and his nose bears a marked similarity to Abraham's, making it appear as if he is in fact Abraham's son. As Levinas insists, "The face speaks."<sup>15</sup> God reveals Himself only by the trace He leaves behind in the face of the Other.<sup>16</sup> The face of the Other, for Levinas, is not really seen, is not experienced as part of the order of the visible. It is, rather, "heard," as Abraham suddenly hears the voice of the angel speaking to him. Rembrandt's painting dramatically depicts this moment of interruption, which is captured not only in the sudden appearance of the angel and in Abraham's suspended knife, but also in the "anguished face" of Abraham who, as Schama finely remarks, has "the look of a madman unexpectedly paroled from hell."<sup>17</sup> If the viewer looks carefully and at close range at the Rembrandt canvas, tears of compassion can be seen to be trickling down Abraham's face. In Caravaggio's rather cruel rendering,<sup>18</sup> Abraham seems grimly determined to slay his son and almost annoyed by the angel's sudden interference. The viewer of the Caravaggio painting is struck more by Isaac's vivid expression of absolute terror than by any sense of relief evident in the face of Abraham. As Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn remark, "In the naturalism of this scene Rembrandt is close to Caravaggio. In Caravaggio's depiction of the same event Abraham pushes Isaac down onto the sacrificial stone with such force that he cries out in fear and pain. Compared with this, Rembrandt's work . . . shows signs of humanity: in the course of his terrible act Abraham—according to Jewish legend—has turned grey."<sup>19</sup> Rembrandt's painting, in contrast to Caravaggio's, is a dramatic example of the artistic representation of transcendence in the ethical, Levinasian sense. Abraham, hearing the voice of the messenger of God who is the face of the Other, experiences a transcendence of his own ego in the direction of ethics, as he responds to and takes responsibility for the Other whose face says "Thou shalt not kill."

Did God in fact command Abraham to kill Isaac? The Hebrew is more ambiguous than has conventionally been thought. God says, “and offer him there [on Mt. Moriah] as an offering [וְהֵעִלְהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה] *v<sup>h</sup>ha’alehu sham l’ olah*.” But what kind of offering, and what does “offering” really mean? The words “offer him” (הֵעִלְהוּ *ha’alehu*) and “offering” (עֹלָה *olah*) literally mean, respectively, “cause him to go up” (i.e., “bring him up”) and “something that is brought up.”<sup>20</sup> There is a sense in which Isaac is being brought up, “elevated” as an example—an example of the impossibility of human sacrifice in the name of God. According to Rashi (the acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Itshaqi, the famous medieval biblical commentator), God said, “And bring him up there [*v<sup>h</sup>ha’alehu*]’ . . . He did not say to him . . . , ‘Slaughter him.’”<sup>21</sup> And the severity of the command is softened by God’s intimate language of polite request: the particle *na’* in the imperative phrase *qach-na’* (“please take [your son], I beg you,” Genesis 22.2) introduces a note of sympathetic awareness and compassion that mitigates the idea that this is a harsh and unforgiving God who would, without hesitation, order a father to murder his son. God’s words to Abraham are somewhere between a polite request and a command.

For many readers, the point of the Abraham and Isaac story is the testing of Abraham’s faith in God: so strong was Abraham’s faith that he would even obey the divine command to murder his own son. This was Kierkegaard’s understanding of the episode, which is central to the argument of *Fear and Trembling*. In the Kierkegaardian construction, the religious dimension of experience demands a “leap of faith” that takes one beyond ethics. For Levinas, in contrast to Kierkegaard, it is the second divine command that is the apex of the story. In responding to Kierkegaard’s reading, Levinas remarks, “Perhaps Abraham’s ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, was the highest moment in the drama.”<sup>22</sup> Let us pause a moment to consider this observation by Levinas. Levinas here aptly remarks upon a sudden shift, in the consciousness of Abraham, from an immersion in presence and hence in the realm of the visible, to that of a transcendence to the ethical dimension through hearing, through a listening to a voice.<sup>23</sup> It is precisely this “highest moment in the drama” that Rembrandt’s dramatic painting of 1635 depicts, paradoxical though it be that a painting is here representing an act of listening, of a transcendence of the realm of the visible. But this paradox is precisely what I wish to highlight, for in the chapters that follow I hope to show how literary texts are similarly interrupted in the direction of ethics, texts that interrupt themselves in order to gesture

toward the transcendent otherness of the other person, the revelation of whom is beyond vision, revelation, and representation.

A later work of Rembrandt that depicts this same biblical scene seems to stress this more Kierkegaardian view. I refer here of the etching of 1655 (I.8), which appeared on the cover of Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, in which Derrida meditates on Kierkegaard's (as well as on Levinas's) reading of Genesis 22.<sup>24</sup> Michael Zell believes that "[t]he etching dramatizes . . . Abraham's preparedness to prove his faith in God."<sup>25</sup> David R. Smith argues that Abraham's darkened eyes—which in the etching are *not* turned toward the face of the angel—suggest a blind faith in God, in "the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11).<sup>26</sup> In the 1635 painting, in contrast, Rembrandt emphasizes Abraham's horror at what he believes he has been ordered to do, and his stunned relief at the interruption of this moment of horror occasioned by the face of the angel.



I.8. Rembrandt, *Sacrifice of Abraham* (1655). Etching and drypoint, 15.7 x 13.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection.

In *Reframing Rembrandt*, Zell argues for the influence of Rembrandt's fellow Amsterdamer, the well-known and cosmopolitan Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), on Rembrandt's depictions of sacred history in the 1650s. Indeed, Rembrandt and Menasseh ben Israel lived on the same street in Amsterdam, St. Antoniesbreestraat.<sup>27</sup> Zell focuses on Menassah's *Piedra Gloriosa* for which Rembrandt agreed to provide illustrations in 1655. But the rabbi influenced Rembrandt's earlier work as well. Indeed, the mysteriously appearing Hebrew/Aramaic letters drawn by the hand of God to the astonishment of King Belshazzar in *Belshazzar's Feast* (I.4)—and painted in (or around) the same year (1635) as *The Sacrifice of Isaac*—likely have their source in Menasseh ben Israel, who published this precise inscription in his *De Termino Vitae* of 1639. According to Zell, “Menassah might well have written out the inscription . . . for Rembrandt before the book appeared.”<sup>28</sup> Menasseh ben Israel's most famous and influential work was his *Conciliador*, published in Spanish in 1632 and translated into Latin in 1633, two years before Rembrandt painted the 1635 *Sacrifice of Isaac*. In his *Conciliador*, we find Menasseh citing a commentary on the “Aqedah” (the “binding” of Isaac), by Rabbis Isaac Arama and Don Isaac Abranbanel, that imagines God saying what we might imagine the stunned Abraham is hearing at the very moment of the interrupted sacrifice: “Dost thou think, Abraham, that it was actually necessary to sacrifice thy son to confirm thy being a fearer of God? Thou deceivest thyself; lay not a hand upon the youth, for I knew you were a God-fearer, without putting it into execution.”<sup>29</sup>

## II

The tension between the two commands in the biblical account of the binding of Isaac suggests that the story is narrating a transition, in religious experience, from the “sacred,” associated with polytheism, to the “holy” (*qadosh* in Hebrew) of monotheism, a distinction that is central to the thought of Levinas. Hence, this particular passage describing the Aqedah reiterates the movement of the Abraham narrative as a whole, which tells the story of Abraham's journey from the polytheistic world of Mesopotamia westward to Canaan and what will be the monotheistic world of Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Levinas associated the “sacred” with the experience of participation in a cosmic whole, in the manner discussed by the ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). In the experience of the “sacred,” the distinction between subject and object is blurred. The emphasis

here is upon participation in a totality of which you and I are mere parts. The holy (*qadosh*), in contrast, requires my recognition of the absolute exteriority of the Other, of the necessary separation of subject and object, self and world, self and other, of a necessary atheism, a breaking with polytheism that can only recover a relationship to the divine through my responsibility for the Other. The emphasis in the holy is upon my unique and inescapable responsibility for a unique and irreplaceable Other. Mt. Moriah, where Abraham builds the altar upon which he intends to sacrifice his son, at first trembles with the dark mysteries of the sacred, but it then—with Abraham's obedience to the second command—becomes a site of the holy.<sup>31</sup>

Shalom Spiegel, similarly, views the episode as recording a “profound revolution in the history of religion, when the primitive blood sacrifice was abolished,” as suggested in the midrash of Rabbi Benaiah, “one of the last of the Tannaim,”<sup>32</sup> those Jewish scholars who lived from the first century BCE to the third century CE and whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, or oral law. Spiegel goes on to remark:

The biblical account, then, came to enforce and validate a new way of worship; and, too, it came to abolish and discredit the statutes of the ancient world. The Akedah story repels once for all the primitive notion of the sanctity of the human first born and its derivative demand for the literal sacrifice of children. The Akedah story declared war on *the remnants of idolatry in Israel* and undertook to remove root and branch the whole long, terror-laden inheritance from idolatrous generations.<sup>33</sup>

Abraham's faith consists, largely, in his pursuit of justice required by obedience to the one God.<sup>34</sup> Note the play on the word *one*—which echoes the oneness of the one (*echad*) God—in this passage: God tells Abraham to offer “your only” (יחידך *y'chid'kha* 22.2) (legitimate) son. And when Abraham is reprieved through his obedience to the second command, Isaac as the object of human sacrifice is replaced by “one” (*echad*) ram.<sup>35</sup> As Spiegel speculates:

It may well be that in the narrative of the ram which Abraham sacrificed as a burnt offering in place of his son, there is historical remembrance of the transition to animal sacrifice from human sacrifice—a religious and moral achievement which in the folk memory was associated with Abraham's name, the father of the new faith and the first of the upright



in the Lord's way. And quite possibly the primary purpose of the Akedah story may have been only this: to attach to a real pillar of the folk and a revered reputation the new norm—abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead.<sup>36</sup>

The Qur'an, like the Hebrew scriptures, sees Abraham's faith as consisting in the obedience to the command to be just, to be responsible for the other person, an obedience that can be seen to accompany the transition from polytheism to monotheism. Abraham's position as a transitional figure from the world of polytheism or pantheism to monotheism is clearly articulated in Sura 6:75–79 on "Abraham's Creed":

75. Thus We showed Abraham the visible  
and invisible world of the heavens and the earth,  
that he could be among those who believe.  
76. When the night came with her covering of darkness  
he saw a star,  
and (Azar, his father) said: "This is my Lord."  
But when the star set, (Abraham) said:  
"I love not those that wane."  
77. When (Azar) saw the moon rise all aglow,  
he said: "This is my Lord."  
But even as the moon set, (Abraham) said:  
"If my Lord had not shown me the way  
I would surely have gone astray."  
78. When (Azar) saw the sun rise all resplendent,  
he said: "My Lord is surely this,  
and the greatest of them all."  
But the sun also set, and (Abraham) said:  
"O my people, I am through  
with those you associate (with God).  
79. I have truly turned my face  
towards Him who created the heavens and the earth:  
I have chosen one way and am not an idolator."<sup>37</sup>

James L. Kugel sees Genesis 12, which tells of Abraham's journey from Chaldea, as articulating a transition from the polytheism of Mesopotamia to the monotheism of Israel. Kugel cites many ancient biblical interpreters who comment on the significance of Abraham's relation to his native city of Ur in Chaldea, which is in Mesopotamia.<sup>38</sup> A number of these interpreters, as does the previous passage from the Qur'an, present Abraham as an astronomer or astrologer. Kugel observes

that Abraham's homeland, Chaldea, "was famous for one thing in particular: it was the home of astronomy and astrology. So great was the association between Chaldea and the study of the stars that the very word 'Chaldean' came to mean 'astronomer' in both Aramaic and Greek. Many interpreters therefore naturally assumed that Abraham the Chaldean must himself have been something of an astronomer."<sup>39</sup>

### III

Can the Other be your own son, as I am arguing is the case in Genesis 22, verses 10–12, which is so dramatically represented by Rembrandt in his 1635 painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*? Aren't we literary scholars and critics now thoroughly acculturated to view the Other as the person who is quintessentially "different" from ourselves, especially in the sense of being culturally, racially, sexually "different"? Can the Other be my own son, my own daughter, my neighbor?

The term *the Other* is continually evoked in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Indeed, Mineke Schipper, a scholar of African and comparative literature, has remarked on the "Western multinational Otherness industry"<sup>40</sup> that has developed in recent years. Schipper goes on to observe that the term *the Other* has become "so "fashionable in [the] Western academy that words such as 'difference' and 'Otherness' have come to function—in the words of Edward Said . . .—as a talisman, serving to guarantee political correctness."<sup>41</sup> While the Otherness industry is indeed in high gear, the term *the Other* has gone remarkably unexamined. It seems to have lost its moorings in—or rejects the reality of—the intersubjective encounter, as discussed by Martin Buber (1878–1965) and especially by Levinas, who is surely one of the most influential of contemporary philosophers. Levinas, whose work participates in the phenomenological tradition of philosophical analysis, was a student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and was the revered teacher of such important modern (or postmodern) thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray. Alarmed by the apparent complicity of the most sophisticated philosophical speculations on the nature of "being" with ethical turpitude and indifference, as evidenced by the great philosopher Heidegger's association with Nazism, Levinas sought to rethink the relationship between philosophy and ethics. He argues that ethics must precede ontology (the science of "being"), which is always in danger of betraying ethics. By ethics Levinas means the face-to-face, concrete encounter with a unique human being for whom I am personally and inescapably responsible.

In the current climate of opinion in much of literary and cultural studies, cultures are often blamed for injustices, but we hear nothing or relatively little of the human, of what Levinas insists is my personal responsibility for a unique Other—a responsibility that constitutes my very humanity. For Levinas, the Other is the other person, my neighbor, and not necessarily or even primarily the culturally different person. Indeed, for Levinas, to view the Other primarily as culturally (or racially or sexually) different would turn the face of the Other into an object of knowledge that has been assimilated by my consciousness, and hence not an occasion for the transcendence of the ego in the direction of what it is not, that is, of what is truly other. As Levinas writes in *Humanism of the Other*, “[S]ignification is situated before Culture . . . ; it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification.”<sup>42</sup> Much contemporary literary/cultural criticism is focused on the social or cultural “construction” of the Other. For Levinas, in contrast, the Other is precisely that which eludes construction and categorization, or what Levinas calls “thematization.”<sup>43</sup>

Why do I choose the adjective *transcultural* for the subtitle of this book, rather than “multicultural” or “intercultural”? One might answer that any single culture is in fact, in its lived concreteness, a mixture of many cultures, that culture is, by its very nature, transculture. The adjective *transcultural* would therefore be preferable to “multicultural” because the word *multiculturalism* might suggest that individual cultures, which allegedly embody distinctive essences, are homogeneous, insufficiently diverse unless they are seasoned by other cultures. But it might well be the case that all cultures are, to greater or lesser degrees, multicultural. The term *transcultural* is appealing to me not only because it implies the value, in our studies, of going beyond a single culture, however diverse that culture might in fact be. “Transcultural” also implies the existence of a beyond of the very concept of culture, which has so often been fetishized as the ne plus ultra in literary studies in the academy today, in our posthuman so-called humanities. The adjective *transcultural* in the phrase “transcultural studies” in this book’s subtitle is meant to suggest that there is something in our humanistic studies that transcends or goes beyond culture. Does culture truly have the first and last word? Or is it rather ethics, as understood by Levinas, that is situated both before and beyond culture, and that allows us to evaluate culture and cultural expression?

I wish to bring Emmanuel Levinas, the great theorist of alterity, into the discourse of intercultural, comparative studies. After all, Levinas himself participated, simultaneously, in a number of different cultures. The obituary released by the Associated Press in Paris (December 28,

1995) on the occasion of the philosopher's death refers to Levinas as a "philosopher of four cultures": Russian, Jewish, German, and French. Andrius Valevicius, who discovered and translated into English an early essay written by Levinas in 1933, when he was twenty-seven years old, goes farther than the writer of the Associated Press obituary and refers to Levinas as a philosopher of five cultures, emphasizing Levinas's immersion in Lithuanian culture in addition to the other four. This essay discovered by Professor Valevicius is, moreover, an interesting study of cultural differences, as Levinas makes subtle and fascinating distinctions between French and German styles of thinking and spirituality.<sup>44</sup>

The many cultural worlds Levinas inhabited in such depth, and which he traversed constantly and adroitly, were diverse, although perhaps not by today's standards of broad cultural diversity. Levinas's critical tools are the result of his immersion in what he calls "the Bible and the Greeks." His frame of reference does not extend much beyond the Western and Judeo-Christian orbit. It is indeed something of a paradox, and even a disappointment, that great theorist of the Other, Emmanuel Levinas, himself showed little curiosity about foundational cultures other than those that produced Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible. The problem in turning to a profound but still fundamentally European-centered thinker such as Levinas as an inspiration for comparative studies is that we are perhaps thus in danger of reinstating the very metaphysical imperialism, the very "allergy" to the Other—as Levinas memorably phrases this pathology—that the work of Levinas attempts to resist. But there is a sentence in Levinas that points in a different, in a more open direction. In an interview about his work conducted at a symposium at the University of Leiden in 1975, Levinas stated: "There is not a single thing in a great spirituality that would be absent from another great spirituality."<sup>45</sup>

But how exclusively "Western" (or Judaic) are the sources of Levinas's rejection of intentionality as the dominant mode of explaining—in the manner of Husserl—how the subject interacts with the world? Many scholars have pointed to the Judaic roots of Levinas's view of alterity. This is surely the case, although Levinas always insists that his works must be understood and evaluated as contributions to Western philosophical discourse rather than as dependent, for their persuasiveness, on other modes of discourse or of belief. While Levinas himself never demonstrated any interest in Daoism, I would argue for a Daoist influence—via Martin Buber—in Levinas's looking outside the purely intentional consciousness for his explanation of the true meaning of subjectivity. Although Levinas comes to question the implications,

for ethics, of certain aspects of Buber's analysis of the I/ thou relationship, Levinas is nonetheless greatly indebted to Buber for that thinker's shifting away from a focus on the purely intentional consciousness, in the mode of the "I/it relation," as a necessary prelude to the ethical relation. Buber was greatly interested in Asian philosophy, particularly in Daoism. Indeed, one of Buber's early works was a translation of and commentary on the great early Daoist thinker, Zhuangzi.<sup>46</sup>

Despite this indirect influence of Daoist thought, via Buber, on Levinas, the contours of Levinas's thought are shaped, as I have mentioned, by what Levinas calls "the Bible and the Greeks."<sup>47</sup> Levinas showed no interest in Daoist thought, or in Buddhist thought, or in any of the great religious traditions of Asia, despite the fact that he believed, at least by 1982, that Western thought had reached "the end of Europocentrism" which, he remarks, has been "disqualified by so many horrors."<sup>48</sup> Still, Emmanuel Levinas was no multiculturalist, certainly not by today's standards. Howard Caygill, in his book *Levinas and the Political* (2002), goes so far as to accuse Levinas of a hostility toward Asia that calls into question the universalist intentions of Levinas's work, which continually commands us to welcome rather than to demonize the Other.<sup>49</sup>

Caygill focuses mainly on two essays Levinas published in the early 1960s. The sentences in question from these essays oppose a vaguely defined Asia that Levinas sees as a threat to the West because it knows nothing, as Levinas writes in his essay "Jewish Thought Today" (1961), of the Holy History ("Histoire Sainte")<sup>50</sup> of Judaism and Christianity. I do not want to minimize the cultural provincialism that this sentiment expresses. It reveals a disturbingly phobic ignorance of Asian thought, to be sure. But Caygill is wrong to insinuate that Levinas's use of the term *Holy History* is tantamount to a fundamentalist notion of providential history unique to Christians and Jews, and perhaps to Muslims. Holy History is rather, for Levinas, the eruption of the *holy* out of the cruelty of the *sacred*. It is this process of moving from the sacred to the holy, "du sacré aux saint"<sup>51</sup>—the very process that produces what Levinas means by "Holy History"—that I described in my paradigmatic Levinasian reading of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. As I mentioned, Mt. Moriah, where Abraham builds the altar upon which he intends to sacrifice his son, at first trembles with the dark mysteries of the sacred, but then, with Abraham's obedience to the second command that he spare his son, it becomes a site of the holy.

There is, in Levinas, a clear philosophy of history, one very much in opposition to Hegel's. Any notion of an impersonal, unilinear history that aims to assimilate everything in the path of its unfolding must be



interrupted, for Levinas, by individual acts of goodness. The history that emerges from my inescapable responsibility for a unique and irreplaceable other is what Levinas means by “Holy History.” Levinas is open to any expression, from any culture, that embraces the primacy of ethics, the primacy of my responsibility for the Other, that refuses, that is, to sacrifice the uniqueness of the concrete Other to a cruel and unforgiving totality. This is precisely the significance of Levinas’s response to Philippe Nemo, who had asked Levinas if he would “go so far as to say that an ethical man could, at all times and places, give written or oral testimonies which could eventually constitute a Bible? Or, that *there could be a common Bible between men who belong to different traditions* or who do not acknowledge themselves to be part of any religious tradition?” Levinas answers, unequivocally, “Yes, ethical truth is common.”<sup>52</sup> I can even imagine Emmanuel Levinas, despite his apparent lack of awareness of Asian culture, approving of my chapter on the primacy of ethics in the Confucian/Mencian tradition and of my remarks, in my conclusion, on the similarities between Levinas’s own thought and certain important aspects of Mahayana Buddhism. Moreover, my chapter on the Confucian tradition confirms Levinas’s suspicion—ignorant though it was—that Chinese culture did in fact far too often betray ethics in the interests of imposing on its people a cruel and ruthlessly totalizing political agenda.

In testing the universalist implications of Levinas’s notion of ethics and otherness, I suggest that we search, in traditions outside the Judeo-Christian orbit, for what I call “diverses altérités” or “other Others,” that is, for ways of talking about otherness that are drawn from other religious and cultural traditions. In this sense, the biblical Abraham can again be taken as an exemplar of what I am attempting to say in this book, of what I mean by “other others.” Levinas often contrasts the goal of Odysseus, which is to return home, with the journey of Abraham, which Levinas sees, in the words of Jill Robbins, as a “one-way movement, irreversible, a departure without return.”<sup>53</sup> “To the myth of Odysseus,” Levinas writes, “we wish to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his fatherland forever for a land yet unknown, and forbidding his servant to bring even his son to the point of departure.”<sup>54</sup> Abraham, the hospitable immigrant who comes to Canaan from Ur in Mesopotamia (in today’s Iraq), offers us a model for teaching and writing across and beyond cultures.<sup>55</sup> By “other others,” I thus mean (1) something other than what the term *the other* is commonly taken to mean in literary and cultural studies today; and I also mean (2) the articulation of this other, Levinasian notion of otherness in traditions other than the Judeo-Christian.<sup>56</sup>

There exist a few essays on Levinas and literature, and at least two books—Robert Eaglestone’s *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*<sup>57</sup> and Jill Robbins’s *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*.<sup>58</sup> These works try to make sense of Levinas’s remarks on literature within the context of Levinas’s own thought, but critics have not generally explored the implications of Levinas’s thought for literary works not specifically discussed by Levinas himself,<sup>59</sup> and almost no one has tried to extend the relevance of Levinas’s thoughts on alterity into the area of intercultural literary studies.<sup>60</sup>

In *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China* (2000), Stephen Durrant and I emphasized what we called the participatory dimension of ancient Greek and early Chinese thought. What has interested me since the publication of *The Siren and the Sage* has been what I now see as the necessary separation of the subject from the experience of being a part of a whole if that unique subject is to be ethically responsible for a unique and irreplaceable Other. The experience of a joyous participation in a sense of mystical oneness, in which subject and object are fused, must be ruptured and demystified if the subject is to encounter the other human being as truly other, as absolutely exterior to the subject’s own consciousness. *Other Others* takes up and modifies the central argument of *The Siren and the Sage*, and it continues in the same comparative vein.

Chapter 1, on the “Canto of Ulysses” chapter of Primo Levi’s first book, *Se questo è un uomo* (translated into English as *Survival in Auschwitz*), argues that ethics, rather than being an effect of or subordinated to culture, as much of today’s literary-cultural criticism would have it, is rather a disruption of culture, a disruption that occurs first and foremost on the intersubjective level. As Levinas insists, so in this opening chapter I argue that true signification “is situated before Culture . . . ; it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification.”<sup>61</sup> Chapter 2, on Marco Polo’s *Travels* and Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, shows how Italo Calvino—who greatly admired Primo Levi—profoundly registers what Cheyney Ryan refers to as “the difference between difference and otherness,”<sup>62</sup> that is, between the exotic charms of cultural difference experienced by the mere tourist, on the one hand, and, on the other, the opening toward a dialogue with another human being, as figured in the frustrated but nonetheless incipient dialogue between the Venetian Marco Polo and the Mongol Emperor of China, Kublai Khan.

In chapter 3, I take issue with the claim of the formidable and widely read (especially in France) contemporary French sinologist/philosopher, François Jullien, who claims that there is no Other in

China. In this chapter, I show how Sima Qian (145?–90? BCE), in his *Records of the Historian* (*Shi ji* 史記), views many of the actions of the first Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, and his legalist ministers as betrayals of the notion of alterity that is venerably articulated in Confucius (in e.g. his understanding of *ren* 仁 [“benevolence”]) and in Mencius.

Having suggested the applicability of Levinas’s thoughts on alterity to traditional China in chapter 3, in chapter 4 I turn mainly to ancient Greek literature and to the Hellenic tradition. Levinas continually makes the point that ethics must precede ontology. In chapter 4, I suggest that Euripides understands this well and indeed views the disastrous Peloponnesian War of the fifth century BCE as a direct consequence of the Hellenic focus on a conceptualizing mode of thought that betrays ethics.

In chapters 5 and 6 I analyze the paradoxical betrayal of Christian charity by Portia in the famous trial scene of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* and by Roman Catholic missionaries in colonial West Africa in the novel *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* by the contemporary Cameroonian novelist Mongo Beti (1932–2001). In chapter 7, I turn to the fiction of the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz (winner of the Nobel Prize in 1988) who, in his novel *Children of Our Alley* and its companion-piece short story “Zaabalawi,” meditates—via the Islamic tradition of Sufi mysticism—on the relation between the absolute transcendence of God and human responsibility. The intimate relation between the absoluteness of divine transcendence, on the one hand, and human responsibility, on the other, is central to Levinas’s thought as well, as we have seen from our Levinasian reading of the Aqedah. In the final chapter, I turn to one of the masters of modern American poetry, Edgar Bowers, “one of the best living American poets these last forty years,” according to Harold Bloom.<sup>63</sup> Here I consider the ethical turn in Bowers’s later poetry, a turn toward the Other and away from the poet’s previous preoccupation with consciousness, a preoccupation against which he struggled and which he inherited from the symbolist tradition of Mallarmé and Valéry. This final chapter on Bowers’s notion of the poet as witness returns to the subject of the first chapter, in which I discuss how Primo Levi, in *Se questo è un uomo*, records the transformative moment when Levi sees himself as a writer who, should he miraculously survive his captivity, is determined to bear witness to the destruction of man at Auschwitz.

This book, then, is about ethics and literature, or, rather, it is about the irruption of ethics in and through literature, through writing. As Massimo Lollini, the distinguished author of *Il vuoto della forma*, has written, “in an ethical approach to literature, the writer and/or the reader may experience a change emerging in the very act

of writing and of reading, a change leading to the transcendence of the ego. Writing and reading are ethical activities as long as they leave the door open to the unexpected, to an interruption of the economy of the same made possible by the encounter with the other.”<sup>64</sup> In this book I open myself, as a reader, to moments in literary texts, from a variety of religious and cultural contexts, that interrupt “the economy of the same.” I shall, in brief, read for those unexpected moments that record or effect the transcendence of the ego of the writer and/or the reader in the direction of the Other, moments analogous to Rembrandt’s depiction of the stunned face of Abraham.