

TRACING RESPONSIBILITY: LEVINAS BETWEEN MERLEAU-PONTY AND DERRIDA

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What are the traces of responsibility that link Merleau-Ponty to Derrida through Levinas? How can one think this tracing of responsibility? What does it mean to think Levinas between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida? The very question asks that there already be a relation between Levinas and Merleau-Ponty and between Levinas and Derrida. But it also suggests that there may be a relation between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. In what sense, then, is there a face-to-face (*vis-à-vis*) relation between Levinas and each of these two thinkers—even though, now, sadly all three are no longer alive? And given that a relation to “the other” in Levinas already means that there is a response by the other in the face-to-face, the project of asking the question of the relation to the other will have been, in a sense, a question of responsibility—the response that happens “between”—between persons, between thinkers, between philosophies. As we know, all three thought the question of the trace: Merleau-Ponty as a “*tracé*”—a tracing or tending toward express; Levinas as the trace of the face-to-face as alterity; Derrida as the undecidable trace of difference in the event of a deconstructive strategy. Here the question of the tracing of responsibility will be the event of an intellectual network in which continental philosophy as we

know it today will find a certain hospitality... a place to speak... I begin with a little story of intellectual history.

I

Maurice Merleau-Ponty was born—100 years ago—just two years after Levinas (Merleau-Ponty in 1908, Levinas in 1906). One could say then that they were of the same generation. Derrida was born (in 1930) some 24 years after Levinas: another epoch, another era, another philosophical currency. And yet the chronology belies the relationality. Levinas came from Lithuania, spoke Russian at home (especially since his family moved to the Ukraine during his growing years). He also learned Hebrew, then German and some French.¹ When at the age of 17 he went to Strasbourg to study Latin and then to enter the university in the following year, he was always speaking a non-native language—a language that he could not call his own. When, at the age of 22, he organized for himself a study year in Germany—across and south along the Rhine to Freiburg-im-Breisgau — to follow Husserl's last year of lectures in 1928-29, he was again speaking a language he had learned for intellectual purposes. And when he stayed another year (1929-30) to follow Heidegger's first year of lectures as Professor of Philosophy at the University of Freiburg, he had to shift even the language of phenomenology from the transcendental Husserlian variety to the existentialized hermeneutics that Heidegger had to offer. Learning a new philosophical language paralleled his experience of learning a new spoken language—and even his adopted language of French was never quite a space of accentless comfort. While he learned from Husserl's phenomenological method, he was always critical of philosophical methods. Heidegger, who had come to occupy the intellectual spaces of Freiburg at the time, showed him a new path of thinking but one that he could never fully adopt. When he returned to France and completed his doctoral thesis at the University of Strasbourg on the *The Theory of Intuition according to Husserl* (published in 1930 by Felix Alcan in Paris) he was importing something very new, unknown, and other into the French context. Indeed, the work of this young man of 24 years was the first substantial introduction of Husserlian phenomenology into the French context. A stranger who had come to live and study in France then in Germany for those two critical years (1928-30), like Nietzsche's Dionysus or Oedipus in Thebes, he came from the outside and brought new philosophical life to the inside

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context.² Jean-Paul Sartre (a year older than Levinas and himself from Alsace where Levinas had made his new home) reports having read Levinas's work on Husserl at the time that he himself went to Germany some five years after Levinas (or so we read in Simone de Beauvoir's autobiography). Husserl himself at the age of 70 in his last year of official teaching in Freiburg had been invited by the Institut d'Etudes germaniques and the Société française de philosophie in February 1929 to give four lectures in Paris. Levinas had just received his doctorate from the University of Strasbourg after returning from his two year stint in Freiburg and was invited to co-translate Husserl's revised version of the lectures for publication. These lectures are the well-known *Cartesian Meditations*, which appeared in 1931 under the French title *Méditations Cartésiennes: Introduction à la phénoménologie*. So in many important ways, Levinas was the crucial figure who mediated the appearance of phenomenology in France. And only when Raymond Aron went to the Institut Français in Berlin in 1934 and then persuaded Sartre to go there in the following year did phenomenology make its mark on the French scene—quite specifically in 1936 with Sartre's *The Transcendence of the Ego* (which appeared in the journal *Recherches philosophiques*).

In those early years of the 1930s, before it was fully evident that Heidegger's turn was taking him in the direction of unacceptable political commitments, the fascination with his thought, first in Levinas (who wrote a short 1932 piece entitled "Martin Heidegger et l'ontologie"), and then in Sartre, was nevertheless firmly rooted in a careful reading of Husserl's phenomenology. At the same time, the somewhat younger Merleau-Ponty — who was also heavily imbued with the neo-cartesianism that he, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and others were taught at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and who was also fascinated by Bergson's thought — was looking for a new way to think human experience and to account for the nature of perception, including the perception of other people. Like Sartre, he studied the German language and looked to Husserl's philosophy for guidance. In the early 1930s, after the publication of Levinas's book on Husserl's theory of intuition, Merleau-Ponty set forth his project proposals on the "nature of perception." But it became evident that he would need to study Husserl in detail in order to follow out the implications of this work for his interest in the nature of perception. After the Second World War had already begun (but before the German occupation in 1942), he wrote to Father Van Breda. In 1939, following Husserl's death the previous year in 1938, Van Breda had brought hundreds of

thousands of pages of Husserl manuscripts to Leuven so as to escape their destruction at the hands of Nazi orderlies. And while Sartre was busy developing his critique of the Husserlian theory of the transcendental ego into his first *magnum opus*, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Merleau-Ponty at the age of 31 in April 1939 went to Leuven to read Husserl's later manuscripts, particularly the materials from the unpublished 1912 *Ideas II* and materials from his 1935 Prague lectures entitled *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. In these studies, written after retirement, Husserl developed his notions of *Leib* (the lived body) and the *Lebenswelt* (the lifeworld). While Sartre built his own essay in phenomenological ontology, *Being and Nothingness*, on the diverse notions of negation in Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty focused more on the psychological and epistemological implications of Husserl's writings and their connection with how he understood Gestalt Psychology—a theme that he carried into his teaching at the University of Lyon after the war and in his Sorbonne lectures from 1948 to 1952 and where questions of relations with others (*autrui*)—the experience of others, the child's relations with others, intercorporeal experience, etc., permeated his thinking.

It is doubtless the case that without Levinas's study of Husserl's theory of intuition (which elaborated the notion of *Anschauung* as a key element of intentionality) and his translation of the *Cartesian Meditations* (which included the famous fifth meditation on "intersubjectivity"), Merleau-Ponty would not have had the necessary occasion to elaborate his own reading and development of Husserl's thought into the full-bodied theory that resulted in his 1945 *thèse d'état*, his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty might, indeed, have remained a devotee of the work of the Gestaltists Kohler, Koffka, Gelb, and Goldstein infused with the Bersonian *vécu*. At the outset of the war, the 33 year old Levinas was drafted into the French army as an interpreter of Russian and German—he had become a citizen in 1930.³ But in 1940, like Sartre, as a French officer, he became a prisoner of war (and therefore was not sent to a concentration camp). Unlike Sartre, who escaped and returned to Paris, Levinas spent the remainder of the war doing forced labor in the forest. By the time Levinas's next book publication (most of which he wrote while in the German military prisoner's camp) appeared in French in 1949, entitled *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*⁴, the work of figures such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty had thoroughly eclipsed the role of Levinas as the one who had introduced phenomenology into France. Even Levinas's

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lectures in 1946-47 for Jean Wahl's *Collège Philosophique* on "Time and the Other" resulting in the highly original study entitled *Le temps et l'autre* (1947)—which Adriaan Peperzak describes as containing the core ideas of Levinas's later work: "the Other is the center, and time, as the ultimate horizon, determines the relations between the Other and me" (*BPW*, ix)—had nowhere near the impact of Sartre's 1947 *What is Literature?* or Merleau-Ponty's 1948 collection of essays entitled *Sense and Non-Sense*. One might then ask, along with Sartre, who pressed the question of responsibility in his celebrated (and infamous) 1946 essay "Existentialism is a Humanism" stating that one is responsible because one responds, and responding is a free choice, who is responsible for the success of phenomenology in France? As Sartre puts it: "If... existence is prior to essence, man is responsible for what he is. Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders." (Sartre 1989)⁵ If Sartre's voluntaristic account has weight, then it would be difficult to say who chose to be responsible for the development of phenomenology in France—Levinas or Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. But if we think of their responding to Levinas and Levinas responding to Husserl and Heidegger, the question of responsibility is displaced to another place...

In 1947, Merleau-Ponty was appointed Professor of Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne (Institut de Psychologie)—as the new replacement for Jean Piaget who returned to his native Geneva to inaugurate his Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute for Genetic Epistemology. In French academic circles in the early 1950s, Merleau-Ponty's thought was the center of great attention, and it was not unexpected when he was appointed to the Chair of Philosophy at the Collège de France in 1952. In the next nine years, his views and lectures were carefully followed by students, by readers of his editorials in *Les Temps Modernes* and the popular socialist weekly *L'Express*, and by the multitude of admirers of his thought. The posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible* (Merleau-Ponty, 1964)⁶ was to have been a magnificent achievement: a development of the notion of visibility as chiasmatically linking the visible and the invisible, an elaboration of his notion of interrogation (as a replacement for both Husserlian intentionality and Heideggerian hermeneutics), and an ontologization of what was primarily epistemological in his earlier thought. But Merleau-Ponty died in 1961.

That same year (1961), Levinas published *Totality and Infinity*,

his first major philosophical work in which he develops his account of alterity, exteriority, and the face of the other. While Merleau-Ponty's books began to appear in the several years after his death, among them *The Visible and the Invisible* and *Prose of the World*, it was now possible for Levinas to be noticed above and beyond his fame as an interpreter of Husserl and Heidegger. 1961 was also the year in which Levinas was first appointed Professor of Philosophy, first in Poitiers (1961-67), and then at Nanterre (1967-1973), and finally at Paris-IV in 1973. At last, Levinas was a figure to be accounted for on the philosophical scene. He was a name in his own right, but only some 30 years after he published his first study of Husserl, only after two decades of achievement by figures such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre. And while Merleau-Ponty should have completed *The Visible and the Invisible* sometime around 1961, Sartre published his massive *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (volume 1) in 1960. So the impact of Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* would take some time, especially given that it was published by Nijhoff in Holland, signaling its connection with the Husserl publishing machine, but not part of the mainstream publishing scene for philosophy in France, which was by then thoroughly dominated by Gallimard, Vrin, and PUF (Presses Universitaires de France) for the more tried and true works (including some of Levinas's own work on Husserl and Heidegger).

On the American scene, where phenomenology was still trying to find its place in 1961 (the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy held its first session in 1962), Levinas was unknown because untranslated. The first work to be published in English was *Totality and Infinity* (translated by none other than Alphonso Lingis, also of Lithuanian origins, in 1969 after he completed and published his translation of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous *The Visible and the Invisible*). Levinas's *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* (which had first appeared in French in 1930 at the outset of our story) finally appeared in 1973 in the important series edited by James M. Edie at Northwestern University Press. Because of the success of *Totality and Infinity*, it also made sense to translate Levinas's early ground-breaking dissertation on Husserl. If I may remark, I specifically remember the appearance of the Northwestern University Press translation of Levinas's study of Husserl's theory of intuition since it was published the same year as my own translation of Merleau-Ponty's *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* and (my soon-to-be Stony Brook colleague) David Allison's translation of Jacques Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena* (*La Voix et le*

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phénomène), whose excellent Translator's Preface I read on the plane from California to New York on my way to Stony Brook for a job interview in the Spring of 1974. All three of these works (by Levinas, by Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida) were published by Northwestern in 1973.

Two years earlier (1971-72) while writing a doctoral thesis in Paris as a boursier du gouvernement française and Fulbright scholar, I had the good fortune to meet Levinas. At the time, he was teaching at Nanterre where I was participating in Mikel Dufrenne's seminar on expressivity. Dufrenne had brought Levinas to Nanterre from Poitiers and I decided to attend Levinas's lectures as well. Even now vivid recollections abound of sitting in Levinas's classroom following in intricate detail his reading of Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*. I remember asking him whether he would not also be teaching his own philosophy—after all he was by then the celebrated author of *Totality and Infinity* (1961). His response was that he would not teach his own philosophy at the university, but rather he saw as his task to present his interpretation of Husserl's and Heidegger's philosophies. This rule would change over time, but it was rather astonishing that a full decade after the publication of *Totality and Infinity* he still felt obligated to lecture solely on Husserl and Heidegger. I spoke with him after class and on the phone a number of times that year, attended *soutenances de thèses* by friends for whom Levinas was a member of the jury, and read assiduously his writings on Husserl and Heidegger.

The doctoral defenses were perhaps the most memorable since they afforded the occasion to meet and talk with Levinas as well as the other two jury members, Jacques Derrida and Mikel Dufrenne, at the successful candidate's party following the public defense. Derrida whom I also had the opportunity to hear and meet at a weekend long seminar at the Ecole normale supérieure late that Spring was only 41 years old at the time. *Margins of Philosophy* was about to appear in 1972. But in 1967 he had already published three books of momentous occasion. Among them *L'Écriture et la différence* contained the first of three major essays on Levinas: "Violence and Metaphysics." For those who had begun to follow Derrida and who may not have been familiar with the work of Levinas, this was their *entrée*. By a curious turn of events, Levinas who could be traced as responsible for inaugurating phenomenology in France and who was then placed in the background during the heyday of the postwar existentialist rage, returned to the scene (like Orestes) through the writings of a man some 24 years his

junior. Nevertheless, the repeated reinsertion of Levinas's thought in its own right, as articulated in *Totality and Infinity* in particular and in Derrida's respectful but critical readings, reaffirmed Levinas as one of the dominant philosophers to be responded to in the later portion of the twentieth century.

II

So what does it mean to be first and yet to be between? To be responsible and the figure to be responded to? To be both first and last? To be the dominant figure to whom scholars and critics, philosophers and thinkers respond and the mark of what follows their responses. This is a theme which Derrida himself took up in his farewell to Levinas in December 1995, first in a eulogy given at Levinas's funeral and then in a paper given a year later in December 1996 at a two day conference in his honor. *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*⁷ appeared in 1997 and contains these two thoughtful and sympathetic texts by Derrida. In between, was a second essay by Derrida on Levinas: "At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am".⁸

The question of the between is signaled by the role of the relation to the Other which, according to Levinas, is unquestionably prior to ontology, prior to any discourse of Being. The face of the Other is prior to any form of Being. In Levinas, there is not even the expectation that the Other will respond, for there is, as Derrida points out, an absolute anteriority of the face of the Other (*Adieu*, 4/14). Ethics comes before and goes beyond ontology, the State, and politics; ethics even goes beyond ethics. What I want to suggest here is that Levinas's thinking of phenomenology, of intuition, of consciousness-of, was anterior to the various versions of phenomenology from Merleau-Ponty to Sartre, and yet his own thinking of this priority as the priority of ethics, as the anteriority of the face of the Other comes *after* the dominance of figures such as Merleau-Ponty and Sartre in France and elsewhere. In effect, Levinas speaks the importance of phenomenology *through* the face of the Others. And Derrida, by contrast, in his readings of Levinas, first in *Violence et métaphysique* (1967), then in *En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici*. (1980), and finally in *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (1997) demonstrates the significance of a certain interruption in the transition from phenomenology to its deconstruction in Derrida's own writings, from phenomenological ontology and the primacy of perception to the effects of undecidability

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and marginality. And Levinas is perhaps one of the best examples of this very undecidability and marginality in the development of French thought, and hence raises the very question of intellectual responsibility...the response to the thought of the other.

III

In order to understand this very Levinasian interruption, consider now in detail Derrida's *Adieu*—written of course before it became necessary to express our own adieu to Jacques Derrida in October 2004. The first of the two *Adieu* texts understands this interruption as “a certain non-response in a response which will never come to an end for me, as long as I live” (*Adieu*, 5/16). Powerful and impressive words for the philosopher who now must speak through the words that he has left behind since his own death—a theme that plagued him often in the decade or so before he died. The interruption occurs then as an endless and interminable “non-response” in each and every response that I can give. The interruption is a between that has no place, a rupture that comes between but does not provide an answer. “*Elle est le sans-réponse*,” Derrida cites Levinas as saying (16). The interruption, the face-to-face is the *without-a-response*. Death, Derrida shows, quoting Levinas, is the death “which ‘we encounter’ ‘in the face of the other’ as non-response” (16). Death is an interruption in the response of the other. And death is not a negation: not a “annihilation, non-being or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the ‘without-response’ [*anneantissement, le non-etre ou le néant, mais une certaine expérience, pour le survivant, du ‘sans-réponse’*]” (*Adieu*, 6/17). “It is the murderer who would like to identify death with nothingness [*identifier la mort au néant, c’est ce que voudrait faire le meurtrier*]” (6/17). Death, for Levinas, has nothing to do with this wish to negate the other. “The face of the other forbids me to kill, it says to me: ‘thou shall not kill’, even if this possibility remains presupposed by the interdiction that makes it impossible [*Le visage d’autrui m’interdit de tuer, il me dit ‘tu ne tueras point’ même si cette possibilité reste supposée par l’interdit qui la rend impossible*]” (6/17). But what sort of prohibition is this? Prohibition, interdiction (*l’interdit*) is a “saying between,” an interruption in what one does. The *interdit* is the placing between that says what shall not be said, or done! And this interdiction that one shall not kill is even more originary than to be or not to be. Death, as Levinas understands it, is an infinite interruption, like the one Derrida could feel in Levinas when talking

with him on the phone (one that I also experienced): “the anxiety of interruption...when, on the telephone, for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the ‘without-response,’ of the other...between each sentence and sometimes mid-sentence.” (*Adieu*, 9/21). Such an interruption functions as a kind of figure of the non-response that is always there in the face of the Other, in the response *of* the other.

The question of interruption returns in the second text, entitled “*Le mot d’accueil*” (“The Word of Welcome”). Here the figure of *l’accueil*—the welcoming—is precisely that of “a welcoming where ethics interrupts the philosophical tradition of giving birth and foils the ruse of the master who feigns to efface himself behind the figure of the midwife [Diotima]” (*Adieu* 17/41). This approach or *étude*, Derrida says, “cannot be reduced to maieutics” (17/42). It is not a question of a teaching, or that the other already knows what is to be said or the intellectual work finds itself in the effort at giving birth to what is already there.” Derrida writes:

according to *Totality and Infinity*, maieutics teaches me nothing. It reveals nothing to me. It unveils only what I am already *in a position* to know *myself* (*ipse*), capable of knowing by *myself*, in this place where the *self*, the *same*...gathers *in itself* capacity and knowing, power and knowledge, and as the *same*, the same *being-in-a-position-to*, in the property of what is proper to it, in its very essentiality [*la maïeutique, selon Totalité et Infini, ne m’apprend rien. Elle ne me révèle rien. Elle dévoile seulement ce que je suis à même, déjà, de savoir moi-même* (*ipse*), *de pouvoir savoir de moi-même, en ce lieu où le même...rassemble en lui-même pouvoir et savoir, et comme le même, le même être-à même-de en la propriété de son propre, en son essentialité même*]. (*Adieu*, 42)

In the *accueil*, the welcoming, there is already a response to the other, and of the other. There is “a politics of power with regard to the *bôte*, be he the one welcoming (*host*) or the one being welcomed (*guest*) [*une politique du pouvoir quant à l’hôte, qu’il soit accueillant (host) ou accueilli (guest)*]” (42). The welcoming of the teaching for Levinas interrupts the priority of the one welcoming (*accueillant*) in relation to the one welcomed (*accueilli*). The task is “to receive from the Other beyond the capacity of the I...to have the idea of infinity” (Levinas, *Totalité et Infini*, 22; quoted in *Adieu*, 18/43).

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For Levinas, one must think the opening as beginning with hospitality or welcoming—and not the inverse. Every opening opens on the very condition that there is at bottom a hospitality or a welcoming of the other. But what is important here is that the hospitality or the welcoming should interrupt every opening—of being, of the one in relation to the other. The interruption which offers hospitality or the welcoming imposes itself on every relation to the other. An ethics of hospitality, Derrida suggests, a law or right or a politics of hospitality, will recognize this interruption in the face of the Other. Hospitality is the response of the face of the Other, but it is capacity and knowing, power a response that does not await a response.

The Other is the only one who can say “yes.” The first “yes” or “*oui*” is always the “welcoming of the other.” The “yes” to the Other is already given in the *accueil* of the Other. There is no First “*oui*,” for the “*oui*” is already a response. And this is the sense in which, although Levinas himself first said “yes” to phenomenology and made that “yes” evident in the French context, his cannot be considered to be the first “yes.” Phenomenology was already in the air and Levinas would become known as a philosopher in his own right only long after phenomenology achieved its successes—particularly in France. Levinas’s “yes” is at best an interruption between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida.

Levinas speaks of “*thématisation*” and “*la visibilité du visage*” (Peace and Proximity, 1984). This term “*visibilité*” is of course linked with the thought of Merleau-Ponty. *Visibilité* is the chiasmatic linking of the visible and the invisible, of the seen and the seer, of what appears and what does the seeing. Visibility is the making visible of what is already visible. Visibility occupies no space. It is an *entrelac*, a *chiasmen* which links and separates at once. Visibility invokes what Merleau-Ponty calls “perceptual faith.” So what does it mean to think Levinas’s “visibility of the visage” (the face) in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s *visibilité du visible*? If a sculpture by Sacha Sosno is visible, it is something else to ask about the visibility of the sculpture—the obliteration of the figure, the marking out of the full visible space, the imposition of an abstraction onto a figurative piece that interrupts the visible as a continuous space. In this sense it is the interruption, the chiasmus between the figure and the block which blocks it out, which identifies the visibility of the sculpture.

For Levinas, the face, le visage, has a visibility. Its visibility interrupts the kind of relation that philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty had always thought characterized intersubjectivity. Merleau-Ponty’s idea

of intersubjectivity came from Husserl. But Husserl's notion was sorely inadequate. Merleau-Ponty came to speak of an *entremonde*, and *l'autrui* for him was always a recognition of other people as developed by the child in growing up, as marking human freedom, as operating a certain dialectic. When, in his later philosophy, he came to see that visibility was even more fundamental than the relation to oneself or the relation to others, he was then able to see this relation as interwoven between self and others.

But for Levinas, the other is already visible, is already a response, is already a face. For Levinas, visibility of the visage is already an engagement with the other — even before there is the slightest response. For Levinas, the welcoming is always reserved for the face. Hence the welcoming is already a visibility of the face. The welcoming, the hospitality is already there when the face becomes visible. The welcoming is always reserved for the face.

Derrida asks: “What *bearing* does this gathering have? [*Quelle portée pour ce recueillement?*]” (*Adieu*, 36/71 translation modified). *Recueillement*, linked to the Heideggerian notion of *Sammlung*, *sammeln*, *rassemblement*, gathering, indicates a sense of the already gathered (*déjà rassemblé*) in the face of the Other. It refers to a gathering, a welcome. “It bears on this; this is its *ference*, its *rappport* or relation” (*Adieu*, 36/71). The relation is already a gate, a door, an entrance, a going-through, a passage, a between, a relationality (*un entre-deux*). This relationality renders the exteriority of the other already interior by virtue of its *recueillement*, its *entre-deux*. The import (*ce qui importe ici*), what carries here, is the visibility of the face of the other. To be at home, hospitality presumes that a being is at home. (Etre chez soi, l'hospitalité presume un être chez soi.) For that is where the *accueil* takes place—“*un accueil... 'en soi', avant l'éthique*”—even before ethics (*Adieu*, 39/75). “*L'accueillant est d'abord accueilli chez lui,*” writes Derrida (*Adieu*, 79). “The one who invites is invited by the one whome he invites. The one who receives is received, receiving hospitality in what he takes to be his own home [*L'invitant est invité par son invité. Celui qui reçoit est reçu, il reçoit l'hospitalité dans ce qu'il tient pour sa propre maison*]” (*Adieu*, 42/79). Hence the host gathers or receives the received host [*l'hôte accueillant un hôte accueilli*]” (*Adieu*, 80). But what is also crucial here is that hospitality precedes propriety (*la propriété*) (*Adieu*, 45/85); any question of ownership, of mineness, of *Jemeinigkeit*, of *propriété* is preceded by hospitality. And we must not forget that Levinas was not in any way “owner” of the phenomenology that he

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brought to France. The hospitality which takes the form of a research, of a gift, of an opening was already there in the presentation of Husserl's thought for the French context. And such hospitality does not require an appreciation, an acceptance, even a response, and yet the question of responsibility persists.

IV

And so we arrive at the last question, the one that was in effect the first question. According to Derrida, Levinas has produced an equation: "metaphysics, the welcome of the other, and 'radical separation'" of the one from the other (*Adieu*, 47/89). Hence there is here, in this equation, a relation and a separation, an equation, and identity, and an alterity. "To metaphysical thought," Levinas says, "where a finite has the idea of infinity—where the radical separation is *produced* and, *simultaneously*, the relation with the other—we have reserved the term intentionality, consciousness of. . ." (quoted in *Adieu* 47/89). Hence for metaphysics, for this radical separation, that is, the relation with the other that precedes every relationship with others, Levinas names this intentionality, consciousness of. . . So intentionality names this radical separation, names the relation with the other. That is, phenomenology includes in a certain sense the fundamental metaphysics which is first philosophy and which is what comes before everything else according to Levinas. But at the same time, he distinguishes hospitality from thematization. Hospitality is not thematization in itself—but rather thematization is at the limit, on the horizon of hospitality. "Thematization," writes Derrida, "already presupposes hospitality, welcoming, intentionality, the face" (*Adieu*, 48/92). For "intentionality is hospitality" (*Adieu*, 50/94).

"Intentionality opens, from its own threshold, in its most general structure, as hospitality, as welcoming of the face, as an ethics of hospitality, and, thus, as ethics in general" (*Adieu*, 50/94). This means that every hospitality is phenomenology, experience of existence, and every phenomenology is a relation to the other. Furthermore, "there is no intentionality before and without this welcoming of the face that is called hospitality" (*Adieu*, 50/94-95).

Levinas was received in France, in Strasbourg, in order to carry out his studies. This hospitality was not given, it was, according to him, already there, even before he requested it. In discovering phenomenology in Germany, in importing it into France, in gathering and welcoming French philosophy as it would have been able to have

phenomenologized, Levinas obliterated himself behind those philosophers of French origin such as Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Dufrenne, and many others. But in obliterating himself, Levinas was at the same time hospitality itself—for he is the one who named the relation to the other, the hospitality with intentionality, with phenomenology itself. Levinas was the interruption which found itself always on the inside of this long history lasting over 65 years in France. Levinas made himself the interruption at the heart of phenomenology so that this hospitality could live...

According to Derrida:

It is tempting to relate this interruption to the one that introduces radical separation, that is to say, the condition of hospitality. For the interruption marked by ethical discourse *on the inside* of phenomenology, in its inside-outside, is like no other. Phenomenology imposes this interruption on itself; it *interrupts itself*. (*Adieu*, 51/96)

Phenomenological intentionality was always a relation: with Husserl, it was the constitution of the object by a transcendental subject; with Sartre, it was nihilation (neantisation); with Merleau-Ponty, it was the circuit of existences; with Dufrenne, it was an aesthetic experience, and so forth. With Levinas, intentionality is the relation to the other, the face of the other which is situated before all other personal relations between people.

Intentionality is an interruption. “It interrupts itself [*s’interrompt elle-même*]” writes Derrida, and that means “an interrupton of the self by the self as other [*l’interruption de soi par soi comme autre*]” (*Adieu*, 52/96-97). And so it is in this sense that Levinas offers phenomenology the possibility of interrupting itself, of separating itself, of establishing a link between Merleau-Ponty, for instance, and Derrida. Levinas is very much himself—historically and philosophically, even ethically—the relation between Merleau-Ponty et Derrida; and at the same time he is the separation, the chasm and chiasm between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida. As Derrida has written: “This fidelity that makes one unfaithful is the respect for consciousness-of... as hospitality” (*Adieu*, 52/97). The relation between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida is indeed a complex one—and particularly across Derrida’s fidelity to the phenomenological tradition there is at the same time an enormous infidelity on the side of Derrida and deconstruction in relation to the phenomenological tradition. And it is possible that across Levinas’s hospitality—his

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welcoming, the welcoming of Levinas, the non-phenomenological phenomenology of Levinas—the interruption on the interior of phenomenology is very much the place where phenomenology interrupts himself and where Levinas’s responsibilities can be traced across the gap between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, between Husserl and Heidegger, between German philosophy and French philosophy, between transcendental phenomenology and existential phenomenology, between a philosophy in which the other is constituted methodologically and a philosophy in which the other is experienced intersubjectively as belonging to an interworld in which the other is the host and the subject is the guest, in which the ethical call is a call to responsibility—a call for a response for which there is no other response other than the very pre-ontological ethical relation itself.

Tracing the relation of responsibility between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, marking it by the often unacknowledged position of Levinas in this network of relations is the inscription of a difference between, a between in which the very Levinasian face-to-face, vis-à-vis, relation of alterity marks a difference. And this difference is not according to a theory of “influence” or “intellectual heritage” but a lived relation of responsibility—a responding that happened between each of these philosophers such that something like a “school of thought” took shape. Without the respond-ability, there might not be a legacy, and without the legacy the face-to-face that we enact today might not have found a home—a place of hospitality, of welcoming, of being-at-home, here now —*entre nous*—readers of the newly named *Journal of French Philosophy* as a vital site for the growth of continental philosophy as we know it in our time...⁹

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Notes

¹ As reported to me in August of 1997 by his son Michael Levinas, a well-known pianist, during the first International Congress of Philosophy organized by the Societe Azurienne de Philosophie under the direction of Daniel Charles and in cooperation with the Azurian sculptor-painter Sasha Sosno.

² Much insight into Levinas’s itinerary from Lithuania to the Ukraine then back to Lithuania before leaving for France, his role in infusing Husserlian and Heideggerian thinking into the French context can be reaped from the detailed intellectual history of this period by Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger’s Philosophy in France, 1927-1961*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell

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University Press, 2005.

³ See the excellent “Preface” by Adriaan T. Peperzak. In *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966. vii-xv. Henceforth cited as *BPW*.

⁴ Levinas, Emmanuel. *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris: Vrin, 1949.

⁵ Sartre, Jean-Paul. “Existentialism is a Humanism.” In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, by Jean-Paul Sartre, edited by Walter Kaufmann, translated by Philip Mairet. Meridian Publishing Company, 1989.

⁶ Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Galilee, 1997). Henceforth cited as *Adieu*.

⁸ Derrida, Jacques. “‘At this Very Moment in this Work Here I Am’.” In *The Derrida Reader - Between the Blinds*, by Jacques Derrida, edited by Peggy Kamuf, 403-442. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

⁹ This paper was presented at the annual session of the *Société Américaine de Philosophie de Langue Française* in December 2007.