

○ A PLEA FOR ETHICAL VIOLENCE

Professor Slavoj Žižek, European Graduate School

Slavoj Žižek is a professor at the European Graduate School EGS and at the Institute for Sociology, Ljubljana. He has lectured throughout the world and is probably the most successful and prolific post-Lacanian scholar, having published over fifty books including translations into a dozen languages.

See: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek.html>

There is nothing more ethically repulsive than the idea that, beneath the surface of differences, we all share the same kernel of humanity, of human weaknesses, hopes and pleasures. Against this fake humanist notion of 'solidarity', one should ruthlessly assert the Platonic core of ethical violence articulated in a most pointed way, as one may expect, by Brecht in one of his stories about Herr Keuner: 'Herr K. was asked: "What do you do when you love another man?" "I make myself a sketch of him," said Herr K., "and I take care about the likeness." "Of the sketch?" "No," said Herr K., "of the man".' (Brecht 1995, p. 24).

This radical stance is more than ever needed, in our era of over-sensitivity for 'harassment' by the Other, when every ethical pressure is experienced as a false front of the violence of power. This 'tolerant' attitude fails to perceive how contemporary power no longer primarily relies on censorship, but on unconstrained permissivity, or, as Alain Badiou put it in the thesis 14 of his 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art': 'Since it is sure of its ability to control the entire domain of the visible and the audible via the laws governing commercial circulation and democratic communication, Empire no longer censures anything. All art, and all thought, is ruined when we accept this permission to consume, to communicate and to enjoy. We should become pitiless censors of ourselves' (Badiou 2004).

Can one imagine a stronger contrast to today's all-pervasive complaints about 'ethical violence', ie, to the tendency to submit to criticism ethical injunctions which 'terrorise' us with the brutal imposition of their universality. The (not so) secret model of this critique is an 'ethics without violence', freely (re)negotiated – the highest Cultural Critique meets here unexpectedly the lowest of pop psychology. John Gray, the author of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, deployed in a series of Oprah Winfrey shows a vulgarised version of narrativist-deconstructionist psychoanalysis: since we ultimately 'are' the stories we are telling ourselves about ourselves, the solution to a psychic deadlock resides in a creative 'positive' rewriting of the narrative of our past. What he had in mind is not only the standard cognitive therapy of changing negative 'false beliefs' about oneself into a more positive attitude of the assurance that one is loved by others and capable of creative achievements, but a more 'radical', pseudo-Freudian notion of regressing back to the scene of the primordial traumatic wound. That is to say, Gray accepts the psychoanalytic notion of a hard kernel of some early childhood traumatic experience that forever marked the subject's further development, giving it a pathological spin. What he proposes is that, after regressing to his primal traumatic scene and thus directly confronting it, the subject should, under the therapist's guidance, 'rewrite' this scene, this ultimate fantasmatic framework of his subjectivity, in a more 'positive', benign and productive narrative – say, if the primordial traumatic scene that persisted in your Unconscious, deforming and inhibiting your creative attitude, was that of your father shouting at you 'You are worthless! I despise you! Nothing will come out of you!', you should rewrite it into the new scene with a benevolent

father kindly smiling at you and telling you ‘You’re OK! I trust you fully!’... (In one of Oprah Winfrey’s shows, Gray directly enacted this rewriting-the-past experience with a woman who, at the end, gratefully embraced him, crying from happiness that she was no longer haunted by her father’s despising attitude towards her.) To play this game to the end, when Wolfman ‘regressed’ to the traumatic scene that determined his further psychic development – witnessing the parental coitus a tergo – the solution would be to rewrite this scene, so that what Wolfman effectively saw was merely his parents lying on the bed, father reading a newspaper and mother a sentimental novel. Ridiculous as this procedure may appear, let us not forget that it also has its PC-version, that of the ethnic, sexual, etc. minorities rewriting their past in a more positive, self-asserting vein. Along the same lines, one can even imagine a rewriting of the Decalogue itself: is some command too severe? Let us regress to the scene on Mount Sinai and rewrite it: adultery – yes, if it is sincere and serves the goal of your profound self-realisation... What disappears in this total availability of the past to its subsequent retroactive rewriting are not primarily the ‘hard facts’, but the Real of a traumatic encounter whose structuring role in the subject’s psychic economy forever resists its symbolic rewriting.

The ultimate irony is that this ‘critique of ethical violence’ is sometimes even linked to the Nietzschean motif of moral norms as imposed by the weak on the strong, thwarting their life-assertiveness: ‘moral sensitivity’, bad conscience, guilt-feeling, as internalised resistance to the heroic assertion of Life. For Nietzsche, such ‘moral sensitivity’ culminates in the contemporary Last Man who fears the excessive intensity of life as something that may disturb his search for ‘happiness’ without stress, and who, for this very reason, rejects ‘cruel’ imposed moral norms as a threat to his fragile balance... What gets lost in this ‘critique of ethical violence’ is precisely the most precious and revolutionary aspect of the Jewish legacy. Let us not forget that, in the Jewish tradition, the divine Mosaic Law is experienced as something externally and violently imposed, contingent and traumatic – in short, as an impossible/real Thing that ‘makes the law’. What is arguably the ultimate scene of religious-ideological interpellation – the pronouncement of the Decalogue on Mt Sinai – is the very opposite of something that emerges ‘organically’ as the outcome of the path of self-knowing and self-realisation: the pronouncement of the Decalogue is ethical violence at its purest. The Judaeo-Christian tradition is thus to be strictly opposed to the New Age gnostic problematic of self-realisation or self-fulfilment: when the Old Testament enjoins you to love and respect your neighbour, this does not refer to your imaginary semblable/double, but to the neighbour qua traumatic Thing. In contrast to the New Age attitude which ultimately reduces my Other/Neighbour to my mirror-image or to the means in the path of my self-realisation (like the Jungian psychology in which other persons around me are ultimately reduced to the externalisations/projections of the different disavowed aspects of my personality), Judaism opens up a tradition in which an alien traumatic kernel forever persists in my Neighbour – the Neighbour remains an inert, impenetrable, enigmatic presence that hystericises me. The core of this presence, of course, is the Other’s desire, an enigma not only for us, but also for the Other itself. For this reason, the Lacanian ‘Che vuoi?’ is not simply an inquiry into ‘What do you want?’, but more an inquiry into ‘What’s bugging you? What is it in you that makes you so unbearable not only for us, but also for yourself, that you yourself obviously do not master?’ In Serb, there is a vulgar expression which perfectly renders this meaning: when somebody is getting on one’s nerves, one asks him ‘What for a prick is fucking you? Koji kurac te jebe?’...

It is against this background that one should approach the topic of iconoclasm. The Jewish commandment that prohibits images of God is the obverse of the statement that relating to one's neighbour is the ONLY terrain of religious practice, of where the divine dimension is present in our lives. 'No images of God' does not point towards a gnostic experience of the divine beyond our reality, a divine which is beyond any image; on the contrary, it designates a kind of ethical hic Rhodus, hic salta: you want to be religious? OK, prove it HERE, in the 'works of love', in the way you relate to your neighbours.... Levinas was therefore right to emphasise how 'nothing is more opposed to a relation with the face than "contact" with the Irrational and mystery' (Levinas 1997 p. 9). Judaism is anti-gnosticism par excellence. We have here a nice case of the Hegelian reversal of reflexive determination into determinate reflection: instead of saying 'God is love', we should say 'love is divine' (and, of course, the point is not to conceive of this reversal as the standard humanist platitude). It is for this precise reason that Christianity, far from standing for a regression towards an image of God, only draws the consequence of the Jewish iconoclasm through asserting the identity of God and man – or, as it is said in John 4:12: 'No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us'. The radical conclusion to be drawn from this is that one should renounce the very striving for one's own (spiritual) salvation as the highest form of egotism – according to Leon Brunschvicg, therein resides the most elementary ethical lesson of the West against the Eastern spirituality: 'The preoccupation with our salvation is a remnant of self-love, a trace of natural egocentrism from which we must be torn by the religious life. As long as you think only salvation, you turn your back on God. God is God, only for the person who overcomes the temptation to degrade Him and use Him for his own ends' (quoted in Levinas 1997 p. 48).

So what about the Buddhist figure of bodhisattva who, out of love for the not-yet-enlightened suffering humanity, postpones his own salvation to help others on the way towards it? Does bodhisattva not stand for the highest contradiction: is not the implication of his gesture that love is higher than salvation? So why still call salvation salvation? And, what we find at the end of this road is atheism – not the ridiculously pathetic spectacle of the heroic defiance of God, but insight into the irrelevance of the divine, again, along the lines of Brecht's Herr Keuner: someone asked Herr Keuner if there is a God. Herr Keuner said: 'I advise you to think about how your behavior would change with regard to the answer to this question. If it would not change, then we can drop the question. If it would change, then I can help you at least insofar as I can tell you: You already decided: You need a God' (Brecht 1995 p. 18).

Brecht is right here: we are never in a position to directly choose between theism and atheism, since the choice as such is located within the field of belief. 'Atheism' (in the sense of deciding not to believe in God) is a miserable pathetic stance of those who long for God but cannot find him (or who 'rebel against God'...). A true atheist does not choose atheism: for him, the question itself is irrelevant.

SMASHING THE OTHER'S FACE

How does subjectivity relate to transcendence? There seem to be two basic modes exemplified by the names of Sartre and Levinas: (1) either the 'transcendence of the ego' (Sartre), ie, the notion of the subject as the force of negativity, self-transcending, never a positive entity identical to itself; (2) or the existence of the subject as grounded in the openness to an irreducible-unfathomable-

transcendent Otherness – there is a subject only insofar as it is not absolute, self-grounded, but remains in a tension with an impenetrable Other; there is freedom only through the reference to a gap which makes the Other unfathomable (according to Manfred Frank et al, this is what Hoelderlin, Novalis, Schelling, etc., knew in their critique of idealism). As expected, Hegel offers a kind of ‘mediation’ between these two extremes, asserting their ultimate identity (Hegel 1978). It is not only that the core of subjectivity is inaccessible to the subject, that the subject is decentred with regard to itself, that it cannot assume the abyss in its very centre: it is also not that the first mode is the ‘truth’ of the second (in a reflexive twist, the subject has to acknowledge that the transcendent power which resists it is really its own, the power of the subject itself), or vice versa (the subject emerges only as confronted with the abyss of the Other). This effectively seems to be the lesson of Hegel’s intersubjectivity – I am as a free subject only through encountering another free subject – and the usual counter-argument is here that, for Hegel, this dependence on the Other is just a mediating step/detour on the way towards full recognition of the subject in its Other, the full appropriation of the Other. But are things effectively so simple? What if the Hegelian ‘recognition’ means that I have to recognise in the impenetrable Other which appears as the obstacle to my freedom its positive-enabling ground and condition? What if it is ONLY in this sense is that the Other is ‘sublated?’

The topic of the ‘other’ is to be submitted to a kind of spectral analysis that renders visible its imaginary, symbolic and real aspects – it provides perhaps the ultimate case of the Lacanian notion of the ‘Borromean knot’ that unites these three dimensions. First, there is the imaginary other – other people ‘like me’, my fellow human beings with whom I am engaged in the mirror-like relationships of competition, mutual recognition, etc. Then, there is the symbolic ‘big Other’ – the ‘substance’ of our social existence, the impersonal set of rules that coordinate our coexistence. Finally, there is the Other qua Real, the impossible Thing, the ‘inhuman partner’, the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the symbolic Order, is possible. And it is crucial to perceive how these three dimensions are hooked up. The neighbour (*Nebenmensch*) as the Thing means that, beneath the neighbour as my semblant, my mirror-image, there always lurks the unfathomable abyss of radical Otherness, of a monstrous Thing that cannot be ‘gentrified’. It is already in his Seminar III that Lacan indicates this dimension:

And why... the Other... with a capital A ...for Autre...? For a no doubt mad reason, in the same way as it is madness every time we are obliged to bring in signs supplementary to those given by language. Here the mad reason is the following. You are my wife -- after all, what do you know about it? You are my master -- in reality, are you so sure of that? What creates the founding value of those words is that what is aimed at in the message, as well as what is manifest in the pretence, is that the other is there qua absolute Other. Absolute, that is to say he is recognised, but is not known. In the same way, what constitutes pretence is that, in the end, you don't know whether it's a pretence or not. Essentially it is this unknown element in the alterity of the other which characterizes the speech relation on the level on which it is spoken to the other (Lacan 1981 p. 48).

Lacan's notion, from the early '50s, of the 'founding word', of the statement which confers on you a symbolic title and thus makes you what you are (wife, master), is usually perceived as an echo of the theory of *performatif* (the link between Lacan and Austin, the author of the notion of *performatif*, was Emile Benveniste). However, it is clear from the above quote that Lacan aims at something more: we need the recourse to performativity, to the symbolic engagement, precisely and only insofar as the other whom we encounter is not only the imaginary *semblant*, but also the elusive absolute Other of the Real Thing with whom no reciprocal exchange is possible. In order to render our co-existence with the Thing minimally bearable, the symbolic order qua Third, the pacifying mediator, has to intervene: the 'gentrification' of the Other-Thing into a 'normal human fellow' cannot occur through our direct interaction, but presupposes the third agency to which we both submit ourselves – there is no intersubjectivity (no symmetrical, shared, relation between humans) without the impersonal symbolic Order. So no axis between the two terms can subsist without the third one: if the functioning of the big Other is suspended, the friendly neighbour coincides with the monstrous Thing (Antigone); if there is no neighbour to whom I can relate as a human partner, the symbolic Order itself turns into the monstrous Thing which directly parasitises upon me (like Daniel Paul Schreber's God who directly controls me, penetrating me with the rays of *jouissance*): if there is no Thing to underpin our everyday symbolically regulated exchange with others, we find ourselves in a Habermasian 'flat' aseptic universe in which subjects are deprived of their hubris of excessive passion, reduced to lifeless pawns in the regulated game of communication. – And it is from here that one should approach the key Levinasian notion of encountering the other's face as the epiphany, as the event that precedes Truth itself: 'To seek truth, I have already established a relationship with a face which can guarantee itself, whose epiphany itself is somehow a word of honor. Every language as an exchange of verbal signs refers already to this primordial word of honor... deceit and veracity already presuppose the absolute authenticity of the face' (Levinas 1979 p. 202).

One should read these lines against the background of the circular, self-referential, character of the Lacanian 'big Other', the symbolic 'substance' of our being, which is perhaps best rendered by Donald Davidson's 'holistic' claim that 'our only evidence for a belief is other beliefs... And since no belief is self-certifying, none can supply a certain basis for the rest' (Davidson 1986 p. 331). Far from functioning as the 'fatal flaw' of the symbolic order, this circularity is the very condition of its effective functioning. So when Levinas claims that a face 'can guarantee itself', this means that, precisely, it serves as the non-linguistic point of reference which also enables us to break the vicious circularity of the symbolic order, providing it with the ultimate foundation, the 'absolute authenticity'. The face is thus the ultimate FETISH, the object which fills in (obfuscates) the big Other's 'castration' (inconsistency, lack), the abyss of its circularity. At a different level, this fetishisation – or, rather, fetishist disavowal – is discernible also in our daily relating to another person's face. This disavowal does not primarily concern the raw reality of flesh ('I know very well that beneath the face, there is just the Real of the raw flesh, bones and blood, but I nonetheless act as if face is a window into the mysterious interiority on the soul'), but rather, at a more radical level, the abyss/void of the Other: the human face 'gentrifies' the terrifying Thing that is the ultimate reality of our neighbour. And insofar as the void called 'the subject of the signifier' (\$) is strictly correlative to this inconsistency (lack) of the Other, subject and face are to be opposed: the Event of encountering the other's face is not the experience of the abyss of the other's subjectivity – the only way to arrive at this experience is through defacement in all

its dimensions, from a simple tic or grimace that disfigures the face (in this sense, Lacan claims that the Real is 'the grimace of reality'). Perhaps the key moment in Jerry Lewis's film occurs when the idiot he plays is compelled to become aware of the havoc his behaviour has caused: at this moment, when he is stared at by all the people around him, unable to sustain their gaze, he engages in his unique mode of making faces, of ridiculously disfiguring his facial expression, combined with twisting his hands and rolling his eyes. This desperate attempt of the ashamed subject to efface his presence, to erase himself from the other's view, combined with the endeavour to assume a new face more acceptable to the environs, is subjectivisation at its purest.

So what is shame, this experience of 'losing one's face'? In the standard Sartrean version, the subject, in his 'For-Itself', is ashamed of the 'In-itself', of the stupid Real of his bodily identity: am I really THAT, this bad smelling body, these nails, these excrements? In short, 'shame' designates the fact that 'spirit' is directly linked to the inert vulgar bodily reality – which is why it is shameful to defecate in public. However, Lacan's counter-argument is here that shame by definition concerns fantasy. Shame is not simply passivity, but an *actively assumed passivity*: if I am raped, I have nothing to be ashamed of; but if I enjoy being raped, then I deserve to feel ashamed. Actively assuming passivity thus means, in Lacanian terms, finding *jouissance* in the passive situation in which one is caught. And since the coordinates of *jouissance* are ultimately that of the fundamental fantasy, which is the fantasy of (finding *jouissance* in) being put in the passive position (like the Freudian 'My father is beating me'), what exposes the subject to shame is not the disclosure of how he is put in the passive position, treated only as the body: shame only emerges when such a passive position in social reality touches upon the (disavowed intimate) fantasy. Let us take two women, the first, liberated and assertive, active; the other, secretly day-dreaming about being brutally handled by her partner, even raped. The crucial point is that, if both of them are raped, the rape will be much more traumatic for the second one, on account of the very fact that it will realise in 'external' social reality the 'stuff of her dreams'. Why? There is a gap which forever separates the fantasmatic kernel of the subject's being from the more 'superficial' modes of his or her symbolic and/or imaginary identifications – it is never possible for me to fully assume (in the sense of symbolic integration) the fantasmatic kernel of my being: when I approach it too much, when I come too close to it, what occurs is the *aphanisis* of the subject: the subject loses his/her symbolic consistency, it disintegrates. And, perhaps, the forced actualisation in social reality itself of the fantasmatic kernel of my being is the worst, most humiliating kind of violence, a violence which undermines the very basis of my identity (of my 'self-image') by exposing me to an unbearable shame.

We can clearly see, now, how far psychoanalysis is from any defence of the dignity of the human face: is the psychoanalytic treatment not the experience of rendering public (to the analyst who stands for the big Other) one's most intimate fantasies, and thus the experience of losing one's face in the most radical sense of the term? This is already the lesson of the very material dispositif of the psychoanalytic treatment: NO face to face between the subject-patient and the analyst, but the subject lying and the analyst sitting behind him, both staring in the same void in front of them. There is no 'intersubjectivity' here, only the two without face-to-face, the First and the Third...

How, then, do the law, courts, judgements, institutions, etc., enter? Levinas's answer is: by way of the presence of the THIRD. When face to face with the other, I am infinitely responsible to him, this is the original ethical constellation; however, there is always a third one, and from

that moment new questions arise: how does my neighbour whom I face relate to this Third? Is he the Third's friend or his foe or even his victim? Who, of the two, is my true neighbour in the first place? All this compels me to compare the infinites that cannot be compared, to limit the absolute priority of the other, to start to calculate the incalculable. However, what is important for Levinas is that this kind of legal relationship, necessary as it is, remains grounded in the primordial ethical relationship to the other.¹ The responsibility for the other – the subject as the response to the infinite call embodied in the other's face which is simultaneously helpless, vulnerable, and issuing an unconditional command – is for Levinas asymmetrical and non-reciprocal: I am responsible for the other without having any right to claim that the other should display the same responsibility for me. Levinas likes to quote Dostoyevsky here: 'We are all responsible for everything and guilty in front of everyone, but I am that more than all others' (Levinas 1997 p. 18). The ethical asymmetry between me and the other addressing me with the infinite call is the primordial fact, and 'I' should never lose my grounding in this irreducibly first-person relationship to the other which should go to the extreme, if necessary – I should be ready to take responsibility for the other up to taking his place, up to becoming a hostage for him: 'Subjectivity as such is primordially a hostage, responsible to the extent that it becomes the sacrifice for others' (p. 23). This is how Levinas defines the 'reconciliatory sacrifice': a gesture by means of which the Same as the hostage takes the place of (replaces) the Other... Is, however, this gesture of 'reconciliatory sacrifice' not Christ's gesture par excellence? Was He not the hostage who took the place of all of us and as such is exemplarily human ('ecce homo')?

In his *Ethics and Infinity*, Levinas (1985) emphasises how what appears as the most natural should become the most questionable – like Spinoza's notion that every entity naturally strives for its self-perseverance, for the full assertion of its being and its immanent powers: do I have (the right) to be? Is it not that by insisting in being, I deprive others of their place, I ultimately kill them? (Although Levinas dismisses Freud as irrelevant for his radical ethical problematic, was Freud also in his own way not aware of it? Is 'death drive' at its most elementary not the sabotaging of one's own striving to be, to actualise one's powers-potentials? And is not for that very reason the death drive the last support of ethics?) What one should fully acknowledge and endorse is that this stance of Levinas is radically *anti-biopolitical*: the Levinasian ethics is the absolute opposite of today's biopolitics with its emphasis on regulating life and deploying its potentials – for Levinas, ethics is not about life, but about something MORE than life. It is at this level that Levinas locates the gap that separates Judaism and Christianity – Judaism's fundamental ethical task is that of how 'to be without being a murderer':

If Judaism is attached to the here below, it is not because it does not have the imagination to conceive of a supernatural order, or because matter represents some sort of absolute for it; but because the first light of conscience is lit for it on the path that leads from man to his neighbor. What is an individual, a solitary individual, if not a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun, a being that is fully justified in its nature and its being? What is an individual, if not a usurper? What is signified by the advent of conscience, and even the first spark of spirit, if not the discovery of corpses beside me and my horror of existing by assassination?

Attention to others and, consequently, the possibility of counting myself among them, of judging myself – conscience is justice (Levinas 1997 p. 100).

In contrast to this admission of terrestrial life as the very terrain of our ethical activity, Christianity simultaneously goes too far and not far enough: it believes that it is possible to overcome this horizon of finitude, to enter collectively a blessed state, to ‘move mountains by faith’ and realise a utopia, AND it immediately transposes the place of this blessed state into an Elsewhere, which then propels it to declare our terrestrial life of ultimately secondary importance and to reach a compromise with the masters of this world, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. The link between spiritual salvation and worldly justice is cut short.

The determination of Judaism as the religion of the Law is to be taken literally: it is the Law at its purest, deprived of its obscene superego supplement. Recall the traditional obscene figure of the father who officially prohibits his son casual sex, while the message between the lines is to solicit him to engage in sexual conquests – prohibition is here uttered in order to provoke its transgression. And, with regard to this point, Paul was wrong in his description of the Law as that which solicits its own violation – wrong insofar as he attributed this notion of the Law to Jews: the miracle of the Jewish prohibition is that it effectively IS just a prohibition, with no obscene message between the lines. It is precisely because of this that Jews can look for the ways to get what they want while literally obeying the prohibition: far from displaying their casuistry and externally-manipulative relationship to the Law, this procedure rather bears witness to the direct and literal attachment to the Law. And it is in this sense that the position of the analyst is grounded in Judaism. Recall Henry James’s ‘The Lesson of the Master’, in which Paul Overt, a young novelist, meets Henry St. George, his great literary master, who advises him to stay single, since a wife is not an inspiration but a hindrance. When Paul asks St. George if there are no women who would ‘really understand – who can take part in a sacrifice’, the answer he gets is: ‘How can they take part? They themselves are the sacrifice. They’re the idol and the altar and the flame’ (chapter five). Paul follows St. George’s advice and renounces the young Marian whom he passionately loves. However, after returning to London from a trip to Europe, Paul learns that, after the sudden death of his wife, St. George himself is about to marry Marian. After Paul accuses St. George of shameful conduct, the older man says that his advice was right: he will not write again, but Paul will achieve greatness... Far from displaying cynical wisdom, St. George acts as a true analyst: as the one who is not afraid to profit from his ethical choices, ie., as the one who is able to break the vicious cycle of ethics and sacrifice.

It is possible to break this vicious cycle precisely insofar as one escapes the hold of the superego injunction to enjoy. Traditionally, psychoanalysis was expected to allow the patient to overcome the obstacles which prevented him/her the access to ‘normal’ sexual enjoyment; today, however, when we are bombarded from all sides by the different versions of the superego-injunction ‘Enjoy!’, from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening, one should move to a more radical level: psychoanalysis is today the only discourse in which you are allowed NOT to enjoy (as opposed to ‘not allowed to enjoy’). (And, from this vantage point, it becomes retroactively clear how already the traditional prohibition to enjoy was sustained by the implicit opposite injunction.) This notion of a Law which is not sustained by a superego supplement involves a radically new notion of society – a society no longer grounded in shared common roots:

Every word is an uprooting. The constitution of a real society is an uprooting – the end of an existence in which the ‘being-at-home’ is absolute, and everything comes from within. Paganism is putting down roots... The advent of the scriptures is not the subordination of the spirit to a letter, but the substitution of the letter to the soil. The spirit is free within the letter, and it is enslaved within the root. It is on the arid soil of the desert, where nothing is fixed, that the true spirit descended into a text in order to be universally fulfilled. Paganism is the local spirit: nationalism in terms of its cruelty and pitilessness... A humanity with roots that possesses God inwardly, with the sap rising from the earth, is a forest or prehuman humanity...

A history in which the idea of a universal God must only be fulfilled requires a beginning. It requires an elite. It is not through pride that Israel feels it has been chosen. It has not obtained this through grace. Each time the peoples are judged, Israel is judged... It is because the universality of the Divine exists only in the form in which it is fulfilled in the relations between men, and because it must be fulfillment and expansion, that the category of a privileged civilization exists in the economy of Creation. This civilization is defined in terms not of prerogatives, but of responsibilities. Every person, as a person – that is to say, one conscious of his freedom – is chosen. If being chosen takes on a national appearance, it is because only in this form can a civilization be constituted, be maintained, be transmitted, and endure. (Levinas 1997 pp. 137–138).

However, is not the Jewish identity still the paradox of the being-uprooted itself functioning as the foundation of ethnic roots and identity?² Is not, consequently, the next step to be accomplished that of forming a collective which no longer relies on an ethnic identity, but is in its very core the collective of a struggling universality? Levinas is right in locating Jewish universalism in their very non-proselyte stance: Jews do not try to convert all others to Judaism, to impose their particular religious form onto all others, they just stubbornly cling to this form. The true universalism is thus paradoxically this very rejection to impose one’s message on all others – in such a way, the wealth of the particular content in which the universal consists is asserted, all others are left to be in their particular ways of life. However, this stance nonetheless involves its own limitation: it reserves for itself a privileged position of a singularity with a direct access to the universal – all people participate in the universality, but Jews are ‘more universal than others’: *‘The Jewish faith involves tolerance because, from the beginning, it bears the entire weight of all other men’* (Levinas 1997 p. 173). The Jewish man’s burden... What is still missing here is the notion (and practice) of antagonistic universality, of the universality as struggle which cuts across the entire social body, of universality as a partial engaged position.

JEW, CHRISTIAN, AND OTHER MONSTERS

The limitation of Levinas is not simply that of a Eurocentrist who relies on a too narrow definition of what is human, a definition that secretly excludes non-Europeans as ‘not fully human’.³ What Levinas fails to include into the scope of ‘human’ is rather the INHUMAN itself, a dimension which eludes the face-to-face relationship of humans.

In a properly dialectical paradox, what is missing in Levinas, with all his celebration of the Otherness, is not some underlying Sameness of all humans but the radical, 'inhuman', Otherness itself: the Otherness of a human being reduced to inhumanity, the Otherness exemplified by the terrifying figure of *Musulmannen*, 'living dead', in the concentration camps. Which is why, although Levinas is often perceived as the thinker who endeavoured to articulate the experience of *shoah*, one thing is self-evident apropos his questioning of one's own right to be and his emphasis on my unconditional asymmetrical responsibility: this is not how a survivor of the *shoah*, how one who effectively experienced the ethical abyss of *shoah*, thinks and writes. This is how those think who feel guilty for observing the catastrophe from a minimal safe distance.⁴

For this same reason, Levinas is also unable to take the (properly Christian) path of ethical paradoxes (of the 'teleological suspension of the ethical') outlined by Kierkegaard. In 'The Ancient Tragical Motif as Reflected in the Modern', a chapter of Volume I of *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard (1959) proposed his fantasy of what a modern Antigone would have been. The conflict is now entirely internalised; there is no longer a need for Creon. While Antigone admires and loves her father Oedipus, the public hero and saviour of Thebes, she knows the truth about him (murder of the father, incestuous marriage). Her deadlock is that she is prevented from sharing this accursed knowledge (like Abraham who also could not communicate to others the divine injunction to sacrifice his son): she cannot complain, share her pain and sorrow with others. In contrast to Sophocles's Antigone who acts (buries her brother and thus actively assumes her fate), she is unable to act, condemned forever to impassive suffering. This unbearable burden of her secret, of her destructive *agalma*, finally drives her to death in which only she can find peace otherwise provided by symbolizing/sharing one's pain and sorrow. And Kierkegaard's point is that this situation is no longer properly tragic (again, in a similar way that Abraham is also not a tragic figure).⁵ Furthermore, insofar as Kierkegaard's Antigone is a paradigmatically modernist one, one should go on with his mental experiment and imagine a postmodern Antigone with, of course, a Stalinist twist to her image: in contrast to the modernist one, she should find herself in a position in which, to quote Kierkegaard himself, the ethical itself would be the temptation. One version would undoubtedly be for Antigone to publicly renounce, denounce and accuse her father (or, in a different version, her brother Polynices) of his terrible sins OUT OF HER UNCONDITIONAL LOVE FOR HIM. The Kierkegaardian catch is that such a PUBLIC act would render Antigone even more ISOLATED, absolutely alone: no one – with the exception of Oedipus himself, if he were still alive – would understand that her act of betrayal is the supreme act of love.... Antigone would thus be entirely deprived of her sublime beauty – all that would signal the fact that she is not a pure and simple traitor to her father, but that she did it out of love for him, would be some barely perceptible repulsive tic, like the hysteric twitch of lips of Claudel's *Sygne de Coufontaine*.

The more standard answer to Levinas's ethic of radical responsibility would have been that one can truly love others only if one loves oneself. However, at a more radical level, is there not something inherently FALSE in such a link between the responsibility for/to the other and questioning one's own right to exist? Although Levinas asserts this asymmetry as universal (*everyone* of us is in the position of primordial responsibility towards others), does this asymmetry not effectively end up in privileging ONE particular group which assumes responsibility for all others, which embodies in a privileged way this responsibility, directly stands for it – in this case, of

course, Jews, so that, again, one is ironically tempted to speak of the ‘Jewish man’s (ethical burden)?’

The idea of a chosen people must not be taken as a sign of pride. It does not involve being aware of exceptional rights, but of exceptional duties. It is the prerogative of a moral consciousness itself. It knows itself at the centre of the world and for it the world is not homogeneous: for I am always alone in being able to answer the call, I am irreplaceable in my assumption of responsibility (Levinas 1997 pp. 176–177).

In other words, do we not get here – in a homology with Marx’s forms of the expression of value – a necessary passage from the simple and developed form (I am responsible for you, for all of you) to the general equivalent and then its reversal (I am the privileged site of responsibility for all of you, which is why you are all effectively responsible to me...)? And is this not the ‘truth’ of such an ethical stance, thereby confirming the old Hegelian suspicion that every self-denigration secretly asserts its contrary? It is like the proverbial excessive Political Correctness of the Western white male who questions his own right to assert his cultural identity, while celebrating the exotic identity of others, thereby asserting his privileged status of the universal-neutral medium of recognizing other’s identities... Self-questioning is always by definition the obverse of self-privileging; there is always something false about respect for others which is based on questioning one’s own right to exist.

A Spinozean answer to Levinas would have been that our existence is not at the expense of others, but as part of the network of reality: there is, for Spinoza, no Hobbesian ‘Self’ as extracted from and opposed to reality – Spinoza’s ontology is the one of full immanence to the world, i.e., I ‘am’ just the network of my relations with the world, I am totally ‘externalised’ in it. My *conatus*, my tendency to assert myself, is thus not my assertion at the expense of the world, but my full acceptance of being part of the world, my assertion of the wider reality within which I can only thrive. The opposition of egotism and altruism is thus overcome: I fully am not as an isolated Self, but in the thriving reality part of which I am.

Levinas therefore secretly imputes to Spinoza an egotistic ‘subjectivist’ notion of (my) existence – his anti-Spinozean questioning of my right to exist is inverted arrogance, as if I am the centre whose existence threatens all others. So the answer should not be an assertion of my right to exist in harmony with and tolerance of others, but a more radical claim: do I exist in the first place? Am I not, rather, a *hole in the order of being*? This brings us to the ultimate paradox on account of which Levinas’s answer is not sufficient: I am a threat to the entire order of being not insofar as I positively exist as part of this order, but precisely insofar as I am a hole in the order of being. As such, as nothing, I ‘am’ a striving to reach out and appropriate all: only a Nothing can desire to become Everything (it was already Schelling who defined the subject as the endless striving of the Nothing to become Everything). On the contrary, a positive living being occupying a determinate space in reality, rooted in it, is by definition a moment of its circulation and reproduction.

Recall the similar paradox of what structures the Politically Correct landscape: people far from the Western world are allowed to fully assert their particular ethnic identity without being proclaimed essentialist racist identitarians (native Americans, blacks...); the closer one gets to

the notorious white heterosexual males, the more problematic this assertion is: Asians are still OK, Italians and Irish maybe, with Germans and Scandinavians it is already problematic.... However, such a prohibition of asserting the particular identity of White Men (as the model of oppression of others), although it presents itself as the admission of their guilt, nonetheless confers on them a central position: this very prohibition to assert their particular identity makes them into the neutral medium, the place from which the truth about the others' oppression is accessible.

One should therefore assume the risk of countering Levinas's position with a more radical one: others are primordially an (ethically) indifferent multitude, and love is a violent gesture of cutting into this multitude and privileging a One as the neighbour, thus introducing a radical imbalance into the whole. In contrast to love, justice begins when I remember the faceless many left in shadow in this privileging of the One. Justice and love are thus structurally incompatible: justice, not love, has to be blind, it has to disregard the privileged One whom I 'really understand'. What this means is that the Third is not secondary: it is always-already here, and the primordial ethical obligation is towards this Third who is NOT here in the face to face relationship, the one in shadow, like the absent child of a love-couple. This is not simply the Derridean-Kierkegaardian point that I always betray the Other because *toute autre est un autre*, because I have to make a CHOICE to SELECT who my neighbour is from the mass of the Thirds, and this is the original sin-choice of love. The structure is similar to the one described by Emile Benveniste apropos verbs: the primordial couple is not active-passive, to which the neutral form is then added, but active and neutral (along the axis of engaged-disengaged). The primordial couple is Neutral and Evil (the choice which disturbs the neutral balance), or, grammatically, impersonal Other and me – 'you' is a secondary addition (Benveniste 1973).

This brings us to the radical anti-Levinasian conclusion: the true ethical step is the one BEYOND the face of the other, the one of SUSPENDING the hold of the face: the choice AGAINST the face, for the THIRD. This coldness IS justice at its most elementary. Every preempting of the Other in the guise of his face relegates the Third to the faceless background. And the elementary gesture of justice is not to show respect for the face in front of me, to be open for its depth, but to abstract from it and refocus onto the faceless Thirds in the background. It is only such a shift of focus onto the Third that effectively *uproots* justice, liberating it from the contingent umbilical link that renders her 'embedded' in a particular situation. In other words, it is only such a shift onto the Third that grounds justice in the dimension of *universality* proper.

This structure is irreducible. Otherwise, we remain caught in the 'understanding': one can 'understand' everything, even the most hideous crime has an 'inner truth and beauty' when observed from within: recall the refined spiritual meditations of the Japanese warriors. There is a weird scene in Hector Babenco's *The Kiss of a Spider-Woman*: in German-occupied France, a high Gestapo officer explains to his French mistress the inner truth of the Nazis, how they are guided in what may appear brutal military interventions by an inner vision of breath-taking goodness. We never learn in what, exactly, this inner truth and goodness consist; all that matters is this purely formal gesture of asserting that things are not what they seem (brutal occupation and terror), that there is an inner ethical truth which redeems them... THIS is what the ethical Law prohibits: justice HAS to be blind, ignoring the inner truth.

Levinas is right to point out the ultimate paradox of how...

the Jewish consciousness, formed precisely through contact with this harsh morality, with its obligations and sanctions, has learned to have an absolute horror of blood, while the doctrine of non-violence has not stemmed the natural course towards violence displayed by a whole world over the last two thousand years... Only a God who maintains the principle of Law can in practice tone down its severity and use oral law to go beyond the inescapable harshness of Scriptures (Levinas 1997 p. 138).

But what about the opposite paradox? What if only a God who is ready to subordinate his own Law to love can *in practice* push us to realise blind justice in all its harshness? Recall how Che Guevara conceived revolutionary violence as a ‘work of love’: ‘Let me say, with the risk of appearing ridiculous, that the true revolutionary is guided by strong feelings of love. It is impossible to think of an authentic revolutionary without this quality’ (quoted in Anderson 1997 pp. 636–637). Therein resides the core of *revolutionary justice*, this much misused term: harshness of the measures taken, sustained by love. Does this not recall Christ’s scandalous words from Luke (‘if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes even his own life – he cannot be my disciple’ (Luke 14:26)) which point in exactly the same direction as another of Che’s famous quotes? ‘You may have to be tough, but do not lose your tenderness. You may have to cut the flowers, but it will not stop the Spring’ (quoted in McLaren 2000 p. 27). This Christian stance is the very opposite of the Oriental attitude of non-violence which – as we know from the long history of Buddhist rulers and warriors – can legitimise the worst violence. It is not that the revolutionary violence ‘really’ aims at establishing a non-violent harmony; on the contrary, the authentic revolutionary liberation is much more directly identified with violence – it is violence as such (the violent gesture of discarding, of establishing a difference, of drawing a line of separation) which liberates. Freedom is not a blissfully neutral state of harmony and balance, but the very violent act which disturbs this balance.

Marx said about the petit-bourgeois that he sees in every object two aspects, bad and good, and tries to keep the good and fight the bad. One should avoid the same mistake in dealing with Judaism: the ‘good’ Levinasian Judaism of justice, respect for and responsibility towards the other, etc., against the ‘bad’ tradition of Jehovah, his fits of vengeance and genocidal violence against the neighbouring people. This is the illusion to be avoided: one should assert a Hegelian ‘speculative identity’ between these two aspects and see in Jehovah the SUPPORT of justice and responsibility. Judaism is as such the moment of unbearable absolute contradiction, the worst (monotheistic violence) and the best (responsibility towards the other) in absolute tension – the two are the same, coinciding, and simultaneously absolutely incompatible. Christianity resolves the tension by way of introducing a cut: the ‘Bad’ itself (finitude, cut, the gesture of difference, ‘differentiation’, as the Communists used to put it – ‘the need for ideological differentiation’) as directly the source of Good. In a move from In-itself to For-itself, Christianity merely assumes the Jewish contradiction.

ENDNOTES

- 1 At the end of this road of the celebration of irreducible Otherness, of the rejection of closure, there is, of course, as its effective spiritual movens, the ineluctable political conclusion: 'Political totalitarianism rests on an ontological totalitarianism' (Levinas 1997 p. 206).
- 2 Which is why, when it comes to collective relations between Jews and other ethnic groups, Levinas cannot but accept the necessity of war – when he writes 'my Muslim friend, my unhated enemy of the Six-Day-War', he thereby endorses the necessity to fight the war – in a move recalling the old Buddhist warrior ethic, what his position amounts to is that we have to fight the enemy without hatred...
- 3 Although one may formulate the reproach also at this level. Today, in our Politically Correct anti-Eurocentric times, one is tempted to admire Levinas's readiness to openly admit his being perplexed by the African-Asian other who is too alien to be a neighbor: our time is marked by 'the arrival on the historical scene of those underdeveloped Afro-Asiatic masses who are strangers to the Sacred History that forms the heart of the Judaic-Christian world' (Levinas 1997 p. 160).
- 4 At a different level, the same goes for Stalinist Communism. In the standard Stalinist narrative, even the concentration camps were a place of the fight against Fascism where imprisoned Communists were organising networks of heroic resistance – in such a universe, of course, there is no place for the limit-experience of the *Musulmann*, of the living dead deprived of the capacity of human engagement. No wonder that Stalinist Communists were so eager to 'normalise' the camps into just another site of the anti-Fascist struggle, dismissing *Musulmannen* as simply those who were too weak to endure the struggle.
- 5 It was already Hegel who intuited that the modern stance of desublimation undermines the tragic perception of life. In his *Phenomenology*, he supplements the famous French proverb 'There are no heroes for a room-servant' with 'Not because the hero is not a hero, but because the room-servant is just a room-servant', ie, the one who perceives in the hero just his 'human, all too human' features, small weaknesses, petty passions, etc., and is blind for the historic dimension of the hero's deeds – in modernity, this servant's perspective is universalised, all dignified higher stances are reduced to lower motivations.

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