WHO, EXACTLY, IS THE OTHER?

WESTERN AND TRANSCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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A collection of essays
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3. Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony

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In my essay I address the three basic ideas at the center of our symposium (alterity, transcendence and representation), and the role they play in ethics and literature. First I analyze the ideas of alterity and otherness that I see connected to the notion of transcendence as it manifests itself in Levinas's ethics and in a philosophy of testimony. Thus, in the first part of my essay I make some brief remarks on *otherness* and *alterity* as fundamental categories of an ethical discourse and on *transcendence* as a *philosophical* category related to a testimonial discourse. In this context I discuss also the possible intersection of literature and ethics.

Ethics and Otherness

Levinas's ethics, and ethical discourse in general, is very different from what is generally understood as moral discourse. Ethics and morals obey two very different regimes of discourse. The categories proper to a moral discourse are Good and Evil, whereas the categories proper to an ethical discourse are otherness and sameness. Ethics is the field in which the very notion of otherness is articulated and discussed. The specificity of ethical discourse consists in its ability to deconstruct the set of rules given by moral discourse. Ethics deals more with questions than answers and does not consider only one point of view, or follow one ideology, or obey just one moral imperative. Morality represents the moment of decision that cannot take place in a purely ethical domain. Ethics is the ground of a general command to act on principle, without any specific reference to any particular value. On the other hand, moral consciousness has the capacity to introduce human beings to ethical consciousness, which is based on the "straight-forwardness" of my staring, without artifice or evasion, at the absolutely unprotected eyes of the other in front of me.[1]

I consider ethics the field in which literature and philosophy intersect and I find particularly interesting the notions of an ethics of reading and an ethics of writing. If ethics is the site of alterity (or otherness), how does this notion apply to an ethics of writing and reading? Is there an ethics in literature? The ethical approach in writing and reading is characterized by a double and dialectical movement between freedom and necessity. The ethical element consists of the awareness of the limitations implicit in any free choice that we make in reading and writing. Ethics can accept a reader-centered kind of criticism based on the notion that the reader is free and responsible for his/her construction of the text. However, an ethical approach can take place only when one realizes how one's own reading is not

only free and autonomous but also bound to the encounter with the other and to a logical structure implicit in the text. By other here I mean both the writer, the narrator, and the characters implicit in the text.

In the case of a narrative text, the reader's response might be related to the development of the plot that makes the reader identify with the suffering of the protagonist or with the actions of the main character. This identification process can be the first step toward an ethical reading but it is not in itself ethical. The ethical element in writing and in reading intervenes when the writer and/or the reader move away from that identification process and become aware of the otherness of the world and of the voice speaking in the text. Moreover, in an ethical approach to literature the writer and/or the reader may experience a change emerging in the very act of writing and of reading, a change leading to a transcendence of the ego. Writing and reading are ethical activities as long as they leave the door open to the unexpected, to an interruption of the economy of the same made possible by the encounter with the other. In the context of a phenomenological approach to the problem of consciousness, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced the notion of the "transcendence of the ego." For Sartre there is no transcendental ego in consciousness. Consciousness is empty, the ego is in the world as an object among other objects. Sartre developed a radical critique of the representational theories of knowledge because they violate the human sense of life. He insisted that when we see a tree or a mountain we are really seeing a tree or a mountain, not our ideas of them. From this perspective, consciousness becomes involved with our concrete relationship to the world, to other human beings, and to ourselves.[2]

An approach to literature that is based on thematization, ideology and representation is not ethical but can be moral or political. To become ethical, literary criticism has to put into question the very notion of literature and of poetic experience by addressing the conditions in which alterity (or otherness) operates in the writing and reading process. The awareness of the otherness implicit in the text and in the voice speaking in the text does not coincide either with the notion of literary self-consciousness, so popular in literary criticism, nor with the apology of deconstructive reading. In his work on the ethics of reading, J. Hillis Miller has argued that "all great literary works come to terms in some way with their own fictionality, which means that they all thematize the basic undecidability between the figural and the referential functions of their language."[3] From this perspective ethics appears to be possible only through submission to linguistic indeterminacy and is far removed from Levinas's notion of alterity and transcendence.

The very possibility of transcendence is based on what Levinas calls the "transcendence of words" that happens when one recognizes in the sound of words a phenomenon that exceeds any capacity to represent. Vision

manifests itself as a totalitarian, sensible approach to the world, willing to come to terms with the world as it appears through a representation. Sound, on the contrary, alludes always to something beyond the given:

> While in vision a form espouses a content and soothes it, sound is like the sensible quality overflowing its limits, the incapacity of form to hold its content—a true rent in the fabric of the world—that by which the world that is *here* prolongs a dimension inconvertible into vision. It is thus that the sound is symbol par excellence—a reaching beyond the given. If, however, sound can appear as a phenomenon, as here, it is because its function of transcendence only asserts itself in the verbal sound. The sound and noises of nature are words that disappoint us. To really hear a sound is to hear a word.[4]

The best expression of sound for Levinas is a word. Words are evoked in writing, and writing, therefore—even though it tends to crystallize the transcendence of words—makes it nonetheless possible to keep a trace of its verbal utterance. This trace is testimony to the infinite, a realization of the very fact that the sound of the voice of the other human being is irreducible to a pure representation. In many works Levinas argues that testimony and ethics are not possible in literature and that ethics is only possible in the face-to-face situation, in the direct encounter with the other human being. Nevertheless, he writes that literature can work as a preparation for philosophy and that the great Russian novels, above all the novels of Dostoevsky, were his preparation for philosophy.[5]

Moreover, if one considers what Levinas writes about the transcendence of words, one is made to think that the sound of words and the transcendence of words manifest themselves both in direct conversation with the other and in the trace of that conversation in writing and in literature. In both cases what is at stake is the event of alterity. The Other, writes Levinas, "is not a being we encounter" but a relationship with the future and infinity; the situation of the face-to-face with the Other is not a relationship of full presence, but a relationship with the mystery of the future, the very presence of the future in the present.[6]

Literature and writing, conceived of as mirrors of the face-to-face situation, cannot substitute for that encounter, but they can help in understanding the infinite nature of that encounter, its irreducibility to any given form, its continuous alluding to the beyond. Thus the very ideas of testimony and the ethics of writing and reading in literature are intrinsically related to the notion of otherness and of transcendence, or else they cannot stand for an ethical relationship and a credible mirror of the face-to-face situation with the other.[7]

Ethics and testimony refer to an event in relation to which the subject is

not an active agent or a master. Levinas thinks of time as the event that puts into question the very notion of subjectivity. Time exists only in relation to the other and the very relationship with the other can be described as a relationship with time.[8] For this reason among the typical forms of a testimonial discourse we find diary- and letter-writing. In contrast to an autobiographical discourse based on a retrospective thematization of one's own past life, diary- and letter-writing are based on a relationship with the future and with the other. In diary- and in letter-writing, the relation to time imposes a testimonial attitude that departs from ontological language. Every entry, every letter, every instant is irreducible to the other and does not allow any kind of closure but points constantly to the future as a dimension open to the unexpected and to a possible meeting with the other. As a form of writing that incorporates the future into the present, testimony does not require a full identity of the subject and it is based on the subject's passivity, which is a consequence of the meeting with the other, a meeting continuously deferred and that is nonetheless necessary because of its relation to time. Testimony requires a language that foregrounds the relation to its addressee, to the other.

The witnesses are free to choose their literary forms, but they soon become aware that these forms, and the writing process itself, impose their peculiar relation to time and "situatedness" not only on the very choices of the writer but also on the reader's response. Testimony is always related to the very specific moment of a trauma, of an offense, of a suffering that urgently needs to be told. That moment seems eternal, always the same. This moment in itself, even when it is said and articulated in discourse, is not the moment proper to testimony that intervenes only when the witness separates herself from the sameness of time and introduces an element of discontinuity or diachrony, as Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being*, that exposes the subject to the other and to the interruption of its essential identity:

> In its identity invoked the one is irreplaceable, and does not return to itself; in its bearing of itself, it is an expiation for the other, in its "essence" and ex-ception to essence, or a substitution. The-one-for-the-other is not the one trans-substantified into another, but for the other, in the discontinuity or diachrony of signification not yet set up in a theme, in which a said does indeed manifest itself, but seems immediately trapped in the theme, in synchrony and essence.[9]

In suffering the subject manages to accomplish all its solitude and realizes the impossibility of detaching itself from the instant of existence.[10] The event that can produce the passivity of the subject is not suffering in itself, but death. Death is an event absolutely unknowable by the subject,

never present to the subject and yet able to interrupt its consistency. The subject does not desire this moment of disruption freely or intentionally. On the contrary, she is subjected to it when she is able to understand the limit that death imposes on the very notion of subjectivity. This moment of disruption is what makes the subject able to listen not to her own suffering but to the suffering of the other.

Levinas develops the notion of alterity not only in reference to death but also to language. Here we have to introduce two key terms of his philosophy of testimony: the *saying* and the *said*. Witness, writes Levinas, is not in the *said* but in what he calls *saying*, in a pure process of signification:

> Saying is this passivity of passivity and this dedication to the other, this sincerity. Not the communication of a said, which would immediately cover over and extinguish or absorb the said, but saying holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said.[11]

Literary ethics consists precisely in the tension between the freedom of writing and reading a text as a definite and concluded text of our own (the *said*), and the necessity of transcending our view originated by the encounter with the other (*saying*). The otherness proper to testimony and to an ethical approach to literature is based on this fundamental tension between the *saying* and the *said* which prevents any uncritical thematization and representation.

The notion of otherness in literature and testimony is many-sided and there are at least three aspects of it that I would like to point out. First of all there is the otherness of the experience in its encounter and tension with language. The experience in itself is infinite but the language wants to hold it in the said. The notion of experience here refers not just to the facts narrated or discussed in the text but also to the very experience of writing and reading that text. Secondly, we have the otherness of the subject that discovers itself always changing, inside and outside of itself, in the encounter with the other. By subject here I mean not just the subject narrated in the text, but also the writer and the reader themselves. Finally, there is the otherness of death that the subject can witness and experience only in the form of the death of the other man. To witness the death of the other man means to become responsible for the other not by identifying with him or her, not by thematizing his or her suffering, but by substituting for him or her, as Levinas writes in *Otherwise than Being*.[12] Otherness is tied to infinity, because when the reader realizes the alterity of the text he or she realizes also the infinity of the witness, and of the writer. The text is infinite, the author is infinite (not dead, as Roland Barthes suggested, while at the same time paradoxically becoming an author!)[13] and the reader is infinite

too. The introduction of the notion of the infinite in literary criticism can be very useful to resist the idea of reading a literary text as a purely political document that can be easily assimilated into the political agenda of the reader or of the writer. To resist this idea means to recognize the infinite labyrinth at the core of any great work of literature and the mystery that still remains open even after centuries of literary criticism. It is the greatness of that mystery that still gives a sense to our life in a culture of advertisements and wishful thinking.

Testimony and Transcendence

Only the appreciation of *otherness* in its various forms can open the road to the *transcendence* of the ego and to the acceptance of the responsibility for the other, opening the possibility of a moment of humility and authenticity, of a meaningful *diachrony* in the sameness of time. I find a good literary example of this notion of transcendence in Arthur Koestler's *Dialogue with Death*. Koestler was imprisoned during the Spanish civil war by the Fascist army, kept *incommunicado* and sentenced to death. He was not able to speak to anyone and all of a sudden he was forced to face his own death. The new situation seemed unreal, dreamlike to him, and in his dialogue with death he reached the conclusion that nobody believes in his own death and that nobody can die consciously. Koestler at this point became obsessed with time. He lived in what he calls the "stupefying sameness of time,"[14] in synchrony, to use Levinas's terminology. It was the otherness of death that interrupted the synchronic presence of the subject to himself by putting into question his own relation to time. Koestler soon realized that a complete awareness of time is impossible because this would mean a pure experience of time that is only possible in death. The real interruption of the synchronic dimension of time could take place only when he witnessed the death of other human beings. The death of hundreds of other prisoners forced Koestler to interrupt the sameness of time, to transcend his own ego, to become responsible for the others, to substitute for the others, to become a witness. When he realized that he was not going to die, he wrote in his diary on April 22, 1937:

> Was at first mad with delight—then overcome by unspeakable nausea at finding myself for the moment indifferent to the fate of others, now that I felt comparatively safe. This feeling of nausea was so intense that I could not sleep, although tonight all was still. . . . The urge to bear the burden of the others acts on me like a categorical imperative. . . . [15]

The urge to bear witness to the death of the other moved Koestler to dedicate his *Dialogue with Death* to his friend Nicolás when he learned about his execution:

> Requiescat in pace, Nicolás. Let us hope it was all over swiftly and that they did not make you suffer too much. They chose a solemn day for your execution. I wonder what flags the consulate flew? Little you were, a little Andalusian peasant, with soft, slightly prominent eyes, one of the poor and humble; this book is dedicated to you. What good does it to you? You could not read it even if you were still alive. That is why they shot you; because you had the impudence to wish to learn to read. You and a few million like you, who seized your old firearms to defend the new order which perhaps some day might have taught you to read.
> They call it armed rebellion, Nicolás. They call it the hand of Moscow, Nicolás. They call it the instinct of the rabble, Nicolás. That a man should want to learn to read.
> My God, they should really have sent you to Geneva in a cage, with the inscription: " Ecce Homo, Anno Domini 1937."[16]

In this dedication one realizes how the basis for communication, the impulse to write and to bear witness, is not the speech in itself, or the silence that punctuates and grounds speech, but the exposure to the death of someone else, to the "eternal and unbearable absence" of a friend.[17] I find in this text an excellent literary trace of Levinas's notion of testimony as a completion of Kant's categorical imperative. As happens to any witness who acts on ethical grounds, Koestler did not plan to become a witness. It was the missed encounter with his own death and the real encounter with the death of the other prisoners that put him in the position of becoming a witness. Testimony is not a voluntary act, as was very clear also to Albert Camus, another European writer, witness to the disasters of World War II. In a speech he gave to an international meeting of writers in 1948 he wrote: "it is vain and ridiculous to ask for justification and engagement from writers. We are engagé, although involuntarily."[18]

For Levinas, the witness reaches the inscrutable profundity of his self "abruptly as an extradition to the other" ("d'emblée comme extradition à l'autre"),[19] in the same way God suddenly breaks into human consciousness, within the impersonal event which Levinas calls the "there is" ("événement impersonnel de l'il y a"),[20] as an unapproachable testimony of the Infinite.[21] The responsibility toward the other is neither an experience nor a proof of a definite something, and it does not have a beginning. It is a kind of speech which does not speak, a kind of discourse which comes before any discourse, it is a pre-original saying which escapes the rigidity of essence and of ontology present in the said, in the actual language, it is an absolute obedience to a call which comes before any command.

"No one is good voluntarily," writes Levinas in *Otherwise than Being*; the

Good cannot be present or enter into a representation or be the result of an active choice made by the human subject: the Good chooses before being chosen.[22] The human subject listens to a "categorical imperative," as Koestler, using a Kantian terminology, writes. In Levinas the imperative becomes the obedience to a silent command, as it happened to the prophet Isaiah who, after hearing the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" answered: "I, here I am" (*Is.* 6, 8). In that "Here I am," in that absolute responsibility toward the other, Levinas sees the silent revelation, the testimony made possible by listening to the secret self which lives inside every human being, under the cover of each individual ego.[23] Koestler in his prison cell heard a voice that commanded to him an order "not to remain indifferent to that death, not to let the other die alone, i.e., to answer for the life of the other man, at the risk of becoming the accomplice of that death." This event, to continue to use Levinas's terminology, introduced in Koestler's life "the time of transcendence."[24]

Levinas's notion of ethics develops and completes the Kantian categorical imperative which, for Kant, exists separate from knowledge and from ontology. Levinas's ethics is based on a perfect "emptiness" of the commandment to obey. It creates an obligation without normativity that has led some postmodern thinkers to interpret Levinas's ethics in terms of deconstructive criticism.[25] However, the absolute character of the ethical obligation is not exhausted by a purely deconstructive practice or by an exclusively poetic attitude; on the contrary, it should encourage us to take a step out of intellectual parasitism and reductionism. Levinas's ethics remains a challenge to think *otherwise than being* and to explore the reasons why, notwithstanding a lack of foundation, ethical discourse is still persistent today in European and North-American philosophy. Taken seriously, ethical discourse can open the door of the small room of our own in which we can see only the contingencies of our subjectivity, without being able to bear witness to the other and to the world that surrounds us.

Levinas develops the idea of substitution to prevent self-assertion in the responsibility to the other: substitution is the proper form of compassion and pity and, at the same time, the proper form of testimony. Compassion and pity are made possible in the human world through the condition of the self which, as hostage, lives as a proxy for others, is already substituted for others. I see Levinas's notion of testimony as a crucial reflection on the problem of witnessing in our time. He reminds us that the real issue in testimony is not to act as a conscious subject, is not to speak out and to add one's own voice to the other voices. The real issue in testimony is to *listen*, to become able to listen to the voice of the other. If we lose the relevance of *listening* we end up corrupting the ethical ground of witnessing and we vilify the very notion of testimony.

The actual debate on testimony that is taking place nowadays among

historians further illustrates this point. As Annette Wieviorka has recently pointed out, the role of the witness of the Shoah has radically changed after the trial against Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann was kidnapped by a group of Israeli soldiers and then taken to Jerusalem, where he was tried, sentenced to death, and executed. The historical trial against Eichmann was not so much based on documents, as was the trial of Nuremberg, but on the witnesses who played an important role in the accusations against Eichmann.[26] After this trial began the era of a legalistic and political idea of the witness that superimposes itself on the religious idea of testimony. In this new era there is a complete reversal of the situation in which the witnesses found themselves after World War II, when nobody would pay attention or listen to their disquieting testimony. On the contrary, nowadays, in the new era started after the Eichmann trial, the witness has acquired an important social status and plays a relevant political role. Consequently, there is an impressive proliferation of testimonies to the Shoah. To listen only to the testimonies taped by the Spielberg Foundation, one would need to spend nine and a half years in front of a television.

One needs to be aware nowadays of the political use of the witness, a use not concerned with the notion of listening and with what Levinas calls the Glory of the Infinite. In a mass culture still focused on entertainment and obsessed by sexual desire and material success, the Shoah—stripped of its specificity and uniqueness—has instead become the paradigm of any evil through which we evaluate any event past or present that offends human dignity. This situation has been created, in part, by empathetic responses to the witnesses of the Shoah. In this way, testimonial discourse abandons its ethical ground and becomes one more representational and political discourse among others. The problem is not the reliability of the witnesses or the presence of false testimony, but the possibility of a purely political use of testimony, the reduction of testimony to representation, to "the assembling of being in the present, its synchronization by retention, memory and history."[27]