

Futurity in the Early Levinas

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
T. S. Eliot¹

Under the impact of Thomas Stearns Eliot's four terse, dense, somber poems in *Four Quartets*, his readers peer over the precipice of time, only to find their lives seemingly tipping over into absurdity.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps contained in time future,
And time future contained in time past.

Time as past occurrence may already be lost, and as future yet to be, and as present fleeting and ephemeral, yet notwithstanding such distinctions, "[a]ll time," Eliot writes, "is eternally present." The yet-to-come assumes a position in what-is, even as what-is slips relentlessly into what-was, while looping around the yet-to-come, in a dynamic that appears to collapse everything into abstractions. So the meeting that, for instance, began at two in the afternoon, following many long

¹Thomas Stearns Eliot, "Burnt Norton" in *Four Quartets* (London: Harcourt Inc., 1943).

hours of anxious anticipation is, at this moment, which is an hour later, winding down, but not before it stirs a thought, though only for now, about its possible consequences tomorrow. As much as we neither can escape it nor obviate its relentlessness, “[a]ll time,” Eliot writes, “is unredeemable”

What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.”²

Emmanuel Levinas, in *On Escape*,³ and *Existence and Existents*,⁴ two early texts, similarly reflects upon the problem of time, which he views, not so much as a collection of discrete moments, but as a continuum, that is, as the uninterrupted hypostasis of a unique, irreplaceable existent freely acting within the ambit of a unique, unrepeatable order of instants. Levinas observes, however, that this existent’s “freedom does not save it from the definitive character of its very existence, from the fact that it is forever stuck with itself.”⁵ The existent is a permanent and inescapable “tributary of itself,”⁶ and therefore cannot be anything other than itself. As such, it is essentially alone, and permanently susceptible to the crushing experience of “despair and abandonment.” In hopes of obviating its condition of isolation, it may attempt to shore up the resources over which some meaningful measure of control is possible to it, making a show, for instance, of its “virility, pride and sovereignty.”⁷ It could attempt to sharpen its self-definition, clarify its position in relation to the other, stubbornly cleave to all its decisions.

²Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), p. 117. Henceforth abbreviated as TCPPE.

³Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. by Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003). Henceforth, OE.

⁴Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978). Henceforth, EE.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁶EE, p. 87.

⁷Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 55. Henceforth abbreviated as TATO.

All these, however, amount to no more than seizing the moment, to engaging the present and struggling to “become” within tipping distance of a myriad pitfalls. In this fashion, the existent reinvests itself with an awareness of its unbearable solitude. The present, indeed, is unredeemable.

Levinas, to the contrary, asserts that the present is not yet time, and that its progeny, which is the subject as solitary, is not the bearer of time.

How indeed could time arise in a solitary subject? The solitary subject cannot deny itself; it does not possess nothingness. If time is not the illusion of a movement, pawing the ground, then the absolute alterity of another instant cannot be found in the subject who is definitely himself.⁸

To obviate tragedy, Levinas turns to modes of time other than the present; that is, he invokes the future, by means of an evocation of death and desire.

Future and Death

In the Apology, Socrates berates his fellow Athenians who seem to him to behave in cowardly and unjust fashion because they fear death, which they stubbornly and arrogantly insist is “undesirable.” Yet no one alive, he argues, has certain knowledge of it. And in words that prefigure his own imminent demise he says, “Who knows? Perhaps death is the greatest good that could befall a person. Perhaps it would be a chance to rest at last.”

Not unlike the men and women of ancient Athens, we “experience” death from-without-death, and as a result find little motive to divest it of its menace and its mystery. We do not move up to it closely enough to be able to touch it because we assume it is ensconced, not in the present, but in the future. Death defines the future, we say. Leo Tolstoy, in his chronicle of the death of Ivan Ilyich, shows us a man, a career

⁸EE, p. 93.

executive in the Russian bureaucracy, who observes every convention proper to a man of his station. He has the requisite education, enlists in the government service, gradually moves up its ranks, takes a wife, produces children, and generally hums along until, one day, a serious injury he sustains while redecorating his house shatters the humdrum and fakery of his existence. On his deathbed, waves of denial, and anger, and depression, sweep over him, and exacerbate the burden he has become to his family who, for its part, remains oblivious to his suffering. Tolstoy describes his situation thus:

It seemed to him that he and his pain were being thrust into a narrow black sack – a deep one – were thrust farther and farther in but could not be pushed to the bottom, And this dreadful business was causing him suffering.⁹

There is no evading the “sack,” a figure for the total loss of control and the absence of possibility, but Ilyich struggles mightily against falling right in. Death is inevitable, but he will resist it all the same.

Levinas supplies us with his rejoinder to this human tragi-comedy in *Time and the Other*:

The unknown of death, which is not given straight off as nothing, but is correlative to an experience of the impossibility of nothingness, signifies not that death is a region from which no one has returned and consequently remains unknown as a matter of fact; the unknown of death signifies that the very relationship with death cannot take place in the light, that the subject is in relationship with what does not come from itself. We could say it is in relationship with mystery.¹⁰

Death as future is obscured in darkness, hidden from human knowledge. It is at a distance from human control. As much as the

⁹Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, trans. by Lynn Solotaroff (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 117.

¹⁰TATO, pp. 69-70.

subject may be hurtling in its direction, he is unable to pinpoint with any degree of accuracy his point of impact with it. It adds up to much more than those things which can be grasped, such as the cessation of bodily functions, or the onset of fleshly decay. Death as future shatters the present in its masterfulness and virility. Levinas continues:

This end of mastery indicates that we have assumed existing in such a way that an event can happen to us that we can no longer assume, not even in the way we assume events — because we are always immersed in the empirical world — through vision. An event happens to us without our having absolutely anything ‘a priori,’ without our being able to have the least project, as one says today. Death is the impossibility of having a project. This approach of death indicates that we are in relation with something that is absolutely other, something bearing alterity not as a provisional determination we can assimilate through enjoyment, but as something whose very existence is made of alterity. My solitude is thus not confirmed by death but broken by it.¹¹

An echo presents itself here of Henri Bergson’s theory of duration. Bergson believes that, while the subject may persist in its forward movement from one instant to the next, there is one instant it could never take up insofar as it is never present, and were the subject ever to take it up, at the instant it became present, the subject would not be present, would not be at all, and that instant is the point of death. The subject’s relation to death, as a relation to alterity, specifies the within which could develop a new understanding of time — one that figures the future, not so much as the present which projects itself, but as the present intruded upon by death, as by a thief in the night. Death’s alterity would then specify its very futurity. Ivan Ilyich experiences this as he hurtles towards his demise. From the standpoint of those who, like him, thrive on convention, death would always be tragic insofar

¹¹TATO, p. 74.

as it annihilates all conventions. The present in its familiarity and durability cannot contain the future in its otherness.

The future is in no way grasped. The exteriority of the future is totally different from spatial exteriority precisely through the fact that the future is absolutely surprising. Anticipation of the future and projection of the future, sanctioned as essential to time by all theories from Bergson to Sartre, are but the present of the future and not the authentic future; the future is what is not grasped, what befalls us and lays hold of us.¹²

Yet Levinas says, "The future that death gives, the future of the event, is not yet time."¹³ As modes of time, present and future are related only analogically. The future is the present which is not yet present. The alterity of the future assures that the present and the future will never converge until the future becomes present, but a present for which the future is again other. As Levinas says, "There is an abyss between the present and death, between the ego and the alterity of mystery."¹⁴ And this is not yet time. For time to be established, the gap between the present and the future must be bridged, and such an act appears to remain beyond the reach of the subject. The very alterity of the future, its very futurity, ensures its release from the grasp of the subject. How then, can such a relationship be forged?

The true relation that is established, and which in fact establishes time, is the relation between the subject and the Other. Like death and the future, the Other remains essentially ungraspable, breaking through the solitude of the subject; the relation to the Other is a relation to mystery. This relation, however, does not occur upon the insistence of the subject. For the initiative lies with the Other, who arrives from the future, as it were. Levinas remarks further that "the other is the future. The very relation to the other is the relation to the future. It seems to me impossible to speak of time in a subject alone."¹⁵ Time,

¹²TATO, pp. 76-77.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴TATO, p. 81

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 77.

then, is never the accomplishment of the subject in solitude, but the achievement of a relation to what is unforeseen, ungraspable, Other. "The condition of time," Levinas says, "lies in the relationship between humans."¹⁶ This relation to the Other, which constitutes the subject's relation to the future, provides the heart of Levinas' thought.

Now, if the future is constituted in the relation to the Other, how is this relation experienced? For Levinas, the experience is the epiphany of the Face of the Other. Unexpected, unforeseen, the Other emerges and penetrates the solitude of the subject as Face. The escape from the present is accomplished as an ex-perience, a de-position brought on by the Face of the Other. Beyond the enfleshment that both expresses and obscures the Face, the flesh reveals the Face in its weakness and destitution, in its uprightness, in its plea for mercy and its command of justice, that which cannot be contained or subjugated, even as it falls victim to the subject's virility. Levinas adds: "Relationship with the future, the presence of the future in the present, seems all the same accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time."¹⁷

The structure of death, assumed by the subject and yet unassumed because of its very alterity, reveals the structure of the future. Yet Levinas understands the future as constituted by the relation to the Other. It appears, then, that death, as the future of both the subject and the Other, insufficiently describes the possibility of relationship. What logic would then suffice? In the early works adverted to at the outset, Levinas provides an answer. One approaches the Other and, through the Other, the future, in the movement of Desire; to illustrate the trajectory of this movement, we turn to the story of the patriarch Abraham.

Future and Desire

Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁷TATO, p. 79.

¹⁸Genesis 12: 1-2, *The Jerusalem Bible*.

name so famous that it will be used as a blessing.¹⁸

Coming literally out of nowhere, the call of Abram does not begin with polite introductions nor with pomp and ceremony, but proceeds immediately to the imperative: Go! Surprisingly, in the face of such a call, Abram obeys.

Though the journey is fraught with difficulty, Abram manages to leave the land of his father to arrive in the land of promise, a land not his own. With the promise of land come many other promises: that Abram shall have descendants that number as the stars, that Abram's family shall inherit the land of promise. Yahweh binds Abram to himself and Abram binds himself to Yahweh by means of a Covenant, an agreement in which one is never left unchanged. And so Abram is renamed: He shall now be known as Abraham.

You shall no longer be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I will make you father of a multitude of nations. I will make you most fruitful... I will establish my Covenant between myself and you, and your descendants after you, generation after generation, a Covenant in perpetuity, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.¹⁹

And so goes the story of Abraham: a call "out of nowhere," which is also an imperative, that comes from an unseen God; a journey to a land not one's own; a covenant which binds and sets free, which changes one and makes one fruitful.

In that space where we see Abraham responding to that call to abandon security and control, so does Levinas see a fundamental human experience of being called towards the unknowable, towards the Other, towards what shall later be described as the Infinite. What propels this response, according to Levinas, is Desire.

But what is Desire, exactly? Is it merely a more intense need? In *On Escape*, Levinas seems to confuse need and Desire. Need, "in aspiring

¹⁹*Genesis 17: 5-8, The Jerusalem Bible.*

²⁰OE, p. 58.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 59.

²²OE, p. 59.

towards its own satisfaction,”²⁰ “clings fiercely to the present,”²¹ and yet “the satisfaction of a need does not destroy it.”²² In later texts, Levinas will use the term need for that which is purely economic, that which accounts for materiality and worldliness. Desire, on the other hand, is like a need; yet unlike need, it does not lack anything, but tends towards what is desired, impossible to fulfill.

As Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak says, in a commentary on one of Levinas’ essays:

Desire differs, however, essentially from all varieties of need; indeed, it cannot and does not desire to be satisfied but grows to the extent to which it seems to reach the desired. Since the eros that lies at the root of human existence and philosophy desires the other as Other, it cannot be united or ‘fulfilled’ by her or him. It wants the other to grow in independence and well-being. Desire is a giving of goodness as opposed to the narcissistic urge for union and fusion. Desire does not fill the holes of ego’s being but opens up and dedicates.²³

In trying to understand the experience of desire, Levinas arrives upon a term which is able to think more than it thinks. Approaching the Other entails a thinking beyond the definition of the subject in its solitude. Embracing the future requires more than the finite eternity of the present. The relationship with the Other becomes a relationship with the Infinite, because, as he says:

The infinite is not the object of a contemplation, that is, not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of the infinite is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire ‘measures’ the infinity of the

²³Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, in a footnote to Emmanuel Levinas’ “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in Peperzak’s *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1983), p. 113, footnote 66.

²⁴Emmanuel Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite,” in *To the Other*, p. 113.

infinite.²⁴

Going beyond want and need, the term Desire marks the propulsion one experiences in the face of the Infinite.²⁵ It is beyond the level of nourishment, beyond bread or land, because Desire does not satisfy, but gravitates towards what is absolutely Other. "Desire measures the infinity of the infinite" because the very direction and intensity of Desire reveals the inadequacy of concept to reality. Desire reveals the very structure of asymmetry and non-adequation, an inordinateness inherent in the very structure of Infinity, a Desire for what is essentially ungraspable.

The call of Abraham is colored by this very non-adequation, this asymmetry. Abraham hears the call of something beyond the range of his experience, indeed, beyond the range of his cognition. There is, all of a sudden, a reality which impinges on his own, whose presence he cannot deny, who speaks to him and bids him go. It is as though, suddenly, the most ancient of truths was new again and being spoken to him for the first time. Confronted with this reality of absolute alterity, Abraham could not but bow in reverence and heed the call.

Confronted by an Infinite Other, responding to an Other-ly call, Abraham enters a wholly Other time. Catherine Chalier writes:

Time is analyzed by the philosopher as relation. Time is the relation with the infinite or this diachrony which, at the heart of every finite life, presents itself and is experienced as a relationship to the irreducible mystery of the otherness of the neighbour; a diachrony which keeps pace with what remains other and which, in the face-to-face with the other person calls me and asks for me; time as vigilance and patience, time as awakening and disturbance.²⁶

Dia-chrony. Two times, incommensurate and insoluble in one another, and yet establishing a relationship. Simon Critchley defines

²⁵Levinas, in Peperzak's *To the Other*, pp. 113-114.

²⁶Catherine Chalier, "Levinas and the Talmud" in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, ed. by Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 114.

diachrony as “the coming apart of time, the inability to recall the succession of instants within memory or to predict the instants to come.”²⁷ In diachrony, the subject loses control of time – the past escapes recollection and the future eludes prediction. Critchley goes on to say that “diachrony is the primordial, or authentic, time from which the vulgar, inauthentic conception of time as synchrony is derived.”²⁸

Beyond the perdurance of the present comes the unexpected future, occasioned by the epiphany or revelation of the Other. Perhaps we can imagine Abraham trying to understand what it was that happened, whose voice it was that called out to him. Perhaps we can imagine him trying to push his reason as far as it can go, finally accepting the lack of satisfaction. Abraham experienced a desire that could not be satisfied. In the same way, the future is approached in terms of non-adequation; the future is a surprise, unprecedented and unexpected. The future expands time, breaks time apart, breaking open the solitude of the subject in order to embrace the Infinite.

Desire and the Face of the Other

In this encounter with the Infinite, Levinas once again sees as crucial the experience of the social relation, the experience of the Face of the Other. The experience of the Infinite is the experience of alterity, it is that epiphany which marks the revelation of the Other as Other. “Thinking more than it thinks” is the situation of the subject in approaching the Other. Like death, like the future, the Other resists the virility of the subject in its quest for persistence in the present. Before the Face of the Infinite Other, the subject is faced with the impossibility of possibility; the subject is de-posed.

For Levinas, the experience of the Face is traumatic, it is like a wound inflicted upon the I which forever changes the I, because here, at last is a reality which the I cannot control, cannot deny. The immensity of the Infinite is not in terms of height or width, but in terms of depth and mystery. And what is more mysterious than the Face?

²⁷Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, 2nd Ed., (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999), p. 165.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166.

The reality of the Face which Levinas speaks about is that experience of an exterior reality which is sorrowful or joyful in itself, which is tragic or triumphant in itself. It is that experience of a reality whose meaning lies not in the I, but in itself; it constitutes its very meaning. It is in this sense that the Face is invisible, for it is beyond the grasp of sight. Beyond sight and appropriation, the Face of the Other is revealed as an authority, whose command is unexpected and unforeseen for the subject whose prior concern was only perdurance. As Peperzak comments:

The supreme command is not 'experienced' as a 'presence' and, in its complete difference from any observable figure, the face is invisible. The invisible is, however, the closest and most intimate reality of our lives, because it commands and constitutes the innermore interiority of our selves. The absolute presents itself without being a phenomenon. Its presence is our awareness of a demanding obedience and humility.²⁹

As Abraham experienced, the command comes from an invisible reality. He is made to leave his home for a land not his own by an unseen God. Yet this unseen God speaks to Abraham personally, promises to Abraham personally, makes a covenant with Abraham personally. The encounter with Yahweh affects Abraham on such a personal level that he is not left unscathed; he must cast his old self away, forgetting himself as Abram and becoming Abraham.

In the experience of the Other's Face, the I is changed. The I is no longer able to have power, because its regard for the Other takes priority over its regard for itself.

The relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly

²⁹Adriaan Theodoor Peperzak, "Jewish Existence and Philosophy," in *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 14.

³⁰TATO, p. 78.

unable in its regard...³⁰

The resistance of the Other is constituted by a powerlessness, a vulnerability of the Face, which both commands and pleads. In the encounter of the face-to-face, the I discovers a reality as from on high. "This Desire without satisfaction hence takes cognizance of the alterity of the Other. It situates it in the dimension of height and of the ideal, which it opens up in being."³¹

The ideal status of the Other, in the sense that it is a reality that is higher than the I, leads to a stance which recognizes the presence of the Other, the importance of the Other. Becoming aware of the primordial reality of the Other, as Infinite, as the Desired, selfhood is constituted anew, dying as it were in the face of the Other. This insight anticipates the direction in which Levinas's thought will travel. As Levinas says later on, in *Totality and Infinity*:

The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical Desire. That this height is no longer the heavens but the Invisible is the very elevation of its height and its nobility. To die for the invisible — this is metaphysics.³²

One enters into metaphysics, as opposed to ontology, in the face of the Other. The encounter with the Other, the experience of the Infinite, explodes the boundaries of the finitude of the subject, thus changing the I from simply being to being-for-the-Other. The future of the Other breaks open the solitude of the subject in the present in order to establish time at last.

As Rudolf Bernet writes:

This sudden appearance of the other produces... a subject totally liberated from itself and from its imprisonment in the present time of its own beginning. The other who enters my life not only delivers me from the weight of my

³¹Levinas, in Peperzak's *To the Other*, p. 114.

³²Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press), pp. 34-35.

own solitude, but also opens within my life the dimension of a present, a future and a past whose meaning is no longer established in me, and which for this very reason I cannot appropriate. The alterity of this present, this past and this future is thus affirmed by my inner passivity with respect to this other time that comes to me from the other person.³³

In the last lines of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas argues that what is at stake in this understanding of existence and time is “the meaning of the very fact that in Being there are beings.”³⁴

At this juncture, the meaning which is bound up inextricably in the Infinite, a meaning which is played out in the actions of the subject can already be foreseen. In a word: Ethics.

Desire and Goodness

The relation with the Other, with the Infinite, borne of a Desire which is perfectly disinterested, the encounter with the Invisible, leads to a constitution of the self which enters the realm of generosity. The change which marks the death of the I is brought on by the explosion of the Infinite, the inadequacy of category and concept. The opening up to the Infinite which Desire initiates is described by Levinas in some instances as generosity and goodness.

The generosity which the I takes on is shaped by Desire. Desire, by lacking satisfaction, by deepening rather than filling, becomes goodness. By “nourishing itself with its hunger,” Desire “pushes back the horizons of hope” such that the I is capable of doing more good for the Other. “The true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy. It is goodness.”³⁵

This goodness, however, is not nostalgia for innocence; it is not a naïveté which is sought once more after having been lost. Goodness is neither the meekness of timidity, nor the weakness of passivity. Born of gentleness and compassion, goodness is more importantly ethical.

³³Rudolf Bernet, “Levinas’s Critique of Husserl” in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, p. 94.

³⁴EE, p. 101.

³⁵Levinas, in Peperzak’s *To the Other*, p. 114.

Enflamed by Desire, goodness becomes conscience, the realization that the actions of the self have lasting repercussions on the Other. The structure of Desire becomes the structure of Goodness as well, arriving at the reality that there is no such thing as “enough Good” done for the Other.

The Desire for the infinite does not have the sentimental complacency of love, but the rigor of moral exigency. And the rigor of moral exigency is not bluntly imposed, but is Desire, due to the attraction and infinite height of being itself, for the benefit of which goodness is exercised.³⁶

This Desire for goodness, however, does not mean that the I ceases to cultivate itself. Rather, the responsibility for the Other demands a cultivation of the I, desires a cultivation of the I, not for the I's purposes, but for the purposes and desires of the Other. The cultivation of the self, the search for happiness, which used to characterize virility or the tendency for totality, is now subverted and converted into a desire to do more good for the Other.

Here also, the struggle against death gains new meaning. Revisiting Tolstoy's work on the death of Ivan Ilyich, we find that Ilyich discovers a way out of death, which is really a way through death, which is shown him by an Other. Mad with pain, despair and self-pity, Ilyich struggles against his impending doom until he realizes that his life is a sham, and flounders about, trying to find some last meaning to grasp at in a life otherwise bereft of significance. In an epiphany, it comes to him:

Just then his son crept quietly into the room and went up to his bed. The dying man was still screaming desperately and flailing his arms. One hand fell on the boy's head. The boy grasped it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry. At that very moment Ivan Ilyich fell through and saw a light, and it was revealed to him that his life had not been what it should have but that he could still rectify the situation.³⁷

³⁶Levinas, in Peperzak's *To the Other*, p. 119.

³⁷Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, p. 132.

Rather than the virility of the subject announcing his heroic assumption of death, Levinas proposes a subject fighting against death, asking for more time, not for oneself but for the Other. Ilyich here discovers that “to be a self is to have the time to be against death.”³⁸

Desire and Desire

The dialectic of time is the very dialectic of the relationship with the other, that is, a dialogue which in turn has to be studied in terms other than the use of the dialectic of the solitary subject.³⁹

The epiphany of the Other changes the rules of engagement. Following the structure of the future and the Other, the structure of Desire becomes the structure of goodness, similar in asymmetry and non-adequation. In the concrete relation, as seen in Abraham's example and in Ilyich's discovery, the Desire for the Other becomes a Desire to do justice to the Other, to abide by the terms of the Covenant, as it were, and even surpass these terms.

The structure of Desire is also the structure of fidelity, such that fidelity nourishes itself, transcends itself into greater and greater fidelity. Unforeseen though the future is, it promises something new, an ex-perience, an escape; which is really a Desire.

We see now that inasmuch as immortality is not the objective of Desire, it still accomplishes it, in a certain sense. As Abraham was promised a near-infinite paternity, Desire also engenders Desire, Goodness engenders Goodness. It is like the experience of paternity; one's child is experienced as exteriority, constituting a range of possibilities similar and utterly unlike one's own. The movement of Infinity, the movement of Desire, the movement of Goodness, transcends even itself. Fecundity brings together the present and the future; there exists, in the case of paternity, an Other whose present is tied radically to one's own, and yet is of itself absolutely Other, absolutely future. The good, then — which is to say, the Other — comes in its own time, is its own time.

³⁸Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 166.

³⁹EE, p. 94.

Concluding Remarks

One might describe the journey of Levinas's thought as not simply a journey through space but a journey in and through time as well. The future breaks through to the present and changes the subject's landscape, reveals the hidden Face.

If time, as our reflections have shown, is constituted in the encounter with the Other, it makes sense, then, to inquire as to how this encounter might take place. Levinas will show that the knot with the Other is tied only as responsibility, as ethics. Bringing these two ideas together leads us to wonder if there is not a responsibility towards time, a responsibility that must be assumed in time. Indeed, one could say that time and ethics are reckoned in the same way: both are determined by the way hands move. To quote Edmond Jabés once more: "How far does our responsibility go? The void is forged by our hands."⁴⁰ Time begins with the encounter with the Other, for whom our hands work. Responsibility is a void, infinite like desire and time.

Looking, then, at the way in which we describe time, it seems that the question of ethics is already implicated. We speak, for example, of "wasting time" or "spending time," as though time were a commodity or possession. To "spend time" assumes that time is one's own, a sort of currency which can be kept as an investment or given away. Time is "wasted" when nothing of consequence is accomplished. Both of these usages point to the fact, however, that time has value. And yet how exactly is time valuable? Or to ask the question in a different manner, what gives time its value? For Levinas, the answer is clear: Time is valuable because it comes from the Other.

In light of the encounter with the Other, all of these usages gain an altogether different meaning. We might think of time as an investment, time as a means rather than an end. As fleeting as the present is, both Levinas and Heschel remind us that time is an end in itself. As the context for human experience and encounter, time is home to us inasmuch as it remains a stranger. Levinas adds:

⁴⁰Jabés, *The Book of Margins*, trans. by Rosmarie Waldrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 165.

⁴¹EE, p. 97.

To have a time and a history is to have a future and a past. We do not have a present; it slips between our fingers. Yet it is in the present that we are and can have a past and a future. This paradox of the present – all and nothing – is as old as human thought.⁴¹

In this sense, time is “lost” (in the sense of “losing time”) precisely because of its otherness. Between the open future and the irreparable past, the human being finds himself or herself without control, unable to have power. And yet it is only in time that control or power has any value; it is only because of time that any value is possible. Time is more than a resource; it is a source. The value of time comes not from itself but from its constitution in the relationship with the Other. Although it may forever seem strange to us, time becomes home because of the Other’s hospitality and generosity, which for Levinas is also at once poverty and humility.

It is in this regard that one can “ask for more time” and “be given time,” because there is an Other from whom one can request for patience or forgiveness and be given such. In the fecundity of goodness, one can ask for more time to be ethical, to be responsible. Every instant in which the subject takes up its responsibility for the Other appears as a new creation, a new situation. As in Bergson’s idea of duration, human existence is renewed in the encounter with the Other. Time is, then, as we have said, a gift of the Other: an experience of difference and deference, respect and responsibility, humility and hospitality.

As the structure of responsibility, we can also see how Levinas’s understanding of time prefigures another important notion in his later work: substitution. The very outline of time prophesies substitution, in that every instant gives way to the next. The past gives way to the present. The present defers to the future and thus becomes past. This infinite substitution of instants render time infinite, like a bush that burns but is not consumed. In the same way, one substitutes oneself for the Other in responsibility. For the infinite number of Others, one is infinitely responsible, substituting oneself for all, even unto the responsibility of all Others. Here also, it becomes possible to ask for “more time,” as the substitution proceeds infinitely.

However, these requests for “more time” really only make sense in

the face of the reality that, for the subject, there is “not enough time.” Confronting the alterity of death, the subject understands that there is a limitation to the time that one experiences. Before the time when the subject can no longer be able, one endeavors to “use one’s time wisely.” Death, absolutely Other, becomes the condition for infinite responsibility, which nonetheless remains infinite. As the future remains open and unforeseen, one is asked to make use of the time one is given.

And yet, for Levinas, it seems that time still points to something else. There is the encounter with the Other, who gives us time; but beyond time there is eternity, or the Infinite. As Abraham Joshua Heschel says, “To the philosopher the idea of the good is the most exulted idea. But to the Bible the idea of the good is penultimate: it cannot exist without the holy.”⁴² Time has already been described as an infinite creation. Might it not point to an Infinite Creator? The structure of infinite substitution which pervades time could lead to wondering whether this infinite substitution is an act of infinite responsibility by the Infinite. The question of time then leads us to the question of the Absolute. After all, one might ask, who is it that gives time to both the Other and oneself? If we share time, perhaps there is an Other who shares time with us.

If one accepts that to hope for the present is to hope for the irreparable, one flirts with the absurd. Denying absurdity, Levinas says: “It is generally thought that this reparation is impossible in time, and that eternity alone, where instants distinct in time are indiscernible, is the locus of salvation.”⁴³ On the same page, Levinas writes: “The true object of hope is the Messiah, or salvation.”⁴⁴ In Wiesel’s *The Town Beyond the Wall*, these questions are articulated in a parable that closes the novel. In the closing parable, Wiesel imagines a situation in which God and human being have switched places. “Years passed, centuries, perhaps eternities,” writes Wiesel. “And suddenly, the drama quickened. The past for one, and the present for the other, were too

⁴²Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), p. 75.

⁴³EE, p. 91.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵Wiesel, *The Town Beyond the Wall*, p. 179.

heavy to be borne.”⁴⁵ Indeed, Wiesel hints at the “infinite yearning” for the Messiah, a yearning which Levinas and Heschel surely must have endured and expressed as well, a yearning for what is future, what is Other.

Given the questions raised by this present study, it might be good to end by revisiting Eliot. Caught in past, present and future, the human being finds himself freed by the Other, in the relationship of time. In response to this encounter, the human subject assumes responsibility. For Eliot, this responsibility is, like time, a gift; the good, after all, comes in its own time. It is a gift that makes for saints and prophets, a gift that occupies a lifetime in its infinitude. The outline of the human figure for Levinas is one defined by time in its wholeness, which for Levinas opens to the Infinite, the holy and the timeless. In this Stranger called time, at last we are Home, at last are we ourselves: bound infinitely to the infinite Other in responsibility. The time of ethics inaugurates an ethics of time.

Men's curiosity searches past and future
 And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
 The point of intersection of the timeless
 With time, is an occupation for the saint –
 No occupation either, but something given
 And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,
 Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.⁴⁶

⁴⁶TCPPE, 136.