

“And Cain said to Abel: \_\_\_\_.”

## Filling in the blanks while moving ‘beyond the tribal’ with Levinas and Derrida.\*

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“Cain,” Levinas says somewhere, “is not Abel’s brother.”<sup>1</sup> What an extraordinary statement! Could it be that this Sunday-afternoon Talmudist, as he calls himself, would be even more of a dilettante than he would like us to believe? How can he ignore that they were born from the same womb — or if this is not ignorance, what good could there be in denying mankind its common ancestry? But perhaps he is not seeking to deny the obvious here, but simply playing with paradox in order to state the obvious: for as any child with a somewhat decent Christian education would be able to tell us (and weren’t we all raised to be such children?), Cain didn’t behave like a brother to Abel. But, then, how do brothers behave? Should they be each other’s keeper? And what would that mean? And supposing that we would know what

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\*This is the text of a lecture as I read it in the presence of Jacques Derrida at the International Conference devoted to his *Politics of Friendship*, at the KUBrabant (Tilburg, The Netherlands). Papers in that conference were meant to be published together with Derrida’s reply, but the book never came out. Let me just thank Professor Derrida for the interesting discussion that followed and the editors of BUDHI for offering me this chance to publish my unchanged text in their journal. Please also note that I have used the following abbreviations, most of which you can find at p. x of *Truth and Singularity*. For Levinas cf. TI (*Totalité and Infini*); TaI (*Totality and Infinity*); EDE (*En découvrant l’existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1988); HS (*Hors Sujet*, Paris, Fata Morgana, 1987). For Derrida: VM (see *Truth and Singularity*, p. 279 note 17); AD (*Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris, Galilé, 1997); PA (*Politiques de l’Amitié*, Paris, Galilé, 1994).

<sup>1</sup>François Poirié, *Emmanuel Lévinas* (Besançon, Editions de la Manufacture, 1992), p. 98: “Cain n’est pas le frère d’Abel!”

it takes to be a brother, supposing that we could and would agree on what it takes *to be called* a brother — and perhaps that is not the same thing — how many of them can we afford to keep? For if there is indeed this common ancestry, if we all go back to the same mother and father, can we afford to go all the way back to that common origin, to that same womb — or shouldn't we draw a line somewhere, appealing to those sad facts that philosophers call finitude, and economists, budget constraints, and that force us to fold back upon ourselves, turning our hearts into stone while digging ditches and erecting fences, while patrolling and resting on the top of those walls that we did not just build to keep out others, but to be good to those that we can afford to keep in — a finite consolation for finite beings, for sure, but consoling enough a thought to let that stone in our chests glow and keep it at our body temperature where we no longer feel its weight and can enjoy our lives.

"Cain's answer is sincere," Levinas tells another interviewer,<sup>2</sup> and as we know from *Totality and Infinity*, enjoyment always is: "love of life," for life is "an existence that does not precede its essence" (TaI 112), because that of which one lives, the 'contents' or, if I am allowed the pun, the *essence* in the sense of *the gasoline* of life cannot be separated from life itself or from the act of living it. The food that one eats, the air that one takes into one's lungs, fill and sustain life, but the eating of that food and the breathing of that air are the "joy" of living. Whatever I do in life, whatever I am, is at the same time "that from which I live" (TaI 113) for "to live is a sort of transitive verb" — that we all live our lives means that "the contents of our life" "are its direct objects" and that "the act of living these contents is *ipso facto* a content of life" (TaI 115). *Ipso facto* and thus not as the diversion of a *besorgen* that *obfuscates* a more primordial *Sorge*, not *uneigentlich* but, quite simply, enjoyment, happiness, the innocent egoism of life, a "relation of life with life," a contentment which "does not love Being but the happiness of being" (TaI 145), an independence which does not have to be declared, since it is the birthmark of life, "the very pulsation of the I (*du moi*)" (TaI 113). And it is that pulsation that makes Cain plead for himself and that inspires him to turn God's question back to Him with that mixture of brutality and

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<sup>2</sup>*Philosophie, Justice et Amour: Entretien avec Emmanuel Levinas* (3 and 8-10-1982), Concordia, 1983 (3), p. 65. Henceforth, PJA.

innocence with which all life, every one of us, every family, every tribe, every nation will respond when it finds itself unjustly accused, accused, that is, of what it cannot be blamed for — for who can be blamed for living, for being happy in spite of oneself, for loving life — one’s own life — in spite of the sordid conditions in which others pass theirs? If life is love of life even before one can decide to love this love or to reject it (suicide, Levinas says, already testifies to this love, it cannot but consecrate it), if to be born is to be constituted as this magnet that ignores its own magnetism and cannot but find itself unknowingly relating everything to itself, then how could all the Cains in the world, and thus, in a sense, every one of us, not turn God’s question back to Him? If such is the gift of life, then shouldn’t the giver be accused? If to accept that gift which is, of course, prior to the existence of the one who is supposed to receive it—and the philosophical name of this priority is ‘creation’— if to be created is to receive with life a love of life and thus the independence of an ego-ity which is only egoistic in the pre-moral sense of an involuntary self-centeredness which is the very structure of the self thus created, its contentment with its being which, as the tradition says, converts with the good — in short, if this is creation, then shouldn’t the Creator mind his own — and my brother’s — business? Why should *I* be my brother’s keeper? My brother is, like me, his own keeper; he is a being that cannot but care for his own being, he is *jemeinig*, his existence is his own, no one can ‘stand out toward’ in his stead, and should God disagree with these basic elements of fundamental ontology, should he think that to be one’s own keeper is not enough, he should have seen to it that there was another member in the team. He should have created differently or, having created as he did, *He* should have been that other member. Given the circumstances — and I know that you know that these are the circumstances of a murder, but why do you assume that Cain knows, how could he? — it is not me, Cain, but you, God, who should be my brother’s keeper.

Thus, reasons Cain, and Levinas agrees. He doesn’t agree with the murder, but he agrees with the answer: “One should not, he stresses, take Cain’s answer as if he was mocking God, or as if he was playing the little boy who replies ‘it’s not me, it’s him’” (PJA, 65). Cain’s answer is sincere because it moves on the only level of reasoning available to him at that point, which is, says Levinas, the level of “ontology” where “I am I and he is he” (PJA, 65). But, as we already know, this defense of Cain

is not the only possible one. It echoes, of course, the impressive analysis of the solitude of existing that Levinas had developed in his early work — “to be,” Levinas had written in *Time and the Other*, “is to be isolated by existing”: “One can exchange everything between beings except existing”.<sup>3</sup> But what about happiness? Could one exchange happiness between beings? By the time of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas’s analysis of the sincerity of enjoyment as love of one’s own life would have seemed to allow for a different defense of Cain — instead of saying, as we just heard him say, that Cain’s answer is sincere because it moves on the level of ontology and because we are “ontologically separated beings” (PJA 65), Levinas could have linked this sincerity to what in it points “beyond ontology.” For, as *Totality and Infinity* never tires of stressing, enjoyment is “beyond ontology” and thus already “beyond being” — which means that we would not have to see in Cain’s action another instance of that infamous *conatus essendi*, but of what in man is always already beyond such a *conatus*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 42.

<sup>4</sup>It would call for a separate analysis to spell out the consequences of this for the shift that Derrida indicates between an analysis of the subject as host (*Totality and Infinity*) and of the subject as hostage (*Otherwise than Being*) (cf. AD, 108). If there is a turn in Levinas, I would suggest, it has certainly to do with the fact that in the latter book the difference between enjoyment and *conatus essendi* as the “naked will to be” is no longer systematically stressed, with the consequence that “the persecuted one cannot defend himself by language, for the persecution is a *disqualification of the apology*” (OB 121, my italics) — something that the author of *Totality and Infinity* seems expressly intent to exclude when he wrote for example: “Conversation... *cannot renounce* the egoism of its existence... Apology... *belongs to the essence* of conversation. The goodness in which ... conversation issues and from which it draws signification will not undo this apologetic movement” (TaI 40, my italics). Although I will not pursue these differences any further here, I think it is important to realize that they would immediately complicate what I take to be Levinas’s central move in *Otherwise than Being*: “*Enjoyment* in its ability to be complacent in itself, exempt from dialectical tensions, is the *condition of the for-the-other* involved in sensibility, and in its vulnerability as an exposure to the other” (OB 74, my italics) — a passage that should be contrasted with: “The plurality required for conversation results from the interiority with which each term is ‘endowed’, the psychism, *its egoist and sensible self-reference. Sensibility constitutes the very egoism of the I, which is sentient and not something sensed*” (TaI 59, my italics). The irony in all this is that it would seem that Levinas is only able to write a book about an “otherwise than being” that is “beyond essence” by

“The bare fact of life is never bare. Life is *not the naked will to be*, an ontological *Sorge* for this life ... Life is *love of life* (Levinas’s italics), a relation with contents that are not my being but *more dear than my being*: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. Distinct from my substance but *constituting it*, these contents make up the worth [*le prix*] of my life. When reduced to pure and naked existence, like the existence of the shades Ulysses visits in Hades, life dissolves into shadow. Life is an existence that does not precede its essence. Its essence makes up its worth [*prix*], and here value [*valeur*] constitutes being. The reality of life is already on the level of happiness, and in this sense beyond ontology. Happiness is not an accident of being, since being is risked for happiness.” (TaI 112)

I will come back to this long quote later, but first let me address those of my readers who may think my insistence on getting straight at what level exactly Cain’s answer is sincere, is a bit exaggerated, to say the least. After all, the man is a murderer, that much is clear and all the rest seems just a pastime for philosophers who refuse to take up their responsibility and push the button of the electric chair. But, as we already know, not only does Levinas not agree, but it seems as if God too thinks that Cain has a point. Perhaps there is something wrong with creation. Could it be that the job is not finished? For the Talmudic tradition at least, this is a very serious question. It is perhaps a more serious question than it could ever be to us, for in translating *Genesis* 4,8, Christianity has filled in a blank and, thus, the Talmudic masters will argue, missed an essential part of the text. For the beginning of *Genesis* 4,8 reads in Hebrew: “And Cain said to Abel: \_\_\_\_”. He did not say, “Let us go into the open country” as our text reads;<sup>5</sup> he said nothing. How could he? Who would

suppressing the danger contained in his earlier suggestion that, as we will read in the quote that now follows in our main text, there is another “beyond essence,” but a deeply unethical one: the love of life.

<sup>5</sup>As Jim Faulconer kindly pointed out to me, it may be slightly misleading to speak here of “our tradition” since the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the Vulgate and the Syriac text all have filled in the blank, whereas the Masoretic text on which the Talmud relies, has not. Strictly spoken, the difference then is not between Christian and Jewish texts (since the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint are not Christian texts), but a difference between textual traditions: the one to which ‘we’ belong versus the Talmudic one. The oldest physical copy of the Masoretic text is, of course, also much more recent than that of the Septuagint (whereas the age of the oldest copy

have taught him to address a fellow human being? Certainly not his parents, for Adam had never talked to Eve. Eve had talked to the serpent, and Adam had talked *about* Eve to God, but between them: not a word! No wonder then that Cain and Abel were not on speaking terms — as André Neher notes, in the silence between these brothers (“And Cain said to Abel:\_\_\_”), resounds only the terrifying silence between their parents: “Because the brothers, like their parents, are unable to invent the dialogue, something else is invented by them, a substitute for the lack of speech: death, which appears here for the first time in the biblical text.”<sup>6</sup> God had been talking to man, but he had not realized how difficult it must be for creatures to talk amongst themselves — for what would they talk about, what would they say to one another? After all, He had made them happily centered on themselves. For sorrow too is a form of happiness;<sup>7</sup> it obeys the same almost autistic logic as the love of life: Cain’s anger in seeing his gifts neglected was his, no less than the joy of Abel in seeing his sacrifice accepted was his. These sacrifices are as yet without an altar and do not break out of the closed economy of life. They do not yet testify to a confrontation of life with something strong enough to break through that economy and to de-center that self-centeredness with which life reacts to whatever it is that delights or saddens it. They cannot be, then, those sacrifices that Levinas is thinking of when he tells us that “it is not certain that war was at the beginning, before the altars” (OB 118). For the ‘altars’ of Cain and Abel resort under the logic of war. They lead to terror because they are themselves the product of terror. After all, life’s happiness is a happiness after paradise, which means that while being happy, life is already — and still — under the sign of death.

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of the Samaritan Pentateuch is still debated). The Dutch translation and The New English Bible which I consulted do not follow the Masoretic text. As Prof. Faulconer points out, this is not the case with other English translations.

<sup>6</sup>A. Neher, *L'exil de la parole: Du silence biblique au silence d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), pp. 103-104. See also the commentary in D. Banon, *La lecture infinie: Les voies de l'interprétation midrachique* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), p. 207 ff.

<sup>7</sup>“Enjoyment” is a technical term in *Totality and Infinity*: it can have the positive connotation it has in ordinary language, but it also includes what we would not readily count among the joys of our lives, as in: “We live from our labour which ensures our subsistence; but we also live from our labour because it fills (delights or *saddens*) life” (TaI 112, my italics) — which is why Levinas sometimes puts quotation marks around the “joy” of life, as in the sentence following the just quoted passage.

For life worries — it worries about the future and about what the elements may bring (TaI 140-4). It is terrified that the earth that it ploughs or on which it has let its cattle graze, can be unreliably austere. It can turn arid in no time, as if not appreciative of man's efforts. Life is terrified by everything that it is relying on but that sets its own course. The terror of the earth and of the elements in general lies in their essential ambiguity, in the essential secrecy with which they are concocting plans of their own — it is the same rain which makes the crops grow that can flood the land, the same sun that tans and burns. From one moment to the next, the elemental in which we "bathe" (TI 117: *baigne*) can *turn into* a trap from which there is no escape. It is essentially *bifrons*, and therefore without a face. For the face, as we shall see, brings peace, whereas the elemental is like Janus, it can bring both peace and war, and by thus putting peace at the same height as war, it is but degrading peace and debasing it to the absence and thus to the imminence of war. The elements are whimsical and one understands heathen like Cain and Abel to look for signs that they are on their side. Pagan rain dances, nothing more! This God who accepts Abel's gift and ignores Cain's allows himself to be trapped by the same tricks as those "faceless gods" (TaI 142) for which paganism, according to Levinas, has been inventing its rites. These gifts are not sacrifices, they are not pure enough, as Derrida would say,<sup>8</sup> for they are given unto themselves. And it seems that the Lord agrees with Cain, and with Derrida and with Levinas, for instead of severely punishing Cain for what he did, he is trying to save his face (and one should perhaps take this as literally as suggested) and punishes the earth instead. The earth will not have drunk Abel's blood without sanction,<sup>9</sup> for that blood will render it infertile and it is because Cain can *rely* on this infertility — he has God's word for it — that he will have to be a wanderer and a foreigner on earth. Some punishment! The father,

<sup>8</sup>For what is at stake in a pure gift: J. Derrida, *Donner le temps*. 1 : *La fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), e.g. p. 156 ff.—pages which should be carefully compared to what Levinas had already been saying e.g. in "La trace de l'autre": "L'Oeuvre pensée radicalement est en effet un mouvement du Même vers l'Autre qui ne retourne jamais au Même" (EDE 191 — the whole phrase is italicized by Levinas).

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), p. 272: "oblivion (the earth's sin in Cain's murder of Abel)." In what follows I develop my own interpretation of this brief but inspiring remark.

ashamed of having neglected to get his children on speaking terms, is feigning his anger and feigning to curse the one he neglected most. But what looks like a punishment in fact seems to work as a blessing, since it is already giving Cain a law on which he can *rely*, a law that supersedes the ambiguity of the elemental by cutting through the ties that bind men to the whimsicality of the elements. Cain's curse is a blessing since it puts him beyond the unreliable "law without a law"<sup>10</sup> of the elements: he is the first foreigner on earth, but also the first on whom the earth can no longer exert its powers of seduction, the first who knows that he should pay no attention to whatever promises that earth whispers into his ears, the first to see through these promises and to suspect behind them the operations of those pagan "gods without a face" who are luring man into bondage by promising him an independence that is not real. *Autochthony*, as Levinas says, "is at the same time an attribute of sovereignty and of submission" (TaI 164). The autochthonous I "is, to be sure, happiness, presence at home with itself" (TaI 143), but "the sovereignty of enjoyment nourishes its independence with a dependence on the other" (TaI 164): since it is "enjoyment of something else, never of itself", it "remains in the non-I" (TaI 143) and as such "runs the risk of a betrayal" by "the alterity by which it lives" (TaI 164). In short, it is because autochthony is the independence of a being that is "enrooted in what it is not" (TaI 143) that it is "without security" and "runs up against the very strangeness of the earth" (TaI 142) on which it must and at the same time cannot rely for its survival.

In being the first to be without such roots, Cain is also the first to be put *above the earth* and beyond the reach of these mythical autochthonic gods that keep man dependent while declaring him separated and independent. The sacred spell of this neo-colonial logic that Levinas calls "fusion" or "participation" can only be broken by a law that installs a principle of "uprootedness" or "non-participation" (cf. TaI 61). And to show that Cain's homelessness is ordained by this law, God is going to

<sup>10</sup>For this expression which could be linked to what Lacan says about 'la Chose' and to what psychoanalysis teaches us about the maternal super-ego, P. Moyaert's brilliant *Ethiek en sublimatie: Over de ethiek van de psychoanalyse van Jacques Lacan* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1994).

<sup>11</sup>This is a recurrent phrase (especially) in Levinas's Talmudic writings where one finds a constant opposition between the letter (of the Torah), the spirit (of Christianity that sees in Judaism only the yoke of law, the dead letter) and the soil (of pagan-



leave him with a mark, as if to give a first indication of that Covenant where "the letter is substituted for the soil".<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Cain will suffer; the mark which God puts on him "in order that anyone meeting him should not kill him" (*Genesis*, 4,15), is not a fool-proof guarantee against murder. But due to the inscription of God's word on Cain's forehead, murder becomes a human affair, an affair between humans who can no longer drink each other's blood as the earth that had opened its mouth to drink Abel's blood. *What the soil forgets, the soul will remember*. It can no longer innocently absorb and wipe out the traces of what happened, for it will have read God's word on the skull that it smashes. And thus, that "Torah before the Torah" about which Derrida writes at length in his *Adieu*, a Torah given to all nations and not just to Israel, is given by God to Cain, who is in a sense the first and the only man on earth, not because he killed, and not in spite of it (as if God would have forgiven and elected him), but because his killing reminded God that He could not finish creation on His own. It is not by creating man, but by creating "the other man" that creation gets a chance to become finished, but also, as we shall see, to change its status. For Cain is "the other man" who brings humanism to man: it is only by reading Cain's sign, by hearing God's word in the face of that foreigner, that the rest of man-

ism). Consider as one example among many the following passage from *Difficult Freedom*: "The constitution of a *real society* is an *uprooting* — the term of an existence in which the 'being-at-home' [*chez soi*] is absolute, and everything comes from within. Paganism is putting down *roots*, almost in the etymological sense of the term. The advent of the Scriptures is *not the subordination of the spirit to the 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* [and I would add in the light of my above commentary on Cain's 'punishment': where the soil is so arid that it is left without promises by which it could seduce man to put down roots], that the *true spirit* descended into a text in order to be universally fulfilled" (p. 137). Incidentally, it is the whole axiomatics contained in this and similar passages which has programmed Levinas's position vis-a-vis Christianity: "What Christian theologians present as a stubborn attachment to the letter is in reality a refusal of that which is too easily called spirit" (DF, p. 49) — too easily, for by underestimating the liberating effect of the letter, Christianity left Europe exposed to the spell of the soil: "A humanity with roots that possesses God inwardly, with the sap rising from the earth, is a forest or a prehuman humanity ... If Europe had been spiritually uprooted by Christianity, as Simone Weil complains, the evil would not be great. ... but is Europe's unhappiness not due to the fact that Christianity did not sufficiently uproot it?" (ibid., p. 137).

<sup>12</sup>This is the title of a French collection of Levinas's essays: *Humanisme de l'autre homme* (s.l., Fata Morgana, 1972).

kind will get a chance to become human for the first time. Humanism of the other man<sup>12</sup> is a subjective genitive. It means that humanity is offered to us by the face of the Other. Offered to us, and not imposed on us. Such is the tiny line between the ontology and onto-theology of creation that Cain had at his disposal, and the ethics and metaphysics of a *creatio ex nihilo* that he could not know of, since he was to be its first messenger.



The central word in this ethics and metaphysics, the word that functions as the key that opens these difficult texts, since it provides us with the key in which these texts are to be read if they are to be understood at all, this key-word, then, on which everything else depends, and in particular the priority of peace over war, is as inconspicuous as it can be. For it is a simple “yes.” But, as we shall see, without this “yes” there can be no true fraternity. Without this “yes,” it would be “natural” for all those who come after Cain to kill their Abels again and again. And since *Politics of Friendship* is also, if not foremost, a reflection on what happens when the friend goes political and is called a brother, one understands why Derrida must have felt himself drawn uncomfortably close to Levinas — close enough to write another book *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, which reads like a long appendix to *Politiques de l’Amitié* where Levinas, a bit surprisingly, had only been mentioned once or twice, and then only in passing.<sup>13</sup> But not just close, also uncomfortable, for there is a little problem with the way this “yes” functions in Levinas, and the author of *Adieu* cannot have been unaware of this, as is clear from some of his notes where he seems to be reminding himself and his readers that, notwithstanding the obvious parallels between Levinas’s concern and his own, it might be wise not to give up all distance: for example — and there are only one or two of these examples, and thus a good deal less than one could have expected from the author of *Violence and Metaphysics* (a text, to be sure, that antedates *Adieu* by some thirty years, but that has lost nothing of that admirable venom

<sup>13</sup>Cf. PA 326 (“a third friend” joining the friendship between Bataille and Blanchot), 329 (“the other great friend of Blanchot”), 338 (quoted below).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. M. A. Lescourret, *Emmanuel Levinas* (s.l., Flammarion), 1994, p. 320 (referring to “a radio-interview in 1992” — no further source indicated).

which gave Levinas the impression of being exposed to an "assassination under narcosis").<sup>14</sup> For example, then, after noting that in Levinas's texts the expression "Palestinian nationalism" does not have its counterpart in "Israeli nationalism" (for Israel, as Levinas tirelessly stresses, is not the name of another particularism), Derrida ends his note with the following reminder: "Let us not forget, let us never forget that the same Bible also travels in the luggage of the Palestinians, be they Muslims or Christians. Justice and tertiality" (AD, 196). In a sense, with this note everything is said: both the grandeur and the inherent failure of the enterprise known to us as Levinas, is condensed in this single note which by itself has enough force to shatter the rest of the text. Rest assured, I will not be the one to detonate it — at least not here, in a text which was written to be read in the presence of Derrida, and which had to leave him the room and the freedom to speak for himself, and to comment on whatever reasons he may have had of his own to contain the damage he might have caused. But, of course, like any other of Derrida's readers of the first hour I would like to know more about these reasons. Like them, I wonder what could have made the author of *Violence and Metaphysics* come to think of the difference between him and Levinas as only one of "accent".<sup>15</sup> Instead of speaking for myself, then, and of explaining for example why I agree when in *Politics of friendship*, again with his finger hovering over the button, he writes in a similar vein: "I add that the language of fraternity appears to me equally problematic when (...) Levinas has recourse to it to extend humanity up to the Christian (etc.)" (PA 338), I will simply be satisfied to polish up that button so that it becomes both more dangerous and more alluring. It is time, then, to start cleaning and dusting off the language that, as we have seen, was missing between Cain and Abel. For Levinas seems to suggest that the possibility of that language depends on the institution of a true fra-

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<sup>15</sup>I am alluding here to the remarkable exchange between Derrida and Andre Jacob who is questioning him as to his difference with Levinas. In his reply Derrida denies that there would be any *philosophical* difference between him and Levinas: "I do not know ... Before a thought as that of Levinas, I never have an objection. I am willing to subscribe to everything he says ... I find it difficult to see [in whatever] divergence [there may be between me and Levinas] anything else than differences of 'signature', i.e. of writing [écriture], of idiom, of ways of handling things, of history, of inscriptions linked to the bio-graphical, etc. They are not philosophical differences" (in J. Derrida — P.-J. Labarrière, *Altérités* (Paris: Osiris, 1986), pp. 74-75, my trans. and italics.

ternity which, in its turn, depends on something else. We are not at the end of our surprise, for this something else is a murder: "Cain was not Abel's brother! True fraternity (*la vraie fraternité*) must found itself after the scandal of this murder, that is the murder of a stranger."<sup>16</sup> Let us suppress our urge to associate this murder with the one in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* where, as one will remember, it is the common guilt of having shared in a murder that installs a community between the sons. For the kind of community Levinas seems to have in mind does not owe its ties to a father whose authority is not so much increased, as established by being murdered.<sup>17</sup> It is not power but shame which is at the origin of community in Levinas. For, as we shall see, true fraternity for Levinas is the fraternity of a "yes" which does not have its origin in Cain's murder, nor in God, but in God's shame over not having prevented this murder, and in a sense of having needed this murder to draw his conclusions and to let the fate and the end of creation depend on what men will make out of it.



What does Levinas mean by this "yes," and how does it relate to what he calls a "true fraternity," a fraternity "outside of all biology" (OB 87) that "precedes the commonness of a genus" (OB 159)? At first sight, when one looks at the main texts, the answer is not so difficult. It is clear that this "yes," which Levinas stresses is not the "yes" of "an infantile spontaneity" (OB 122), is not simply my "yes," the "yes" with which I reply to the appeal of the Other. In this sense, it is, as Derrida likes to put it, "before all yes or no".<sup>18</sup> It is anterior to the opposition of "yes" and "no" because it is anterior to my decision. Rather, it points to what

<sup>16</sup>François Poiriè, *Emmanuel Levinas ...*, o.c., p. 98.

<sup>17</sup>See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's excellent "Le sujet freudien, du politique à l'éthique," *Cahiers Confrontation*, 1989 nr. 20 ('Après le sujet QUI VIENT'), pp. 53-72.

<sup>18</sup>This "yes" before all yes or no, has been a topic in Derrida at least since *Ulysse gramophone: Deux mots pour Joyce* (Paris, Galilée, 1987), and it is certainly not only restricted to his reading of Levinas (one can find it in his marginals to texts by Heidegger, Nietzsche and others, e.g. "Nombre de oui," in J. Derrida, *Psyché. Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée), p. 639 ff., and esp. p. 643 n.1 for Derrida's own references to some of his other texts on the "yes"). But it would seem to me that in his more recent work, it has received a more distinct Levinasian ring — as indeed I will try to show near the end of this article.

forces me to decide and is thus presupposed by my every decision, be it a "yes" or a "no." It is not what gives voice to my acceptance of the appeal of the other, for such an acceptance would have as its logical counterpart the possibility of my rejecting it. But the "yes" which forms the linchpin that holds together the whole of Levinas's ethics, does not have such a logical counterpart. For it points to the anteriority of the good to evil, and to "a pact with the good" which is itself anterior to "the alternative between good and evil" (QLT 65). But let us approach this metaphysical theme in the way that Levinas has always preferred: by starting from a phenomenological description of what happens when the Other approaches me.

Such an other is not an object. He may behave like one and fade into the background of his social role or context without disturbing me. But he is a possible address and, as such, the imminence of a language that will reach out for me. I cannot not hear such an address. Although I can say "yes" or "no" to the Other's appeal, I must have heard it to make up my mind. Even if I seek seclusion, and do not respond to the knock on my door, there will have been that knock and I will have been disturbed. Whether I like it or not, my inability not to hear the appeal of the Other points to what Levinas calls an "implication": "a being caught up in fraternity" (OB 83), well anterior to my decision whether to take part in it or not. As soon as the Other speaks to me, I hear myself replying to him. At the very moment in which he is speaking and I am listening, I am already replying. Even if in the end I chose not to utter a word, my tongue will have urged me to speak. It will have spoken for me. To listen to the Other is already to be in response to him. I wouldn't be in this response if it were not for the Other; in that sense I owe it to him. Which is why there can be circumstances in which I owe him a reply (in a different sense) and in which not to reply is an insult, a declaration of war that already presupposes the peace with which it breaks. For the language of the Other brings peace. No matter how trivial its content may be, it interrupts what I could not interrupt myself: any address by the Other will put me before a sorrow that is not my own and it will thus have torn me, for however short a moment, not only out of my happiness but also out of my caring and my worrying for the persistence of that happiness. The language of the Other offers me a protection from the terror of the elemental that no rite, no matter how refined, could give. For a fraction of a second, I am not alone with my

being, and that which thus rends my solitude does not destroy it. In allowing me to reply, it crosses out the dependence that makes me vulnerable and leaves me with an independence that is free of terror. Language is the first leisure of men. It is a celebration, for it serves no purpose and it is good for nothing. But it thus points to the gratuitousness of its origin — which is not Nothing, for its name is the Good.

But let us not move too fast. For Levinas is clearly claiming more than a dialogue before the kind of dialogue<sup>19</sup> that is thematized by philosophers such as Habermas or Apel. He is not just pointing to a way of providing the obligation inherent in all language with a different source than the one that threatens speakers with self-contradiction if they refuse to account for the validity claims they could not, in speaking, avoid raising. When he says that “to hear a voice that speaks to you is *ipso facto* to accept the obligation *vis á vis* the one that speaks” (QLT 104), he is not just thinking of the lack of consistency in the event of my refusing the peaceful interruption offered here by the Other. For if the Other’s appeal would limit itself to an interruption that I cannot avoid bearing, but that while enduring it, I could still resent, it would not bring me a peace that is prior to war. True fraternity must be “without allergy”,<sup>20</sup> for in allergy there is still too much distance between me and the Other — while bearing with his presence, I could still find the time to curse him for his visit. The “yes” that would have arranged for the proximity between him and me that I did not wish for and could

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<sup>19</sup>I owe this expression to Theo de Boer who, if I recall well, used it to indicate the difference between Levinas and Habermas.

<sup>20</sup>Ethics and the absence of allergy are synonymous for Levinas (e.g. TaI 51 and *passim*) and they are ‘first’: war seems to be conceived of as an allergical reaction that points to a disease that in itself already presupposes the normal state of health: “War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergical presence of the Other” (TaI 199). Moreover, since a “pacific relation with the Other” is for Levinas a relation “without frontier” (TaI 172), it is tempting to conclude from this that *the only kind of frontier that Levinas seems to have room for within his system, will be one that will give rise to war*. The ‘frontier’ itself seems to be considered as an allergical reaction and will thus always be secondary and derived. The presence of a frontier indicates an incapacity to leave oneself, and thus violence: “The violent man does not move out of himself. He takes, he possesses” (DF 9). But, as we shall see, the philosophical name for such violence is Evil: Evil refuses a dispossession by the Good which precisely because it is good, lacks the means to *impose* itself.

not avoid, would still be on a par with the "no" which allows me to retreat into an escape that cannot be touched by his presence. This is why what corresponds to this "yes" on my part is what Levinas calls an "absolute passivity" prior to the usual opposition between activity and passivity — and for such an absolute passivity *which does not cancel* my eventual "yes" or "no" but leads to it and allows for it, Levinas reserves the term "creatio ex nihilo."

[I]n the concept of creation *ex nihilo*, if it is not a pure nonsense, there is the concept of a passivity that does not revert into an assumption. The self as a creature is conceived in a passivity more passive still than the passivity of matter, that is, prior to the virtual coinciding of a term with itself. (OB 113-4).

As we shall see, such a priority which cannot be undone, such a non-coincidence which cannot be taken up and grounded ("assumed") by this absolutely passive self that Levinas insists on calling "creature," is exactly what motivates him to see in this creature an ethical instance. For the only candidate that Levinas can think of for a priority that prevents a self from coinciding with itself and yet matters to it, although it does not know why, is that of a self under obligation:<sup>21</sup> a self that finds itself responsible — in response — before it could decide *to be* responsible. Responsibility is not a product of my freedom, it is "older" than my freedom, and it thus involves a time lag that is similar to that of creation: "in creation, what is called being answers to a call that could not have reached it since, brought out of nothingness, *it obeyed before hearing the order*" (OB 113). But to understand that, like creation, responsibility involves a "doing before hearing" Levinas will need to do more than point to a similarity between the two. He will need to show how they are internally linked. And why the idea of a "creatio ex nihilo" is not, as is often thought, one of those little cogs that one can take out of his system and still expect it to run.

Without this notion, then, Levinas's ethics will fall to pieces. There will, for example, be no priority of peace over war and no "true" fraternity. But, of course, one could always respond, even before finding out what such a notion stands for, that if this is the cost to be paid to

<sup>21</sup>See the conclusion of my *Truth and Singularity: Taking Foucault into Phenomenology*, pp. 375-97.

make one's way to a fraternity that would be without violence, it is perhaps better to give up such chimerical aspirations and be satisfied with notions that agree better with our finitude. I am not sure, for example, whether a very subtle version of that reply was not introduced into the discussion when the author of *Violence and Metaphysics*, who does not mention creation once, let alone creation *ex nihilo* wrote, for example, something like this:

God alone keeps Levinas's world from being a world of the pure and worst violence, a world of immorality itself. The structures of living and naked experience described by Levinas are the very structures of a world in which war would rage — strange conditional — If the infinitely other were not infinity, if he would be, by chance, a naked man, finite and alone. (VM 107, transl. corr.).

It is certainly not superfluous to ask whether for a "thought of original finitude" (as Derrida was describing the position which allowed him or forced him to resist Levinas back then, cf. VM 103) this strange conditional ("a world in which war would *rage*") is still possible.<sup>22</sup> But it is no less superfluous a question, and certainly one more central to our concerns here, to find out what it takes to avoid that conditional and whether one has not already subscribed to it, as soon as one has subscribed to the idea of a "Torah before the Torah" that the author of *Adieu* seems to wish to share with Levinas, which would mean that the "come hither" ("*viens*") or the "yes" with which Derrida urges us to welcome what he now calls the "absolute event" and of which he says "that justice, in the most enigmatic sense of the world, is somehow at stake"<sup>23</sup> in it, is perhaps no longer the "yes" of a man who by chance is naked, finite and alone. But let us suppress these questions until we understand better what is at stake in them. Let us try to find out first why, for Levinas at least, this "strange conditional" starts making sense as soon as one

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<sup>22</sup>I pursue this question in another, not yet published text: "Anti-Racism's first word: How not to inherit Derrida's legacy from Levinas." As to why I would answer here with a categoric 'no,' see my "A Sartrean in Disguise? Levinas on Racism" to appear in *Levinas: the Face of the Other (The Fifteenth Annual Symposium of the Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center)*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997, p.

<sup>23</sup>See the translation of a long and extremely enlightening interview originally conducted in French and turning around issues in Derrida's *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993): "The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Radical Philosophy*, 1994, p. 68, quote at p. 32. Henceforth quoted as DA.



relates it to the idea of a *creatio ex nihilo*, and to that "yes" before all yes or no which is implied in it.

For this "yes" is the "yes" of creation and, without it, the appeal of the Other would either have to miss me and not arrive at all, or if it did touch me, it would leave me indifferent at best or, perhaps more plausibly, provoke an allergic reaction on my part. The call of the Other would merely introduce another worry into my existence which has already enough sorrows of its own, and instead of bringing me the peace that Levinas believes to be "the essence of the original language" (EDE 232), it would merely enhance the violence of a world in which war rages and is its normal state. But Levinas insists on the conditional: the state of war is not normal, it already presupposes peace. Of course, it would not be legitimate to ask him to prove this. The keyword of a philosophy is never proven by "the facts." Nor for that matter belied by them, since it is telling us how to order them. Philosophy as such is always already beyond empiricism. Which is not to say that it is pure imagination. It is translation, in the sense Merleau-Ponty gave to this word: a work which produces the original it was supposed to merely reproduce. No philosophy is beyond this and certainly not that of Levinas, no matter what conclusions the author of *Violence and Metaphysics* may have come to draw (cf. VM 151-3, which should be quoted here in full) upon hearing Levinas declare that he wishes to start from experience itself, or better still: from what he calls the only true experience — the effect that the appeal of the Other has on me.

I do not 'react' to the appeal of the Other in the same way as I would to the intrusion of any other otherness that confronts me with an alterity for which I presently lack concepts. In fact, I do not react at all, for unlike the latter intrusion, that of the Other does not allow me to recover from the shock and to be my "old self" again. For the alterity of the Other is not just a temporary anomaly in the tapestry of my "normal" experience. If anything, such anomalies simply confirm the meaningfulness of my attempt to be *at home* in the world — the unexpected and the unfamiliar only strike me because they diverge from what I had expected on the basis of a previous familiarity with the world; their divergence is simply an invitation to revise these expectations and to think of a pattern where what is at present an anomaly would disappear into normality again. The Other is anything but such an invitation, he resists my attempts to weave his otherness into the web of a new normality

because he is not just an unknown but an “unknowable” (TO 75), not just an unsolved question that puzzles me, but a “complete surprise” (OB 99, 148) that throws me off balance and that un-settles (or un-saddles) me in a way that fundamentally alters me. Instead of being a question, the Other calls me into question. Far from being an invitation to revise my view of the world, he accuses me of having such a view and of having been a settler who made himself at home in such a world. But this accusation is not just an external one, it is more insidious since it is formulated in such a way that it turns me into my own prosecutor.

The “non-autochthony” of the face of the Other (HS 141) — Cain’s mark — shows me the conditions of my own autochthony and it forces me to conclude that if I keep living according to these conditions, I will not only miss what is truly other in the Other, but also do him an injustice. The Other cannot prevent me from doing such an injustice — his resistance is not physical, but ethical — but he condemns it in advance. For there is no question that I can still exert my grip on the Other and treat his anomaly as I treat other anomalies. But then I miss him *qua* Other. *Qua* Other, the Other leaves me without a grip. But this “without” is not just a negative phenomenon; it is not something that I can simply decide to do without. For even if I so decide, that decision will take place within a context where I cannot choose not to be. Since I cannot not hear the Other who invites me to approach him *qua* Other, I will have lost control over the meaning or the value of my decision. For the Other draws my attention to something I was unaware of and could not but be unaware of — he shows me what it has meant for me to be me and to live my life: the weak resistance he offers to my attempt to re-establish my grip and to remain in control shows me that for me to have been me, was not to be “a being that always remains the same (*le même*), but (a) being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in *recovering* its identity throughout all that happens to it” (TaI 36). The face of the Other operates a phenomenological reduction on me: it shows me that identity results from identifying and that *the same* which I took to be my substance *is in truth a verb*. *To be*, the Other seems to tell me, *is to be at one’s defence* — always trying to recover one’s identity throughout all that happens to it — it is to be at war. By not resisting this war and simply calling it by its name, the language of the Other shows me the possibility of peace. A possibility which I could not have discovered myself, for as we have seen, to live my life is to enter into a

self-centeredness which does not know of itself since it is a happiness before all knowledge. The Other offers me peace by revealing my prior state of war. And he undermines this priority by accusing me of the war that I was, and by then letting me be defendant, prosecutor and judge at the same time: for the Other cannot sanction my decision, he has offered himself to be the lamb for my further immolation, but the sign on his forehead means that peace is in my hands and in my hands alone.

Whether I take this offer or reject it, whether I convert myself to this peace or not, I cannot prevent myself from having been in this "state" of conversion, I cannot prevent the Other from having put me before a choice such as I never had in my *life*, I cannot prevent him from having put me before a freedom I never had and that now gives me vertigo: for I was never free to love my life, I always already loved it, it had a *value* that I didn't give to it and that was my implicit measurant for all other values, and now, all of a sudden, there has come some leeway between that value and me, for there is a new and other value at stake and one that I annihilate when measuring it with the measuring rod that my life has always been for me, but also one that calls into question that measurant since it brings to attention a dimension which cannot be measured by it. *And that dimension is creation*: my being a creature that had been given the grace of ignoring its own status, and of now discovering it through an Other. A discovery, says Levinas, that I can only make in shame: shame is the *affect* which comes to substitute for my lack of *conceptual* grip. And this very substitution indicates that there is *more* behind what would only be a lack if the failure of my grip on the Other would be restricted to what happens between him and me. For why would I be *ashamed* that there is something that cannot be measured by my measurant, why wouldn't the thought of my own finitude be its own consolation? But there is this shame which I experience as soon as I experience the Other — *ipso facto* says Levinas<sup>24</sup> and we have heard him use that word before:

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<sup>24</sup>As I have indicated in notes 11 and 20, it wouldn't be too difficult to question the kind of axiomatics that leads Levinas to the quote that follows. On a 'rootedness' which seems to escape that axiomatics and with which Levinas never seems willing to discuss, see my "Dis-possessed: How to remain silent after Levinas," in *Man and World*, vol. 29 (1996), pp. 119-146.

The welcoming of the Other [perhaps too strong a word for an *accueil*, which, as we just have seen, I cannot not give the Other] is *ipso facto* the consciousness of my own injustice — the shame that freedom feels for itself. (TaI 86).



If one grants Levinas the inner link between this last “*ipso facto*” and the one we met earlier when we heard him explain that “to hear a voice that speaks to you is *ipso facto* to accept the obligation *vis á vis* the one that speaks” (QLT 104), one has to grant him everything that he wishes us to accept. And in particular, that one (and Derrida would be such a “one”) *cannot have the ‘yes’ before all yes and no, without also subscribing to creation and seeing in that creation the trace of a God beyond being.*

For Levinas’ God is a trace. Which is why He “*is*” not. Certainly not a presence now past, but neither a past that has never been present and content to remain that past. God “works” as a disturbance of the order of being, which is the order in which He returns without taking place in it, or as Levinas sometimes says, without taking “body” (“*Dieu ne prend jamais corps*”).<sup>25</sup> It is this “without” which disturbs that order, for it feels haunted by something which refuses the *inter-esse* that would make it part of it. And yet that something which refuses to *incarnate* itself in it, is *inscribed* in it, but in such a way that one can never lay hands on it. God is *inscribed but not incarnated* in those square letters which he has substituted for the soil, and which dispossess those who thought of themselves as possessors. Not just those letters given to Israel at Sinai, but also those of that “Torah before the Torah” which turned Cain into “the other man.” No “Torah before the Torah” without such a trace. And without God’s an-archy which is, as we shall see, but another word for that trace, no such “messianism” that the author of *Adieu* would like to call “structural or *a priori*,” in the sense of “a messianism proper to a historicity” that, as Derrida says here and elsewhere, “*is without particular incarnation*”, “without revelation or without the datedness (*datation*) of a given revelation” (AD 121-2).

There would be no such messianism had not a mark been given to

<sup>25</sup>E. Levinas. *Alterité et Transcendance* (s.l., Fata Morgana: 1995), p. 172.

Cain and had God thereby not initiated that withdrawal into silence so essential for Judaism and for the philosophy of Levinas even when, especially when, it speaks Greek. For what would remain of that *anarchy* of which Levinas so often speaks, if it were simply silence, and not a silence which is felt? For this an-archy not to turn into another "archy," another *arché*, another *basileia*, for it to contest all -archy as such, it cannot, of course, reign. But it would "reign in its own way" (OB 194n2), says Levinas — it would be part of Being, albeit its highest part — if, like the Epicurean gods, it would be content to withdraw and not expose itself to the betrayal of that which it must contest without ever being able to pacify it by bringing it under its rule. God's an-archy can only inscribe the 'beyond' of non-indifference into Being by not imposing it on Being. Such is the ransom for creation: like all future educators of mankind, God had to grant man an independence for him to discover a dependence which does not contradict his freedom but institutes it. For man could never have been free, had he not been allowed to ignore his Creator and had his Creator been imposing himself on him, burning him with his "numinous" presence, as any of the pagan gods "without a face" would have done. In granting man atheism — in letting him ignore not just his Creator but also what it means to be created — God had put Himself already one step beyond these pagan gods: for it is, says Levinas, "a great glory for the creator to have set up a being capable of atheism, a being which, without having been *causa sui*, has an independent view and word and is at home with itself" (TaI 58-9).

But this sort of atheism can only be a first step between God and the gods of the sacred. For how to explain to such a being what one really wants from it, how to call into question its "*chez soi*" and to make it understand that, as Derrida explains at length in *Adieu*, it is a guest in its own house (AD 79 ff.)? How to break the roots that tie it to what it calls home, how to tell it that, as Levinas remarks in a passage that Derrida seems to quote with approval, "the chosen home is the very opposite of a root," that "it indicates a disengagement, a wandering which has made it possible, which is not a *less* with respect to installation, but the surplus of the relationship with the Other, metaphysics" (TaI 172; cf. AD 164)? It is certainly no small difficulty to bring metaphysics to a creature one has left with the enjoyment of *ta physica*. God had already been given a taste of this difficulty. In preferring the gifts

of the younger brother to those of the older brother, in thus choosing against the logic of the blood, he had found himself irresistibly drawn into that same logic. Not even his explanations to Cain could prevent that logic from following its course — indeed, his explanations seem to have made it worse, at least in the eyes of those who see in *Genesis* 4,7 one of the five untranslatable verses of the Bible and who then finally point out that in interpreting them as to their spirit, Cain became “the first religious man to attribute himself the magisterium of the interpretation of the Divine Word” — with the known consequences: the more obscure this Word, the more passionate the interpretation, and the more likely the chances that it will lead to violence: Abel, it is suggested, was killed “pro maiorem Dei gloriam”, “in the very name of that Divine Word of which Cain believed himself to be the exclusive and absolute interpreter”.<sup>26</sup>

Although Levinas never states it as such, one would still remain within his logic, if on the basis of this or a similar reasoning,<sup>27</sup> one would come to suspect at the hither side of God’s “great glory” a great shame: for the only way for God to have prevented that murder, would have been to programme man’s freedom and to create a slave who would be less than man. And thus God’s great shame is turned into a source of great anxiety: for although that murder, in principle, could have been the only one necessary to lead man into “true fraternity,” it may not be the last one. For “true fraternity” is not in our genes — if Levinas calls it “beyond biology,” it is because it is a possible part of our independence and not a reminder of our dependence. Or rather, it is what independent beings can make out of a dependence which doesn’t contradict their independence. The Good would not be good, it would be a programme instead of what calls for responsibility, if it wouldn’t allow man this strange mixture of dependence and independence which

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<sup>26</sup>A. Neher, *o.c.*, p. 107. Levinas’s insistence on the difference between the ‘letter’ and “that which is too easily called spirit” (DF, p. 49—quoted in note 11 above) expresses, of course, a similar distrust as Neher’s vis-a-vis Christianity. In this context, see the beautiful essay by J.-Fr. Lyotard, “D’un trait-d’union,” *Rue Descartes*, 4: *Le théologico-politique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1992), pp. 47–60.

<sup>27</sup>Although what follows is not a commentary on this text, a lot of what is at stake in “Judaism and Kenosis” (in E. Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), pp. 114–32) will find its echo here.

means that he is not just exposed to the Good, but also to Evil. Such is the price of man's independence: it takes the anxiety and the sorrow of a Creator who has to put the fate of his creation into the hands of a being that he has allowed to become disloyal. A God who is not "without face" is a God who takes the risk of losing his face to whatever it is that laughs in his face and ridicules the effort of his contraction and his restraint. The humility of a God who puts himself below the level of theodicy, is necessarily the humiliation and the pain and the sorrow of a God who in the name of loyalty has to bear with a principle of disloyalty entering creation. Not just as a possibility, but effectively, as if man must have tasted Evil before he can turn himself into a knight of the Good: "True fraternity must found itself after the scandal of this murder, that is the murder of a stranger."

It took a murder for all those coming after Cain to find out that the one he murdered was not just a stranger in the sense of a different, possibly impossible, center of happiness, but a stranger who was closer to him than a brother. It took a murder for him and all those after him to make the switch from an association that looked for the brother in the stranger, to one that recognized "the stranger in the brother",<sup>28</sup> and thus to accede to that "full sense" of fraternity which seems to be Levinas's version of that figure of thought that *Politiques de l'amitié* calls — but never without suspicion — a "fraternity beyond fraternity" (PA 265). Evil, that is, has to be allowed in, for it to become ashamed of itself and to recognize itself as evil. Evil cannot be banned from creation, since to create is to create a life which is beyond being, which has worth and value of its own, a life which loves its own life *and for which its being converts with the Good*. Evil discovering itself *as evil*, means that it discovers the essential secondarity of its worth and its value when compared to the value of the Good. *But if the Good were not God there would only be a secondarity in terms of degree*, and it would never be essential. At least, according to Levinas who, as is well-known, writes alternately either "God" or "the Good." But his reasoning, as now becomes apparent, is not from "God" to the Good, but from the Good to God. For only

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<sup>28</sup>E. Levinas, "La vocation de l'autre," in *Racismes: L'autre et son visage: Grands entretiens réalisés par Emmanuel Hirsch* (Paris: Cerf, 1988), p. 96: "Le moment où la fraternité arrive à son sens plein, c'est lorsque, dans le frère même, l'étranger est reconnu. L'au-delà tribal."

"God" can give an extra articulation to the principle of non-indifference which is the structure of any good, including the good of life. Only God's shame and the structure of *creatio ex nihilo* that this shame stands for, can provide Levinas with that extra articulation which he needs to develop what he means by "true fraternity": "a being put in question by the alterity of the other, before the intervention of a cause ... *a pre-original not resting on oneself*" (OB 75).

All the weight of Levinas's argument rests on this "pre-" by which he distances his ethics from a philosophy of origins and points to the difference between a kinship that is biological and involuntary and one that is "beyond biology," not because it is voluntary but because it is pre-voluntary and allows man a will of his own. Indeed, for Levinas, a being with a will is not a being without origin in the sense of a being that is its own origin, but a being that discovers only *a posteriori* what is its *a priori* (TaI 54, 59). Such a being is *beyond* being because it is always too late in catching up with its origin. It is a being which can only discover its origin through the shame of realizing that what it took to be its independence was in fact the grace of being granted a dependence without equal. For such a being to say "yes" to another being, is to affirm that essential secondarity of its being which Levinas calls creation. The "yes" of creation which precedes the "yes" by which beings accept a responsibility they did not originate, has no other voice than this latter "yes": for creation is "a sound" which becomes "audible only in its echo" (OB 106), in that "yes" of responsibility which, as Derrida would say, marks by an address to the other that there has been an address by the Other.<sup>29</sup> But without Levinas' God and the "yes" of creation, it is difficult to see how one could have such a "yes." For in its turn, this "yes" about which Derrida has written so much lately, seems itself to call on a "strange conditional" (VM 107, quoted above). It is, as he recalls, a "yes" to an other who is so absolutely other that "I ought not to propose contracts or impose conditions" on his arrival — "I ought not," says Derrida, and he adds "in any case, by definition I cannot" for this messianic experience is "*a priori* exposed, in its own expectation, to what will be determined only *a posteriori*, by the event."

<sup>29</sup>Cf. e.g. Derrida's analysis in *Ulysse gramophone*, o.c., p. 124 ff. And AD, 51 ff. where he is finding the same structure of a double "yes" in Levinas's notion of hospitality.



There would be no event, no history, unless a 'come hither' [i.e. a *viens*, or a *oui*, R.V.] opened out and addressed itself to someone, to someone else whom I cannot and must not define in advance. [...] Absolute arrivals must not be required to begin by stating their identity; I must not insist that they say who they are, and whether they are going to integrate themselves or not; nor should I lay down any conditions for offering them hospitality: for whether or not I shall be able to 'assimilate' them into the family, the nation, or the state. (DA 32).

I ought not and I cannot, says Derrida, in a world where war is doing nothing but that. But to this contestation of war, to this strange plea for a world in which war would rage, were it not for this "I ought not and I cannot," Levinas would perhaps reply: "But have you then finally granted me everything, except as you say those opinions that in my discourse would be due to 'an intra-political analysis of the current situations or of the effectivity of the terrestrial Jerusalem' (AD 202). I accept that you reserve for yourself the right not to have to share these opinions as you call them, since you have made it clear that you share with me what was most dear to me back then, even before we became friends. For if you say now that we must not and at the same time cannot impose conditions on those who knock at our borders for example, if in the name of that messianism, of that 'Torah before Sinai' you call on all the cosmopolitans in the world to make yet another effort,<sup>30</sup> if you still hear the voice of war in the Kantian peace which imposes such conditions (e.g. AD 156 ff.), if you thereby invoke my name and our friendship while displaying this extremely alert and admirable courage in resisting all the National Fronts in the world and in protesting against that horrible attempt in our country to impose conditions on a hospitality toward those that you still hesitate to call 'brothers' (PA 338) (and I will bear with your hesitation, although I no longer see its point — but isn't it that what our friendship demands) — if you go to these extremes to undo that narcosis which you came to regret, then perhaps

<sup>30</sup>Cf. J. Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!* (Paris: Galilée, 1997).

<sup>31</sup>C.f. AD, 122 — Derrida is alluding here to the last words of Levinas's short piece on him: "Tout autrement," in E. Levinas, *Noms Propres* (s.l., Fata Morgana, 1976), p. 72: "En soulignant l'importance primordiale des questions posées par Derrida, nous avons voulu dire le plaisir d'un contact au coeur d'un chiasme." (my italics).

you and I have become that chiasm that I once mentioned<sup>31</sup> — we do not write the same texts but we are both obliged by the same, what you called back then, “strange conditional,” for we both know that war rages at this end of our century and that it is setting our world ablaze, and we both regret in the name of a “state beyond the state”<sup>32</sup> — in the name of justice and of the third — that all the states in the world are constantly imposing conditions on their new arrivals and that they all are busy defining and narrowing the mesh of the sieve which will separate those we can bear from those we cannot. But this “return of the tribal”<sup>33</sup> is not the world’s last word. It cannot be and it should not be. For what I called “God” and “creation,” that “yes” that I took so seriously and that now finds its echo in your work, is what will forever contest that war is the first and the last word. Before the war, there were the altars — *les autels*,<sup>34</sup> or as only you might have said: *les hôtels*; the raging of war comes second, but this secondariness is essential,<sup>35</sup> nothing precedes

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<sup>32</sup> C.f. AD 138 ff where Derrida comments Levinas: “Au-delà de l’Etat dans l’Etat,” in E. Levinas, *Nouvelles lectures talmudiques* (Paris: Minuit, 1996), pp. 43-76.


<sup>33</sup> A return to which Levinas contrasts *in the name of a fraternity beyond being* the ‘au- delà du tribal’ (quoted above n. 28) to which I allude in my sub-title.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. EDE 234: “Il n’est pas sûr que la guerre fût au commencement. Avant la guerre, étaient les autels” and the parallel passage in OB 118 to which we referred above when discussing Cain and Abel.

<sup>35</sup> The notion of an “essential secondariness” was coined by Derrida in the course of his attempt in VM to show to what extent Levinas’s argument is indebted to the word God: “The aspect of living and original speech *itself* which Levinas seeks to save is clear. Without its possibility, outside its horizon, writing is nothing. In this sense, writing will always be secondary. To liberate it from this possibility and this horizon, *from this essential secondariness*, is to deny it as writing, and to leave room for a grammar or a lexicon without language, for cybernetics or electronics”. But the readers of the present article will perhaps be able to look with a different eye at the sentences that then followed: “But it is only in God that speech, as presence and horizon of writing is realized without defect. *One would have to be able to show that only this reference to the speech of God* [and hence to that “yes”, the ‘logic’ of which we have tried to analyse here — R.V.] distinguishes Levinas’s intentions from those of Socrates in the *Phaedrus*; and that *for a thought of original finitude this distinction is no longer possible*. And that if writing is secondary at this point, nothing, however, has occurred before it” (VM 102-3 ). If properly understood it would seem that Levinas’s argument as I tried to present it, would be that without reference to that ‘first word’ which he calls ‘God’, there could not be the ‘essential secondariness’ that Derrida is in need of, to be able to formulate the ‘I ought and I cannot’ at work in his double ‘yes,’ which is why I suggested earlier that this “yes” is perhaps no longer within original finitude.

it. That is what I called *diachrony*, the diachrony of a creation that puts us before that "strange conditional" which keeps together and yet separates the war which rages and which without that word "God" which was so dear to me, would rage; that separates and keeps together the conditions we impose and that we should not and, at any rate, cannot impose. This "together" which is separated is, as you know, what I called the structure of time: the "not at the same time" of what rages and would rage. Finally, we agree, then, perhaps we always did, perhaps we were never more than a different tone, or as you once suggested,<sup>36</sup> a different accent, different accents — to see what our friendship is about, one should not listen to us, one should read us and look for these accents which have made it both acute and grave, both *aigu et grave*".



It would be tempting — as indeed I have been tempted — to react to this voice. For example, by agreeing with it and declaring it mine. But then it would have been no more than a literary fiction that I could have done without. And yet, I could have sworn that I heard this voice, and that I only wrote down what it had to say. Not just now, in these last pages, but from the first lines onwards: as if this text which grew out of my hand, had but the one purpose of giving birth to a question that was addressed by me, but not to me. As if it tried to mark by an address to the other (Derrida) that there had been — that there still is — an address by the Other (Levinas). Which is why I would think it improper to break the rule which I adopted throughout these pages: not to speak for myself, but to lend my voice to a voice that can no longer speak for itself and that I imagine somehow being stirred or disturbed by this "Adieu." Derrida is too subtle a reader — of Hamlet, for example — to react as others would to what seems to be merely a product of wild imagination. No doubt, he must have heard this voice too. For he knows what it means when a spirit returns and wanders about, complaining about its assassination, be it with or without narcosis. And he knows that, confronted with such a spirit, one may come to depend upon the fiction or the play of a voice as "the thing by which to capture the conscience of a king." Which is why I propose that we do not dismiss this voice right away. Let us find out first how he reacts. 

<sup>36</sup>Cf. note 15.