

Art and Idolatry: Aesthetics and Alterity in Levinas

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The insurmountable caricature in the most perfect image manifests itself in its stupidity as an idol. The image qua idol leads us to the ontological significance of its unreality.¹

As one reads *Existence and Existents*, one initially experiences a certain surprise to discover a significant number of pages devoted to reflection upon the nature of the work of art. While one can understand from an autobiographical perspective, given the significance of Heidegger's work for the development of Levinas' thought, why he would choose to engage in such reflection, it is not immediately clear why he would have devoted so much space to this topic in one of his seminal texts, rather than, say within an essay. It is the question of the place of art and aesthetics in Levinas' thought that will be explored in this paper.

In the most general terms Levinas is committed to the view that the representational work of art is an essentially idolatrous object. By which he means an object that is the outcome of an attempt to synthesize and hence represent the un-synthesizable infinity of the other. In this respect his understanding and critical evaluation of art is intimately connected with the most central concerns of his ethical reflection. Levinas' ethics as a whole is an ethics of iconoclasm (albeit an iconoclasm that comes from the other, rather than the same), which posits as its highest goal engagement with the other and not with our representations of the other.

Plato's aesthetic reflections centre around the condemnation of the image because it is at a distance from absolute reality and in this sense a deficient representation. For Levinas an image of the other is impossible *per se*. The beautiful image is without voice; silent. This is the silence of the portrait or death mask in contrast to the living fertility of the face that speaks to us, as it is understood in *Totality and Infinity*. Art, we are told:

... brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as lightness and as grace. It frees. To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer to have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. Magic recognized everywhere as the devil's, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry.²

In this sense, the ethical world is the world which contains not only the artist and work, but also the critic. The work of art cannot be the final point at which the genius has expressed him or herself and at which we may stop for ever more.

However, there is also a strong ambivalence within Levinas' analyses of art, for while he condemns the idolatry of representational realism, in *Existence and Existents* he praises the ways in which abstraction allows us to gain access to a more primordial untypified materiality. So we might say that he is a champion of certain aspects of the modernist avant-garde over against any attempt to create realistic images.³ Such realistic images will always lack something. For Levinas, this something is the voice itself; that ethical discourse which comes from beyond the visual.⁴

A further complication is added, however, by the fact that he also distinguishes in *Totality and Infinity* between both ethical and non-ethical (aesthetic) uses of language. We cannot simply assert that the realm of ethical relations is the realm of speech, as over and against that of vision and hence the aesthetic. It is rather the case that there are also intra-linguistic distinctions to be made. Specifically, he distinguishes between the poetic (within which he includes the musical), and the prosaic. The former understood to be destructive of ethical relations and the latter characteristic of them.

This paper will deal with only some of the aspects of this overall problematic. Firstly the analyses of non-representational abstract art given in *Existence and Existents*, and secondly the reflections upon language and linguistic art forms to be found in *Totality and Infinity* and a number of earlier essays. As such it will be divided into two major sections. This structure corresponds to the movement from the 'silent' interiority of the visual to the polyphonous 'aurality' of the ethical.

I

'Otherness' and Visual Abstraction

According to Levinas, we cannot break through the shell of the visual in any absolute sense. The social other cannot be seen 'as other' in fact.⁵ To be simply seen is to be

coopted into my world and arrayed around the centre which I have made myself.⁶ To convert this into somewhat more linguistic categories, it is that level of experience at which the other may be talked “about” and not “to” and in this sense is not truly other.⁷ However, although the social other cannot appear at the level of the visual for Levinas, otherness as un-synthesizability and a-typicality can and it is just this that we experience *via* artistic representation, or at least some (specifically abstractionist) forms of artistic representation, in any case.

In general terms the visual world manifests a systematic and functional (functionalized) unity. Things within it are typified and they are either this or that ‘type’ of thing. And so:

Things refer to an inwardness as parts of the given world, objects of knowledge or objects of use, caught up in the current of practice where their alterity is hardly noticeable. Art makes them stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject.⁸

In general we only thematize the ‘useful’, or ‘relevant’, aspects of things at hand. The ways in which they transcend our immediate interests are put out of mind and perhaps even asserted to be inessential properties. We distinguish between primary (real) and secondary (apparent) qualities, for example, or between useful entities and obstructions, or things in or out of harmony with the past flow of conscious experience. In other words, the inclusion of objects, or indeed even experiences in the visual ‘world’, or perhaps more to the point, ‘my world’ (whether it be of practice or theory, use or representation) is also always an exclusion of other aspects of the objects in question.

Abstract artistic representation, by contrast, extracts things from the unity of an interested subjectivity and makes us see objects (insofar as they can still be named ‘objects’ at all) in their independence from our projects and intentions. It forces us to confront the apparently useless, obstructive and a-typical, not as a negative excess to be excluded, but as a significant part of experience.

Levinas tells us that this is achieved by

... furnish(ing) an image of an object in place of the object itself—what Bergson called a view of the object, an abstraction, and which he considers to be something less than the object, instead of seeing in it the more of what is aesthetic. Even photography functions in this way. This way of interposing an image of the things between us and the thing has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world.⁹

The image is a view out of context. A fragment of experience that is without any definite horizons or use value. This is a view of art that takes as its paradigm, not the artefact, but rather the abstract representation.

It is the modernist avant-garde that Levinas apparently thinks of when he reflects upon art and not of classical or folk art as does Heidegger, for example.¹⁰ Indeed

it is fair to say that Levinas implicitly thinks of avant-garde art, and in particular abstraction, as more authentic art than the paradigms appealed to in Heidegger's analyses. One would have to say that insofar as a work of art shows forth a world it perpetuates totalization.

Although it must also be said that there is a certain vagueness about both the targets and paradigmatic examples of art for Levinas that make his reflections on art somewhat difficult to follow at times. It would no doubt be interesting to 'test' Levinas' reflections against more detailed and specific examples. However, there is also a certain confusion of the normative and descriptive in his reflections. It would seem that when Levinas utilizes the word 'art', he in fact means 'authentic art'. We must take him in the analyses of abstraction now being considered, to be constructing a normative ideal, as much as attempting to simply describe the essence of art as it is. A further potential problem is that his notion of abstraction may itself be inadequate to what is normally considered to be abstract art by standard histories of art. But perhaps all these reflections display is that there is a complex interplay of description and normativity within Levinas' phenomenology and that the attempt to unpick this complex weave simply misses the point

But to return to the exposition again. What Levinas asserts in his theory of the abstract image, contra both Husserl and Heidegger is that it is possible to have non-contextual and hence unworlded experience. I will recount briefly Husserl's phenomenology of perceptual experience to give a sense of what he means by this.¹¹

According to Husserl, when we are within a horizontal structure we do not distinguish between the world and representations of the world. Rather, we have the world as a whole co-present in every perceptual experience. Everything that we see is seen in context. The part of the table that we have before us here and now is not a representation of the table, but an aspect of the table itself, for example. However, in understanding this, we have always already remembered past perspectives of the table (retention), understood that there will be more perspectives to come (protention), recognized that the table is within a room, the room within a university and so on. The world, and in fact more importantly, a single inclusive world, is co-present to us. We have not represented anything here insofar as this implies creating a mirror image of an external object, but we have contextualized.

Levinas is arguing, then, both that it is possible for us to have representational images of things and that these representations can be significant despite being de-contextualized. Art can produce images of the thing in ways which pay no attention to the purposes for which they were originally deployed within the world. One has only to think here of the sort of found objects or montages we see in Surrealist or Dadaist art, which specifically aim at such a disorientation and decontextualization. One finds a urinal and signs one's name to it,¹² places it in a gallery and it loses its initial significance. It becomes instead a symbol of resistance to a broader symbolic order. As a viewer, one is forced to reflect upon why such an apparent abomination is to be found within the cathedrals of high art. It has been transformed from being an apparently uninteresting and completely functional

entity, into something that disturbs my sense of the world or makes me laugh at the seriousness with which I viewed that world order in the past.

This quality of otherness that artistic representation gives us access to

... modifies the contemplation (of the thing depicted) itself. The “objects” are outside, but this outside does not relate to an “interior”; they are not already naturally “possessed.” A painting, a statue, a book are objects of our world, but through them the things represented are extracted from the world.¹³

In other words, artistic representation allows us to step back and see things outside of their functional locations in the economic world. We are forced to thematize the represented objects in ways that are new. But this is not necessarily a disinterested and theoretical view. It may just as easily turn out (as suggested by the last example), to be a disturbing and uncomfortable view. The worldless-ness of Levinas’ artistic representations may raise any number of differing responses.¹⁴ One might feel uncomfortable or shocked at being confronted by a largely incomprehensible entity or perhaps simply surprised and entertained. In any case, disinterest is only one possible response and perhaps a rather unusual response at that.

The work of art forces us to recollect the forgotten, untypified and in some ways perhaps even fearful (insofar as incomprehensible), materiality of experience. We have here

... a notion of materiality which no longer has anything in common with matter as opposed to thought and mind, which fed classical materialism. Matter as defined by mechanistic laws which sum up its whole essence and render it intelligible is the farthest removed from the materiality in forms of modern art. For here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare, ugly.¹⁵

The abstract work of art is, for Levinas, a ‘grasping as releasing’ and a ‘representing as not-representing’. Despite the apparent ‘paradox’ of this position, it does in fact seem consistent with a sense of otherness as a materiality and excessiveness of experience. Even given the example of waste (see note 12), which is in some senses an unwonted coming forth of materiality and in that sense perhaps an evasion of our grasp, rather than a ‘grasping/ungrasping’ (true artistic representation), we still do not have here an enclosure of that which simply cannot be enclosed. This is a relative otherness, an otherness that needs us in a sense, either as artist, or simply as the possessor of a project that distinguishes waste from work, in order to appear. Ultimately it is this that distinguishes the intimations of otherness to be found in the abstract work of art from the encounter with the fully ethical other in and through the voice and language. Not only do we not choose to have the ethical other before us, but insofar as we do it is not the other as such.

II

Social Otherness and Language

So far Levinas has spoken of art in relation to painting, photography and film. All of these have been modes of access to alterity as non-social otherness. However, it would seem that an abstractive visual representation of the ethical or social other could never truly convey his or her otherness. It would bring forth the materiality and un-synthesizability of embodiment, but not the sense of the ethical other as unwonted. It would be a visual grasping (even if it succeeded in being a grasping/ungrasping) of the other.¹⁶ A grasping which on Levinas' own account is inconsistent with the presence of an ethical other. In fact, social otherness would seem to be at once both an unwontedness and an evasion of the grasp. The grasp is that before which the other shrinks or better still cowers.

Let us consider Levinas' analyses of the ethical and aesthetic uses of language. The theory of language that Levinas sets forth in *Totality and Infinity*, and other earlier essays within which he engages with these issues, is in some respects consistent with and in other respects develops upon the conception of visual art briefly discussed thus far. As we have seen, the production of an abstract artistic representation (the only acceptable artistic representations on Levinas' terms), results in an abstraction of the thing represented from the worldly context in and through which it is normally understood. What will be explored in the second part of this essay is whether one might consistently carry out such an abstraction of the social other from his or her worldly context (insofar as such language is consistent with the notion of otherness in any case), *via* the use of language.

Three aspects of Levinas' theory of language will be considered here: the notions of language as designation, questioning and finally, the distinction between poetic and prosaic language. In the most general terms we are presented with a model of language as discourse in *Totality and Infinity*. Authentic language is not, according to Levinas simply an act of monological description or setting forth.¹⁷ It is always an other directed movement and hence also, always a movement beyond the enlightened world of one's own interiority. Both the analyses of designating and questioning are characterized by such an exceeding of the totality of my own visual and essentially silent world.

In designating a thing, we are told:

I designate it to the other. The act of designating modifies my relation of enjoyment and possession with things, places the things in the perspective of the other. Utilizing a sign is therefore not limited to substituting an indirect relation for the relation with a thing, but permits me to render the things offerable, detach them from my own usage, alienate them, render them exterior.¹⁸

It is a means by which I abstract things (as is also the avant-garde art so far discussed) from the context of my world and make them thematic for the other. The world in question here is the very typified and functionalized world described above and in carrying out such an abstraction, the very question of the world is opened up for discussion between my self and the other. Designation allows me to pull a thing out of my world (the world as seen in my totalizing gaze) and offer it to the other. It is indeed asserted to be an act *via* which I give the other the very 'gift' of my meaning and in this sense it has a substantive ethical role. Words do not simply stand in for, or cover over, the 'real' experiences, as Husserl believes. In this sense, to recall once again the language of world and abstraction. For Husserl, words and meanings both refer to and reflect, enworlded and horizontal structures, and therefore also totalities. Designation, is for Levinas, on the other hand an act of abstraction from such a totalized structure.

But are we then to understand Levinas' own texts as a giving of the other to the other, insofar as they circle around and in a certain uncomfortable and inconsistent way, eternally return to the other? Insofar as Levinas' texts are a designating/giving of the other, they are also an imprisonment of the other within a language that is as subject to the evils of repetition as any other philosophical language. It is the relations of the same and the other that he ever seeks to understand and the other that is ever newly exemplified, if not defined. Levinas himself has a rhythm even as he condemns rhythm. There are significant senses in which this movement of exemplification is itself not exemplary.

The reverse of the linguistic generosity of designation is the question. As well as giving to the other through my words, I may also be questioned by the other. Questioning

... is not explained by astonishment alone, but by the presence of him to whom it is addressed. A proposition is a sign which is already interpreted, which provides its own key. The presence of the interpretative key in the sign to be interpreted is precisely the presence of him who can come to the assistance of his discourse, the teaching quality of all speech. Oral discourse is the plenitude of discourse.¹⁹

In other words, to engage in discourse with the other is to be willing to answer and to be questioned by, the other. To say anything is, according to Levinas, at the least to expect to have to further clarify and explain.²⁰ But such questioning and answering is not simply a merely contingent aspect of language, we find instead that "... this assistance (the answer) always given to the word which posits the things is the unique essence of language."²¹ Answerability to the other is the defining characteristic of language. But it would also seem that in this sense and indeed as Levinas explicitly asserts here, that a truly ethical language must be oral. And yet once again we have here a certain inconsistency; a denial of the validity of textuality within a text.

Indeed, it is the very ‘questionableness’ (in the literal sense of this word) of both our actions and our hold upon the visual world that manifests our responsibility to the other. In being questioned my self-enclosed freedom and certainty are exposed as inadequate. “The presence of the other is equivalent to this calling into question of my joyous possession of the world.”²² It is *via* the questioning of the other that the iconoclastic erasure of my representations of the other occurs. In discourse there are never any final conclusions; simply more questions and answers.

However, we do not simply find ourselves in a world in which we are confronted by such ethical exchanges of questioning, answering and teaching. Not all forms of linguistic usage invite such ethical questioning by the other to the same extent and indeed, some forms of language positively suppress it. Specifically in question here is the poetic, and it is the distinction between the poetic and the prosaic that will be briefly discussed now. In *Totality and Infinity* we find that

To poetic activity—where influences arise unbeknown to us out of this nonetheless conscious activity to envelop it and beguile it as a rhythm, and where action is borne along by the very work it has given rise to... is opposed the language that at each instant dispels the charm of rhythm and prevents the initiative from becoming a role. Discourse (questioning and answering) is rupture and commencement, breaking of rhythm which enraptures and transports the interlocutors—prose.²³

There is a difference, then, between ethical language, a language open to the alterity of the question and the aestheticized language closed to alterity. Levinas (a solid Platonist in this respect) condemns the poetic in favour of the prosaic,²⁴ and yet also in a thoroughly Platonic move he condemns poetry from within a language that speaks of “clothing the world in light” (*Existence and Existents*), for example.

Poetry and prose are identified respectively, by Levinas, with rhythmic and ruptured linguistic exchange. However the language of poetry is for Levinas also the language of both theatre and liturgy. To be engulfed in the poetic or the rhythmic is to play a role. This is further also related to the ways in which as actors (in both senses of this word) within the functionalized social world we act out our ordained roles. To fulfil such a social role is to simply do what anyone else in our position would do. This is the functionalized social world as a stage for which we prepare every morning, as we shave or put on make up.

In *Reality and its Shadow*, where we are further told that: “Rhythm represents a unique situation where we cannot speak of consent, assumption, initiative or freedom, because the subject is caught up and carried away by it,”²⁵ and further still, that rhythm is the “... captivation or incantation of poetry and music. It is the mode of being to which applies neither the form of consciousness, since the I is there stripped of its prerogative to assume, its power, nor the form of unconsciousness, since the whole situation and all its articulations are in a dark light, present. Such is a waking dream.”²⁶ The life devoted

to the rhythmic or the aesthetic is a life in which one has lost one's power to question and hence to ask the other to give an account of him or her self, because of the incantations and enchantments of music and poetry.

In the rhythms of poetry we find a reconstruction of that harmonious and self enclosed horizontality analysed by Husserlian phenomenology.²⁷ This is a movement which is in time with itself and indeed disallows any variation. We cannot interrupt, question or offer the gift of our words to such a rhythmic progression, nor in fact do we really wish to either. It is always already finished and constructed before the fact. And indeed Levinas even goes so far as to suggest that "[a]ll the arts, even those based on sound, create silence."²⁸ It is here that we see the way in which Levinas reinterprets 'silence' to mean, not simply the literal silence that is an absence of sound, but rather the silence of a monotonous rhythmic sound without interruption. This is indeed also the silence of Hegel's dialectical harmonies and rhythms, which can have no questioner beyond them and hence allow no real transcendence. Levinas extends his original distinction between the silence of the visual realm and the aurality of the ethical to cover the aesthetic uses of sound as well. The aesthetic is still the 'silent', however it is not absolutely coextensive with the seen.

The notion of rhythm can be deepened, however, by relating it to the distinction between temporal diachrony and synchrony to be found in both *Existence and Existents* and *Totality and Infinity*. The visual world is an essentially synchronous world. It is structured by relations of repetition, harmonization and confirmation and it is in the most general sense synchronized. Even the otherness encountered *via* abstract art is able to be ignored if so we choose. It does not force itself upon us if we do not wish it to. That which breaks the rhythms of repetition and confirmation and cannot be ignored (the questioning other) is the diachronous.

But it is also *via* the notion of rhythm that Levinas expands upon his understanding of visual art. He asserts that "... we must detach them (the terms rhythm and musicality) from the arts of sound where they are ordinarily envisioned exclusively and draw them out into a general aesthetic category."²⁹ Rhythm is the category that fundamentally unites all aesthetic realms, whether visual or aural. The realist represents the harmony of the world; a world in time with itself and as such leaves no space for the other. The world of rhythm is self-enclosed. It is just such a self enclosed rhythmic structure, within which everything runs on time and things and people are in time with each other, that is questioned by the uncontrollable materiality of the abstract work of art and the unexpected and indeed, quite possibly undesired questions of the other. It would seem that the way in which this generalized notion of rhythm must be interpreted is on the basis of a recognition that everything is fundamentally temporal and temporalized, whether it be visual or aural or indeed even tactile. Insofar as this is the case it may be understood as being a harmonic confirmational structure through time or as a structureless disharmony. If one looks at a realist image, no matter where one starts (so to speak), one knows what sort of thing to expect, as one continues exploring. The painting or the sculpture unfolds through time as a harmonic and rhythmic structure of expectation and fulfilment.

Although it must also be observed in relation to these reflections that, without

specific examples, it is quite difficult to understand with complete clarity the exact meaning of this reapplication of essentially musical and poetic categories to the visual and plastic realms. Once again, as with his notion of abstract art, and perhaps even more so here, we have a concept in need of further clarification and exemplification.

III

Conclusion

In the first section of this paper Levinas' thesis that artistic abstraction allows access to an un-enworlded materiality has been briefly analysed and in the second we have seen *via* an analysis of language and musicality, that what is characteristic of realism (art as portraiture) by contrast, is a certain rhythmic quality of the work as it unfolds for me through time.

Far from being peripheral to Levinas' broader project, his reflections upon art allow us to understand his thought with considerably more depth. One finds here an undermining of that very traditional Western identification of the Good and the Beautiful, at least insofar as beauty is conceived in classical Greek terms, as order and harmony. To use a musical metaphor, one might say that the ethical life for Levinas is not a life of harmony and tonality, but rather of disharmony, surprise and a-tonality. Order structure and harmony are not 'natural' aspects of reality, but rather the result of a totalizing limitation of experience.

More specifically, these reflections on art have allowed us to clarify somewhat the relationships between the visual and the aural within Levinas' analyses. Far from the relationship between these two fields of possible experience taking the form of a simple dichotomy, reflection upon the work of art in Levinas, has brought to light a more nuanced relationship. One cannot simply assert that the visual realm is the realm of interiority and hence necessarily lacking in any ethical comprehension and that aural encounters are necessarily always ethical. In fact there are, according to Levinas experiences of otherness at the visual level (even though the ethical or social other as such cannot be encountered) and also experiences of violent interiorization at the aural level. These correspond respectively to abstract visual art and the poetico/musical. In this sense, then, 'silence' also, is not in Levinas simply a literal silence, able to be characterized as an 'absence of noise', nor is speech or orality simply a literal saying of words of any sort and in any way. True or real speech is prosaic and ruptured, just as silence is equivalent to any rhythmic absorption and domination of such a capacity to interrupt, be it visual or aural.

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Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow," trans. Alphonso Lingis, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Blackwell: Oxford, 1994) 137.
2. Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow" 141.
3. By 'realism', here, will be understood the attempt to produce a mirror image of the still en-worlded object as en-worlded. From this perspective, the peasant shoes that Heidegger makes so much of in *The Origin of the Work of Art* would indeed be understood to show forth a world. However, rather than being the authentic mode of the work of art (in contrast to art as a commodity and hence 'out of place'), this showing forth is itself a deficient representational mode. This is an understanding of realism as portraiture and indeed the paradigm of the in-authentic work of art must surely be for Levinas the portrait as an attempt to capture the 'character' of the person. The disordered materiality of the world shown forth by abstraction is distinct from any form of en-worldedness, be it as commodity, as object of use, or object of ritual.
4. Although, as with so many of Levinas other key terms it is necessary here, as well, to somewhat stretch and distort the standard meaning to get to his point. Clearly one would have to include sign languages, for example, within the realm of the voiced and sound. One is able to do this because the primary quality of the 'voiced' is the way in which it is characterized by its unwontedness and the ways in which it calls up our moral responsibility to the ethical other. This distortion of the literal meaning of the word is similar to the ways in which silence is also distorted, in order to also cover the 'silence' of the poetic. Somewhat more will be said of this later.
5. And so he says, for example: "Phenomenological description, which by definition cannot leave the sphere of light, that is, man alone shut up in his solitude, anxiety and death as an end, whatever analyses of the relationship with the other, it may contribute, will not suffice. Qua phenomenology it remains within the world of light, the world of the solitary ego which has no relationship with the other qua other, for whom the other is another me, an alter ego known by sympathy, that is, by a return to oneself." Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1978) 85. And further also: "... "knowledge does not surmount solitude. By themselves reason and light consummate the solitude of a being as a being, and accomplish its destiny to be the sole and unique point of reference for everything." Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987) 65, as distinct, for example, from both Husserl and Sartre. In Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* we find a position to the effect that the Other is experienced as an-other me in the visual field. For the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* that the Other is a subject as object. Neither of these positions satisfies Levinas.
6. As is also true of the Sartrean account and the Husserlian account of the pre-intersubjective

stratum of experience. Nevertheless, it is also true that in the Sartrean analysis the other does in fact appear, albeit as a 'subject become object'. The other always appears as either objectified by my gaze, or as the one who makes me his or her object. However, Levinas denies that the objectified other is such an other absorbed into, and hence appearing to, the same.

7. The distinction between talking "about" and talking "to" may be even better conveyed by distinguishing between gossiping about and talking to. This gives more of a sense of the way in which in talking about the other we are often involved in sheer fabrication, rather than ethical discourse.

8. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 52.

9. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 52.

10. Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," trans Albert Hofstadter, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (Routledge: London, 1993).

11. I am not, of course, trying to imply here that if one knows Husserl's phenomenology of perception one need not reflect upon Heidegger. It is rather the case that the notion of the contextuality of experience is sufficiently similar at a general level in both of these thinkers for an example from only one of them to suffice as an explanation of Levinas' point.

12. As was indeed done by the Dadaist Marcel Duchamp.

13. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 52. Levinas also points to photography and film and in particular to closeups, as potential sources of alienation from the enworlded and pre-digested thing. "Effects of a similar kind are obtained in cinema with closeups. Their interest does not only lie in that they can show details; they stop the action in which a particular is bound up with a whole, and let it exist apart. They let it manifest its particular and absurd nature which the camera discovers in a normally unexpected perspective—in a shoulder line to which the close-up gives the hallucinatory dimensions, laying bare what the visible universe and the play of its normal proportions tone down and conceal." Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 55.

14. This is not, in other words, simply the unworlded *Vorhandensein* of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which is a plurality of merely externally related and for this very reason, meaningless entities contemplated in theoretical disinterest.

15. Levinas, *Existence and Existents* 57. The fact that Levinas makes the assertion that "materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is brute but impassive presence; it is also what is humble, bare, ugly" suggests that materiality is not in fact identical with the notion of enjoyment and sensation to be found in *Totality and Infinity*. Far from this list of adjectives giving us a sense of a paradisiac bathing in the elements prior to any distinction between substance and adjective, it would seem that what we have here is a recollection of the marginalized. This recollection is at once from the perspective of the system that has made materiality marginal, insofar as it is humble, bare and ugly and yet also transgressive of this system insofar as it has weight, consistency and absurdity. We are further enlightened as to what Levinas is attempting to convey via the notion of materiality if we reflect upon the following two quotes. He says firstly of individuality that "The perception of individual things is the fact that they are not entirely absorbed in their form; they then stand out in themselves, breaking through, rending their forms, are not resolved into the relations that link them up to the totality. They are always in some respect like those industrial cities where everything is adapted to a goal of production, but which, full of smoke, full of wastes and sadness, exist also for themselves. For a thing nudity is the surplus of its being over its finality." Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1995) 74. In other words, even the most mechanized and technical contexts never completely succeed in functionalizing objects or things. Somehow they are out of our control; they produce waste and smoke and have a sadness of decay about them. Indeed Levinas even asserts that in constituting works we necessarily also always produce wastes. And so "The hand's rigorously economic movement of seizure and acquisition is dissimulated by the traces, "wastes", and "works" this movement of dissimulation leaves in its wake. These works, as city, field, garden,

landscape, recommence their elemental existence.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 159. In fact one could really say that the creation of a work is nothing more than a distinguishing between the ‘workliness’ of the work and the ‘waste’ that hinders it.

16. Although it must be said that it is far from clear whether Levinas is in fact correct in his rejection of visual Otherness. We have already seen above in note three’s reference to sign language, that all may not be so obviously happy with his account. It seems that it need not simply be the Husserlian alter ego, that is an-other me, that is encountered in the visual field. One thinks here of ballet, for example, which is surely as capable of surprising us as a question or a caress, although it must be granted that it is perhaps not able to bring us to the sense of moral responsibility and obligation that Levinas asserts in many locations is always part of the encounter with Otherness.

17. A theory which Levinas contrasts both with Husserl and Heidegger’s theorizations of language. “The function of words was understood in their dependence upon reason: words reflected thought... Husserl’s critique, completely subordinating words to reason, showed this divergency to be only apparent. The word is a window; if it forms a screen it must be rejected. With Heidegger, Husserl’s esperantist words take on the colour and weight of a historical reality. But they remain bound to the process of comprehension.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 205. Which displays (as one would expect) a particularly sharp insight into Husserlian phenomenological method. Husserl’s quite difficult language functions specifically to overcome the ways in which we take for granted the language of the tradition, without truly returning to a reflection upon the phenomena themselves.

18. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 209.

19. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 96.

20. As Plato also says in his seventh letter.

21. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 97.

22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 76.

23. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 203. But we also find on the page just preceding this one that “The ethical relation, the face to face, cuts across every relation one could call mystical,... where discourse becomes incantation as prayer becomes rite and liturgy, where the interlocutors find themselves playing a role in a drama that has begun outside of them.” Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 202.

24. The creation of poetry is in fact, we are told in very classical language, “... not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city.” Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow” 142. The poet has become lost in his dreams and in so doing lost in sameness and interiority itself. He no longer has any responsibility for or to the other; the unpredictable, ungraspable, diachronic other.

25. Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow” 132.

26. Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow” 133.

27. And so, for example, in “The Other in Proust” Levinas says of Proust that he was “... a wizard of inexpressible rhythm. He was the writer who, through a miracle of language, rediscovered and recreated a world and a time that had been lost through being dispersed into tiny moments.” Levinas, “The Other in Proust,” trans. Seán Hand, *The Levinas Reader* 161.

28. Emmanuel Levinas, “The Transcendence of Words,” trans. Seán Hand, *The Levinas Reader* 147.

29. Levinas, “Reality and its Shadow” 133.

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