

Art, Humanism and Otherness in Lévinas

According to Lévinas the relation of otherness was neither reducible to *being-with*, Heidegger's *Mitsein*, nor to Sartre's *being-for*. Otherness is located inside the subject, the self, itself a dialogue, a relation between self and other. The other, is inseparable from the ego, the Self (*Même* as intended by Lévinas), and as *Etranger* it cannot be included within the totality of the ego. The other is necessary to the constitution of the ego and its world, at the same time it is refractory to all those categories that wish to eliminate its otherness, thereby subjecting it to identity of self. The relation with the other gives rise to a constitutive impediment to integrity and closing of self, it is intended as a relation of excess, a surplus, the surpassing of objectivating thought, release from the relation between subject and object and from the relation of equal exchange.

Active in the very constitution of self, at the *linguistic level* otherness produces *internal dialogization of the word*, the impossibility of being an integral word; at the *linguistic-esthetic level*, the *double* of concept and reality; at the *moral level*, restlessness, obsession with the other, answerability.

An ethical foundation, therefore, is proposed by Lévinas for the self/other relation. But what does "ethical" mean in this context? Lévinas (1949:167-169) gives the following explanation:

Nous appelons éthique une relation entre des termes où l'un et l'autre ne sont unis par une synthèse de l'entendement ni par la relation de sujet à l'objet et où cependant l'un pèse ou importe ou est signifiant à l'autre, où il sont liés par une intrigue que le savoir ne saurait ni épuiser ni démêler.

The self/other relation irreducibly supercedes the realm of knowledge, of the concept, of abstract thought, even if the latter are possible thanks to this relation.

The appearance of the relation of otherness with the development of self-awareness (a condition of self-identity), is described by Lévinas as follows:

Quel est le rapport entre le "soi-même" et le pour-soi de la représentation? Le "soi-même" est-il une recurrence du même type que la conscience, le savoir et la représentation et qui se sublimerait seulement dans la conscience conçue comme Esprit? Le "soi-même" est-il conscience à son tour ou tout autre événement qui justifierait l'emploi de termes distincts: Soi, Je, Moi, ame? Les philosophes ont le plus souvent décrit l'identité du soi-même par le retour à soi de la conscience. Pour Sartre, comme pour Hegel le soi-même est posé comme un pour soi. L'identité du Je, se réduirait ainsi au retournement de l'essence sur elle-même, à son retour à elle-même et à l'identification du Même dont elle semblait à un moment être le sujet ou la condition (Lévinas 1968, now reformulated in 1974:131).

Contrary to Sartre and Hegel, for Lévinas the self of "being conscious of oneself" neither coincides with nor presupposes consciousness; rather it pre-exists with respect to consciousness to which it is connected by a relation of otherness and autonomy.

Lévinas turns his attention to socio-cultural phenomena as they originate from the category of other and not of self. In a chapter entitled "Le sens et l'œuvre" in his 1972 book *L'humanisme de l'autre homme* (now in Id. 1990), Lévinas uses the term *Œuvre*, to designate a movement toward the other where the possibility of return to self is excluded:

L'œuvre est une orientation qui va librement du Même à l'autre[...]. L'Œuvre pensée radicalement est un mouvement du Même qui ne retourne jamais au Même (Lévinas 1990: 6).

This movement is especially evident in artistic creation. Nonetheless it is not limited to the field of art but is present each time a human product conveys something more than its function—a chronotopic excess, a surplus value with respect to the restricted horizon of the needs, interests,

ideologies, values, life and time of the subject and its contemporaries. The specifically human present in any human enterprise, whatever it may be. As says Lévinas, beyond perfect adaptation to its own goal, the human enterprise

[...] porte le témoignage de son accord avec un je ne sais quel destin extrinseque au cours des choses, et qui la place en dehors du monde, comme le passe a jamais revolu des ruines, comme l'insaisissable étrangeté de l'exotique. (Lévinas 1948: 106)

To accept the concept of *œuvre* as designating the specifically human, as the movement in which the human is realized, means, says Lévinas, to support a kind of humanism in which the usual itinerary of philosophy is inverted and which

reste celui d'Ulysse dont l'aventure dans le monde n'a été qu'un retour à soi; le natale—une complaisance dans le Même, une méconnaissance de l'Autre. (Lévinas 1972a:5)

Humanism of otherness, of the other man (as already signalled, *Humanisme de l'autre homme* is the title of a book by Lévinas), finds expression in artistic production, in the immediate orientation of the latter toward the realization of an artwork.

Such a perspective favors a better understanding of the relation between art and answerability. Insofar as it is oriented in the sense of the concept of *œuvre*, art may be considered as being *dégagé* thanks to its otherness and autonomy as regards the author, and to its ability to surmount the historico-biographical and historico-social boundaries of its production: thanks to its excess as an *œuvre*. Much as the author would like to be *engagé*, the *œuvre's* disengagement is inevitable. The *œuvre* is essentially *dégagé*.

Disengagement of the *œuvre* has nothing to do with the esthetics of art for art's sake. Distancing from the subject, its release from the sphere of the same—the sphere of the single subject author as well as of the global social context in which the opus is produced—, its irreversible movement toward the other are elements which establish a link between art and answerability. The latter is neither intended in the juridical type, nor in the conventional-moral sense where the subject answers for himself and the disposition to *answer for* is entirely relative to the sphere of the subject's jurisdiction; a given code, specific duties, a contract, a particular role. By contrast, in the discourse of art answerability is no longer a question of answering for oneself but for the other: answerability for the other surpasses the limits of individual answerability (of an ethico-normative, juridical and political order), the laws of equal exchange, the functions fixed by roles and social position, the distinctions sanctioned by law between individual identities each with its private sphere of freedom and imputability.

In the relation of otherness understood as absolute otherness and not as otherness relative to self, the other is not given, it is not the object, it is not conceptually representable or definable. Lévinas mentions this relation in "La réalité et son ombre", although it is explicitly mentioned in terms of the relation with other people only toward the end. It should now be clear why in this article Lévinas maintains that the most elementary procedure in art consists in substituting the object for its *image*, and why the image is contrasted with the *concept*. The concept is the object insofar as it has been grasped, captured; and from this viewpoint there is no difference between knowledge and action: both capture the object. The image, instead, neutralizes such a relation with the real.

The so-called disinterestedness of art consists in neutralization, but such disinterestedness is not an expression of the subject's freedom and initiative, it does not ensue from a situation of power. On the contrary, the image implies dominion over the subject, recovery of the the subject's original sense as "being subject to something". The image involves a situation of passivity. Neither the

notion of "conscious" nor of "unconscious" can be applied here; although initiative and intentionality are lacking, this whole process develops in *praesentia*, before one's very own eyes, as in a "daydream". This particular situation is characterized by automatism, which Lévinas compares to dance, where "nothing is unconscious, but where the conscious paralyzed in its freedom performs (*joue*) wholly absorbed in this performance (*jeu*)".

The image is the otherness of what is, the *étrangété* of what is with respect to itself, its double. The thing is itself and the image of itself; consequently, the image, the double, is as real as the fact that something is what it is. Identity and *étrangété*, otherness: these are the two faces of the real which realism does not capture. Art looks at the real's double. Art does not represent reality but we could say that it pictures its double.

In "La realite et son ombre", Lévinas too observes that in art the real world seems to be placed in parentheses or inverted commas, a procedure realized differently according to the various modalities of writing. The double—otherness as it escapes the identity of what is, or the image pictured in art—is always to a degree parodic, caricatural. Unlike objective discourse, objectified discourse is not taken seriously; rather, it is discourse in disguise. Objectified discourse reveals what the subject does not succeed in grasping, thus rendering awkward and ridiculous its attempts at containing such discourse within the sphere of its own identity. The parodic aspect of the double is analyzed by Lévinas. He observes that a person is not only his identity, that which is, but that together with the being he coincides with, he wears his very caricature on his face, his picturesque side. The picturesque, says Lévinas, is always a little caricatural. Likewise, a thing does not coincide with what it is as the object of knowledge or of practical activity; relatively to what the subject wants it to be in relation to cognitive and practical functions it remains behind, like a dead weight. For this reason we might say that things are always in a sense "still-life".

Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. The picturesqueness is always to some extent a caricature. Here is a familiar everyday thing, perfectly adapted to the hand which is accustomed to it, but its qualities, color, form, and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the "old garments" of a soul which had withdrawn from that thing, like a "still life" (Lévinas 1948; Eng. trans.:135).

Because of its relation with death, the caricatural nature of the double, the fact that the image tells of linear, productive, cumulative time, the artwork is always more or less comico-tragic, simultaneously. As Lévinas says, every image is already a caricature, but such caricature is turned toward the tragic.

If we now consider the relation between orality and writing with respect to the possibility of dialogism and otherness, we realize that the sign of otherness which finds expression in written and oral language, exists autonomously and antecedently as regards orality and writing. The sign in which otherness manifests itself does not require vocalization to subsist, it is independent from the phoné, and has a life of its own antecedent to orality; just as it is independent from the written sign as such, for not all of what is written is portrayal of otherness, of the image.

The question of the specific sign of otherness and dialogue cuts across the opposition between orality and writing and, moreover, refers beyond the limits of the verbal, calling for consideration of the relation between verbal signs and nonverbal signs. If writing favors the development of Socratic dialogue, at the same time it produces dialogic texts which of original Socratic dialogue maintain only the form: their content is monologic, and dialogue is no more than a method used pedagogically to expound a thesis, a doctrine. As we know, this is what occurs in Plato himself.

Such transformation is not caused by use of the written form, but by subjection of the dialogic form to the direct word, the objective word. Where, instead, the indirect, distanced word prevails, where writing resorts to syntactic and literary distancing expedients from one's own word, in both reporting and reported speech, to devices that transform the objective word into the objectified word—regarding Plato, this occurs above all in the *Symposium*—, the dialogic form rediscovers the effective dialogism of content.

According to this acceptation, *writing* is a practice which does not identify with the production of written signs: thus intended, the term "writing" can also be used to indicate a practice independent from the phoné, and traceable outside verbal signs in general every time we have a one-way movement, without returns, also in the sense of "without profit", a movement toward otherness which Lévinas calls *œuvre*. This movement is present in the artwork as such, but does not belong to the artwork alone: on the contrary, the esthetic event shares in the character of *œuvre*. Therefore the *œuvre* can also be traced outside the esthetic sphere, even though it emerges in the latter as a fundamental condition, as a method. "Writing", therefore, is a practice oriented according to the movement of the *œuvre*..

Together with Lévinas, we may use the term "trace" for the sign of this "writing" practice as it is characterized by the movement of the *œuvre*. The "trace" is the sign of otherness and dialogic openness. It is what in *Totalite' et Infini* and *Autrement qu'être* Lévinas characterizes as the significance of signification in communication: that is, the fact that signification signifies in saying and is not exhausted in the said. Characteristics of the significance of saying comprise: autonomy with respect to the "said"; the fact that it is a surplus nonfunctional to the exchange of messages; disymmetry, excess (that is, the significance of saying escapes being and the categories which describe it), "uselessness" by comparison with the economy of "narration", of the "fabula"; self referentiality, ambiguity, equivocity, contradiction; the fact that what is revealed in the significance of saying does not unveil itself, remains invisible, irreducible to the status of object, does not lose its interiority, its secret; lastly, openness to absolute otherness. Thanks to all these characteristics, the significance of saying as proximity, contact, intercorporeity, involvement, is characterized as writing (intransitive writing as distinguished from transcription by Barthes).

To recognize the Lévinasian relation of otherness as writing, the relation of otherness as obtained in the significance of saying, means to become aware of the equivocation implied in wanting to see in the Lévinasian "face-to-face" relation a preference for oral discourse and consequent depreciation of writing (a sort of return to Plato).

For Lévinas, as he explicitly states in his preface to *L'au-de-là du verset* (1982b) the human word in itself is writing given its ability to constantly signify more than what it says, given the excess of the signifier with respect to the signified, of saying over the said. As the expression of otherness, as the trace, the presence of an absence, the word presents itself as writing independently of the fact of being written in the literal sense. Writing, says Lévinas, exists in language and communication before the stylet and the pen impress letters on tablets, parchment, or paper, "literature before the letter!": communication and language do not merely have the status of instruments, they are not exhausted by the literal sense of what they prescribe, thematize, or disclose.