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From Eros to the Question of the Death of God

I would like to explore two essential themes in Levinas's philosophy. First, I will examine how Levinas, in the outline of his attempt at fiction, *Eros*, or *Sad Opulence*, manages to join the erotic and the ethical. Secondly, I will argue that the rhetoric of the prophetic in Levinas's discourse takes aim at the end of the rhetoric of the promise and should be read in light of the unfathomable question concerning the death of God in the Nazi extermination camps. My aim here is to demonstrate how Levinas, the philosopher, found in literary texts, as exemplified by Vassily Grossman's monumental work *Life and Fate*, the possibility of an anti-rhetoric of the prophetic that led him to conceive God as still audible after the Shoah.

1 The Erotic and the Ethical in Dialogue

In the fragment *Eros*, which is actually entitled *Sad Opulence* (Levinas 2013), our novelist-philosopher sets the action during the spring of 1940. The major character in the beginning of the work, the recently mobilized Paul Rondeau, enters into a dialogue with France and also with history. The plot, from which eroticism is not absent, is psychological. We encounter Joan of Arc and General Weygand. The narrative gathers momentum when Rondeau's battalion is captured and he becomes a *Kommando* in charge of a group of prisoners, several of whom are Jewish. In the course of these pages, Levinas introduces a passage devoted to women and a "soft" eroticism – an eroticism bathed in poetry: "Mais le jour où à travers une fenêtre ouverte on a aperçu une jeune fille qui peignait de longs cheveux on avait l'impression d'une indécence ou d'un rêve, d'une poésie aiguë et déchirante de la beauté qui fait mal. Plus fort que la Lorelei, mais pas plus haut. Le mélange d'une grande beauté et d'une grande bassesse. [But the day when across an open window one caught a glimpse of a young girl who was combing her hair, one had the impression of an indecency or a dream, of a sharp and

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rending poetry, of beauty which causes pain. Stronger than the Lorelei, but not higher. The blending of a great beauty and a great baseness.]" (Levinas 2013, 50).

Let us now examine how the phenomenologist analyzes the utility of the pair of stockings that is drying in the wind: "ces bas qui réchauffent ou qui empêchent que la chaussure n'irrite la peau et ne la blesse et que dans l'usage quotidien on manie avec la précision et la sobriété de médecin n'avaient plus rien de leur chaste essence d'ustensiles. [these stockings that keep one warm or prevent the shoe from irritating the skin and wounding it and that daily use treats with the precision and sobriety of a physician . . . no longer had anything left of their chaste essence as tools.]" (Levinas 2013, 50–51) It is not the "[m]onde cannibale de l'érotisme [cannibalistic world of eroticism]" (Levinas 2013, 51) of which Levinas speaks, but, beginning with an erotic allegory, a return to things themselves. A pair of stockings is there foremost not to excite the erotic imagination of the man, but rather as protection for a woman's legs.

In this fragment of his novel, Levinas returns to Bobby, the little dog who, in the stalag, had glommed onto the *Kommando* of the Jewish prisoners: "ce fut le seul être qui ne faisait pas de différence entre les prisonniers et les aryens qui les gardaient. [. . .] Il reconnaissait seul le droit de l'homme et la dignité de la personne de ces juifs. [the only being who did not discern a difference between the prisoners and the Aryans who were guarding them [. . .] He only recognized human rights and the dignity of the Jewish person.]" (Levinas 2013, 51) We can compare this page to the particular text in *Difficult Freedom*, which draws as much from the genre of the story, as from the novella, the press, and philosophy and which is titled "The Name of a Dog, or Natural Rights". "But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. [. . .] For him, there was no doubt that we were men." (Levinas 1990, 153)

There is in these strictly speaking non-philosophical texts a rift between moral conduct and the forbidden, between narration and reflection, between prose in its pure state and a speculative discourse such as that between the psychology of the characters and the action that drives them. Love of literature again assumes here in a brief instant its place in the imagination of a man nourished from his earliest years by the great Russian novelists. Beyond these novelistic fragments, there is, as there was in his Russian youth, a Levinas who was a poet – as can now be read for the first time in the third volume of the *inédits* (Levinas 2013) that I wish to acknowledge for including an impressive number of unedited poems and especially some one would not inevitably expect to find. It is an impressive collection that gives a more complete and almost definitive vision of Levinas the philosopher, more in keeping with the man, the thinker, that he was, for they grant him the secret share of literary ambition and of efforts to produce non-philosophical writings. Jean-Luc Nancy examines the transgression

linked in part to the erotic “à la fois emblème et lieu effectif [at the same time emblem and actual site],” but, on the other hand, connected as well to a form of writing employed here because “[l]a littérature permet la transgression: c’est-à-dire qu’elle la transporte hors de tout cadre moral ou légal et en permet l’expression. [Literature permits transgression, that is to say, it transports transgression outside any moral or legal framework and allows for its expression.]” (Nancy 2013, 28). It is as if literature, for the philosopher, incarnates eros in its dimension of mystery, of desire, of the quest for going beyond being for being.

However, contrary to Sartre, Levinas did not seek to make these literary premises parallel to his philosophical work, which is already doubled by a strong Talmudic and Jewish content – and by a book so close to being literature: *Proper Names*. In his “Philosophical Notes on Eros”, Levinas strongly separates himself from Heidegger, who in *Being and Time* outlines a phenomenology in which, so to say, there is no relationship between beings. On the contrary, Levinas defines the relationship with the shopkeeper, or the artisan, as an act of sociality (Levinas 2013, 165). He distinguishes, for example, “cette relation interpersonnelle de commerce économique ou intellectuel [this interpersonal relation of economic or intellectual commerce]” from social, non-commercial relations (Levinas 2013, 167). There exists in these pages a play on the polysemic meaning of the word commerce, as when Levinas writes, “le commerce intellectuel est essentiellement une communion [intellectual commerce is essentially a communion]” (Levinas 2013, 166–167), before using the word several lines later to speak of commercial relations, which, if they are sometimes similar, are opposed to one another more than they can be considered mutual substitutes, communion being only rarely a commercial relationship.

On the level of eros itself, we find marvelous expressions, such as these: “Autrui – c’est négativement le caché. Et l’éros c’est la communion avec le caché. Le caché n’est pas seulement ce qui est caché pour la connaissance; ce qui est ignoré: c’est la caresse qui est en quelque manière l’accès à autrui. [The Other is negatively the hidden. And eros is communion with the hidden. The hidden is not only what is concealed from knowledge; it is what is not known: it is the caress, which, in a certain way, gives access to the other.]” (Levinas 2013, 179) Quite paradoxical as well as strange is the development of sexuality that Levinas sees as “une relation sans ‘avoir’ et par conséquent une relation sans responsabilité. Dans l’événement sexuel – la volupté et la caresse – le moi sort du règne de la possession – il sort de lui-même, de la tautologie moi-soi. [a relationship without possession and consequently a relationship without responsibility. In the sexual experience, in the sensual pleasure of the caress, the self leaves the domain of possession and goes out from the tautology of the I-Self.]” (Levinas 2013, 181) Despite these paradoxes, Levinas insists on the fact that nudity is not only “le fait

d'être sans vêtements. Elle est l'apparition et l'appel du mystère, le fait pour le Mystère de se révéler. [the fact of being without clothes. It is the apparition and the summons of mystery, the way for mystery to reveal itself.]” (Levinas 2013, 181) From which follows the total rejection of pornography, which denies all mystery, where flesh, reduced to being only a receptacle for pleasure as well as sexual pain, has nothing to reveal in its nudity. In these non-dated “Notes”, close in time to the writing of *Totality and Infinity*, there arises the rustling of the “there is” in its association with night, as we found in Blanchot, but which goes back further to *From Existence to Existents*, written right after the war. Levinas clearly distinguishes between the anonymity of the “there is” and the “assumption du présent à travers la distance de l’instant [taking on of the present via the distance of the instant]” (Levinas 2013, 162).

2 The Prophetic Function and the Question of the Death of God

How can we now approach Levinas from the precise point of view of the prophetic function with, as a surplus, the testimonial function? An entire part of his work can be read under the aegis of prophetic philosophy or of testimonial rhetoric, even when the testimonial function breaks in some way with the entire prophetic function in our time, which we can qualify as postmodern, if it is true that it is situated beyond modernity, the contemporary, and the current. Can we speak of a prophetic rhetoric in Levinas, and if so, what do we make of his ethical rhetoric? As I will attempt to demonstrate, there is a fundamental break from the prophetic to the ethical, namely, the break in history constituted by the years 1939 to 1945. I will begin with the rhetorical function, from the acknowledgment of the death of God in the extermination camps, in order to reach what we see as the end of any rhetorical, prophetic function: Levinas’s encounter with the masterpiece by the Russian novelist Vassily Grossman: *Life and Fate*. Philippe Nouzille, a Catholic theologian and philosopher, in his last work titled *Beyond the Self* and subtitled *Revelation and Phenomenology* (2014), brought in from the very first page these words of Levinas, speaking about 1941, as from a “a hole in History, a year in which all the visible gods had abandoned us, in which god was really dead or gone back into his non-revealedness.” (Levinas 1987a, 93) But is there not between these two concepts in Nouzille’s subtitle an antinomy, a radical opposition, that of Revelation and Phenomenology? Through phenomenology, he aims to approach the fact of revelation. What is in the realm of revelation, however, cannot

belong to phenomenology, and the same goes for our question – what is in the realm of revelation was canceled by the Shoah.

Let us take serious Levinas's formulation on the veritable death of God, as if Nietzsche had moved forward in a tempestuous or visionary or prophetic manner – or what he calls “his non-revealedness.” God returned to the state of the underside of revelation. If biblical Revelation carries in its heart a promise made to men, made to his [God's] people in the broadest sense, or to his peoples, because no single people has the privilege or the presumption; to say that this God, the God of Revelation, returned to his non-revealedness, signifies something much more serious that Levinas took a long time to formulate: there are no longer any promises possible. The end of the promise requires then, for the philosopher of *Totality and Infinity* who still uses the language of ontology, the construction of an ethics that is capable of responding to the absence of any promise. This end undoubtedly does not signal the end of metaphysics or the end of the prophetic function, except as regards the belief that nothing means anything. Be that as it may, neither of these two functions can endure any longer in the same way after recognizing this acknowledgement. Levinas is not proposing a hypothesis here; he is setting forth a theological affirmation. Thus it is necessary to take him at his word. Yes, after Auschwitz, there is no longer any covenant possible, only the illusion of a covenant.

There is a great distance between Nietzsche's discourse on the death of God and that of Levinas. If by “the death of God,” Nietzsche intended to hasten the presupposed end of religion as we had understood it until then, what Levinas means implicitly by the end of the promise is even much more hallucinatory and terrifying. Certainly, Franz Rosenzweig, in “Das neue Denken: Einige nachträgliche Bemerkungen zum *Stern der Erlösung*,” affirmed, immediately after the First World War, that “God hat eben nicht die Religion geschaffen, sondern die Welt.” (Rosenzweig 1925, 442) But what can a religion be when it is emptied of its power to announce a *happy ending*? What does it serve, what is its ultimate goal?

If we can still speak of prophecy, of the prophetic function after Auschwitz, it must take into account the no longer simple question of *tsimtsum*, of the hidden God of the cabalists, but but rather the notion of a God who is no longer the God of promise, but the one who abandoned His children, His people, in the most appalling abyss.

Let us reread the words of the madman in *The Gay Science*: “Where is Gott? I'll tell you. We have killed him – you and I! We are all his murderers.” (Nietzsche 2001, 119–120) In his fifth book, subtitled *We fearless ones*, Nietzsche added a second declaration: “The greatest recent event –that ‘God is dead’; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable – is already starting to cast its first

shadow over Europe.” (Nietzsche 2001, 199) Nietzsche attached great importance to his a-theological discovery. Heidegger, however, so profoundly antisemitic, anti-Judaic, glosses the quotation thus: “It is clear from this sentence that Nietzsche, in speaking about the death of God, means the Christian God. But it is no less certain and no less to be kept in mind beforehand that Nietzsche uses the names ‘God’ and ‘Christian God’ to indicate the supersensory world in general. God is the name for the realm of ideas and the ideal. Since Plato, or more accurately, since the late Greek and the Christian interpretations of the Platonic philosophy, this realm of the supersensory has been considered the true and actually real world. [. . .] ‘God is dead’ means: the supersensory world has no effective power. It does not bestow life. Metaphysics, which for Nietzsche is Western philosophy understood as Platonism, is at an end.” (Heidegger 2002, 162)

Let us now return to *The Humanism of the Other Man*. The last chapter, “No Identity,” opens with words quite Nietzschean but perhaps also anti-Nietzschean: “The end of humanism, of metaphysics – the death of man, the death of God (or death to God) – these are apocalyptic ideas or slogans of intellectual high society.” (Levinas 1987b, 141) Levinas takes up in his own way a rhetoric that has biblical accents, which resonates with unbelievable force in our time, torn precisely between ethics and no more ethics. We are facing an opposition that it is difficult not to consider essential. This marks the end of theodicy, the “end of all theodicy,” (Levinas 1986) as Levinas specifies in a rare untitled text, to which he never returned, on the scandal of evil.

Voici l'être vidé de Dieu et qui n'en finit pas de finir – selon Maurice Blanchot. Voilà un Dieu qui s'est “laissé vider” plus lamentablement que le Dieu qui s'est laissé mourir chez Nietzsche. Cette petite fille sur l'écran de la télévision qui se noie lors de la récente catastrophe de Colombie est sans doute seule à appeler encore sa maman, vainement, au secours : “Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné ?”. Il n'y eut plus de Dieu là où les faibles périssaient. Mais, dans les camps d'extermination, Emil Fackenheim a vu le Diable. [Here is being emptied of God, who never finishes finishing – according to Maurice Blanchot. There is a God who “let himself be emptied” more lamentably than the God who let himself die in Nietzsche's writings. This little girl on the television screen who is drowning in the recent catastrophe in Colombia is undoubtedly alone in vainly calling again to her mother for help: “My God, my God why have you abandoned me?” There is no longer any God there where the weak perish. Rather, in the extermination camps, Emil Fackenheim encountered the Devil.] (Levinas 1986)

The question posed to us is this: who is the God who returned to his non-revealedness or the dead God of whom the philosopher speaks here? Because in any epoch we could not speak of God “there where the weak were dying” even if we were to do so, out of weakness perhaps. What absolute change has

occurred in order for discourse, for biblical but also philosophical rhetoric, to thus lose its power of persuasion?

A German journalist interviewed Levinas for *Spuren* seven years before his death. Let us reread the strong words he spoke in answering the interviewer:

Questioner – Le Dieu qui révèle ici son sens, c'est encore et toujours le Dieu positif de la toute puissance, le Dieu d'une existence suprême. Vu à partir de Nietzsche, c'est donc le Dieu dont la pensée passait les voies du nihilisme, en le poussant vers une crise désespérée. [The God who here reveals his meaning is always the positive, all powerful God, the God of supreme existence. Beginning with Nietzsche, he is seen thus as the God whose thought passed through the paths of nihilism, pushing it towards a desperate crisis.]

Emmanuel Levinas – Ce Dieu a encore une voix. Il parle avec une voix muette, et cette parole est écoutée. Mais ce Dieu est le Dieu mort de Nietzsche. Il s'est suicidé à Auschwitz. Cependant l'autre Dieu qui ne peut pas être prouvé statistiquement et celui qui seul figure en tant que fait de l'humanité, c'est une protestation contre ce qui seul figure en tant que fait de l'humanité, c'est une protestation contre Auschwitz. Et ce Dieu apparaît dans le visage de l'autre. Dans ce sens précis, Dieu fait irruption dans la pensée, mais dans la pensée conçue phénoménologiquement, d'une manière rigoureuse. Et cela, c'est l'éthique. [This God still has a voice. He speaks in a mute voice, and his word is listened to. But this God is Nietzsche's dead God. He committed suicide at Auschwitz. However, the other God, who cannot be proven statistically and who alone figures as a fact of humanity, is a protestation against which humanity signifies as protestation against Auschwitz. And this God appears in the face of the other. In this precise way, God bursts into thought, conceived of phenomenologically in a rigorous way. And that is ethics. (Levinas 1995, 134–135)

Through this reply, Levinas refutes any prophetic function. But he touches here upon the basis of the aporia/impass of the end of meaning, the limit of discourse that he took up only once, in 1986, with an accent of endless hopelessness. It is a forbidden question, which becomes, in this way, the sole question that dominates everything and which presupposes the ultimate question: “Can one remain a Jew before God who breaks the covenant, who stops answering, who refuses help, and who lets you die as if he abandoned you? Do we not, by remaining Jewish, take lightly the despair – and perhaps the doubts – of those who were going to die?”

It matters little here the reply Levinas offers to Fackhenheim. The ultimate question remains and signals the ultimate reply. But did he not go to the end of aporia, of the logical incompatibility of the question he posed, of the infinitude of the question? After that, how can one redeem a God who allowed Himself to die lamentably along with His children, His chosen people from time immemorial? This people had been for all time the people of the promise. Does not letting this people die thus amount to killing the promise that they carried in themselves for three thousand years?

The depth of the abyss presented here is to reply no longer to a God who has broken the covenant, but rather to a God who let himself die at Auschwitz-Birkenau or, worse yet, to a phantom of a one and only God whom men have been addressing since Abraham and Moses, but who is a utopia. Let us take up the rest of the text:

Emil Fackenheim pense pourtant que ne pas assurer la continuation d'Israël reviendrait à parachever l'entreprise criminelle du national-socialisme, à combler les vœux de Hitler: anéantir Israël pour annuler son message. Oublier la Bible, oublier la Thora, oublier la miséricorde qui, à travers la Loi, est ordonnée aux hommes. D'où devoir impérieux : rester juif, maintenir Israël, accomplir les conditions morales et politiques de cette existence. Bâti la nation et l'Etat – formes modernes de cette survie du peuple. [Emil Fackenheim, however, thinks that not to assure the continuation of Israel would be equivalent to putting the finishing touches on the criminal enterprise of National Socialism, to fulfilling Hitler's vow: to annihilate Israel in order to destroy nullify its message. To forget the Bible, to forget the Torah, to forget mercy, which through the Law is commanded to men. From that point comes the imperious duty: to remain Jewish, to support Israel, to live up to the moral and political conditions of its existence. To build the nation and the State – modern forms of the survival of the people.] (Levinas 1986)

Today we ask ourselves – how can we not raise this question? – the way in which Israel replies to these questions. But in doing so, we would be going beyond our problematic. Thus, let us come back to Levinas.

We can take note of the fact that the written form of the word God is different in *Humanism of the Other Man*, where “god is truly dead or has returned to His non-revealedness” (Levinas 1987, 93) is written in small letters, in relation to all his other texts, including this last one, where God who breaks the covenant is once again written in capital letters.

The presupposition that leads Levinas to speak of a God who breaks the covenant is quite paradoxical and raises numerous questions, as do Paul Celan's poetry and Elie Wiesel's *Night*. However, in the interview cited above, the philosopher definitely concedes that “[u]n certain Dieu et une certaine façon de penser Dieu, telle qu'elle est propre aux instances religieuses positives, a certainement pris fin [a certain god, a certain way of thinking about God (...) appropriate to positive religious moments has certainly ended]” (Levinas 1995, 135); but on the other hand, he notes that the entity “speaks in a mute voice,” even if “this word is listened to. But this God is the dead God of Nietzsche. He committed suicide at Auschwitz.” (Levinas 1995, 135) “La négation de Dieu par Nietzsche a été confirmée par le XXe siècle; le Dieu de la promesse, le Dieu donnant, le Dieu comme substance – tout cela ne peut être maintenu, bien entendu. [Nietzsche's negation of God was confirmed by the

twentieth century, the God of promise, the giving God of substance – all that cannot be maintained of course.]” (Levinas 1995, 133)

In these two texts Levinas ends with a philosophical way-out, an intentional aiming. In fact, this dead god, preached about by churches and religious authorities, is definitely dead, but he is not the true god. It is as if Levinas, confirming the death of this God, who is the God of theologians, had an obsessive wish to found a new relationship with the divine, with a God who comes to mind and does not preach.

What then is the high point of all of the rhetoric on presence (parousie)? That it is as if the Apocalypse – or revelation – were no longer at the end of history but at the beginning or in the middle.

If theologians of different religions proved their inability to speak of a God who died at Auschwitz, arriving at the aporia (impass?) of their discourse, then we can say either that they are incapable of taking into account what destabilizes and essentially contradicts them, and thus they destroy themselves, or that they take this into account but do not draw any lesson that has true meaning, that can be heard by those who call their rhetoric into doubt. Of course, there exist exceptional theologians who worked with great courage to define possible Christian theologies after the death of God during the Shoah. But we find only a few rabbis after the Shoah who have made theological advances, taking these questions into account, such as Emil Fackenheim, Abraham Yeshoua Heschel, and Leo Baeck, who was deported in 1943 to Theresienstadt. These questions were above all taken up by certain poets, musicians, philosophers, and writers, among whom Levinas is one of the most important, but also by other writers, Yiddish or not, such as Yitskhok Katzenelson, killed at Birkenau in 1944 and author of the terrifying *Song of the Murdered Jewish People*; Benjamin Fondane, who died several months later in the same gas chambers; and Paul Celan, who took his own life in Paris in 1970. Can we say that Levinas was wrong the day he replied that religion could offer more consolation than philosophy (cf. Levinas 1998a, 86) ?

At this time I would like to open another path in our exploration. Nothing would be more absurd than to oppose philosophy to literature, because, for more than a century now, so many philosophers and writers have built bridges between these two disciplines, two fields of action and thought. If it is true that fundamental questioning of being, of the self but also of the other as the source of all morality of all ethics, is the formidable contribution of philosophy, which elaborates with phenomenology all questioning, it does the same with regard to things in themselves and first causes, as well all things in an ultimate sense, which pertain to metaphysics. Philosophy has a powerful relationship with the prescriptive, the juridical, and with rhetoric. On the other hand, contrarily perhaps to literature, to poetry, it does not assume any power/right regarding prayer. But let us go a bit

further. So many contemporary and likewise more classical philosophers knew how to reach transcendence in non-conceptual discourses, such as literature, poetry, mysticism, sacred writings, not to mention art and music.

Among the many philosophers who found in writers and poets a sustenance for their exploration of the conceptual, epistemological, analytical, phenomenological and metaphysical realms, Heidegger encountered in Hölderlin and in Trakl two poets who marked, by means of another rhetoric, a unique story and related it to Greek mythology. Levinas found in the Torah and the Talmud – more so than in the greatest literature, from the Greek tragedies to Celan and Jabès – elements that nourished his philosophical discourse, and his ethics, in particular. Dostoevsky, not Kant, in this realm brought him the idea of a universal responsibility of men for one another. He regularly quoted the eternal words of the staretz, Father Zossima, in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everyone, and I more than the others.” (cf. Levinas 1991, 146; cf. Levinas 1998, 105) Responsibility is already present in the Torah, naturally, but here it takes on an altogether universal form. Then, in 1982, at the dawn of his last and so fruitful decade, reflecting on “God who comes to mind,” we see the concept of saintliness assume an all-important place, which is nothing less than totally anti-rhetorical, because we either scorn it or scorn ourselves in the depths of our human conscience, or we aspire to it from afar, or we embody it, without knowing so, of course. In 1980, Levinas discovered a final Russian masterpiece, by Vassily Grossman, titled *Life and Fate*, which brought to fruition the last part of his own work on the beyond of ethics, a meta-ethics altogether contemporary with the moment when the term “saintliness” appeared in his writings, and which we could qualify as the sublime epiphany.

All of his discourse on the epiphany of the face, of God who comes to mind, if it brings no new proof of the existence of God, does speak of the irreducible place of an invisible presence, of a “new breath,” which lets itself be heard and perceived. There remained for Levinas an evidence, that of a summoning to human gratuitousness, which assumed a new name for him: the small goodness.

What is conceived of as a concept can still be induced from a homiletic rhetoric. On the contrary, what escapes a concept, a dogma by nature can in no way enter into a rhetoric if it is not by breaking it open. Levinas knows that there are rituals in life, in particular in Judaism, which escape all rhetoric; he likewise knew that there were human actions that similarly escaped it. With Vassily Grossman, it is necessary to leave the realm of rhetoric, that is the great instituted Good, whether it be ecclesiastical, ideological, political, or philosophical.

Let us note that at least in contemporary philosophy since Bergson, there is a moment when “diachrony [. . .] will turn out to be love of one’s fellowman.” (Levinas 1998b, 208) But how can philosophy, which is not a religion and offers

so little wisdom in our time, put in place love for one's neighbor? To answer this question, let us come back to Levinasian presuppositions, to that which is above all essential for him. Levinas always wished to read the word philosophy as the wisdom of love, which, for all that, did not exclude the wisdom of knowledge or science, as epistemologists understand it. Let us read as signature and prolepsis his lines:

He [the author of *Totality and Infinity*] then asked himself whether all that was dear to the love of "the love of wisdom," or the love that is the philosophy of the Greeks, was the certainty of fields of knowledge directed toward the object, or the even greater certainty of reflection on these fields of knowledge; or whether knowledge beloved of and expected from philosophers was not, beyond the wisdom of such knowledge, the wisdom of love or wisdom in the guise of love. Philosophy as love of love. A wisdom taught by the face of the other man !
(Levinas 1998b, 200)

We can be surprised by the at once questioning and affirmative phrasing chosen by the philosopher, who concludes with a period, not a question mark. Levinas echoes Plato: "It is in view of the Good that each soul does what it does" (cf. *The Republic*, 505 d-e). Once again, we are in the midst/context of the rhetorical function. But soon the end of all rhetoric shows up, when he invokes Grossman in *Life and Fate*. Here are several of the anti-conceptual words that the author of *Otherwise than Being* uses: mercy, goodness, kenosis (humbling oneself?), epiphany, and finally, saintliness. Where does he find them? They do not come from the philosophical lexicon. He found them, he read them in works of theology, in Russian and French literature, and above all in the Torah, except for the words kenosis and epiphany, which come from Greek. We understand here the metaphor of *Ruah hakodesh*, the spirit of saintliness, so striking in the book of Ezekiel, when God says: "Spirit, come from the four winds, breathe on these dead, so that they might live again!"

Then, let us say that the *Ruah hakodesh*, the spirit of saintliness did breathe and still breathes highly and sublimely through the pen of Vassily Grossman, at a level rarely reached in the twentieth century. Levinas reads Grossman for us, with us:

He thinks that "the small goodness" from one person to his fellowman is lost and deformed as soon as it seeks organization and universality and system, as soon as it opts for doctrine, a treatise of politics and theology, a party, a state, and even a Church. Yet it remains the sole refuge of the good in being. Unbeaten, it undergoes the violence of the evil, which, as small goodness, it can neither vanquish nor drive out. A little kindness going only from man to man, not crossing distances to get to the places where events and forces unfold! A remarkable utopia of the good or the secret of its beyond.
(Levinas 1998b, 230)

Levinas, philosopher, phenomenologist, as Grossman the writer, sought untiringly the trace of the "*for-the-other* [. . .], in which, in the adventure of a possible holiness, the human interrupts the pure obstinacy of being and its wars."

(Levinas 1998b, 231) In this way, it is possible to show how Levinas's philosophy of saintliness (the for-the-other) stems from the rhetorical function and, in a certain way, also from the prophetic function. Confronted with the question of Auschwitz and the death of God (by suicide), this development of his thought leads up to the theme of the epiphany of the face, of saintliness in the sense that I specified, but never in an ecclesiastical, religious sense and finally in the small goodness found in Grossman.

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