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Appearing Otherwise: Encountering the Other In Levinas

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This project attempts to follow the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas as he struggles to formulate an encounter and a relationship with the Other that manages to preserve the Other's alterity. At the heart of this is an effort to understand what it means for Levinas for a thing or being to be circumscribed within the horizon of the same, particularly what it means for a thing to appear within that horizon, and with that, to be known. It is only in light of his understanding of appearance and knowledge that we can come to understand what exactly Levinas means when he tells us that the Other, is she is to remain Other, must be precluded from appearance and being known. This paper will argue that for Levinas an appearance is always *as* a thing within the light or horizon of being. Thus, if there were some way for the Other to manifest otherwise than as a thing, there would open the possibility for an encounter with the Other that leaves her preserved in her alterity. It would mean that there would be a third choice between the Other's simply appearance – which would sacrifice her existence as Other – and her pure absence or concealment, leaving the encounter entirely uncertain, not sure it even occurred. This lies at the heart of Levinas' thought; it is his attempting to think otherwise than the being/non-being dyad. This paper will offer that in Levinas' thinking about the saying and the said he, perhaps, offers a guide to how we may think this otherwise than being and non-being. It will propose that in the movement of appearing – of the emergence into the light of being – the Other is not fully apparent, and thus does not lose its alterity, yet it is also not completely hidden and concealed. Hence, this paper will offer that it is in the *appearing* of the Other that we may be able to encounter her in such a way that preserve her alterity.

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I Introduction

At the heart of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas is his unceasing drive to preserve the alterity of the Other – an Other that is not simply Other in relation to me, as some alter-ego, but one that is radically, absolutely, and infinitely Other, constituted by alterity as such. Everything in Levinas’ work is devoted to thinking how we can encounter this Other in such a way that preserves her¹ radical alterity. In Levinas’ view, this is a task that western philosophy has never attempted. For him, the entire history of western thought, save for a few fleeting glimpses (such as in Plato’s *Sophist*, and Descartes’ conception of infinity), has always thought difference and alterity only in relation the same, where the Other has been understood in terms of presence and being, and thus made to appear within a horizon from which nothing escapes. Within this realm, all things that *are* – that exist – necessarily occur within this horizon, leaving nothing fundamentally different, instead rendering them the same, in so far as all are beings or things that appear within being’s light. Thus, for Levinas, the tradition has managed to

¹ I have attributed to the Other the female sex for two reasons. First, because Levinas himself identifies the female as the Other *par excellence* throughout his oeuvre (though, strangely, in many of his works, including those heavily drawn on this essay, *Totality and Infinity* and *Meaning and Sense*, Levinas will often refer to the Other as “he”). This has led to many powerful feminist critiques of Levinas’ work, most notably in Luce Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Irigaray, Luce. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.).

The second reason I have attributed to the Other the female sex is because Levinas always insists that the relation between the I and the Other is a concrete relation between two singular individuals. Thus, for me to speak of the relation between the I and the Other I must speak of *my* relation to the Other. As this will sometimes take the form of the caress I must speak of that Other that I caress – my partner Jessica. It is for this reason that I will speak of the Other as “she”, for she is for me. While this does not obviate the important concerns that Irigaray and others have raised regarding Levinas’ gendering the Other as female, I hope that it might illuminate why I have followed Levinas’ practice in this essay.

preclude any possibility for radical and absolute difference, always reducing such alterity to the same.

The task Levinas gives himself is to think otherwise, that is, to think and encounter the Other in such a way that leaves her alterity intact. This is no easy task – indeed, it may prove to be an impossible one – as, for Levinas, being, presence, appearance, light, vision, phenomena, and knowledge are all grouped together under the banner of the same, foot-soldiers of what he calls its totality. The same allows nothing to escape its reductive grasp. Thus, for the Other to occur as Other, she must be beyond being, outside of presence and appearance; she cannot be known, seen or sensed as such, but must escape these limits to preserve her alterity. Yet, this clearly opens a profound paradox: How can we encounter an Other that can never be present or appear, can never be seen or known, and indeed cannot even be said to *be*? That is to say, how can we ever encounter the Other in a way that preserves her *as* Other?

Levinas initially attempts to think through this in his work *Totality and Infinity* by conceiving of the encounter with Other in two distinct but intertwined manners: as an encounter with the face of the Other, that, in its expression, opens a dialogue between us, and as an erotic caress. He argues that the expression of the face – which he finds to be the essence of what it means to be a face – opens a dialogue with me that always exceeds the form that is presented to me. Furthermore, the opening of such a dialogue turns the Other into an interlocutor, rendering her participation in the dialogue always in excess of what is thematized in it. Finally, Levinas argues that in the caress what is aimed at, or

desired – which is nothing less than the Other herself – is never grasped, but always slips away, leaving me with nothing but my further inflamed desire.

Despite this effort to conceive of an encounter that preserves the alterity of the Other, the central paradox of Levinas' thought seems to still loom. What kind of encounter could this be if the Other is precluded by Levinas' own thinking from appearing in any way? All of the formulations of the encounter in *Totality and Infinity* do not seem to escape this dichotomy, as they either seem to require the Other to be made present in some fashion – namely, as an expressing face – or as what exceeds and slips away from presentation. The first, clearly, seems to offer an encounter that does not preserve the alterity of the Other at all, for it offers an encounter with an Other that appears in her face. Yet, the latter kind of formulation offers an encounter with absence – with nothing – casting doubt on whether or not an encounter has even taken place. Hence, in *Totality and Infinity*, we appear to be left with either an encounter with the Other where she appears – destroying her alterity – or is left absent, leaving us to encounter nothing, meaning, perhaps, that no encounter ever occurred at all.

Levinas is not unaware of these difficulties within his own thinking in *Totality and Infinity*, and, as a result, tries to address them by introducing the concept of the trace through which we encounter the Other. In the trace, the Other signifies herself without appearing in any way. Instead, she announces or points to herself as precisely the withdrawn and absent. In this, the Other never appears in being, but as an interruption of the order of being in the fact that she is presented by her absence, by the very fact that she did not appear, but is missing.

However, this new conception of the encounter with the Other, via her trace, seems to go too far, rendering the Other entirely hidden and concealed from me. What kind of encounter could there be if it is with an Other that is always absolutely absent and withdrawn? In this, much as before, our encounter with the Other appears to be an encounter with nothing, with an Other never there for us to meet, but always missing. Nonetheless, Levinas is adamant that an encounter occurs, and that, indeed, there is a kind of signifyingness that occurs in the trace that is different from pure concealment. This paper is an attempt to understand what exactly Levinas could mean by such an insistence. It will ask: what distinguishes our encounter with an Other made present in her absence and an encounter with absence as such, that is, an encounter with nothing? In short, it will ask what signals that an encounter with the Other takes place at all.

To think through this question, this paper will attempt to re-think the conception of the trace and what it means to “signify without making appear” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 61) by offering that it seems to allow for some sort of manifestation of the Other – and thus allows for some sort of encounter with her – that signals her as beyond or in excess of what is manifested. That is to say, I will propose in this paper that the trace allows for the Other to signal her withdrawal into absence in such a way that discloses or shows nothing, but instead simply announces the Other’s having passed and left. I will attempt to articulate this by arguing that the warmth one finds in a caress may offer just such an encounter that signals without showing anything – that such an experience of warmth signals from across a distance the withdrawn and absent alterity of the Other that I am not privy to, that I cannot make my own, and that can never appear as such. In this

way, warmth may be understood as the trace of the Other, announcing her existence without revealing it as such.

With this possibility for encountering the Other in a trace that does not render her absolutely hidden, while also not making her appear as such, a further question must be raised: does even this limited sense of manifestation – where the Other reveals nothing of herself, but simply that she is there – cause the Other to appear in some way, and thus reduce her to the same? Put differently, in the end, is the complete absence of the Other – what Levinas calls pure concealment, where she is absolutely hidden and unknown – necessary to maintain her alterity? Does everything else risk her destruction, even the limited knowledge that she exists?

To address these questions will require a closer examination of what exactly it means to appear for Levinas, and with that what it means to know and to sense. I will argue that for Levinas, appearing is always an appearance as..., an appearance *as* a being – a thing in the light of being. Thus, as knowledge for Levinas is always premised on a thing's appearance, with knowledge being a kind of seeing or recognition, knowledge too is always a knowledge *as* some thing. This means, then, that Levinas' prohibition of the Other's appearance – and with that, any knowledge of her – is not a prohibition of her manifestation as such, but simply of her appearance in the light of being where one always appears *as* a thing. Thus, if the Other were to be able to appear or manifest in some way other than as a thing or being then it would be possible to encounter her without necessarily risking the destruction of her alterity.

In this light, I will offer that Levinas' formulation of the saying and the said in *Otherwise Than Being* may offer a possibility for just such an encounter. The saying for Levinas is the very happening or event of communication; it is the means by which the said is brought forth into existence. In this way, the saying always exceeds the said, as it is the very presenting of it, and thus cannot be presented itself, as it is the very movement of presentation, rendering it always antecedent to the presentation itself. Therefore, I will propose that if we think of the *appearing* of the Other – the process of her coming to appear, or, more accurately, not appear – in the same way as the saying of the said, we may find a moment that resists and overflows any appearance of her, while still allowing for a moment in which an encounter may take place. I will argue that this moment of *appearing* is one before and beyond any appearance in being itself, and thus is never made present, but is instead, always already past. Yet, this *appearing* as always already past and never fully present does not mean that it cannot be encountered. Here I will propose that, just as the saying is what one encounters and experiences in the event of dialogue, so too is the *appearing* what one experiences in the event of the Other's appearance as absence. Put simply, I will propose that in her *appearing* we are able experience her withdrawal into absence, thus allowing the Other to announce herself without appearing in the light of being, *as* a thing. In this, I will argue that this is precisely the kind of encounter with the Other that Levinas has been trying to articulate throughout his oeuvre – one that occurs beyond, before, and in excess of being.

The importance of this possibility cannot be overstated. Only on the basis of such a moment of manifestation in which the Other can be encountered without appearing as a

thing is an encounter that does not destroy the alterity of the Other made possible. If there were no third way, no otherwise than being (and with it, non-being), the Other could not signal or announce itself in any way, as any kind of manifestation would make it appear and make it known. This would mean that the only way in which the Other could maintain herself as Other would be not appear at all, that is, to remain absolutely hidden – in Levinas' language, to be entirely concealed. Thus, it is only on the basis of a way of manifesting otherwise than being or non-being, and with that, the same, that it is possible for the Other to leave a trace – whether it be warmth or something different – for us to encounter. Put simply, it is only by conceiving of a way in which the Other can manifest other than appearing in the light of being that any kind of encounter with the Other that preserves her *as Other* is possible.

II The Encounter With The Other In Her Face

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas attempts to formulate a relationship with the Other *as Other*. In this formulation, the Other's resistance to my grasp is central to her escape from enclosure in the same. It is the impossibility of her possession – her continual excess – that preserves her alterity. This is what Levinas calls the infinity of the Other – her inability to be contained within the confines of the totality of the same. He

writes: “Infinity is characteristic of a transcendent being as transcendent; the infinite is the absolutely other. The transcendent is the sole *ideatum* of which there can be only an idea in us; it is infinitely removed from its idea, that is, exterior, because it is infinite” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 49). In identifying the Other with infinity Levinas is laying the groundwork for how it may be possible to encounter the Other without destroying her absolute alterity. For him, following Descartes², the idea of the infinite is one that we could not possibly have produced on our own. Indeed, infinity itself – and with that, the alterity of the Other – can never be held within the idea we have of it, but is always in excess of it, beyond the borders and confines of that idea. Put simply, the idea of infinity is always greater than what we have and know of it, as it is precisely the uncontainable. In this, Levinas is laying out a possibility for a relationship that escapes the grasp of knowledge and being, those accomplices of the same. Levinas continues from the above quotation: “The Cartesian notion of the idea of the Infinite designates a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it. It designates the contact with the intangible, a contact that does not compromise the integrity of what is touched” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50). As Levinas understands it, the Cartesian conception of infinity offers a relationship where one party – the infinite for Descartes, the Other for Levinas – resists and escapes the grasp of the other. For Descartes, the infinite can neither be held by me as an idea nor be thought to be produced by me. Thus, in the Cartesian relationship with the infinite, nothing of the infinite itself is grasped, leaving it entirely exterior, while nonetheless allowing for the infinite to be

² Cf. Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993, p. 30-31.

intimated. For Levinas, this formulation holds the potential to articulate a relationship with the Other that does not reduce her alterity to the same, but, instead, resists its grasp. It is for this reason that Levinas attributes infinity to the Other, as it is precisely her infinity that allows her to slip away from the grasp of the same. With this, Levinas begins to outline a relation with the Other where she always escapes and exceeds what is given of her (if it can even be said that something of her is given at all). It is a relationship with an Other that is always beyond or outside what we grasp as her appearance, thus always escaping our possession.

This simultaneous presentation and escape from presentation of the Other occurs via what Levinas calls the face. “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 50). He continues: “This *mode* does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51). Put differently, the presentation of the face does not offer the Other to me to be examined and made my own, like other objects or ideas do. Instead, the Other exceeds and destroys what she leaves me to examine. She renders meaningless the image of the face I take from the presentation of it, as she is already beyond or more than what is presented. What is offered in the face of the Other is never the Other herself, allowing her to preserve her alterity, and keep it outside of my possession and that of the same.

For Levinas, this double movement where the Other both presents herself and escapes that presentation is what he calls the expression of the face. “It [the face]

expresses itself. The face brings a notion of truth which, in contradistinction to contemporary ontology, is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter, but *expression*: the existent breaks through all the envelopings and generalities of Being” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 51). In addition to being a clear jab at Heidegger, Levinas is also here explaining that the presentation of the face is not an appearance at all in any normal sense. An expression is not a disclosure, or appearance in the light of being, but is something different, something that precisely breaks through the limit of the horizon of being, disclosure and appearance. In this way, the expression of the face of the Other is able to present itself without trapping itself in the totality of the same.

With this notion of the expression of the face, we begin to see that Levinas’ understanding of the relation with the Other is one of dialogue, a kind of conversation between the I and the Other. The expression of the face acts as a communication in which the Other is announced to me. In this dialogue the Other is able to present herself at a distance through addressing or calling to me in the expression of her face. She is thus able to stand apart, outside my grasp, yet still call to me and make herself known.

Levinas writes:

Here contrary to all conditions for the visibility of objects, a being is not placed in the light of another, but presents itself in the manifestation that should only announce it; ... *The absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation*: a coinciding of the expressed with him who expresses, which is the privileged manifestation of the Other, the manifestation of a face over and beyond form. Form – incessantly betraying its own manifestation, congealing into a plastic form, for it is adequate to the same – alienates the exteriority of the Other. The face is a living presence; it is expression. The life of expression consists in undoing the form in which the existent, exposed as a theme, is thereby dissimulated. The face speaks. The

manifestation of the face is already discourse. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 65-66)

This is an incredibly important passage, and was therefore important to quote at length. In it we can see clearly the narrow berth Levinas is trying to navigate: the Other cannot appear, or manifest as an image or plastic form, as such a manifestation would destroy her alterity, her very Other-ness. Thus, she must manifest otherwise. This, for Levinas, occurs as a call, an announcement or address that comes from the Other³ which reveals her presence without making it present – that is to say, revealing her to be there without bringing her before me as a thing draped in a form, and thus reducible to the same. In addition, in what will prove to be crucial further on, Levinas identifies the face and its expression as a *living* presence, and, as such, one that cannot be bound by the form or image of the face that speaks to the I. Put differently, the face of the Other – that face which speaks and expresses itself – is always beyond and more than the face that appears in expressing itself.

Levinas calls this kind of expressing that the face participates in *signifying*. It is the giving of meaning before the existence of the horizon against which meaning normally derives. It is therefore a direct and immediate meaning, unreliant on generalities or universals – that is, categories and definitions – that western thought has assumed to be necessary to deploy meaning. Put concretely, this means that in the signifying of the face, the face of the Other is meaningful in itself, singularly, and not because it is some thing

³ The Judaic overtones here are undeniable, though, I believe, they should neither be simply magnified to be the heart of Levinas' thought, yet neither should they be brushed away. The "revelation" of the Other – the beyond – through speech certainly draws on God's revelation of himself to Moses by announcing "I am who am" (Exodus 3:14), however, it is my belief that Levinas is simply using this as a model for the relationship between the I and the Other, and that it is not intended to be primarily religious in nature.

(namely, a person or being). This is the difference between a thing that is disclosed and revealed. Levinas writes:

To disclose a thing is to clarify it by forms: to find for it a place in the whole by apperceiving its function or its beauty.

The work of language is entirely different: it consists in entering a relationship with nudity disengaged with every form, but having meaning by itself, signifying before we have projected light upon it...Such a nudity is the face. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 74)

The face occurs outside and before all horizons and forms. This, clearly, is designed to protect it from imprisonment in the totality of the same. Yet, this passage also reveals a crucial element of why such a preservation of radical alterity is necessary: the preservation of radical alterity against the hegemony of the same is what allows for the irreducible singularity of each human being, or what Levinas calls, each existent. That is to say, Levinas is here drawing our attention to the fact that each human being is meaningful in and of themselves, indeed, by themselves, and does not require the backdrop of their being a person, or even their existence in being to be so. As he writes, “It [the Other] *is* by itself, and not by reference to a system” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 75). It can then be stated that it is this irreducible singularity, this absolute uniqueness, that serves to underwrite Levinas’ understanding of the radical alterity and the transcendent infinity of the Other.

Thus, it is now the singular Other that addresses us in dialogue. The peculiarity of dialogue, Levinas identifies, is that no matter what is thematized – no matter what is spoken about – there always exists something in excess of that thematization. It can never encompass the interlocutors who participate in the dialogue. He writes: “Language is a

relation between separated terms. To the one the other can indeed present himself as a theme, but his presence is not reabsorbed in his status as a theme. The word that bears on the Other as a theme seems to contain the Other. But already it is said to the Other, who, as interlocutor, has quit the theme that encompassed him, and upsurges behind the said” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195). Put simply, even when the Other is spoken about she is still spoken to. Therefore, she must always exist outside what is spoken about, even when it is her that is thematized, for the moment in which she seems to be fully thematized and made present to me always necessitates the moment of our dialogue that concerns that thematization. It is this moment of address – that I am speaking to an Other or she to me – that can never be fully encapsulated in what the Other or I am saying, but always lies outside of it. As Levinas puts it: “In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold him, forthwith contests the meaning that I ascribe to my interlocutor” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195). It is in this fashion – that the Other as respondent always exceeds her manifestation in her expressing response – that the Other overflows and destroys the image of her face that we see and hold.

For Levinas, this mode of resisting the grasp of the same via the expression of the face is the result of the fact that such an expression requires the Other to not only express or call to us, but that to do so she must *face* us. That is to say, it is in the face-to-face relation with the Other that the Other is able to express herself and thus resist her reduction to the same. He writes:

The presence of a being not entering into, but overflowing, the sphere of the same determines its 'status' as infinite. This overflowing is to be distinguished from the image of liquid overflowing a vessel, because this overflowing presence is effectuated as a position *in face of* the same. The facing position, opposition par excellence, can be only as a moral summons. This movement proceeds from the other. The idea of infinity, the infinitely more contained in the less, is concretely produced in the relation with the face. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 195-196)

Thus, while it is through the expression of the face that the Other announces herself and manifests herself to us, such expression is only possible because the Other faces us. This is not a sequential process where the Other faces me and then expresses herself, but rather, the two occur simultaneously – for the Other to face me *is* for her to express and address me through her expression. For Levinas, this is always an expression of nudity, an immediate relation that occurs beyond ontological appearance, and, indeed, before it.

In expression a being presents itself; the being that manifests itself attends to its manifestation and consequently appeals to me. This attendance is not the *neutrality* of an image, but a solicitation that concerns me by its destitution and its Height... To manifest oneself as a face is to *impose oneself* above and beyond the manifested and purely phenomenal form, to present oneself in a mode irreducible to manifestation, the straightforwardness of the face to face, without the intermediary of any image, in one's nudity, that is, in one's destitution and one's hunger. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200)

It is important to notice Levinas' insistence on the immediacy of the face-to-face relation with the Other, and that it occurs both beyond and before the phenomenal appearance of her form. Further on I shall more fully explore what it means for Levinas for a thing to appear as a phenomenon – indeed, what, for him, it means to appear at all – but for now it must suffice to understand that an appearance as a phenomenon is always an appearance

within the totality of being, and thus precludes the existence of the radical alterity of the Other. Thus, in the face-to-face relation, not only does the Other exist outside the realm of being and the same, but, in some way, she exists *before* it, and is therefore able to manifest to me in a way that does not risk her reduction to the same. This point will be returned to later on in our more robust treatment of Levinas' understanding of appearance.

III The Encounter With The Other as a Caress

Let us return to the relation with the Other where its announcement in the epiphany of its face exceeds the image of the face that presents itself to us. In *Totality and Infinity*, this does not only occur in the face-to-face relation of discourse, but also in the erotic relation of the caress. This idea of the encounter with the Other as a kind of caress is first articulated in *Existence & Existents* where he writes, "Intersubjectivity is not simply the application of the category of multiplicity to the domain of the mind. It is brought about by Eros, where in the proximity of another the distance is wholly maintained, a distance whose pathos is made up of this proximity and this duality of beings" (Levinas, *Existence & Existents*, 98). This is reiterated in *Time and the Other* where he writes, "The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of

beings. It is a relationship with what always slips away” (Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 86). In these two early works (both were published in 1947), the idea of the erotic relationship serves as the paradigmatic relationship with the Other that allows for the preservation of her alterity. In these works, the erotic caress is precisely characterized by its duality, where the Other and I are at once close and infinitely distant, allowing for the Other to slip away from my grasp.

This understanding of the erotic caress as one marked by distance and with what cannot be held, with what slips away, is returned to and developed more fully in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas writes:

The caress, like contact, is sensibility. But the caress transcends the sensible. It is not that it would feel beyond the felt, further than the senses, that it would seize upon a sublime food while maintaining, within its relation with this ultimate felt, an intention of hunger that goes unto the food promised, and given to, and deepening this hunger, as though the caress would be fed by its own hunger. The caress consists in seizing upon nothing, in soliciting what ceaselessly escapes its form toward a future never future enough, in soliciting what slips away as though it *were not yet*. It *searches*, it *forages*. It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257-258)

Here we see the true nature of the caress for Levinas. While it is a kind of touching – and thus a kind of sensation bound within the realm of phenomenality, appearance and being – it is also otherwise, in that it does not aim to grasp or possess, as it precisely aims at what cannot be held or touched. It is instead a kind of searching or perpetual going forth after what cannot be reached, as he says, after what “slips away”. This is the Other

herself, which, as we have seen in the face-to-face relation is always beyond my apprehension.

This expedition after what is always beyond is driven by what Levinas calls desire. He writes:

The metaphysical desire tends toward... the *absolutely other*...

The metaphysical desire does not long for return, for it is desire for a land not of our birth, for a foreign land to every nature, which has not been our fatherland and to which we shall never betake ourselves... It is a desire that cannot be satisfied... The metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it. (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33-34)

For Levinas desire is the desire for the Other. Yet, this is not a desire to consume or possess the Other – it is not a need or hunger – as it is a desire that cannot be satisfied, a desire for the inconsumable. Indeed, every glimpse of, and touch with the Other does not sate the desire, but amplifies it, further illuminating that it is not satisfied. Put simply, any contact with the Other that would seem to fulfill the desire for it simply exposes the fact that the Other has slipped away and not been touched at all. This is not a source of despair or sense of failure, but instead inflames the desire for the Other even more, as if, as Levinas tells us in his essay *Meaning and Sense*, it is fed by its own hunger (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 52).

While desire is certainly at work in the face-to-face relation of discourse (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 62), it is most apparent in the caress. For Levinas, it is in the caress that we are most starkly faced with the withdrawal of the Other, as he says, of her “slipping away”, while continually being spurred on by that absence. He writes:

“Voluptuosity, as profanation, discovers the hidden as hidden. An exceptional relation is thus accomplished in a conjuncture which, for formal logic, would arise from contradiction: the discovered does not lose its mystery in the discovery, the hidden is not disclosed, the night is not dispersed” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 260). Here, the encounter with the Other in the caress begins to contrast with the encounter in discourse: no longer is the encounter one of the announcement of the Other’s existence – of her being there – while simultaneously preserving her alterity. Rather, the encounter announces the Other’s absence – her having withdrawn from the point of contact – thus fully illuminating her complete excess of our encounter. That is to say, in the face-to-face encounter the Other, in calling to us, is able to manifest herself in such a way that leaves her alterity – her status as Other – outside, or in excess of, her presentation or announcement. Yet, in this kind of encounter, her *excess* is not thematized as such; rather, it is precisely her presentation that is dwelled upon – her announcement of herself to me. In the caress, by contrast, it is precisely the absence of the Other that is brought forth. It is where, as Levinas tells us, we “discover the hidden as hidden” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 260), and as “invisible” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 258). Thus, it is in the caress that we realize that nothing is caught, nothing is grasped, and that the Other, in her excess of appearance and being, has escaped us and the realm of the same.

Thus, it begins to emerge that, for Levinas, the separation and distance between the I and the Other is essential to an encounter with the Other that preserves her alterity. In discourse, it is the initial distance between the Other and the I that allows for her to present and announce herself through the expression of her face. That is to say, it is

because discourse necessarily occurs across a distance as a kind of telecommunication that the Other is able to call to me while remaining exterior and separate. The distance here is crucial to the preservation of her alterity. Yet, in expressing the Other comes toward me – calls to me – and hence seems to bridge this distance between us, despite the fact that she always remains in excess of this seemingly newfound proximity. The caress seems to operate in the directly opposite fashion. It is because the caress is precisely characterized by proximity and intimacy that we are struck by the Other's withdrawal and distance from us. It is because she should be close to us that we discover her distance and absence.

Coming into focus here is the central difficulty in Levinas' thought: what kind of encounter with the Other is possible that neither makes her present – and thus reduces her to the same – nor leaves her non-present – opening the objection that no encounter occurred at all? From the proceeding examination of the encounter with the Other as it is conceived in *Totality and Infinity*, it is not entirely clear that Levinas has been able to successfully navigate through these tight straits.

IV The Central Paradox

Let us begin by looking again at the face-to-face relation, where we encounter the Other through the discourse opened by the expression of her face. Levinas goes to great lengths to tell us that the face of the Other manifests or presents itself in a mode other than that of disclosure, and thus does not appear in the usual sense, existing outside of the ontological walls of the same. As such, it is not known or grasped as a thing – thereby being reduced to the same – but always exceeds, overflows, and, indeed, destroys such a reductive power. Yet, Levinas, nonetheless seems to admit that the face and its expression does ossify into some plastic image – some thing – that does appear within the realm of being, which we do then grasp and know (even if he only says this to then declare that the Other overflows and destroys such an image). Levinas himself seems to be caught here in the tension of his own thinking – the Other cannot appear without sacrificing her alterity, yet we cannot encounter the Other unless she appears in some way. Levinas' rough answer seems to be that the appearance the Other gives to us in the image of her face is always exceeded and overwhelmed by the face of the Other itself. As such, the image we receive is an inadequate one, acting as a kind of protective decoy or mask – it is a fake that offers nothing of the Other herself, but simply announces herself through the feeble image she offers. This is, at best, an indirect encounter with an intermediary or emissary of the Other in the inadequate image of the face.

Yet, Levinas also continually insists on the immediacy of the face-to-face, that the dialogue between myself and the Other is premised on our facing each other as interlocutors. This is a direct relation, without, as he says, any intermediary or any image. This side of the relation with the face seems to succumb to the opposite pitfall: it seems

to require the straightforward appearance of the Other – as he says, in her “nudity” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 200) – making it difficult to think how this could be anything other than an appearance in being, hence enclosing the Other within the horizon of the ontological, and with it, the totality of the same. Put simply, how can the Other manifest directly to me by facing me without appearing?

In the caress, we find the same problem we found in our first re-examination of the encounter with the face, namely, that we do not directly encounter the Other at all. In fact, the encounter with the Other that occurs in the caress appears to go even further – in the caress there is not even an indirect encounter via an intermediary, but instead is precisely an encounter with nothing, with the very absence of the Other. Here the Other has escaped and withdrawn, leaving us confronted only with her absence, her having left, and therefore, leaving us to encounter absolutely nothing. Can this encounter with nothing properly be called an encounter at all?

These objections – that in *Totality and Infinity* we either encounter nothing, leaving in doubt whether an encounter has indeed occurred, or that we encounter something, thus destroying the alterity of the Other – are precisely those leveled against Levinas by Jacques Derrida in his essay *Violence and Metaphysics*, and Diane Perpich in her book *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, who follows and expands upon much of Derrida’s argument.

V Further Criticisms: Derrida and Perpich

Let us begin with Derrida. Much as I have tried to do, Derrida proceeds by trying to work from inside Levinas own thought in an attempt to understand it. Summarizing the complicity of western thought in the destructive power of the same, he writes:

Incapable of respecting the Being and meaning of the other, phenomenology and ontology would be philosophies of violence. Through them, the entire philosophical tradition, in its meaning and at bottom, would make common cause with oppression and with the totalitarianism of the same. The ancient clandestine friendship between light and power, the ancient complicity between theoretical objectivity and technico-political possession. 'If the other could be possessed, seized, and known, it would not be the other. To possess, to know, to grasp are all synonyms of power' (*TA*). To see and to know, to have and to will, unfold only within the oppressive and luminous identity of the same; and they remain for Levinas, fundamental categories of phenomenology and ontology. (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 91-92)

Yet, Derrida proceeds to ask, how will the announcement of the face, even when thought of as epiphany, escape such an illuminated existence, and thus one circumscribed by ontology (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 92)? It can only do so as the invisible, the inaccessible, in the mold of the Judaic conception of God as the highest high (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 93). "Therefore," Derrida writes,

there is no way to conceptualize the encounter: it is made possible by the other, the unforeseeable 'resistant to all categories.' Concepts supposed anticipation, a horizon within which alterity is amortized as soon as it is announced precisely because it has let itself be foreseen. The infinitely-other cannot be bound by a concept, cannot be thought on the basis of a horizon; for a horizon is always a horizon of the same, the elementary unit within which eruptions and surprises are always welcomed by understanding and recognized. (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 95)

Thus, the encounter with the Other must be entirely surprising, and, as such, cannot be recognized or understood as an encounter with the Other. It must lie outside of comprehension, and thus confuse us. Put simply, this would mean that we cannot know that we have encountered the Other at all, for such recognition implies that we must have anticipated it, hence meaning that the Other could not have possibly been the absolutely Other as Levinas insists.

Derrida here is taking Levinas at his most extreme understanding of the same and the Other. He is understanding Levinas' Other entirely as the beyond – indeed, at points, he explicitly goes further, understanding the Other as the Hebrew God, the beyond par excellence. This understanding of Levinas necessarily leads him to assert that Levinas' understanding of the encounter with the Other in the face is inherently paradoxical: to say anything about the encounter with the Other – which is, of course, the core of Levinas' text – amounts to the destruction of her alterity. Derrida writes:

For it is impossible to encounter the alter ego (in the very form of the encounter described by Levinas), impossible to respect it in experience and in language, if this other, in its alterity, does not *appear* for an ego (in general). One could neither speak, nor have any sense of the totally other, if there was not such a phenomenon of the totally other, or evidence of the totally other as such. (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 123)

He continues: “Even if one neither seeks nor is able to thematize the other *of which* one does not speak, but *to whom* one speaks, this impossibility and this imperative themselves can be thematized (as Levinas does) only on the basis of a certain appearance of the other as other for an ego” (Derrida, *Violence and Metaphysics*, 123). The difficulty for Levinas, in Derrida’s understanding, is that he himself is bound within the realm of the same, that is, within the realm of ontology and light, appearance and presence, knowledge and phenomenology. Thus, Levinas cannot examine the relationship with the Other without bringing that relationship, and with it, the Other herself, into the realm of appearance and the totality of the same. Even to say that the Other is beyond appearance, for Derrida, is to make it appear in some way, for it makes her known and no longer absolutely Other. For Derrida, then, the Other must remain entirely beyond and outside the realm of the same, and thus entirely unknown – nothing can be said about her, even that she exists. However, conversely, this does not mean that for Derrida the Other does not exist; she is not radically absent or missing, never in contact with me. Instead, for Derrida, the Other must exist – though even existence here is still too strong – in a kind of indecidability, under a supreme uncertainty, unsure of the Other’s existence or non-existence. Put simply, the Other must remain entirely unforeseen and surprising, outside of any conceptualization. Thus, for Derrida, Levinas’ project is fundamentally an impossible one, as it is always bound within the horizon of conceptuality by its necessity to occur within language – he simply cannot say what is fundamentally unsayable.

Diane Perpich’s critique extends this Derridean line of thinking directly to the face, bringing Derrida’s concerns much closer to those I have raised above. She writes:

“The face is exposed as figure of unreconstructed paradox: it represents that which it claims is unrepresentable; it presents immediacy through the mediation of an image; it makes an ethical claim that compels the hearer without ever becoming audible or legible” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 54). Here Perpich appears to understand Levinas himself through the cipher of Derrida’s indecidability. That is to say, she sees Levinas’ analysis of the relation with the face as one marked by the indecidability that Derrida insists on for the preservation of the Other’s alterity. Instead of being felled by his inability to respect the indecidability of the Other, Perpich sees Levinas as precisely trying to enact it by writing about the relationship with the Other in a paradoxical structure, giving both sides together in contradiction, leaving us with a fundamental uncertainty.

Perpich attempts to elucidate this by following what she sees to be the fundamental dichotomy in relation to the face. She writes: “The fundamental thesis broached in the discussion of the face is the difference between the way in which objects are given to consciousness (the order of ontology) and the way in which human beings are encountered (the order of ethics)” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 55). When we encounter objects it is via an “objectifying intentionality” where we re-present the object to ourselves, thus appropriating it and making it our own. Perpich calls this “a kind of creative mastering of the world through the production of intelligible or meaningful objects and events” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 56). The encounter with the Other, conversely, as we have seen, is precisely an event that defies such objectifying intentionality, overflowing and destroying any kind of representation

and with it any kind of thematizing grasp of the same. Yet, we not only know of the encounter – that it occurs, for Levinas’ whole thinking in *Totality and Infinity* must be premised on the fact of the encounter occurring – but also that it is not an encounter that is governed by objectifying intentionality. Indeed, we even know something of the Other herself, namely that she cannot be reduced to the same, resisting, exceeding, and destroying its grasp. Thus, “singularity – understood as that in the other which refuses the mastery of representation – must appear as a theoretic object, but simultaneously, it is required to *appear* as that which cannot appear” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 70, emphasis added). Perpich continues: “The face must be represented theoretically – it must be in some manner *conveyable* – but, equally, it must be conveyed as beyond or transcendent to representation in order to convey the ethical inadequacy (and even violence) attendant on practices of representation” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 70). For Perpich, Levinas is stuck in this paradox of the necessary appearance of the face of the Other, which is precisely the appearance of that which cannot appear. This must be read in both ways for her: that the Other *appears* in not appearing, and that the Other appears in *not appearing*.

Thus it emerges that, for Perpich, Levinas has not failed to live up to Derrida’s demand for the indecidability of the Other, but has instead precisely instituted it. Perpich writes: “Either the face is treated as an object and suffers the violence of appropriation and reduction to the status of a thing, or the face is unrepresentable and suffers from going unrepresented, unseen, misrecognized... Levinas rightly wants us to avoid both poles of this alternative” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 72). In centering the

encounter with the Other in the paradox of the face – that which necessarily both is and is not – Levinas has left us entirely uncertain, for it is unforeseeable and unconceptualizable how exactly the face both appears and does not appear at the same time. It is simply outside the categories of logic and knowledge.

Yet, despite Levinas' apparent fidelity to what Derrida sees to be the fundamental indecidability of the Other, the essential paradox both Perpich and Derrida raise remains: either the Other appears in some way when she faces me, or she does not, and is, instead, exactly absent. Thus, we either encounter her or we encounter nothing. Even if we leave the notion of the Other's indecidability in force – that she is at once both present and non-present, but also neither – we appear to be left in a moment *before* the encounter occurs. That is to say, the event of the encounter, its happening, must be a moment of decision: we either meet something or we meet nothing. Hence, it seems that Levinas must either sacrifice the alterity of the Other in order to say that we encounter it in the face-to-face, or be open to the challenge that in encountering nothing there simply was no encounter.

VI The Trace and Its Objections

It is in response to such a challenge that Levinas introduces the notion of the trace, developed in the essay *Meaning and Sense*. In the opening of his section entitled “The Trace,” Levinas writes:

The notion of sense developed on the basis of the epiphany of the face, which has enabled us to affirm it as a sense ‘before history,’ poses a problem to which, in closing, we would like to outline a response.

Is not the ‘beyond’ from which the face comes, and which fixes consciousness in its straightforwardness, an idea understood and disclosed in its turn? (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 59)

Levinas then begins to answer this by offering the explanation he gives in *Totality and Infinity*, namely, that the face of the Other is precisely the undisclosable, and is beyond all appearance within the realm of ontology and knowledge. The coming of the face – its address to me – is thus not one of appearance, but is beyond, or otherwise, than it. Yet, as Levinas himself raises the question, “What then can be this relationship with an absence radically withdrawn from disclosure and dissimulation? And what is this absence that makes visitation possible, but which is not reducible to concealment, since this absence involves a signifyingness, a signifyingness in which, however, the Other is not controvertible into the Same?” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 59). Put simply, as I have raised above, how can there be an encounter with the Other that preserves her alterity through her withdrawal, yet is still certainly an encounter?

Such an encounter with the Other is possible via the trace of the Other. For Levinas, the uniqueness of the trace lies in that it “signifies beyond being” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 61), that is, it is not of the same order as being and appearance, and thus cannot be thought in that fashion. “The signifyingness of the trace consists in

signifying without making appear... consequently, the trace does not belong to phenomenology, to the comprehension of *appearing* and *dissimulating*” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 61). Instead, the trace of the Other operates by *interrupting* the realm of appearance and ontology by disturbing the enclosed totality of the same in which appearance and being occur. That is to say, the trace is able to signal or point to the Other without making her appear by breaking open and exploding the claim of ontology that all that *is* must appear or be present.

Instead, through the trace, the Other is presented in its absence, and is thus presented by the very fact that it *does not appear*. In this way the trace seems to act as a kind of sign, yet unlike any other sign, it signals no other apparent thing, but instead something that is absent, indicating outside or beyond the world of being and appearance (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 61). This in no way makes the Other appear, for nothing has been left to indicate her presence, no clues or footprints, as when an animal has passed in the snow. Yet, the Other has disturbed the order of being, and in this disruption, left her mark. Levinas writes: “He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. For he has passed absolutely. To be qua *leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 62). The Other has left nothing, no marks or clues of her presence, but has instead effaced everything that could lead back to her. Yet, it is precisely this nothing, this non-trace, that announces she has passed through. It is this absence of a sign that signals her; it is her having left that is her trace. To put it simply, in

leaving nothing – in her refusal to appear and disclose herself, and, indeed, in wiping away all possible marks – the Other has announced herself *as Other*.

In the trace, then, the Other is signaled or announced by her very absence. Thus, in a paradoxical sense, she is presented precisely by her absence. “The trace is the presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 63). The Other, then, has never been there with me, but existed only in “an immemorial past” to which no memory can proceed (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 60). Yet, this is not to say that the Other was once present in her own time, and is simply beyond my own. No, this immemorial past is one that has never been present (Levinas, *Enigma and Phenomenon*, 72), but instead, always already past, and, as such, can be understood as being *before presence*.

However, with this introduction of the trace, it becomes apparent that, in our encounter with the Other, her and I are never together, never with each other. Instead, it seems that our encounter is one that occurs across time and space via the trace the Other has left behind precisely unintentionally. Everything about our relationship with the Other is then characterized by distance and separation, indeed, it appears as if it is marked by an absolute and infinite distance. Here Levinas’ earlier thinking of the encounter as a kind of dialogue comes back into sharper focus. Dialogue, as we have seen, is marked by the movement across distance, while nonetheless preserving that distance entirely. We call across space without being able see one another, let alone touch each other. In fact, when one considers the time it takes for sound to travel through space – which, in the case of infinite and absolute space, is indeed a long time – the trace as a

call of the Other begins to make more sense. Yet, in *Totality and Infinity*, dialogue was not achieved by calls alone, but centrally by the expression of the face. This requires, in Levinas' understanding, a face-to-face relationship. While it can be averred that the face-to-face requires distance and separation between the Other and I, this seems to be purely spatial and not temporal. Instead, the face-to-face seems to require the contemporaneity of the two of us facing each other.

However, the formulation of the encounter with the Other in her trace proves to be most difficult to accept when the encounter is thought of as a caress. Instead of being marked by distance, as in dialogue or the face-to-face, a loving caress is precisely marked by proximity, intimacy, and the closeness of those two embracing. How could the encounter with the Other be considered a caress if the relation with her is characterized by distance – indeed, absolute distance! There, the caress would become one with an absent Other, rendering it sterile and cold. It would be a caress where the Other is never with me, in my arms, but always out of reach, withdrawn from me. It is difficult to comprehend how this could ever be considered a caress.

Furthermore, in fact, it is difficult to understand how this is considered an encounter at all if there is no meeting to speak of. If the Other is announced by her absence, what prevents me from taking that absence as simply nothing? What differentiates her absence from absence as such – pure nothingness? That is to say, what *signals* the Other's absence, preventing me from simply missing her?

Levinas seems to readily admit to this possibility – that we will simply miss the Other and not encounter her. In the essay *Enigma and Phenomenon*, he writes of the

trace: “What would be needed would be an indication [of the Other] that would reveal the withdrawal of the indicated, instead of a reference that rejoins it. Such is the trace, in its emptiness and desolation. Its desolation is not made of evocations but of *forgettings*, forgettings in process, putting aside the past” (Levinas, *Enigma and Phenomenon*, 69). In this essay the encounter with the Other is one that is likely to be missed, manifesting as something that is normally missed. While Levinas does not seem to go this far, Diane Perpich reads this as the removal of certainty that an encounter occurs at all – it is no longer sure that there is a trace, and with it, the Other (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 114). She writes: “The ethical disturbance, if indeed there “is” one, passes in a trace that is altogether inapparent. The face no longer *imposes* itself, but passes in a modality that is eminently discreet, liable to be missed, ignored, or denied” (Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 115). Thus, it seems that the encounter with the Other may not be certain. In fact, from what Levinas writes in *Enigma and Phenomenon* (and later in *Otherwise than Being*⁴) it may prove essential that such an encounter is in doubt, for it may be that only when it is thought in such a way that leaves it devoid of certainty – namely, when it is formulated as occurring via the trace of the Other, or her absence – that an encounter with the Other that preserves her as Other is possible. In effect, Levinas would be conceding to the criticism that Derrida in particular has leveled: that any knowledge of the Other, even knowing that we know nothing of her – that we know she is absent – makes her in some way present or known, and thus reduces her to the same.

⁴ This is seen most acutely in the fourth chapter of *Otherwise Than Being*, entitled “Substitution”, p. 99-129.

Thus, the only way to preserve her in her alterity is to leave in doubt whether or not the encounter with her actually occurred.

Yet, despite this apparent capitulation to the fact that nothing may differentiate the absence of the Other and absence as such, Levinas himself, in *Meaning and Sense* seems to try and obviate such criticisms by his distinction between the absence of the Other that signals her, and pure concealment. Remember, the trace is attempting to answer the following problem: “And what is this absence that makes visitation possible, but which is not reducible to concealment, since this absence involves a signifyingness, a signifyingness in which, however, the Other is not controvertible into the Same?” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 59). Thus, the trace cannot simply be a kind of absence as such – that is, a kind of nothingness – as that would amount to concealment: we would simply have no knowledge of the Other, she would be absolutely hidden. Though he backs away from this in *Enigma and Phenomenon*, in *Meaning and Sense*, where he first lays out the idea of the trace, Levinas clearly understands it as having some sort of revelatory power, some kind of “signifyingness.”

VII Re-thinking the Trace as Warmth

What could this possibly mean to “signify without making appear”? It must be some sort of announcement of the Other, or pointing to her, as being beyond or exceeding what manifests. That is to say, it would have to be a signaling of the Other being-there without illuminating her in any way. This, perhaps, would be simply, and only, the announcement of the Other’s existence, and not the revelation of her as such, *as Other*. It would be purely the revelation of the Other, in that it would reveal the Other’s existence – thus preventing her from being completely hidden or concealed – while illuminating nothing, no thing, leaving her alterity untouched. It would reveal *that* she is, not *what* she is.

Here, we are offered a possibility that arose out of an objection I raised earlier. One of the difficulties in accepting Levinas’ conception of the relationship with the Other as a caress is that it created a caress that no lover could possibly identify: it offered a caress marked by distance and separation, where my lover and I were never present to each other – never *with* each other – but always missing from one another. My lover was absent, withdrawn, beyond me and my touch. Thus, the caress was one where I could never embrace my lover, where I could never kiss her, marked instead by a lack of intimacy, rendering it cold and sterile. Yet, the caress, as we experience it, is marked precisely by the opposite – by its intimacy, and, indeed, by its warmth. It is in this warmth that I propose we may find a trace of the Other that signifies her without making her appear.

This, of course, is initially threatened by Levinas’ identification of all sensation with the realm of appearance and phenomena (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44).

Sensation is what makes things present to us, appear before us, and thus is complicit in bringing them into the light of being and the same. What is sensed then, properly speaking, is stripped of its alterity. Yet, Levinas also tells us that while the caress is a kind of sensibility, it also “transcends the sensible” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 257). Thus, the mode of contact in the caress does not succumb fully to sensation’s participation in the same. This mode of contact, of course, is touching. In the touch of the caress we discover the character of the Other’s skin and the outline of her form, both of which manage to offer her as an object – they reveal information about *what* she is like. In this way, they reveal her *as* something – soft, smooth, supple, her shape – all of which, together, manage to present an image of her for me to hold. In short, they all contribute to possessing her by my self and the same. This is confirmed by the fact that such qualities are discovered by my *moving* touch, where I am specifically exploring her, trying to discover her, trying to know her, and in this sense, trying to grasp her.

Yet, in the caressing touch we also encounter the fact that the Other is warm. While this too clearly offers some sense of what the Other is like, and thus contribute to her becoming an image, the sensation of warmth also appears be uniquely different than the others found in touching, in that warmth does not simply offer a sensation of the Other’s form alone. That is, warmth appears different than the other kind of touching listed above, which only endeavour to discover the form of what is touched. They only attempt to discover what she is like as an object: Is it a soft object? A smooth one? What is its shape? Taken together these sensations give the form of what is touched. The warmth felt in the caress does more than this, in that warmth uniquely is able to signal

that the Other is an Other and not an object or thing, as it signals that Other is alive, a radically singular existent. Yet, it does not do so by making that existence appear as such. That is say, it does not offer the life of the Other as an object for me to examine in the same way that touching her form does. Instead, it simply announces her existence, without showing that existence to us. Put simply, it only announces that she is, and never what she is. Crucial to this understanding is the fact that her warmth does not appear to exist on her surface, but seems to come from within her, emanating out, signaling an interiority – indeed, a transcendence or infinity – that I am not privy to, without presenting any of that to me. It simply reveals it to be there. In this, warmth appears to signal her as being beyond me, without making any of that which is beyond appear.

Furthermore, the Other is warm despite any effort not to be – she does not *mean* to be warm. It is something that she cannot efface, but is there by virtue of her being alive. This is precisely what Levinas tells us of the trace – that it is what cannot be effaced entirely, indeed, that it is what remains in the attempt to efface all marks and carry out the perfect crime. Thus, it appears that it is impossible for the Other to be traceless. Instead, the trace is the mark left by the Other who has passed, and in passing, has disturbed the world irreparably. This is the mark of one who has lived – just as Levinas told us that the face is the mark of a living Other – and disturbed the world in her radical singularity. Warmth is this mark of life, it signals the distinction between a mere body and a living person. Thus, again, warmth appears to be the mark of the trace of the Other, of her passing and interrupting the order of the world with her absolute and unique singularity, her human life.

Finally, the sensation of warmth seems to not come via the same searching and discovering process in which we discover the form of things. We do not attempt to grasp the warmth of the Other, but it appears to come from the Other herself, surprisingly and unanticipated. This comes from the fact that we feel the warmth of the Other most acutely not when we are moving along her, actively touching her, but when we are simply embracing her, holding her close. In this embrace we are not attempting to discover or know her⁵, but simply be *with* her, and yet, it is here, where we are looking for nothing, that we find the warmth of the Other. Thus, it seems to not be something that *we* discover, but something that the Other announces to us – it comes from her.

In this way, her warmth remains something that we cannot grasp, that we cannot make our own. That is to say, in not being something that we can find for ourselves, it becomes something that appears only as a revelation or as an epiphany, much as Levinas tells us the face of the Other does. It comes from somewhere we cannot illuminate, but from a place – if it can even be called a place – that we cannot follow to, where we cannot go. In this sense, warmth is able to signal what is hidden and withdrawn, it is able to signal a beyond that we cannot hold. Thus, the warmth of the other is precisely able to appear by disturbing the order of appearance – by pointing to something that remains outside it. This is the work of the trace.

Thus, it seems that in the warmth of the Other we feel in our caress with her we find her trace. It is in her warmth that she is able to “signify without making appear”, pointing to herself as precisely beyond the order of appearance and being. In this way she

⁵ As counterintuitive as this might seem, in holding the Other in an embrace, I am not attempting to possess or grasp her at all, but instead am reveling in our proximity.

is able to make herself present in absence, to occur as an interruption, as one who has passed absolutely, yet never risking her alterity by appearing as such, in the realm of the same. Thus, through her warmth, it seems, the Other is able to accomplish what Levinas attempted to articulate – she is able to present herself to me without making herself appear, thus preserving her alterity.

But this possibility is not without its own difficulties. The first, and perhaps the most obvious objection, is the possibility that warmth is simply a surface phenomenon. This would mean that warmth is no different than anything else of the Other that is touched, namely her form. In fact, it would mean that her form is all that is touched, and would no longer signal a beyond that I am not privy to. In this way, her warmth would merely be another quality of her, like her softness or smoothness, further focusing the image I have of her. In short, if her warmth were simply a surface phenomenon, it could no longer act as her trace, but instead would be an accomplice in making the Other appear within the same.

Yet, the way in which we feel the warmth of the Other appears to challenge this objection. As I have argued, the warmth of the Other is felt most strongly not when it is sought through the groping touch, but when we are still, simply holding the Other in our arms. In this, it appears that the warmth of the Other is not something we feel along the surface, but something we feel *through* it. Thus, it seems to not be something on the surface, but something that comes from beneath it.

However, with this objection addressed, a second, deeper one emerges: does any manifestation of the Other – even one via the trace, where she is signified without ever

appearing – make her known, and thus destroy her alterity? That is to say, does even her announcement of herself, regardless if it comes from beyond the realm of being and appearance, indeed, even if it occurs as an interruption of that realm, does such a revelatory epiphany make her known and appear in some way?

This question is Derrida's that we explored earlier, returning (as so many of Derrida's thoughts do) to haunt us once more. Here it has mutated slightly, infecting what was supposed to be its cure – the trace. The trace was designed to overcome Derrida's challenge, by rendering the mark of the Other as one of interruption and absence, as precisely what does not appear. This was designed to leave the Other unknown, unforeseen, and surprising, just as Derrida's objections demanded. Yet, in it, Levinas preserved this small opening of the unique signifyingness of the trace that allowed for the signaling of the absence of the Other, differentiating it from absence as such, or pure nothing. I have argued that the warmth of the Other found in the caress accomplishes this task. Yet, in this signifyingness that makes nothing appear – and here the emphasis must be placed both ways: it at once makes *nothing* appear, and makes nothing *appear* – the Other is revealed to exist, albeit as beyond being and appearance. But is this enough? Does this make the Other known? Does her revelation as existing make her appear – even if this revelation is of her *non*-appearance? Thus, if the Other is to remain Other, must she remain entirely beyond, never signaling herself at all? In short, must she remain absolutely concealed to remain Other?

Perhaps our folly here – along with Derrida's – is that this criticism remains within the dichotomy of being and non-being – appearance and non-appearance – that

Levinas is so tirelessly trying to overcome. Instead, he is attempting to think other than or outside of being, which, for him, also does not mean non-being. As he writes in

Meaning and Sense:

This signifyingness [of the trace] is not a way for the Absent to give itself in a blank in the presence of the face – which again would bring us back to a mode of disclosure. The relationship which goes from the face to the Absent is outside every relation and dissimulation, a third way excluded from these contradictories. How is this third way possible? But are we not still seeking that from which the face proceeds as if it were a sphere, a place, a world? Have we been attentive enough to the interdiction against seeking the beyond as a world behind our world? The order of being would still seem to be presupposed. (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 60)

Thus, perhaps in thinking that the Other is either made present in appearance – and thus destroyed as Other – or remains absolutely absent, we are remaining within the realm of the same and ontology, where the only options are presence and absence, being and non-being. Instead, as Jill Robbins puts it in her book *Altered Reading*, “Belonging to an immemorial past and accessible to no present, this trace is outside the presence/absence dyad” (Robbins, *Altered Readings*, 28). Hence, in order to address this re-emergent line of Derridean criticism, we must attempt to think beyond this presence/absence dyad, attempting to elucidate how the signifyingness of the trace exists outside it, and is instead otherwise. To do this, we will first have to more fully explore what exactly it means for Levinas for a thing to appear within the light of being, and with that, what it means to know.

VIII Levinas' Understanding of Appearance and Knowledge

For Levinas, to know or to comprehend is always a kind of possession or holding of what is known. It makes mine that which I know, for I now have an idea or concept of it through which I can always re-present an image of it⁶. The thing is no longer outside me, different from me, but now, quite literally, a part of me as an idea in my mind. It is no longer strange, but understood and familiar. As Levinas writes in the essay *Transcendence and Intelligibility*: “Knowledge is a relation of the *Same* with the *Other* in which the Other is reduced to the Same and divested of its strangeness, in which thinking relates itself to the other but the other is no longer other as such; the other is already appropriated, already *mine*” (Levinas, *Transcendence and Intelligibility*, 151). Here, knowledge is essentially the process in which the alterity of the Other is destroyed and reduced to the same – it is therefore Odysseus’ journey par excellence, always a return home, to the same.

Yet, knowledge and comprehension are only possible for Levinas if that which is known is illuminated in the light of being. It must *appear* for it to be known. He writes: “To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity. This result is obtained from the moment of the first ray of light. To illuminate is to remove from being its resistance, because light opens a horizon and

⁶ This is particularly stark in French, where the very word to understand – *comprendre* – harbors within it the verb *prendre*, which means to take or to hold.

empties space” (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 44). Thus, knowledge occurs as a kind of vision, where what appears in the light is immediately seen, and in being seen, known. Crucial to this vision is recognition – it must be seen *as* some thing, indeed, as *a thing*, for it to be known. Levinas understands the horizon against which the thing appears – which is the light of being itself – as that which allows for it to be recognized. For it is against, or perhaps more properly put, inside, this horizon that the thing is able to be presented at all. Put simply, for Levinas, it is because the thing appears as a being, present before us, that it can be recognized and known as a being. In this way, for Levinas, things never appear on their own, but always *as* something. He writes in *Meaning and Sense*: “The given is presented from the first qua this or that, that is, as a meaning. Experience is a reading, the understanding of meaning an exegesis, a hermeneutics, and not an intuition. *This taken as that*” (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 38). This appearance as something – as either this or that – is not simply that it appears as some kind of thing – as, say, a glass or a chair – but also that it appears as *a thing*, as a being. Thus, even if a thing were to appear as something entirely unique and new – as in a new invention, or a work of art – it would still not be radically new, entirely unforeseen, because, in appearing, it manifests *as* a being, that is, *as* a thing that appears. Thus, Levinas is able to say:

Pure receptivity, in the sense of a pure sensible without any meaning, would be only a myth or an abstraction... There is no given already possessing identity; no given could enter thought simply through a shock against a wall of receptivity. To be given to consciousness, to sparkle for it, would require that the given first be placed in an illuminated horizon... The meaning would be the very illumination of this horizon. (Levinas, *Meaning and Sense*, 36)

Nothing appears purely on its own, but always against the horizon of being. It is by virtue of this appearance in the light of being that a thing can be seen and recognized; therefore, it is because a thing appears in the light of being that it is knowable. Thus, a thing is known – recognized *as* some thing - by virtue of its illumination. Hence, knowledge and appearance are always a knowledge and appearance *as* some thing.

In Levinas' eyes, this is a Husserlian and Heideggerian understanding of appearance and knowledge – that all that is present and known, is so by virtue of its appearance against the horizon of the world or being – yet it is one that Levinas leaves in force in his own thought. It is against this understanding of appearance – that appearance is always an appearance *as* some thing against the horizon of being – that Levinas attempts to think the manifestation of the Other. He writes:

What is needed is a thought which is no longer constructed as a relation of thinking to what is thought about, in the domination of thinking over what is thought about; what is needed is a thought which is not restricted to the rigorous correspondence between noesis and noema and not restricted to the adequation where the visible must be equal to the intentional aim... what is needed is a thought for which the very metaphor of vision and aim is no longer legitimate. (Levinas, *Transcendence and Intelligibility*, 155)

What is needed is a kind of manifestation and a subsequent kind of thinking that is other than the phenomeno-ontological thinking of appearance as... within the horizon and light of being. Crucially, Levinas is not asking after something other than appearance or knowledge as such, but only something other than the kind of appearing and knowing in which the thing that appears and is known is robbed of its alterity. That is to say, he is

simply asking for something other than the appearance as... and the knowledge as... that occurs within the illuminated horizon of being.

IX **Appearing Otherwise**

This is precisely what Levinas has been attempting to articulate throughout his work. The Other is that which manifests before being, outside of being and beyond it, indeed, as exactly that which disrupts the order of being. In this, he tells us that the Other addresses us immediately and on its on, not *as* anything. Yet, it is not until his final great work, *Otherwise Than Being*, that we perhaps begin to gain a glimpse of what this before and beyond being might be. Here it cannot simply be non-being, as this remains within realm of being and the same, as it gains its status as other than being by being opposed to it (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 3). Levinas writes: “Is not the inescapable fate in which being immediately includes the statement of being’s *other* not due to the hold the *said* has over the *saying*, to the *oracle* in which the said is immobilized?” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 5). There is much at work here, and we must unpack this fully, as it is of paramount importance. Here we first glimpse the distinction between the saying and the said, in which Levinas identifies the saying – the very event or happening of communication, or, to use the language of *Totality and Infinity*, dialogue – with the

preservation of the alterity of the other, and the said – what is said or thematized in the communication, that is, what is made known in it – with being and the same. Thus, being is identified with language, where things are made present in it. For Levinas, there is a kind of ossification in language – an immobilization he calls it – where things become fixed in language to make them present. This is exactly what occurs when a thing appears in being, that is, when it appears *as* some thing – it becomes fixed in the image of its presentation, *as* the being it is. Thus, if there lies in the happening or event of language – the very communicating of it – something that escapes and exceeds the petrification of it into language itself, we can then, perhaps, take this as a preliminary guide to say that there may be something in the happening or event of being – perhaps in its *appearing*, before it fully has appeared – that resists its appearance as a thing in being.

For Levinas in *Otherwise Than Being*, the saying is that by which the said comes forth. In this way, it is before the said, and behind it, leaving it outside or in excess of the said. Levinas writes: “Antecedent to the verbal signs it [saying] conjugates, to the linguistic systems and the semantic glimmerings, a foreword preceding languages, it is the proximity of one to the other, the commitment of an approach, the one for the other, the very signifyingness of signification” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 5). Put differently, it is through the saying that the said emerges, and, as such, is prior to it. In this, the saying is the very signifying of the said. It is the moment of the said’s occurring, where it is not yet fully said, but also not silent. It is instead a moment in between where the said approaches us from our interlocutor, and in so doing brings us into contact and proximity. The saying is thus the *movement* of communication. It is the approach

communication makes across the distance between interlocutors, bringing them into proximity. Here Levinas' discussion of the expression of the face in *Totality and Infinity* comes back into clearer focus. There he told us that the Other presents herself in the expression of her face, never risking her alterity because her expression always exceeds the figure the face offers. Thus, perhaps we are to understand this expression as the saying of the face, as the movement of its presentation. In this, the expression of her face remains before any appearance of her face, as it becomes the very movement of her face appearing.

The centrality of movement found in the saying is essential to attempting to conceive of how the Other may manifest and be encountered without appearing in being in any way. That is to say, perhaps here in the happening of appearance – that dynamic process of its coming to appear – we have found a moment before being and appearance that nonetheless shows something. For the saying here is certainly something experienced – it is the very occurring of what is said, meaning that not only is it the saying of the said, but also the hearing or experiencing of it. Thus, it is the very occurrence or happening of dialogue and communication between interlocutors. Indeed, Levinas tells us that it is the very signifyingness of signification, meaning that is in the saying that signifying takes place. Furthermore, Levinas understands the saying as a kind of approach, a movement across distance and into proximity. Yet, in this signifying approach, the saying does not appear – it does not turn into a said. This is perhaps because the saying is a constant motion – it is a pure happening, that is nothing but the process or movement of occurring – and thus can never ossify into something that is said, for to become something said is to

stop, to be at rest, and thus congeal into some thing. The said, then, and with that being and appearance, is the unmoving or static par excellence – it is by virtue of its being at rest that we are able to take hold of it and grasp it in knowledge and the light of being. Thus, to appear as... is also to be at rest. This is, perhaps, what Levinas means in *Otherwise Than Being*, when he identifies the synchronic with appearance and being, where things are always fully assembled, complete, and thus offer a totality that nothing escapes (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 46). The completeness is crucial here, as it is only when things are fully formed – when they fully *are* – that they can be offered to us in the light of being. He writes of this synchronic realm of the same: “The beings remain always assembled, present, in a present that is extended, by memory and history, to the totality determined like matter, a present without fissures or surprises, from which becoming is expelled, a present largely made up of re-presentations” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 5). The saying resists this realm of the present because it is never at rest, but is in constant motion, for it is, essentially, movement itself. In this, it is then, perhaps, that very becoming – for it seems to be the coming to be or happening of the said – that Levinas here tells is forbidden in the realm of the same. This is a diachronic movement, across time, that Levinas goes on to identify with the encounter with the Other (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 11). Thus, perhaps if the expression of the face – that is, the very presentation of the Other – is thought of as the movement of its appearing, of its coming to appear, it becomes possible for us to meet and encounter the Other without her

becoming present. That is to say, we are thus able to encounter her very coming to appear in the event⁷ of her being.

Thought in this way, the encounter with the Other would be one that is direct and without intermediary, for it would be in a moment that is before she *is* any thing, even a thing or being, as it is the moment before she has appeared – it is the moment *before* being. Indeed, it is a moment that can never be made present, as it is the very moment of coming into presence. In this way, this moment of encounter would be always already past, in, perhaps, an immemorial past, as it would be a past that could never be present. Thus, if this is the moment of encounter with the Other, it is also the moment of her leaving and departure, as it is the moment before her withdrawal into absence from being. It is, therefore, a moment of simultaneous departure and approach, in fact, it is perhaps an approach in departing – we encounter her in this departure, this moment of leaving. Levinas has already told us that the saying is a kind of approach. Further on he seems to confirm this approach as a departure when he writes: “It is because in an approach, there is inscribed or written the trace of infinity, the trace of a departure, but a trace of what is inordinate, does not enter into the present” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 117). Here we see confirmed that it is in the saying of the Other – in her approach – that she leaves the trace of herself and her departure from being into absence. Thus, it is then, perhaps, in this moment of movement, this two-fold moment of approach and retreat, where the Other neither is apparent nor hidden, that we encounter her in her face. In this moment she neither is nor is not, but is something else, something otherwise, where we meet her

⁷ It is important to emphasize here that I mean event in its active verbal sense, in its happening, or, perhaps, its event-ing. This must be contrasted with the event as noun, where the event is *what* has happened, and is thus closer to the said than the saying, which is precisely not the meaning here intended.

straightaway, as she is, and not *as* any thing. In this way, perhaps, we are able to encounter her as she is, as the Other.

If this is the case, that here in the happening or appearing of the Other we have found a moment before appearance and being, then it now becomes possible to address Derrida and his criticism that has haunted this paper. We are here faced with the possibility that the Other does not have to remain absent, hidden, and entirely unknown – that is, absolutely concealed – for her to maintain her alterity and not be reduced to the same. In the movement of the Other’s appearing and leaving we are offered a direct experience of her, where she *is* nothing, no thing, yet is also not nothing as such, or pure emptiness. That is to say, it offers a moment in between being and non-being where the Other is something different, something otherwise, where she is not yet illuminated in the light of being *as* a being, yet is not entirely cloaked in darkness, hidden absolutely from view. Instead, it would be that very moment of traverse, crossing from darkness to light that we find the Other as Other. This is simultaneously a retreat or slipping away, for in the moment that she is fully illuminated in the light she ceases to be coming into it, and thus the moment in which she was otherwise than being, where she was as she is, as Other, is lost. This is perhaps what Levinas means when he tells us that “We have been seeking after the *otherwise than being* from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it” (Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7). Thus, in the moment of the said and presence, everything must be either present or absent, and it is here that the saying – the very appearing of the Other – is lost, and retreats into absence. Yet, just as Levinas tells us in *Meaning and Sense*, the

Other, in *appearing*, has passed through before the moment of presence, and in so doing has left her mark, her trace, which manages to make her present in absence. This would make such an encounter with the Other possible, as it would mean that we never experience or see her *as* any thing, and thus cannot know her. Instead we would encounter her directly in her appearing, lending new certainty to the fact that the encountered occurred.

Perhaps nothing shows this more than the feeling of warmth in the caress that I have already offered as the trace of the Other. As I have argued, in her warmth we are pointed to an interiority of the Other that I can never access, that remains always hidden from me. In this way, her warmth is the signal of her leaving and withdrawal from me, the signal of her distance and difference from me. Yet, her warmth seems to emanate out from her, from that very place I cannot go. In this way her warmth acts as a kind of approach, signaling that we are together, in proximity and intimacy – indeed, that we are in each other’s arms. Her warmth then is able to traverse our distance to announce our proximity. In fact, it is possible to think that her warmth is that very traversing itself – that very movement across distance. In this way, the warmth of the Other that we find in our caress with her announces her to be there with me, yet apart from me, withdrawn and at a distance. It manages to signal her without bringing her into the light of appearance, and thus making her known. While we may know that she is and that we encounter her, we never know *what* she is. This is what Levinas prohibits when he finds knowledge to be an accomplice of the same, not knowledge as such. Thus, it becomes possible for us to

think of the warmth of the Other as the trace of her that we encounter without risking reducing the Other to the same and bringing her into the light of being.

X Conclusion

This paper has been an effort to think through what it would mean to encounter the Other in such way that respects her alterity and does not risk reducing her to the same. At the heart of this project has been an attempt to understand what it means for Levinas for a thing or being to be circumscribed within the horizon of the same, particularly what it means for a thing to *appear* within that horizon, and with that, to be known. I have offered that for Levinas appearance and knowledge are always *as* some thing, some being, where it becomes petrified, and thus fossilized into the same. Thus, I have argued, it is not appearance and knowledge as such that Levinas finds complicit in the totality of the same, but is instead this particular way of appearing – that is, the way things appear in the light of being – that destroy the alterity of the Other. Thus, if the Other were able to appear otherwise, outside and beyond this horizon of being and the same, it may be possible to encounter her in such a way that preserves and respects her alterity, meaning that there would be a third choice between the Other's appearance – which would sacrifice her existence as Other – and her pure absence, where she would remain

altogether concealed, unable to confirm that we have encountered her. This is the heart of Levinas' thought, his attempting to think otherwise than the being/non-being dyad.

As I have tried to illustrate, Levinas himself struggled through this effort to elucidate his thinking, offering constant re-formulations of what this otherwise might be. I have attempted to follow Levinas on this voyage through his own thinking, offering that in his formulation of the saying and the said in *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas may have signaled a way in which we may finally conceive of that beyond and before being, that which is otherwise.

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