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LANGUAGE AND ITS CORE: ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS IN LEVINAS AND BENJAMIN

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas' work on the philosophy of criticism stresses the subject's capacity for ethical interactions over the subject's ability to inspect and analyse the world. Walter Benjamin's work on translation and language places a similar emphasis on the ethical subject. His essay, 'The Task of the Translator', considers the analysis employed by poetic criticism to lead to a deep appreciation of the relationship between poet and audience. A proper reading of poetry deepens our feeling for communication. Further, criticism has the power to wake us up to our relationships. The Jewish element of Levinas and Benjamin's thought influences their notions of the ethics driving those relationships. This essay traces Levinas and Benjamin's development of an ethical readership which, while not itself strictly 'Jewish', has Jewish origins.

ADDITIONALLY, THIS paper follows from William Large's 'God and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: A Nietzschean Response' (*Literature and Theology* 14 (2000) 335–49). Large asks whether or not Levinas' ethical subject 'is merely the mask of the religious subject' (p. 347). Large notes that if the ethical subject were, in fact, the religious subject, the ethical subject would disappear with the dwindling of community life. When what Large calls 'social and political forces of identification' are threatened, the voice of God which they produce will also dwindle (*ibid.*). Large proposes that Levinas's ethical subject is vulnerable to the Nietzschean criticism that said subject is merely posited by an established moral culture. Rather than refuting Large's point, I instead take it as a point of departure for this essay.

While Large traces Levinas' philosophical debt to theology, I trace Levinas' theory of ethical criticism to the established moral culture in which he operates—to society, rather than to theology. I explore the Jewish origins of the sociality of language, as this concept appears in Levinas and Benjamin. I note that threats to the subject's relationship with the surrounding world,

or with the established moral community, often result in crises of readership and interpretation. In other words, I am interested in exploring the implications of Large's 'Nietzschean Response' for Levinas and Benjamin's theories of criticism.

I. THE THREAT OF MECHANICAL TRANSLATION

How can we know the cultural luggage of a language? How to formulate historical, political and cultural links and associations with daily life? How to establish and understand what creates the spirit of a language, its metasemantics, perhaps even metaphysics? Eliot said: poetry is what is untranslatable. But must Eliot be right?

Try to imagine an interpreter capable of accumulating all knowledge of words and language with an unlimited memory that can be used at any time. An unconventionally used mathematical apparatus might be made into something or somebody like that.

Krzysztof Kieslowski and Krzysztof Piesiewicz, *Decalogue I*

The speaker in Kieslowski and Piesiewicz' film *Decalogue I* desires a technically flawless translation, the original and the translated copy linked through immutable laws of grammar. This renders irrelevant any question of a language's intimate relationship with its speakers. The notion that there is something untranslatable about language, Eliot's notion, is directly opposed to this view in *Decalogue*. The speaker in the film is a professor who has built his career by teaching computers how to think. His ideal translator is an 'unconventionally used mathematical apparatus', rather than a person. The film uses the image of an electronic translator to ask first 'what is translation?' and then 'who, or what, is a translator?' and this is why the film provides us with a poetic entrance into the questions taken up by Walter Benjamin in 'The Task of the Translator' and by Emmanuel Levinas in 'Reality and its Shadow'. These essays consider the relationship between human language and a second level of non-symbolic communication, beyond signification. In Benjamin's writings this second level has religious associations, connected to a kind of communication found in the Bible's stories. In both 'The Task of the Translator' and the earlier (1916) 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man', Benjamin speaks to the fear that the metaphysical component of language has been forgotten by modern language users. To Benjamin, this loss is only one part of modernity's general forgetting of the sacred. Out in the streets and marketplaces, Benjamin's contemporaries see language as tool: this alone does not trouble Benjamin, but he worries that modern readership has become utilitarian. It is unclear whether he sees his neighbours as missing out on a dimension of poetic experience, or if he sees poetry itself as suffering. In either case, contemporary readings of poetry have become blind to everything but the most basic level of content, which each person is expected to interpret

in the same fashion. 'Even the concept of an 'ideal' receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art ...'¹ Much modern readership misses the significance of poetic language; people are only seeing a small portion of a whole thing.

While Levinas writes on art criticism rather than on poetic translation, the same theme emerges in his work: the critic is focused on something communicated by art, beyond its simple content. Thus Benjamin writes: 'It is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language' (*ibid.*, p. 79). If we look at Benjamin and Levinas' views together, we see that one of their common positions is that the critic must protect art from having its real significance drained by set of linguistic rules. Levinas warns against the tendency to view visual art as discursive communication, which he regards as a bad habit learned from literary criticism: 'perhaps the tendency to apprehend the aesthetic phenomenon in literature, where speech provides the material for the artist, explains the contemporary dogma of knowledge through art' (p. 131).² The intellectual's role is not to explain what anyone could tell about a piece of art, but to explain why art engages us on a deeper level—it is this deeper engagement, after all, that Levinas sees as criticism's first concern: 'The fact that one cannot contemplate in silence, justifies the critic' (*ibid.*, p. 130). There is something about art that calls for communication, something that demands conversation and human contact.

Benjamin's understanding of what it means to translate comes closer to the role of an interpreter at a diplomatic meeting, in contrast to the almost geometric translation process described by Kieslowski's professor. At such a meeting, the relationship between two languages is actually the relationship between two persons, and the translator's task is to expedite the latter relationship by crossing the gaps between the languages; 'Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this relationship itself; but it can represent it by realising it in embryonic or intensive form' (p. 72). The latter half of this quotation suggests that the translation is not to be taken as a grand theory, describing exhaustively the relationship between languages, but rather as an illustration of one way in which that relationship plays itself out. Flux and change, rather than static meaning, are the important terms in Benjamin's analysis—terms which describe the way people behave towards one another, not the way in which equations function. Benjamin's good translator understands language in a manner described by the German verb *kennen*, which connotes familiarity built through acquaintance.

Benjamin and Levinas both present the subject as possessing a primary identity within relationships—an ethical understanding, for Levinas views relationships as a font of ethical life. The human relationship is the relationship

with the Divine writ in smaller script. The notion of the subject as primarily ethical, rather than primarily a 'knower', is not simply a strike against other critics' work, but a foundation for ethically informed aesthetic criticism. The distinction between ethical and knowing subjects, in Levinas, is established effectively by William Large in his 'God and the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas: A Nietzschean Response'.³ My essay seeks to explore the centrality of the ethical subject within Levinas' theory of criticism, and within Benjamin's theory of language and translation. How does ethics, defined simply as the proper treatment of persons, replace or augment pure epistemology as a founding principle of criticism?

A diplomatic interpreter's work involves translation but also the creation and maintenance of relationships. The translator's work does not simply involve responsibility to a poem, but loyalty to a critical mode in which the things one says have meaning in the context of the relationship between speaker and listener. This means that the critic engages in what Sartre would call socially engaged criticism, although Benjamin construes this as an engagement with metaphysical language while Sartre considers it to be an engagement with political ideology. The practice of criticism is social, involving a sensitivity to human relationships and a view of language as a way of mediating those relationships. This is a very different way of talking about the relationship between critic and society, of course—the critic is not an analyst who scrutinises language from a safe distance, but a fellow-speaker who is as much embedded within speech as the poet. Benjamin develops a message about the relationship between critic and society, not just between critic and language, in 'The Task of the Translator', just as there is a more explicit message of the same type in Levinas' 'Reality and its Shadow'.

As I see traces of the earlier 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' in Benjamin's essay, I must necessarily refer to this earlier consideration of a split between discursive and divine language. If language as discourse is the language of society, then the critic must attune herself to the parts of a work that communicate through content, and to those that communicate through rhythm or form. Levinas also grounds his essay in a split between language's discursive and phenomenal qualities, echoing his earlier explorations of the split between philosophical work which functions through categorisation, and philosophy which takes the philosopher's relationship to the world as primary. The theory of the critic's responsibility to society developed in 'Reality and its Shadow', echoes the theory of the philosopher's responsibility to others developed in Levinas' 1957 *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*.⁴ Because 'Reality and its Shadow' is also a response to Sartre's theory of engaged literature, it applies ideas laid down in *Totality and Infinity* to Sartre's view of language as a site for ideological conflict. 'The world in which Sartre sees language as active is the world of ideological battles, where morality is

a function of self-conscious political and religious allegiances and not of a simple and unreflective social round', writes Iris Murdoch.⁵ Levinas' complaint with Sartre, as Murdoch describes it is that Sartre views language as a tool for negotiating abstractions, often ideological ones, while Levinas wishes to explore its phenomenological valences. 'Engaged literature', to Levinas, could involve focusing on ideas while overlooking those people for whom ideas are crafted. While we have identified language's non-discursive level as having to do with human relationships, there is still the question of how the concern for those relationships was introduced into Levinas' criticism, and what characteristics his criticism shares with his ethical theory.

II. TRANSLATION: LANGUAGE AND THE SELF

If language and content constitute a certain unity in the original, like fruit and rind, the language of translation envelops its contents in vast folds like an emperor's robes. For this language signifies a loftier language than its own and therefore remains non-adequate, violent and foreign with respect to its own content.

Walter Benjamin⁶

We begin with the fundamental opposition that Benjamin develops in 'The Task of the Translator'. His 'bad translator' fails to understand that translation is not a matter of rendering a foreign text in an 'intimate', familiar language. Interestingly, both Benjamin and *Decalogue* describe translation with words that implicate the translating subject: 'intimate, violent', and so on. Translation is a project for *selves*; its use indicates selfhood. By rendering things in our own language we eradicate their foreignness. We gain a reassuring sense that they will not change the way that we read. As Carol Jacobs points out in her essay, 'The Monstrosity of Translation', Benjamin juxtaposes that bad translation—which was an abstract matter of determining what a poem (Baudelaire's) tried to communicate, then rendering that meaning in a new language—which by its very abstraction left the translator herself *out* of the process of translation—against a translation which admits the translator's central role: 'For Benjamin, translation does not transform a foreign language into one we may call our own, but rather renders radically foreign that language we believe to be ours.'⁷ The translator is made aware of her relationships partly because the activity of translation makes her radically aware of herself.

On this point Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz: 'Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a false grounding: they wish to Germanise Hindi, Greek, and English instead of hindicising, grecising, and anglicising German' (Benjamin IV.1:20). How to create better translations? The bad translator must abandon the myth that his own language ('our own native German') is unchangeable or impermeable, and, doing something which the

computer-translator could never do, he must give up the thought that he can keep his own language pure and unchanged. This idea has a broad relevance, even though Benjamin writes specifically about the task of translating Baudelaire. The general tone of his essay suggests the ultimately sweeping significance of his ideas. His *nota bene* is not only directed to translators, critics and philosophers, but towards laypersons as well. Benjamin's linguistic theory directly addresses literary criticism, but appears to also address the language of everyday experience; Benjamin seeks to inhabit both the salon and the street. In both locales, constantly in contact with others, we necessarily speak a language that contains foreign elements. The questions Benjamin asks, then, are the questions we address when bringing up xenophobia and the commonplace, difficult project of living with other people.

Levinas describes the philosopher and his intellectual language in a manner that parallels Benjamin's treatment of the critic. He directs his writing towards the intellectual sphere, at least making specific philosophical and critical traditions the apparent focus of his works. Western philosophy wields a reason which may be 'violent and foreign' to the others whom it represents, just as Benjamin's bad translator does violence to alien texts. While Benjamin describes his ideal translation in prescriptive terms, Levinas will intertwine his critique of representation with his prescription for an ethically improved philosophical mode.

For Benjamin, good translation means opening oneself up to having one's language transformed—'This invasion of the foreign [i.e. having one's language altered] is perhaps merely prescriptive for other translations' (Jacobs 756). In the chapter of *Totality and Infinity* entitled 'The Phenomenology of Eros', Levinas explores the possibility of avoiding philosophy's domination by reason. The notion of the 'caress' presented in this chapter—it is significant that Levinas uses the image of a romantic encounter—involves an abandonment of self. That is, in an ethical encounter with another person, we must abandon our habit of self-protection. Levinas describes his caress in contrast to its opposite, which would be a kind of domination of the other. In philosophy, one tool for domination is description itself. The caress, by contrast 'Is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement into the invisible', and 'It thus goes further than to its term' (TI 258). Rather than remaining in the easily understood, comfortable, domain of the self 'within its own term', the caress aims at a more complex encounter in which it risks everything. Imagine a conversation between friends: both may walk away with a troubling sense that something went wrong between them, simply because the conversation did not flow as they expected. Each person hoped something would be said that was forgotten or passed by; they both forgot that the participatory nature of conversations makes them difficult to plan ahead, unless a dialogue is to be turned into a confessional.

My concern for the other opposite me—in the romantic case, this person whom I care for and love—causes me to *forget myself* in the act of describing this other. There is no speech made about the loved one, for such a speech may be purely for the enjoyment of the speaker. The subject whom Levinas critiques in *Totality and Infinity*, a rational idealist subject, remembers himself in his act of representation, and thus never gets further than himself. The act of translation is defeated, the interpersonal level never reached. Another aspect of translation becomes clear now: it is not simply a matter of dropping our barriers, or of allowing the other its individuality. We, ourselves, are re-translated.

Like Benjamin's good translator, Levinas' caressing lover will be changed through the act of acknowledging his beloved. The parallel becomes elegant when we consider that the beloved is in Benjamin's essay a text and in Levinas' essay a person; responsibly loving texts, and people, share common characteristics. Our own identities are vulnerable when we love and when we read. Stating the point more dramatically, our identities are precisely what is *at stake* in the course of such relationships.

In 'Phenomenology of Eros', Levinas writes 'The caress aims at the tender which has no longer the status of an "existant", which having taken leave of "numbers and beings" is not even a quality of an existent. The tender designates a *way*, the way of remaining in the *no man's land* between being and not-yet being' (TI 259). In this essay, at least, Levinas does not want to surrender his subject to any fixed 'translation', or 'being'. I read this as his movement away from the fixity of identity, taken to one logical extreme. The centrality of the idealist philosophical subject, one of the central problems considered in *Totality and Infinity*, does not itself fully describe the failure of the idealist system. The idealist tendency is to extend the 'self' of the subject to cover everything around him—self pervades everything, the objects of the world and one's neighbours. When the philosopher finds meaning in those objects, he is only finding the same rationality that he aspires to possess himself.

This causes more than a failure to represent others ethically. This failure, which I discussed above, is simply the result of the idealist's treatment of the other people in the world. The philosopher's representations of other people are a means through which he represents himself; his reflections on his world are inevitably reflections on himself. The possibility of a real encounter with another has been obliterated, just as Lacan, writing on Freud, asks: 'What is the first encounter, the real, that lies behind the fantasy [fantasme]?'⁸ A primary encounter has been discarded in favour of a shadow-play. The irony here is that the idealist may in fact be striving for a more 'genuine' experience of the world; he may see himself as cutting through layers of illusion, getting closer to a trustworthy relationship with his surroundings and neighbours.

The idealist representation is in fact just more illusion, a reverie of self unchallenged by any possibility of the foreign. If the reverie of self is like a dream, then Levinas' philosophical project will be to wake the idealist subject from this dream. Benjamin's hope is that dreams of perfect translation between languages—a fantasy of total transparency between individuals—will be replaced by an appreciation of the kind of non-discursive language present in real relationships.

Once again we arrive at the theme of replacing an epistemological understanding of the subject with an ethical one. Benjamin and Levinas, in emphasising the critical subject as situated within a network of human relationships, deploy a Jewish notion of the ethical subject within superficially secular realms of critical thought. Levinas does not care about relationships simply for phenomenological reasons—for example, because those relationships make up the subject's phenomenal world, or constitute the horizons (Heidegger) of possible experience. Nor does Benjamin see the metaphysical dimension of language as a step-up from its discursive dimension because the former is epistemologically more reliable. Levinas is in some ways a phenomenologist, just as Benjamin's thinking owes a debt to the philosophy of aesthetics, yet neither deploys the motif of the relationship solely for reasons relating to those fields. While allowing that they both maintain complicated ties between their Jewish and non-Jewish thought, I would focus attention on the Jewish views of the ethical subject which strongly influence their writing.

III. TROUBLED LANGUAGE AND OLD JEWISH WORLDS

Every language communicates itself *in* itself; it is in the purest sense the 'medium' (*das Medium*) of the communication. Mediation (*das Mediale*), which is the immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) of all spiritual communication (*Mitteilung*), is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one chooses to call this immediacy magic, then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infiniteness. This is conditional on its immediacy.⁹

Benjamin wrote 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in 1916, placing it in a different phase of his intellectual development from the later 'The Task of the Translator'. In 1912 he had written a letter to Ludwig Strauss in which he espoused a 'Cultural Zionism which sees Jewish values *everywhere* and works for them'. Identifying with those values in a more overt manner than in his later letters to Gershom Scholem,¹⁰ he followed with the second statement: 'Here [in my Jewishness] I will, stay, and I believe I must stay.' The connection between the above quotation from 'On Language', and Benjamin's cultural Zionism holds relevance for the next turn in my project.

Benjamin's work on language stems directly from his theoretical account of the relationship between human language and the transcendent experience of the Divine. Linguistic representation offers traces of something inexpressible, scattering those traces throughout human symbolic language; a person must know what to look for.

There is a striking parallel between Benjamin and Levinas' conceptions of the 'trace of the inexpressible'. There is another crucial parallel between them: the importance, which is of course an ethical importance, of seeing those traces in everyday life. When Levinas claims to be a philosopher of everyday experience, it seems at first that he has misrepresented himself. *Totality and Infinity* is concerned with the Infinite, something beyond the inadequate totalities into which we fit human experience (Sartre). However, he is really concerned with the relationship between the Divine and an everyday experience that has heretofore been misunderstood. He sets himself the task of freeing everyday experience from the language which philosophers have thrown around it, and of relating such experience to the ethically commanding thought of the Infinite—the Face of the Divine. Thus his task is to free philosophy's interpretive hermeneutic and render it sensitive to the trace of a fundamental relationship. That fundamental relationship is not that between a knowing subject and a known world, but between the subject and the Divine, between the subject and other people. It is as immediate as a personal encounter, not mediated by analysis. When he writes 'Reality and its Shadow', Levinas explores the possibility of uncovering those primary relationships as the underpinnings of our intellectual lives.

Given this, it is not hard to see Levinas prioritising the Jewish ethics in his thought over his instinct to create a 'knowing philosophical subject'. This is the direction in which his most technical work, *Totality and Infinity*, drives. Just as Benjamin's theory of language invokes a longing for a lost way of reading the Bible, Levinas' theory of criticism tries to recuperate the Jewish ethical subject as primary. Communication and good relations with neighbours provide the primary framing of ethical and intellectual experience. The covenant with the Divine, the holy Other, becomes a type after which those experiences are modelled. The Face of the Other, which refers to the undefined (beyond the reach of human discourse) countenance of God, becomes a model for encounters with other people. The faces of others are traces of that primary Face.

For Levinas, the Jewish ethical subject's obligation to others is not simply tied to some form of communitarianism, but is intertwined with the language that the community employs and exists within. Language and ethics have a direct connection in that they both flow into the human world from the primary experience of the Divine. In 'Apropos of Buber: Some Notes', Levinas writes that 'God is personal insofar as He brings about interpersonal relations

between myself and my neighbours. He signifies from the face of the other person, with a significance articulated not as a relation of signifier to signified, but as order signified to me'.¹¹ The intertwining of questions of language and questions of ethics in Levinas' thought, and the centrality of the Divine Face in both language and ethics, makes it easy to follow the theory of language in 'Reality and its Shadow', back to another relationship. This is the connection between human language, Divine language, and community, a relationship revived by each instance of a 'trace'. The trace is a reminder of the primary experience of God's face, separating that which can be signified from the un-signifiable, dividing the Divine from the human but also establishing a relationship between them.

Everyday language is not simply the discursive communicative act which both Benjamin and Levinas view as potentially debasing. It is a tool used for negotiating an everyday world that God has created and which is hallowed for human life. Brian Britt's reading of Benjamin's essays on language, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible*, explores the connection between divine and human languages.¹² If we take 'Everyday language' to mean all manner of cultural expression—literature, radio, print journalism and film—as well as everyday human speech, we can connect Benjamin's work on language with his 'Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', which makes very specific points about those media.¹³ Britt focuses on Benjamin's critical theory of symbolic representation and Benjamin's relationship to theology, taking as Benjamin's central concern a human inability to connect with the Divine via language, to feel the presence of God in their lives. In taking communicative acts to be no more than a transmission of content, the location of speaker and listener is forgotten—their very *being* is, in fact, forgotten. They are taken as no more than two nodes in a chain of information transmission and their existence beyond such functionality is neglected.

Britt notes that in Benjamin's writings on the Bible, the human debasement via language results in a forgetting of how to read the sacred text. Reading it as conveying literal truth is what Benjamin sees as the 'Modern approach', and he associates this approach with a contemporary understanding of how language operates.

Such interpretation, Benjamin suggests, entails extracting a particular meaning out of the text, whereas his concern is to identify the spiritual being communicated by the text. Conventional exegesis would fix the text's meaning, but miss its spiritual being that is fully expressible only in its original form. But the contemporary hermeneutical perspective, characterised by fallen language, has no direct access to the revelation of the Bible. (Britt 40)

On Britt's reading, Benjamin diagnoses the language of his day as being cut off from any kind of genuine religious experience. On the one hand, this is

Benjamin's protest against a world rendered devoid of religious meaning. On the other hand, it is a protest that has more to do with humans' openness to the religious and the transcendent than with their experience of each action and object around them as the imprint of a Divine plan. 'The contemporary hermeneutic perspective' could be read as the 'bad translation' that appears in the later 'Task of the Translator' essay, an attempt to reduce language to a merely discursive role. Part of Benjamin's argument is that Biblical language is meant to open people to revelation, not to express specific messages or *revelations*.¹⁴ The meaning of 'Revelation' here has more to do with a transformation of mindset. Note that it is not the message or even the interpretation that is important here, but the interpreter herself.

Benjamin is quite aware of the hegemonic effect of modern discourse, of course: we all shape our thoughts in the terms of this hermeneutic. It is not solely the bad habit of philosophers and critics. Likewise, Benjamin does not write a critique only of philosophy but of cultural activity considered more broadly, including areas favoured by Benjamin such as urban architecture and book-collecting. Every object that passes through our hands is a representation. Further, our hermeneutic perspective is untouched by any high culture/low culture distinction (i.e. it is not the sole possession of an elite or of a proletariat) and affects every level of life. This concept of an hermeneutic inflecting even everyday speech is of course also important to Levinas.

Levinas's critique in *Totality and Infinity* is more directly aimed at the Idealist tradition within philosophy, but this is not to say that he sees his comments as only relevant to that tradition. Like Benjamin he writes in such a way that his points 'overflow' the framework he sets out for them, revealing an expansive dimension to his thought: he seeks to comment both on intellectual life and on the worlds of experience in which it occurs. Levinas does, however, concern himself most directly with the representational mode that *intellectual* history has left us.

Enlightenment notions of rationality and the philosopher's ability to understand the world's ontological structure inflect everyday representation, although in a stronger sense than a local accent might inflect someone's speech. Benjamin's reading of everyday speech—which, following imagination, is the second most common kind of representational activity—certainly seems consistent with this thought; something has happened to the way we talk about our world. We eliminate the potential for meaning in our lives through the reduction of language to a symbolic medium: 'The enslavement of language in prattle is joined by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence' (*Reflections*, p. 329). The speaker and the hearer are forgotten when the idea is reduced to an image.

Of course, Benjamin will not try to elevate language *above* its symbolic use. Like Levinas he sees language as one side of the barrier between human and

something transcendental—the Face of the Divine, in Levinas. Benjamin’s ‘On Language as such and the Language of Man’ can never be anything more than a tool for communicating about the things of this world. However, this does not preclude it from providing suggestions or hints of the transcendental; the critic or translator is the one who helps ‘Man’ to appreciate his language correctly. A ‘world barren of meaning’, for Benjamin, is a world that has forgotten how to appreciate language as a trace of the Divine. The problem of Modern life is the problem of how to read those traces back into language and into representation. While political Zionists concerned themselves with the physical in-gathering (geographic relocation) of the exiles, Benjamin began a less overtly political Jewish project. He took as his subject of concern the restoration of language’s human core, which might restore it to its rightful place as a carrier of divine meaning in human life.

The political crises of the twentieth century, characterised by nationalisms and violence, are distilled into the linguistic crises which concern my critics. Language has become the medium through which humans judge one another, just as for Levinas, people use an idealist hermeneutic of representation to set the world according to categories. In the introduction to *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is critical of the way people judge one another in terms of those categories. ‘In the Fall, the eternal purity of names was violated, the sterner purity of the judging word arose’ (*Reflections*, p. 328). Benjamin does not capitalise ‘word’ here, suggesting that he means the human symbolic rather than a Divine *Logos*. When a human names another he attempts to bind them to that name. Races are ‘names’, in this sense. So is any other category into which people are placed, a placement which also functions as a judgment. Even personal names, which do not seem to ‘grasp’ us, may serve to bind us into a social order.

Benjamin presents a different view of naming and its place in language. When the Figure whom Jacob wrestles says ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed’ (Gen 32:29), this is not the sort of negative naming Benjamin and Levinas wish to critique. When Benjamin writes ‘For the proper name is the word of God in human sounds’ (*Reflections*, p. 324), he indicates that human language can contain at least a reference to an earlier Divine expression.¹⁵

The episode of Jacob wrestling illustrates another of Benjamin’s insights. Defeated, the adversarial figure (Angel, Man or God) names Jacob (Israel) but will not give up his own name. Instead he indicates that Jacob’s new name ‘He who has striven with God’ elliptically reveals his own. Thus one name contains another, and the action of naming is also a bonding between man and God; the new name serves to describe the relationship between them. The name Israel is, itself, the trace of a relationship. Benjamin writes: ‘The

other conception of language, in contrast [to the bourgeoisie or symbolic conception] knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in naming, the mental being of man communicates itself to God* (*Reflections*, p. 318). The adversarial figure declines to name itself, and in so doing does not submit itself to the human (symbolic) economy of names. Rather, it employs a trick to reveal itself through the naming of Israel (Jacob).

This elliptical communication makes the same manoeuvre as Benjamin's 'other' conception of language: it gets right to the heart of what language is about, without taking a detour through the symbolic or utilitarian use of language. There is no 'addressee of communication' here, despite the fact that a conversation is going on between Jacob and his adversary; this is because there is no attempt to *communicate* what Benjamin would think of as the 'signified'. Instead, there is a stress on the relationship between the individuals meeting face to face in a relationship not of dominance and control; the wrestling match is over. Language need not serve to continue the match, and the naming comes close to exemplifying Benjamin's 'Naming is that by which nothing beyond it is communicated, and *in* which language itself communicates itself absolutely' (*ibid.*). If human symbolic language is characterised by a struggle for dominance, for control, then this exhausted, face to face exchange of names is about the very event of exchange: it takes as its theme the interaction itself, in an expression that is infinitely self-referential for it expresses only itself. This is the sort of 'magic' to which Benjamin refers. Real language is at its core magical, for it expresses without representing. The name 'Israel' is a special kind of trace in another sense—in addition to referring to a specific kind of relationship, it hearkens back to the primary conflict through which God drew Jacob out of symbolic language and into a presymbolic form of contact.

Benjamin pictures human language as having an affinity both with God's language (which, since it is non-symbolic, should not be called 'language') and with the world: 'Language is therefore both creative and finished creation, it is word and name' (*Reflections*, p. 323). Names are associated with finished creation, the human world. The naming word is that of God: 'God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language' (p. 321). Benjamin's hope in his reading of language is that there might be a way to reflect on language that resurrects its Divine origins and restores to humans a wonder before the transcendental. As he did in 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin is trying to understand criticism as the project of restoring wonder, of mending the human relationship with the Divine. He comes very close to Levinas on this point, though he does not explicitly use the Divine to make ethical demands on the human. However the parallel holds, and for both thinkers, restoration starts with the modern world, which holds both alienation and redemption in everyday moments.

In Benjamin's essay language plays a role similar to that played by reason in *Totality and Infinity*. It is a necessary tool for navigating a human world of symbols. Once that world has been rendered meaningless—or, for Levinas, when it becomes marked by violence against others, by war—then navigational tools must be examined and reformed. The Other is Levinas' tool in his philosophical attempt to hold idealist representational thought (which had gone undercover by wearing the garb of 'reason') hostage to ethics. Seeing everyday interactions as traces of the relationship with the Other is his way of connecting humans with an ethical dimension of experience.

It is not enough to reflect on language or philosophy for Levinas; this is a critical distinction between Levinas and Benjamin. The latter sees reflection (including reflection on language and on philosophy), as in and of itself salvational. Michael Oppenheim notes that "It is not self-consciousness that brings authenticity, according to Levinas, but rather, it is "my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual 'I'".¹⁶ The ethical relation is what saves consciousness from the experience of alienation, returning meaning to the interactions between people; 'reflection' is a necessary step on the way, but not the end in itself.

We have already seen that 'the everyday', or 'everyday language' also means literature, film and other mediums. Levinas, like Benjamin, does not want to devalue life in the modern world or the artworks that express that life. As we saw before, he thinks that each 'made thing' has a quality of 'face-ness', revealing the human power of creativity and the infinite importance of the subjectivity behind creation. Benjamin also wants to take a positive stance towards the world of everyday life—it is the poetic interpretation and the experience of that world that he wishes to mend. Levinas and Benjamin are both very Jewish in their desire for an ethically inspired criticism—they want to see the ethics mandated by religious experience expressed in the life of the community, beliefs finding their real truth in actions. Levinas goes further than Benjamin by directly connecting his criticism to religious experience; human life itself is an invitation to interact with the Divine.

IV. JEWISH KNOWING

For Levinas, asocial religious systems, like asocial philosophical systems, misunderstand the significance of knowledge. A philosopher's knowledge of a subject will ideally be based on a study of that subject's relationship with the world—this keeps abstraction from being imposed over real being. Experience is Levinas' concern in the religious realm as well. Experience of the Divine may be important in its own right—he nowhere denies this—but the aspect of

it that he wants to develop is the way that religious experience becomes embodied in social life—and can grace social life with ethical commandments, making the word of the law into action.

Oppenheim rightly mentions that Levinas does ‘Not believe that the interhuman realm exists for the sake of the divine, or that religious story diminishes the importance of the human in any way’ (Oppenheim 22). Human faces do not exist to create ‘trace’ experiences of the Divine face. The desire to see traces of the Divine in human beings and their arts reveals Levinas’ valuation of human life. Further, human life is always the life with others. I apprehend my life as meaningful while I take part in relationships with other people—not because I feel actualised by a particular social role (a Kantianism with its origin partly in Herder)—but because it is through the lens of my duty and obligation to others that I understand the world, navigating creation through the ties that bind.

Noting that these ties are not chains or limitations, but rather opportunities to act (to act with ‘freedom’ for Levinas, is to be free to act in a meaningful way), I also note that understanding the world in a new way is another species of action. This is an appropriate point for a jumping-off into Benjamin’s theory of language itself, for his understanding of language is: our understandings of the world are themselves forever actions, limited (given an epistemological horizon) by our very status as *actors*. To grant thought the status of a verb is to understand thinking’s relationship with living. To understand communications not simply as messages but as references to the dialectic between two *beings* is to understand the real weight behind the things we say.

Edith Wyschogrod writes that ‘to interpret Benjamin’s views as a longing for originary presence is to miss the thrust of his analysis’ (Wyschogrod 75),¹⁷ urging against a mis-reading of Benjamin’s ‘Language’ essay. Benjamin never suggests that Adam’s naming in Genesis is important *because* it takes place before a fall and is thus somehow pure. It is not purity that Benjamin longs for in language, as we have already seen. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it, ‘philosophical contemplation reinstates the original perception of the words’.¹⁸ Perception has its origin in the perceiver, in their phenomenological experience—so in a sense, there *is* an ‘originary presence’, but Wyschogrod’s point is still well taken: we must not misinterpret Benjamin’s desire. Paradise is not established by stripping language of its alienated qualities but by understanding the relationship between speaker and what is spoken. During the same period that Benjamin worked on ‘Language’, he was operating with an almost magical understanding of the relationship between language and the material world that it describes.

Benjamin posits his theory of readership and translation as a better alternative to the readership of popular culture, and the Jewish element of his readership

is partly tied to the biblical origin of that readership: he recruits Jewish values as a central motif of reading. Levinas employs a Jewish critical ethic in order to reposition himself in relation to a philosophy that opposes itself to the Jewish values of community: The philosopher faces 'a war he knows is inescapable, except by denying discourse, that is, by risking the worst violence'. At the same time as the philosopher cannot get away from his discipline, he enjoys the luxury of questioning philosophy's aspiration towards scientific accuracy (p. 117 and 118, respectively). The philosopher must remain within philosophy—but manages to gain a consciousness of how it shapes his thoughts. The philosopher, in his relation to language, must correct his discipline's mistakes. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 292:

A philosopher: alas, a creature who often runs away from himself—but so inquisitive that he always 'comes to' again, to himself.¹⁹

Nietzsche's aphorism captures the spirit of the philosopher's relationship to his own discourse: a perpetual movement outwards into a world which wants to be explored combined with a habit of questioning his own outward movement. Even the philosopher's outward footsteps are really an investigation of self. This fits Levinas' portrait of the Idealist. Levinas would transform the Nietzschean aphorism further by noting that the return to self is not only in the *investigation* of one's own methods (the hallmark of Descartes' *Meditations*, for example) but often the unobserved result of one's searching. For Levinas, philosophical investigation is often just a matter of imposing one's ideas onto the world. One 'returns' to oneself to the extent that one never looked beyond oneself in the first place.

Levinas' attempt to move towards a picture of the philosophical critic's responsibility to society begins with the phenomenological moment we began with: intellectual work, like language, may have an abstract discursive capacity, but it has the horizons demarcated by experience. The movement goes further than this simple re-statement of a phenomenological position which we have seen in Heidegger and even. Levinas carries it far enough to produce a picture of criticism as more than *figured* by the critic's place in society, but somehow *needed* by society—criticism with a mission, in service not to some abstract goal of philosophical investigation, but to the society itself.

This is the point I am trying to extract from both Benjamin and Levinas, after all. For the former, the critic is not estranged from his social world in the sense that Marx intended when he said that the Germans had been 'philosophical counterparts' to the real historical development of their world. The mediation of society's desires in philosophical terms, rather than alienation from society's desires, is Levinas' goal for the critic. He leaves room for the analysis of Beauty, but the critic's task is not merely to explain why an image is

engaging or pleasing but to explain what *this engagement* teaches us about the world we have built around ourselves. Once again we see the critic acting in the role of interpreter, focusing attention on relationships; here those relationships are between society and the art objects which society's artists have created.

Benjamin provides an account of the critic's relationship with society that mirrors 'Reality and its Shadow', although his view of the critic is of an alienated—'rootless and cosmopolitan'—individual, not necessarily connected to his neighbours. Benjamin never suggests that society requires criticism. Instead, the critical interpreter offers to explain the world to itself, is rebuked or ignored, and moves on. The distinction between their pictures of the critic's relationship with society is poignant, in part because of their shared theoretical views on discourse and religious experience. Both stress a criticism based on relational understandings of languages: signification is not merely discursive but phenomenological as well, with a view of the phenomenological as a realm of religious experience hiding in the background. Their phenomenological understanding of artistic language, which prioritises the subject's experience of their relationships over their intellectual experience, leads them to understand language as something too rich for *Decalogue's* computer to grasp. Yet it is Levinas and not Benjamin's critic who feels that the world requires his work; his work is transparent to society; he has a relationship with those around him such that his work can be appreciated both intellectually and morally. The line between the two thinkers is not defined clearly as a distinction between alienated and unalienated, of course.

Levinas' understanding of criticism and language is hard to extract from a Jewish context. This is not to entangle his philosophy and his Jewish thought, but merely to propose that he cannot get away from himself. Nor can Benjamin—his theory of language in both 'The Task of the Translator' and 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' is based on a longing for a lost Biblical way of reading texts and understanding intellectual experience, a way of reading which associates itself naturally with Jewish thought. To Benjamin, this Jewish way of reading has become lost in modernity: Europe's industrialisation and throwing of its productive back into nationalist causes has affected intellectual life.

For Levinas, the threat to phenomenological and religious experience is located more centrally within philosophy and aesthetic criticism themselves. His task is in some ways more self-conscious than Benjamin's, for he understands that a philosopher such as himself must, in the process of critiquing philosophy, write the history of his relationship with his discipline. Levinas knows how close he is to Nietzsche's philosopher of Aphorism 292. The connection between Levinas' philosopher and the Jewish exegete of the Law, who uses interpretation of story and holy text to explain society to itself, is

strong. Levinas imagines the philosopher to be working on issues of law, morality and the ethical treatment of one's neighbours. Benjamin, on the other hand, imagines the philosopher as understanding a language which is somehow hidden behind the world's veil. This secret language is, as before, the one in which the Bible is really written. Further, this is the language that hides behind everyday discourse. There is great potential even within everyday conversations to reveal Divine meaning.

Unfortunately the philosopher cannot share this understanding of the world with those around her—and even if she could, it is unclear (in Benjamin) whether or not she shares concerns in common with her neighbours. Benjamin's intellectual work certainly produced theoretical conclusions which could have been of interest to the more practically concerned people around him, but on another level he remained preoccupied with Baudelaire and other writers. Like Baudelaire, Benjamin was only able to communicate with a circle of friends which, while close in spirit, was in body scattered across Europe. Levinas worked for years in the Ecole Universelle Israelite, teaching and administrating in an educational system designed to prepare fellow Jews for the world around them. Levinas' texts of choice were in fact more technically abstract than Benjamin's poems and historical volumes, but the theoretical issues he used them to negotiate were ones close to the heart of Jewish society in general. The critic is tied to his fellows not simply by co-habitation within the European ghetto or even within the 'nation of Israel' considered as an imaginary nation stretched over the world, but by common concerns. It is that sense of common concern that lends weight to his relationships, makes the Divine language he aspires to seem, to him, to be one he shares in transparency with those near him. That language is, after all, one in which relationship is the central term.

Philosophy and Jewish thought are traditions that have shared many points of co-development and cross-fertilisation. Levinas' contribution of bringing Jewish ethical thought into contact with philosophy is not strange or new; it may bring philosophy back to one of its own lost moments. His contribution, though it comes from a particular tradition of Jewish thought, has relevance for more general conversations regarding the intellectual's duty to society. Deepening the understanding of linguistic relationality, he shows that the intellectual model a critic chooses has a great deal to say about that critic's sense of intellectual responsibility. Opposing a view of the intellectual as an isolated worker, Levinas joins Benjamin in taking the translator's real task not to be *translation* alone, but the working through, with others, of our relationships. This practice may take the form of a solitary effort, similar to the abstract work of a Cartesian philosopher or Baudelaire translator, but it is not as a solitary thinker that Benjamin or Levinas' good translator writes. She writes with her own hand, but for, and with the backing of, her community.

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- ⁹ W. Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man' in *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 317.
- ¹⁰ See G. Scholem (ed.), *Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).
- ¹¹ In H. Jodalen and A.J. Vetlesen (eds), *Closeness: An Ethics* (Oslo: Scandinavian UP, 1997), p. 50.
- ¹² B. Britt, *Walter Benjamin and the Bible* (New York: Continuum, 1996).
- ¹³ This connection is important. Benjamin's writings on language come earlier in his career. They seem motivated by the concern that the language we use is inherently alienating, or at least opens up the way for an alienation of signifiers and signifieds—and this concern, as I am attempting to explore, becomes characterised in religious terms as a desire to return to pre-Fall language. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is, in part, a meditation on the problems of alienation given the dominance of modern media, which can contribute to that experience. It is worth noting that Benjamin's theories of language as an alienating force were probably developed before he became the long-term guest and friend of Bertolt Brecht, whose conception of 'alienation', 'estrangement' or 'enfremdungs-effect' has become as canonical in academia as Benjamin's observations on Klee's *Angelus Novus*.
- ¹⁴ When viewed this way, Benjamin seems to protest against Fundamentalist readings of Scripture. Any conservative reading of Scripture that attempts to isolate the meanings of each line is a 'bad reading', on Benjamin's terms, because the reader has misunderstood the way in which Biblical revelation works. The point is not that Biblical language functions as the signifier, relating directly to a signified object in a manner intended by the hand that set this language in place. Rather, Biblical language contains suggestions of the transcendental. It does this by its very language-ness, or, language's ability to communicate itself in a self-referential fashion; communicating the very fact of its communication.
- ¹⁵ Also important is the parallel between Benjamin's 'name as suggestion of God's word' and Levinas' image of human faces reminding the philosopher of the revelation of the Divine Face. This reinforces the theme, common to both thinkers, of the smallest details of everyday life invoking the Divine. They diverge on what 'Divine' means, of course, and neither makes firm theoretical statements regarding this term. I have perhaps not given this divergence a lengthy enough investigation. However, their parallel readings of everyday human life are my immediate concern.
- ¹⁶ M. Oppenheim, *Speaking/Writing of God: Jewish Philosophical Reflections on the Life with Others* (Albany: SUNY, 1997), p. 17.
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