L'AIMÉ QUI EST L'AIMÉE

Can Levinas' Beloved Be Queer?

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Abstract

Emmanuel Levinas' teachings with regard to the other, the erotic and fecundity can speak powerfully to questions of Queer politics, morality and justice. Levinas' insistence on the inalienability of human rights which supersede the bourgeois social contract, the interpersonal as the locus of goodness and his interest in the moral possibilities of the affectional and erotic offer stirring possibilities. So does his insistence that each person is a unique event in being, irreducible to genus (or gender). But what about Levinas' formulations which appear to reinscribe heteronormative and patriarchal ideas about gender and family? Levinas scholars disagree about how to read these texts. This article provides a close reading of one of Levinas' more provocative texts to derive a queer reading that honours the teacher.

From a Queer perspective, the casting and shifting of gender performance in the course of erotic relationship – top/bottom, butch/femme – is a commonplace in the organization of daily life and what many of us know of love and goodness. Emmanuel Levinas' teachings with regard to the other, the erotic and fecundity can speak powerfully in this context if one reads Levinas' lover/beloved, masculine/feminine such that they describe positions that exist only in-relation-to and can be taken up by anybody in any body. Levinas was opposed to any move that might promote a regime of the Neuter.[1] But what about a regime of the singular and of the Human?

Why look to the work of Levinas for insights that might inform today's debates about gender and sexuality? First of all, Levinas is a key figure in the development of that broad philosophical movement dubbed postmodernity. His work champions multiplicity and pluralism, insisting on the uniqueness of the individual, not in his agonistic power, but in her irremissible, specific obligation to the Other. The Other, for Levinas, is simply the other person. (She is, explicitly, not the categorical Other of sociology.) The Other does not command the subject's response on the basis of any categorical loyalty

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or genus that would exist as a subset of the human. 'Absolving himself from all essence, all genus, all resemblance, the neighbor, *the first one on the scene* [emphasis E.L.'s] concerns me for the first time (even if he is an old acquaintance, an old friend, an old lover, long caught up in the fabric of my social relations) in a contingency that excludes the a priori'.[2]

Levinas denounces the privileging of ontology (what is real) and epistemology (how we know what is real; what is true) in favour of ethics as first philosophy. For Levinas, the other person, the Other, resists any categorization that would reduce her to an object of experience; and she represents a demand that the subject account for her exercise of power in ordering the world – and in assuring her own existence – at the possible expense of the other. In a move that links his philosophical writing (what he designates as 'the Greek') with his Jewish writing (of course, 'the Hebrew'), Levinas designates this encounter with the Other as metaphysical: 'Metaphysics, transcendence, the welcoming of the other by the same, the welcoming of the Other by me, is concretely produced as the calling into question of the same by the other, that is, as the ethics that accomplishes the critical essence of knowledge. And as critique precedes dogma, metaphysics precedes ontology'.[3] For Levinas, the first question is not 'What is that?' but 'Who are you?'.

By placing the relationship between incommensurable human beings first, Levinas destabilizes Totality, the regime of Being that dominates Western thought and includes philosophy, categorical identity and war. In place of the mobile, self-propelled I of modernity, Levinas posits the subject, the one who is subject-to. It is imperative to locate Levinas' thinking in the historical context of the Shoah and the revulsion against Absolutes that this catastrophe elicited in major Western thinkers. It is no accident that such postmodern luminaries as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard cite Levinas as an influence.

Among the postmodern thinkers, Levinas stands out as someone who worked to deploy Jewish thought as a countervailing way of doing wisdom in creative tension with, but distinct from, traditional Western thought. For Jews who are determined to remain engaged with Talmud Torah in considering questions related to gender and sexuality and also to push Jewish thought on those questions forward, Levinas, the champion of Talmud Torah as a model for multivocality and pluralism (within the boundaries and methods of a particular discursive community), is a key model.

Secondly, Levinas offers an approach to questions of a priori human rights from which all who are seeking to advance any project connected to such rights might benefit. Levinas wrote his second great book, *Otherwise than Being*, as a consideration of issues inherent in the question of justice.[4] For Levinas, the singular Other always comes upon me from the perspective of height; her presence constitutes her demand; she holds me hostage. She affects

me this way not by an exercise of power, but by her potential destitution, her potential hunger and vulnerability. Thus she calls me to account. However, the world is not made up of her and me. It includes me and he and she and they. There are other Others whose claim may conflict with hers. This is the problem of the Third.

For Levinas, the appearance of the Third, and the concrete reality of a whole world of thirds and fourths ad infinitum, is the warrant for justice, for the necessary violence of laws and their enforcing apparatus. Laws, of course, do violence to the incommensurability of the other by creating categories based on acts, capacities and other data; laws assign consequences and enforce them in ways that are not always responsive to the individual story behind transgression. Laws do more than punish, they regulate commerce, traffic and other aspects of a society that exists outside of a state of war. The very nature of a liberal state that protects liberty is to apply the rules universally (imperfectly and in the context of inevitable corruption) and to refuse individual distinctions. Through an engagement with this set of ideas, Levinas addresses issues of justice.

Justice is, for Levinas, a necessary recourse to Being, to ontology and to objectification so that the disparate claims of the Third, Fourth and all the others might be adjudicated. He insists that 'In it [– proximity of the other, who comes upon the subject –] justice is shown from the first, it is thus born from the signifyingness of signification, the one for the other'.[5] Justice for Levinas comes out of the saying, the face-to-face, the giving of one's word to the other, the choice for discourse over war. Justice requires the possibility of violence, but it is not born out of violence, rather from interhuman expression, the voice of the Good.

Levinas knows full well, of course, that this violence, born out of non-violence, can become very brutal very quickly. He cautions that 'Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges, and work are comprehensible out of proximity. This means that nothing is outside of the control of the responsibility of the one for the other. It is important to recover all these forms . . . at every moment on the point of having their center of gravity in themselves'.[6] Levinas' best state and legal system are not their own justifications; they exist for the sake of mediating the obligations of actual human beings to one another (not simply the continuation of state power). War, for example, should always be conducted with *mauvaise conscience*, a bad conscience, always reluctantly, as a last resort, and should never be taken for a norm to which we will inevitably return.

Levinas insists that, as a concretely practical matter,

> It is not without importance to know if the egalitarian and just State in which man is fulfilled (and which is to be set up and, especially, to be maintained) proceeds from a war of all against all, or from the irreducible responsibility of the one for all, and if it can do without friendships and

> faces. It is not without importance to know that war does not become the insaturation of a war in good conscience.[7]

Howard Caygill offers an extensive reading of Levinas' oeuvre in his book *Levinas and the Political*. Caygill argues that Levinas locates his commitment to justice and his active citizenship within a democratic republic in a concept of human rights which is harmonious with that in the Declaration of Independence of the United States. Caygill draws our attention to the essay 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' found in the collection *Outside the Subject*. There, Levinas writes

> The rights of man . . . can be heard throughout history, ever since the first stirrings of consciousness, ever since Mankind.[8] These rights are, in a sense, *a priori*, independent of any power that would be the original share of each human being in the blind distribution of nature's energy and society's influence, but also independent of the merits the human individual may have acquired by his or her efforts or even virtues. Prior to all entitlement; to all tradition, all jurisprudence, all granting of privileges, awards or titles, all consecration by a will abusively claiming the name of reason. Or perhaps it is the case that its *a priori* may signify an ineluctable authority older and higher than the one already split into will and reason and that imposes itself by an alternance of violence and truth; the authority that is, perhaps – but before all theology – in the respect for the rights of man itself, God's original coming to the mind of man. These rights of man, that do not need to be conferred, are thus irrevocable and *inalienable* [emphasis mine].[9]

Here, Levinas finds a way to link citizenship in the modern liberal democratic state with the call of the Other who bears a trace of her Creator. Levinas endorses human rights while withholding a similar sanction from the idea of meritocracy. In the essay 'Who Plays Last', found in the collection *Beyond the Verse*, Levinas explicates,

> The delicacy of a culture which is based on the power of young animals more talented than others must be rejected, for it will lead back to a society in which inequality reigns; the excellence of some will separate them from others. The inequality of natural talents is, by itself, a form of violence which can be curbed only by a sociality returning to sources other than biological ones.[10]

As Caygill observes, 'The ethical basis of fraternity is thus freed from membership of a particular community and offers an "original right", orienting justice prior to the institutions of the state. It permits the re-ordering of the trinity of "liberty, equality and fraternity" that inspires the republican defence of human rights'.[11] Caygill continues, 'Equality is no longer founded in community – the equality of the brothers – but in difference, in extreme individuation'.[12] And by the common status of each person as *b'tselem Elohim* ('in the image of God').[13]

Here, then, is the basis for a Levinasian approach to political and social questions: law and policy in service of one-for-the-other, in service of the individual exposed subject and of the widow, orphan and stranger to whom we are each responsible.

Thirdly, as a phenomenologist and philosopher of ethics, Levinas was concerned deeply with embodied human life. For Queer Jews, the body, in its holiness and ordinariness, is a key site of praxis and contention. Levinas reminds us that human beings do more than observe the world; we live from and within it. 'One lives one's life; to live is a sort of transitive verb, and the contents of life are its direct objects'.[14] Life is more than a series of observations and thoughts; it is sensuous, affective.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas does not locate his treatment of embodied human life in a discussion of the philosopher's curiosity, nor does he begin with the phenomenologist's awareness of being conscious or with the animal sensation of want, but rather with the phenomenon of pleasure. 'Life is not the naked will to be . . . . Life's relation with the very conditions of its life becomes the nourishment and content of that life. Life is *love of life* [emphasis E.L.'s]; a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being; thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun. . .'.[15]

To be a physical being, dependent on the world is not, for Levinas, an ontological insult; it is the ground of the subject, of the particular personality having a life in the world. 'To be cold, hungry, thirsty, naked, to seek shelter – all these dependencies with regard to the world, having become needs, save the instinctive being from anonymous menaces and constitute a being independent of the world, a veritable *subject*, capable of ensuring the satisfaction of its needs which are recognized as material, that is, admitting of satisfaction'.[16] The body is not a Platonic prison for the soul but, as we shall see (when the Other comes along), the means of the soul's realization.

Levinas observes that in eating, for instance, the person is aiming not only to ensure continued existence but also to satisfy hunger and, should they have enough to no longer be famished, to enjoy their food: 'To live is to play, despite the finality and tension of instinct to live from something without this something having the sense of a goal on an ontological means[;] . . . it consists in sinking one's teeth fully into the nutrients of the world'.[17] Without the summons of the other, there need be no anxiety about the purpose of life – to be alive feels good unless one is hungry or cold and then the purpose of life is finding food and warmth. One only asks 'What is to be done with my life?' in a social context having to do with obligations to other people. Otherwise, the play of living is its own justification.

For Levinas, this play is interrupted, *not* by any kind of categorical shame at physicality as such, but by the other person who calls my enjoyment and

freedom into question through the nudity of her face, her potential hunger and destitution – a vulnerability that I understand because, as an embodied being, I share it. It is precisely not alienation from my own body's vulnerability, or any denial of my own need, that calls me to responsibility but solidarity with the vulnerability of my neighbour.

> The being that expresses itself imposes itself, but does so precisely by appealing to me with its destitution and nudity – its hunger – without my being able to be deaf to that appeal. Thus in expression the being that imposes itself does not limit but promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness. The order of responsibility . . . is also the order where freedom is ineluctably invoked.[18]

The other interrupts my naïve exercise of freedom, calling me to account, making me responsible for the effects of what I do or fail to do. She calls into question my spontaneous use of power. Thus it is the other – not the mere condition of existing – who elicits critical thinking, theory; in practice, ethics as first philosophy. The other, therefore, invests my freedom; she does not eradicate it. She invites me to do justice. *Here, Levinas shows us a way out of the liberal antinomy between personal autonomy and social accountability.* He teaches that the subject is indeed special – as someone uniquely summoned to answer to and for the neighbour. The other founds my freedom by calling me to the honour of obligation (as the Jews as a people ratified our freedom by assuming the honour of obligation at Sinai).

Levinas emphasizes his distance from the Sartrean notion that the other represents an equal freedom with which the subject must contend for mastery. He writes,

> The Other is not another freedom as arbitrary as my own, in which case it would traverse the infinity that separates me from his and enter under the same concept. His alterity is manifested in a mastery that does not conquer, but teaches. Teaching is not a species of a genus called domination, a hegemony at work within a totality, but is the presence of infinity breaking the closed circle of totality.[19]

For Levinas, the voice of the other person, speaking and teaching, breaks into the inner world of the subject. In this way, the voice of the other person is like revelation – a teaching from the outside. So attending to the other person opens one's consciousness to the Creator.

The other teaches me about my status as a finite, created creature by reminding me that I did not make the world. She comes upon me uninvited. She is, like me, separate. And in this separation, we find relationship. We speak to one another. Our very separation, our finitude, allows us to partake in discourse – only separate beings can surprise one another. Our embodied finitude is its own consolation.

In discourse with the Other – in conversation – the subject is thrust into diachronous time. Diachrony for Levinas refers to a breach in synchronous inner time. A conversation is a series of ruptures, surprises, successive instants. The subject does not generate the Other's saying. Each saying is a rip in the immanence of being. Every intersubjective encounter is, in these ways, diachronous. It is in this way that the Other (person) teaches us about our status as creature; she trains us to listen to the revelation which will come from outside ourselves. The other reminds us that the very formation of our subjectivity is an unforgettable, yet unrecallable event in response to the shock of the other's existence. One can either understand this idea in Levinas as a reference to the ontic shock of the infant's discovery of the mother/other[20] or as a reference to the command at Sinai to which, it is said, every Jew has already acceded: love your neighbour as yourself. Either way, every interpersonal encounter is a reminder of what can never be recalled or forgotten, an event in disjunctive, diachronous time. 'Diachrony is not a difference amounting to a relationship between the known and the unknown' – because if it were, the unknown could be domesticated into the known, assimilated as a datum into the Same – 'where the dissimulated and the knowable would already share the thematizable plane of essence. The transcendence of the Infinite is an irreversible divergency from the present, like that of a past that was never present. A difference of the irrecuperable. . .'.[21]

Levinas also points to a path that takes us beyond questions of nature and nurture. Levinas is not interested in 'human nature', but in human beings. For him, as has been observed here, the other is a unique event in being, not an example of a genus. 'The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say "you" or "we" is not a plural of the "I". I, you – these are not individuals of a common concept. . . . He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no concept in common with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other'.[22] We are the same and the other because we are both human; incommensurable because both singular.

According to Caygill, this metaphysical materialism of Levinas suggests a political orientation. Caygill writes,

> In a line of argument that he will subsequently refine and take further, Levinas uses absolute freedom to criticize any notion of fate – be it natural, historical or the fusion of both in National Socialist racial philosophy of history – and then to justify human equality. In absolute freedom the individual is liberated from both 'natural existence' and the 'vicissitudes of the world's real history' (RH, 'Reflections on Hitlerism',[23] 66); is liberated, in short, from any determination be it natural (racial) or historical (political or confessional). In this way 'the equal dignity of each and every soul, which is independent of the material and social conditions of people' is due not to a quality possessed by the individual

> soul or body but to 'the power given to the soul to free itself from *what has been*, from everything that linked it with something or engaged it with something. . .' (RH, 66). The rooting of equality in the power of freedom, and then this power in the liberatory potential of monotheism – where the claims of the natural and historical world are nothing as compared to those of God – is consistent with Levinas's attempt to revitalise the revolutionary principles of 1789. This is emphasised in 'Reflections on Hitlerism' by the sympathetic critique of liberalism that follows the derivation of equality from freedom.[24]

As Caygill reminds us, Levinas' rejection of 'human nature' is rooted in commandedness – a most unnatural condition. The natural human subject, as described above, lives off the world, exercises power in transforming the environment into nourishment. But the Other interrupts this exercise of natural power with a super-natural transcendent command: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Here we see Levinas' Jewish understanding of creaturely commandedness in congruence with his philosophy. The subject is never perfectly adequate to the task but is never at liberty to desist from it. As Caygill puts it,

> Levinas rigorously distinguished human from natural rights. While the early modern rights tradition used the adjective 'natural' to validate the *a priori* character of human rights, Levinas insists that they transcend nature, thus linking fundamental rights with the 'requirement of transcendence, in a sense, of the inhuman that may be contained in pure nature, and of blind necessity in the social body' (OS [*Outside the Subject*], 121).[25]

For Levinas, for any Jew, the question 'What is natural?' must always remain secondary and instrumental with regard to the question 'What is just?'. Therefore, from this perspective, any recourse to natural rights from either the Left or the Right with regard to LGBT issues must be a dead end. Arguments such as 'we were born this way' and 'what you are doing is unnatural' are, ultimately, beside the point.

In most ways Levinas' approaches to gender, and to marriage, develop clearly from his approach to the human and to justice. In other ways, it can be argued that, at times, he deviates from his own apparatus in favour of essentialist impulses. One wishes to read these lapses as excursions into Gallic irony or as provocative play with antinomy, but there are places in the work where such a generous reading would be forced in the extreme. It is likely that, like most pioneering thinkers, Levinas developed his apparatus unevenly and, like all of us, he was immersed in the discursive web of his own milieu.

The biggest problem with Levinas' work regarding gender is that he employs the term 'the Feminine' in ways that appear to violate his proscription against shunting human beings into categories. In her book *Levinas, Judaism and the Feminine*, Clair Elise Katz gives Levinas the benefit of the doubt

with regard to his intentions: 'His intention is to create an ethics that includes everyone'.[26] (Here she is referring to Levinas' analysis of a sugya that begins in Talmud Bavli Berachot 61a, found in *Nine Talmudic Readings*, a work that we will not concentrate on here.) But with regard to Levinas' use of the trope 'the Feminine', Katz suggests, 'The "feminine" satisfies this role precisely because of the meaning that it has for us, even though this meaning alerts us to the potential problems and stereotypes that accompany it'.[27] She sums up the problem admirably: 'The confusion that arises from Levinas's use of the feminine has its roots in its ambiguous reference: Does the feminine refer to empirically existing women, or does it describe metaphorically what might be interpreted as stereotyped feminine attributes such as gentleness?'.[28]

Let us, at this point, interject a remark that Levinas made during an interview conducted in 1981 and published in 1982. He said, 'Perhaps all these allusions to the ontological differences between the masculine and the feminine would appear less archaic if, instead of dividing humanity into two species (or into two genders), they would signify that the participation in the masculine and the feminine were the attribute of every human being. Could this be the meaning of the enigmatic verse of Genesis 1:27: "male and female created He them"?'[29] Here, at a mature stage in his development, Levinas actually departs from the analysis cited by Katz, found in *Nine Talmudic Readings*,[30] in which Levinas joins our rabbis in an interpretation of the verse that assumes the originally created male and female to either be two separate beings or a hermaphrodite that needed to be split in order to create singly gendered males and females.

With all that in mind, let us proceed to a close reading of the section 'The Phenomenology of Eros' in Levinas' first great book, *Totality and Infinity*. My aim with this undertaking is to read Levinas in the way that he reads our rabbis, to employ his work as a lens through which to examine key social and political issues of our own time. I am fully aware that some of my conclusions might well have unsettled the thinker on whose work I draw. Applying Levinas' thinking to political questions has always been a tricky challenge – even to Levinas himself.

For Levinas, erotic desire constitutes an unsettling, special case; an egoistic pleasure that is also a relationship with the other. That desire which Levinas most privileges is the disinterested desire of the subject for the Other, whose need and destitution comes upon the subject as an indeclinable command. This command echoes as a trace of Infinite, the Creator, Whom we desire without the possibility of objectification. This moving towards that which can never be grasped, this recurrent answer to an assignation that can never be completed, is, in Levinas' thought, the structure of goodness. This motion toward the ungraspable, Levinas tells us, also structures the caress. Like the Desire for the Infinite, and unlike hunger for food, which is satisfied in

consumption, erotic desire grows from satiety. Eros, a unique combination of jouissance and for-the-other is vital to, and generative of, the human.

It is noteworthy that, at the beginning of his phenomenology, Levinas presents us with a male or masculine beloved: 'Love aims at the Other, it aims at him in his frailty'.[31] He then inverts the beloved's gender: 'In this frailty, as in the dawn, rises the Loved who is the Beloved: "Aimé qui est Aimée".' In his frailty, he who is loved becomes she who is beloved. So, already, it is a quality, that of frailty, that makes the difference in how we approach the Other and that turns him into the Beloved. The Beloved, Levinas continues, is 'but one with her regime of tenderness'.[32] And then, Levinas repeats his inversion: 'the other is other, foreign to the world too coarse and too offensive for *him*' (emphasis mine). To belabour the obvious, Levinas begins his argument in terms that invite us to conceive of the Other as s/he who oscillates between male and female or masculine and feminine, depending on the other's relationship with the subject who responds.

To go on with his argument, Levinas says that the Beloved resides at a place of tension between a kind of ultraphysicality – 'a sort of paroxysm of materiality' – and withdrawal, an evanescent frailty that is barely present in the material world at all.[33] 'The simultaneity of the clandestine and exposed precisely defines profanation. It appears in equivocation.'[34]

He continues, 'The mode in which erotic nudity is produced (is presented and is) delineates the original phenomena of immodesty and profanation'.[35] The production of the nude body that constitutes its eroticization in any consensual encounter would have to denote the *intention* of the beloved to be nude in her nakedness, to 'present' nudity. As will be discussed later, only a being with a face, with the potential to command as the other, can render herself nude. Only she who carries the trace of the Holy can be profane. It is refreshing that Levinas, a philosopher who appeals to us because he is not ashamed of morality, here appears to be unashamed of the element of lewdness that informs this constitutional human relationship.

Levinas calls the Beloved 'the tender', implying a degree of delicate attention that approaches queasiness and also rawness or exposure. Levinas goes on to define 'feminine' as 'the simultaneity or the equivocation of this fragility and this weight of non-signifyingness (non-significance), heavier than the weight of the formless real'.[36] Again, here is a kind of ultraphysicality associated with 'the' feminine: a weight that, in its gravity, pulls the lover down.

Levinas refers to the 'inviolable virginity' of the feminine, who is tangible but not 'graspable', 'not a freedom struggling with its conqueror, refusing its reification and its objectification, but a fragility at the limit of non-being'.[37] On one hand, this seems like the most indefensible kind of essentialism: that which reduces the feminine to the realm of mystery in the male imagination

and may even deny her agency in refusing objectification. But since Levinas started out with *l'aimé*, leaving open the possibility that feminine does not necessarily mean female, we can understand this to mean that any Beloved is invested with mystery; is over- and non-signified through his/her impermanent status as Beloved. (We Queers can push this point further to acknowledge the potential for fragility, the penetrability, of any male body.) We have been told what the lover is doing, but for all this to happen, does not the Beloved have to 'assume the position', and, thus, relate actively?

Furthermore, as we have seen, in the overall context of his work, Levinas rejects a Sartrist view of the other as an equal freedom, because he rejects the idea of a push/pull between potential masters. For Levinas, the Other is always more, not less, than the subject precisely because of his vulnerability, his potential destitution, which demands that I limit my freedom so as not to kill him. So when Levinas talks about the power of the beloved at her most vulnerable, this is not about Romantic chivalry or the Beloved as object, but about ethics.

There remains a potential problem with the non-signifyingness of the Beloved, especially given the primacy, for Levinas, of speech, of giving one's word to the Other. One can read this as denying the feminine – especially if one reads the feminine as woman – her voice. But, again, the Beloved, who may or may not be a woman, chooses her 'equivocation',[38] her tantalizing play between speech and not speech. Given that the speaking Other compels the subject's response, does not the non-signifying Beloved playing wantonly with her power to command announce a supreme confidence in her humanity? Does not her invitation draw the subject along the trajectory of that most privileged Desire, the yearning toward the Infinite? The caress, like the prayer, always seeks the not yet.

In discussing the caress, Levinas moves into tricky territory. Saying 'the caress aims at neither a person nor a thing',[39] he talks about the 'tender' in non-human terms. He writes, 'one plays with the Other as with a young animal'.[40] Is Levinas sentimentalizing a male objectification of women here? Or is this simply an apt phenomenology of someone assuming a role which is designated Lover, a role that anyone can assume in the context of sexual play?

Can a female, loving subject apprehend the tender in her beloved? Is the tender only 'the' woman or, can she be 'the' feminine (or the femme or the bottom), who, as we Queers know, can be any and all parties present at various times in one encounter?

'The caress does not act, does not grasp possibles. The secret it forces does not inform it as an experience, it overwhelms the relation of the I with itself and with the non-I'.[41] With this sentence, Levinas ties the effect of the Beloved on the subject to the effect of the face, the Other, who defies the subject to assimilate him/her into experience. The beloved is almost a hyper-Other. 'The

feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face.'[42] Later, Levinas discusses the 'effemination' of the subject when the subject is moved by Eros. Eros frees the subject by arresting 'the return of the I to itself'[43] because it presents the exteriority of the Other, not reducible to the subject's inner monologue.

In a resonant and beautiful account of how the Lover is moved with and by the Beloved's paroxysms, Levinas describes voluptuosity as 'a pity that is complacent[,] ... suffering transformed into happiness'[44], beautifully evoking that strange place where compassion, triumph and tender care collide and join. Like the encounter with the face, voluptuosity exceeds experience and 'the possible'.[45]

Levinas reminds us that 'Only the being that has the frankness of the face can be "discovered" in the non-signifyingness of the wanton'[46] and that the face provokes my goodness, which is my being-for-the-Other. The face is the origin of exteriority and the face itself is nude, destitute, vulnerable.

Levinas further acknowledges the connection of Beloved and Other: 'the whole body ... can express as a face'.[47] However, he contrasts the Other's 'height', 'his strength and his right', with '[t]he frailty of the feminine (which) invites pity' and is 'profaned'[48] with her erotic nudity. So, again, is the Other feminized when he turns Beloved – or can the female human face never command the male subject from the Other's dimension of height? Maybe not in Levinas' view, as of 1961, taken strictly at its word.

Levinas introduces us to the feminine face, which presents the 'non-signifyingness of the wanton'.[49] This face 'dissimulates illusions, innuendoes'. This face is a flirt. We have all, as Levinas must have, known such faces to be attached to male bodies. But, here, Levinas will not allow such an interpretation: he is talking about Woman, in her socially construed normative presentation: 'interlocutor, collaborator and master superiorly intelligent, so often dominating men in the masculine civilization it (the feminine) has entered'[50]. But what happens when a woman refuses to femme it up? Or when a femme in make-up speaks candidly, declining to manipulate? Does not she then take her place as the Other who, by initiating the face-to-face dialogue, necessarily commands?

In fact, Levinas says that 'disrespect presupposes the face .... It is necessary that the face have been apperceived for nudity to be able to acquire the non-signifyingness of the lustful. The feminine joins this clarity and this shadow'.[51] This is a further meditation on the phenomenology of eroticism. For there to be lewdness, there must be some underlying holiness that can be profaned. The erotic charge of the veil lies in the knowledge that a face is concealed beneath. This applies to all clothing. (Sexy clothing conceals a little while suggesting a lot – and, as mentioned above, in Levinas' thought any part of the body can signify as a face.) The issue here is that Levinas is linking 'the' feminine with the erotic dance of revealing and concealing. Could we

not then say that the Feminine is produced by any person who displays her or his nude body?

At any rate, this is where, in Levinas' text, things suddenly become even more interesting, because the one who is loved, no longer called Beloved, is 'he' again:

> In voluptuosity, the other is me and separated from me. The separation of the Other in the midst of this community of feeling constitutes the acuity of voluptuosity. The voluptuous in voluptuosity is not the freedom of the other tamed, objectified, reified, but *his* freedom untamed [emphasis mine], which I nowise desire objectified . . . . Nothing is farther from Eros than possession. In the possession of the Other, I possess the Other inasmuch as he possesses me; I am both slave and master . . . . Voluptuosity aims not at the Other but at his voluptuosity[:] . . . love of the love of the other.[52]

If Levinas can write this gender slippage in the first person, then, surely, we who study his work can investigate its possibilities without violating his teaching.

For Levinas, what reconnects the erotic with the social is fecundity. Levinas describes fecundity as a 'relation to a future . . . irreducible to power over possibles'.[53] Whether or not we have children, tradition tells us that students and teachers of Torah do extend themselves into the future. In the essay 'Cities of Refuge', found in the collection *Beyond the Verse*, one of Levinas' collections of Talmudic commentary, Levinas approvingly cites R. Ashi to undergird his own formulation that 'the fecundity of study' is realized when study is not done alone.[54] So, in his Jewish writing, Levinas gives respect to the rabbinic view according to which one's rav, one's teacher, is like a father and, in some ways, more like a father than one's biological father. As we learn in Talmud Mishnah Baba Metzia Chapter 2, Mishnah 11: 'Your father and your teacher are in captivity; redeem your teacher and afterwards redeem your father. But if your father is a person of wisdom, redeem your father and afterwards redeem your teacher'. Interactive scholarship and praxis give us what Levinas insists is necessary for fecundity, a relationship with infinite time.

In a move that coheres his Hebrew and Greek teaching, Levinas avers in *Totality and Infinity*, 'A being capable of another fate than its own is a fecund being'.[55] However, in 'The Phenomenology of Eros', Levinas focuses on biological fathers and sons – 'The love of the father for the son accomplishes the sole relation possible with the very unicity of another' – even though he generalizes that, 'in this sense, every love must approach paternal love'.[56] The father rejoices in the unicity, the uniqueness, the never-to-be-repeatedness, of his son. In his son (and the son's offspring), a father can see a future stretching out to infinity, a secure source of meaning; the knowledge that, despite his own inevitable death, the world will continue and will contain his loved

legacy. Levinas never explains why 'fathers' and not parents, why 'sons' and not children. (This is one of the places in his writing where he appears to assume a male subject (the father), although why daughters are erased in his treatment of fecundity is still not explained.)

It may be observed that what Levinas wrote about fecundity in the 1960s is not only linked to the Jewish tradition, but also amplified by the Shoah. While there is no arguing with the halakhic and historical basis for his evident concern for Jewish reproduction in particular and human reproduction in general, we can now answer to this concern with families and technologies that take us several steps further than Levinas was prepared to go. Any exclusive linkage of procreation with copulation and the erotic has been broken. Surrogacy, adoption and blended families make procreation and familial bonding possible in ways that would not have been conceivable half a century ago.

Certainly, we are all someone's child. We are born into families or, at least, into cultures, that claim and name us. '[E]ach son of the father is the unique son, the chosen son'.[57] The parent is usually that first Other who elicits our subjectivity by surprising us with the shock of our uniqueness and separation. Children for whom this does not happen may be wounded psychically for life. We cannot deny the figure of the mother/other of whatever gender here. As Levinas' work matured, he grew to appreciate the issue of the mother. He went on to say in *Otherwise than Being*, his last great work, 'Subjectivity of flesh and blood in matter – the signifyingness of sensibility, the one-for-the-other itself – is the preoriginal signifyingness that gives sense, because it gives. Not because, as preoriginal, it would be more originary than the origin, but because the diachrony of sensibility, which cannot be assembled in a representational present, refers to an irrecuperable pre-ontological past, that of maternity'.[58]

Richard Cohen, one of the important Levinas scholars and translators, offers, in the chapter of his book *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Levinas and Rosenzweig* called The Metaphysics of Gender, a reading of 'The Phenomenology of Eros' that seems to foreclose the sort of multigendered reading that is attempted here. Cohen makes a conservative reading of Levinas' metaphysics of gender and fecundity central to Levinas' ethical system. He ignores Levinas' references to fecundity that do not concern procreation. Given Cohen's long history of association with Levinas, it is difficult to dispute his knowledge of the author's intentions. But, we must ask, with respect, if complacence about the congruence of a conventional reading of Levinas' phenomenology with stereotypes that actually suppress the singularity of living subjects really serves Levinas' projects best.

Cohen quotes Levinas' early work *Time and the Other* to the effect that sexual difference 'conditions the very possibility of reality as multiple'[59] in a way that appears to turn Levinas' observation that people are gestated and born,

not generated by fission, into an over-privileging of gender as an ur-difference between people. But, as Cohen indeed acknowledges, and as we discovered in our reading of And God Created Woman, Levinas rejects Plato's story of complementary opposites. When Levinas talks about the duality of lover and beloved, he means any two specific lovers, not some primal male and female uniting through interchangeable vessels. Here it must be reemphasized that, for Levinas, the Other always resists categorization and is not an example of a genus. All human relations, for Levinas, are about non-commensurability; about the other's ethical height and authority, greater than my own; about the impossibility of reducing the other to an object I can comprehend.

Also questionable is Cohen's treatment of sexual difference and diachrony.[60] Cohen attempts to create a special link between diachrony and sexual difference by calling sexual difference the 'material condition of all intersubjectivity'. Again, if this is simply a reminder that people are uniquely different from one another by virtue of a particular chromosomal heritage, it is hard to argue with. But not every intersubjective encounter is about sexual difference. Every intersubjective encounter is about the unbreachable alterity of every other for every one. Each and every intersubjective encounter, between people of the same gender or of different genders, is, in Levinasian thought, diachronous.

Cohen reminds us that, for Levinas, Eros 'stands to the fully human tasks of ethics and justice as an interlude, intermission or vacation',[61] because Levinas emphasizes the twosome as 'dual solitude[,] . . . the supremely non-public'. It is true that Levinas observes about lovers that they retreat to privacy. The lover's playroom is 'unsocial'.

However, the erotic trains us to be human. The play of the erotic, the training in deferral offered by the caress, is profoundly ethical because, as Levinas observes, it teaches that, at her most vulnerable, her most naked, the beloved remains ungraspable, not our experience or creation. The Lover's movement towards is structured along the contours of the subject's response to the Other who commands, simultaneously, from the dimension of height and from vulnerability. Levinas brought all these ideas together in *Otherwise than Being*, saying,

> In a caress, what is there is sought as though it were not there[,] . . . like an absence which, however, could not be more there. The caress is the not coinciding proper to contact, a denuding never naked enough. The neighbor does not satisfy the approach. The tenderness of skin is the very gap between approach and approached, a disparity, a non-intentionality, a non-teleology. Whence the disorder of caresses, the diachrony, a pleasure without present, pity, painfulness. Proximity, immediacy, is to enjoy and to suffer by the other. But I can enjoy and suffer by the other only because I am-for-the-other ... which is the very birth of signification beyond being.[62]

At this late point in his development, Levinas is conflating the beloved with the neighbour, the Other whose face commands my substitution, within the same formulation. The caress, the handshake, the prayer: each is a reaching-towards along a continuous trajectory, never an arrival.

In 'The Fecundity of the Caress', her contribution to the anthology *Face to Face with Levinas*, edited by Cohen, Luce Irigaray takes particular issue with Levinas' linkage of the caress with procreation, as well as with his presentation of the Beloved. This silent, elusive Beloved is entirely too much of a Platonic cliché for Irigaray. She has lost her voice, her 'song'.

Irigaray accuses Levinas of making the Beloved an exception to his insistence that the other can never be an object of the subject's experience. According to her reading, Levinas makes the Beloved the ground for the subject's encounter with the unnamable. 'The loved one. Not the Beloved. Necessarily an object, not a subject in touch, like him, with time. Dragging the lover down into the abyss. . .'.[63]

Irigaray argues directly with Levinas' presentation of fecundity. She reminds us that, 'prior to any procreation, the lovers bestow on each other – life'.[64] To look at it through Levinas' lens as she understands it, Irigaray warns, is to turn the loved one into a mere 'bridge between father and son'[65] or an instrument of the subject's search for God. Her most damning accusation is this: 'God, like the son, would serve as a prop during the man's ethical journey'.[66]

While there is strong merit to her criticism regarding Levinas' peculiar emphasis on the fecundity of fathers, along with his apparent failure to sufficiently unhook The Feminine from flesh-and-blood women in their status as subjects, Irigaray goes too far in her dismissal of Levinas' understanding of God. God is the ultimate Alterity, the Other to whom we always aspire, who has figured in Jewish metaphor as both Lover and Beloved. God appears as a trace, in Levinasian thought, in the face of the other person, precisely through the desire God evokes and never quenches. God is not a prop but a beckoning. Through the Other, God calls us towards the possible good in each moment through each incidental encounter with the trace of the Infinite in the face of actual human beings, including The Beloved, to whom we are obligated. A fleeting evanescence of memory, a mirage that is real. In her darkness, her refusal to disclose, is not the human Beloved a sign for the Infinite? What relationship could be more ethically demanding than that?

Irigaray is outraged, because she seems to accept Levinas' schema on the gendered terms that he offers it. It does not occur to her to suggest the possibility that Lover and Beloved are positions that that may be assumed by anyone of any gender. Speaking for the woman, Irigaray asks, 'What future is left for one who is so hemmed in? Even if she plays, within this male

territory[,] at disguising herself in various displays . . . she remains without an identity'.[67]

Irigaray edges close to Queer territory when she protests that the lover should 'take responsibility' for his own modesty and virginity. But she obscures her meaning. We can supply one for her. The world would be spared a great deal of pain if an unembarrassed frankness about the penetrability of male bodies became commonplace, along with Queer knowledge of gender beyond the male/female binary.

However, Irigaray betrays her own heterosexism when she says that, 'Pleasure between the same sex does not result in that immediate ecstasy between other and myself . . . does not produce in us that ecstasy which is our child, prior to (procreation)'.[68] The disagreement between Irigaray and Levinas is brought down to a debate between essentialisms.

In our Queer life as we live it, who is lover and who is beloved? If I'm wearing the trousers, who am I? If I penetrate, who am I? If we're both naked, caressing and caressed, who is who? In all encounters, s/he will never give up hir secret. My beloved is made, manifestly, of flesh; my beloved is going to die. I am going to die. I can't grasp hir. In hir nudity and vulnerability, s/he teaches me about the gift of flesh, about death and separation; and about the miracle of otherness; relationship, the consolation in my power to give. That leads me to God.

Throughout his work, Levinas presents us with the overcome, shaken subject who cannot but respond to the trace of the Covenant in the face of the other. He presents this subject, who has obligations to a particular family – which configuration, Queers have learned, is more mutable than Levinas might have allowed – counterpoised to the virile man of the state who faces death and time alone, who seeks his own eternal life through heroic deeds. For queer Jewish subjects, there is much to be gained from this teaching, along with a necessity to engage with it through passionate argument.

Glossary

Absolutes: Absolute truths, binding on everyone.

Being: As a verb, existing. As a noun, the entirety of what is and also the condition of existing.

Desire: For Levinas, the Desire for God, like Desire for the Other, is different from a wanting that can be assuaged with getting, such as hunger for food. This Desire is metaphysical in that it leads one's consciousness outward and upward in an ever-flowing arc towards, a trajectory that never ends at a destination. Even in sex, after the ecstasy of pleasure has passed, we

discover that we do not 'have' the other, that s/he remains separate and mysterious. And, of course, in prayer, we do not acquire God, we reach out. In conversation, as we learn with regard to diachrony, the Other is never assimilated as an object of knowledge, s/he always stands for more than is said.

Diachrony: Successive time; time as a series of instants (as opposed to the seamless time of synchrony).

Equivocation: With regard to the erotic, equivocation is flirtatiousness. The play of covering and uncovering, innuendo etc.

Essentialism: The idea that some categorical identities (gender, nationality, ethnos) express an inherent essence that is an indissoluble, constituent part of each person who is included in the category.

First philosophy; 'The imperative that impels the examined life': For Levinas, this is ethics: the condition of being in-relation-to the other person. This relationship summons me to accountability, hence to the examined life; that is, philosophy.

(The) Greek: Philosophy for a general philosophically defined audience interested in philosophical problems. May be compared with *(the) Hebrew*: Writing within the Jewish tradition, for Jews who are interested in questions of Jewish thought. These two bodies of Levinas' work are coherent but can be read independently. There are some collections, such as *Collected Philosophical Papers*, where writings from these bodies of work coexist.

Incommensurables: Each and every unique and incomparable human being.

Objectification: Reducing another person to the status of a thing or an instrument; regarding them as an object of one's experience.

Ontic: Pertaining to ontology; of the real. (An ontic shock is a violent shift in one's reality/consciousness of reality.)

Profanation: Profanation presupposes the holy. With regard to the erotic, the human is the holy. The decision to present one's body as nude (not merely naked) is a kind of profanation – playful introduction of an element of overt physicality and naughtiness into the encounter.

Proximity: The 'face-to-face'. The encounter with the Other (person).

Signification: Conveying meaning. For Levinas, it is human interaction that gives birth to language, to signifiers (words and other symbols that convey meaning). It is the impulse to communicate, the agreement to exchange meaning, that gives words, gestures etc. their 'signifyingness'.

The Good: In Levinas' thought, Good serves as a kind of displaced evocation of God and also for that impulse beyond the concrete calculus suggested by Totality with its narrative of power and contestation.

The problem of the Third: In Levinasian thought, the Other (the actual other person with whom the subject is in relationship) is always higher than oneself; always has a claim, based on her potential vulnerability, on the

subject's active response. However, in a world of many persons, there are conflicting claims, hence the necessity of adjudication. For Levinas this is a sort of necessary evil, because he insists that the Other (each other person) resists classification. Laws necessarily categorize and regulate deeds and, in a democracy, must apply equally to everyone. (Although both secular and Jewish laws recognize extenuating circumstances, these too are subject to a priori definition.) Therefore, the law has a tendency to elide the specific, individual story. It is imperative, as members of polities, to insist that the law exist to provide justice to individuals, not simply to perpetuate state power.

Totality: The world of Being; everyone and everything rendered comprehensible though a master narrative of power and interest. Levinas designates Totality as both the project and constitutive discourse of Western thought.

Voluptuosity: The quality of Eros in an encounter; sexual feeling.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alfonso Lingis, Pittsburgh 1969, pp. 298–99: Levinas objects to the Heideggerian account of Being, which he calls the Philosophy of the Neuter, a philosophy that begins with impersonal Being, not the subject in-relation-to. We should not imagine this to be a final foreclosure, on Levinas' part, of a consideration of gender as a social construct (see fn. 26).
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, Pittsburgh 1998, p. 86.
3. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 43.
4. Most specifically, some say, he wrote it as a prolonged response to Jacques Derrida's appreciative and critical essay 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, ed. Claire Katz, Routledge 2005, pp. 88–173.
5. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 159.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 159–60.
8. The issue of gendered language will be addressed later on in this inquiry.
9. Emmanuel Levinas, 'The Rights of Man and the Rights of the Other' in *Outside the Subject*, Stanford University Press 1993, pp. 116–17.
10. Emmanuel Levinas, 'Who Plays Last' in *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary Mole, Bloomington 1994, p. 61.
11. Howard Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, London and New York 2002, Kindle edn, p. 158.
12. Ibid.
13. Genesis 1:27: 'And God created the human in God's own image. . .'.
14. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 111.
15. Ibid., p. 112.
16. Ibid., p. 116.
17. Ibid., p. 134.
18. Ibid., p. 200.

19. Ibid., p. 171.
20. See David Fryer, *The Intervention of the Other: Ethical Subjectivity in Levinas and Lacan*, New York 2004 for a brilliant treatment of the relationship between Levinas' thought and psychoanalytic theory.
21. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 154.
22. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 39.
23. Levinas' 'Reflections on Hitlerism' was published in the journal *Esprit* in 1934.
24. Caygill, *Levinas and the Political*, p. 34.
25. Ibid., p. 153.
26. Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine: The Silent Footsteps of Rebecca*, Bloomington 2003, Kindle edn, p. 38.
27. Ibid., p. 40.
28. Ibid., p. 56.
29. Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Pittsburgh 1982.
30. Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz, Bloomington 1994, p. 169.
31. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 256.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 257.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 258.
38. Ibid., p. 260.
39. Ibid., p. 259.
40. Ibid., p. 263.
41. Ibid., p. 259.
42. Ibid., p. 260.
43. Ibid., p. 271.
44. Ibid., p. 259.
45. Ibid., p. 261.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 262.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., p. 264.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 262.
52. Ibid., p. 265–66.
53. Ibid., p. 267.
54. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*, p. 49.
55. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 282.
56. Ibid., p. 279.
57. Ibid.
58. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 78.
59. Richard A. Cohen, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Levinas and Rosenzweig*, Chicago 1994, p. 205.
60. Ibid., p. 206.
61. Ibid., p. 210.
62. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 90.

63. Luce Irigaray, 'The Fecundity of the Caress' in *Face to Face with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen, New York 1986, p. 238.
64. Ibid., p. 235.
65. Ibid., p. 245.
66. Ibid., p. 247.
67. Ibid., p. 239.
68. Luce Irigaray, 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas' in *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford, Oxford 1991, pp. 178–89. 5. Ibid., 180, quoted in Katz, p. 67.