

# Adieu

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas

For a long time, for a very long time, I've feared having to say *adieu* to Emmanuel Levinas. I knew that my voice would tremble at the moment of saying it, and especially saying it aloud, right here, before him, so close to him, pronouncing this word of *adieu*, this word "*à-Dieu*," which in a certain sense I get from him, a word that he will have taught me to think or to pronounce otherwise. By meditating upon what Emmanuel Levinas wrote about the French word "*adieu*"—which I will recall in a few moments—I hope to find a sort of encouragement to speak here. And I would like to do so with unadorned, naked words, words as childlike and disarmed as my sorrow.

Yet whom would one be addressing at such a moment? And in whose name would one allow oneself to do so? Oftentimes, those who come forward to speak, to speak publicly, thereby interrupting the animated whispering, the secret or intimate exchange that always links one deep down inside to the dead friend or master, those who can be heard in a cemetery, end up addressing *directly, straight on*, the one who, as we say, is no longer, is no longer living, no longer there, who will no longer respond; with tears in their voice, they sometimes speak familiarly [*tutoient*]

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to the other who keeps silent, calling upon him without detour or mediation, apostrophizing him, greeting him even or confiding in him. This is not necessarily out of respect for convention, not always simply part of the rhetoric of oration. It is rather so as to traverse speech at the very point where we find ourselves lacking the words, and because all language that would return to the self, to us, would seem indecent, a sort of reflexive discourse that would end up coming back to the stricken community, to its consolation or its mourning, to what is called, in this confused and terrible expression, “the work of mourning.” Concerned only with itself, such speech would, in this return, run the risk of turning away from what is here our law—and the law as *straightforwardness* or *uprightness* [*droiture*]: to speak straight on, to address oneself directly to the other, and to speak *for* the other whom one loves and admires, before speaking of him. To say to him *adieu*, to him, Emmanuel, and not merely to recall what he will have first taught us about a certain *Adieu*.

This word *droiture*—“straightforwardness” or “uprightness”—is another word that I began to hear otherwise and to learn when it came to me from Emmanuel Levinas. Of all the places where he speaks of uprightness, what comes to mind first is one of his *Four Talmudic Readings*, since it is there that uprightness names that which is, as he says, “stronger than death.”

But let us also keep from trying to find in everything that is said to be “stronger than death” a refuge or an alibi, yet another consolation. To define uprightness, Emmanuel Levinas says in his commentary on the “Tractate *Shabbath*” that consciousness is the “urgency of a destination leading to the Other and not an eternal return to self,”

an innocence without naivete, an uprightness without stupidity, an absolute uprightness which is also absolute self-criticism, read in the eyes of the one who is the goal of my uprightness and whose look calls me into question. It is a movement toward the other that does

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not come back to its point of origin the way diversion comes back, incapable as it is of transcendence—a movement beyond anxiety and stronger than death. This uprightness is called *Temimut*, the essence of Jacob.<sup>1</sup>

This same meditation also set to work—as each meditation did, though each in a singular way—all the great themes to which the thought of Emmanuel Levinas has awakened us, that of responsibility first of all, but of an “unlimited” responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom, that of an “unconditional yes,” as this text says, of a “yes older than that of naive spontaneity,” a yes in accord with this uprightness that is “original fidelity to an indissoluble alliance.”<sup>2</sup> And the final words of this Lesson return, of course, to death, but they do so precisely so as not to let death have the last word, or the first one. They remind us of a recurrent theme in what was a long and incessant meditation upon death, but one that set out on a path that ran counter to the philosophical tradition running from Plato to Heidegger. Elsewhere, before saying what the *à-Dieu* must be, another text speaks of the “extreme uprightness of the face of my neighbor” as the “uprightness of an exposure to death, without any defense.”<sup>3</sup>

I cannot find, and would not even want to try to find, a few words to size up the oeuvre of Emmanuel Levinas. It is so large that one can no longer even see its edges. And one would have to begin by learning once again from him and from *Totality and Infinity*, for example, how to think what an “oeuvre” or “work” is—as well as fecundity. Moreover, one can predict with a certain confidence that centuries of readings will set this as their task. Already, well beyond France and Europe—and we see innumerable signs of this every day in so many works and in so many languages, in all the translations, courses, seminars, conferences, and so on—the reverberations of this thought will have changed the course of the philosophical reflection of our time, and of the reflection on philosophy, on that which orders it according to ethics, according to another thought of ethics, responsibility, justice, the state, and so on, another thought of the other, a thought that is newer than so many novelties because it is ordered to the absolute anteriority of the face of the Other.

Yes, ethics before and beyond ontology, the state, or politics, but also ethics beyond ethics. One day, on the rue Michel Ange, during one of those conversations whose memory I hold so dear, one of those conversations illuminated by the radiance of his thought, the goodness of his

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Quatre Lectures Talmudiques* (Paris, 1968), p. 105; trans. Annette Aronowicz, under the title “Four Talmudic Readings,” *Nine Talmudic Readings* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), p. 48.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–8; pp. 49–50.

3. Levinas, “La Conscience non-intentionnelle,” *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris, 1991), p. 149; hereafter abbreviated “C.”

smile, the gracious humor of his ellipses, he said to me: “You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the holiness of the holy.” And I then thought of a singular separation, the unique separation of the curtain or veil that is given, ordered and ordained [*donné, ordonné*], by God, the veil entrusted by Moses to an inventor or an artist rather than to an embroiderer, the veil that would *separate* the holy of holies in the sanctuary. And I also thought of how other *Talmudic Lessons* sharpen the necessary distinction between sacredness and holiness, that is, the holiness of the other, the holiness of the person, who is, as Emmanuel Levinas said elsewhere, “more holy than a land, even a holy land, since, faced with an affront made to a person, this holy land appears in its nakedness to be but stone and wood.”<sup>4</sup>

This meditation on ethics, on the transcendence of the holy with regard to the sacred, that is, with regard to the paganism of roots and the idolatry of place, was, of course, indissociable from an incessant reflection upon the destiny and thought of Israel, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Such reflection consisted in a questioning and reaffirmation of the legacies of not only the biblical and talmudic tradition but of the terrifying memory of our time. This memory dictates each of these sentences, whether from close or from afar, even if Levinas would sometimes protest against certain self-justifying abuses to which such a memory and the reference to the Holocaust might give rise.

But refraining from commentaries and questions, I would simply like to give thanks to someone whose thought, friendship, trust, and “goodness” (and I ascribe to this word *goodness* all the significance it is given in the final pages of *Totality and Infinity*) will have been for me, as for so many others, a living source, so living, so constant, that I am unable to think what is happening to him or happening to me today, namely, this interruption or a certain nonresponse in a response that will never come to an end for me as long as I live.

The nonresponse: you will no doubt recall that in the remarkable course he gave in 1975–76 (exactly twenty years ago) on *Death and Time*, there where he defines death as the patience of time, and where he engages in a grand and noble critical encounter with Plato as much as with Hegel, but especially with Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas there often defines death, the death that “we meet” “in the face of the Other,” as *nonresponse*; “it is the without-response,” he says. And elsewhere: “There is here an end that always has the ambiguity of a departure without return,

4. Schlomo Malka, interview with Levinas, *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* 18 (1982–83): 1–8; trans. Jonathan Romney, in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), p. 297.

of a passing away but also of a scandal ('is it really possible that he's dead?') of non-response and of my responsibility."<sup>5</sup>

Death: not first of all annihilation, nonbeing, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the "without-response." Already *Totality and Infinity* called into question the traditional "philosophical and religious" interpretation of death as either "a passage to nothingness" or "a passage to some other existence."<sup>6</sup> To identify death with nothingness is what the murderer would like to do, Cain for example, who, says Emmanuel Levinas, must have had such a knowledge of death. But even this nothingness presents itself as a "sort of impossibility" or, more precisely, an interdiction. The face of the Other forbids me from killing; it says to me "you shall not kill," even if this possibility remains presupposed by the interdiction that makes it impossible. This question without response, this question of the without-response, would thus be underivable, primordial, like the interdiction against killing, more originary than the alternative of "to be or not to be," which is thus neither the first nor the last question. "To be or not to be," another essay concludes, "is probably not the question par excellence" ("C," p. 151).

I draw from all this today that our infinite sadness must shy away from everything in mourning that would turn toward nothingness, that is, toward that which still—even potentially—links guilt to murder. Levinas indeed speaks of the guilt of the survivor, but it is a guilt without fault and without debt; it is, in truth, an *entrusted responsibility*, entrusted in a moment of unparalleled emotion, at the moment when death remains the absolute exception. To express this unprecedented emotion, the one I feel here and share with you, the one that our sense of propriety forbids us from exhibiting, and so as to make clear without personal avowal or exhibition how this singular emotion is related to this entrusted responsibility, entrusted as legacy, allow me once again to let Emmanuel Levinas speak, he whose voice I would so much love to hear today when it says that the "death of the other" is the "first death," and that "I am responsible for the other insofar as he is mortal." Or else the following, from this same course of 1975–76:

The death of someone is not, in spite of what it appeared to be at first glance, an empirical facticity (death as an empirical fact whose induction alone could suggest its universality); it is not exhausted in such an appearance. Someone who expresses himself in his nakedness—the face—is in fact one to the extent that he calls upon me, to the extent that he places himself under my responsibility: I must

5. Levinas, *La Mort et le temps* (Paris, 1991), pp. 10, 13, 41–42; hereafter abbreviated *MT*.

6. Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague, 1961), pp. 208–9; trans. Alphonso Lingis, under the title *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, 1969), p. 232.

already answer for him, be responsible for him. Every gesture of the Other was a sign addressed to me. To return to the classification sketched out above: to show oneself, to express oneself, to associate oneself, *to be entrusted to me*. The Other who expresses himself is entrusted to me (and there is no debt with regard to the Other—for that which is due cannot be paid: one will never be even) [further on it will be a question of a “duty beyond all debt” for the I who is what it is, singular and identifiable, only through the impossibility of being able to be replaced, even though it is precisely here that the “responsibility for the Other,” the “responsibility of the hostage,” is an experience of substitution and sacrifice]. The Other individuates me in that responsibility that I have for him. The death of the Other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible I . . . made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other, this is my relation with his death. It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor. [MT, pp. 14–15; quotation in brackets, p. 25]

And a bit further on:

The relation to death in its exception—and, regardless of its signification in relation to being and nothingness, it is an exception—while conferring upon death its depth, is neither a seeing nor even an aiming towards (neither a seeing of being as in Plato nor an aiming towards nothingness as in Heidegger), a purely emotional relation, moving with an emotion that is not made up of the repercussions of a prior knowledge upon our sensibility and our intellect. It is an emotion, a movement, an uneasiness with regard to the *unknown*. [MT, pp. 18–19]

*The unknown* is here emphasized. The unknown is not the negative limit of some knowledge. This nonknowledge is the element of friendship or hospitality for the transcendence of the stranger, the infinite distance of the other. “Unknown” is the word chosen by Maurice Blanchot for the title of an essay, “Knowledge of the Unknown,” which he devoted to the one who had been, from the time of their meeting in Strasbourg in 1923, the friend, the very friendship of the friend. For many among us, no doubt, for myself certainly, the absolute fidelity, the exemplary friendship of thought, the *friendship* between Maurice Blanchot and Emmanuel Levinas was a grace, a gift; it remains as a benediction of this time, and, for more than one reason, the good fortune that is also a blessing for all those who have had the great privilege of being the friend of either one of them. In order to hear once again today, right here, Blanchot speak for Levinas, and with Levinas, as I had the good fortune to do when in their company one day in 1968, I will cite a couple of lines. After having named that which in the other “ravishes” us, after having spoken of a certain

“rapture” (the word often used by Levinas to speak of death), Blanchot says:

But we must not despair of philosophy. In Emmanuel Levinas’s book [*Totality and Infinity*]<sup>7</sup>—where, it seems to me, philosophy in our time has never spoken in a more sober manner, putting back into question, as we must, our ways of thinking and even our facile reverence for ontology—we are called upon to become responsible for what philosophy essentially is, by welcoming, in all the radiance and infinite exigency proper to it, the idea of the Other, that is to say, the relation with *autrui*. It is as though there were here a new departure in philosophy and a leap that it, and we ourselves, were urged to accomplish.<sup>7</sup>

If the relation to the other presupposes an infinite separation, an infinite interruption where the face appears, what happens, where and to whom does it happen, when another interruption comes at death to hollow out with even more infinity this prior separation, a rending interruption at the heart of interruption itself? I cannot speak of the interruption without recalling, like many among you no doubt, the anxiety of interruption that I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the “without-response,” of the other whom he tried to call out to and hold on to with an “allo, allo” between each sentence, and sometimes even in midsentence.

What happens when a great thinker becomes silent, one whom we knew living, whom we read and reread, and also heard, one from whom we were still awaiting a response, as if such a response would help us not only to think otherwise but also to read what we thought we had already read under his signature, a response that held everything in reserve, and so much more than what we thought we had already recognized in that signature? This is an experience that, I have learned, would remain for me interminable with Emmanuel Levinas, as with all thoughts that are sources, for I will never stop beginning or beginning anew to think with them on the basis of the new beginning they give me, and I will begin again and again to rediscover them on just about any subject. Each time I read or reread Emmanuel Levinas, I am overwhelmed with gratitude and admiration, overwhelmed by this necessity, which is not a constraint but an extremely gentle force that obligates and obligates us not to bend or curve otherwise the space of thought in its respect for the other but to yield to this other heteronomous curvature that relates us to the completely other (that is, to justice, as he says somewhere in a powerful and formidable ellipsis: the relation to the other, that is to say, justice), ac-

7. Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini* (Paris, 1969), pp. 73–74; trans. Susan Hanson, under the title *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 51–52.

ording to the law that thus calls us to yield to the other infinite precedence of the completely other. It will have come, like this call, to disturb, discreetly but irreversibly, the most powerful and established thoughts of the end of this millennium, beginning with those of Husserl and Heidegger whom Levinas in fact introduced into France some sixty-five years ago! Indeed, this country whose hospitality he so much loved (and *Totality and Infinity* shows not only that “the essence of language is goodness” but that “the essence of language is friendship and hospitality”),<sup>8</sup> this hospitable France, owes him, among so many other things, among so many other significant contributions, at least two irruptive events of thought, two inaugural acts that are difficult to measure today because they have been so much incorporated into the very element of our philosophical culture after having transformed its landscape.

There was first, to say it all too quickly, beginning in 1930 with translations and interpretative readings, the initial introduction to Husserlian phenomenology, which would in turn irrigate and fecundate so many French philosophical currents. Then, and in truth simultaneously, there was the introduction to Heideggerian thought, which was no less important in the genealogy of so many French philosophers, professors, and students. Husserl and Heidegger at the same time, beginning in 1930. I wanted last night to reread a few pages from this prodigious book that was for me, as for many others before me, the first and best guide. I picked out a few sentences that have made their mark in time and that allow us to measure the distance he will have helped us cover. In 1930, a young man of twenty-three said in the preface that I reread, and reread smiling, smiling at him: “The fact that in France phenomenology is not a doctrine known to everyone has been a constant problem in the writing of this book.” Or again, speaking of the so very “powerful and original philosophy” of “Mr. Martin Heidegger, whose influence on this book will often be felt,” the same book also recalls that “the problem raised here by transcendental phenomenology is an ontological problem in the very precise sense that Heidegger gives to this term.”<sup>9</sup>

The second event, the second philosophical tremor, I would even say the happy traumatism that we owe him (in the sense of the word *traumatism* that he liked to recall, the “traumatism of the other” that comes from the Other), is that, while closely reading and reinterpreting the thinkers I just mentioned, but so many others as well, both philosophers such as Descartes, Kant, and Kierkegaard, and writers such as

8. Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, p. 282; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 305.

9. Levinas, *Théorie de l'intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl* (1930; Paris, 1970), pp. 7, 14–15; trans. André Orianne, under the title *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, (Evanston, Ill., 1973), pp. xxxiv. As the translator notes, Levinas's short preface, or “Avant-Propos,” was omitted from the translation and replaced by the translator's foreword so as to include a series of “historical remarks more specifically directed to today's English reader” (p. xxvii).



Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Proust, and so on—all the while disseminating his words through publications, courses, and lectures (at the École Normale Israélite Orientale, at the Collège Philosophique, and at the Universities of Poitiers, Nanterre, and the Sorbonne)—Emmanuel Levinas slowly displaced, but so as to bend them according to an inflexible and simple exigency, the axis, trajectory, and even the order of phenomenology or ontology that he had introduced into France beginning in 1930. Once again, he completely changed the landscape without landscape of thought; he did so in a dignified way, without polemic, at once from within, faithfully, and from very far away, from the attestation of a completely other place. And I believe that what occurred there, in this second sailing, in this second time that leads us even further back than the first, is a discreet but irreversible mutation, one of those very powerful, very singular, and very rare provocations within history that, for over two thousand years now, will have ineffaceably marked the space and body of what is more or less, or in any case something different than, a simple dialogue between Jewish thought and its others, the philosophies of Greek origin or, in the tradition of a certain “here I am,” the other Abrahamic monotheisms. This happened, this mutation happened, *through him*, through Emmanuel Levinas, who was conscious of this immense responsibility in a way that was, I believe, at once clear, confident, calm, and modest, like that of a prophet.

One of the indications of this historical shock wave is the influence of this thought well beyond philosophy, and well beyond Jewish thought, in various circles of Christian theology, for example. I cannot help but recall the day when, during a meeting of the Congrès des Intellectuels Juifs, as we were both listening to a lecture by André Neher, Emmanuel Levinas turned to me and said with the gentle irony so familiar to us: “You see, he’s the Jewish Protestant and I’m the Catholic”—a quip that would call for long and serious reflection.

Everything that has happened here has happened through him, thanks to him, and we have had the good fortune not only of receiving it while living, from him living, as a responsibility entrusted by the living to the living, but also the good fortune of owing it to him with a light and innocent debt. One day, speaking of his research on death and of what it owed Heidegger at the very moment when it was moving away from him, Levinas wrote: “It distinguishes itself from Heidegger’s thought, and it does so in spite of the debt that every contemporary thinker owes to Heidegger—a debt that one often regrets” (*MT*, p. 8). Now, the good fortune of our debt toward Levinas is that we can, thanks to him, assume it and affirm it without regret, in the joyous innocence of admiration. It is of the order of this unconditional *yes* of which I spoke earlier and to which it responds “yes.” The regret, my regret, is not having said this to him enough, not having shown him this enough in the course of these thirty years, during which, in the modesty of silences, through brief or discreet

conversations, writings that were too indirect or reserved, we often addressed to one another what I would call neither questions nor answers but, perhaps, to use another one of his words, a sort of “question, prayer,” a question-prayer that, as he says, would be anterior even to the dialogue. This question-prayer that turned me toward him perhaps already shared in this experience of the *à-Dieu* with which I began earlier. The greeting of the *à-Dieu* does not signal the end. “The *à-Dieu* is not a finality,” he says, thus challenging this “alternative between being and nothingness,” which “is not ultimate.” The *à-Dieu* greets the other beyond being, in “what signifies, beyond being, the word glory.” “The *à-Dieu* is not a process of being; in the call, I am referred back to the other human being through whom this call signifies, to the neighbor for whom I am to fear” (“C,” p. 150).

But I said that I did not want simply to recall what he entrusted to us of the *à-Dieu* but first of all to say *adieu* to him, to call him by his name, to call his name, his first name, such as he is called at the moment when, if he no longer responds, it is because he responds in us, from the bottom of our hearts, in us but before us, in us right before us—in calling us, in recalling to us: “à-Dieu.”

*Adieu*, Emmanuel.