The Contaminated Wound: Derrida on the Language of Levinas

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To capture the relation between Derrida and Levinas, one could commence as Simon Critchley does in his impressive study *The Ethics of Deconstruction*. To establish that it makes sense to approach Derrida’s deconstruction from the perspective of Levinas’ ethics, he quotes the former’s comment when “challenged by André Jacobs to specify what intellectual distance he maintains with respect to Levinas’ work.”¹ Derrida famously responds: “Devant une pensée comme celle de Lévinas, je n’ai jamais d’objection. Je suis prêt à souscrire à tout ce qu’il dit.”² From this, one could conclude, as Critchley does, that it is justified to assume a definite affinity between Derrida’s and Levinas’ thought. One could argue that even Derrida’s determination of the difference between his and Levinas’ work supports this conclusion since he determines it as a difference of idiom, language, and writing, and these, as he assures us, do not give rise to “philosophical differences.”³ Although this is a striking comment, it is important to remember that idiom, language, and writing are central themes in Derrida’s work. Consequently, the scope of these differences might be more profound than Derrida’s remarks in this discussion indicate. The question he asks—“what do differences of idiom, language or writing mean?”—may at first sight appear to be a rhetorical one but is in fact the crucial question to be answered if one wants to understand the relation between Derrida and Levinas.

Clearly, Critchley is aware of this. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, he even adds that one should “be cautious about such remarks because they were transcribed from an oral, improvised debate.”⁴ Nevertheless, he pushes these objections aside and argues that Derrida’s remarks on the difference with

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³ Ibid., pp. 74–75.
⁴ In fact, Critchley writes: “However, I think Derrida is being a little disingenuous here; for is he not the thinker who, to an unprecedented extent, has shown the crucial role that idiom, signature, and especially writing play in the textual constitution of the philosophical logos?” *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 11.
Levinas indicate that the latter indeed has a privileged place in relation to the former’s thought on deconstruction. Yet, before such a conclusion can be reached and to understand its impact, another examination should take place. Derrida’s brief explication of the difference between his and Levinas’ work implies indeed that this difference is withdrawn from the philosophic scene in the strict sense. Yet, it is not effaced as such but rather concerns the fundamental questions inspiring Derrida’s as well as Levinas’ thought: How to wound the language of philosophy? How to address the other in the language of philosophy? To understand the differences between Derrida’s and Levinas’ responses to these questions, one should interrogate into the differences of idiom, language, and writing. How does Derrida relate to Levinas’ idiom? Even though they both share the same traditional heritage—they are both indebted to Judaism and phenomenology—their work testifies of the relation between these two traditions in a different way. How does Derrida understand the way Levinas relates the language of phenomenology to the language of Judaism? Does this relation presuppose a notion of writing, and to what extent does Levinas’ text employ this presupposition? These are no marginal questions in Derrida’s reading of Levinas. In fact, they are the main questions of both “Violence et métaphysique” and “En ce moment,” and they play a crucial role in Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas as well. This essay is devoted to these questions and these texts in order to understand how Derrida assesses the language of Levinas.

1 How to Transgress the Language of Philosophy?

“Violence et métaphysique” was one of the first and still is one of the main interpretations of Totalité et Infini. It is clear from the outset that Derrida indeed has no “philosophical difference” with Levinas. The general commitment of Totalité et Infini is to think an alterity that precedes philosophy, enables philosophy and cannot be mastered by philosophy. As such, this other of philosophy is at once “its death and its resource.” It is the (re)source of philosophy since the birth of the (philosophical) question is founded in a primordial responsibility for the other. At the same time, it is the death of philosophy

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5 Derrida, *Altérités*, p. 75.