Levinas and Impossible Possibility: Thinking Ethics with Rosenzweig and Heidegger in the Wake of the Shoah

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"Here I am," despite Emmanuel Levinas. Despite his complete lack of interest in soliciting acolytes who would follow him, believing that a normative ethics can be elicited from his position; despite his disregard for women as ethical subjects; despite the impossibility of substituting, or speaking for anyone; despite his death. The force of this word "despite" does not lie in its being contrary to Levinas' wishes. What, then, grants the meaning of the fact that I am here, despite everything? Despite the fact that I cannot merely be a respondent to Levinas—who has put into question the simplicity of what it would mean to respond; despite the fact that I am not a man; despite the fact that I am not Jewish—still here I am. How can this be thought?

Let me forgo all the usual platitudes about the power of this man's thinking, his prescience, the command of his presence—even in, or perhaps, precisely because of—his absence. None of these acknowledgments are adequate to Levinas' philosophy, which has put into question the presuppositions that accord priority to the power of thought, to our ability to foresee what might happen, and to the principle according to which the other presents me with a duty, commanding me to act out of a perceived obligation. The metaphysical assumptions about principle, origin, ἀρχή, and telos informing our usual
preconceptions of what it means to be ethical are uprooted by a careful reading of Levinas' texts.¹

Not only do I want to forgo platitudes about the greatness of Levinas' thought, I also want to circumvent the conventional attitudes that one develops—which are perhaps only a series of defenses—in the face of disaster, evil, injustice. I want to resist sinking into pathos, although there is certainly plenty to provoke a pathetic—in the sense of emotional—response. What can be said that will neither trivialize—by provoking a misplaced empathy or a sympathetic horror—the victims of the Shoah, nor render merely pathetic—in the sense of contemptible, abhorrent, or unthinkable—the visions of the Nazis? There is a tendency for two extremes to neutralize the significance of the museums memorializing the Shoah, and the meaning of narratives written by survivors. We cannot allow our capacity for thought to be satisfied by either transforming the Shoah into something manageable, taming it, relegating it to history, or distancing ourselves from it through avoidance or ignorance, nor can we merely elevate it into an event that defies our categories for thinking, thereby placing it outside the scope of our enquiry and refusing its enormity. In neither case have we begun to accept the necessity of thinking the impossible. We have turned away from the responsibility of thinking impossibility.

Is the Shoah a singular event in a category of its own or is it comparable to other events? To imagine that our responsibility is exhausted by asking such questions is to fail to raise the right questions. To compare the Shoah to other events is to reduce it to a mere event in history—one to be recounted in a narrative and sanitized in the telling, however graphic; one to be stacked up on the shelves of history, among the countless bound volumes—weighty tomes collecting dust. It is to reduce it to the records of the historiographer.² But to treat it as if it were in a category of its own is to run the risk of rendering it unthinkable—as if the break that it represents with all previous events ruptures any continuity that one might try to establish with other atrocities (whether these remain future possibilities or whether we cite events in Bosnia or Rwanda). It is to place it beyond the scope of thought and outside the purview of philosophy, to exempt ourselves from the responsibility of a thoughtful response.

If there is a sense in which thought is suspended by what is unrepresentable, a void, a place that is not a place, a vortex that centers and de-centers, European history—indeed world history—one cannot bear witness to the Shoah by merely integrating it into a story about the development of a European sensibility. But neither can we retreat from the necessity of thinking the impossible.