

The Trace of the Other

I. BEING AND THE SAME

The I is identification in the strong sense; it is the origin of the very phenomenon of identity. The identity of the I is not the permanence of an unalterable quality; I am myself not because of some character trait which I first identify, and then find myself to be the same. It is because I am from the first the same—*me ipse*, an ipseity—that I can identify every object, every character trait, and every being.

This identification is not a simple "restating" of the self: The "A is A" that characterizes the I is an "A anxious for A," or an "A enjoying A," always an "A bent over A." The *outside of me* solicits it in need: the *outside of me is for me*. The tautology of ipseity is an egoism.

The true cognition where the I "leaves it to him" and lets an alien being shine forth does not interrupt this original identification, does not draw the I out of itself without return. The being enters into the sphere of true knowledge. In becoming a theme, it does indeed retain a foreignness with respect to the thinker that embraces it. But it at once ceases to strike up against thought. The alien being is as it were naturalized as soon as it commits itself with knowledge. In itself—and consequently *elsewhere* than in thought, *other* than it—it does not have the wild barbarian character of alterity. It has a meaning. The being is propagated in infinite images which emanate from it; it dilates in a kind of ubiquity and penetrates the inwardness of men. It shows itself and radiates, as though the very plenitude of its alterity overflowed the mystery that harbors it, and pro-duces itself. Though it surprised the I, a being that is in truth does not alter the identity of the I. The obscurity from which it comes is promised to research. It thus opens a future whose night is but the opacity produced by the density of the superimposed transparencies. Memory brings back the past itself and puts it into this future in which research and historical interpretation wander. The traces of the irreversible past are taken as signs that ensure the discovery and unity of a world.

Excerpted from Emmanuel Levinas, "La Trace de L'Autre," translated by A. Lingis, *Tijdschrift voor Philosophie* (Sept. 1963), 605-23.

The priority of the future among the "ecstasies" of time constitutes knowledge as comprehension of being. This priority bears witness to the adequateness of being with thought. The idea of being with which philosophers interpret the irreducible alienness of the non-I is thus cut to the measure of the same. It is the idea that is of itself adequate.

The being of beings—difference in itself, and consequently alterity—enlightens, according to Heidegger, inasmuch as it is buried and always already forgotten. But the poets and philosophers force, for a moment, its inexpressible essence. For it is still in terms of light and obscurity, disclosure and veiling, truth and nontruth—that is, in the priority of the future—that the being of beings is approached.

The intentionality caught sight of, by the phenomenological movement, at the core of practice and affectivity confirms the fact that self-consciousness, or the identification of the self, is not incompatible with consciousness of . . . , that is, consciousness of being. And, conversely, the whole weight of being can be resolved into a play of inwardness and stand on the brink of illusion, so rigorous is the adequation. The apparition of being is possibly but appearance. The shadow is taken for a prey; the prey is let loose for the shadow. Descartes thought that I could have accounted for the heavens and the sun out of myself—despite all their magnificence. Every experience, however passive it be, however welcoming, is at once converted into a "constitution of being" which it receives, as though the *given* were drawn from oneself, as though the meaning it brings were ascribed to it by me. Being bears in itself the possibility of idealism.

Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as a being, loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other—with an insurmountable allergy. It is for this reason that it is essentially a philosophy of being, that the comprehension of being is its last word, and the fundamental structure of man. It is for this reason that it becomes philosophy of immanence and of autonomy, or atheism. The God of the philosophers, from Aristotle to Leibniz, by way of the God of the scholastics, is a god adequate to reason, a comprehended god who could not trouble the autonomy of consciousness, which finds itself again in all its adventures, returning home to itself like Ulysses, who through all his peregrinations is only on the way to his native island.

The philosophy handed down to us reduces to this return not only theoretical thought, but every spontaneous movement of consciousness. Not only the world understood by reason ceases to be other, for consciousness finds itself in that world, but everything that is an *attitude* of consciousness, that is, valorization, feeling, action, labor, and, in general commitment, is in the last analysis self-consciousness, that is,

identity and autonomy. Hegel's philosophy represents the logical outcome of this underlying allergy of philosophy. One of the most profound modern interpreters of Hegelianism, Eric Weil, has expressed this admirably in his *Logique de la philosophie*, showing how every attitude of the rational being turns into a category, that is, grasps itself in a new attitude. But, in conformity with philosophical tradition, he thinks that the outcome is a category reabsorbing all the attitudes.

Even if life precedes philosophy, even if contemporary philosophy, which wishes to be anti-intellectualist, insists on this antecedence of existence with respect to essence, of life with respect to understanding, even if Heidegger conceives the comprehension of being as gratitude and obedience, the complacency of modern philosophy for the multiplicity of cultural significations and for the games of art lightens being of its alterity and represents the form in which philosophy prefers expectation to action, remaining indifferent to the other and to others, refusing every movement without return. It mistrusts every inconsiderate gesture, as if a lucidity of old age had to repair all the imprudence of youth. Action recuperated in advance in the light that should guide it—is perhaps the very definition of philosophy.

2. MOVEMENT WITHOUT RETURN

Yet the transcendence of being which is described by immanence is not the only transcendence the philosophers themselves speak of. The philosophers bring us also the enigmatic message of the beyond being.

The transcendence of the Good with respect to being *epekeina tēs ousias* is a transcendence to the second degree, and we are not obliged to make it immediately reenter into the Heideggerian interpretation of being that transcends beings. The One in Plotinus is posited beyond being, and also *epekeina nou* The One of which Plato speaks in the first hypothesis of the Parmenides is foreign to definition and limit, place and time, self-identity and difference with respect to oneself, resemblance and dissemblance, foreign to being and to knowledge—for which all these attributes constitute the categories of knowledge. It is something else than all that, *other* absolutely and not with respect to some relative term. It is the Unrevealed, but not unrevealed because all knowledge would be too limited or too narrow to receive its light. It is unrevealed because it is *One*, and because making oneself known implies a duality which already clashes with the unity of the One. The One is not beyond being because it is buried and hidden; it is buried because it is beyond being, wholly other than being.

In what sense, then, does the *absolutely other* concern me? Must we with the—from the first unthinkable—contact with transcendence and alterity renounce philosophy? Would transcendence be possible only for

a completely blind touch, or for a faith attached to non-signification? Or, on the contrary, if the Platonic hypothesis concerning the One, which is One above being and knowledge, is not the development of a sophism, is there not an experience of it, an experience different from that in which the other is transmuted into the same? It would be an experience, for it would be a movement toward the transcendent, but also because in this movement the same does not lose itself ecstatically in the other, and resists the sirens' song, does not dissolve into the rumble of an anonymous event. This experience would still remain a movement of the same, a movement of an I; it consequently approaches the transcendent in a signification which it will not have ascribed to it. Does there exist a signifyingness of signification which would not be equivalent to the transmutation of the other into the same? Can there be something as strange as an experience of the absolutely exterior, as contradictory in its terms as a heteronomous experience? In the affirmative case, we will, to be sure, not succumb to the temptation and the illusion that would consist in finding again by philosophy the empirical data of positive religions, but we will disengage a movement of transcendence that is ensured like the bridgehead of the "other shore," without which the simple coexistence of philosophy and religion in souls and even in civilizations is but an inadmissible weakness of the mind. We will also put into question the thesis according to which the ultimate essence of man and of truth is the *comprehension of the being of beings*, a thesis to which, we must agree, theory, experience, and discourse seem to lead.

The heteronomous experience we seek would be an attitude that cannot be converted into a category, and whose movement unto the other is not recuperated in identification, does not return to its point of departure. Is it not furnished us by what we call quite simply goodness, and works, without which goodness is but a dream without transcendence, a pure wish (*blosser Wunsch*), as Kant put it?

But then we must not conceive of a work as an apparent agitation of a ground which afterwards remains identical with itself, like an energy which, in all its transformations, remains equal to itself. Nor must we conceive it as a technical operation, which through its much-proclaimed negativity reduces an alien world to a world whose alterity is converted into my idea. Both conceptions continue to affirm being as identical with itself and reduce its fundamental event to thought which is (and this is the ineffaceable lesson of idealism) thought of itself, thought of thought. *A work conceived radically is a movement of the same unto the other which never returns to the same.* To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we wish to oppose the story of Abraham who leaves his fatherland forever for a yet unknown land, and forbids his servant to even bring back his son to the point of departure.

A work conceived in its ultimate nature requires a radical generosity of the same who in the work goes unto the other. It then requires an *ingratitude* of the other. Gratitude would in fact be the *return* of the movement to its origin. On the other hand, a work differs from a game or pure expenditure. It is not realized in pure loss, and it is not enough for it to affirm the same in its identity circumvented with nothingness. A work is neither a pure acquiring of merits nor a pure nihilism. Beneath the apparent gratuity of his action, both he who chases after merits and the nihilist agent forthwith takes himself as the goal. A work is thus a relationship with the other who is reached without showing himself touched. It forms outside of the morose delectation of failure, and outside of the consolations with which Nietzsche defines religion.

The departure without return, which does not go forth into the void, would also lose its absolute goodness if the work sought for its recompense in the immediacy of its triumph, if it impatiently awaited the triumph of its cause. The one-way movement would be inverted into a reciprocity. The work, confronting its departure and its end, would be absorbed again in calculations of deficits and compensations, in accountable operations. It would be subordinated to thought. The one-way action is possible only in patience, which, pushed to the limit, means for the agent to renounce being the contemporary of its outcome, to act without entering the promised land.

The future for which the work is undertaken must be posited from the start as indifferent to my death. A work, distinguished from games and from calculation, is being-for-beyond-my-death. Patience does not consist in the agent belying his generosity by giving himself the time of a *personal immortality*. To renounce being the contemporary of the triumph of one's work is to have this triumph in a time *without me*, to aim at this world without me, to aim at a time beyond the horizon of my time. It works in an eschatology without hope for oneself, an eschatology of liberation from my own time.

To be for a time that would be without me, to be for a time after my time, for a future beyond the celebrated "being-for-death," to-be-for-after-my-death—"Let the future and the most far-off things be the rule for all the present days"—is not a banal thought that extrapolates one's own duration; it is passage to the time of the other. Do we have to call what makes such a passage possible eternity? But perhaps the possibility of sacrifice goes unto the end of this passage, and discovers the non-offensive character of this extrapolation: to-be-for-death in order to be for-what-is-after-me.

I should like to fix the work of the same as a movement without return of the same to the other with a Greek term which in its primary meaning indicates the exercise of an office that is not only completely gratuitous,

but that requires, on the part of him that exercises it, a putting out of funds at a loss. I would like to fix it with the term "liturgy." We must for the moment remove from this term every religious signification, even if a certain idea of God should become visible, as a trace, at the end of our analysis. Liturgy, as an absolutely patient action, does not take its place as a cult alongside of works and of ethics. It is ethics itself.

3. NEED AND DESIRE

The liturgical orientation of a work does not proceed from need. Need opens upon a world that is for-me; it returns to the self. Even when sublime, as the need for salvation, it is still nostalgia, homesickness. Need is the return itself, the anxiety of an ego for itself, the original form of identification which we have called egoism. It is an assimilation of the world in view of coincidence with oneself, or happiness.

In the "Canticle of the Columns," Valéry speaks of a "desire without lack." He refers, no doubt, to Plato, who, in his analysis of the pure pleasures, discovered an aspiration that is conditioned by no preexisting lack. I shall take up this term desire. To a subject turned to himself, which according to the Stoic formula is characterized by *ornē* or the tendency to persist in his being, or for whom, according to Heidegger's formula, "in his existence this very existence is in question," to a subject that is thus defined by concern for himself and who in happiness fulfills his "for himself"—we oppose the desire for the other which proceeds from a being already replenished to overflowing and independent, and who does not desire for himself. Desire is the need of him who has no more needs. We can recognize it in the desire for an other who is another [*autrui*], neither my enemy (as he is in Hobbes and in Hegel) nor my complement (as is still the case in Plato's *Republic*, which is constituted because something would be lacking for the subsistence of each individual). [The desire for another is born in a being that lacks nothing, or, more exactly, it comes to birth on the other side of all that can be lacking him or can satisfy him.] This desire for another, which is our very sociality, is not a simple relationship with a being where, according to our formulas at the beginning, the other is converted into the same.

In desire the ego is borne unto another in such a way as to compromise the sovereign identification of the I with itself, an identification of which need is but the nostalgia, and which the consciousness of need anticipates. The movement unto another, instead of completing and contenting me, implicates me in a situation which by one side should not concern me and should leave me indifferent: "What then was I looking for in this convict-ship?" Whence comes to me this shock when I pass, indifferent, under the gaze of another? The relationship with another puts me into question, empties me of myself, and does not let off

emptying me—uncovering for me ever new resources. I did not know myself so rich, but I have no longer any right to keep anything. Is the desire for another an appetite or a generosity? The desirable does not fill up my desire but hollows it out, nourishing me as it were with new hungers. Desire is revealed to be goodness. There is a scene in Dostoyevski's *Crime and Punishment* where, apropos of Sonia Marmeladova who looks at Raskolnikov in his despair, Dostoyevski speaks of "insatiable compassion." He does not say "inexhaustible compassion." It is as though the compassion that goes from Sonia to Raskolnikov were a hunger which the presence of Raskolnikov nourished beyond all saturation, increasing this hunger ad infinitum.

The analysis of desire, which it was important to us to first distinguish from need, will be specified by the analysis of the other toward which desire bears.

The manifestation of the other is, to be sure, first produced in conformity with the way every signification is produced. The other is present in a cultural whole and is illuminated by this whole, like a text by its context. The manifestation of the whole ensures this presence and this present; they are illuminated by the light of the world. The comprehension of the other is thus a hermeneutics and an exegesis. The other is given in the concept of the totality to which he is immanent, and which, in conformity with Merleau-Ponty's remarkable analyses, our own cultural initiative, the corporeal, linguistic, or artistic gesture, expresses and discloses.

But the epiphany of the other involves a signifyingness of its own, independently of this signification received from the world. The other does not only come to us out of a context, but comes without mediation; he signifies by himself. His cultural signification is revealed and reveals as it were *horizontally*, on the basis of the historical world to which it belongs. According to the phenomenological expression, it reveals the horizons of this world. But this mundane signification is found to be disturbed and shaken by another presence, abstract, not integrated into the world. [His presence consists in coming unto us, *making an entry*. This can be stated in this way: the phenomenon which is the apparition of the other is also a *face*.] Again, to show this entry at every moment into the immanence and historicity of the phenomenon, we can say: the epiphany of a face is alive. Its life consists in undoing the form in which every entity, when it enters into immanence, that is, when it exposes itself as a theme, is already dissimulated.

The other who manifests himself in the face as it were breaks through his own plastic essence, like someone who opens a window on which his figure is outlined. His presence consists in *divesting* himself of the form which, however, manifests him. His manifestation is a surplus over the

inevitable paralysis of manifestation. This is what the formula "the face speaks" expresses. The manifestation of a face is the first discourse. To speak is before all this way of coming from behind one's appearance, behind one's form—an opening in the openness.

4. DIACONATE

The visitation of a face is then not the disclosure of a world. In the concreteness of the world the face is abstract or naked. It is denuded of its own image. Through the nudity of the face nudity in itself is first possible in the world.

The nudity of the face is a destitution without any cultural ornament, an absolution—a detaching in the midst of its very production. A face *enters* our world from an absolutely alien sphere—that is, precisely out of an absoluteness, which in fact is the name for fundamental strangeness. The signification of a face in its abstractness is, in the literal sense of the term, extra-ordinary. How is such a production possible? How can the coming of the other out of the absolute, in the visitation of a face, be in no way convertible into a revelation—not even by a symbolism or a suggestion? How is a face not simply a true *representation*, in which the other renounces his alterity? To answer, we will have to study the exceptional signifyingness of a trace, and the personal order in which such a signifyingness is possible.

For the moment let us emphasize the sense involved in the abstractness or the nudity of a face which opens to us this order, and works the overwhelming of consciousness, which answers to this abstractness. Stripped of its very form, a face is benumbed in its nudity. It is a wretchedness. The nudity of a face is a denuding, and already a supplication in the uprightness that aims at me. But this supplication is an exigency; in it humbleness is joined with height. Here the ethical dimension of the visitation is announced. While a true representation remains the possibility of a mere appearance, while the world that strikes up against thought can do nothing against the free thought which is capable of refusing it inwardly, taking refuge in itself, remaining precisely a free thought before the true and existing as "there first," the origin of what it receives, mastering by memory what precedes it, while free thought remains "the same"—a face is imposed on me without my being able to be deaf to its appeal nor to forget it, that is, without my being able to cease to be held responsible for its wretchedness. Consciousness loses its first place.

The presence of a face thus signifies an irrecusable order, a command, which calls a halt to the availability of consciousness. Consciousness is put into question by a face. The putting into question is not reducible to becoming aware of this being put into question. The absolutely other is

not reflected in consciousness. It resists it to the point that even its resistance is not converted into a content of consciousness. The visitation consists in overwhelming the very egoism of the I; a face disconcerts the intentionality that aims at it.

It is a matter of the putting into question of consciousness, and not of a consciousness of a being put into question. The I loses its sovereign coincidence with itself, its identification, in which consciousness returned triumphally to itself and rested on itself. Before the exigency of the other, the I is expelled from this rest, and is not the consciousness of this exile, already glorious. Every complacency would destroy the uprightness of the ethical movement.

But the putting into question of this wild and naive freedom, sure of its refuge in itself, is not reducible to this negative movement. The putting into question of the self is precisely the welcome of the absolutely other. The epiphany of the absolutely other is a face in which the other calls to me and signifies an order to me by its nudity, its denuding. Its presence is a summation to respond. The I does not simply become conscious of this necessity to answer, as if it were a matter of an obligation or a duty which it would have to decide of. In its very position it is completely responsibility or diaconate, as said in Isaiah 53.

To be an I then signifies not to be able to slip away from responsibility. This surplus of being, this exaggeration which we call to be an I, this upsurge of ipseity in being, is realized as a turgescence of responsibility. The putting into question of the I by the other makes me solidary with the other in an incomparable and unique way—not solidary as matter is solidary with the block which it is a part of, or as an organ is solidary with the organism in which it has its function. Solidarity here is responsibility—as though the whole edifice of creation rested on my shoulders. The unicity of the I is the fact that no one can answer in my place. Responsibility which empties the I of its imperialism and its egoism, be it the egoism of salvation, does not transform it into a moment of the universal order. It confirms it in its ipseity, in its function of being a support for the universe.

To discover in the I such an orientation is to identify the I and morality. The I before another is infinitely responsible. The other who provokes this ethical movement in consciousness, and who disorders the good conscience of the coinciding of the same with itself involves a surplus for which intentionality is inadequate. To desire is to burn with another fire than that of need which saturation puts out, to think beyond what one conceives. Because of this unassimilable surplus, this beyond, we have called the relationship which attaches the I to the other the idea of infinity.

The idea of infinity is desire. It consists, paradoxically, in thinking

more than what is thought while conserving it still in its inordinateness relative to thought, entering into relationship with the ungraspable while certifying its status of being ungraspable. Infinity is then not the correlate of the idea of infinity, as though this idea were an intentionality that is fulfilled in its object. The marvel of infinity in the finite is the overwhelming of intentionality, the overwhelming of this appetite for light; unlike the saturation in which intentionality is appeased, infinity disconnects its idea. The I in relationship with infinity is an impossibility of stopping one's march forward, the impossibility, to say it with Plato's expression in the *Phaedo*, of deserting one's post; it is literally not to have time to turn back. *The attitude irreducible to a category* is not to be able to slip away from responsibility, not to have a hiding place in inwardness in which one can return into oneself, to go forward without regard for oneself. There is continual increase of demands put on one: the more I face my responsibilities the more I am responsible. Responsible is a power made of impotencies. Such is the putting into question of consciousness and its entry into a confluence of relationships which break with disclosure.

5. THE TRACE

But is the *beyond* from which a face comes an idea understood and disclosed in its turn? If the extraordinary experience of entry and visitation retains its signifyingness, it is because the *beyond* is not a simple background from which a face solicits us, is not "another world" behind the world. The *beyond* is precisely beyond the "world," that is, beyond every disclosure—like the One of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, which transcends all cognition, be it symbolic or signified. The One is "neither similar nor dissimilar, neither identical nor non-identical," Plato says, thus excluding it from every even indirect revelation. A symbol still brings the symbolized back to the world in which it appears.

What then can be this relationship with an absence radically withdrawn from disclosure and from dissimulation? And what is this absence that renders visitation possible, an absence not reducible to hiddenness, since it involves a signifyingness—a signifyingness in which the other is not converted into the same?

A face is abstract. This abstractness is not, to be sure, like the brute sensible datum of the empiricists. Nor is it an instantaneous cross-section of the world in which time would cross with eternity. It is an incision made in time that does not bleed. But the abstractness of a face is a visitation and a coming. It disturbs immanence without settling into the horizons of the world. Its abstractness is not obtained by a logical process starting from the substance of beings and going from the particular to the general. On the contrary, it goes toward those beings, but does not

compromise itself with them, withdraws from them, absolves itself. Its wonder is due to the elsewhere from which it comes and into which it already withdraws. This coming from elsewhere is not a symbolic reference to that elsewhere as to a term. A face presents itself in its nudity; it is not a form concealing, but thereby indicating, a ground, a phenomenon that hides, but thereby betrays a thing itself. Otherwise, a face would be one with a mask—but a mask presupposes a face. If *signifying* were equivalent to *indicating* a face would be insignificant. Sartre says that the other is a pure hole in the world—a most noteworthy insight, but he stops his analysis too soon. The other proceeds from the absolutely absent. His relationship with the absolutely absent from which he comes *does not indicate, does not reveal* this absent; and yet the absent has a meaning in a face. This signifyingness is not a way for the absent to be given in a blank in the presence of a face—which would again bring us back to a mode of disclosure. The relationship which goes from a face to the absent is outside every revelation and dissimulation, a third way excluded by these contradictories. How is this third way possible? But—are we not still seeking that from which a face proceeds as though it were a sphere, a place, a world? Have we been attentive enough to the interdiction against seeking the *beyond* as a world behind our world? The order of being would still seem to be presupposed, an order which contains no other status but that of the revealed and of the dissimulated. Within being, a transcendence revealed is inverted into immanence, the extra-ordinary is inserted into an order, the other is absorbed into the same. In the presence of the other do we not respond to an "order" in which signifyingness remains an irremissible disturbance, an utterly bygone past? Such is the signifyingness of a trace. The beyond from which a face comes signifies as a trace. A face is in the trace of the utterly bygone, utterly passed absent, withdrawn into what Paul Valéry calls "the deep yore, never long ago enough," which cannot be discovered in the self by an introspection. [For a face is the unique openness in which the signifyingness of the transcendent does not nullify the transcendence and make it enter into an immanent order; here on the contrary transcendence refuses immanence precisely as the ever bygone transcendence of the transcendent.] In a trace the relationship between the signified and the signification is not a correlation, but *unrightness* itself. The allegedly mediated and indirect relationship between a sign and the signified is thus still a rightness, for it is a disclosure which neutralizes transcendence. The signifyingness of a trace places us in a lateral relationship, unconvertible into rightness (something inconceivable in the order of disclosure and being), answering to an irreversible past. No memory could follow the traces of this past. It is an immemorial past—and this also is perhaps eternity, whose signifyingness is not

foreign to the past. Eternity is the very irreversibility of time, the source and refuge of the past.

But if the signifyingness of a trace is not immediately transformed into the straightforwardness which still marks signs, which reveal the signified absent and bring it into immanence, it is because a trace signifies beyond being. The personal order to which a face obliges us is beyond being. *Beyond being is a third person*, which is not definable by the oneself, by ipseity. It is the possibility of this third direction of radical *unrightness* which escapes the bipolar play of immanence and transcendence proper to being, where immanence always wins against transcendence. Through a trace the irreversible past takes on the profile of a "He." The *beyond* from which a face comes is in the third person. The pronoun *He* expresses exactly its inexpressible irreversibility, already escaping every relation as well as every dissimulation, and in this sense absolutely unencompassable or absolute, a transcendence in an absolute past. The *illeity* of the third person is the condition for the irreversibility.

This third person who in a face has already withdrawn from every relation and every dissimulation, who has passed, this *illeity*, is not a "less than being" by comparison with the world in which a face enters; it is the whole enormity, the inordinateness, the infinity of the absolutely other, which eludes treatment by ontology. The supreme presence of a face is inseparable from this supreme and irreversible absence which founds the eminence of visitation.

6. TRACES AND "ILLEITY"

If the signifyingness of a trace consists in signifying without making appear, if it establishes a relationship with *illeity*, a relationship which is personal and ethical—is an obligation and does not disclose, and if, consequently, a trace does not belong to phenomenology, to the comprehension of the "appearing" and the "self-dissimulating," we can at least approach this signifyingness in another way by situating it with respect to the phenomenology it interrupts.

A trace is not a sign like any other. But every trace also plays the role of a sign; it can be taken for a sign. A detective examines everything in the area where a crime took place, as revealing signs which betoken the voluntary or involuntary work of the criminal; a hunter follows the traces of the game, which reflect the activity and movement of the animal the hunter is after; a historian discovers ancient civilizations which form the horizon of our world on the basis of the vestiges left by their existence. Everything is arranged in an order, in a world, where each thing reveals another or is revealed in function of another.

But when a trace is thus taken as a sign, it is exceptional with respect to other signs in that it signifies outside of every intention of signaling

and outside of every project of which it would be the aim. When in transactions one "pays by check" so that there will be a trace of the payment, the trace is inscribed in the very order of the world. But a trace in the strict sense disturbs the order of the world. It occurs by overprinting. Its original signifyingness is sketched out in, for example, the fingerprints left by someone who wanted to wipe away his traces and commit a perfect crime. He who left traces in wiping out his traces did not mean to say or do anything by the traces he left. He disturbed the order in an irreparable way. He has passed absolutely. *To be qua leaving a trace* is to pass, to depart, to absolve oneself.

But in this sense every sign is a trace. In addition to what the sign signifies, it is the past of him who delivered the sign. The signifyingness of a trace doubles up this signifyingness proper to a sign issued in view of communication. A sign stands in this trace. This signifyingness lies in, for example, the writing and the style of a letter, in all that brings it about that during the emission of a message, which we capture on the basis of the letter's language and its sincerity, someone passes, purely and simply. This trace can be taken in its turn as a sign. A graphologist, an expert in writing styles, or a psychoanalyst could interpret a trace's singular signifyingness, and seek in it the sealed and unconscious, but real, intentions of him who delivered the message. But then what remains in the specific sense a trace in the writing and style of the letter does not signal any of these intentions, any of these qualities, reveals and hides nothing. In a trace has passed a past absolutely bygone. In a trace its irreversible lapse is sealed. Disclosure, which reinstates the world and leads back to the world, and is proper to a sign or a signification, is suppressed in traces.

But then is not a trace the weight of being itself outside of its acts and its language, weighing not through its presence, which fits it into the world, but by its very irreversibility, its absoluteity?

A trace would seem to be the very indelibility of being, its omnipotence before all negativity, its immensity incapable of being self-enclosed, somehow too great for discretion, inwardness, or a self. And it was indeed important for us to say that a trace does not effect a relationship with what would be less than being, but obliges with regard to the infinite, the absolutely other.

But this superiority of the superlative, this height, this constant elevation to power, this exaggeration, or this infinite overbidding—and, let us say the word, this divinity—are not deducible from the being of beings nor its revelation, even if it is contemporary with a concealment, nor deducible from "concrete duration." These signify something on the basis of a past which, in a trace, is neither *indicated* nor signaled, but yet disturbs order, while coinciding neither with revelation nor with

dissimulation. A trace is the insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines toward a past and a time. This time is a withdrawal of the other, and, consequently, nowise a degradation of duration, which, in memory, is still complete. Superiority does not reside in a presence in the world, but in an irreversible transcendence. It is not a modulation of the being of entities. As He and third person it is somehow outside the distinction between being and entities. Only a being that transcends the world can leave a trace. A trace is a presence of that which properly speaking has never been there, of what is always past. Plotinus conceived the procession from the One as compromising neither the immutability nor the absolute separation of the One. It is in this situation, at first purely dialectical and quasi-verbal (and which is also the case for Intelligence and the Soul, which remain with their principle in their higher parts and are inclined only through their lower parts—a structure which still belongs to iconography), that the exceptional signifyingness of a trace delineates in the world. "Much more than does the unit, The One, remain intact in the principle which is before all beings; especially since the entities produced in its likeness, while it thus remains intact, owe their existence to no other, but to its own all-sufficient power . . . in the realm of Being, the trace of the One establishes reality; existence is a trace of The One . . ." (Enneads 5.5).

That which preserves the specific signifyingness of a trace in each trace of an empirical passage, over and above the sign it can become, is possible only through its situation in the trace of this transcendence. This position in a trace, which we have called *illeity*, does not begin in things, which by themselves do not leave traces but produce effects, that is, remain in the world. When a stone has scratched another stone, the scratch can, to be sure, be taken as a trace, but in fact without the man who held the stone this scratch is but an effect. It is as little a trace as the forest fire is a trace of the lightning. A cause and an effect, even separated by time, belong to the same world. Everything in things is exposed, even what is unknown in them. The traces that mark them are part of this plenitude of presence; their history is without a past. A trace qua trace does not simply lead to the past, but is the very *passing* toward a past more remote than any past and any future which still are set in my time—the past of the other, in which eternity takes form, an absolute past which unites all times.

The absoluteness of the presence of the other, which has justified our interpreting the exceptional uprightness of thou-saying as an epiphany of this absoluteness, is not the simple presence in which in the last analysis things are also present. Their presence belongs to the present of *my* life. Everything that constitutes my life with its past and its future is assembled in the present in which things come to me. But it is in the

trace of the other that a face shines; what is presented there is absolving itself from my life and visits me as already absolute. Someone has already passed. His trace does not *signify* his past, as it does not *signify* his labor or his enjoyment in the world; it is a disturbance imprinting itself (we are tempted to say *engraving* itself) with an unexceptionable gravity.

The illeity of this *He* is not the *it* of things which are at our disposal, and to which Buber and Gabriel Marcel rightly prefer the *thou* to describe a human encounter. The movement of an encounter is not something added to an immobile face; it is in the face itself. A face is of itself a visitation and transcendence. But a face, wholly open, can at the same time be in itself because it is in the trace of illeity. Illeity is the origin of the alterity of being in which the in itself of objectivity participates, while also betraying it.

The God who passed is not the model of which the face would be an image. To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God, but to find oneself in his trace. The revealed God of our Judeo-Christian spirituality maintains all the infinity of his absence, which is in the personal order itself. He shows himself only by his trace, as is said in Exodus 33. To go toward Him is not to follow this trace which is not a sign; it is to go toward the others who stand in the trace of illeity.