

# Tête-à-tête, Face-à-face: Brodsky, Levinas, and the Ethics of Poetry

David-Antoine Williams  
*Hertford College, Oxford*

**Abstract** Two decades have passed since Joseph Brodsky used his Nobel address to advance the idea that “aesthetics is the mother of ethics.” Yet despite the increasing prominence of ethics in literary studies during this time, very little has been written to elucidate his claim. One thing the “turn to ethics” in literary studies *has* produced is a rise in popularity of Emmanuel Levinas among critics. The invocation of Levinasian responsibility, with its refusal to entertain a practical or normative ethics, demonstrates, among other things, how far some streams of ethical criticism have traveled from the politically inflected theory of earlier decades. In this article I place Levinas’s writings alongside the critical prose of Brodsky, whose radical commitment to poetry—what Seamus Heaney called his “peremptory trust in words”—is set at a similar theoretical distance from the idea that the didactic, the deontological, or the political may be constitutive of ethics. To admit from the outset that Brodsky’s maxim is inimical to Levinas’s project—which is to establish ethics as the mother of philosophy, as it were—is to acknowledge that the rapprochement intended here cannot be in any sense final. Instead, in collocating Levinasian reflection on encounter, the originary, and the *face-à-face* with Brodsky’s writings on poetry, I want to give philosophical substance to Brodsky’s musings on the ethics of aesthetic encounter while simultaneously demonstrating one way Levinas can inform literary criticism.

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### 1. Prologue: Indifference and Estrangement

At about the age of twenty, Joseph Brodsky began to move in the literary circles of Leningrad. He worked for a few years without attracting much notice, writing poems and taking on a large amount of translation work in English, Cuban, Polish, and Serbian poetry. By many accounts, Brodsky was a prodigious writer and a formidable reader of poetry, but he did not join any writers' collective and so was mostly unknown outside his immediate circle. Then in 1964 he was arrested, tried, and convicted of "social parasitism," a crime for which he was sentenced to five years' labor in sub-arctic Arkhangelsk. Within months of the verdict, a secret transcript of Brodsky's trial reached Western publications, eventually appearing in German, Polish, and English translation.<sup>1</sup> By the time his sentence was commuted eighteen months later, Brodsky had acquired not only national and international celebrity but also the aura of integrity and moral authority often accorded to the unjustly punished.<sup>2</sup>

Longer versions of this story, encompassing subsequent significant milestones—his forced emigration (1972), his Nobel Prize (1987), his American poet laureateship (1991)—are frequently told in preamble to critical treatments of Brodsky. From one perspective, this is only natural. Brodsky's biography is a good story: romantic, even heroic. But Brodsky himself avoided talking much about his life in Russia, especially about his rough encounters with the state. At times he seemed vaguely embarrassed by or else affected complete disinterest in the facts of his repression, deflecting or dismissing the curiosity of interviewers (see, e.g., Haven 2002: 34, 40–41, 51, 115, 142–43). The closest thing of his to an autobiography begins with a rhetorical disclaimer: "I remember rather little of my life and what I do remember is of small consequence" (Brodsky 1986b: 3–4). When an audience member at a reading asked him, in 1978, what he thought about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and the legend that had grown up around him, Brodsky advised: "As for legend . . . you shouldn't worry or care about legend, you should read the work" (Haven 2002: 52).

Part of the reason Brodsky's legend still tends to frame critical treat-

1. A short summary of notes taken by the journalist Frida Vigdorova first appears in Russian in *Russkaia Mysl'* (May 5, 1964); in German in the Hamburg weekly *Die Zeit* (July 2, 1964); in Polish in *Kultura* (July–August 1964): 3–28; and in English in the American biweekly the *New Leader* (August 31, 1964). In the autumn, Stephen Spender's magazine *Encounter* 23 (3) (September 1964): 84–91 reprints the *New Leader* translation in England. The following year, the complete transcript is published in the New York-based *Vozdushnye Puti Al'manakh* (Vigdorova 1965). All versions appeared anonymously.

2. Fuller biographical accounts are given in Etkind 1978, 1988a, 1988b; Volkov 1988; Shtern 2001, 2004; Loseff 2006.

ments of his work may be that the work poses some real difficulties for commentators. Brodsky's poetry has not been especially well received in the English-speaking literary and academic circles that championed him at the time of his exile.<sup>3</sup> As for the prose, readers often struggle to make sense of the strong ethical position they intuit there. Brodsky's (1996: 49, 208) gnomic utterances—such as the maxim he frequently repeated, “aesthetics is the mother of ethics”—have the aura of authority but on reflection can seem philosophically casual.<sup>4</sup> The biography, it seems, is both more compelling and more tractable. Too often it seems to act as a guarantor of Brodsky's literary merit or ethical seriousness, despite the objections that Brodsky would surely have raised against the reliance on history or psychology as a ground for literary study.

Many of those who knew Brodsky in Leningrad take pains to reframe the discussion of his biography, especially as it concerns his persecution, in terms of his literary style. The offense he committed in his pursuit of poetry, they say, was not political but stylistic: he deviated from the aesthetic tenets of socialist realism. Fellow poet Yunna Moritz qualifies her characterization of Brodsky as “apolitical” by asserting that “all his stylistics, the entire level of his linguistic, intonational thinking, was loathsome to [Soviet] literature, which had created its own style and defended its own style with a bayonet and grenades” (Rich 1997: 28–29). Lev Loseff (1990: 35), latterly also a poet in exile and an early Brodsky scholar, writes, “The polity sensed something subversive in the very linguistic matter of his verse even before he introduced any political themes.”<sup>5</sup> A third Leningrad friend, Solomon Volkov (1988: 12), explains it this way: “Brodsky's poetry wasn't ‘civic’—in this sense—at all. It wasn't anti-Soviet so much as it was un-Soviet, ignoring the regime utterly and refusing to enter into any kind of dialogue with it.” Brodsky's mistake was insisting that anyone could remain, contra the regime's expectations of its citizens, un-Soviet in Nikita Khrushchev's, and later Leonid Brezhnev's, Soviet Union.

Not anti- but un-. Brodsky himself must have believed this, even in the midst of his early tribulations. In the main, he was a passive presence at

3. There were early detractors of Brodsky's poetry, led by Christopher Reid (1988) and Craig Raine (1996). But even sympathetic commentators, such as Sven Birkerts (2000) and Andrew Kahn (2007), have acknowledged a decline in Brodsky's literary reputation since his death.

4. The philosopher Marcia Muelder Eaton (1997: 355), one of very few writers who have tried to come to terms with this statement, points out that the “history of philosophy does not offer many theories in which aesthetics is prior to ethics.” Eaton, though she calls Brodsky's maxim “enthraling,” ultimately finds that she must reject it.

5. The “political themes” to which Loseff refers are traced back by him only as far as Brodsky's post-Arkhangelsk writing, e.g., “A Halt in the Desert” (1966).

his trial, saying very little in his own defense. "I didn't really pay very much attention to what was going on," he told David Montenegro in 1986 (Haven 2002: 116). But in a rare unsolicited interjection, Brodsky hotly (Vigdorova 1965: 293) countered a witness's charge of anti-Soviet writing:

*Nikholaev*: Brodsky's verses are disgusting and anti-Soviet.

*Brodsky*: Give the names of my anti-Soviet poems. Quote just one line from them.<sup>6</sup>

To be anti-Soviet would be, as Volkov puts it, to enter into a kind of dialog with the regime. For a man with an "essentially dialogic" mind (Volkov 1988: xi), this choice to ignore rather than engage is evidence of a constitutional indifference, which would later develop into a philosophical indifference, toward political order. For Brodsky, this indifference is produced and cultivated by aesthetic experience. "Art in general, literature especially, and poetry in particular," he writes, have never been in favor with the political class, because "there where art has stepped, where a poem has been read, they discover, in place of the anticipated consent and unanimity, indifference and polyphony" (Brodsky 1996: 46-47). *Unanimity* finds a natural lexical opposite in *polyphony*, but the antonym of *consent* is usually *dissent*, not *indifference*. Indifference is what Brodsky showed at his trial and also what he expresses when asked to think about his experiences of repression. It is his attitude toward social structure and political organization in general.

There is a question as to whether this indifference, which describes a personal (i.e., psychological) attitude, corresponds in some way to what Svetlana Boym (1996: 523) has called Brodsky's "art of estrangement." That is, one might argue for the literary relevance of Brodsky's biography on the grounds that his art creation is readable as a product of this constitutional indifference. Boym gets her term directly from Brodsky (1986b: 3): "It occurred to me that Marx's dictum that 'existence conditions consciousness' was true only for as long as it takes consciousness to acquire the art of estrangement; thereafter, consciousness is on its own and can both condition and ignore the existence." The art of estrangement, Boym (1996: 523) says, "became a dissident art; in the Soviet artistic context of the 1960s, estrangement represented a resistance to sovietization." This statement is true on a certain reading, but it propagates an unfortunate ambiguity in Brodsky's text. "Art," in this passage, must I think be read broadly to mean "skill" or "knack." The temptation to interpret "art" as "artwork(s)," or as one of the various fine arts, must be resisted: these are not the kind of

6. The English text is Peter France's translation in Etkind 1978: 255-56.

things that the consciousness can “acquire.” But “the art of estrangement,” decontextualized, suggests that Brodsky’s idea of poetry is created from or is otherwise imbued with the same psychological indifference that he expressed toward the state. To equate it with “dissident art” reinforces, however subtly, a spurious connection between Brodsky and the movement of unofficial (usually visual) artists who thought of their work specifically in opposition to official state art—that is, who understood art as one of many sites of political resistance. So while it may be true that Brodsky’s practiced indifference to the polity was in a sense one of the skills a dissident might acquire, that is far from saying that he was committed to a poetics of estrangement. Boym (2005: 606) is more correct in her recent revisiting of the question of art, politics, and estrangement: “The ‘art of estrangement’ in Brodsky’s quote is no longer an aesthetic device but a tactic of dissent, a form of alternative self-fashioning, a survival strategy.”

Strictly speaking, of course, Brodsky was no dissident, though he was a survivor. He did not produce, promote, or distribute dissident art. He did not disagree. He ignored. The estrangement he practiced was in relation to politics and to history. Brodsky (1986b: 6) could estrange himself from art but only from ersatz, state-sponsored art, such as the portraits of Lenin and Joseph Stalin that were ubiquitous in the Soviet Union of his youth: “I think that coming to ignore those pictures was my first lesson in switching off, my first attempt at estrangement.” Estrangement from such politically sponsored art is just another form of estrangement from the political order, a self-externalizing (*estrangement*: from Latin *extrāneus*, external; hence to estrange: to make foreign, to put outside) from the mass that wishes to co-opt one into itself. Describing his youthful “escape” from high school, his first and possibly the definitive break from state control, Brodsky (*ibid.*: 11) writes, “The main thing, I suppose, was the change of exterior.” The geological expeditions he embarked on in his late teens may have had the appeal of maximizing the dimensions of that exterior.

## 2. The Human Face of Poetry

Self-externalized, psychologically if not yet physically, from the social and political context, Brodsky immerses himself instead in art generally, literature especially, and poetry in particular, toward which his attitude is one of utter engagement. For Brodsky, poetry is the preeminent individuator. This is the key to understanding his maxim “Aesthetics is the mother of ethics.” Aesthetic encounter, especially the encounter with poetry, can give birth to ethics because it preserves and fosters individuality, which is the basis of responsibility, in the face of the social processes that seek to co-opt

it. In 1984 Brodsky (*ibid.*: 385) advises the graduating students of Williams College that “the surest defense against Evil is extreme individualism. . . . That is, something that can’t be feigned, faked, imitated . . . something, in other words, that can’t be shared, like your own skin: not even by a minority. Evil is a sucker for solidity. It always goes for big numbers.” “Lots of things can be shared,” he later says, “but not a poem by, say, Rainer Maria Rilke” (Brodsky 1996: 46). Ultimately, the ethical value of poetry comes from this irreducibility, from its grounding in that which cannot be shared or counterfeited, from its creativity, veracity, and privacy, signs of autonomy that in turn supply autonomy to experience.

If there is a conflict between art and politics, it is because politics always seeks to incorporate the individual into the collective, to deny him or her the creativity, the veracity, and the privacy that are the signs of individuality, whereas art always seeks to promote these. This may apply especially to Soviet politics, but it is also true of other forms of social organization, indeed of social organization in general. In an interview not published in English, Brodsky predicts a bureaucratic future where the self and other collapse into an undifferentiated mass, into an all-encompassing social “process.” Of his own analysis, he says: “This must irritate (rub the wrong way) those who speak of socialism *per se*, of the human face of socialism, etc. I find it hard to imagine any future ‘ism’ having a human face. It would have a very impersonal and bureaucratic face” (Brodsky 1988: 55).<sup>7</sup> “The human face of socialism” is a commonplace intended to emphasize the theoretical humanitarianism of socialism, its built-in concern for the less and least fortunate in society. But for Brodsky, who contradicts the cliché just by literalizing it, there is nothing “human” about state bureaucracy. The image that this particular bureaucracy could and did deploy to represent its beneficence was similarly devoid of anything suggesting a real human being: the Soviet portraits of Lenin that “plagued almost every textbook, every class wall, postage stamps, money” were “utterly lacking in character,” with “nothing specific in that face” (Brodsky 1986b: 5–6).

Brodsky thinks about the state in terms of inhuman, characterless, unspecific faces. Art, on the other hand, is often imagined in terms of genuine, individuated faces. If aesthetic experience is the source of individuation, its emblem is the human face: unique, untransferable, and irreproducible. For instance, Brodsky (1996: 89) is attracted to Dante’s idea that “the notion of beauty was contingent on the beholder’s ability to dis-

7. “Cela prend certainement à rebrousse-poil tous ceux qui parlent du socialisme en soi, du socialisme à visage humain, etc. J’imagine mal pour l’avenir un quelconque ‘isme’ ayant un visage humain. Il aura un visage très impersonnel et bureaucratique.” (All translations are my own unless indicated.)

cern in the human face's oval just seven letters comprising the term 'Homo Dei.'"<sup>8</sup> The conceit would have the face as both a picture and a grammar, an arrangement of letters and words into meaning. In this arrangement, the aesthetic recognition of beauty is joined with the ethical recognition of shared humanity. Brodsky (*ibid.*: 47) makes a similar alignment in his Nobel acceptance speech, where he recognizes the Dantesque pictogrammatical face, with the help of art, even inside the "big numbers" for which Evil is such a sucker: "Into the little zeros with which the champions of the common good and the rulers of the masses tend to operate, art introduces a 'period, period, comma, and a minus,' transforming each zero into a tiny human, albeit not always pretty, face." The "little zeros" are in the first place markers of magnitude—the hundreds, thousands, millions, and so on, that give weight to official numbers. But for the individual subsumed into them, they also represent his or her nilness, the erasure of individuality. The action of art in Brodsky's figuration—here again a cross between drawing and writing, centered in the facial oval—is a restoration of individuality, of humanity, a filling in of blanks with eyes (period, period), nose (comma), and mouth (minus). From this artistic palimpsest of the grammatical over the numerical can come the image of a face, a sign of human individuality and proof of the existence of individuated selves within the mass of millions. Conversely, the changefulness of the human face is representative of possibilities of linguistic expression: "The poet," Brodsky (*ibid.*: 93–94) writes, "discerns in that changing oval far more than the seven letters of *Homo Dei*; he discerns the entire alphabet, in all its combinations, i.e., the language."

The trope that would conceive of literature in terms of the face and vice versa is developed in Brodsky's Nobel Lecture, where he quotes from Evgenii Abramovich Baratynskii's 1829 poem "Muza" ("Muse"), in which the power of poetry is conveyed by the muse's "litsa neobshchim vyrazhen'em": by her original, uncommon, or singular facial expression. Jill Higgs renders this phrase as "rare expression" (Baratynskii 2004: 115). Barry Rubin, who translates Brodsky's Nobel address into English, chooses "uncommon visage," which is the title Brodsky gives to the reprinted translation in his 1996 collection of essays. Brodsky (1996: 47) writes: "The great Baratynsky, speaking of his Muse, characterized her as possessing

8. Brodsky gets the orthography wrong in his reference to Dante's invocation, in *Purgatorio*, canto 23, of the medieval idea that God had "signed" the human face with the (six) letters *O*, *M*, *O*, *D*, *E*, *I* ("man of God"). The face could thus be represented pictorially with the *O*'s as eyes, *M* as eyebrows and nose, *D* as ears, and horizontal *E* and *I* as nostrils and mouth. Dante's passage is ambiguous as to whether he himself (or even his narrator) subscribes to this belief, as Brodsky strongly implies.

an ‘uncommon visage.’ It’s in acquiring this ‘uncommon visage’ that the meaning of human existence seems to lie, since for this uncommonness we are, as it were, prepared genetically.”

If the human being considered by him- or herself is genetically prepared for originality and singularity, for rareness of expression or uncommonness of countenance, there is still work to be done in nurturing this predisposition into fulfillment. This involves self-extraction from the social fabric and is achieved mainly through literary experience. “At the speed of the turning page,” Brodsky (*ibid.*: 51–52) writes, reading generates a “movement,” which is nothing like a political movement or even a literary movement but is instead an individual’s “flight from the common denominator”: “This flight is the flight in the direction of ‘uncommon visage,’ in the direction of the numerator, in the direction of autonomy, in the direction of privacy.” In other words, via literature the individual can escape the collective in the direction of his or her own individuality. Here, as everywhere in Brodsky, escape and estrangement from the political are helped and hastened by encounter and engagement with the aesthetic. The “uncommon visage” beckons the individual out of the mass, helping him or her toward the autonomy and privacy of which it is itself a symbol and for which he or she is already “prepared genetically.” Thus the face, in its physical uniqueness as much as in its expressive changefulness—which is to say, in its uncommonness—is a sign of the individuality and the humanity of human persons and is simultaneously symbolic of the originality, difference, polyphony, and veracity of art. “Acquiring” it may mean developing one’s own rareness of expression, but to do so involves first seeking out and encountering the uncommon visage of literature.

The encounter with literature is repeatedly figured by Brodsky as an encounter of faces. It is a face watching or an eye gazing, a meeting of souls and minds, the pondering of a photograph of a lost and somehow loved person. Brodsky (*ibid.*: 46) describes the poem as address, a vocative which engages the reader head-to-head: “A work of art, of literature especially, and a poem in particular, addresses a man *tête-à-tête*, entering with him into direct—free of any go-betweens—relations.” Paul Celan famously compared the poem to a handshake.<sup>9</sup> The goodwill that the figure of the handshake connotes—the open, proffered hand, the facing of one to another, the mutual reception—all of these are bound up in the positive association between truth and poem that Celan makes. Brodsky’s

9. In a letter to Hans Bender dated May 18, 1960, Celan (1986: 28) writes: “Nur wahre Hände schreiben wahre Gedichte. Ich sehe keinen prinzipiellen Unterschied zwischen Händedruck und Gedicht” (Only truthful hands write true poems. I see no difference in principle between a handshake and a poem).



figure of the tête-à-tête reproduces these associations even more affectingly: it is a facing toward one another, a proximity of faces which reveals the one to the other. As in Celan's hand shaking, in Brodsky's face meeting the moment of aesthetic encounter gives rise to the ethical revelation of another's humanity.

One can usefully extend Brodsky's metaphor of aesthetics giving birth to ethics by thinking of the face-to-face as the moment of conception of ethics. This extension is already implicit in much of Brodsky's prose, for there is something very intimate, something both immanent and imminent—indeed something pregnant—in the way he treats faces. He dwells on them, especially when they are those of friends or of people he admires. He writes that “I fell in love with a photograph of Samuel Beckett long before I'd read a line of his” (Brodsky 1986b: 22). He lingers even more intently on the faces in a photograph of his poet friends: “Stephen [Spender] is much taller than any of us, and there is an almost detectable tenderness in his profile as he faces Wystan [Auden], who, hands in his pockets, is immensely cheered. Their eyes meet; at this juncture, they have known each other for forty years” (Brodsky 1996: 465–66). Reminiscing of a lunch, he is again drawn to Spender's face: “Isaiah Berlin is there, and also my wife, who cannot take her young eyes off Stephen's face” (ibid.: 478). When asked in an interview what he most misses about Russia, Brodsky (1986a: 10) replies, “Several faces, and an element of unpredictability in human relations.” In another interview, he meditates again on the face of his revered and beloved friend: “When I look at [Auden], it is like seeing a landscape. But when he raises his eyebrows, I see what I always saw in the photographs of Auden as an unwrinkled young man: that strange nose, so formal, but a bit surprised, as in his poetry” (Levy 1972: 8). This close focus on features, which is at once a reading into and a drawing out of, is typical of Brodsky's attention to faces, as is his return at the end of his description to Auden's verse. Faces are more for him than images; they are revelatory of the other. In the case of Auden, his face seems to personify his writing. The appearance of the face can be intimate, but it can also intimate in the way that art intimates.

In his conversations with Volkov, Brodsky is drawn into an extended description of the face of the man he had called “the greatest mind of the twentieth century” (Brodsky 1986b: 358) and for whom he felt “sentiments . . . of the intensity which should be reserved . . . for the figures of the Creed” (Brodsky 1986a: 12). Volkov (1988: 125) prompts him:

*Volkov:* Could you describe Auden's face to me?

*Brodsky:* It's often compared to a map. In fact, it did resemble a map, with the

eyes in the middle. That's how creased it was, with wrinkles fanning out in all directions. Auden's face reminded me of the surface of a lizard or a tortoise.

*Volkov:* Stravinsky complained that to see how Auden actually looked, you would have to iron out his face. Henry Moore went into raptures over the "monumental ruggedness of his face, its deep furrows like plow marks crossing a field."

Auden himself jokingly compared his face to a wedding cake after a rain.

*Brodsky:* It was a striking face. If I could choose a face for myself, I'd choose either Auden's or Beckett's. More likely Auden's.

*Volkov:* When Auden got to talking, did his face move? Did it come alive?

*Brodsky:* Yes, it was very expressive.

Volkov and Brodsky are having fun with a minitradition of physiognomical joking about Auden's features. Brodsky starts it, but when Volkov begins to list off famous quips (not mentioning David Hockney's unmentionable one),<sup>10</sup> Brodsky seems less willing to play along, becoming suddenly sincere. Brodsky's initial face-as-map image—a hybrid of the commonplace "his face was an open book" and Brodsky's previous "like seeing a landscape" simile—is much more in accord with how he feels about the human face. It is like a document, a legible representation of his soul, even a set of directions toward it. In Brodsky's image, Auden's wrinkles spread out concentrically from the eyes, which, as the givers and receivers of gaze, constitute the meeting point of observer and observed, as in Brodsky's description of the Auden-Spender photograph. Through his figuration, Auden's most recognizable facial feature—his deep furrows—can be seen to direct our eyes from his face's periphery toward its center, finally to the eyes which confront us with a reciprocal gaze. The *bons mots* of Igor Stravinsky, Moore, and Auden himself lack this element of encountering, as much in their concept as in their rhetorical neatness.

Volkov asks if Auden's face "came alive" when he started talking, which allows Brodsky to continue downplaying "monumental" comparisons. The contrast between a monument and a "very expressive" face is one to which Brodsky (1996: 275) later returns in some detail: recalling a boyhood experience of casting shadows on a Roman marble, he writes: "At once her facial expression changed. I moved my hand a bit to the side: it changed again." Brodsky refers to the sculpture as a *fanciulla*, a maiden or young girl,<sup>11</sup> suggesting, if only briefly, an erotic dimension to the story. He is Pygmalion bringing Galatea to life, but the animating gesture, which meta-

10. Alan Bennett (1994: 515) attributes this remark to Hockney: "I kept thinking, if his face looks like this, what must his balls look like?"

11. Also an artwork depicting a young girl. A *fanciulla* is a marriageable but unmarried girl, and in this liminal condition she is often represented in art as either sexually inviting, as in Giovanni Boldini's *Fanciulla sdraiata*, or ambiguously as both childish and seductive, as in Francesco Gioli's *Fanciulla in riva al mare*.

phorizes both erotic and imaginative creation, is squarely focused on the face: “I began moving both my arms rather frantically, casting each time a different shadow upon her features: the face came to life” (ibid.). The association between procreation and art creation is integral to the concept of the muse,<sup>12</sup> and it is at the heart of the Pygmalion myth. In Brodsky’s appropriation of this myth, we see an example of the “uncommon visage” that he associates with his muse. The ever changing facial expression is like the “very expressive” face of the poet, which is like his verse. As if commenting on his earlier description of Auden’s nose as possessing similar qualities to his poetry, Brodsky (ibid.) says of his fanciulla, “There are ways of turning viewing into reading.”

In a late essay, one of his very last, Brodsky tries, but ultimately fails, to turn a reading into a viewing, and here too, coincidentally, a poet’s nose figures centrally. In a paean to his favorite Roman poets (Horace, Ovid, Propertius, Virgil), he professes his longing for a face-to-face encounter. In “A Letter to Horace,” Brodsky (ibid.: 432) enters into one kind of direct address: “Ah, what I wouldn’t give to know what the four of you looked like! To put a face to the lyric, not to mention the epic.” The register is more conversational than it is epistolary—Brodsky wants the relation between him and his imagined (albeit historical) interlocutor to be informal and intimate, despite his temporal remoteness. But the one-on-one tone, set against this remoteness, only highlights the unavailability of the poets’ faces. Though Brodsky (ibid.: 433) is writing to Horace, it is the face of Publius Ovidius Naso—Ovid, nicknamed “the Nose” by friends—that most frustrates his imagination: “No, I never could conjure Naso’s face. Sometimes I see him played by James Mason—a hazel eye soggy with grief and mischief; at other times, though, it’s Paul Newman’s winter-gray stare.” Brodsky calls Ovid by his lesser-known surname, a defamiliarization he had practiced in an early poem, where, imitating Auden’s (1976: 198) “William Yeats is laid to rest,” Brodsky (1973: 101) employed the vocative “Thomas Stearns.” “Naso” names a man; “Ovid,” like “W. B. Yeats” and “T. S. Eliot,” names a literary corpus. Imagining the man’s face only produces ersatz likenesses—stock images borrowed from the popular

12. In the extended or allusive sense of the word: see *OED Online*, “muse, n.1 2a.: The inspiring goddess of a particular poet; (hence) . . . the character of a particular poet’s style”; “2c.: A person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an artist’s inspiration.” In his treatment of Brodsky’s 1983 poem “Galatea Encore,” Leon Burnett (1999: 155) observes that “Galatea may be regarded as an incarnation of the creative principle in art, which male poets have traditionally associated with the Muse of composition.” The poem, Burnett (ibid.) argues, may be read “as a meta-commentary on writing poetry in English, that is to say, on a literary activity that goes beyond ‘the process of composition’ to encompass what Brodsky referred to at the start of his 1987 Nobel Lecture as ‘the creative process itself.’”

imagination. That the face of an actor may come to represent iconically some particular human characteristic (Mason equals expressive emotion, Newman taciturn toughness) is not in itself surprising or disappointing: dramatic roles are by their nature simplifications of human personality. But this simplified face, the face of fixed significance, is in the end of no significance compared with the “very expressive” face, the changing face, which can only be discerned in the poetry. “Naso was a very protean fellow, with Janus no doubt presiding over his lares,” Brodsky (1996: 433) writes, but for all that he “never assumed anyone else’s shape” (ibid.: 458). No number of stock images can encompass the variety and uniqueness present in the work. No imagined face will do justice to it, but no imagining is necessary because of the presence of that work: “I can’t conjure up your faces, [Naso’s] especially; not even in a dream. Funny, isn’t it, not to have any idea how those whom you think you know most intimately looked? For nothing is more revealing than one’s use of iambs and trochees” (ibid.: 434). The truest representation of Naso the man is, finally, Ovid the corpus. His poetry intimates and is intimate; it is “revealing” of the other. And even as Brodsky finds it impossible to conjure up a visage, a visage is unveiled in the form of iambs and trochees. Again using the less publicly recognizable, and so more intimate, address, Brodsky (ibid.: 441) tells Horace: “So stay faceless, Flaccus, stay unconjured. This way you may last for two millennia more.” The potential for direct relations, for the revelation that the face comes to symbolize for Brodsky, is already fully present in the poetry. Brodsky only demands—and it is a great demand—that the reader engage head-to-head, or face-to-face, with that potentiality.

### 3. Levinas, Encounter, and the “Sign” of Poetry

I have said that Brodsky’s grand utterances on the value of poetry can seem philosophically casual. One objective of this article so far has been to demonstrate both a thematic unity and a unity of principle in Brodsky’s prose corpus. The principles that Brodsky espouses value individuality over collectivity, originality over imitation, and art over politics. These have the ring of ethical principles, and in fact they do address two standard concerns of ethics: individual human flourishing and the proper relations among individuals within a society. But the themes that Brodsky develops in conveying these principles veer sharply from traditional discourses of ethics: these themes are the preeminence and permanence of language, especially when figured in poetry, and the ability of the human face to be, like figured language, changeful, intimate, and unique in expression. This power of expression, from which the face derives its symbolic force,

is behind Brodsky's insistence that "aesthetics is the mother of ethics" because of the double recognition it provokes: on the one hand, the face is a sign of shared humanity; on the other, it is a sign of the uniqueness of each human individual.

The philosopher who has thought most profoundly about the significance of the human face is Emmanuel Levinas, whose work is preoccupied with the question of the origin of ethics. If the face is the master trope in Brodsky's "ethics" of poetry (with *ethics* in protective quotes), the face is also the master "trope" of Levinas's ethics of ethics (with *trope* in protective quotes). The terms call for the safe distance that quotation marks offer because they are—at least in the sense that I am using them—importations to the discourses they purport to describe. In his book-length introduction to Levinas, Colin Davis (1996: 122) describes a "Levinas effect: the difficulty of Levinas's texts permits his commentators to find in them a reflection of their own interests and attitudes." Accepting this as an inherent problematic, I wish nevertheless to present a brief reading of Levinas's ethics of ethics to inform my reading of Brodsky's ethics of poetry, acknowledging at the outset my own literary interests and attitudes in doing so. Levinas's extensive, highly nuanced exploration of the place of the face in ethics can help develop some latent strains in the Brodskian imagination, but it also throws up potential objections to the Brodskian treatment of the face. Foremost among these, the Levinasian proscription against figuration in general, and figuration of the face in particular, must stand as a powerful challenge to Brodsky's facial troping. Before returning to Brodsky from a Levinasian perspective, I will attend to the special case of poetry (i.e., "verse," not "the poetic"—*Gedicht*, not *Poesie*) in Levinas, as he discusses it in his essay on Celan.

Levinasian ethics has been variously termed an Ethics of Ethics (Derrida 1967: 164), a protoethics or ultraethics (Robbins 1999: 146, 23), and a "context in which the stakes of ethics are established" (Davis 1996: 54). Each of these formulations is intended to underline the distinction between Levinasian ethics and the traditional aims and methods of ethics in Western philosophy. In Jacques Derrida's (1967: 164) words: "Ethics, for Levinas, is Ethics without law, without concept, which retains its non-violent purity only before its determination in concepts and laws. . . . Levinas does not want to propose moral laws or regulations, he does not want to determine a morality, rather the essence of the ethical relation in general."<sup>13</sup> In

13. "Éthique, au sens de Levinas, est une Éthique sans loi, sans concept, qui ne garde sa pureté non-violente, qu'avant sa détermination en concepts et lois. . . . Levinas ne veut pas nous proposer des lois ou des règles morales, il ne veut pas déterminer une morale mais l'essence du rapport éthique en général."

his first important treatise, *Totalité et infini* (1984 [1961]), instead of determining criteria for achieving a “good life” or for judging human behavior, Levinas investigates the “essence of the ethical relation” by thinking about the moment of encounter between same, or self (*le même*), and other (*l'autre*), the Me (*le Moi*) and Alter (*Autrui*).<sup>14</sup> In doing so, Levinas seeks to reverse what he argues has been the basic feature of Western philosophy since Plato: an idea of the other as only temporarily separate from the self. Traditional first philosophy, Levinas argues, will seek to understand existence in relation to the thinking self, an ontological project with the ultimate goal of reducing all difference to aspects of sameness. For Levinas, this “totalization” is a fatal violence to the other, a “killing” of the other’s otherness. Ethics in the Levinasian sense is impossible within a philosophical framework that begins with the self. To take the ethical relation seriously means, for Levinas, to place ethics at the core of philosophy, which entails a displacement of ontology as first philosophy.

Levinas does not achieve this reversal by privileging the other over the self. For Levinas, ethics requires the other to be preserved in its otherness; it can never be “understood,” never incorporated into the self’s self-understanding, and therefore never “privileged,” since that term implies a specific relationship to the self. Instead of investigating the other directly, Levinas’s philosophy investigates the moment of encounter between same and other. In this proximity of Me and Alter, there occurs a destabilizing *mise en question*, a “calling into question” of Me by Alter, because in this moment I realize for the first time that there exists a not-Me, a something that exceeds my ontology. For Levinas (*ibid.*: 13), this calling into question gives rise to the moment of ethics: “The calling into question of the Same—which cannot occur within the egotistical spontaneity of the Same—is done by the Other. This putting into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other we call ethics. The strangeness of Alter—his irreducibility to Me—to my thoughts and possessions, is accomplished precisely as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.”<sup>15</sup> The

14. In two significant respects I have departed from convention among Levinas scholars writing in English. In translating Levinas, the common practice is to render *autre/Autre* as “other” and *Autrui* as “Other,” regardless of Levinas’s capitalization, which varies. Instead I use “Alter” to signify *Autrui*, though this should not be taken to imply any relation to “alter” as used in psychoanalysis. I have also departed from the convention of translating *Moi* as “I,” preferring “Me.” Beyond the felicity that the objective case is more often grammatically accurate, its use allows for the replication of Levinas’s minuscule *moi* and for consistency among the inflections *ma* and *me* (“my,” “to me”) as well as among determinate and indeterminate articles and for differentiation from his *je*, here rendered as “I.”

15. “Une mise en question du Même—qui ne peut se faire dans la spontanéité égoïste du Même—se fait par l’Autre. On appelle cette mise en question de ma spontanéité par la présence d’Autrui, éthique. L’étrangeté d’Autrui—son irréductibilité à Moi—à mes pensées

opposite of *responsibility*, *spontaneity* is Levinas's word for the self's freedom to exercise its will within the sphere of its sameness, of its self-centered ontology. The appearance of the other suddenly challenges this spontaneity by revealing that there are bounds to the sameness of the self. From this encounter arises the context of ethics, from which *an* ethics—in the usual, non-Levinasian, normative sense—may be derived (a possibility Levinas does not foreclose, though he thinks it outside the remit of philosophy). Prior to and subtending any law, however, the response of the self to this encounter, the self's response-ability/responsibility, is ethically determined by the duty to preserve the other's otherness (*altérité*) next to (but, crucially, neither with nor against) the self's own sameness.

The difficulties of holding to such a radical philosophy, and moreover of expounding it, will already be apparent: Levinas is always in danger of slipping into the ontological mode he is seeking to overturn. His project keeps at its core a concept that he claims is absolutely, eternally unknowable—the other is significant only as long as it remains unknown. Levinas not only courts paradox. He finds he must actively employ it to describe his ethics: it is “relation sans relation,” “rapport sans rapport” (*ibid.*: 52, 271). Yet though these ways of putting it are clearly getting at something—they are not nonsense—they are insufficient. This is where the language of face (*visage*) and *face-à-face* enters Levinas's thought, as a way of describing a relation between self and other that does not reduce the latter to a projection of the former. The Levinasian face is not one of the empirically available, or “real,” human faces of everyday experience, though it embodies perhaps their most important aspects: expressiveness and uniqueness. Instead, the face is “the way in which the Other presents itself, exceeding the idea of the Other in me” (*ibid.*: 172).<sup>16</sup> It is a way of appearing, not a thing that appears, or as Davis (1996: 46) puts it, it is “an epiphany or revelation rather than an object of knowledge.” If the face describes a revelation, the *face-à-face* describes the self's orientation of exposure toward that revelation. Vulnerable self-exposure is the only ethical stance that the self can take toward the other, because the face of the other demands to be preserved in its otherness: “The face refuses to be possessed, refuses my powers. In its epiphany, in its expression, the sensible, still graspable, transforms into a total resistance to my grasp” (Levinas 1984 [1961]: 172).<sup>17</sup> Because the

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et à mes possessions, s'accomplit précisément comme une mise en question de ma spontanéité, comme éthique.”

16. “La manière dont se présente l'Autre, dépassant l'idée de l'Autre en moi, nous l'appelons, en effet, visage.”

17. “Le visage se refuse à la possession, à mes pouvoirs. Dans son épiphanie, dans l'expression, le sensible, encore saisissable se mue en résistance totale à la prise.”

expression of the face defeats not only my powers but my “power to have powers” (ibid.),<sup>18</sup> my very spontaneity, the face-à-face is a relation which is not a relationship, not an economy of give-and-take. Though the self can learn nothing about the other, what the self learns from the encounter with the other, from being brought into proximity with the other, is of utmost importance. In this resistance which calls my very sameness into question, it is revealed to Me that I am not a totality, that I am not alone.

The appearance of Alter to Me is not only asymmetrically revelatory (implying reciprocity would only reduce Alter to a projection of Me) but asymmetrically imperative. The demands of Alter are forever unmet by Me—in Davis’s (1996: 54) words, “they exceed my ability to fulfill them, always demand more, are never satisfied by the completion of any action or service”—because Alter must always and forever be preserved in its otherness by Me. Thus for Levinas the ethical relation is one of infinite burden on the self, a burden which he articulates by quoting Fyodor Dostoevsky: “Each of us is held responsible before all, and for all, and I more than any other” (Levinas 1990 [1974]: 228).<sup>19</sup> With this quotation from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Levinas supplies a rare example of ethical language, a moment of speech which both reveals and maintains the other in all its otherness. Other examples of ethical utterance include the biblical commandment “thou shalt not kill” (Levinas 1984 [1961]: 173) and the response to the call of the Almighty: “Here am I; send me” (Levinas 1990 [1974]: 228).<sup>20</sup> These last two instances of language represent both aspects of the moment of ethical encounter. The former is a revelation of otherness and a command to preserve it; the latter embodies the complete openness, the total responsibility, of ethical response.

The problem with almost all other instances of language, according to Levinas’s (1990 [1974]) second major treatise, *Autrement qu’être*, is that, at its most recognizable, language serves the goals of ontology. It is concerned with propositions about things in the world (including in the imagination), the truth or falsehood of those propositions, and so on. This empirical language, the language of everyday communication, Levinas calls the Said

18. “L’expression que le visage introduit dans le monde ne défie pas la faiblesse de mes pouvoirs, mais mon pouvoir de pouvoir.”

19. “Chacun de nous est coupable devant tous pour tous et moi plus que les autres.” Levinas’s paraphrase amalgamates several related quotations from *The Brothers Karamazov*: “He is responsible to all men for all and everything, for all human sins . . . every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all men” (Dostoevsky 1968 [1880]: 165 [ii.iv.1]); “we are each responsible to all for all . . . perhaps, I am more than all others responsible for all” (ibid.: 307–8 [ii.vi.2]); “take yourself and make yourself responsible for all men’s sins” (ibid.: 333 [ii.vi.3]); “because we are all responsible for all” (ibid.: 625 [iv.xi.4]).

20. See Ex 20:13; Is 6:8.



(*le Dit*). Naturally, Western philosophy has traditionally been concerned with the Said, since it is itself based on and operates within the ontological mode. But Levinas claims that there exists a substratum to the Said, which he calls the Saying (*le Dire*).<sup>21</sup> This represents the dialogic aspect of language, the condition of exposure to the other that dialogue implies. Whereas the Said seeks to understand or represent the world for the benefit of the self, the Saying orients the self, as giver or receiver of speech, toward the other. The Saying has no content; it has no meaning outside this orientation.

The analogy between this distinction and the self/other distinction discussed above further complicates Levinas's exposition. Like the other, who is unknowable to the self, the Saying can never be represented in the Said, resisting even (or especially) philosophical exposition, because it lacks both theme and proposition and is defined by that lack. Like the other, the Saying cannot be experienced or understood, it can only be approached, only detected in traces. And in fact the relation is more than just analogous: if the face of Alter places an infinite burden of responsibility on Me, the Saying is my response-ability, my capacity to respond, even my posture of response, which subtends dialogue. As such, it is dialogic, but it is not dialogue: "It does not belong to the content which is inscribed in the Said and transmitted for decoding and interpretation by the Other. It is in the perilous uncovering of the self, in sincerity, in the rupture of interiority and the abandon of all shelter, in the exposure to trauma, in vulnerability" (*ibid.*: 82).<sup>22</sup> The Saying is therefore something very close to the face-à-face: it is, within language, an orientation of exposure, an openness to the other. To approach it within empirical, Said language involves a constant unsaying (*dédire*) of the Said, an interruption and disruption of the Said (*ibid.*: 278), in order to disrupt the ontology that the Said represents.

This is one important reason why there exists a preallable and ineluctable problem in applying Levinasian ethics to the literary context. Art (including painting, song, music, and literature) is, according to Levinas, especially and robustly resistant to unsaying, since it is essentially autotelic and self-regarding: not only is art dependent on its form for meaning, it

21. The infinitive mood used by Levinas in French captures the eternally imminent quality of the Saying better than the English indicative participle. The Saying is actually the To Say: it is the condition of dialogic speech, that which underlies and provokes speech. Translators have always opted for the participial form in English, however, as the alternative is exceedingly awkward, and I have followed this convention here.

22. "Il ne tient pas aux contenus s'inscrivant dans le Dit et transmis à l'interprétation et au décodage effectué par l'Autre. Il est dans la découverte risquée de soi, dans la sincérité, dans la rupture de l'intériorité et l'abandon de tout abri, dans l'exposition au traumatisme, dans la vulnérabilité."

obscenely glorifies in it (*ibid.*: 70). Levinas appears to deny the “applicability” of his philosophy generally, but in particular he singles out representational art as specifically inimical to the ethical moment of “facing the other.” There are several possible good reasons for agreeing that Levinas’s philosophy is unamenable to any positive association between art and ethics. For instance, because Levinas’s idea of the ethical is preontological, it would seem not to accommodate the art image, which, if understood as a mimetic creation, is always post- instead of pre-. The nature of representation is for Levinas (1948: 780) (following Plato) a corruption of “truth”: “It casts a shadow, gives off that obscure and ungraspable essence, that phantom essence that no one could identify with the essence revealed in truth.”<sup>23</sup> This casting of shadows is more than just incommensurable with the telling of truth, it also does violence to its object. Levinas (1990 [1974]: 70) calls art “display [*ostension*] par excellence—the Said reduced to pure theme, to exposition . . . reduced to the Beautiful, which carries Western ontology.”<sup>24</sup> Art, in seeking to represent, actually covers up the art object with its artistry. It does not reveal or preserve otherness; it processes otherness for the self’s possession and enjoyment.

The Hebraic proscription of images, which Levinas (1948: 786) calls “the supreme commandment of monotheism,” contributes to Levinas’s negative approach to figuration. The preceding quotation hints at this: the use of *ostension* suggests the Christian “showing of the consecrated elements to the congregation at the Eucharist” (*OED Online*, “ostention” 2),<sup>25</sup> entrenching, however subtly, Levinas’s association of ontology, self, and totality with the Western (i.e., Greek), Christian philosophical tradition, pitting this against the Eastern (i.e., Hebrew), Jewish tradition, which according to him promotes ethics, other, and infinity. Another source of Levinas’s antipathy toward art, first suggested by Jean-François Lyotard, may be that its nondenotative mode presents an unwanted rivalry to his project of a nondenotative ethics (Robbins 1999: 53). Just as Plato had to exile the poets in order to secure the primacy of the rational objective mode, it might be that in his philosophical writings Levinas refuses ethi-

23. “Il jette une ombre, dégage cette essence obscure et insaisissable, cette essence fantomatique que rien ne permet d’identifier avec l’essence révélée dans la vérité.”

24. “Ostension par excellence—Dit, réduit au pur thème, à l’exposition . . . Dit réduit au Beau, porteur de l’ontologie occidentale.”

25. English *ostension*, now rare, also shares with its French counterpart the primary sense of “exhibition” and “display” (*OED Online*, “ostention” 1), i.e., a “showing” that is not a revealing or an uncovering as much as a showiness. Cf. “ostentation.” Seán Hand (1996: 65) reads Levinas’s use of *ostension* as a double entendre between the primary and the liturgical connotations, slyly associating the art image with “the beguiling subjugation of the masses conducted by the artistic arm of the totalized society.”

city to art in order to lay sole claim to a prerational, preobjective ethical ground.

Despite what appears to be a fundamental impasse, many readers of Levinas have found reasons for claiming that the Levinasian antipathy to art, at least to certain instances of literary art, may not be as unqualified as Levinas may himself believe. These rereadings have been both intrinsic and tangential to the work. The former kind of critique has pointed out the embedded literariness of Levinas's own writing. Famously, in his early essay "Violence et métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas," Derrida (1967: 124n1) acknowledges Levinas's stated aversion to "Dionysian charm" and "poetic rapture" in *Totalité et infini* but observes that his writing itself displays highly poetic qualities: "The use of metaphor, which is admirable and usually, if not always, above rhetorical abusiveness, houses in its pathos the most decisive movements of the discourse . . . return and repetition, again and again, of the same wave against the same shore, every return also a perpetual renewal and enrichment. Due to all these challenges to the commentator and the critic, *Totalité et infini* is an œuvre and not a treatise."<sup>26</sup> Derrida thinks the philosophy must be approached as one approaches a work of art, not *just* because Levinas has moments of style but because it is within those moments that the "most decisive movements of the discourse" occur. Seán Hand has similarly argued that Levinas's frequent use of literary quotations (which include, prominently, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Nikolay Gogol), is more than merely illustrative. Faced with the intractable problem of attempting to overturn the primacy of the ontological within a discursive philosophical methodology that is itself grounded in ontology, Levinas's recourse to literature supply, Hand (1996: 63) argues, the "necessary dramatization of ethical being," forming "the ethical shadow within ontological language," a trace of the Saying within the Said.

Others have reached beyond the philosophical corpus, putting Levinas's (traditionally quarantined, at his own behest) nonphilosophical writings on religion and on literature into dialogue with his philosophical writings.<sup>27</sup> This is one tactic that Jill Robbins (1999) employs in her comprehensive

26. "L'usage de la métaphore, pour y être admirable et le plus souvent, sinon toujours, au-delà de l'abus rhétorique, abrite en son pathos les mouvements les plus décisifs du discours . . . retour et répétition, toujours, de la même vague contre la même rive, où pourtant chaque fois se résumant, tout infiniment se renouvelle et s'enrichit. Par tous ces défis au commentateur et au critique, *Totalité et Infini* est une œuvre et non un traité."

27. Levinas claims a "very radical distinction" (Wright et al. 1988: 173-74) between his philosophical and his nonphilosophical writings, specifically his so-called "confessional" works of biblical and Talmudic exegesis. Though the genres share themes and preoccupations, Levinas believes their methodologies to be irreconcilable (see also Kearney 1986: 18).

study of Levinas and literature. In a chapter entitled “Facing Figures,” Robbins confronts Derrida’s (1967: 149) assertion that “the face is not a metaphor, the face is not a figure . . . nor is it, as we might be tempted to believe, a prosopopoeia.” By using a range of Levinas’s confessional writings to complicate as well as challenge his account of art (especially of the “figure”) in *Totalité et infini*, Robbins (1999: 54) makes the case that “even the face [is], in the last analysis, a facing figure.” Michael Eskin (2000) puts this notion into practice by including Levinas, along with Mikhail Bakhtin, Osip Mandel’shtam, and Celan, in his discussion of ethics and dialogue. Eskin’s collocation of two philosophers and two poets flows from his view that, because poems “foreground their dialogic constitution both materially and thematically,” poetry “provides a particularly unobstructed view of the complex enmeshment of the dialogic and the ethical.” His investigation, what he calls his “poethics,” centers on “the inseparability of dialogue, ethics, and poetry” (ibid.: 1–2).

Eskin’s project relies on the fact that, though in several ways the ethical gap between Saying and Said sustains Levinas’s antipathy toward imaginative literature, it also supplies the opportunity for Levinas’s rapprochement to poetry,<sup>28</sup> notably in several essays on poets published in the 1960s and early 1970s. At least in those essays, Levinas advances the view that, unlike other kinds of literature, verse can be nonpropositional, nondenotative, and so, in theory, nonviolent. He develops this idea in an essay on Celan, where he begins by interrogating the quotation alluded to above: “I see no difference in principle,” writes Celan (1986: 26), “between a handshake and a poem.” In this formulation Levinas finds a concept of poetry which is in accord with his idea of ethical language, the revelatory and commanding “here am I.” Expanding on Celan’s conceit, Levinas (1982 [1976]: 59) writes: “So there [in Celan’s simile] the poem, highly wrought language, is brought back to the level of an interjection, of an expression as unarticulated as a wink, of a sign given to one’s neighbor! Sign of what? Of life? Of goodwill? Of complicity? Or sign of nothing, or of complicity in nothing: saying without said.”<sup>29</sup> “Saying without Said” is not the only terminology that Levinas imports from *Autrement qu’être*. In the same exe-

28. That is, specifically to “composition in verse form” (*OED Online*, “poetry” 2a). The terminology can be confusing, as Levinas frequently uses *poetry* abstractly, and almost always pejoratively, to mean “a poetic quality of beauty” (*OED Online*, “poetry” 6a). French, like English, lacks the distinction in German between *Gedicht* and *Poesie*.

29. “Voilà le poème, langage achevé, ramené au niveau d’une interjection, d’une expression aussi peu articulée qu’un clin d’œil, qu’un signe donné au prochain! Signe de quoi? de vie? de bienveillance? de complicité? Ou signe de rien, ou de complicité pour rien: dire sans dit.”

getical mode, Levinas (ibid.: 60) continues to intermesh Celan's poetics with themes taken from his own philosophy: "It so happens for Celan that the poem is situated precisely at the pre-syntactic, pre-logical level . . . but also pre-revelatory: at that moment of pure touch, of pure contact, of grasping, of gripping, which is perhaps a way of giving unto the hand that gives. Language of proximity for the sake of proximity . . . the first of all languages, answer preceding question, responsibility for the neighbour, making possible by its *for the other* all the wonder of giving."<sup>30</sup> It is revealing to contrast the positive inflection of "grasping" here to the overtly negative grasping against which the face of Alter was said to provide a "total resistance" in *Totalité et infini*. Here the grasp does not wish to possess the other but instead gives back to the extended hand. Like the Saying, the handshake carries no meaning except contact, the revelation of one to another, the exposure of one to another. Other key markers of Levinas's ethics are present in his discussion of poetry here: its originary and nondenotative status (*pré-syntaxique, pré-logique, pré-dévoilent, premier des langages*), its orientation toward the other (*toucher, contact, etc.; proximité, prochain*), and the ethical demand that the presence of the other generates (*réponse, responsabilité, donner*).

In her chapter "Facing Figures," Robbins (1999: 53) asks, "What if all art, literature, and poetry were *not* mimesis?" If, Robbins (ibid.: 54) argues, following Paul de Man, all literary troping were not done to achieve mimesis but if mimesis were, rather, merely one of the available resources of literary language, then literature would no longer claim identity with the object it imitates and could not therefore be reductive of that object. Understood this way, mimesis would be a case of language operating "intralinguistically," an "example of language's choosing to imitate a nonverbal entity" without supposing an essential link between the verbal and nonverbal. This being the case, "it might be necessary not to turn *away* from the figure, as Levinas does, but to face the figure otherwise, as language's ownmost figurative potential, as that which is most distinctive to language, that is, to face language *as* ethical possibility" (ibid.). In his essay on Celan, I venture, Levinas makes just such a turn toward the figure, or perhaps only a quarter turn, since he strategically deploys "Celan tells us . . ." and "For

30. "Il se trouve donc pour Celan que le poème se situe précisément à ce niveau pré-syntaxique et pré-logique . . . mais aussi pré-dévoilent: au moment du pur toucher, du pur contact, du saisissement, du serrement, qui est, peut-être, une façon de donner jusqu'à la main qui donne. Langage de la proximité pour la proximité . . . le premier des langages, réponse précédant la question, responsabilité pour le prochain, rendant possible, par son pour l'autre toute la merveille du donner."

Celan . . .” to dissimulate himself within his subject. The essay belongs more to Levinas’s nonphilosophical writings than to the philosophical corpus proper; it should not therefore be taken as modification or addition to the picture that emerges from *Totalité et infini* and *Autrement qu’être*. Partly for this reason, I demur from Eskin’s (2000: 56) strong claim that the Celan piece represents an “identification of semethics and poetry.”<sup>31</sup> Instead, I believe Levinas is performing a kind of Levinasian literary criticism along the lines of what I am attempting here: an importation of categories and concerns from the language of philosophy to the language of poetic commentary, with the aims and methodologies of the latter taking priority over those of the former. In elucidating the ethics bound up in Celan’s idea of poetry, Levinas offers an example of how one might draw from Levinasian ethics a form of ethical literary criticism or metacriticism. Levinas repeats his literary-critical performance with the poetries and poetics of S. Y. Agnon, Maurice Blanchot, and others.<sup>32</sup> These essays may have been an excursus for Levinas, but they nevertheless hint at the possibility of extension of this method to the thought and work of other poets.

#### 4. Brodsky’s “I,” Exposure, and the Orinary

The example that Levinas provides in his literary appreciations informs and partially motivates the present discussion. Clearly there are elements of Levinasian philosophy, translated there into the language of criticism, that invite a collocation with Brodsky’s poetics. The recurrence of the human face is chief among these, but what flows from its significance for Levinas is also vital to Brodsky. For Levinas, face-à-face encounter is the origin of the ethical subject, of ethics proper, and so of philosophy itself. Brodsky also bases his philosophy on encounter, albeit aesthetic encounter, which he describes as a tête-à-tête relation. And Levinas’s ethics, like Brodsky’s aesthetics and ethics, resists the normative project of conventional ethical systems, appealing instead to something preoriginal, preceding and subtending any code, an open command of responsibility. Levinas (1984 [1961]: xii) says that “ethics is an optics,” a way of seeing, through the totality of the same, the possibility of the infinite other. Brodsky’s ethics of poetry also attempts to see through totality but with an aesthetic lens; it too proposes a context of being, not a guide to living.

31. *Semethics* is Eskin’s (2000: 39–45) word for Levinas’s ethics of language in *Autrement qu’être*.

32. Levinas’s 1975 collection *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, which reprints four short essays on the author, is included in the English edition of *Noms propres* (Levinas 1996).

However, adducing Levinas also gives grounds for a line of critique potentially fatal to the ethics that Brodsky says aesthetics engenders. Taking Levinas seriously means asking whether Brodsky's idea of the individuated self, with the significance he places on the self's own privacy, is really compatible with a Levinasian Me, a self revealed to itself by the presence of the other. Isn't Brodsky's autonomous "I" an unabashedly egotistical self, concerned only with itself, detached from and insouciant of the others who make up the world? In other words, isn't Brodsky's "I" a totalizing "I," attempting to incorporate existence into its ontology just as ravenously as the state attempts to incorporate existence into its own? Has Brodsky only countered one totalization with a competing totalization? If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," the emphasis of a Levinasian critique must perforce tend toward the competing strain in his writings, the hostile position that mistrusts representation, especially figurative representation, refusing any possibility of ethical art. Without the central irreducible relation between self and other, the shared use of facial motifs can be no more than a felicitous but superficial similarity. In what follows I want to test Brodskian aesthetics against this Levinasian challenge by approaching some of Brodsky's characteristic pronouncements on the role of poetry in the formation of the autonomous "I" in light of the previous section's summary of Levinas's main themes and concerns.

For Brodsky (1986b: 466), aesthetic experience creates and conditions the judging self. It is chronologically as well as categorically previous: "A child is always first of all an aesthete: he responds to appearances, to surfaces, to shapes and forms." To illustrate his point that the categories of "good" and "bad" are "first and foremost aesthetic ones," Brodsky (1996: 49) invokes the image of "the tender babe who cries and rejects the stranger or who, on the contrary, reaches out to him" as exemplifying the original and instinctive aesthetic imperative, calling the baby's rejection an "aesthetic choice, not a moral one." Beginning at this moment, and continuing throughout the life of the self, aesthetic encounter returns the self to itself, affirming and confirming its individuality: "Being the most ancient as well as the most literal form of private enterprise, [art] fosters in a man, knowingly or unwittingly, a sense of his uniqueness, of individuality, of separateness—thus turning him from a social animal into an autonomous 'I'" (ibid.: 46). "Separateness" here is the key feature of the autonomous self. The self's separateness may at first be realized as a separateness from the artwork itself, as a recognition of the artwork's uniqueness that provokes a corresponding recognition of one's own uniqueness. Though the artwork is not "unknowable" in the drastic sense that Levinas's Alter is unknowable, it similarly resists attempts to reduce its difference, and the revela-

tion of that difference similarly dislocates the self from totality, drawing a line around the separateness of Me. The constitution of the self is, in this sense, essentially relational (though not exactly the product of a relationship), depending on aesthetic encounter with a separate, different, unique other.

Levinas describes the relation between self and other, represented by the face, as relation *without* relation, since though it does arise from encounter, it does not result in exchange—I do not learn anything about Alter except that it exists, which fact alone changes everything for Me. In other words, it is not the content of encounter that is generative of ethics but the fact of encounter itself. Similarly, in the distinction between Said and Saying, it is not the content of language that is ethical but the fact of its emanation from the self toward the other. With this typically Levinasian emphasis of mode over matter in mind, it is worth observing that almost nowhere in Brodsky's many writings on the value of poetry does he address the seemingly relevant (though not easy) question of poetic content, nor is he likely to give illustrative examples of either "good" or "bad" technique, imagery, or subject matter. Though he is willing to say that he would forgive a good poet his or her bad deeds (but not necessarily vice versa),<sup>33</sup> it would seem that what we often call aesthetic value—the relative success, however assessed, of a work of art—is not an important factor in the forming and fostering of the separate and autonomous "I." It is not that such judging is impossible; it is presumed to happen as a matter of course. Rather, the "good" or "bad" of art appears not to be important to the essential moment of encounter.

Whatever the content of a poem, its effect is the same: in language reminiscent of Levinasian *mise en question*, Brodsky (*ibid.*: 82) writes, the "authority of poetry . . . hoists a question mark over the individual himself, over his achievements and mental security, over his very significance." This disruption, dislocation, or interruption of the self is central to Brodsky's aesthetics and to the ethics it engenders. Brodsky's friend Volkov (1988: xi) has observed that, "to an extent I've never observed in anyone else," Brodsky's "mind was essentially dialogic . . . with everything existing in flux, subject to open-ended questioning by a free mind. [He] thrived on paradox, ambiguity, and contrariness." For Brodsky, wherever poetry is being experienced, the reading self is being called into question, called to

33. In a seeming echo of Auden's line "Time . . . Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives," Brodsky (1982: 116) says in an interview: "I would say that even if I know a person is dreadful I would be the first to find justifications for that dreadfulness if the writing was good."



account, and through this interpellation and interrogation, is reconfirmed as an individual.

In Levinas, unsaying the Said brings language closer to the Saying. As far as it can, ethical language disrupts Said language's tendency toward ossification, bringing it all the closer to the originary and truly ethical Saying. Levinas's scarce examples of ethical speech—"here am I," "thou shalt not kill"—are such disruptive revelations of alterity which command responsibility. They are so few in number in Levinas because of the danger that the propositional mode of philosophical discourse poses to the Saying. Brodsky is similarly reluctant to give instances of ethical verse, speaking mostly synoptically or in generalities, and the motivation is clearly of a piece: quotation immediately brings the poetry into the prose mode. If exploited as mere illustration of a proposition, a line of poetry loses the very thing which makes it revelatory in the poem. Brodsky resists any such conscription of poetry into prose, preferring formulations which distance the genre as much as possible from other forms of language. This flight from other varieties of language—from counterfeit, or petrified, or clichéd language—is actually a return to the origin of language: "Ideally, however, [poetry] is language negating its own mass and the laws of gravity; it is language's striving upward—or sideways—to that beginning where the Word was. In any case, it is movement of language into pre- (supra-) genre realms, that is, into the spheres from which it sprang" (Brodsky 1986b: 186). If the "mass" of language exerts a constant downward, groundward force, a grounding or tethering of language to the great mass of all that has already been said—in other words, if language exhibits a tendency toward cliché—then poetry represents the countertendency toward newness which is also a return in the direction of the originary, originating Word. In the beginning was the Word, but Brodsky's Word is not with God, nor is it God, nor even is it only a chronological beginning. Brodsky's description of poetry as "striving" toward, and "moving into" preoriginal and originary spaces shares both the imperative and the unachievability of Levinas's process of unsaying. Both Brodsky and Levinas see stagnation of language as the danger which ethical language must continually counteract. So Brodsky describes poetry as linguistic self-negation, as disruption through language of what has already been said and done in language. For Brodsky's (1996: 85) poet, achieving this means extreme individuation and innovation: "To avoid cliché, our poet continually has to get where nobody has ever been before—mentally, psychologically, or lexically. Once he gets there, he discovers that indeed there's nobody about, save perhaps the word's original meaning or that initial discernible sound." The space where no one has ever been, where only the new or the initial exists—the

truly “original” space in both the future and past senses of the word—this is the locus of poetic invention. Levinas (1984 [1961]: 175) writes that the face “opens the originary discourse, in which the first word is an obligation. . . . A discourse that forces one to enter into discourse.”<sup>34</sup> Brodsky believes in the originariness of poetic language. If the poet can “get to” the originary and empty space “where nobody has ever been before” and bring back a poem, then that poem will be completely other, irreducibly separate. And in achieving this separateness, it can open the possibility of true encounter, of direct relations, of tête-à-tête. This is what Brodsky demands of poets; this is why he demands that readers read.

Above I observed that Brodsky is loath to cite specific examples of “good” or “bad” poetry in either the aesthetic or ethical senses of those words. But as with Levinas’s reluctance to quote ethical language, there are rare and illuminating exceptions. Auden’s verse is one. Another is Rilke’s: on at least one occasion, Brodsky does offer a quotation to illustrate what ethical exposure to poetry might be like. The lines are from “Archaic Torso of Apollo”:

. . . this torso shouts at you with its every muscle:  
 “Do change your life!”<sup>35</sup>  
 (Brodsky 1986b: 273)

Rilke’s imperative—“Du mußt dein Leben ändern”—has both the revelatory and the imperative qualities of “here am I”/“thou shalt not kill.” For Brodsky (*ibid.*), it is emblematic of poetry’s special ability to offer “a route of departure from the known, captive self.” Brodsky (*ibid.*) follows this strikingly Levinasian description of the self as captive of its own self-knowledge with a similarly Levinasian invocation of imminent responsibility: “If there is a chance for men to become anything but victims or villains of their time, it lies in their prompt response” to Rilke’s command.

Because poetry is, according to Brodsky, the ultimate individuator, aesthetic experience of poetry gives rise to something ethical. It makes us individually response-able and responsible, separate from the coercion

34. “Le visage ouvre le discours originel dont le premier mot est obligation. . . . Discours qui oblige à entrer dans le discours.”

35. It is not specified what version or translation Brodsky is quoting or whether indeed he has misquoted from memory. The original German lines are “aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle, / die dich nicht sieht. Du mußt dein Leben ändern,” which J. B. Leishman (Rilke 1960: 143) renders: “light like a star: for there’s no place therein / that does not see you. You must change your living.” Don Paterson (2003: 61) has done better: “for there is nowhere to hide, nothing here / that does not see you. Now change your life.”

of the collective but also from the moral anonymity it confers. By “holding a question mark” over the individual, by constantly interrupting our notions of our selves, by forcing reevaluation—in Brodsky’s (1996: 48–49) terms, by “helping a person to make the time of his existence more specific,” by making “man’s ethical reality more precise”—poetry allows for the emergence of ethics. This is why the Brodskian “I” cannot be an egotistical, totalizing I. The I’s encounter with poetry does not seek to impose itself on poetry but rather exposes itself to poetry, asking poetry to impose itself on the I. This is exposure in the Levinasian sense, a pure vulnerability, an orientation which is asymmetrical, carrying with it infinite response-ability.

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