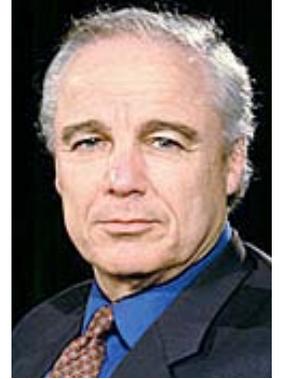


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| Rembrandt's The Sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's Suspended Knife, and the Face of the Other |

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REMBRANDT'S *THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC*, ABRAHAM'S SUSPENDED KNIFE, AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER



Rembrandt, The Sacrifice of Isaac (1635). Oil on canvas, 193×133 cm.
Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

In literary and cultural studies today, the term “the Other” appears to have largely lost its moorings in the primacy of the intersubjective encounter, focusing rather on the social construction of the Other. For Emmanuel Levinas, in contrast, the Other is precisely that which eludes construction

and categorization. In a study that ranges from literature of ancient China, Greece, and Israel to modern Egypt, Italy, West Africa, and America, Steven Shankman tests Levinas's ideas by reading literary works from outside the Judeo-Christian orbit for figurations equivalent to Levinas's notion of the Other. He places ethics at the center of intercultural — or, in his words, “transcultural” — comparative literature. In contemporary literary and cultural studies, it is often assumed that culture has the last word. However, as Levinas insists — and as Shankman argues throughout his book — it is ethics that is the “presupposition of all Culture,” that is situated “before Culture.”

Other Others begins and ends with a meditation on Rembrandt's “The Sacrifice of Isaac,” a painting that hangs in the Rembrandt gallery in the Hermitage. With the kind permission of SUNY Press, we present that meditation to the readers of this journal. In *Other Others*, Professor Shankman opens himself to those unexpected moments that record or effect the transcendence of the ego of the writer and/or the reader in the direction of the Other, moments analogous to Rembrandt's depiction of the stunned face of Abraham.

Key words: alterity, the sacred, the holy, transcendence, the face

«Жертвоприношение Исаака» Рембрандта, вознесённый нож Авраама и лицо Другого

В литературных и культурологических штудиях современности термин «Другой» утратил в значительной степени свою коннотацию с межсубъектным взаимодействием в связи с переносом акцента на социальное конструирование Другого. Напротив, для Эммануэля Левинаса Другое есть именно то, что ускользает от конструирования и категоризации. В исследовании, построенном на материалах, начиная от древнего Китая, античной Греции и Израиля и до современного Египта, Италии, Западной Африки и Америки, Стивен Шенкман подвергает проверке идеи Левинаса путем изучения литературных источников, не принадлежащих орбите иудео-христианской цивилизации, в поисках констелляций, соответствующих идеям Левинаса о Другом. По мысли Шенкмана, этика лежит в центре интеркультурального — или, по его выражению,



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транскультурального — сравнительного литературоведения. В трудах современных литературоведов и культурологов нередко утверждается, что за культурой остается последнее слово. Как бы то ни было, Левинас настаивает — а Шенкман подтверждает всем текстом своей новой книги «Другие Другие» — что этика представляет собой «предпосылку всей Культуры», что она помещается «до Культуры». Книга начинается и заканчивается медитацией над рембрандтовским «Жертвоприношением Исаака» — полотном, находящимся в рембрандтовской галерее Эрмитажа. С любезного согласия *СУНИ-Пресс* эта медитация и пред-

лагается вниманию читателей. В «Других Других» профессор Шенкман открывается тем неожиданным эпизодам, которые подводят итог или оказывают воздействие на трансценденцию авторского и/или читательского Я по направлению к Другому — тем эпизодам, которые аналогичны отразившемуся на потрясенном лице Авраама, изображенном на картине Рембрандта.

Ключевые слова: *инаковость, сакральность, святость, трансценденция, лик*

i.

I begin with a discussion of a painting, idolatrous though that might seem for a book that meditates on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who took very seriously the commandment forbidding graven images. In this book I shall continue to flirt with the idolatrous, that is, with eidola, images, representations, and I shall offer a way of reading literary texts that is, I hope, true both to Levinasian concerns about graven images and ethical at the same time.

Rembrandt's painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1635) hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia [I. 1]. Rembrandt painted it when he was twenty-nine years old in the same year that his first son was born and then died in his infancy, a fact that perhaps lends a special poignancy to the subject of the painting. In Genesis 22, God orders Abraham to take his only legitimate son, Isaac, to the top of Mt. Moriah and to offer him there as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeys and sets out on a three-day journey. When he nears the appointed place, he commands his two young servants to stay behind, and he gathers wood for the sacrifice, taking Isaac with him. Abraham builds the altar of sacrifice with the wood he had gathered. He binds Isaac's hands and feet, places Isaac on top of the pile of wood, and he then raises his arm to execute God's command. The painting depicts the moment that follows from Genesis 22, specifically verses 10–12:

*Avraham stretched out his hand,
he took the knife to slay his son.
But YHWH's messenger called to him from Heaven and said:
Avraham! Avraham!
He said:
Here I am.
He said:
Do not stretch out your hand against the lad,
do not do anything to him.*¹

The painting dramatically depicts a moment of interruption epitomized by the knife that hangs suspended in the air, a baroque gesture that we do not find in earlier pictorial depictions by Caravaggio in his *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1603) [I. 2] or by Rembrandt's



Pieter Lastman, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (1612). Oil on canvas (grisaille), 183×250 cm. Rembrandt House Museum, Amsterdam.

teacher, Pieter Lastman.² In both the Caravaggio and in Lastman's painting *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (c. 1612) [I. 3], which Rembrandt

¹ Trans. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983; rpt. 1995), pp. 94–95. Where I do not cite a translator of the Hebrew text, the translation is my own. We wish to express our gratitude to SUNY Press for generously granting us permission to reprint, in these pages, the introduction and the conclusion of *Other Others: Levinas, Literature, Transcultural Studies* (2010) by Steven Shankman.

² The “baroque” nature of Rembrandt's painting consists, in large part, in its debt to what John Rupert Martin refers to as “the naturalistic vision of the Baroque” (*Baroque* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977], p. 13), especially as achieved by Caravaggio. While baroque painters were certainly not averse to allegorical representation, they tended to stress the dramatic nature of scenes from the Hebrew Bible rather than their mere typological significance. For the indirect influence of Caravaggio via Lastman on Rembrandt's 1635 painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, see J. Bruyn, “Rembrandt and the Italian Baroque,” *Simiolus* 4 (1970), 28–48, esp. pp. 39–40. Rembrandt appears to have been inspired by Lastman's depiction of Abraham's looking directly at the face of the angel. This dramatic gesture “in turn seems to be based on two famous paintings of Caravaggio which Lastman may have seen in Italy between 1603 and 1606: *St. Matthew and the Angel* and *The Sacrifice of Isaac*” (Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn, *Pieter Lastman: The Man Who Taught Rembrandt* (Amsterdam: Waanders Uitgevers, Zwolle, 1991), p. 65.



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Rembrandt, *Balshazzar's Feast* (c. 1635). Oil on canvas, 167.6×209.2 cm. *National Gallery, London.*

knew, the knife remains firmly in Abraham's hand, whereas in the Rembrandt canvas it hangs in mid-air, having been dropped by Abraham, whose right arm the angel has seized, thus interrupting the apparently imminent slaughter. Violence, figured by the suspended knife, is thus dramatically interrupted in Rembrandt's powerful image, painted in the 1630s, at precisely the moment when Rembrandt was proving himself to be a "virtuoso of interruption."³

Rembrandt frequently depicted dramatic interruptions — and particularly interruptions by the divine — in his paintings of the early and mid 1630s. Think of *Belshazzar's Feast* [I. 4], also painted in (or around) 1635, which depicts the God's admonitory and disapproving interruption — through a mysteriously appearing inscription — of King Belshazzar's excessively sumptuous pagan drinking party in Babylon; *Danaë* [I. 5], 1636, in which the nymph Danaë, bathed in a rapidly approaching golden light, is about to be interrupted by Zeus's amorous presence; the naked Susanna in *Susanna and the Elders* [I. 6; c. 1634], who is surprised by elderly voyeurs; and the 1631 portrait of the scholar in *The Young Man at his Desk* who, in the words of the English translation of the Russian caption

describing this painting hanging in the Hermitage [I. 7], appears to have been "unexpectedly interrupted." Simon Schama, in commenting on *The Young Man at his Desk* and on another portrait of this period of Rembrandt's career, remarks that the subjects of these paintings "appear to have been interrupted in the midst of their personal routine rather than made to 'sit' and assume the social mask required for dignified immortalization."⁴

Rembrandt's 1635 painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* is true to the biblical text, which tells of how the messenger of God dramatically interrupts the imminent action with that form of the negative imperative (אל 'al ["do not"] plus the imperative) that, in Hebrew, is especially reserved for expressing immediately pressing, specific commands: "do not stretch out (אל-תשלח 'al-tishlach) your hand"; "[and] do not do (ואל תעש ve 'al-ta'as) anything to him."⁵ At this stage in his career, Rembrandt was interested in rendering the dramatic, human aspect of biblical stories. His paintings from this pe-

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁵ For "durative, non-specific" commands, the word for "not" that precedes the imperative proper would be 'lo — rather than the two instances of 'al — that we find in this passage. See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Hebrew* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971), p. 114.

³ Simon Schama, *Rembrandt's Eyes* (Knopf: New York, 1999), p. 605.



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Rembrandt, *Young Man at His Desk* (1631). Oil on canvas, 104×92 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.



Rembrandt, *Susanna and the Elders* (c. 1634). Panel, 47.2×38.6 cm. Mauritshaus, The Hague.

riod were very faithful to the biblical texts that inspired his visual renderings.

In Rembrandt's painting, Abraham has covered Isaac's entire face with his left hand, suggesting at least two things. First, the father cannot bear to have the son he loves, his only legitimate son, actually witness his own father raising and lowering the knife that will enter his young and tender flesh and end his life. For Abraham to allow Isaac to witness the killing, despite the divine source of the command, no doubt filled Abraham with shame, as well as horror. Second, Abraham apparently cannot kill his son so long as he sees his son's face. Indeed, in the account of the threatened sacrifice in the Qur'an, Abraham (Ibrahim, in Arabic), in order to fulfill God's command, lays his son down prostrate on his forehead (لِجَبِينِ lil-jabeeni 37.103).⁶ The implication here is that if Abraham were to look directly at his son's face, he would not be able to kill him. In his commentary on this passage, al-Tabari (839–923) elucidates the significance of Abraham's placing his son face down. According to al-Tabari, who cites a number of authorities, the son — it is unclear, in the Qur'anic account, whether this son is Ishmael or Isaac⁷ — re-

marks to his father: "When you lay me down to sacrifice me, turn me with my face down; do not lay me on my side, for I fear that if you look at my face pity will overcome you and hold you back from carrying out God's command."⁸

The face, in its vulnerability — as Levinas is fond of remarking — speaks, and it says, "thou shalt not kill."⁹ For the first time in the narrative, after the two set out together, Isaac speaks to his father, movingly enunciating an otherness, an alterity that makes the apparent imminence of the murder all the more shocking and even unimaginable. Isaac is carrying the wood for the offering, and Abraham the cinders for the fire and the knife. Finally, Isaac breaks the deadly silence and speaks to his father, addressing him with the intimate form of address אבי *'aviy* ("my father").¹⁰ His father returns the intimate form of address: "Here I am, my son" (הינני בני *hineni beniy*, 22. 7). Isaac then asks his father a very painful question: "Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the offering?" Abraham replies, "God will provide the lamb for the offering, my son" (בני *beniy*, 22. 8), repeating again, for the third time in a very brief

⁶ In Caravaggio's painting (1601-2) of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* (in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence), Abraham has forcibly placed Isaac's body prone onto the altar of sacrifice and he is trying to hold Isaac's terrified face down when the angel appears and stays Abraham's hand.

⁷ See Khaleel Mohammed, "Probing the Identity of the Sacrificial Son in the Qur'an," *Journal of Religion and Culture*, Vol. 13 (1999), pp. 125–132. Professor Mohammed argues that it is thoroughly misleading to assume that "the Islamic view" (p. 125) holds Ishmael to be the intended offering. Indeed, according to Professor Mohammed, "al-Tabari (dc. 310/923), arguably Islam's most famous exegete, along with several others viewed Isaac as the sacrificial son" (ibid.)

⁸ "Abraham, the Friend of the Merciful," 305, cited from *The History of al-Tabari*, Vol. II, *Prophets and Patriarchs*, translated and annotated by William M. Brinner [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987], p. 93.

⁹ See e.g. Levinas, "Ethics and Spirit," *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, trans. Sean Hand (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), esp. pp. 7–10.

¹⁰ As Robert Alter — having rendered Isaac's "*'aviy*" as "Father — remarks in the sensitive commentary to his fine translation of Genesis, "The Hebrew is literally 'My Father.' But that noun with the possessive ending is the form of intimate address in biblical Hebrew, like Abba in postbiblical Hebrew" (*Genesis: Translation and Commentary* [New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company], p. 105.



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Caravaggio, The Sacrifice of Isaac (c. 1603). Oil on canvas, 104×135 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

space, this intimate form of address, this vocative: not just “son!”, but “my son!” As Levinas remarks, “the Other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative.”¹¹ This passage, then, is framed by three vocatives — “my father” [אָבִי *’aviy*] / “my son” [בְּנִי *beniy*] / “my son” [בְּנִי *beniy*] — that are made even more intimate by possessing (in the Hebrew) suffixes (*aviy/beniy*) that personalize the address (“my father”/ “my son”/ “my son”) in a duet of pressing question and immediate response that dramatically enunciates the radical alterity of Isaac and of Abraham’s painfully enduring affection for his son, whom he is about to slaughter. After such an exchange, it will be very difficult, indeed virtually impossible, for Abraham to take Isaac’s life if he must look his son in the face. Hence, in the Rembrandt painting, Isaac’s face is completely enveloped and obscured by Abraham’s left hand.

Rembrandt’s Abraham, in order to go through with the slaughter, has completely covered Isaac’s face.¹² The angel is looking directly at Isaac’s covered — or, as Simon Schama perceptively ob-

serves, smothered — face.¹³ Abraham, who has avoided looking at Isaac’s face, now looks directly at the face of the angel, who almost dreamily gazes straight ahead, neither at Abraham nor at Isaac. Who is this angel, this messenger of God who is the subject of Abraham’s sudden attention and towards whose gentle face the eyes of the patriarch are abruptly turned? And what is the significance of the interruption? I hope it is not too bold to suggest that the angel or messenger מַלְאָךְ (*mal’akh*) of God is the face of the Other — in this case the face of Isaac — suddenly commanding Abraham not to kill him.¹⁴ In Rembrandt’s painting, the angel seems to be roughly

has avoided much of the Horror of the Story, by making Abraham cover the Boy’s Face, to hide the Horror from himself” (London, 1745).

¹³ *Rembrandt’s Eyes*, p. 410.

¹⁴ See Jeffrey Stolle, “Levinas and the Akedah: An Alternative to Kierkegaard,” *Philosophy Today* (Summer 2001): 132-43. Max Van Manen argues that in their paintings discussed above, “both Caravaggio and Rembrandt anticipate Levinas in their understanding of the significance of the face as the ethical experience of responsibility for the other, and in particular for one’s child” (“Care-As-Worry, or ‘Don’t Worry Be Happy,’” *Qualitative Health Research: An International, Interdisciplinary Journal*, Sage Publications, Vol. 12, No. 2, February 2002, p. 274). See also Claire Elise Katz, *Levinas, Judaism, and the Feminine* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana



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Rembrandt, *Danaë* (1636; after restoration). Oil on canvas, 185×203 cm. Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

the same age as Isaac, and his nose bears a marked similarity to Abraham's, making it appear as if he is in fact Abraham's son. As Levinas insists, "the face speaks."¹⁵ God reveals himself only by the

trace He leaves behind in the face of the Other.¹⁶ The face of the Other, for Levinas, is not really seen, is not experienced as part of the order of the visible. It is rather "heard," as Abraham suddenly hears the voice of the angel speaking to him. Rembrandt's painting dramatically depicts this moment of interruption, which is captured not only in the sudden appearance of the angel and in Abraham's suspended knife, but also in the "anguished face" of Abraham who,

University Press, 2003), who argues that "it is when Abraham sees Isaac's face that he shifts his responsibility from God to Isaac, his son" (p. 118).

¹⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 87. *Ethique et infini* was published in French in 1982. For Jacques Derrida's reflections on the Aqedah, and on Kierkegaard's and Levinas's readings of this text, see *Donner la mort in L'éthique du don* (Paris: Métalié-Tansition, 1992), translated into English by David Wills as *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); see especially Chapter Three. For stimulating reflections on Kierkegaard's, Levinas's, and Derrida's reflections on the Aqedah, see Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore and London:

The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), esp. Chapter Two ("Violence and Testimony: Kierkegaardian Meditations"), pp. 123–210.

¹⁶ See e.g. Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," trans. Alfonso Lingis, in *Deconstruction in Context: Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 31, and "A Man-God?", *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-The-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbar Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 58.



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as Schama finely remarks, has “the look of a madman unexpectedly paroled from hell.”¹⁷ If the viewer looks carefully and at close range at the Rembrandt canvas, tears of compassion can be seen to be trickling down Abraham's face. In *Caravaggio's* rather cruel rendering,¹⁸ Abraham seems grimly determined to slay his son and almost annoyed by the angel's sudden interference. The viewer of the *Caravaggio* painting is struck more by Isaac's vivid expression of absolute terror than by any sense of relief evident in the face of Abraham. As Astrid Tümpel and Peter Schatborn remark, “In the naturalism of this scene Rembrandt is close to *Caravaggio*. In *Caravaggio's* depiction of the same event Abraham pushes Isaac down onto the sacrificial stone with such force that he cries out in fear and pain. Compared with this, Rembrandt's work ... shows signs of humanity: in the course of his terrible act Abraham — according to Jewish legend — has turned grey.”¹⁹ Rembrandt's painting, in contrast to *Caravaggio's*, is a dramatic example of the artistic representation of transcendence in the ethical, Levinasian sense. Abraham, hearing the voice of the messenger of God who is the face of the Other, experiences a transcendence of his own ego in the direction of ethics, as he responds to and takes responsibility for the Other whose face says “thou shalt not kill.”

Did God in fact command Abraham to kill Isaac? The Hebrew is more ambiguous than has conventionally been thought. God says, “[and] offer him there [on Mt. Moriah] as an offering [וְהֵאֵלֶהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה] v'ehae'alehu sham le 'olah.” But what kind of offering, and what does “offering” really mean? The words “offer him” (וְהֵאֵלֶהוּ *hae'alehu*) and “offering” (עֹלָה *'olah*) literally mean, respectively, “cause him to go up” (i.e. “bring him up”) and “something that is brought up.”²⁰ There is a sense in which Isaac is being brought up, “elevated” as an example — an example of the impossibility of human sacrifice in the name of God. According to Rashi (the acronym for Rabbi

Shlomo Itshaqi, the famous medieval biblical commentator), God said “bring him up there [*veha'alehu*] ... He did not say to him, ... ‘Slaughter him.’”²¹ And the severity of the command is softened by God's intimate language of polite request: the particle “נָא *na*” in the imperative phrase “קַח-נָא *qach-na*” (“please take [your son], I beg you,” Genesis 22.2) introduces a note of sympathetic awareness and compassion that mitigates the idea that this is a harsh and unforgiving God who would, without hesitation, order a father to murder his son. God's words to Abraham are somewhere between a polite request and a command.

For many readers, the point of the Abraham and Isaac story is the testing of Abraham's faith in God: so strong was Abraham's faith that he would even obey the divine command to murder his own son. This was Kierkegaard's understanding of the episode, which is central to the argument of *Fear and Trembling*. In the Kierkegaardian construction, the religious dimension of experience demands a “leap of faith” that takes one beyond ethics. For Levinas, in contrast to Kierkegaard, it is the second divine command that is the apex of the story. In responding to Kierkegaard's reading, Levinas remarks, “Perhaps Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order, in forbidding him to perform a human sacrifice, was the highest moment in the drama.”²² Let us pause a moment to consider this observation by Levinas. Levinas here aptly remarks upon a sudden shift, in the consciousness of Abraham, from an immersion in presence and hence in the realm of the visible, to that of a transcendence to the ethical dimension through hearing, through a listening to a voice.²³ It is precisely this “highest moment in the drama” that Rembrandt's dramatic painting of 1635 depicts, paradoxical though it be that a painting is here representing an act of listening, of a transcendence of the realm of the visible. But this paradox is precisely what I wish to highlight, for in the chapters that follow I hope to show how literary texts are similarly interrupted in the direction of ethics, texts that interrupt themselves in order to gesture towards the transcendent otherness of the other person, the revelation of whom is beyond vision, revelation, and representation.

A later work of Rembrandt which depicts this same biblical scene seems to stress this more Kierkegaardian view. I refer here of the etching of 1655 [I. 8], which appeared on the cover of Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, in which Derrida meditates on Kierkegaard's (as well as on Levinas's) reading of the Genesis 22.²⁴ Michael Zell believes that “[t]he etching dramatizes ... Abraham's preparedness to prove his faith in God.”²⁵ David R. Smith argues that Abraham's

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 411. In the Munich version of this painting (also 1635; attributed to Rembrandt and another artist who worked in Rembrandt's studio), Abraham's face appears to be even more stunned, and the angel's intervention less gentle. Here the angel appears to be coming towards the viewer, and his body twists more emphatically, more urgently towards Abraham in order to stay the patriarch's hand.

¹⁸ As Howard Hibbard comments, “*Caravaggio* may simply have been commissioned to paint this familiar subject from Genesis, but his interpretation seems unnecessarily cruel. Poor Isaac has become little more than an animal sacrifice, although his horror is plainly evident: *Caravaggio* was fascinated by the idea of a head cut off or a throat cut” (*Caravaggio* [New York: Harper & Row, 183; rpt. 1985], p. 166).

¹⁹ Pieter Lastman, p. 67.

²⁰ Jill Robbins notes the significance of the literal meaning of the verb *'alah* (“offer him up,” but literally, “to go up, ascend, climb”) in God's command to Abraham that he “offer” Isaac as an offering, though she does not comment on the noun “offering” (*'olah*), which is also related to the same verb; see *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother: Interpretation and Alterity in Augustine, Petrarch, Kafka, Levinas* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 96. As Bruce Feiler reminds us, it was not until after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. and the early rise of Christianity that “the Jewish name for the near *Sacrifice of Isaac* shifted “from offering, a word that appears in the story, to binding, a word that does not... In addition, the *akedah* first enters Jewish liturgy during this period, around the third century” (*Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* [New York: HarperCollins, 2002], pp. 95–96. Feiler suggests that the Jews of the early diaspora saw, in Isaac, a fellow victim and a willing martyr for Judaism. In my reading of the *Aqedah* I stress, in contrast, the vulnerability of the face of Isaac as evoking not a collective Jewish victimhood but rather an inescapable sense of responsibility in his father Abraham.

²¹ *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary*, translated, annotated, and elucidated by Rabbi Yisrael Isser Zvi Herczeg [Brooklyn, N.Y.: 1995], I: 231.

²² *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London and Stanford, CA: The Athlone Press and Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 74.

²³ Sound, for Levinas, always alludes to something beyond representation and vision. Cf. Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 147-148: “While in a vision a form espouses a content and soothes it, sound is like the sensible quality overflowing its limits, the incapacity of form to hold its content — a true rent in the fabric of the world — that by which the world is here prolongs a dimension inconvertible into vision. It is thus that the sound is symbol par excellence — a reaching beyond the given. If, however, sound can appear as a phenomenon, as here, it is because its function of transcendence only asserts itself in the verbal sound. The sound and noises of nature are words that disappoint us. To really hear a sound is to hear a word.”

²⁴ University of Chicago Press, 1995.

²⁵ *Reframing Rembrandt: Jews and the Christian Image in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California



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Rembrandt, *Sacrifice of Abraham* (1655). *Etching and drypoint*, 15.7×13.4 cm. *National Gallery of Art, Washington, Rosenwald Collection.*



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darkened eyes — which in the etching are not turned toward the face of the angel — suggest a blind faith in God, in “the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11).²⁶ In the 1635 painting, in contrast, Rembrandt emphasizes Abraham's horror at what he believes he has been ordered to do, and his stunned relief at the interruption of this moment of horror occasioned by the face of the angel.

In *Reframing Rembrandt*, Zell argues for the influence of Rembrandt's fellow Amsterdamer, the well-known and cosmopolitan Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), on Rembrandt's depictions of sacred history in the 1650s. Indeed, Rembrandt and Menasseh ben Israel lived on the same street in Amsterdam, St. Antoniesbreestraat.²⁷ Zell focuses on Menasseh's *Piedra Gloriosa* for which Rembrandt agreed to provide illustrations in 1655. But the rabbi influenced Rembrandt's earlier work as well. Indeed, the mysteriously appearing Hebrew/Aramaic letters drawn by the hand of God to the astonishment of King Belshazzar in *Belshazzar's Feast* [I. 4] — and painted in (or around) the same year (1635) as *The Sacrifice of Isaac* — likely have their source in Menasseh ben Israel, who published this precise inscription in his *De Termino Vitae* of 1639. According to Zell, “Menasseh might well have written out the inscription ... for Rembrandt before the book appeared.”²⁸ Menasseh ben Israel's most famous and influential work was his *Conciliador*, published in Spanish in 1632 and translated into Latin in 1633, two years before Rembrandt painted the 1635 *Sacrifice of Isaac*. In his *Conciliador*, we find Menasseh citing a commentary on the “Aqedah” (the “binding” of Isaac), by Rabbis Isaac Arama and Don Isaac Arbanal, that imagines God saying what we might imagine the stunned Abraham is hearing at the very moment of the interrupted sacrifice: “Dost thou think, Abraham, that it was actually necessary to sacrifice thy son to confirm thy being a fearer of God? Thou deceivest thyself; lay not a hand upon the youth, for I knew you were a God-fearer, without putting it into execution.”²⁹

ii.

The tension between the two commands in the biblical account of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* suggests that the story is narrating a transition, in religious experience, from the “sacred,” associated with polytheism, to the “holy” (qadosh, in Hebrew) of monotheism, a distinction that is central to the thought of Levinas. Hence, this particular passage describing the Aqedah reiterates the movement of the Abraham narrative as a whole, which tells the story of Abraham's journey from the polytheistic world of Mesopotamia westward to Canaan and what will be the monotheistic world of Israel.³⁰

Press, 2002), p. 187.

²⁶ “Towards a Protestant Aesthetics: Rembrandt's 1655 *Sacrifice of Isaac*,” *Art History* 8 (1985), 290–302.

²⁷ *Rembrandt's Eyes*, p. 418.

²⁸ *Reframing Rembrandt*, p. 62. In exploring the connection between Rembrandt and Menasseh ben Israel, Zell is drawing upon and developing the ground-breaking work of Reiner Haussner (“Zur Menetekel-Inschrift auf Rembrandts Belsazarbild,” *Oud Holland* 78 [1963], pp. 142–149).

²⁹ *The Conciliator of R. Manasseh ben Israel; A Reconciliation of the Apparent Contradictions in Holy Scripture*, trans. E. H. Lindo [New York: Hermon Press, 1972], I:72.

³⁰ This transition from the valorization of “the sacred” in polytheism to that of “the holy” in monotheism should not be taken as a dogmatic fact or as a pretext for avowed monotheists to feel a sense of pride in the allegedly wholesale ethical superiority of monotheism. This caveat seems to be the point of the episode in Genesis 20 in which Abraham, by telling

Levinas associated the “sacred” with the experience of participation in a cosmic whole, in the manner discussed by the ethnologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857–1939). In the experience of the “sacred,” the distinction between subject and object is blurred. The emphasis here is upon participation in a totality of which you and I are mere parts. The holy (qadosh), in contrast, requires my recognition of the absolute exteriority of the Other, of the necessary separation of subject and object, self and world, self and other, of a necessary atheism, a breaking with polytheism that can only recover a relationship to the divine through my responsibility for the Other. The emphasis in the holy is upon my unique and inescapable responsibility for a unique and irreplaceable Other. Mt. Moriah, where Abraham builds the altar upon which he had intended to sacrifice his son, at first trembles with the dark mysteries of the sacred, but then — with Abraham's obedience to the second command — it becomes a site of the holy.³¹

Shalom Spiegel, similarly, views the episode as recording a “profound revolution in the history of religion, when the primitive blood sacrifice was abolished,” as suggested in the midrash of Rabbi Benaiah, “one of the last of the Tannaim,”³² those Jewish scholars who lived from the first century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. and whose views are recorded in the Mishnah, or oral law. Spiegel goes on to remark:

The biblical account, then, came to enforce and validate a new way of worship; and, too, it came to abolish and discredit the statutes of the ancient world. The Akedah story repels once for all the primitive notion of the sanctity of the human

the “pagan” potentate Abimelech that Sarah is his sister (rather than his wife), places Abimelech in the potentially embarrassing and ethically compromised position of unwittingly violating Abraham's wife. As Alter comments, “Abimelech is a decent, even noble, man; and the category of ‘Sodom’ is not to be projected onto everything that is not the seed of Abraham” (Genesis, p. 94). Abraham, in this instance, by categorizing Abimelech as culturally “different” (indeed, inferior) and not expecting him to act in an ethically responsible manner, blocks his (i.e. Abraham's) own capacity to experience a transcendence of his own ego in the direction of acknowledging the otherness of Abimelech. According to Rodney Stark, “it is now accepted that the Israelites did not fully embrace true monotheism until many centuries after the Exodus” (*One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism* [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 32]). Stark argues that the monotheism of the Israelites “seems to have emerged from a pantheon that has been traced to Persian sources, not to Egypt... Just where true monotheism first arose,” Stark argues, “remains unknown” (ibid.).

³¹ As Rodney Stark argues, “it is very unusual for religion to be linked to morality in polytheistic societies” (*One True God: Historical Consequences of Monotheism*, p. 206.)

³² *The Last Trial: On the Legends and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as a Sacrifice: The Akedah*, trans. with introduction by Judah Goldin (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 61. On monotheism's rejection of human sacrifice, see also the sixteenth-century Mexican colonial play “*The Sacrifice of Isaac*,” trans. Marilyn Ekdahl Ravicz in her book *Early Colonial Religious Drama in Mexico: From Tzompantli to Golgotha* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic Press of America, 1970), pp. 83–98. This play was written (in the Nahuatl language) by Spanish missionaries to be performed for the natives, according to Ravicz, in order to discourage them from practicing rituals of human sacrifice: “That God does not desire human sacrifice is also patent from this play. This fact was clearly a point in issue for an audience recently given to ritual human sacrifice on a stupendous scale, for the Aztec gods in the days immediately preceding the conquest had seemed ever to demand the precious blood offerings of the believers” (p. 97). For a discussion of the French Roman Catholic missionaries' paradoxical betrayal, in the name of God, of the alterity of the unique and irreplaceable Other in colonial West Africa in the twentieth century, see Chapter 6 of this book.



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first born and its derivative demand for the literal sacrifice of children. The Akedah story declared war on the remnants of idolatry in Israel and undertook to remove root and branch the whole long, terror-laden inheritance from idolatrous generations.³³

Abraham's faith consists, largely, in his pursuit of justice required by obedience to the one God.³⁴ Note the play on the word "one" — which echoes the oneness of the one (*echad*) God — in this passage: God tells Abraham to offer "your only" (יחיד *ye chidekha* 22.2) [legitimate] son. And when Abraham is relieved through his obedience to the second command, Isaac as the object of human sacrifice is replaced by "one" (*echad*) ram.³⁵ As Spiegel speculates:

*It may well be that in the narrative of the ram which Abraham sacrificed as a burnt offering in place of his son, there is historical remembrance of the transition to animal sacrifice from human sacrifice — a religious and moral achievement which in the folk memory was associated with Abraham's name, the father of the new faith and the first of the upright in the Lord's way. And quite possibly the primary purpose of the Akedah story may have been only this: to attach to a real pillar of the folk and a revered reputation the new norm — abolish human sacrifice, substitute animals instead.*³⁶

The Qur'an, like the Hebrew scriptures, sees Abraham's faith as consisting in the obedience to the command to be just, to be responsible for the other person, an obedience that can be seen to accompany the transition from polytheism to monotheism. Abraham's position as a transitional figure from the world of polytheism or pantheism to monotheism is clearly articulated in Sura 6:75-79 on "Abraham's Creed":

75. Thus We showed Abraham the visible and invisible world of the heavens and the earth, that he could be among those who believe.

76. When the night came with her covering of darkness he saw a star,

and (Azar, his father) said: "This is my Lord."

But when the star set, (Abraham) said:

"I love not those that wane."

77. When (Azar) saw the moon rise all aglow, he said: "This is my Lord."

But even as the moon set, (Abraham) said:

"If my Lord had not shown me the way

I would surely have gone astray."

78. When (Azar) saw the sun rise all resplendent,

he said: "My Lord is surely this,

and the greatest of them all."

But the sun also set, and (Abraham) said:

"O my people, I am through

with those you associate (with God).

³³ *The Last Trial*, p. 73.

³⁴ The entrance into an ethical relation with the Other is, for me, the very meaning of the covenant. Abraham merits his election by his concern for justice, as evidenced in his bold questioning of God on behalf of the innocent in Sodom in Genesis 18.

³⁵ Rejecting, with Alter (*Genesis*, p. 106) and most scholars, the reading of the Masoretic text, which gives *achar* ("after" or "behind") for *echad* (one).

³⁶ *The Last Trial*, pp. 63–64.

79. I have truly turned my face towards Him who created the heavens and the earth: I have chosen one way and am not an idolator.³⁷

James L. Kugel sees Genesis 12, which tells of Abraham's journey from Chaldea, as articulating a transition from the polytheism of Mesopotamia to the monotheism of Israel. Kugel cites many ancient biblical interpreters who comment on the significance of Abraham's relation to his native city of Ur in Chaldea, which is in Mesopotamia.³⁸ A number of these interpreters, as does the previous passage from the Qur'an, present Abraham as an astronomer or astrologer. Kugel observes that Abraham's homeland, Chaldea, "was famous for one thing in particular: it was the home of astronomy and astrology. So great was the association between Chaldea and the study of the stars that the very word 'Chaldean' came to mean 'astronomer' in both Aramaic and Greek. Many interpreters therefore naturally assumed that Abraham the Chaldean must himself have been something of an astronomer."³⁹

iii.

Can the Other be your own son, as I am arguing is the case in Genesis 22, verses 10–12 of which is so dramatically represented by Rembrandt in his 1635 painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac*? Aren't we literary scholars and critics now thoroughly acculturated to view the Other as the person who is quintessentially "different" from ourselves, especially in the sense of being culturally, racially, sexually "different"? Can the Other be my own son, my own daughter, my neighbor?

The term "the Other" is continually evoked in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. Indeed, Mineke Schipper, a scholar of African and comparative literature, has remarked on the "Western multinational Otherness industry"⁴⁰ that has developed in recent years. Schipper goes on to observe that the term "the Other" has become "so fashionable in [the] Western academy that words such as 'difference' and 'Otherness' have come to function — in the words of Edward Said... — as a talisman, serving to guarantee political correctness."⁴¹ While the Otherness industry is indeed in high gear, the term "the Other" has gone remarkably unexamined. It seems to have lost its moorings in — or rejects the reality of — the intersubjective encounter, as discussed by Martin Buber (1878–1965) and especially by Levinas, who is surely one of the most influential of contemporary philosophers. Levinas, whose work participates in the phenomenological tradition of philosophical analysis, was a student of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger and was the revered teacher of such important modern (or postmodern) thinkers as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray. Alarmed by the appar-

³⁷ *Al-Qur'an*, a contemporary translation by Ahmed Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 121–122.

³⁸ See James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 244–274, which comments on Abraham's journey from Chaldea in Genesis 12.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁴⁰ *Imagining Insiders: Africa and the Question of Belonging* (London and New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The reference to Said is specifically to his essay "Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors," *Critical Inquiry* 15.2 (1989): pp. 205–225, particularly p. 213.



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ent complicity of the most sophisticated philosophical speculations on the nature of “being” with ethical turpitude and indifference, as evidenced by the great philosopher Heidegger’s association with Nazism, Levinas sought to rethink the relationship between philosophy and ethics. He argues that ethics must precede ontology (the science of “being”), which is always in danger of betraying ethics. By ethics Levinas means the face-to-face, concrete encounter with a unique human being for whom I am personally and inescapably responsible.

In the current climate of opinion in much of literary and cultural studies, cultures are often blamed for injustices, but we hear nothing or relatively little of the human, of what Levinas insists is my personal responsibility for a unique Other — a responsibility that constitutes my very humanity. For Levinas, the Other is the other person, my neighbor, and not necessarily or even primarily the culturally different person. Indeed, for Levinas, to view the Other primarily as culturally (or racially or sexually) different would turn the face of the Other into an object of knowledge that has been assimilated by my consciousness, and hence not an occasion for the transcendence of the ego in the direction of what it is not, i.e. of what is truly other. As Levinas writes in *Humanism of the Other*, “signification is situated before Culture ... ; it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification.”⁴² Much contemporary literary/cultural criticism is focused on the social or cultural “construction” of the Other. For Levinas, in contrast, the Other is precisely that which eludes construction and categorization, or what Levinas calls “thematization”.⁴³

Why do I choose the adjective “transcultural” for the subtitle of this book, rather than “multicultural” or “intercultural”? One might answer that any single culture is in fact, in its lived concreteness, a mixture of many cultures, that culture is, by its very nature, transculture. The adjective “transcultural” would therefore be preferable to “multicultural” because the word “multiculturalism” might suggest that individual cultures, which allegedly embody distinctive essences, are homogeneous, insufficiently diverse unless they are seasoned by other cultures. But it might well be the case that all cultures are, to greater or lesser degrees, multicultural. The term “transcultural” is appealing to me not only because it implies the value, in our studies, of going beyond a single culture, however diverse that culture might in fact be. “Transcultural” also implies the existence of a beyond of the very concept of culture, which has so often been fetishized as the ne plus ultra in literary studies in the academy today, in our post-human so-called humanities. The

adjective “transcultural” in the phrase “transcultural studies” in this book’s subtitle is meant to suggest that there is something, in our humanistic studies, that transcends or goes beyond culture. Does culture truly have the first and last word? Or is it rather ethics, as understood by Levinas, that is situated both before and beyond culture, and that allows us to evaluate culture and cultural expression?

I wish to bring Emmanuel Levinas, the great theorist of alterity, into the discourse of intercultural, comparative studies. After all, Levinas himself participated, simultaneously, in a number of different cultures. The obituary released by the Associated Press in Paris (December 28, 1995) on the occasion of the philosopher’s death referred to Levinas as a “philosopher of four cultures”: Russian, Jewish, German, and French. Andrius Valevicius, who discovered and translated into English an early essay written by Levinas in 1933, when he was twenty-seven years old. Valevicius goes further than the writer of the Associated Press obituary and refers to Levinas as a philosopher of five cultures, emphasizing Levinas’s immersion in Lithuanian culture in addition to the other four. This essay discovered by Professor Valevicius is, moreover, an interesting study of cultural differences, as Levinas makes subtle and fascinating distinctions between French and German styles of thinking and spirituality.⁴⁴

The many cultural worlds Levinas inhabited in such depth, and which he traversed constantly and adroitly, were diverse, although perhaps not by today’s standards of broad cultural diversity. Levinas’s critical tools are the result of his immersion in what he calls “the Bible and the Greeks.” His frame of reference does not extend much beyond the Western and Judeo-Christian orbit. It is indeed something of a paradox, and even a disappointment, that great theorist of the Other, Emmanuel Levinas, himself showed little curiosity about foundational cultures other than those that produced Greek philosophy and the Hebrew bible. The problem in turning to a profound but still fundamentally European-centered thinker like Levinas as an inspiration for comparative studies is that we are perhaps thus in danger of reinstating the very metaphysical imperialism, the very «allergy» to the Other — as Levinas memorably phrases this pathology — that the work of Levinas attempts to resist. But there is a sentence in Levinas that points in a different, in a more open direction. In an interview about his work conducted at a symposium at the University of Leiden in 1975, Levinas stated: “There is not a single thing in a great spirituality that would be absent from another great spirituality.”⁴⁵

But how exclusively “Western” (or Judaic) are the sources of Levinas’s rejection of intentionality as the dominant mode of explaining — in the manner of Husserl — how the subject interacts with the world? Many scholars have pointed to the Judaic roots of Levinas’s view of alterity. This is surely the case, although Levinas always insists that his works must be understood and evaluated as contributions to Western philosophical discourse rather than as dependent, for their persuasiveness, on other modes of discourse or of belief. While Levinas himself never demonstrated any interest in Daoism, I would argue for a Daoist influence — via Martin Buber — in Levinas’s looking outside the purely intentional consciousness for

⁴² Trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), p. 36. See also Richard Cohen’s excellent introduction to this book, esp. pp. xviii–xxxv. *Humanisme de l’autre homme* was first published, in French, in 1972. The first chapter of this book, from which the above translation is drawn, first appeared in *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* in 1964.

⁴³ J. Hillis Miller, similarly, in the introduction to his book *Others* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), distinguishes what he means by the “other” from “the way the concept of the ‘other’ is used in literary and cultural studies these days. Most such uses mean by the ‘other’ the racial, gendered, or ethnic other. The word is used invidiously to name the way a hegemonic culture or gender group views different and subaltern ones as exotic or inferior or just plain alien, therefore as something it would be a good idea to erase or assimilate by some form, overtly violent or not, of ethnic cleansing” (p. 1). While what Miller and I mean by the “other” is not the same, we both offer understandings of the “other” that are often at odds with current orthodoxies.

⁴⁴ “The Understanding of Spirituality in French and German Culture,” translated by Andrius Valevicius, *Continental Philosophy Review* 31: 1–10, 1998. See also Professor Valevicius’s “Afterward: Emmanuel Levinas, the Multicultural Philosopher,” *ibid.*, pp. 11–14.

⁴⁵ *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bergo, p. 93.



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his explanation of the true meaning of subjectivity. Although Levinas comes to question the implications, for ethics, of certain aspects of Buber's analysis of the I/ thou relationship, Levinas is nonetheless greatly indebted to Buber for that thinker's shifting away from a focus on the purely intentional consciousness, in the mode of the "I/it" relation," as a necessary prelude to the ethical relation. Buber was greatly interested in Asian philosophy, particularly in Daoism. Indeed, one of Buber's early works was a translation of and commentary on the great early Daoist thinker, Zhuangzi.⁴⁶

Despite this indirect influence of Daoist thought, via Buber, on Levinas, the contours of Levinas's thought are shaped, as I have mentioned, by what Levinas calls "the Bible and the Greeks."⁴⁷ Levinas showed no interest in Daoist thought, or in Buddhist thought, or in any of the great religious traditions of Asia, despite the fact that he believed, at least by 1982, that Western thought had reached «the end of Europocentrism» which, he remarks, has been «disqualified by so many horrors.»⁴⁸ Still, Emmanuel Levinas was no multiculturalist, certainly not by today's standards. Howard Caygill, in his book *Levinas and the Political* (2002), goes so far as to accuse Levinas of a hostility towards Asia that calls into question the universalist intentions of Levinas's work, which continually commands us to welcome rather than to demonize the Other.⁴⁹

Caygill focuses mainly on two essays Levinas published in the early 1960s. The sentences in question from these essays oppose a vaguely defined Asia that Levinas sees as a threat to the West because it knows nothing, as Levinas writes in his essay «Jewish Thought Today» (1961), of the Holy History («Histoire Sainte»)⁵⁰ of Judaism and Christianity. I do not want to minimize the cultural provincialism that this sentiment expresses. It reveals a disturbingly phobic ignorance of Asian thought, to be sure. But Caygill is wrong to insinuate that Levinas's use of the term «Holy History» is tantamount to a fundamentalist notion of providential history unique to Christians and Jews, and perhaps to Muslims. Holy History is rather, for Levinas, the eruption of the holy out of the cruelty of the sacred. It is this process of moving from the sacred to the holy, «du sacré aux saints»⁵¹ — the very process that produces what Levinas means by «Holy History» — that I described in my paradigmatic Levinasian reading of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac. As I mentioned, Mt. Moriah, where Abraham builds the altar upon which he had intended to sacrifice his son, at first trembles with the dark mysteries

of the sacred, but then, with Abraham's obedience to the second command that he spare his son, it becomes a site of the holy.

There is, in Levinas, a clear philosophy of history, one very much in opposition to Hegel's. Any notion of an impersonal, unilinear history that aims to assimilate everything in the path of its unfolding must be interrupted, for Levinas, by individual acts of goodness. The history that emerges from my inescapable responsibility for a unique and irreplaceable other is what Levinas means by «Holy History.» Levinas is open to any expression, from any culture, that embraces the primacy of ethics — i.e. of my responsibility for the Other, that refuses to sacrifice the uniqueness of the concrete Other to a cruel and unforgiving totality. This is precisely the significance of Levinas's response to Philippe Nemo, who had asked Levinas if he would «go so far as to say that an ethical man could, at all times and places, give written or oral testimonies which could eventually constitute a Bible? Or, that there could be a common Bible between men who belong to different traditions or who do not acknowledge themselves to be part of any religious tradition?» Levinas answers, unequivocally, «Yes, ethical truth is common.»⁵² I can even imagine Emmanuel Levinas, despite his apparent lack of awareness of Asian culture, approving of my chapter on the primacy of ethics in the Confucian/Mencian tradition and of my remarks, in my conclusion, on the similarities between Levinas's own thought and certain important aspects of Mahayana Buddhism. Moreover, my chapter on the Confucian tradition confirms Levinas's suspicion — ignorant though it was — that Chinese culture did in fact far too often betray ethics in the interests of imposing on its people a cruel and ruthlessly totalizing political agenda.

In testing the universalist implications of Levinas's notion of ethics and otherness, I suggest that we search, in traditions outside the Judaeo-Christian orbit, for what I call "diverses altérités" or "Other Others," i.e. for ways of talking about otherness that are drawn from other religious and cultural traditions. In this sense, the biblical Abraham can again be taken as an exemplar of what I am attempting to say in this book, of what I mean by "Other Others." Levinas often contrasts the goal of Odysseus, which is to return home, with the journey of Abraham, which Levinas sees, in the words of Jill Robbins, as a "one-way movement, irreversible, a departure without return."⁵³ "To the myth of Odysseus," Levinas writes, "we wish to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his fatherland forever for a land yet unknown, and forbidding his servant to bring even his son to the point of departure."⁵⁴ Abraham, the hospitable immigrant who comes to Canaan from Ur in Mesopotamia (in today's Iraq), offers us a model for teaching and writing across and beyond cultures.⁵⁵ By "Other Others," I thus mean 1) something other than what the term "other" is commonly taken to mean in literary and cultural studies today; and I also mean 2) the articulation of this other, Levinasian notion of otherness in traditions other than the Judaeo-Christian.⁵⁶

⁴⁶ See Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber's Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996). On Zhuangzi's placing of intentionality within a broader context of knowing and of being in the world, see Steven Shankman and Stephen Durrant, *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China* (Cassell/Continuum: London/New York, 2000), esp. pp. 189-193. On Levinas's response to Buber, see, e.g., chapters 2 ("Martin Buber and the Theory of Knowledge") and 3 ("Dialogue with Martin Buber") of *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1996), pp. 15-39. Noms Propres was originally published in 1976.

⁴⁷ "The Bible and the Greeks" is the title of Chapter 8, *In the Time of the Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 133-135. This essay was first published in *Cosmopolitiques* 4 (February, 1986).

⁴⁸ *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 117.

⁴⁹ *Levinas and the Political* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 182-194.

⁵⁰ *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963; deuxième édition, 1976), p. 216.

⁵¹ *Du sacré au saint* is the title of a book of five Talmudic lectures that Levinas published in 1977 (Paris: Éditions de Minuit).

⁵² *Ethics and Infinity*, p. 115 (italics are mine); *Ethique et infini*, p. 124: «Oui, la vérité éthique est commune.»

⁵³ *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 7.

⁵⁴ "The Trace of the Other," *Deconstruction in Context*, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Abraham is referred to as the *Ivri* in Genesis 14.13. This phrase is often translated "Abraham the Hebrew," but it also means "Abraham, the one who crosses over [from the other side (ever) of the Euphrates River]." Abraham is a border-crosser, a transcultural traveler.

⁵⁶ My use of the phrase "Other Others" is perhaps different from what Levinas himself can be taken to mean by it. Levinas insists on the primacy



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There exist a few essays on Levinas and literature, and at least two books — Robert Eaglestone's *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas*⁵⁷ and Jill Robbins's *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature*.⁵⁸ These works try to make sense of Levinas's remarks on literature within the context of Levinas's own thought, but critics have not generally explored the implications of Levinas's thought for literary works not specifically discussed by Levinas himself,⁵⁹ and almost no one has tried to extend the relevance of Levinas's thoughts on alterity into the area of intercultural literary studies.⁶⁰

of the ethical relation, of the face-to-face. But one's responsibility to the Other in the face-to-face relationship is not the last word, for there is also the third party ("le tiers"), and with the appearance of these third parties — these *Other Others* — comes society, law, and the state, i.e. the realm of politics. The subject is responsible for these *Other Others* as well, and this always poses the possibility, in the context of politics, of a certain betrayal of the face-to-face. For Levinas's discussion of the "third party," see *Otherwise than Being Or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 16; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Martinus Nijhoff: The Hague, 1974; rpt. Paris: Livre de Poche/Kluwer Academic, 2001), p. 33. On the "third party" ("le tiers") in Levinas, see Robert Bernasconi, "The Third Party: Levinas on the Intersection of the Ethical and the Political," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 1999, 30 (1), pp. 76–87.

⁵⁷ Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

⁵⁸ Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. See also Gerald L. Bruns, "The Concepts of Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas's Writings," in *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas*, eds. Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 206–233.

⁵⁹ Steve McCaffery is one of the few critics who attempt to formulate and apply a Levinasian poetics to literary works not discussed by Levinas himself. See Chapter Twelve ("The Scandal of Sincerity: Toward a Levinasian Poetics") of Steve McCaffery's *Prior to Meaning: The Protosemantic and Poetics* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001), pp. 204–229. McCaffery was preceded in this attempt by Gerald L. Bruns, "Poethics: John Cage and Stanley Cavell at the Crossroads of Ethical Theory," in Marjorie Perloff and Charles Junkerman, eds., *John Cage Composed in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), as well as by Jill Robbins in *Prodigal Son/Elder Brother*.

⁶⁰ See Steven Shankman and Massimo Lollini, eds., *Who, Exactly, is the Other? Western and Transcultural Perspectives* (Eugene, Oregon: University of Oregon Books, 2002), especially Part II ("*Other Others*: Transcultural Perspectives"). In that book, we take note of our obligation to the Other as this is expressed what Levinas calls "the great spiritualities" (*Of God Who Comes to Mind*, p. 93), among which we include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, indigenous African religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. See also Elias Bongmba (who contributed an essay to *Who, Exactly, is the Other*, pp. 35–39), *African Witchcraft and Otherness: A Philosophical and Theological Critique of Intersubjective Relations* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2001). For Levinas and Buddhism, see Kenneth Liberman, "The Other in Tibetan Buddhism" in *Who, Exactly, is the Other?*, pp. 41–47. For similarities between Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas, see Wing-Cheuk Chan, "Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas: The Primacy of the Other," in *Varieties of Universalism: Essays in Honour of J. R. A. Mayer*, eds. Marko Zlomislac, David Goicoechea, and Zdenko Zeman (Port Colborne, ON [Canada]: Thought House Publishing Group, 1999), pp. 227–238. For the importance of Levinas to intercultural studies, see Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Difference in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) and Haun Saussy, "No Time Like the Present: Contemporaneity in Chinese Studies" in Steven Shankman and Stephen W. Durrant, eds., *Early China/Ancient Greece: Thinking through Comparisons* (Albany: State University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 36 and 48. In *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), trans. Stephen Pluháček, Luce Irigaray interestingly develops Levinasian thoughts about alterity, combined with reflections on the importance of breathing in the teachings of ancient India, in the direction of intercultural encounters; *Entre Orient et Occident* first appeared in 1999 (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle).

In *The Siren and the Sage: Knowledge and Wisdom in Ancient Greece and China* (2000), Stephen Durrant and I emphasized what we called the participatory dimension of ancient Greek and early Chinese thought. What has interested me since the publication of *The Siren and the Sage* has been what I now see as the necessary separation of the subject from the experience of being a part of a whole if that unique subject is to be ethically responsible for a unique and irreplaceable Other. The experience of a joyous participation in a sense of mystical oneness, in which subject and object are fused, must be ruptured and demystified if the subject is to encounter the other human being as truly other, as absolutely exterior to the subject's own consciousness. *Other Others* takes up and modifies the central argument of *The Siren and the Sage*, and it continues in the same comparative vein.

Chapter One, on the "Canto of Ulysses" chapter of Primo Levi's first book, *Se questo è un uomo* (translated into English as *Survival in Auschwitz*), argues that ethics, rather than being an effect of or subordinated to culture, as much of today's literary-cultural criticism would have it, is rather a disruption of culture, a disruption that occurs first and foremost on the intersubjective level. As Levinas insists, so in this opening chapter I argue that true signification "is situated before Culture ... ; it is situated in Ethics, presupposition of all Culture and all signification."⁶¹ Chapter Two, on Marco Polo's Travels and Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, shows how Italo Calvino — who greatly admired Primo Levi — profoundly registers what Cheyney Ryan refers to as "the difference between difference and otherness," i.e. between the exotic charms of cultural difference experienced by the mere tourist, on the one hand, and, on the other, the opening towards a dialogue with another human being, as figured in the frustrated but nonetheless incipient dialogue between the Venetian Marco Polo and the Mongol Emperor of China, Kublai Khan.⁶²

In Chapter Three, I take issue with the claim of the formidable and widely read (especially in France) contemporary French sinologist/philosopher, François Jullien, who claims that there is no Other in China. In this chapter, I show how Sima Qian (145?–90? BCE), in his *Records of the Historian* (*Shi ji* 史記), views many of the actions of the first Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, and his legalist ministers as betrayals of the notion of alterity that are venerably articulated in Confucius (in, e.g., his notion of *ren* 仁 ["benevolence"]) and in Mencius.

Having suggested the applicability of Levinas's thoughts on alterity to traditional

China in Chapter Three, in Chapter Four I turn mainly to ancient Greek literature and to the Hellenic tradition. Levinas continually makes the point that ethics must precede ontology. In Chapter Four, I suggest that Euripides understands this well and indeed views the disastrous Peloponnesian War of the fifth century B.C.E. as a direct consequence of the Hellenic focus on a conceptualizing mode of thought that betrays ethics.

In Chapters Five and Six I analyze the paradoxical betrayal of Christian charity by Portia in the famous trial scene of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and by Roman Catholic missionaries in colonial West Africa in the novel *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* by the contemporary Cameroonian novelist Mongo Beti (1932–2001). In Chapter Seven, I turn to the fiction of the Egyptian author Naguib

⁶¹ *Humanism of the Other*, p. 36.

⁶² Cheyney Ryan, "The Two Faces of Postmodernism, or the Difference Between Difference and Otherness," in *Who, Exactly, is the Other*, eds. Shankman and Lollini, pp. 15–22.



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Mahfouz (winner of the Nobel Prize in 1988) who, in his novel *Children of Our Alley* and its companion-piece short story «Zaabalawi,» meditates — via the Islamic tradition of Sufi mysticism — on the relation between the absolute transcendence of God and human responsibility. The intimate relation between the absoluteness of divine transcendence, on the one hand, and human responsibility, on the other, is central to Levinas's thought, as well, as we have seen from our Levinasian reading of the Aqedah. In the final chapter, I turn to one of the masters of modern American poetry, Edgar Bowers, “one of the best living American poets these last forty years,” according to Harold Bloom.⁶³ Here I consider the ethical turn in Bowers' later poetry, a turn towards the Other and away from the poet's previous preoccupation with consciousness, a preoccupation against which he struggled and which he inherited from the symbolist tradition of Mallarmé and Valéry. This final chapter on Bowers' notion of the poet as witness returns to the subject of the first chapter, in which I discuss how Primo Levi, in *Se questo è un uomo*, records the transformative moment when Levi sees himself as a writer who, should he miraculously survive his captivity, is determined to bear witness to the destruction of man at Auschwitz.

This book, then, is about ethics and literature, or, rather, it is about the ethics of and through literature, through writing. As Massimo Lollini, the distinguished author of *Il vuoto della forma*, has written, “in an ethical approach to literature, the writer and/or the reader may experience a change emerging in the very act of writing and of reading, a change leading to the transcendence of the ego. Writing and reading are ethical activities as long as they leave the door open to the unexpected, to an interruption of the economy of the same made possible by the encounter with the other.”⁶⁴ In this book I open myself, as a reader, to moments in literary texts, from a variety of religious and cultural contexts, that interrupt “the economy of the same.” I shall, in brief, read for those unexpected moments that record or effect the transcendence of the ego of the writer and/or the reader in the direction of the Other, moments analogous to Rembrandt's depiction of the stunned face of Abraham.

Conclusion: The Saying and the Said / Representation and Interruption

i.

The famous Ming-dynasty novel *Journey to the West* (Xiyouji 西遊記), attributed to Wu Ch'eng-en (1500?–1582?), fictionalizes the story of the travels of the 7th-century C.E. Buddhist monk, Xuanzang (c. 600–664), from China to India to retrieve the Mahayana Buddhist scriptures for the Tang Emperor T'ai-tsung. The novel, like the

journey, is very long. Towards the end of the novel, fourteen years after setting out from the Chinese capital of Chang'an and having endured scores of ordeals, the pilgrims — Monkey (Sun Wu-k'ung [Awake-to-Vacuity]), Tripitika [Xuanzang], Sha Monk, and Chu Pa-chieh [Pig Eight-Abstinenes, called Pigsy in Arthur Waley's translation] — finally reach their destination. They arrive at the Great Hero Hall of the Thunderclap Monastery, where they meet the Buddha himself, who asks two of the monks there, the Honored Ones Ananda and Kasyapa, to give the pilgrims some scrolls to take back with them to the land of the east.

Ananda and Kasyapa ask for a small gift — a bribe? — in return for the scriptures. Since these two monks receive no compensation from the pilgrims, they return the favor by giving them wordless, empty texts. As they depart and begin their long journey back to China, the pilgrims are at first unaware that the scriptures they are carrying are wordless. Suddenly, there is a huge gust of wind. A hand descends from the heavens, it seizes and lifts the scriptures high into the air, and the scrolls then waft down to the ground, revealing their contents:

When Sha Monk opened up a scroll of scripture which the other two disciples were clutching, his eyes perceived only snow-white paper without a trace of so much as a half a letter on it. Hurriedly he presented it to Tripitika, saying, “Master, this scroll is wordless!”

Pilgrim [Monkey] also opened a scroll and it, too, was wordless. Then Pa-chieh opened still another scroll, and it was also wordless. “Open all of them!” cried Tripitika. Every scroll had only blank paper.

Heaving big sighs, the elder [Tripitika, or Xuanzang] said, “Our people in the Land of the East simply have no luck! What good is it to take back a wordless, empty [kong 空] volume like this? How could I possibly face the T'ang emperor? The crime of mocking one's ruler is greater than one punishable by execution!” ...

The pilgrims then appeal to the Buddha himself, who skillfully adjudicates the dispute. Just before requesting that Ananda and Kasyapa hand over to the pilgrims some scrolls with words to bring back to the Tang emperor in China, the Buddha remarks:

Since you came with empty hands [kong shou 空手] to acquire scriptures, blank texts were handed over to you. But these blank texts, these true scriptures, though wordless, nevertheless are [the] good ones [bai ben zhe, nai wu zi de, dao ye shi hao de 白本者, 乃無子的真經, 到也是好的]. However, those creatures in your Land of the East are so foolish and unenlightened that I have no choice but to impart to you now the texts with words.⁶⁵

What is the meaning of the blank scriptures which are in fact the true scriptures? Scriptures with words are “said” that are inferior to the saying that is betrayed by inscription. The wordless, empty texts are a ruse, just recompense for the “empty hands” [kong shou 空手] of the pilgrims, who had failed adequately to bribe the monks guarding the scriptures. Yet these blank texts are, at the same time,

⁶³ Bloom's remarks are cited on the back cover of Bowers' *Collected Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997). In full, they read: “Edgar Bowers has been one of the best living American poets these last forty years. His *Collected Poems* now testifies to his authentic eminence: in vital form, in accuracy of perception and sensation, in a vision at once original yet profoundly representative of the American imagination at its most eloquent maturity.»

⁶⁴ “Alterity and Transcendence: Notes on Ethics, Literature, and Testimony,” in *Who, Exactly, is the Other? Western and Transcultural Perspectives*, eds. Shankman and Lollini, p. 24. The full title of Lollini's masterful and wide-ranging recent book is *Il vuoto della forma: scrittura, testimonianza e verità* (Genova: Marietti, 2001).

⁶⁵ *The Journey to the West*, translated and edited by Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), four volumes, Vol. IV, pp. 393–394. The Chinese text is cited from (Shanghai, 1954; rpt. 1956), p. 1150. I have slightly adapted the translation of the longer quotation cited in the original Chinese.



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true texts in that, in their very blankness, they convey the central importance, for Buddhism, of emptiness, of detachment from an intentionality that desires to grasp and to possess reality — including other human beings, and all other sentient beings — as an object to be assimilated by the consciousness, as something to be known.

Yet the monks who have been protecting and who eventually release some of these blank scriptures, these apparent saids that silently speak of the inadequacy of saids, at the same time are still so attached to the world, so greedy for gain, that the blankness of the scriptures can also be read as a witty and vengeful trick perpetrated by two cunning and less than spiritually pure monks on four perhaps less than generous Buddhist pilgrims.

The scriptures are those of Mahayana Buddhism, which — as we are reminded in Chapter 12 of the novel — proclaimed itself the “Greater Vehicle,” as opposed to the “Lesser Vehicle” (Theravada), the earlier articulation of Buddhist faith that had stressed the importance of transcending the world through the attainment of individual enlightenment (nirvana). Mahayana Buddhism does not rest content with the joys of attaining personal enlightenment, but rather obliges the enlightened person to devote himself, in the here-and-now, to helping others attain well-being and enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, as in the work of Levinas, ethics precedes ontology.⁶⁶

Is the novel a serious religious allegory or an irreverent and energetic comic masterpiece? Or both, a paradoxical and “skeptical discourse,” like Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*, which — in the interests of expressing the primacy of ethics to ontology — “states the rupture, failure, impotence or impossibility of disclosure?”⁶⁷

What have I said, or tried to say, in the preceding pages?

ii.

The preceding chapters have been essays on literature inspired by Levinas, “saids” which gesture towards the “saying” necessarily betrayed by these “saids” inscribed by a number of authors from a variety of religious and cultural contexts. I have focused on representations, in language, of moments of transcendence that either

⁶⁶ See Chan, “Mahayana Buddhism and Levinas: The Primacy of the Other,” *Varieties of Universalism: Essays in Honour of J. R. A. Mayer*, pp. 227–238. We might even speculate that the Buddhist notion of reincarnation figures the primacy of ethics. Buddhist consciousness is never purely ontological; it comes into being already ethically inflected by the karma generated by actions from previous lives.

⁶⁷ *Otherwise than Being*, p. 168. On *Journey to the West* as a religious allegory, see the introduction to Anthony Yu's four-volume translation. The same scholar cites recent scholarship by Wang Guoguang (Xiyouji bielun [Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1992]) and Wang Gang («Xiyouji — yi ge wanzheng di Dao jiao neidan xiulian guocheng,” *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, New Series 25/1 [March 1995]: 51–86) on the novel's indebtedness to the Daoist canon, in “Readability: Religion and the Reception of Translation,” *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 20 (1998), esp. pp. 97–98. The Wangs' research, for Professor Yu, has persuasively made the case for seeing the novel “as an allegory of alchemical self-cultivation” (“Readability: Religion and the Reception of Translation,” p. 98). The novel can surely be read as allegory, but it is perhaps more satisfying to describe its significance as residing somewhere between allegory and a textuality that at times seems to contradict the moral slant of its allegorical intent. As Wai-ye Li perceptively remarks, *Journey to the West* “unfolds gaily on the precarious balance between allegorical meanings and the comedy and energy of the esthetic surface” (*The Columbia History of Chinese Literature* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2001], p. 637).

come to pass or that are resisted, aborted. Passages from these works, I have shown, often illustrate the wisdom, the deep suggestiveness of a phrase to be found in a footnote in Levinas's *Otherwise than Being*: “theological language destroys the religious situation of transcendence [le langage théologique détruit la situation religieuse de la transcendance].”⁶⁸

Theological language, and perhaps any use of language that betrays its interpellative, its vocative nature, its address to the Other, a responsiveness that is spoken through the receptive and hospitable “نعم na ‘am” (“Yes?”) of the calligrapher Hassanein to the nameless protagonist in search of meaning and of Zaabalawi in the short story by Mahfouz. Any use of language not in the vocative — including the language I am now writing — potentially betrays the closeness, the proximity to the Other communicated by the “Here I am, my son” (*hineni veniy*) of Abraham to Isaac (Genesis 22.7), who had just, in this same passage, addressed his father with the vocative אבי 'aviy (“my father”).

Theological language is always in danger of destroying the religious situation of transcendence. And this theological abuse of language is a specific example of a general slippage towards impersonal inscription that stalks all language, all saids said cut off from saying, from the saying that is an openness to transcendence before the face of the Other that stuns Abraham in Genesis 22; the transcendence of the ego that, in Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo*, is the attentive listening of Jean the Pikolo to the words of Levi, who is in turn undergoing a transcendence of his own ego when, in recalling the words of Dante's Ulysses Canto, he is overwhelmed by his ethical responsibility to bear witness, in his writing, to the *Inferno* that is Auschwitz; the transcendence that beckons the unsatisfied imperial consciousness of Kublai Khan in the presence of the Marco Polo of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*; the transcendence experienced by Mencius as he responds to the cry of the helpless child in the well; the promise of transcendence that comes to haunt the consciousness of Talthybius in *The Trojan Women*, who washes the mangled corpse of the murdered child Astyanax, whose broken and bloody face had spoken to Talthybius too late, a face that manages to speak to its grandmother, Hecuba and, through her, to the Athenian audience on the brink of the fateful expedition to subdue far-off Sicily; the transcendence that is powerfully evoked by Shylock's disruptive “hath not a Jew eyes” and that is then resisted and reversed by the perhaps good intentions of Portia's preaching; the transcendence resisted by Father Drumont, but which gradually comes to haunt his consciousness and that makes it impossible for him to continue in his position as a Roman Catholic priest and head of the Bomba mission in French colonial West Africa; the transcendence of the ego of the poet as registered by Edgar Bowers as he disburdens himself of much of the ontological baggage of the symbolist tradition and becomes a witness in his later blank verse.

iii.

When I first visited the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg in June 2001, I was struck by Rembrandt's painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* for some of the reasons I discussed in the introduction to this book. I received a kind invitation to lecture in St. Petersburg again the following year and keenly anticipated seeing the painting again,

⁶⁸ Autrement qu'être, p. 192, note 1; *Otherwise than Being*, p. 197, note 25.



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having by then read quite a bit about it, and anxious to test out my new thoughts about the masterpiece. My Russian hosts had kindly arranged for me to meet with a well-known Rembrandt scholar, Irina Linnik, the curator of Dutch paintings at the Hermitage and a scholar who has published important work on a later painting by Rembrandt, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (1669), also hanging in the Hermitage. Dr. Linnik's husband, now deceased, was also a famous Rembrandt scholar, a specialist on Rembrandt's *Danaë* (1636), the painting that had been slashed by a fanatical and no doubt deranged young Lithuanian visitor to the Rembrandt room in the Hermitage on June 15, 1985.

I met the curator of European paintings on the first floor. He told me how fortunate I was to have the opportunity to meet with Dr. Linnik, who had been on vacation for several months and had just returned to St. Petersburg. The chief curator introduced me to Dr. Linnik, who walked with a cane, and was halting in her English, which she spoke very softly and which I had to strain to understand. I felt extremely grateful for this opportunity to discuss with her some of my ideas about the painting. We ascended the stairs to the long Rembrandt gallery, working our way towards the painting which I had traveled thousands of miles to see. Dr. Linnik suddenly let out what seemed to be a rather restrained shriek, and she then looked back at me, her eyes wide with disbelief. The painting, she exclaimed, was not there! It was always there. Where could it be? She immediately contacted the chief curator of European paintings and learned from him that, just the day before, the painting had been packed up for a *journey to the West*. It had been sent to the Somerset House in London for an exhibit of the Walpole Collection, which consists of the paintings sold by Prime Minister Walpole's grandson to Catherine the Great towards the end of the eighteenth century (1778–1789).

Across the wall from where *The Sacrifice of Isaac* should have been was a slightly earlier painting (1631) [I. 7] of a scholar who, as the English translation of the caption describing the painting reads, "has been unexpectedly interrupted" from rapt contemplation of his book, as he looks at the painter who is in the process of capturing his slightly stunned pose.

An image, by Rembrandt, of a scholar interrupted, this image observed by another scholar whose intentions were likewise interrupted!

The suddenly acknowledged absence of the object of my desires left a gap that needed to be filled. I studied, with uncommon in-

tensity, all the works in the Hermitage that Rembrandt had painted around 1635. If I had been deprived of my beloved *Sacrifice of Isaac*, I could at least focus my gaze on the works Rembrandt had produced at around the same time to find traces of the absent painting. I listened to the elderly, fragile Dr. Linnik with almost desperate interest, trying to learn everything I could about Rembrandt, especially about Rembrandt and his paintings around the year 1635.

To the left of where *The Sacrifice of Isaac* hung only a few hours before my visit was Rembrandt's *Danaë* of 1636, its naked subject caught awaiting Jove's imminent arrival in a shower of gold. That painting is now restored after having been slashed three times by the knife of the Lithuanian puritan — a kind of deranged, perverse Don Quixote, unable to distinguish fact from fiction — on that June day in 1985 before the attacker, who also threw acid on the painting, was wrestled to the ground by museum guards. No angel stayed the man's hand, and Rembrandt's painting was all but destroyed [C. 1].

But Rembrandt's *Danaë*, damaged almost beyond recognition, was restored [I. 5]. A painting is, after all, an image, an idol, and it was specifically idolatry that the astrologer and astronomer Abraham, whose father was a maker of idols, left behind in his journey from Mesopotamia to Israel. Rembrandt's sensuous, glowing *Danaë* is a representation, an idol. She is not a human being, and her image has been restored. Had Abraham not seen and responded to the face of Isaac and not heeded the angel's command, however, his son's life would have been lost beyond repair, would have been taken, once and for all. The represented face, in a picture, can be restored from destruction. But a real face — which the mind might represent and thematize to itself as a necessary albeit painful sacrifice — once betrayed and murdered is beyond restoration. As Evadne's grief-stricken father Iphis remarks in Euripides' *Suppliants*, after his daughter, in seeming emulation of a tragic heroine, leaps onto a funeral pyre: we have only one life to live; how different it would be if, having made a fatal mistake, "we could restore ourselves (εφξωρθουσμε-εθα), having received life a second time."⁶⁹

The painting of *The Sacrifice of Isaac* that, surprisingly, was not there, was not in its usual place, in its very absence powerfully — more powerfully than if it had been there? — gestured towards the face of a vulnerable, irreplaceable Isaac beyond being, idolatry, and representation, recalling the saying that lay beyond its painted said.

⁶⁹ Line 1086.

