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History and the Other

Dussel's challenge to Levinas

Abstract Is *history* a product of human thought that betrays the lived uniqueness of persons, reducing 'otherness' to the categories of the understanding and to its historical consequences? Or is history too 'thick' to be synchronized in memory and historical consciousness? The article, taking its inspiration from Enrique Dussel's ethics of liberation and particular moments of Latin American history, develops the notion of the proximity of history, phenomenologically critiquing Emmanuel Levinas's own reduction of history to consciousness, his reading of history as a synchronizing betrayal of diachronic events. It thus reads Levinas against his own texts, arguing that historical memory and historical encounters function much as the face does in Levinas's own ethics, not only giving rise to irrecusable responsibilities, but also demanding the work of a critical, conscious appropriation of that history.

Key words conquest · Dussel · ethics · history · Latin America · Levinas · proximity · responsibility

Enrique Dussel, the Argentinian philosopher who moved to Mexico more than twenty-five years ago when his house was bombed in reactionary, late-Perón Argentina, has published a second *magnum opus* on the philosophy of liberation, *Ética de la Liberación en la Edad de la Globalización y de la Exclusión*,¹ in which Emmanuel Levinas's thought again plays a crucial role. In Dussel's first major work, *Para una Ética de la Liberación Latinoamericana*,² his discovery of Levinas allowed him 'to move beyond Heideggerian ontology' in understanding the field of liberation.³ However, Dussel has consistently maintained that Levinas's thought is limited in so far as it fails to articulate any meaningful political philosophy. This limitation becomes most apparent, he says, when Mexican and Latin American students ('who belong to the third or even the fifth

world') are introduced to Levinas's thought and ask, like Tolstoy, 'What then must we do?' Levinas, he contends, has no real answer to this question, at least not on the pragmatic, political plane.⁴

Although much has been written recently about Levinas and 'the political', a good deal of this scholarship must read like theses on the emperor's new clothes to those in the developing world actually involved in political struggles for economic survival and human dignity. In fact, Jacques Rolland has argued that, while Levinas certainly did produce a coherent and necessary critique of politics, in so doing he also rendered politics as such a questionable field for philosophical ethics.⁵ Politics, the art of the possible, ever threatens to compromise what Levinas explicates as the 'anarchic' and *impossible* commitments of the one for the other: responsibility, proximity, substitution.⁶

The explorations of Levinas's notion of politics that have appeared inevitably focus on Levinas's account of the third person, who interrupts the radical responsibility and intimacy of the 'one-for-the-other' and introduces the possibility of measured and contemporaneous relations among persons – relations characterized by a demand for reciprocity and order. Levinas describes this appearance of social relations that modulate the unconditional demands of proximity and responsibility without displacing or replacing them under the title 'From the Saying to the Said' (OB 153–62).⁷ Here he outlines how the pure 'saying' of ethical responsibility comes both to form and to inform the common social plane – 'the said' – in which we exchange and measure ideas and even develop social institutions. Because this movement to sociality must transpire without compromising the urgency and irreducibility of the 'saying', Levinas's focus almost immediately shifts to the necessary movement of 'unsaying' this said, lest the common-sense commerce of the said betray rather than transmit the urgency of the ethical saying. This shift happens too quickly for those like Dussel who would like Levinas to develop more fully the picture of social relations and even worldly institutions that might remain faithful or attentive to their birth in 'anarchic' responsibility despite doing their work on the plane of consciousness. While philosophy is called to think on the common plane of social relations, for Levinas it must do so as 'the servant of the saying that signifies the difference between the one and the other' (OB 162). Levinas's philosophy thus remains more committed to a skeptical critique of the political than it is to developing a positive social or political program of thought.

As I have mentioned, Dussel is not satisfied with this primarily skeptical role for philosophical ethics. Rather, he wants to engage ethical thought in the practical political work of liberation. For Dussel, ethics must indeed be critical but must also move beyond this critique to

liberate the oppressed, the victims of the socio-political order, facilitating their assumption of an active and constructive role in making a more just and more humane life possible. Every social or political order achieved would remain provisional, subject to criticism and renovation by those it excludes or subjugates, but ethics itself is to be judged incomplete unless engaged in the praxis of liberation. In this way Dussel's challenge to Levinas is not a repudiation, but an attempt to push Levinas beyond his own reluctance to think in terms of the concrete practice of a liberating ethics. In order to explore this challenge further, I would like to examine another dimension that is important to Dussel, one also related to Levinas's reluctance to think politically, to his distrust of the common measure that elides proximity by fitting it into our conceptual ordering of space and time. It is time to ask about history and Levinas's aversion to it, even his polemics against it.

Along with 'ontology', 'totality', and 'the State', Levinas's first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, censures 'history' at almost every turn. Paul Ricouer recalled my attention to this antagonism with his little book presented, paradoxically, as a reading of the second major work, *Otherwise than Being*, and entitled simply, *Autrement*. Ricouer notes that with the tropes of *proximity*, *an-archē* and *dia-chrony*, Levinas rigorously evokes a dimension of time incommensurable with an anteriority that would be recuperable by retention or memory: 'In this regard, Levinas refuses the support that might be offered him by a phenomenology of memory, or history and narrative. These for him are three operations that *synchronize* what Augustine even refers to as *distentio animi*'. Ricouer acknowledges this as his reference, not Levinas's, then continues: '[Levinas] himself pleads incessantly for a *dia-chrony* without a recuperating *syn-chrony*. He does not recognize irreducible diachrony in either memory or history, insofar as the linguistic mediation of narrative neutralizes, according to him, the passage of time as dis-sociation, as *dia-chrony*'.⁸ This suspicion of the neutralizing, synchronizing operation of narrative in both memory and history makes it clear why Levinas pleads so assiduously for a radical diachrony: only this would establish the radical priority of the ethical responsibility encountered in the face-to-face and in the word of the other. Only an *irreducible* diachrony can give rise to an ethical responsibility that cannot be accounted for by an ontology or a system of thought, including those that employ historical narratives or memory.

However, Ricouer asks, what sense are we then to make of the 'poignant inscription' to *Otherwise than Being*, dedicating it to the victims of the Nazi Holocaust: 'To the memory of those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists . . .?' Has memory here been cured of its servility to synchronicity? What

sort of memory might this be that respects diachrony, that throbs with a pain that is past but never past enough, suffocatingly close but never coincident? Might history also be our neighbor, our *prochaine*?

Here I would like to return to Dussel, whose *Ética de la Liberación* begins with a brief world history, rebutting the Eurocentric myths of modernity he finds in almost all Continental and Anglo-American philosophy. Rather than starting with Descartes in Amsterdam in 1629 or with Bacon, Kepler, and Galileo slightly earlier that century, modernity began, Dussel contends, a century earlier with Columbus's claiming the 'New World' for the Old one.⁹ It was in part the supposed 'right to occupy, dominate, and "manage" [*gestionar*']' (*ELEGE* 59) this new world that made possible the explosion of the sciences and rational thought in Europe, not simply because of the leisure and wealth such exploitation produced in Spain, Portugal, England, Holland, etc., but largely because the rational conquest and management of the empirical and intellectual world that Euro-Americans think of as modernity is nothing but a conceptual extension and perfection of this geographic conquest and colonization.¹⁰

Such historical theses seem a far cry from Levinas's rigorous phenomenological account of the relationship between 'saying' and its 'said', of a diachrony without synchrony. Yet on that dedication page to *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* the memory of these others is also invoked. 'The millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other [man]' are remembered along with 'those who were closest among the six million assassinated by the National Socialists'. We must ask what the status of such 'histories' is with regard to our ethical responsibilities today. How do such histories and their others bear on the ethical responsibilities that thrust themselves upon us prior to any possible assumption of duties or projects? And what concrete, irreducible, historical otherness – irreducible also to their own understanding of the world or their own history – what historical otherness do millions on millions of mestizo Americans, African-Americans, African-Europeans, the remnants of Indigenous Americans as well as Africans, the descendants of families and societies rent by slavery – what otherness do these historical peoples deliver us over to in the face-to-face encounters where ethical responsibility is born and borne?¹¹

Such questions imply the task of thinking the meaning of history's otherness. For Levinas, 'history' is almost always Hegelian history, much as the 'State' is invariably epitomized – and judged – as the overarching life-management and governance of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Levinas repudiates a history that is always 'comprehended history', that is simultaneously the 'Calvary' and the 'recollection' [*Erinnerung*] of absolute Spirit at the end of the *Phenomenology*.¹² The time in which the other appears, the time that emerges in Levinas's early study *Time*

and the Other as the very othering of the Other, as sociality itself,¹³ is not the time of history, or is a time dead to history. It is absent from 'comprehended history'.

Little has been written about Levinas's conception of history, perhaps because it seems clear and unproblematic.¹⁴ Levinas's rebuttal of history's final word is most clearly expressed in *Totality and Infinity*: 'The way of access to social reality starting with the separation of the I is not engulfed in "universal history," in which only totalities appear. . . . Cronos, thinking he swallows a god, swallows but a stone'.¹⁵ As a product of human thought, History is a mode of cognition, and 'to know objectively is to know the historical, the *fact*, the *already happened*, the already passed by'.¹⁶ History conspires with another 'universal order' to subsume the 'ipseity of individual consciousness . . . into the State, [where] it could only undergo the judgment of history, rather than remain me, that is, judge that history' (*TI* 208).¹⁷ Finally, history is seen not only as a product of reason but as aglow with reason's very light, visibility itself:

The judgment of history is set forth in the visible. Historical events are the visible *par excellence*; their truth is produced in evidence. . . . The invisible must manifest itself if history is to lose its right to the last word, necessarily unjust for the subjectivity, inevitably cruel. (*TI* 243)

History thus understood is wholly of the order of the said, the comprehended, the order where not only subjectivity but ethical responsibility pales and withers in the unblinking light of reason. History effaces the other.

The unrelenting reduction of history to comprehended history continues through and beyond *Otherwise than Being*, although it never quite becomes the explicit theme there that it is in *Totality and Infinity*. Ricouer is right to situate Levinas's campaign against history, memory and the recuperation of time in the insistence on a diachrony irreducible to synchrony, on the *saying* not taken up into the *said* in which it issues. Levinas makes this clear in the brief opening 'Argument' of *Otherwise than Being*: though it is the 'differing of the identical . . . time is also a recuperation of all divergencies, through retention, memory and history' (*OB* 9). In another passage Levinas criticizes how even Husserl reduces the 'lived present' and its 'primal impressions' to the order of consciousness,

. . . where the time-structure of sensibility is a time-structure of what can be recuperated. The thesis that the non-intentionality of the primal retention is not a loss of consciousness, that nothing can be produced in a clandestine way, that nothing can break the thread of consciousness, excludes from time the irreducible diachrony whose meaning the present study aims to bring to light, behind the *exhibiting* of being. (*OB* 34)¹⁸

Thus *Otherwise than Being* recasts the polemic against history in terms of a default from consciousness and synchrony, in terms of a saying that remains 'the hither side' of any said. The 'said' is for Levinas the locus of history: 'history' is consciousness of the past, of a past understood as having been present to this same consciousness.

One final testimony that Levinas remained suspicious of history to the end can be found in the later essay 'The Old and the New'.¹⁹ Here, with Bergson's creative *duration* as his foil, Levinas again assails Hegel. For Levinas, history the enemy is not mere chronology, which he rebuts at the start of the essay. Chronology would represent history as passive synthesis, determined by the pure form of time's passage. However, against this naïve chronology, already 'a certain ordering is outlined between the lived contents [that] dominates that of pure succession. "Histories" are superimposed onto it. A finality or a system of elements that are not integrated by chronology is affirmed between things or between dispositions' (ON 123). What Levinas is describing here is the work of synthetic thought, which is not simply the gathering together of lost moments, a 'recording' of the passage of time, but rather the creation of meaning itself, the making of history and not the accumulation of chronology.

History as the creative unfolding of meaning marks the constitution of modern consciousness for Levinas, where 'Western humanity has been conscious of a single and universal historical ordering, one that unfolds with a view to a culmination' (ON 124). What is precisely 'new' in 'modernity' according to this analysis is not the events of history but the work of human consciousness itself, incessantly making or disclosing to itself the truth of its experience: 'Time is not a succession of novelties which are made old and aged, but a history where everything comes and goes into a time progressively constituting the truth' (ON 127).²⁰ What happened was merely a hint; the truth is still to come. The *essence* of this history – essence both nominally and verbally, as Levinas explains in *Otherwise than Being*²¹ – the essence of this history would be the 'fully arranged state of the world' (ON 125), an arrangement that another thinker might call the 'en-framing' or *Ge-stell* of history.²²

Here we have the old enemy: history as historiography or rather historiology, the sublimation of the thickness of the lived present into the 'essence' of consciousness. But we also glimpse, in part through the renewed allegiance to Bergson, another sense of history, of the 'immemorial past' that synthetic history elides. Does this immemorial past still figure in the *memory* 'of those who were closest among the six million'? Can an understanding of history as the 'deep past' sustain practical philosophical reflection on the ethical responsibility posed today by the millions upon millions of the 'two-thirds world' who

strangely inhabit a history that seems to exclude them? Is history's other only an 'immemorial past'?

The proximity of history

Rufina Amaya, sole survivor of the 1981 massacre of nearly 800 men, women, and children at El Mozote in El Salvador, a massacre carried out by elite Salvadoran military troops whose officers were schooled in US counter-insurgency tactics and who brandished US-supplied rifles and rode in US-supplied helicopters and scorched the earth with US-supplied quarter-ton bombs²³ – Rufina Amaya is a typically short Salvadoran woman, apparently in her mid-60s, although time seems to score the skin differently in the tropical heat and dust and violence. Her physical presence is simple but insistent, disarmingly straightforward. There is in fact almost nothing extraordinary about her appearance, for virtually all Salvadorans today are of mixed race, their features suffused with indigenous characteristics. Unlike in Guatemala, however, there are very few 'purely' indigenous people left in El Salvador to afford a comparison, since anyone clinging to Indian garb or speaking one of the indigenous languages had already been massacred in the 1932 reprisals against a revolution plotted by indigenous coffee-workers, an episode in Salvadoran history called simply *La Matanza*, 'The Slaughter'. Those who survived adapted; those who did not adapt did not survive.

So Rufina Amaya emerges before us from a history of survivors. This history, however, was of no avail to the hundreds of others like her who were killed in the few days of 'Operation Rescue'. Pursuing the US-inspired policy of 'draining the sea to catch the fish' (it had worked so well, after all, in Vietnam), the Atlacatl Battalion rounded up in the church and a few other central buildings of El Mozote all the men, women and children in the town, many of whom had come there from the surrounding hamlets precisely for safety. The following day, these civilians, erroneously believed to be harboring and supporting the guerrillas operating in the hills, were taken from the church in groups and systematically executed: first the men, who were interrogated and tortured before being killed, and later the women, the younger of whom were first raped, while the older were simply marched away to be shot or beheaded with machetes. Rufina Amaya, the last woman in line in the last group of women, was briefly left alone when the soldier at the rear ran forward to help 'control' the point of execution. She fell to her knees, praying for deliverance, and as the line continued slowly to advance, she sidled behind a small crab-apple tree, a branch of which she pulled down with her little finger to cover her formidable, flat, campesina feet.

In the gathering dusk, somehow the soldiers never discovered her (she had meanwhile hidden in a large patch of maguey), and they returned to the church buildings, where they killed the children, whose screams she could hear, her own children's voices recognizable among them. At night Rufina Amaya crept into the hills, surviving on wild fruit until campesinos fleeing the violence discovered her, half-crazed, and took her to a refugee camp across the border in Honduras. She began telling her story and it was reported in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, although the Salvadoran government as well as the Reagan administration in the USA dismissed it as fabricated. Only in 1992, with the exhumation of the remains by a team of forensic anthropologists contracted by the archdiocesan Human Rights Commission, was Rufina Amaya's story corroborated in every grisly detail.

Today, Rufina Amaya sometimes walks slowly down to the main road in her bare feet and almost-shapeless blue print dress to meet groups of passing visitors – more pilgrims than tourists – those whose drivers know where to find this spectacularly ordinary woman who still tells her story to those willing to listen. What history is here present or almost present? Certainly not 'comprehended history', for while Doña Rufina firmly believes that God spared her to be a witness, to tell the truth of El Mozote, this truth is hardly 'comprehended'. It is rather revealed in raw experience. Thought, for all its Hegelian agility, cannot rise to the 'truth of this experience', this experience that is precisely without truth. No, Rufina Amaya *aches* this history. It is etched into the otherwise expressionless face with which she recounts what happened, her voice maintaining a steady and undemonstrative timbre. The history with which we must contend, the history that calls us to an ethical response – 'us' and not just 'me' – is not the sum of these happenings, nor simply Rufina Amaya's account of them, nor even the forensic scientists' and United Nations Truth Commission's reports and judgments. Rather, this substantial or hyper-substantial history – a history that reaches back to the conquest of the Americas and the enslavement and cross-breeding of its indigenous peoples, through the colonial exploitation and later national oligarchic repression – looms at us in the face-to-face encounter, aches towards us in the still, steady voice, confronts us in the stolid body that bears its grief.

Still less, I think, can such visceral history be described as a 'trace', a 'remote' or 'deep past', an 'immemorial past'. If it were immemorial, there would be no problem, and from it to us no responsibility would devolve. Yet we may still be able to characterize it – like the 'memory of those who were closest among the six million' – as diachronic, as time or history in its pure multiplicity or plurality, not 'present' but insistent, demanding space in a present that can neither contain it nor decline it.

I have presented here merely one witness; there could be hundreds, thousands more, ‘millions on millions of all confessions and all nations’ more. Enrique Dussel might suggest we listen to Rigoberta Menchu, the Nobel laureate from Guatemala.²⁴ Other notable witnesses to history abound in other traditions: Nelson Mandela in his prison cell and later as president of the ANC and of South Africa, but also innumerable African-American grandmothers huddling their working daughters’ children around a flickering television set because gangland crossfire renders their apartment complex’s playground unsafe. Another Salvadoran campesino in Morazán trudges up a path, bent double under his load of *leña*, wood for the cooking stove, bent so low he probably cannot see our modern van passing on the asphalt highway he has left behind. He has to seek the firewood further afield each year, as deforestation devours the local supply, and his machete dangles from his belt as he walks, its sheath fashioned from more leather than it would take to sew a pair of shoes for his calloused feet – but the knife is more important. What sort of history confronts us here, solicits our response?

What Levinas teaches us about the sheer physicality of living can be instructive here, whether it be the delectation of enjoyment, luxuriating even in the needs from which it lives, the cumbersome insomnia of the *il-y-a*’s palpably featureless night, or even the sensate torsion of responsibility: ‘twisted over itself in its skin, too tight in its skin’ (*OB* 104). We do not simply digest the past in thought but live bodily from it, live as this past, aging in the wrinkling of skin, the sagging of flesh, the scarring of soma and psyche. (The inwardness of the psyche would not be something separate, rattling around inside us, but, in a phrase Deleuze used to describe Foucault’s surprising return to subjectivity, it is precisely ‘the inside of the outside’, a fold or ‘folding’ of the flesh.²⁵) In a word, we must learn to think the proximity of history, its closeness and even too-closeness to us. History impinges on us in a proximity that cannot be reduced to ‘history’s lessons’ but that nevertheless speaks the truth to us or rather confronts us with history’s very palpability – a history that sustains us even as we live away from it or struggle to overcome it.²⁶

But is a rehabilitation of history as diachrony enough, faithful as it might be to the way we live with and from history, to establish the role that history can and should play in our ethical consciousness, our ethical conscience? Can we substitute the proximity of history for a critical consciousness or understanding of history? Dussel moves beyond Levinas precisely in considering the importance not only of this critical consciousness, but of its practical consequences, the ‘critical criteria of feasibility’ and its engaged ‘principle of liberation’. One of Dussel’s major inspirations for thinking about the critical consciousness exercised in

liberating action is Paulo Freire, the great Brazilian educator.²⁷ For Freire, those who merely suffer the past even as they embody it are still wholly caught up within it. While Levinas thinks the oppression and persecution of ethical responsibility, Dussel, with Freire, wants to push ethical responsibility towards the work or praxis of liberating from oppression, even though no liberation could ever be complete. One of the peculiarities of Levinas's ethics is that even such liberating action – and one cannot fairly think of Levinas as indifferent to liberation from oppression – is figured first and foremost as the responsibility of the one for the other, and only secondarily as the responsibility one might take up in one's own name or in solidarity with others in the same plight. True, in the light of the third person the responsible self discovers a responsibility even for itself, 'become[s] an other like the others' (OB 161). But is it enough to be told that 'Justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work are comprehensible out of proximity'? Or to be exhorted that 'It is important to recover all these forms beginning from proximity' (OB 159)? As sincere as Levinas's conviction is here that 'the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two' (OB 159) his inability to effect such a comprehension or recovery threatens to reduce these principles to pious wishes. The specter of Hegel's beautiful soul haunts Levinas's ethics.

It is not that Levinas's formulations here are illogical; they are not. But the passage is never really made. Let us stop here briefly to consider what it might mean to 'comprehend justice and society out of proximity' if we think not of the proximity of the one (person) to the other, but the proximity of history to the lived present, which is shot through, true enough, with the 'diachrony of the two'. History confronts us not primarily as the past actions or experiences of individuals, however much these individuals might be caught up in and bear this history. Rather, what we are conscious of, what bears on us, is the history of peoples. The conquered and converted, enslaved and oppressed semi-indigenous woman that meets us with her story confronts us out of the history of a particular people. Levinas is willing to talk about the legitimate and meaningful history of a people when it is the Jewish people, but I do not know of occasions when he entertains this possibility for other peoples. Yet surely the history we touch, the history that touches us when we walk, for example, through the ruins of the Aztec *Templo Mayor* in Mexico City, past the foundations of the house Hernán Cortés built for his brother on and out of the temple stones they had razed without regard for the sacred and terrible meetings with their gods that the Aztecs prepared there, walking around and among the Mestizo descendants of both of these races, a raven-haired and olive-skinned people calling to or conversing with one another in Spanish, perhaps

just having come on this Sunday afternoon from the enormous cathedral not fifty paces away, covering that portion of the temple precinct that has not been and will not be excavated – surely the history that confronts us here, the history in whose proximity we move, is the history of peoples. Not of persons primarily, but of peoples for whom no mere accumulation of individuals could ever suffice or substitute. If ‘the contemporaneousness of the multiple is tied about the diachrony of two’, it seems equally true that the two dwell always already within a multiplicity that both is and is not contemporaneous, the proximate history of peoples.

The point here is not simply that Levinas’s ethical schema envisions a single other that history replaces with a plurality. Instead, the notion of an historically specific ‘people’ points already to the work of what Levinas calls ‘consciousness’ and the ontological plane. If it already strains philosophical sense to talk of an individual as absolutely other, to talk of a people as absolutely other makes no sense at all. A people, whether or not it is an identifiable totality, functions already on the cultural plane of shared conceptions and ideas: it is not only the product but the embodiment of culture. Levinas’s own description of how the advent of the third person initiates the plane of consciousness, where the face of the other is ‘both comparable and incomparable, a unique face and in relationship with faces, which are precisely visible in the concern for justice’ (OB 158) underlines this shift from the absoluteness of the face-to-face to the consciousness of human community and identity. The face with which history confronts our complacency, summons us to ethical judgment and responsibility, is already a face among faces, a saying woven into the ontological fabric of a said that nevertheless bears and does not merely betray the urgency of that saying.

This crossover of the notion of a historical people into consciousness is why it is so important in Dussel’s and Freire’s eyes that the oppressed²⁸ develop together a critical consciousness of their oppression, which entails a consciousness not only of the history that produced it, but of themselves as a historical people living this oppression and committed to transforming it: ‘Discovering themselves to be oppressed only begins to be a *process of liberation* when this discovering that one is oppressed *transforms itself into a historical commitment* . . . a critical insertion into history to create it’.²⁹ It is not enough to be haunted by the human history that presses against us. To act ethically, to begin to think ethically about this concretely historical world we inhabit, we must already develop a critical consciousness of that historical world and a critical praxis of transforming that history. For Freire, one is not first conscious of this history in order later to transform it: critical consciousness only arises in praxis, and true liberating praxis is shaped by the critical consciousness engaged in it. The consciousness of history –

which need not be the 'comprehension' of history, for it is always partial and provisional³⁰ – is not opposed to the ethical proximity of history. This proximity need not be bridged but would remain diachronic, other than the present on which it impinges. The consciousness of history is also not simply a 'said' but a 'saying' as well.

One thing Levinas can teach us about the proximity of history, about history not betrayed by synchronization and comprehension, is that consciousness will never be able to get all the way back to this history, even though this history seems too close, right up against it, breathing down its neck. A concrete, corporeal history is suffered by those who bear it into the present. Yes, there must also always be a struggle on the part of those who bear or embody a history of exclusion and oppression to bring this history to critical consciousness. Only thus can those oppressed by history hope for liberation, for a future and not merely a past. But what Levinas teaches us is that no consciousness, not even critical consciousness, can get all the way back to the proximity of history. Lived history remains, stubborn, aching in our midst, unable to go away because it is so close that comprehension cannot get a hold of it firmly enough to cast it finally behind.

Is not this the lesson, the purpose of the projects of historical memory in El Salvador, Guatemala, South Africa? 'Historical memory' is the phrase deliberately employed by those whose suffering has called them not only to political action but to ethical political action. Does the Holocaust Museum or do Holocaust memorials liberate us from the 'history' that goes by the name of the Shoah? The history that hurts us into responsibility pushes upon us without ever making it all the way into the light of our day. This is why the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, that is a black gash in the earth, a black granite mirror of the pain and incomprehension of those who face it, is a true *memorial*, one that respects the density of history precisely by placing us face-to-face with its opaque historical otherness, and why that obscenely optimistic statue of athletic and multicultural soldierly camaraderie added as a palliative two years later is a lie, a history that ignores history, a memorial that remembers nothing.³¹

Levinas taught the philosophical world an unblinking vigilance for the ethical critique of ontology and categorical schemas, for the face and voice of the other breaking through the privilege of thought and a responsibility that reason would have only to itself. It remains a task for those who follow Levinas to take up the challenge he himself announced and, in so doing, to recognize some of his own categorical prejudices. If we are to begin from proximity and recover 'justice, society, the State and its institutions, exchanges and work', making them 'comprehensible out of proximity', we might begin with a reawakened

awareness of the ethical proximity of history aching and coming to critical consciousness in our midst.

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Notes

- 1 Citations are from the 2nd edition (Madrid: Trotta, 1998); cited hereafter as *ELEGE*. An English translation has been prepared but not yet published.
- 2 In five volumes: 1973, 1977, 1979–80. These never appeared in English. Vols 1–2 contain the most important material on the move beyond ontology to ethics (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 1973).
- 3 Dussel has said this in several places. Here I am quoting a recent conversation with him in Mexico City (21 January 2003). See also *ELEGE*, p. 359. Unless a specific citation is given, informal references to Dussel's reading of Levinas will be taken from these recent interviews. Formal interpretations or criticisms will be cited from the appropriate texts.
- 4 This was made explicit in conversation. It is implicit in where and how Dussel uses Levinas. In Dussel's scheme, Levinas occupies the crucial juncture (with Marx!) of establishing a *critical material* or *ethical* principle for liberation ethics. The first three principles are not yet critical: the 'universal material moral', 'formal universal moral' and 'ethical feasibility [*factibilidad*]' principles. The critical material principle inaugurates a critical mode that continues through the 'critico-discursive principle of validity' to the 'critical criterion of feasibility' or 'principle of liberation'.
- 5 Jacques Rolland, 'Pas de conseils pour le tyran: Levinas et la question politique (*All is not well*)', *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 100(1–2) (February–May 2002): 32–64 [parenthetical subtitle in English in original]: 'One must, however, agree that the political question never occupied first place in this [Levinas's] thought. This reflection did not go beyond the outlines of a doctrine – which need not surprise, if one takes seriously what one might willingly call the "secondariness" of the political order as such, always on a fair way to sinking into tyranny . . .' (*Author's Résumé*, pp. 63–4).
- 6 These terms are crucial especially in Levinas's second major work, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston, MA: Kluwer, 1991); cited hereafter as *OB*. While the present article cannot provide a full introductory exposition of Levinas's thought and terminology for those less familiar with his work, it may help to note that all these terms indicate the radical nature of his conception of ethical responsibility. 'Anarchic' is to be taken literally as that which is not grounded in a principle and is thus prior to all principles of ethics, no matter how necessary these may become. 'Proximity' and 'substitution' (the 'one *for* the other') likewise indicate the urgency of Levinas's conception of the responsibility arising

from the encounter with the other prior to all commitments or comparisons.

- 7 Again, 'the saying' and 'the said' are crucial tropes for Levinas's later work. To summarize briefly, Levinas argues that the perfect commerce most philosophies of language seek between the 'saying' and the 'said' misses the ethical significance of the pure saying: 'Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said. This signification to the other occurs in proximity' (OB 46). What this 'anarchic' saying signifies to the other is responsibility itself: an 'exposure to the other' in which the subject 'finds itself' in responsibility without first having made any commitments or taken any initiative (OB 46–51).
- 8 Paul Ricouer, *Autrement: Lecture d'autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 12; my translation.
It may be helpful for those unfamiliar with Levinas's use of 'diachrony' and 'synchrony' to point out that these terms are used with a different sense than that usually given them by historians or linguists. 'Diachrony' for Levinas indicates the 'spread-outness' not simply of 'events-over-time' but of time itself. In Levinas's understanding, any account of events is *synchronic*, whether it recounts how events unfold *over time*, respecting their sequence and differentiation from one another, or whether it takes a snapshot of a historical moment *in time* and thus presents specific historical phenomena as unified in time. (This is the standard distinction between 'diachronic' and 'synchronic'.) What makes any account 'synchronic' for Levinas is the fact that, as a product of consciousness, the account is still representing and thus holding together in the present what only transpires diachronically as time or temporalization.
- 9 *ELEGE* §0.6, pp. 58–66.
- 10 Dussel defines modernity as the '*gestión*' or establishment of the centrality of Europe *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world, which becomes its periphery as well as what it 'manages' as its project. The colonization of the fields of science and of the human subject and its thought are later fruit of the 'centering' of Europe as the center of the world. This is the main thesis of Section 2 of Dussel's Introduction: 'World History of Ethicalities' [*Eticidades*] as well as the theme of Dussel's earlier book, *The Invention of the Americas: The Eclipse of the 'Other' and the Myth of Modernity*, trans. Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995).
- 11 I have limited myself here to those peoples directly involved in the conquest that Dussel marks as the dawn of modernity (and the damnation of its ethics). Certainly the question pertains as strongly to other peoples marred by small and great historical movements. Levinas's dedication makes this clear: 'of all confessions and all nations'.
- 12 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 493.
- 13 Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987); see especially Part III, pp. 74–9.

- 14 In French, the papers of a 1997 colloquium on the topic have been published: *Emmanuel Lévinas et l'histoire: Actes du colloque international des Facultés universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix (20–21–22 mai 1997)*, ed. Nathalie Frogneux and Françoise Mies (Paris: Cerf/Presses Universitaires de Namur, 1998). In English, recent studies substantively treating the idea of history in Levinas include James Hatley, 'The Sincerity of Apology: Levinas's Resistance to the Judgment of History', in *Phenomenology, Interpretation, and Community*, ed. Lenore Langsdorf and Stephen H. Watson, with Marya Bower (Albany: SUNY, 1996); and Robert Eaglestone, 'The "Fine Risk" of History: Post-Structuralism, the Past, and the Work of Emmanuel Levinas', *Rethinking History* 2(3) (1998) 2.3: 313–20.
- 15 *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne, 1969), p. 58; hereafter *TI*.
- 16 Lingis notes the French: '... le fait, le déjà fait, le déjà dépassé' (*TI* 65).
- 17 This passage is a clear allusion to Hegel, especially in 'the judgment of history', which is notoriously indifferent to its 'dupes'.
- 18 This 'exhibiting' of being, though likely a reference to Heidegger, evokes also the succession of shapes of Spirit at the end of Hegel's *Phenomenology*.
- 19 1979–80; included in Cohen's translation of Levinas, *Time and the Other*, pp. 121–38; cited as ON.
- 20 It should be noted that this view of modernity, while a philosophical and not a historical thesis, nevertheless is consonant with Dussel's assessment of modernity's essential character: thought managing and dominating or ordering its peripheries.
- 21 Levinas explains in a prefatory note that he is using the term 'essence' not in the traditional philosophical sense of quiddity but as the verbal noun 'being' (which Heidegger contrasts to 'beings'). By etymological rights, Levinas notes, he could spell the term 'essance', though he rejects such an affectation. Thus, the 'essence of history' roughly translates to 'history's act of being what it is'.
- 22 The reference is to Martin Heidegger's 'The Question Concerning Technology', which examines how scientific thought 'enframes' the being of any given entity, ordering it to the dimensions of human production and planning; published in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1982), pp. 3–35.
- 23 The story of El Mozote, with a summary of Rufina Amaya's testimony and the reports of the forensic team, is told by Mark Danner in *The Massacre at El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
- 24 Dussel in fact uses Menchu as an example of the development of critical consciousness, 'the antihegemonic validity coming from the community of victims' (ELEGE, §5.1, pp. 412–22).
- 25 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand, foreword, Paul Bové (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); the final chapter, pp. 94–124, is a reflection on this theme; the phrase occurs on p. 97.
- 26 With his notion of 'fecundity', Levinas thinks not of history but of the future in terms of time's physicalness. However one ultimately judges Levinas's precarious theses about this non-continuous continuation of 'the father',

- one can at least find in it sanction for thinking the irreducible plurality of the past, the proximity of history.
- 27 See *ELEGE* §5.2, pp. 422–39, esp. 430–9.
- 28 I prefer Paulo Freire’s term to the one Dussel borrows from Walter Benjamin, ‘the victims’.
- 29 Dussel, *ELEGE* 436, quoting Carlos Torres, *La praxis educativa de Paulo Freire* (Mexico: Gernika, 1992).
- 30 This is ultimately the quarrel with the Hegelian version of history. Ultimately for Levinas as well as for Dussel, there can be no closure to history as comprehended history. Even though lived history, the Spirit poured out into history, is always diachronic in Hegel, this diachrony is commensurable with consciousness – this is the work of the *Phenomenology* – and this is precisely what Levinas rejects.
- 31 The two memorials are Maya Ying Lin’s memorial wall (1981) and Frederick Hart’s *Three Soldiers* (1983).