Conclusion

The Face of the Other as a Gift Returned

The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia as such. --- Jacque Derrida

Ethics in the philosophical tradition has been usually seen as answering questions like—“What should one do?” or “How should one live?” The various answers proposed by philosophy and religious practices generally take the form of prescriptive phrases. At least since Nietzsche, philosophers have been more hesitant to embrace such prescriptions, which can be seen as the legitimization of regimes of power and intersubjective domination. The idea of the interior self as the founding reality for human individual is something virtually everyone wants to hold on to. Given the persistence of the interiority myth, one understands why Nietzsche felt the need to philosophize with a hammer and why Foucault strived to erase the concept of man. Among the thinkers who denounce the myth of interiority, Levinas, in his shocking formulation of the “absolutely Other,” is the one who most insistently demands “exteriority” as a necessary dimension to the theory of difference.

Extteriority in Levinas’s thinking represents the other-directed orientation of human existence, especially in the ethical instance that is both a response to the call of the other and the need to resist intersubjective violence.

The face is a key term in the development of Levinas’s thought of exteriority. Usually when we encounter things we do so within a system of relations or across a generality. In other words, the signification of a being is relative to a context or in its relation to another being. But for Levinas a direct encounter with a being “is that
which puts us in contact with a being that is not simply uncovered, but divested of its form, of its categories, a being becoming naked, an unqualified substance breaking through its form and present a face” (Levinas 1987: 20). According to Levinas, in the face-to-face encounter, the self and the other do not reciprocally exchange ideas; rather, the face of the other manifests itself as a singular, irreducible gift. In calling for an ethical response to the gift of otherness, Levinas advocates what he calls an “ingratitude” of the receiver, because “gratitude would in fact be the return of the movement to its origin” (Levinas 1986b: 196). Put differently, for Levinas, the singular gift that demands a radical ingratitude thus preserves an asymmetrical and nonreversible relation to the other.

In pondering how to receive the gift of Levinas’s ethical thought, Derrida takes up what it might mean to display a radical ingratitude toward an author whose work forbids any symmetry, outlaws equality, and asks for no return.1 Derrida thus suggests that it is perhaps precisely by being ungrateful and refusing to return the work to its author that the alterity that Levinasian ethics seeks to establish is maintained:

If someone says to you: do not render /return to me what I give you—you are at fault even before he has finished speaking. It suffices that you hear/understand him, that you begin to understand and to recognize. You have begun to receive his injunction, to render to yourself what he has said, and the more that you will obey him by restituting nothing, the better you will disobey him and will render yourself deaf to what he addresses to you.

(Derrida 1991: 14)

In other words, a gift that is returned to its origin is not a gift, and one who returns it is no longer a receiver. Derrida hence claims that in order to engage Levinas’s text at all there “would have to be a writing that performs . . . a performative heretofore
never described” (1991: 34-5). For all his endeavor to enact such a performance, Derrida can neither dispense with Levinas’s conceptuality nor with his own conceptual grasp of Levinas’s discourse. In speaking of the gift as “absolute arrivant”, Derrida nonetheless acknowledges that “the aporia can never simply be endured as such. The ultimate aporia is the impossibility of the aporia as such” (1993: 78).

In Derrida’s reading of Levinas’s text arises the decisive question, which is also the major concern governing my reading of Lawrence’s text—i.e., the question of the possibility and impossibility of thinking difference as radical otherness. As I have mentioned in Part One, Levinas tropes knowledge as an invasive light, a light that reduces the exteriority of otherness to an imperial sameness. In an attempt to provide a basis for allowing otherness to remain other, Levinas asserts that true knowledge emerges in the direct encounter with the “absolutely Other.” For Derrida, Levinas’s strong formulation of the “absolutely Other” is desirable in intent, yet he is wondering whether there can be a meaning or knowledge that does not culminate in a transformation of the Other into the Same. According to Derrida, difference cannot be thought in terms of an absolute otherness because “the infinitely other is invisible . . . it does not belong to space, is not of this world” (VM 93). Moreover, the attempt to have an ethical relation to absolute alterity is itself paradoxical since the very relation dissolves the absoluteness. The Absolute, once in relation, becomes “relative to.” In a word, the question raised by Derrida is the problem of how can the other appear and be cared for in a face-to-face encounter. The enigmatic dilemma for Levinas and Derrida himself, as well as for the other thinkers mentioned above, can be summarized first of all as such—How can the other be perceived if not by the same and, if it is perceived, how can it be other? Put differently, the other cannot be other if it is perceived through the same and if it is not perceived through
the same it cannot appear at all. Beyond that, if I do not act on my interpretation of the Other’s welfare, am I not guilty of sinful indifference? And if I do, how can I not violate the Other’s autonomy? In other words, violence is always already necessary for the beginning of any relation, even the one designed to escape violence.

For all its impossibility and unthinkable, the “absolutely Other” is a fabulous but important story we should pay attention to, especially when we were too much in love with autonomy and immanence. It is in this sense that Levinas’s ethics of exteriority can spot an inspiring light on our understanding of Lawrence’s repeated emphasis on “profound singleness” and “untranslatable otherness.” In his treatment of the relation between truth and fiction, self and other, men and women, Lawrence proves himself to be a highly conscious and intelligent being who knew he must listen carefully to something other than his own consciousness. Like Levinas, he shows his profound awareness of the need to respect utter and uncontained difference and he is deeply concerned with the problem of how to communicate with an absolute other in order that I might not see everywhere my own self-image and inflict intersubjective violence on the other. Along the lines, my major concern in this study—ethics of language, love, and sexual difference—is also founded on this problem of the self’s ethical relation to the (unsubsumable) other.

As a novelist who implicitly or explicitly challenges the representative aspects of language, Lawrence calls into questions what Kristeva called the “phallic position” which exists “in a culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as master of their speech” (1980b: 165). Instead of conceiving the speaking subjects as master of their speech, Lawrence argues that we should trust the tale, not the artist. The gap between word and thing, language and being, has been central to Lawrence’s writing. His use of language is as much a response to as a use of it. Lawrence’s fiction thus highlights a creative process necessary for ethical activity. To believe that fiction
gives us versions of real-life events so that we can hone our skills in making ethical decisions is to assume that ethics exists outside the force of language and representation. But if fiction is not the mirror of life, if language does not merely communicate normative values but also functions as an invocation to them, then we must also learn to read people and events as we learn to read fiction. Given that the thick moral thinking embedded in the formal structure of language in Lawrence’s literary text does not issue in prescriptive assertions but remains unexhausted, the “ethics” of reading his fiction demands that textual analysis be an ethical imperative. The text is both an object of reading and an interlocutor. Every comprehension of the text is simultaneously an address to it.

Nonetheless, art does not raise its most disruptive questions with regard to ethics by a reversal of the truth, but as a deviation or detour that does return, though not to that unquestioned truth. While Nietzsche called for a “revaluation of all values” by making art an alternative to philosophical truth, he nevertheless insisted that value has to be put back into values after nihilism has itself been discredited (Nietzsche 1968: 7). In referring to the ethical function of language, Kristeva also indicates, “All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thematic. It requires an identification” (1984: 43). That is, as soon as the semiotic properties of language seek to express themselves, they begin to be “grasped” by the policing faculties of the symbolic function. Yet what returns in the symbolic realm is not the repetition confirming the identity of something that would return but the “repetition in difference.” It is along these lines that Lawrence’s discursive writing accomplishes the retour as a detour (turning away) and vice versa. As we have seen all throughout this study, Lawrence’s texts are especially featured by insistent and repetitive motions with slight modification. Moreover, his text is engaged in a process of self-criticism and self-interrogation through an act of “commentary.” Within and through this kind
of repetition, moment of alterity opens up within the text which allows it to deliver itself up to an “other” reading. The moment of alterity is glimpsed most significantly by giving oneself up to textual repetition and textual difference.

In his engagement with the ethical imperative of language, Lawrence seeks in his fiction to find ways of describing a non-normative or non-prescriptive ethics, an ethics which informs his conception of love with a profoundly intimate philosophy of the unsubsumable Other. Anticipating Levina’s philosophy of the face, which is predicated on the irreducibility of the Other to the Same, Lawrence attempts to formulate a love relationship in which otherness and foreignness are given a positive meaning. In other words, the encounter with the face of the other is seen as an articulation of the ethical relation to alterity, one in which, in Kristeva’s words, the other is not feared as a “threat” but becomes a participant in an identity as an “open system” (1987: 13). Moreover, the encounter in a love relationship opens a dimension of “response” that originates in the interruption of understanding and recognition that eliminate the other’s singularity. Thus, for Lawrence, as it is for Levinas, love involves not only understanding the other, but also not understanding the other. Levinas’s and Lawrence’s formulations of love as a recognition of otherness and as demanding the mutual cultivation of “inalienable difference” are valuable in an age wherein subjects, haunted by “terror of alterity,” validate themselves at the cost of the radical otherness of their object.

While thus formulating love as an encounter with radical otherness, they however face the same dilemma mentioned above—i.e., how to communicate with an absolute other. Put differently, while recognizing the vitality of “thought from the outside,” they are demanded to face the problematic status of any “outside.” In response to Levinas’s ethics of exteriority, Derrida suggests that the move to an unthinkable exteriority is not very pragmatically useful in ethical terms since we are
indeed faced with otherness “in” the world—i.e., otherness always already comes to us as predicated on some kind of relationship. Another way of putting this is that transcendence is possible only as transcendence in immanence, even though the obligation entailed by the other’s face is transcendent and infinite. Indeed, given his repudiation of the tyranny of consciousness, to cross the markers of irreconcilable differences is for Lawrence to be guilty of some kind of psychological imperialism. Yet as I hope I have made clear in the above discussion, what Lawrence’s fiction demonstrates is that nevertheless the crossing has to be made, and that in fact the relationship of difference demands that this crossing be made. In other words, while the mainspring of Lawrentian love is the lovers’ constant exposure to a surplus in exteriority which is irreducible, love in Lawrence’s fiction is at best conceived as mediating between interiority and exteriority. Love for Lawrence is union as well as separateness, communication as well as defamiliarization.

The notion of absolute alterity is especially relevant to the question of sexual difference. The way Levinas defines the feminine as that which is posited as fundamentally incommensurable with the masculine economy of the same contributes a lot to an ethics of sexual difference based on non-oppositional and non-assimilable difference. Yet it is problematic of him to designate the feminine as a way of rendering what cannot be reduced to beings: “The feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face” (TI 260). In other words, one of the most disturbing issues in a philosophy of radical alterity is that the subject of consciousness, in respecting the otherness in the Other, fails to attend the possibility of the other as subject. In like manner, Lawrence’s insistence on radical sexual difference, while revealing his respect of the other sex’s singularity, involves a dangerous risk of ignoring the harm done to women because of their sexual difference. In other words, highly valued as an absolute other, woman is nevertheless left in the Underworld, in an unknown mode
of being, instead of emerging as a visible subject “in” the world. Male appreciation of essential femininity appears to be at odds with feminine aspiration for liberation.

As an ethically- and politically-minded person, Lawrence recognizes that sexual distinctions exist, but understands that they should not be allowed to become the excuses for sexual discriminations. Accordingly, what he is also deeply concerned with is to remove the prejudices that rationalize aggression and exclusion on the basis of those differences. Despite his insistence upon the “incomparability” and “unutterable separation” between different sexed beings, Lawrence does not simply oppose a fixed and essentialist conception of femininity to an equally fixed and essentialist conception of masculinity. Instead, he provides a disruptive understanding of the male/female distinction as internally interdependent, combined with a deep concern with the political pragmatism. For instance, while suggesting that women should valorize their own femininity instead of living in accordance with male standard, Lawrence at the same time seeks relentlessly to dissociate women from their socially and culturally established roles as wife/mother. Without taking “untranslatability” between sexes as an excuse of not speaking for others who one can never know, Lawrence, writing with a recognition of himself as a writer gendered male, reveals his deep sympathy with women’s predicaments by exposing the inequality of sexual power and by subverting the entrenched gender ideologies. In other words, Lawrence’s concern with an ethics of sexual alterity does not prevent him from being engaged in the pursuit of a world of justice for both sexes.

Lawrence’s treatment of love and sexual difference as expressed by his artistic language reminds us that if others are to remain distinct as this or that person within alterity, their heteronomy must be conceived as finite—i.e., it must at least in principle be possible to bring them to some degree into mutuality. Moreover, if we are to deal seriously with the others and not reduce them to insignificance or
irrelevance, we need to begin by positing the “minimal” commonality between us and them. Against the background of an enormous neglect of otherness and difference, it is important to call attention to attitudes like radical otherness. At the same time, we must not lose sight of the way in which difference can only be appreciated in the context of a recognition of similarity and commonality. The very extremism of the notion of absolute alterity destroys real human intersubjectivity. In this sense, Lawrence’s fiction might be read both as a manifestation and a critique of the notion of absolute alterity. However that may be, Levinas’s efforts remain fruitful, despite their limitation. We now learn that, in order to listen better, we should from time to time “turn away” with a respectful ingratitude. Perhaps total non-violence is not humanly or psychologically possible or desirable, but the attempt to think in exteriority engenders an opening, an otherwise-than-being, in the hypostasis of the subject, which composes the potential for an ethical opening in intersubjective relations. Yet what is otherwise-than-being cannot help ending up as being-otherwise. Likewise, any reading of Lawrence’s text, no matter how non-violent it has been intended to be, cannot avoid reducing the text to a form of comprehension. If Levinas’s notion of absolute alterity inspires us to encounter Lawrence’s text as a gift, Derrida’s acknowledgement of the impossibility of the radical gift reminds us that the gift, in order for itself to come into being, must be returned, though in a way of ardent patience and attentiveness—that is, in a way of preparing for the arrival of the other.
NOTES

1 I am grateful to Professor Sun-chieh Liang for reminding me to avoid confusion between my use of the term “gift” here and Derrida’s concept of a gift. In Derrida’s thinking, the gift as an “absolute arrivant” (Derrida 1993: 34) recedes infinitely from the self’s grasp. Not only can one not ask what the gift is, or where it comes from, once there is a gift, one cannot hold onto it: “No gift is without absolute forgetting” (Derrida 1987:167). Indeed, given that the gift can never arrive at the destination, there can be no problem of returning it or not. What should be noted is that my adoption of the term refers not to Derrida’s conception of infinite regress but to Levinas’s emphasis on the attitude of a radical ingratitude in the face-to-face relation, which, as Davenport puts it, “has the similar structure that Derrida finds in an ideal (though for him, impossible) gift beyond all economic investment or expectation of payoff” (338).