

Rhythm and Sense in the Philosophy of Levinas

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1.

It has been more than thirty years since I discovered the texts of Emmanuel Levinas. Before publishing the Japanese translations of *Totality and Infinite* and *Otherwise than being*, I published an anthology of Levinas' work that included texts such as "Il y a", "Reality and its shadow" and so on. While I translated these texts, I noticed the importance Levinas accorded to the notion of "breaking of rhythm" as well as to that of "rhythm" itself, either when he compared "il y a" to the prose poem by Edgar Allan Poe in "Il y a" or when he stressed the musicality of image in "Reality and its shadow". But I've not been able to develop this topic for long time, until I read the first and the second volume of Levinas' *Complete Works* where we can find several very significant fragments on rhythm.

What is rhythm or breaking of rhythm for Levinas? For the latter, we can find a decisive passage in *Otherwise than being*:

"Proximity is nothing but difference -- non-coincidence, arrhythmia in the time, diachrony refractory to the thematization, refractory to the reminiscence which synchronize phases of a past. Impossible to narrate -- other losing his face in the narration." (*Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1974, p.258)

As far as I know, Levinas didn't use the term "arrhythmia" (arythmie) at all elsewhere; nevertheless, no doubt there is a solid link between "breaking of rhythm" remarked in "Il y a" and "arrhythmia" used in *Otherwise than being*, link running through thirty years. And it's not exaggeration to affirm Levinas' philosophy is nothing but philosophy of arrhythmia. That's what I want to say today for you.

2.

In his book *Levinas: The Life and the Trace*, Salomon Malka wonders why he began to read *Totality and Infinite* at the seashore near Montpellier. He recalls how he spent his summer vacations reading *Totality and Infinite* and he also remembers the sensations of being shaken by the waves. He says it was as if the tide of the phrases by Levinas had kept on crashing against the shore. Before Malka, Jacques Derrida also wrote about the style of *Totality and Infinite* as follows.

“In *Totality and Infinite*, the development of the themes isn’t purely descriptive or purely deductive. It unrolls itself with infinite insistence of the waters against the shore : return and repetition forever of the same wave against the same shore, in which all, in summing up itself each time, renews itself infinitely and enhances itself.”(*Écriture et Différence*, Minuit, 1968, p.124)

That is the way in which the style or writing of Levinas is compared to the movements of wave in the littoral zone. As you perhaps know well, Levinas himself said Talmud has an “oceanic rhythm.” To this, I’d like to add the unforgettable work of Thomas Wiemer which was the first to analyze in great detail the style or the destruction of style by Levinas and to name it “writing of memory”. Having said that, I must now point out that Levinas himself was very sensitive to the styles of writers such as Céline, Proust, and Poe. We must not forget Levinas was one of the first to appreciate Céline’s *Travel at the end of the night*. This is how Levinas describes Céline’s style in *Notbooks during captivity*.

“Style of Céline -- the verb took refuge in the interjection. The obscene word adds to this character of interjection. The phrase in crisis. The phrases without verb which give static appearance can have also this kind of exclamation.” (*Œuvres complètes*, tome I, Grasset, 2009, p.127)

This remark on the verb relates closely to the philosophical reflection of Levinas. In fact, Levinas’s words in *Notbooks during captivity* anticipate the positions he takes in *Otherwise than being*:

“Be(ing) isn’t only a verb -- but the Verb. (...) Be(ing) equal verb. Isn’t the essence of the word the verb? So the link between word and verb be(ing)” (*ibid.*, p.167)

Furthermore, I’ve found there a very interesting phrase: “The verb of be -- dilatation,

contraction of the being (*id.*).” Just like heart, just like respiration, the be or being has its own rhythm of repetition. Levinas also uses the word “vibration”. I will come back to this point later.

In regard to Proust, Levinas abandons the word style; but what he says about Proust still has something to do with the problematics of rhythm; the following quote from Levinas shows that it is included in the realm of sensation or of sensibility.

“In Proust there is something unique that isn’t his style or his theory of time or his fineness and precision of psychological analysis. It’s the aristocratic character of his sensations. Proust comes to make understand the interior life as something unique, as inimitable thrille.”(*ibid.*, p.179)

But, in regards to the question of literature (or the literary) in Levinas’ writing, we must mention the case of Edgar Allen Poe above all. Levinas quotes a long passage from the deleted part of *Loss of Breath* by Poe. I’d like to quote it in French.

“Ceci donc, méditait mon esprit, cette obscurité qui est palpable et opprime d’un sentiment de suffocation -- ceci -- ceci -- est véritablement la mort. Ceci est la mort -- la terrible mort -- la sainte mort. (...) La raison est folie, la Philosophie un mensonge. Nul ne connaîtra mes sensations, mon épouvante -- mon désespoir. Et pourtant les hommes continuent à raisonner, à philosopher, à faire les imbéciles. Il n’y a, je le vois bien, point de ci-après que ceci. Ceci -- ceci -- ceci -- est la seule Eternité ! -- et quelle, ô Belzébuth ! -- quelle éternité -- être étendu dans ce vaste -- ce redoutable vide -- à l’état de hideuse, de vague, d’insignifiante anomalie -- sans mouvement, mais désireux de me mouvoir -- sans puissance, mais avide d’être puissant -- pour jamais, pour jamais, pour jamais !” (*ibid.*, p.67)

It looks as if paratactic repetition of “ceci” swallowed the verb “être”; and Levinas comments on this passage as follows: “it is worthy to be noticed that repetitions here give a rhythm of the situation rather than the contents.” In the essay mentioned above “Il y a”, Levinas spoke about “breaking of rythme”(rupture du rythme). Now I come to think it’s one of the most important conceptions of Levinas’s philosophy. You might know well that Levinas defines “alterity” as “unpredictability”; the “unpredictability”, isn’t it a typical case of “breaking of rythme”?

Furthermore, the title itself of this prose poem of Poe: “The Loss of breath” had become one of the keywords of Levinas, that is “essoufflement.” As regards this Levinas wrote in *Otherwise than being* that “The Good supposes the breathlessness of spirit or the spirit stopping breath -- where the beyond the essence passes itself, says itself since Platon.

One must from now on wonder if this breathlessness or this halt isn't the extreme possibility of the Spirit which carries a sense of the beyond the Essence" (*AQE*, p.16)

3.

It was Merleau-Ponty who asked Levinas to write something about art for *The Modern Times* ; and it was also Merleau-Ponty who prefaced Levinas' text. In this preface, Merleau-Ponty compared Levinas with Sartre; in fact, Levinas stresses on the "disengagement" (*dégagement*) whereas Sartre professes the "engagement" (commitment) of writer. Instead of committing oneself into the world of light, artist escapes from the world into the obscure region of untruth. This Hadean descent is possible only by the fact the things as well as persons don't have absolute identity and they also do not resemble themselves. Each of them has its own double, its own image, its own shadow on itself. Levinas calls this "allegory". For example, caricatures fix and exaggerate it. But what is important here is an involuntary movement of distraction from oneself. It is no longer us who has our shadow; we are dragged down into shadow and lose our personality.

It is precisely in this process or recess that rhythm and musicality play their essential role. Rhythm signifies precisely the hold images have upon us. It's a kind of enchantment; and on this point, Levinas draws his inspiration from the anthropological research of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. The terms Levinas used such as resemblance, double, and shadow come from Lévy-Bruhl's *The Primitive Soul (L'âme primitive)* was published in 1927. As in the case of participant observation conducted by Lévy-Bruhl, we lose our individuality with rhythm and find that we belong to some collectivity as an anonymous being.

"Rhythm represents the situation where we cannot speak of consent or of assumption, or of initiative, or of liberty, because the subject is seized, taken away by rhythm. (...) In the rhythm, there isn't self (*soi*) any more, but something like passage from self to anonymity. It's the charm or incantation of the poesy or of music."(*Les impévues de l'histoire*, Fata Morgana, 1999, p.111)

If it were the case, *Totality and Infinite* as book for defense of subjectivity would necessarily be against the rhythm. Indeed, we can read there the passage as follows.

"To the language in which influences appear without our knowing it from conscious activity for enveloping it and lull it as rhythm, where the action is carried by the work it created, and where the artist becomes an artistic work in Dionysian manner -- according to the expression by Nietzsche -- the language is opposed language which breaks all the time the charm of rhythm and prevents an

initiative from becoming a simple role. The discourse is breaking and beginning, breaking of rhythm which ravishes and takes away the interlocutor -- that is prose.” (*Totalité et Infini*, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961, p.222)

I’ve already said that “breaking of rhythm” is characteristic of the Other; but it’s precisely this passage that has made me stop from advancing more research on the problematics of rhythm in *Totality and Infinite*. But now, I think I was wrong. Even if Levinas himself weren’t conscious of this fact at all, a kind of underground dialogue or rather polylogue around this problematics continue in his PHD thesis. At first, the early Nietzsche, at the epoch of *The Birth of Tragedy*, planned the Philosophy of Rhythm; and in its draft he writes that “The rhythm is an attempt of individuation. With the existence of the rhythm, multiplicity and becoming must exist.” For Nietzsche, rhythm is Apollonian principle of individuation, whereas for Levinas it is Dionysian principle of dis-individuation.

What strikes me most in this respect is a change or a total reversal happened in the trajectory 4 from *Totality and Infinite* to *Otherwise than being*. Levinas who rejected Nietzsche’s poesy or Dionysian rhythm, he had come to praise the poetical writing of Nietzsche.

“So called placing into brackets is it enough to execute the transcendental reduction? No, it isn’t. To realise it, we must reach nihilism of Nietzsche’s poetical writing, nihilism which reverses the irreversible time into vortex. We must reach laughter which refuses the speech.” (*AQE*, p.10)

Before entering the detail of this shift, I’d like to point out one thing. That is: these two passages suggest us that *Totality and Infinite* is to *Otherwise than being* what prose is to poesy. I know very well that the term poesy would cause misunderstanding. But Levinas himself acknowledges *Totality and Infinite* used still ontological language and therefor he tried to escape it after this work. In fact, Levinas came to situate the birthplace of ontology in the Said (le Dit) and speak about Saying without Said (Dire sans Dit) in his own way of exaggeration. The Said is proposition Levinas called apophansis : that is “S is P”, whereas the Saying cannot be integrated nor gathered into the proposition, and therefore it is called “delirium”(délire). It is needless to say that delirium could be connected with Dionysian perpetual tearing. That’s why Levinas came to praise the poetical writing by Nietzsche.

In *Totality and Infinite*, Levinas connects Nietzsche’s poetical writing with nihilism, with vortex. Nihilism is an overcoming of the European metaphysics and the term “vortex”

suggests Nietzsche's idea of "ewige Wiederkunft des Gleichen" (Eternal Return of the Same). Later I'll take up the effects exerted by this chain of Nietzsche's ideas: poetical writing, Dionysian rhythm, nihilism, eternal return of the same on *Otherwise than being*. As regards this point, I pose the hypothesis that besides Heidegger's *Nietzsche*, Blanchot's *Infinite Dialogue* (1969) invited Levinas to reevaluate Nietzsche's writing.

Very sorry, I cannot enter the detail today; but you may know Blanchot hadn't stop speaking about "rhythm" since his essay included in his *Literary Space* (1955). There Blanchot quoted the words of a German poet Hölderlin: "All is nothing but rhythm." In this respect, I think "breaking of rhythm" or "arrhythmia" by Levinas resembles very much what Hölderlin called "ceasure" (Zäsur), "counter-rhythmic movement."

What is "otherwise than being"? I know very well this form of question is wrong for the notion itself of "otherwise than being"; but it could be conceived as breaking of regular rhythm of breathing on the ground of ontology; and it's only this breaking of rhythm that can make possible a "sense." In a word, philosophy of Levinas is philosophy of "sense"; it takes "sense" for "bottomless of being", it refuses to take "being" for "bottom of sense." On this point, I dare to assert "otherwise than being" is another name of being. We know Levinas qualifies "il y a" as "absurde", that is "non-sense" Therefore, we can now complement our previous definition: now philosophy of Levinas is philosophy of birth of "sense" based on "non-sense." As for Levinas, impossibility of this birth of "sense" is nothing but inevitability of ethics and of philosophy.

As regards what is called "sense", we could find several impressive descriptions in Notebooks during captivity. In particular fragments about the battle of Alençon, a town in the Normandy of France. "The wall-hangings which fall down in my scene of Alençon concern also the things. The things decompose themselves, lose their sense. (...) But I wouldn't like to speak simply about the end of the illusions, it's rather the end of the sense."(*EC*, tome I, p.132)

As the end of the philosophy is for Levinas the beginning of the epoche where all things become philosophical, the end of sense turns itself into the rebirth of sense. It corresponds with the breaking of rhythm, and with breathlessness. Breathlessness here signifies the excluded third term within the pairing of inspiration and expiration. The same would be true of other key concepts presented in *Otherwise than Being*, such as Saying-Said. With the third notion of "Un Saying", Levinas stressed amphibological rather alternant rhythm of correlation Say-Said. As for the rebirth of sense, Levinas employs the word "twinkling" (clignotement) which must remind us of rhythm. Let's read another passage including the word "modulate": "The trace draws itself and erases itself in the face as equivocality of Say, it modulates thus the modality of the Transcendent."(*AQE*, p.27)

It's true the modulation isn't rhythm itself; but rhythm as well as modulation might belong to what the Jewish interpretative tradition calls "Taam", meaning flavor or tasty.

To this I must add that in the chapter five of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas came to speak about the sense of "Il y a", which originally is defined as "breaking of rhythm", as "non-sense." Obsessive repetition deranging our rhythm as subject or as citizen is necessary for the advent of the sense itself and prevents both "justice" and "charity"(love) from institutionalize themselves. In this sense, it's very interesting to find the passages in Levinas' inedited texts, which relate both "justice" and "good" with the notion of rhythm.

"Justice is some relation that exists between parts and all, where parts are neither absorbed in all, nor annihilated by all, and parts do not absorb all. The speech consists in breaking this rhythm -- and the justice consists in my presence in all and against all, in the manner according to which a speaker coexists with another speaker." (*ibid.*, p.534)

"The essence of time is rhythm which liberates the instant from their tragic character of stance. Thus we get the first vision about the Idea of the Good. The Good isn't Being; it comes from the rhythm itself of the time. It's precisely the rhythm of time. (...) It signifies the fact that Being isn't accomplished all of a sudden. The Good isn't accomplishment -- because accomplishment consists in having being already accomplished forever. Whereas Good is the fact that what has been accomplished is decomposed. We can thus understand why Good is beyond the Being." (*ŒC*, tome III, 2013, p.203)

4.

Furthermore, Levinas said about experiences of prisoner that "there was a new rhythm of life" (*ŒC*, tome I, p.203). Then how could we read Levinas' *Notebooks during captivity*? Naturally each reader would have his or her own way. Nothing can forbid it. As for me, I've been wondering why Levinas had started the text by mentioning Maimonides, Bahiya and their notions of allegory. For me, it wasn't fortuitous.

You may know well that at this epoche, Levinas was much interested in Proust's novel: *In search of Lost Time*, in particular its fifth and sixth volumes titled *The Prisoner (La prisonnière)*, *The Fugitive (Albertine disparue)*. Both Prisoner and Fugitive, Albertine represents for Levinas alterity of the Other. As Levinas writes, "What is Albertine unless an evanescence of other? Her reality is made with her nothingness, her presence with absence, the struggle against the elusive."(*ibid.*, p.72) But that's not all. The word "prisoner"

(*prisonnière*) had been often used by Ibn Gabirol for example for designating the state of Jewish Diaspora. As for Maimonides, he was obliged to live in the Islamic world. According to Abraham Heschel, Maimonides recalled his life as follows: “Since our life of exile began, persecution hasn’t ceased. Since my childhood, no, since I was in my mother’s womb, I’ve endured sufferings”. At that time of persecution, Jews of the Diaspora faced the alternative of apostasy or martyrdom. In this situation, Maimonides displaced it and opened the third way for the Jews to live through, even with the verbal apostasy. I think this fact prepared anyhow the Marrano’s way of existence, which, through its essential ambiguity and duplicity, could come to disclose the inanity of the martyrdom of logical radicalism.

As war prisoner, Levinas was clearly conscious of this historical fact and as Maimonides he tried to create a new rhythm of life in the prisoner camp so as to escape the false alternative of apostasy or martyrdom. The expression “*Quiddush hashem*” included in the following passage testifies to the fact that Levinas situated himself in the rabbinic tradition. As I said above, it’s no accident at all Levinas began his Notebooks with the mention to Maimonides.

“For the people deported to the concentration camps, the martyrdom was imminent, whereas the war prisoners had enough time to prepare themselves for it. There was an interval where one could take certain attitudes toward the suffering before it captured and tore them. (...) The people deported to the concentration camps experienced it as torture, death, *Quiddush hashem* (sanctification of the name [of God].” (*ibid.*, p.246)

Levinas seldom uses the word “martyrdom”; but we can find a very important passage including this term in his second opus magnum *Otherwise than Being*, as well as in one of his books on Judaism: *Beyond the Verse*. I’d like to quote two passages, one from each of these books:

“Signification as witness or martyrdom -- intelligibility preceding the light, preceding the present of initiative by which signification of logos signifies the being in its present or its synchrony.” (*AQE*, p.124)

“Crudeness of the world, of which Judaism isn’t only conscience but also witness, that is martyrdom. Cruelty where the burns of my suffering and the anguish of my death can transform themselves into dread and into worry about other man.”

(*L'au-delà du verset*, Minuit, 1982, p.18)

Therefore we can say that for Levinas, “martyrdom” constitutes precisely the essence of Judaism; nevertheless the second passage suggests that here “martyrdom” doesn’t consist of dying, even if it were for God, rather, it takes place in my worrying for other person. The etymological sense of martyrdom is to bear witness. Therefore, bearing, that is “witness” is another name for this kind of worry. What Levinas calls witness is “Saying”; but to “Saying” isn’t simple “Saying”. It is not an action based on my initiative. On the contrary, I’ve been always obliged to “Saying” an “Unsayable”, in other words, to send excessively and gratuitously my Being-for-the-Other. Levinas would say I’m obliged to expose myself “beyond my death”. That’s what Levinas calls “infinite responsibility” for the Other. But it should be noticed here that the Other isn’t God at all and that in the philosophy of Levinas, the responsibility for another man prevails over the responsibility for God. Such an extraordinary plot of ethics is in all respects breakings of rhythm.

In his essay on music, Saint Augustine also stressed the radical change of rhythm in the pious life. But by saying this, I don’t want to speak about convergence, but divergence, or rather dynamism of polyrhythmicity or of transrhythmicity. In this respect, I recall a remark Spinoza made in his posthumous book on Hebrew Grammar: according to him, almost all the Hebrew words, including prepositions, could be classified as “noun”, so that we can write “the between” or “betweens” (*les entres*) for example. This topic will constitute the subject of my following research.

*This text reproduces my lecture given at Levinas’ Summer Seminar organized by Doctor Richard Cohen at Berkeley on 23th July in 2016. And it’s me who translates into English all the citations from Levinas as well as from Derrida.