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Spectre of the Stranger

Towards a Phenomenology of Hospitality

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my grandfather,
Santo Bazzano, who emigrated from his native Calabria to New York
in the first years of the twentieth century*

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Who loves the stranger?

Who else is there to love?

(Jacques Derrida)

...justice, not metaphysics;

(Geoffrey Hill)

A spectre is haunting Europe...

(Marx & Engels)

Introduction

I started writing this book as a rebellion against the absolute -- only to realize, half way through, that there is no such thing. Most philosophical and religious traditions speak of two worlds, even though the language they use differs. Zen Buddhism speaks of the *absolute* and the *relative* dimensions: "like two arrows, meeting in mid air", they are said to fit one another "as a box and its lid". Or so goes the recitation of the sutras. In reality, there seems to be a preference for the absolute, for 'enlightenment', often understood as a breakthrough to a 'God's-eye view'. We find the same division in Hellenism: instead of absolute and relative, the Greeks used the terms *being* and *becoming*. Hegel similarly wrote of *infinite* and *finite*, and in Hinduism we find a distinction between *Brahman* and *Maya*. In art and in literature, as in our habitual language, we distinguish between the sublime and the ordinary.

And yet, alongside this mainstream philosophical view, a different perspective has developed which focuses on the appreciation of the givens, or gifts, of the everyday and on its unfathomable nature – a perspective which refrains from metaphysical pretensions. Another positive result of this stance is a democratization of the entire spiritual and philosophical endeavour. Over the years, I have noticed and grown wary of the tendency, prevalent among explorers of the human potential, which emphasises transcendence and enlightenment to the detriment of the everyday dimension into which we are thrown. This is often accompanied by the cult of personality directed at teachers, therapists and facilitators and kept alive by the pervasive belief that these people have crossed a threshold earning them permanent access to a dimension denied to mortals. This tendency is at odds with the cultivation of doubt and perplexity, essential attributes in any enquiry wishing to travel a little further than the metaphysical shopping mall. It is also at variance with the

emphasis, in Zen Buddhism as well as in humanistic psychology, on everyday reality. Zen reminds us that ordinary mind is the Buddha; Carl Rogers reminds us that the actualizing tendency is “always up to something”.

The yearning for the absolute is nevertheless enticing and I do feel a kinship with the aspirations and the claims of the Romantics, with the flight of Icarus and the feverish visions of Rimbaud. If, on the one hand, they warn us against the dangers of a life consummated by too great a thirst for the sublime, the biographies of Kierkegaard, Genet, Van Gogh, Jimi Hendrix, and Sylvia Plath continue to ignite the imagination. Whereas artists transmute their yearning into a perilous dedication to the Muses, spirituality and psychology devotees invariably convey this longing in the language of *totality*: the day after their conversion or revelation, they become confident purveyors of truth and (invariably second-hand) metaphysics.

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Idealists of every creed hurriedly dismiss the everyday because they see it as dualistic. In deciding to pay attention to it, I ran into the difficult domain of ethics and morality. Throughout the book I emphasize the difference between *morality* and *ethics*: I see morality as the set of introjected norms of civil life, the conscience that is nearly always bad conscience, whereas I understand ethics as the attempt to respond adequately to the other. Morality turns a person into a bourgeois. Ethics turns a person into a citizen. Morality produces interiority-as-repentance. Ethics introduces exteriority as reality.

Twentieth century ethics inherited the mighty deconstruction of morals carried out by Nietzsche. It took several decades and the unfolding of an ambiguous cultural movement, phenomenology, to accelerate the dismantling of morality and metaphysics, a process which contributed to the advent of our post-metaphysical era.

It may seem odd to speak of a post-metaphysical era now that religious wars are back in fashion, but the virulent revival of dogmatism we are witnessing at present is born out of the decline of metaphysical certainties.

Levinas was the first to introduce a startling element in philosophy: he located the foundation of ethics not in religion or universal reason, but in phenomena themselves and particularly in the *face* of the other. He did not reach this position at random but after having patiently dismantled the philosophy of Heidegger, a thinker he himself had introduced to the French-speaking world.

Reading Levinas is a remarkable experience: a sincere confrontation with his thought demands nothing less than a careful dismantling of the entire edifice of identity on which traditional western thought is built, an undoing which has repercussions in philosophy, psychology and politics. When I first started writing this book, I tried to articulate the impact this mode of thought had on me; four years later, with the book completed, I can say, not without a sense of relief, that I am free of Levinas. Some may recognize how an original thought becomes sooner or later a new constraint; others may be familiar with the insidious anxiety of influence which makes us worry to be growing under the foliage of a mighty tree that restores yet limits us.

Levinas's position too easily lends itself to the injunctions of the super-ego, and the response to the other slips into a post-modern version of the old patriarchal order. Unlike Buber, Levinas, a Talmudic scholar before being a phenomenologist, sadly failed to recognize otherness in the face of the Palestinians. I believe that Levinas's phenomenology gives us nevertheless the foundation for constructing a *radical ethics* through a widening of the personal and relational spheres into the social and political dimensions, in search of subjects who can represent otherness in the era of globalized capitalism.

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I had not anticipated that by investigating contemporary ethics I would stumble into the minefield of politics. I knew that researching and writing a book can take one to unexpected places: *Buddha is dead* had begun with the relatively simple intention of paying tribute to Nietzsche and the Zen tradition, but in the process I encountered psychotherapy, first as a client and then, as the cliché of the wounded healer dictates, by becoming a fully-fledged practitioner.

The current book too had surprises in store: I found themes which I had abandoned in 1980, the year I left for India, at the peak of a turbulent experience with the students' movement and the Italian radical Left. I cannot claim that many will identify with this path, but some readers may find reverberations and even a sort of indirect encouragement.

We used to say the personal is political, and I think this still holds true. But all too often care of self becomes solipsism, while political activism becomes projection onto an external enemy. Both in *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality*, Foucault expressed two theses which disoriented the orthodox Marxists of the time. The first one maintains that in modern society power has no definite locus but is de-centred (which makes the siege of the Winter Palace redundant). The second is an even more provocative statement: there is no external power but we ourselves are integral to it -- which makes it nearly impossible to conceive a clash with the power *out there*. Rather than constituting an impasse, these two theses invite us to study subjectivity directly and initiate a process of dis-identification with the central axioms of coercive power.

In carrying on his research, Foucault focused, during his last lectures at the *Collège de France* in the nineteen eighties, on Hellenism and care of self. Some erroneously interpreted this as a return to traditional subjectivity, but studying and observing the self does not imply

substantiating the self. One could argue that Buddhist meditation is precisely this: phenomenological investigation, patient dismantling of a fictitious entity, a process which is at variance with the Judaeo-Christian vision and mainstream western philosophy which both understand interiority as repentance. Perhaps it would not have been necessary for westerners to resort to the Buddha's teachings if western culture had paid attention to investigations alive but marginal in the very heart of European culture. In Montaigne, for instance, introspection leads to discovery of the fluid and contradictory nature of the self rather than to the operative parables of repentance and redemption. To study the self is a form of observation akin to Montaigne's sceptical and ironic procedures of investigation and to the exploratory methods taught by the Buddha. Self-inquiry elicits the dismantling of traditional philosophical categories and of the very notion of power. One needs to experience the insubstantiality of the self in order to understand the insubstantiality of the expanded self, i.e. the nation-state, as well as the insubstantiality of the cosmic self (God, transcendental consciousness, *atman* and so forth).

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In the first chapter, I discuss the notions of identity and otherness. Identity is conventionally constructed *against* otherness. My place in the sun implies your place in the cold. The identity that emerges out of this conventional perspective is not the singularity that emerges out of mutual recognition but individualism, an isolated and solipsistic view of the self. What I aim to show is that a different kind of interdependent relation exists between identity and otherness, out of which individuality is born. The name for this interdependent relation is *hospitality*. Throughout the first chapter I move back and forth between two hypotheses, one inspired by the Zen Buddhist tradition, the other motivated by the philosophy of otherness as expounded by some influential thinkers in the last few

decades. The first maintains that there is no such thing as interiority; it asserts the non-substantiality and ineffability of the self. When we look closely, we do not find a thing we can call the self, distinct from phenomena. Consciousness itself emerges from phenomena. The idea I have of myself is another phenomenon just as the traffic noise, the birdsong in this late summer morning. I simply cannot know myself as a solid and separate entity. The *I* too belongs to exteriority. I am external to myself, unknowable to myself; a *stranger* to myself. The *I* itself belongs to otherness. *Je est un autre*: I is another, Rimbaud's famous phrase is, as we shall see, open to several meanings. Identity begins to falter as my observation becomes more precise.

The second hypothesis is that only through hospitality true identity is born. Summoned by another, called to respond, the response *creates* me. Called to respond, I step into that shared domain that the neurologist and philosopher Kurt Goldstein¹, forerunner of Gestalt psychology and a man inspired by Goethe, calls *the immediate*. Called to respond, to be a host to the other, I recognize that an autarchic existence is sheer illusion. It is easy to mistake the domain of the immediate with the inter-subjective and dialogical domains. The latter – now canonical in contemporary psychology – emphasizes the relational aspect of the encounter between two or more subjectivities and confirms the notion of identity rather than questioning it. It also misconstrues the notion of interdependence, common to Buddhism and existential phenomenology. *Inter-subjectivity* is the way in which mainstream western philosophy - steeped as it is in Judaeo-Christian values – translates (and in doing so largely betrays) groundlessness, by safely inscribing it in the Christian notion of love of one's neighbour. Laudable as it might be, such notion averts our gaze from the terror which arises when stumbling upon the insubstantiality of the self.

¹ Goldstein, 1995.

A perspective rooted in otherness also overturns the Platonic idea of maieutics and the very meaning of experience. The process of education is then no longer seen as extracting pre-existent knowledge and wisdom but instead as the product of an encounter with otherness.

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Striving to translate the previous statements into the social and political domains, in the second chapter I went in search of myths and cultural matrixes which justified hostility towards otherness. Relying on Regina Schwartz's seminal study on the Bible², I have traced the origin of nationalism and xenophobia in monotheism, or rather *monolatry*, i.e. the superstitious belief in an exclusive and exclusivist deity. Hospitality, or even *xenophilia* (love of strangers), is then the opposite stance, no less than a revolution, albeit a *human revolution* (the title of the second chapter which is also an expression used by Marx in the 1840s) – a political, but also ethical and aesthetic revolution.

By opening the borders to capital and to the profit of the elites, globalization has exacerbated the condition of millions who have become refugees, migrants, non-citizens and effectively *non-persons*. If individuality comes to light through openness to the other, in the wider social sphere the citizen becomes a citizen by opening up to the experience of the non-citizen. Only thus he becomes a true citizen, for it is only a full recognition of vulnerability which defines human goodness and the meaning of justice itself³.

In an attempt to redefine an emancipative praxis, migrants may come to embody (alongside those who live at the margins of globalization's air-conditioned nightmare) a new revolutionary subjectivity after the disappearance of the proletariat. The ethical response

² Schwartz, 1997.

³ Nussbaum, 1994.

marries political activism and renews the tradition of anarchism, substituting the classic notion of individual emancipation of the anarchist tradition with responsibility towards otherness and revolutionary violence with a combative pacifism, civil disobedience and direct action.

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In the third chapter I have attempted to delineate the connection between the ethical and the aesthetic dimension. By introducing a symbolic dimension one might avoid the danger of a too-literal interpretation of injunctions and obligations which can be easily hijacked by moral impositions. *Poetry*, understood in a wider sense, is the term I propose in the attempt to avoid the subjugation to the totalizing imperatives of religion and science. It indicates, rather than defines, otherness in the area of identity, of relating, and in the political domain. Inspired by Hölderlin's statement *dwelling poetically on this Earth*, it reasserts hospitality first and foremost as the poetic act of a subject who never forgets his or her status as a passenger and a guest on this Earth.