

Autochthony and Welcome: Discourses of Exile in Levinas and Derrida

Edith Wyschogrod

Rice University

Is hospitality not a solicitation to its addressee, "*Viens*, all that I have, all that I am, is at your disposal?" Is hospitality, as Emmanuel Levinas writes, "an incessant alienation of the ego... by the guest entrusted to it ... being torn from oneself for another in giving to the other the bread from one's mouth," a one for the other that fissures the ego, a hospitality that does not expect reciprocity and withholds nothing from the guest?¹ Or is there, as Derrida observes, an ineliminable tension between an unconditional offer to another and the juridical, political and economic conditions that actually constitute the offer and without which the extending of hospitality is meaningless? Does this tension inhere in Abraham's proffering of bread and refreshment to the three strangers who arrive after God appears to him at Mamre (Genesis 18.4-5), an offer generally adduced as a paradigmatic instance of biblical hospitality?

Because the invitation to the other, "*Viens*," issues from a corporeal subject to another corporeal subject who must traverse a space to a site to which that other is invited, it would seem that hospitality is bound up with distance and contiguity. But the awareness of the "to and fro" of this traversal is, for Levinas, a theoretical apprehension of space that is contingent upon a prior relation to the other, not one of perception but of proximity. In Levinas' terms in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*:

"As a subject that approaches, I am not in the approach called to play the role of a perceiver that reflects or welcomes... Proximity is not a state, a repose, but a restlessness, null site, outside of the place of rest. It overwhelms the calm of the non-ubiquity of a being which becomes a rest on a site. No site then is ever sufficiently a proximity."²

Prior to representation or reflection, the subject who approaches in proximity, the one who is nigh (near), the neighbor, is caught up in the relation to the other, in what Levinas calls fraternity, itself a primordial act of signifying. It would seem that meaning is born in and as hospitality thus understood.

Yet if, as Levinas also concedes, ontological significations cannot be disengaged from their empirical conditions, the relation with the Other may call the world into question but is not produced outside the world. Thus in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas maintains that human relationships must not remain "a beatific contemplation of the other" which would (on his view) constitute idolatry. In contrast to his later account of hospitality in *Otherwise than Being* as occurring at a "null site," that of a proximity that cannot be measured, the earlier work acknowledges the necessity for habitation. For there to be hospitality there must be a home: "Recollection in a home open to the other [is] hospitality."³ The home is a site that allows for self-enclosure, the shutting in of oneself that constitutes individuation, yet is also open to the other. To be sure, the home founds possession or ownership but is not itself owned in the same way as are moveable goods; it is possessed because "it already ... is hospitable for its proprietor."⁴ Yet the home is "the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering that has made it possible."⁵ Did Abraham, the biblical paradigm of hospitality, not claim, "A wandering Aramean was my father?"

The Problem of Autochthony: Abraham and Lot

The other who can be seen on the one hand as the neighbor can also for Levinas be encountered as a magisterial presence. It is, the presence of the other as a human face that binds me in fraternity, another that is encountered as asymmetrical and higher than myself. Does Abraham in Genesis 18.2 not run from the entrance of his tent and "bow down to the ground" in a primal gesture of hospitality as subservience to the other, to the strangers in recognition of their alterity and of the elsewhere from which they come. Derrida sees this event as an exemplary instance of hospitality in the Abrahamic religions,⁶ an account that would support Levinas' contention that "the relation with the other is accomplished as service and hospitality."⁷

The biblical narrative continues with Abraham's intervention on behalf of the righteous in the sinful city of Sodom (Genesis 18.16-23). This plea is followed by Lot's serving as host to the strangers and his effort to protect them from the sexual desires of the citizens of Sodom by offering them his virgin daughters in their stead. The alarming implications of the proposed trade with respect to the status of daughters requires extended analysis that cannot be undertaken here. Relevant in the present context is the sacrifice, the becoming hostage of that which is held dear. For Levinas, the primordial act of expiation is the willingness to substitute for the other.⁸ Is this acceptance of being hostage for the other not also the very law of hospitality?

These brief comments on Genesis 18.1-9 and Genesis 19.1-11 lie within the disclosive conditions of a Levinasian biblical hermeneutic but, it can be argued, the aporias of the Abrahamic narrative require further exploration. If one invites another to one's home is not the precondition of this hospitality a certain agency and a certain belonging to a site on the part of the host? Do these conditions not presuppose that the host is justified in soliciting the other in that the host can lay claim to the

site? Thus, the right to invite would seem to intrinsic to the act of invitation. If however the other is absolutely other, descriptively unspecifiable, the host can only offer the other in his/her unspecifiability a non-site. And, if so, has the host not abandoned the power of agency required in order to fulfill the responsibility to offer food and shelter? The difficulty is compounded when we see that the face of the other that in its vulnerability solicits hospitality always already relates one to a third party:

"[The other] moves into the form of the We, aspires to a State, institutions, laws, which are the source of a universality. But politics bears a tyranny within itself; it deforms the I and the other who have given rise to it, for it judges them according to universal rules."⁹

Still, it is not enough to define the stranger in terms of ethos, family, civil society or the state as did Hegel.¹⁰ Today, as Derrida reminds us, states attempt to regulate the boundaries between public and private, to control the technological channels of communication thereby altering these boundaries. The state is an outside that is inside so that being at home (*chez soi*) in an inviolable domain is no longer possible.¹¹ Derrida points to current ethnic, national and religious reactions against anonymous technologies. It must also be added that the rationality of the infoculture, what Dominique Janicaud calls technodiscourse, exerts a power of its own.¹²

To be sure, the rationality of technodiscourse can contest the space of the site but the latter does not disappear. If the site persists, the paradox of hospitality, in Derrida's terms, "the unconditional or the hyperbolic on the one hand, and the juridico-political... on the other" is ineliminable.¹³ The ethical then extends between the two, the one governed by the absolute gift, the other by the rules of economy, between hospitality of the proper name, "Peter, come," or the absence of the name, "Whoever you are, you are welcome. As my interlocutor you are absolutely strange to me, the stranger par excellence."¹⁴ If this

tension is to be maintained, the nameless subject of ethics must be deterritorialized so that s/he emanates from a null-site. Still, it must be recalled that, for Levinas, it is impossible to become detached from empirical conditions, as though significations could be produced from outside the world. Yet is the other as signifying, as the subject of approach and proximity, not decorporealized, dispossessed of its empiricity in the interest of this deterritorialization? Levinas describes the subject as a self in the accusative, passive in its exposure to being, an offering of itself that is a suffering. "The subject is in the accusative, expelled from being, outside of being."¹⁵ If so, must it not be conceded that the one who suffers, who is not a gnostic subject but an incarnate someone, be somewhere?

I cannot enter into the details of Levinas' critique of an autochthony that he sees as grounding Heidegger's philosophy. However, insofar as the relation of hospitality to alterity and to a certain politics of the site are at issue in the present context, it is necessary to consider, however briefly, Heidegger's account of dwelling. For Heidegger, on Levinas' view, being at home is inextricably tied to autochthony: to dwell is to be rooted in the earth. To be, *Ich bin*, is linked to the word *bauen*, to build, so that the manner in which one exists is as one who dwells.¹⁶ For Heidegger, it is poetry both as a measuring of that which cannot be measured, the Godhead, and as a kind of building that opens the possibility of dwelling. Significant in the present context is the claim that authentic poetry exists as long as there is kindness, understood not as a welcoming of the other in her alterity but as "the pure, [that comes] to the dwelling being of man... as the claim and appeal of the measure to the heart."¹⁷

In *Totality and Infinity*, the hospitable subject is, as already noted, localized, inhabiting a site from which food and shelter are offered and, as such, having the right to invite. The home in its concreteness exists as granted to a subject by a political or an economic entity that is empowered to do so.

The home is always already a place of inclusion and exclusion, of friend and enemy, a place in which the stranger may evoke distrust: is s/he friend or enemy? In an exemplary biblical instance of such suspicion, it may be recalled that the men of Sodom say of Lot, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge," (Genesis 19.9).

Bending Etymologies

Is the friend/enemy relation not already to be discerned in the etymology of the term hospitality? It can be assumed that the Indo European ghost is the root of the Latin *hospitalitas* and of the old Norse *gestri*, a root that denotes guest and host, someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality. The term also derives from the Latin *hostis*, enemy or stranger as in hostile.¹⁸ Does not the German *Gastfreundlichkeit*, hospitality, not evoke its root *Geist*, spirit or ghost, so that one is reminded of the spectral possibility of the enemy in the guest? In what might be seen as a subtle correction of this picture, Carl Schmitt (admittedly a politically problematic thinker who figures in Derrida's account of hospitality) considers another etymological distinction having important semiotic implications.¹⁹ In order to preserve the Christian injunction to love one's enemies, Schmitt distinguishes personal animus from political enmity thereby cordoning off a discursive space for the personal in which Christian love can be expressed. Derrida explains:

"In Chapter 3 of *The Concept of the Political*, [Schmitt] emphasizes ... that *inimicus* is not *hostis* in Latin and *ekhthros* and *polemios* is not *poleimos* in Greek. This allows him to conclude that Christ's teaching concerns the love we must show to our private enemies, to those we might be tempted to hate through through personal or subjective passion and not to public enemies."²⁰

For Schmitt, the precondition for the possibility of politics is precisely a war that

does not presuppose hatred of an enemy (*hostis*). But for Derrida the reciprocal imbrication of public and personal cannot be dismissed. Turning to the text of Matthew 5.43-44, Derrida links the command to love one's enemy to the Levitical command to love one's neighbor. The neighbor, Derrida maintains, is *eo ipso* a member of the same ethnic group (*amith*) as oneself and thus always already belongs to the political in Schmitt's sense. Thus, if one loves the enemy as one loves the neighbor, Derrida concludes, "it would be difficult to keep the potential opposition between one's neighbor and one's enemy." Is the political then not already "within the sphere of the private?"²¹ Do the men of Sodom not see Lot as an enemy when he assumes the role of judge because he attempts to usurp an autochthony he does not possess?

The Linguistic Turn and the Political

The etymological difference between *hostis* and *inimicus*, an aporia that brings to light what is ineliminably political in the sphere of the private, can be discerned in Levinas' account of the rhetorical aspect of language. Consider first that, for Levinas, hospitality arises in and as language. The relation with the other not only leads to the generality that language or the word makes possible but is this generality, the primordial donation or offering of the world as word. To be sure, Levinas insists that the relation to the other is realized in and as the vocative, the language of interpellation. "The interpellated one is called upon to speak, to come to the assistance of his word."²² Such speech is essentially a coinciding of teacher and teaching, so that true teaching is not merely drawing out of truths, (a recognizably Kierkegaardian point). Instead, "truth is made possible by relation with the other, our master" so that justice crystallizes in recognizing in the other a magisterial presence.²³ But—and this is the point—Levinas concedes that "rhetoric, taking the position of him who approaches the neighbor with ruse... is absent from no discourse."²⁴ As propaganda, diplomacy etc.,

rhetoric solicits the other's agreement and is, as such, violence, injustice. If rhetoric is always already intrinsic to language must it not also infiltrate hospitality? Referring to Carl Schmitt, Derrida writes "War has its own rules and perspectives, its strategies and tactics but they presuppose a political decision... naming who is the enemy."²⁵

In addition, it is crucial to note that for Levinas the relation to another is not that of two monadic individuals but ineliminably plural. The other is imbricated in social existence, thus already reflecting a third person who opens the possibility for justice. The relation to the other is not one of intimacy, an *a deux*, but one in which "the third party looks [out] at me in the eyes of the Other -- language is justice... the epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity."²⁶ The meaning of "third in the eyes of the other" is a matter of considerable complexity. The other is both destitute and an equal. "His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the third party... whom the other already serves He comes to join me in service."²⁷

Once hospitality and justice are linked, the category of the political cannot be bypassed. In this regard, it is helpful to elaborate further upon Derrida's reading of Carl Schmitt's "polemical use of the concept of the political" and Schmitt's rendering of the friend/enemy relation.²⁸ For Schmitt, Derrida argues, key concepts are already presupposed in the analyses intended to establish them. Thus, "concepts of the polemical are never implemented... except in a polemical field [and] have a strictly polemical use."²⁹ This question begging as it were is intrinsic to the "logical matrix" of Schmitt's vision of the political. Thus Derrida:

"The State presupposes the political, to be sure logically distinguished from it; but the analysis of the political... its irreducible core, the friend/enemy configuration, can only privilege... as its sole guiding thread, the State form of this configuration -- the friend or enemy qua citizen."³⁰

One must of course decide who is to count as the friend.

There are, Derrida maintains, three logical possibilities in determining the meaning of this crucial relation. First, there is no friend without the possibility of killing, a possibility that establishes a political or non-natural community that is contingent upon the mortality of all parties, so that the parties are in a sense "dead for one another." Second, what is true of the enemy, his mortality, suspends or annuls friendship. The same possibility, mortality, is true of both friend and enemy and yet altogether different in relation to the friend. The interdiction against killing in the case of the friend both expresses and forbids this possibility. Third, Derrida asks whether there may be a politics of friendship beyond that of killing, whether *polis* and *filia* can be associated differently. We are, Derrida says, at the crossroads of an "undecidable triviality." Are we in pondering this tension returned to Aristotle's apothegm: "My friend there is no friend?"³¹

Are we, in applying comparable logical strategies to hospitality, compelled to say to a putative host, "There is no hospitality?" Like the bestowing of a gift, hospitality consists in an act of donation, in giving something to someone, as Derrida points out, conditional when the gratitude of the guest is expected but unconditional if no reciprocity is anticipated. When conditional, the mastery of the host is asserted in that it is he who invites, whose house, city, and nation control the relation to the guest. When hospitality is unconditional no invitation is issued. The other, his coming a pure surprise, simply arrives and is welcomed with no thought given to the possible consequences. "For unconditional hospitality to take place you have to accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place... stealing everything or killing everyone."³²

Levinasian hospitality can be seen to exhibit a similar tension: one invites another to one's home thereby implicitly expressing proprietary rights while, at the same time, the other who arrives exerts an

unconditional ethical demand. In response to the other who has come one must be willing unconditionally to offer oneself as hostage for that other so that self-donation is, in its pure form, the gift of death. For Derrida, the risk of "wild war and terrible aggression" renders the question of pure hospitality's existence undecidable. Can it then be said that the apothegm "My friend there is no friend," re-arises spectrally in Derrida's claim with respect to hospitality, "There may be no such thing?"³³

In/conclusion

The inquiry into the private and the political, into the meaning of friend and enemy, is not an excursus in the analysis of hospitality but exposes the risks and paradoxes built into the discussions of hospitality in the works of Levinas and Derrida. The personal is shown to remain personal yet is at the same time already demonstrably political, autochthony persists while engaging in its own deterritorialization. As Derrida argues, "absolute hospitality requires that I risk opening my home to the stranger... to the absolutely unknown, [who remains] anonymous... [so that the other can] have a place in the place that I offer him."³⁴ Still, it must be asked, is hospitality not also rendered to one who is named as well as to the nameless subject? If I am host is there not already a collusion between hospitality and power? Even if, as host, I may be willing to risk inviting the enemy into my home, does not the fact that I speak from a site implicate me in the *polemos* of the political? Private or family law is always already mediated by public or state law that can be both repressive and protective in keeping with Schmitt's model of friend and enemy as grounding political power. Is this configuration of power not attested in the failure to extend the privileges of inhabitants to the resident alien as exemplified in the men of Sodom's questioning of Lot's right to extend hospitality to the stranger?

Although the absence of physical boundaries in the virtual spaces of the new communication technologies radically alters

biblical accounts of the home, one does not feed the hungry and shelter the destitute from the nowhere of a website. Virtual space is infiltrated by an ethical subject who is always already corporeal. To say this is not to confuse the corporeality of the ethical subject with a state of nature, as it were, but rather to see the subject in her/his bodily vulnerability as contesting political power grounded in the friend/enemy distinction wherever it is to be found.

Notes

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Trans. Alphonso Lingis, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), 79.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 82.
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Trans. Alphonos Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 172.
4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 157.
5. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 172.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Anne Dufourmantelle invite Jacques Derrida a repondre: De l'hospitalite*, (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1997), 135. Translations of direct citations from this work are mine.
7. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300.
8. In *Otherwise than Being*, 114, Levinas writes: "In responsibility for another, subjectivity is only [the] unlimited passivity of an accusative ... [reducible] to the passivity of a self only as a persecution... that turns into an expiation (p.112). He goes on to say that "the self of this passivity... is a hostage."
9. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 300
10. Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalite*, 44-45.
11. Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalite*, 47ff.
12. Dominique Janicaud, *Powers of the Rational: Science, Technology and the Future of Thought*, Trans. Peg Birmingham and Elizabeth Birmingham, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana

University Press, 1994). See esp. chap. 3, pp59-75.

13. Jacques Derrida, *On Hospitality*, 119.
14. The latter position is that of Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 73.
15. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 110.
16. Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 147.
17. Martin Heidegger, "Poetically Man Dwells," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 228-29.
18. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Ed. William Morris (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 1518. See also Derrida's play on the ambiguity of his coined word *hostipitalite* expressing both welcome and hostility in *De l'hospitalite*, 45.
19. A brief account of Schmitt's membership in the Nazi party and for a certain time his articulation of juridical principles in consonance with its doctrines can be found in George Schwab, *The Challenge of the Exception*, (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1970). See esp. Part II, "Schmitt and National Socialism 1933-1936." For recent engagement with Schmitt in a theological vein, see Jacob Taubes, *Ad Carl Schmitt Gegenstrebigue Fugung* (Berlin: Merve Verlag Berlin, 1987).
20. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 103.
21. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 104.
22. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 69.
23. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 72.
24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 70.
25. Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, Trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 126.

26. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
27. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 213.
28. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 116-17.
29. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 116.
30. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 120.
31. Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 122-23.
32. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility" in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 70.
33. Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," 70.
34. Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalite*, 29.