

WITNESS TO THE FACE OF A RIVER
THINKING WITH LEVINAS AND THOREAU

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with

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*Stupid kindness . . . is
as beautiful and powerful as dew*

Levinas is witness to the Shoah; Thoreau is witness to a river, a pond. What can either say to the other? They might converse about witness and first person address, and the importance of both, especially when clouded in one's own or another's affliction, say remembering or living through the tragic or traumatic. Moments of pain can be left inadequately acknowledged, abandoned, and when we are attentive, we acknowledge and bear witness to this abandonment. These are moments that draw out the poignant *necessity* for articulate witness. But witness also figures in moments of joy or acclamation, say at the birth of a child. In addition to witness, Levinas and Thoreau might also converse on responsiveness, deep moral responsibility. They might converge on the importance of answerability to a call from a particular other in distress, and perhaps also, answerability on occasion of delights that call for affirmative response or acclamation. There are calls to acknowledge joy as well as calls to acknowledge suffering.

I. Ethics: A LIFE OF STUDIES, WORKS, AND DELIGHTS

Ethics, in a classical view, is what makes a good and fulfilling life. Hilary Putnam begins an account of Jewish ethics with the rabbi's tale of God's daily routine: good works in the morning, study in the afternoon, sporting with whales in the evening.¹ Such would be the model of an ideal human life, one that took God's example seriously. The story leaves out warriors, battles,

and punishments, and of interest to contemporary planetary concerns, such a life leaves no carbon imprint, no time for consumerism, alienating labor, or exploited natural resources. It is content with study, good works, and fun. *What would Thoreau and Levinas make of this?*

Thoreau sported with fish and woodchucks, and rowed for fun with his brother, John. He was a voracious reader and note-taker, studying the *Bhagavad-Gita*, as well as Greek and modern classics.² For good works, he escorted fleeing slaves traveling north to Canada and gave a night in jail for justice, writing up “Civil Disobedience”, a primer for Ghandi and Martin Luther King.

Levinas was a scholar, and his good works did not stop with teaching. Can we picture him “sporting with whales”? Well, he does have a place for simple enjoyments: food, air, light, sleep, sun on one’s back.³ To live from my daily bread is enjoyment; “to live is to take pleasure in life.”⁴ Yet “sporting with whales” seems to raise pleasure from out of the ordinary. Can mere humans take on Leviathan? As a friend has pointed out, the biblical leviathan was not porpoise-size, made for boys and girls. *The Voice from the Whirlwind* mocks Job, reminding him that he is utterly *incapable* of sporting with Leviathan. “But embracing the impossible responsively and responsibly is precisely what Levinas also claims is our most pressing vocation.”⁵ Thus might Levinas linger with the thought of sporting with Leviathan.

As I hear this suggestion, we are never to rest in the assurance that we know what is possible and what is not. In ethics, especially, we should press our imagination to the edge of possibility and beyond, imagining (as we will elaborate) a mercy and benevolence where any such response would, by normal accounts, be impossible. Thus ‘sporting with whales’ can be meant as a challenge to ethical responders to be open to what may be required -- beyond all routine expectation.⁶

Thoreau is immersed in the broad traditions of Western philosophy, in its literature, and in the scriptures of “East and West.”⁷ In the great 19th century tradition than includes Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky, both he and Levinas are *moralists* (without being

preachy or moralistic). Among other things, these writers describe how we fit into the largest scheme of things -- our modes of attachment to others and a common world, be it alien or welcoming.

We may be attached to study, good work, and pleasure, but for Levinas and Thoreau, good work is our most telling attachment; it is properly seen as responsiveness to a primordial ethical *demand*. Before we speak or act it seems the world speaks to and acts on us -- with demands and invitations. The *world* initiates speech, listening, action and reception. And increasingly as we mature, the difficulty of reality, the sometimes simple -- as often complex -- ways we are addressed by the world, initiate thought and fledgling philosophy. With luck we become articulate *conversational* creatures. My colleague Lyman Mower reminds us:

[Philosophy] begins in dialogue, and this connection can only be characterized as ethical. The call and response of dialogue is the best everyday, practical example of how ethics seeps into life.⁸

If we are rational, political, language-using, or tool-wielding animals, we are also *conversing* animals who inherit and inhabit practices of articulation and address, who take up such practices making them our own, and who can witness to demands that intrude from *outside* habitual practices -- as in artistic inspiration or ethical revelation. In dialogue we negotiate meanings in ongoing passionate and measured disputes, in acclamations and condemnations, invitations and declarations that shape and establish (or diminish) our humanity.

The ethical call to responsibility for both Levinas and Thoreau is primal in that there is nothing deeper beneath it. In human activity and passivity, all that springs as significant and telling flows from our response to relational address. Nothing lies beneath it -- not objects, Gods, force fields, or language -- not knowers, actors, beliefs or doctrines. As my colleague puts it, "*Relationship goes all the way down.*" He goes on:

This is Levinas' theory of the subject, a subject that emerges in response to a call from beyond itself. Thoreau, too, sees himself in relationship to

other people, animals, and events in such a way that their demands upon him are partially constitutive of who he is.

An ethical address reaches toward an ear, toward receptive sensory capacities. A moral claim emerges from an unknown source, and can alter (or disrupt) a world. A meadow or river might address Thoreau, and he'd find himself bearing lyrical witness to its wonder, raising the hearty sense that *it is there* to be celebrated and preserved. Such attending and preservative caring are environmental virtues—perhaps crowning ones. We are addressed, it seems, by rich and singular things and occasions (rivers, persons at risk, meadowlarks), and these addresses are *that than which we cannot delve deeper*.

II. JUSTICE, IMPERFECTION, FLOURISHING AND CARE

I am inviting Thoreau and Levinas to converse across seas and languages and time. I'd like to start with what they might think about ethics. Levinas in particular, I suspect, would not settle for ethics as primarily flourishing, leading a good life – say a life of study and good works. That would leave out ethics as a voice of prohibition. The motif of *study and works* is only the first of four gerrymandered sectors we can trace through that relatively indeterminate landscape of *ways of life, virtues and cares, prohibitions, and restless striving* for a better next self -- the varied landscape we call ethics.⁹

For Levinas, ethics is responsibility, and we are given no rest from its call. His is a hyperbolic or “insomniac” responsibility. We are responsible especially to heed the ethical prohibition, “*Do not Kill!*” Such an ethical command accosts us, intervenes, takes over – demands submission. It does not urge me to heed principles, categorical imperatives, or virtues. It does not appeal to conscience or an edict of God. Responsibility as the prohibition of injustice bursts from nowhere, or at most, from the epiphany of a face, as Levinas has it. This goes against the modern grain of placing justice and injustice within a forensic setting as a requirement of law, as an imperative, an obligation, or a matter of rights. The roots of

responsibility are not established in a constitution's proclamations. Levinas is unique among contemporary ethicists in taking the claim of responsibility or prohibition of injustice to be an experiential deliverance, an epiphany or *Augenblick*, striking like a clap of thunder.¹⁰

Now Levinas links ethics not only to prohibitions but to what I have called endless striving for a better self. Not infrequently and perhaps chronically we sense that we could be better, are not beyond reproach, called toward an inner transformation whose precise content can remain opaque. This restless sense of a 'next self' to achieve, the incompleteness and imperfection of our present self, is often tied to the sense that our intimate relations and friendships and sense of political vocation are shifting, for better or worse. Through conversation with close others, one or both of us may be subtly or dramatically changed. The ethical stress here is on what Pierre Hadot, following Socrates, calls care for the self (or soul) – its ever-falling-short of felt goals.¹¹

The concern with who we are, have been, and might become is an *ethical* concern that crisscrosses concerns for justice, a flourishing life, care for close others. In the early 1980s, Stanley Cavell began to develop what he called Emersonian perfectionism, a theme he finds first in Thoreau.¹² Persons undergo renewal or rebirth; a next and better self calls forward, endlessly. I will say no more about Cavell's marvelous development of this idea of moral perfectionism, but the borders of the ethical should be wide enough to encompass it. It is the sense that in intimate as well as more political relations, we are never beyond reproach

In addition to our attraction to ways of life (say sporting and good works), our subjection to prohibitions, and our restless sense of imperfection, we can consider a fourth sector drawn through the landscape of ethics. There are invitations and *solicitations* to the ethical, as well. Others ask for, invite, or solicit our care in a voice more like the allure of a flower than like the piercing shout of an injunction or demand. Ethical responsiveness to solicitations can be warm and caring and show a ready hospitality. Part of my responsibility is to cherish children, hearth, and place, and to be attentive to the fragility of each. In the 1970s, Carol Gilligan contrasted an

ethics of personal care with an ethics of impersonal rules and strict obligations or rights.¹³ If we are to find places where Levinas and Thoreau converge, it is essential to maintain a capacious construction of ethics that includes a flourishing life, justice, inescapable imperfection, and attentive care.

We can note two corollaries of an extension of ethics toward caring attention. First, a caring response can be simultaneously aesthetic and ethical. Second, the recipient of such care need not be a person. A beautiful old violin or magnolia bush calls for response in the register of aesthetic delight and also in the register of preservative care. Sometimes ethicists speak of the heritage value of an old house or an irreplaceable landscape or an art object.¹⁴ In these cases the aesthetic and ethical are interwoven, and the object of attentive care is not a person.

We can fruitfully illustrate these four sectors by reviewing Thoreau's concerns in their light. He has no system of ethics, nor does Levinas, but for Thoreau, as we've seen, good works and study are parts of a *flourishing* life, and part of good works is a concern to honor the *prohibitions* against injustice. Think of Thoreau's ringing defense of John Brown, about to be hanged for his anti-slavery raid on the arsenal at Harper's Ferry as the American Civil War was about to erupt. Thoreau's prophetic voice bears witness to John Brown and against the abomination of slavery. Thoreau's ethical restlessness illustrates what Cavell calls *moral perfectionism*. Becoming my next and better self demands something more than meeting the requirements of law or attention to the solicitations of others. Finally, Thoreau gives *caring moral attention* to living things -- trees or hawks -- and to non-living things, rivers and morning mists. That attentiveness can be construed quasi-theologically as his response to things of creation that solicit his capacity for praise, preservation, protection from harm.

III. ETHICS – WITHOUT PRINCIPLE OR SYSTEMATIC DERIVATION

Witness to the ethical – to my ties to the other, to the ties that the other exacts from me – is occasioned often enough when we are powerless to save the one crying for help. Thoreau was

helpless holding his brother -- writhing, dying, in his arms. He bears veiled witness to that pain and that friendship (and so much more) in *A Week on the Concord*. For his part, Levinas is witness to the millions lost in the Shoah, and witness to his helplessness to bring his family and others from death. Injustice and unspeakable loss leave visceral wounds. Yet despite desolation, each finds unexpected moments of joy and delight. Lyman Mower speaks of Levinas being stopped by such moments in “the elemental [plane of existence], in eating, and *living from* things in the world.” He continues:

Levinas’ philosophy might be austere, but there is a place for joy within it.

In being humanly alive, we live from joys and consumptions that are not reducible to [Heidegger’s categories of] readiness or presence at hand.

It is a bitter truth that one cannot leave the Shoah behind. Thankfully, that is not the only reality Levinas inhabits. John Thoreau’s violent death and the hanging of John Brown leave a bitter taste in Thoreau’s mouth. Thankfully, these are not the only realities he inhabits.

Thoreau took unrestrained delight in others and animals, in meadows and swift waters. Levinas took delight in the pleasures of conversation and teaching. It is as if each, in their way, return again and again to occasions of the world’s intrusion or call -- from *this* face, *this* place -- eliciting response that speaks now of joy, now of sorrow. Each intrusion is unique in the sense that it is abandoned to be itself and is not elevated in a generalizing spirit as an instance of a broader principle or lesson or theme. And in my hearing Lyman Mower adds,

These words – “regard,” “concern,” “attention,” “care” -- should be heard as freighted with the most serious philosophical intent. Also important is the singularity Thoreau and Levinas place on the specific call they face.

Demand is never “demand in general” but *this* call, emanating at *this* unrepeatable moment.

We have gathered some threads that can ravel toward a particular look to ethics as call and response, as interpersonal and expandable so that even things of the environment can call

for our response. We are not dealing with principles to wield in semi-forensic settings, but with ethics as resonating calls or salient looks that call for response, and a raveling of particular encounters (calls, sights) toward a sensibility we recognize as ethical. Preservative care and appreciation arrive as felt-necessities from the face of a river or the flight of a swallow.

Broadly speaking, this is a perceptualist ethics, a sense of demand or invitation encountered in striking, immediate events – certainly not derived from propositions proposed as a theory any rational mind should accept.¹⁵ As one reaches to protect a child, one might think “she’s about to fall, about to be harmed.” But this is not to advance or act on a principle (“Always treat children well”). The stress is not on what one *thinks* (deferring to or acting on a moral maxim) but on *valuing this child*. And often one’s situation is not so simple: what is called for can seem bafflingly complex, opaque. Jim Hatley puts this eloquently:

The Tzadik (righteous one, or saint) is not on a straightforward path, for the other's approach requires a storm-tossed and creative wisdom lying beyond the automatic or anonymous application of principles to particulars. In fact a wisdom is demanded that at times utterly befuddles the rational straightforwardness of principles. This discernment, this wisdom, might be Temimuth, an aversion to the idol, an aversion to the miscategorization of the infinite as merely finite.¹⁶

Beyond responsiveness and answerability to the face of another (a person or not), the broad visions of Levinas and Thoreau remind us that not all issues of affliction are open to solution through rational negotiation or adjudication. As we learn from *The Book of Job*, ill-fortune may overwhelm our understanding. And just as clearly, *good*-fortune can exceed all understanding.

We live in times of species extinction, global warming, mass starvation in Africa, devastating oil spills. These are not, let us concede, the best of times. Yet even the worst of times need not stifle all hope. It is a hard lesson: even in darkest times despair is not the only

option. Without whitewashing the dangers that the times inscribe, Levinas and Thoreau exemplify courage and facility in husbanding resistance and hope. And in the case of Thoreau, and to some extent Levinas as he enters the spirit of Dostoevsky, Grossman, or Torah, we are given ongoing poetic and parabolic transformations and expansions of our worlds.

IV. A LEVINASIAN STORY

Here is a parable of responsibility from Levinas, a moment of Ethics. She had barely been freed when by happenstance or a dark pull of the place, this woman, a Russian, returned to the site of her Nazi imprisonment. (This is a paraphrase.¹⁷) She revisits the cells of her captivity and torment. Russian soldiers, her liberators, are at hand as she recognizes one of her German captors, now *himself* captive, humiliated and afraid. He is in dirty rags, bent under the indignity of hauling out excrement and putrefying corpses. He is weak. She stoops to draw up a brick and brings it up under her jacket. *He does not deserve to live! Justice will be mine!* She has strength, seething anger, and a taste for vengeance. A quick blow to the temple will do it. What stands between her and a righteous killing? Nothing! Who would blame her? Yet as if against her will, she finds her hand not on the brick but on a morsel of bread, a scrap she had saved for herself. -- In a whisper, "*Here, take this!*" She lifts the scrap gently to his lips. Later she is *ashamed*, almost as if she had been *again* defiled. Through sleepless nights, she rehearses her humiliation. *She was a fool not to kill him.* Worse, she was tender.

When Levinas privileges ethics, he is privileging a prophetic Biblical stance, full of mysterious justice and the surprise of a surplus of goodness or mercy. To contemporary students of ethics, this is unfamiliar territory. Levinas is not providing a *principle* of absolute altruism or commending a *principle* of forgiveness. We can admire a mode of human responsiveness (say a merciful response) yet resist the urge to proclaim principles. Like many Biblical parables, this story projects unsettling *oppositions*, tensions that resist summation. We have a tale of mercy; vengeance is set aside. Then aspects shift. We see the shattered confusion

of a woman deranged by pain: pathetically, she identifies with her oppressor. Then aspects shift yet again. She *disavows* her act, which reverses or undermines her mercy or benevolence.¹⁸ Is this a tale of moral folly and confusion?

The ethical weight of the occasion seems to undercut itself. It seems suddenly weightless, without traction. There's nothing to latch onto if one is a Kantian, Utilitarian, Virtue-ethicist, or a Divine-command theorist. It is useless for a philosopher immersed in the Law of Nations or Victim's Rights or Transitional Justice. There are no implicit action guides, or materials for drafting legislation. So how do we account for its palpable ethical resonance?

This story belongs to a Biblical time before ethics meant Aristotle or Kant. It rings of Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor," and of Kierkegaard's retelling the Abraham-Isaac story. Isaac's near death, like the near death of the ragged soldier, is beyond understanding, uncanny, a paradox both shattering and revelatory. Perhaps mercy and goodness – when not matters of routine -- rise from the underground, revealing things disturbingly beyond our grasp -- even as we are grasped.¹⁹ The weight is Biblical. A face or voice comes out of nowhere interrupting everything, as in a dream, as one might dream a Kafka puzzle-story or old-testament story. We have a fear-laden, love-laden drift of revelation, but no recipe for action or justification. An aesthetic-religious vision, a good-bad dream, doesn't give us an unequivocal hierarchy of goods or a transparent list of prohibitions (though rules or goods may play a *role* in a story or dream). We interpret the woman as we might a nightmare or the scene of a miracle. Interpretation takes place not in a debater's forum but in something like a therapy session or a lesson with a rabbi who helps us through dreams or revelations. These negotiations of meaning with wise others can lead to a refinement of vision, an increase in ethical imagination or sensitivity. These conversing consultations can reinforce commonplace rules -- "*Don't kill!*" (but . . . never?)²⁰ ; Levinas (in the role of Old Testament prophet) can proclaim such a rule in fiery voice. But in his prophetic robes, is not in a line with Aristotle, Hume, or Kant.²¹

V. A TERRIBLE PATHOS

A human at risk, under duress, calls out for preservation: “Do not kill !” For Levinas, this cry jells as a cry as from a face, but not restricted to the physiology holding eyes, mouth, and so forth. He quotes approvingly from an account that has the face speak from the nape of the neck of a prisoner in line just ahead.²² The back of the neck can express all the humanity and suffering of the one in line just ahead. It *speaks* -- and *silences* us. Perception can numb.

Levinas comments on a scene recounted by Vassily Grossman. The prisoner stands in line in a barrack’s soup kitchen, looking at the nape of the neck of the prisoner before him. His first impression is of the overwhelming vulnerability of the man. I imagine that prisoner half-remembering a particularly grisly mode of execution – details relayed by prison grapevine, if not witnessed.²³ The executioner holds a pistol to the nape of the neck. Killing silently from behind, he gains surprise, scotching attempts of the victim to flee or cry out; he saves himself a look of terror or incredulity on the face of the victim, saves himself accusing eyes, the blank look of death. This is like hooding the prisoner. Why do *that*? Even in this triumph of killing efficiency, avoiding a victim’s eyes or grimace might – perversely -- *ease one’s conscience!*

Thoreau recounts a similarly horrific occasion. In 1697 Hannah Duston plummets downriver toward Haverhill, fleeing her Abenaki captors. Beneath the thwarts of the canoe that she steals for her escape lie their bloody scalps and the scalps of their children. She was taken from her home by marauders, who dragged her away, splattered the brains of her nursing child before her eyes, and brought her north up the Merrimack.

Each of these stories is horrific. And for different reasons, each is intractable, uncanny. We hear the tale of the woman with a brick at first as a tale of mercy and benevolence defeating cold fury and vengeance. Yet we could as well think, “*She’s a fool. She says as much herself!*” -- And which view is right? At first we read the incident of prisoners in line, prefacing a memory of grisly execution. In stark outrage, we cry “*He’s a monster!*” Yet we know such monstrosity becomes regularized, everyday, and so less monstrous (we might think). Does such cruelty

become cheap theater, a reeking *banality*, all in a day's work? Should this in any way *slacken* outrage?

Is Hannah Duston heroic as she survives capture and the terror of her infant's slaughter – *heroic* in effecting righteous revenge and skillful escape? Or is she no less bloodthirsty than her captors? If she is returning an eye for an eye, nevertheless her actions seem especially brutal. Perhaps this marks an American Fall from Grace. Yet that leaves us with the disheartening news that *we're all equally stained* -- so who's to judge, who's to blame? Isn't violence the order of the day?

We want *conviction* that the woman is correct -- or incorrect; we want *conviction* that the executioner is evil – or not; want *conviction* that Hannah Dustan can be vindicated -- or can't. *Ethics must give answers*. In extremity -- and these stories *traffic in extremity* -- a narrative field drenched by the ethical appears hauntingly powerful in *posing questions*. When it comes to *answering* them, that ethics-drenched field appears hauntingly helpless. A kind of riveting paralysis *within* ethics, a shimmering irresolution, accounts for the majestic irresistible *weight and register* of these quasi-Biblical tales. We are thrown into an abyss of untamable ethical kinetics.

These stories dare to raise the highest ethical hopes -- say, from one point of view, the plausibility of unconditional benevolence – to raise them only to dash them. The tale of the woman with bread has too many counter trends within the narrative itself to yield much conviction. And even if a maxim of absolute benevolence were the *only* possible interpretation, that maxim in any case could hardly be found universally applicable. Such tales, many of them, seem to read like counter-factual “what if“ thought experiments, exercises in imagination, imagination that expands possibilities (and stirs a soul – toward its aching need and fear and trembling). What *if* God commanded Abraham to take Isaac to the mountain? What *if* God spies Moses and thinks of killing him?²⁴ From this angle, they track the enormous *need* for conviction around the plausibility of a moral ideal (God *couldn't* do that!). And these stories

seem perversely and simultaneously to *destroy* all hope of realizing conviction (God *couldn't* do that -- but *does* do that!). Far from reinforcing dogmatic conviction, they put it at risk.

VI. FACING THE NON-HUMAN

Thoreau and Levinas suppose an implicit scale of moral importance and urgency. At one end we find indifference, inattention, not to mention violence in varying degrees; at the other end we have the vivid sense of one's answerability for the life of another. This radical receptivity resembles submissiveness. It is far from rational self-assertion. As the woman, we can find ourselves lost in the midst of a "stupid kindness, as beautiful and powerful as dew."²⁵

The human voice or face can predominate without being all that speaks or faces. For Thoreau, things of the earth speak, but he does not allow just *any or every* rock or crow, at any time at all, to corner his answerability. Such unmonitored, unmodulated receptivity would *overload* moral senses, jamming reception. John Brown overrides the call of the woodlot. Levinas can grant a family cat, or a great aunt's shawl, prerogative to call on his answerability, saying, were we inattentive, "*Do not discard, or harm!*" Letting cocks crow and rocks speak, claiming our attention, will not *dilute* the urgency -- when apt -- of responding to the *human* face. This is not a zero sum game.

Why is Levinas cautious in spreading the facing relation to cats or fine furniture? Lyman Mower sees this hesitation to be "less a matter of *what* faces us ethically, than *how* that ethical facing is constituted." We can't peer ever so carefully to determine if a snake or the trunk of an oak *in fact* has a face. Nor should we passively accept a stipulation, on the authority of Levinas alone, about the proper scope of facing relations.²⁶ Consider, too, that Thoreau is not alone in inviting us to acknowledge the call of a distant mountain or near-by birds. Let the seascape have the face of the deep. Let the heavens look down with heavenly face. Thoreau's vision of things-that-call-for-preservation might lure Levinas to his orbit, where the centrality of the

human face is supplemented -- say, by the face of a river. Or perhaps, as we'll see, Levinas has already partially joined Thoreau, as he tells us of a delightful bounding dog named "Bobby."

VII. BEING LOST -- GRATUITOUS GOOD

Philosophy is continuing education, schooling for grownups in moral formation. We want to know what to do, what to make of our lives. In our ignorance and struggle, we turn not just to a parent or rabbi or priest but to a modern double authority, Reason and Ethics. If they fail? Is there other than violence or despair?

There is a cultural repository of rules and answers that fit standard cases brought to a bench for decision. There is also a cultural repository of resilience and resistance in case we face an absence of answers from more obvious moral sources. We turn to the repository of parables or stories, and learn that our great writers, Kafka, Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, not only Reason and Ethics, are our sources of wisdom. Or we might listen for philosophy beneath Thoreau's deceptively easy narratives. Or we might listen beneath the tangled, often opaque excursions of *Totality and Infinity* -- listen for Levinas' *Biblical* voice. Wittgenstein sees philosophy as the condition of not knowing one's way about, of being lost in Dante's dark wood. Witness and the ethical-poetic take over where simple instruction and forensic justification break down. They display intractable circumstances in ways that avoid *despair over their intractability*.

In the nearly Biblical story of a woman with bread, Levinas invites us to countenance a kind of lawless, gratuitous goodness (the flip side of gratuitous evil), that intervenes unbidden and unwanted, a kind of eucatastrophe, a good ending beyond all expectation and with hardly any rationale. Levinas thinks ethics must 'start' with a rogue or 'stupid' goodness, refusing any handbook of *what to do when* or of *what trumps what*. (Not: "Be merciful!" or "Obey the moral Law!" Not: "Promote *the greatest happiness* but first *Do no evil*." Not: "Justice first, Love thy neighbor, second".)

Could this sort of quasi-Biblical story have any relevance for an environmental ethics? Much in this emerging field can be framed forensically (legislatively or juridically) in terms of arguments about debts to future generations, about what we owe directly to domesticated farm animals, about whether trees can have legal standing, about the heritage value of ponds, stone walls, or beaches, and about the urgency of resistance to global warming – and so forth. Ideology and formal ethics intersect in these areas. But Levinas surely has nothing to add to the ongoing debates that deploy utilitarian and rights arguments, or virtue theory arguments, in contesting those who would continue in gross neglect and outright destruction of the environment that sustains us all. What can he teach us, then?

If the story of the woman underwrites ethics as the interruption of gratuitous good, a rogue event triggering a capacity to hear a call of a face, then it cannot be a story underwriting an obvious virtue. We cannot strive to emulate the conduct of this woman – her situation is as idiosyncratic as her response is unexpected. Her response resists generalization and does not even remain commendable in her own eyes, after the fact. Her mercy and generosity, her rejection of vengeance, in just those circumstances, is not the educated response of a habitually virtuous woman. Furthermore, virtues are typically recognized and promoted by families, churches and temples, educational institutions, and political regimes. But is it even intelligible that citizens, for example, could or should be trained in responsiveness to gratuitous goodness?

There is a sense in which gratuitous good, “stupid good,” is at the root of the Whirlwind’s Voice (in the Book of Job). A sense of the inexplicable goodness of things (in seascapes, in night, in Leviathan, in snow) is granted through the Storm. Such a gift of inexplicable goodness is the requisite world from which both forensic arguments and further epiphanies and demands can emerge. The story of the woman reminds us never to rule out the possibility of gratuitous good, good beyond desert, ‘stupid’, ‘senseless’ good. *Job* teaches us never to rule out the possibility of good radiating from the face of rivers, from the flight of hawks, from the majesty of bursts of hail or stars in the desert night.

From Levinas' corner, ethics as prohibition and the intrusion of good is best construed as a *happening*, an unexpected intrusion that releases moral imagination toward widening consciousness, toward deepening the soul. It is an occasion for witness to whatever uncanny good has interrupted or might do so soon. The structure of my sudden answerability to another person can become a model of my sudden answerability to *this* patch of garden, to *this* nocturnal creature, to *this* alpine setting. I might wonder what was ethical (as opposed to aesthetic) in my basking attention to the rocky shoal just now receiving the advance of the sea. Yet the latent presence of the ethical will become abundantly clear if the shoal is washed by oil, flaring my moral outrage.²⁷

For Thoreau, slavery is the catastrophe that the Shoah is for Levinas. Less evidently, the ethical impinges as homage to the other in his veiled witness to his brother John, who died early and violently, and in his overt tribute to brotherhood in his chapter on friendship in his first book, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack*.²⁸ Yet the preciousness of a swallow's flight or the face of a child elicits preservative care for the swallow or child, and also of the world it thrives in and rests with. This care-to-preserve is an ethical care, a care to preserve the good and the beautiful. Why should a gardener's protective, responsible, caring attention to earth and its yields, be excluded from the domain of fully *ethical* response? Responsive care can be healing and redeeming.

VIII. PERSONS AS NON-PERSONS, NON-PERSONS AS PERSONS

I have written as though there were a question about Levinas' willingness to expand the demand of the face to include those facing relations Thoreau values: the face of an oak, or a loping fox. I think there is a real issue here. It involves what Levinas himself might in his most generous moments concede and also what his picture of ethics allows or permits in terms of our own desire to expand ethics toward inclusion of non-persons and the non-living within the circle of ethical care. But I would be remiss if I failed to cite an extraordinary passage where Levinas

already extends something like an ethical relation – better, a condition for an ethics –by describing a relation to a non-human creature.

There were seventy of us in a . . . unit for Jewish prisoners of war . . . The French uniform still protected us from Hitlerian violence. But the other men, called free, who had dealings with us and gave us work . . . stripped us of our human skin. We were subhuman, no longer part of the world . . .

And then a wandering dog entered our lives. One day he came to meet this rabble as we returned under guard from work. He survived in some wild patch in the region of the camp. But we called him Bobby, an exotic name, as one does with a cherished dog. He would appear at morning assembly and was waiting for us as we returned, jumping up and down and barking in delight. For him, there was no doubt that we were men.²⁹

This is a third and last Levinasian story, rather different from the grisly executioner, and not quite as uncanny as the woman with bread. The story suggests a role for relations that *enable* ethical relations, facing relations. It suggests that such enabling relations are nothing to do with submitting to a demand not to be harmed. Bobby's delight is enjoyment, part of an ordinary world in which ethical pleas can arise, a world that is background to an ethical demand. But his delight is not the intervention of "a face." He does not introduce the demand, "Do not kill!" The prisoners, stripped of their skins, confront the gift of fleshly delight, not an obtruding, commanding face.³⁰ This story opens an important dimension of broadly ethical responsiveness.

An unexpected and delightful camp pet solicits and draws out the care of the prisoners in a way that establishes their *willingness* and *capacity* to care, in the bleakest of circumstances, circumstances that would seem to have defeated all care. Children must be led into their humanity, into a personhood capable of care. The pet's bounding greeting is a face of delight but

not what Levinas identifies as an ethical face. It's plausible that an ethics of care could allow that Bobby shows care for the prisoners as men (as opposed to trees or squirrels). And insofar as Levinas gives weight to a world of hospitality and delight, an ethics of prohibition (the face that commands "Do not kill!") will find a place *within* this world of delight. But Bobby makes no ethical demands and utters no prohibitions. His greeting offers a gift to the desolate -- a gift of life-giving nourishment, of care and attention, almost of food. Such greeting and gift lead those who have become terribly bereft of humanity back into a humanity capable of care. We might hazard that only those blessed by a loving, appreciative acknowledgment by others -- persons or not -- will be granted a degree of moral, human strength *sufficient*, thereafter, to *hear* the command "*Do not kill!*" -- and to heed that prohibition. If so, Bobby grants others a capacity to encounter a face. He is God's intermediary, bringing prisoners back into their skins.

IX. MOVING IN THE RIVER

Thoreau bears witness to Concord River, its strange and uncanny instruction, its capacity to call and speak to our moral responsiveness. Thoreau is called a "Transcendentalist," and you might reasonably believe that a river, like the Concord, evokes for a transcendentalist the upward ascent in Plato toward eternal Forms.³¹ One scholar suggests we speak of Thoreau's "*descend-*entalism," letting those elevated ideals descend to bob and weave immanently, by and within the ebb and flow of the river.³² We should find the poetry and philosophy *just there*, within vibrantly animated occasions, not unlike our finding a call *just there*, in this face, say the face of one's tormentor. The singular occasions we follow are anomalously and poetically transcendental and immanent, temporal and atemporal, transversal and tributary -- worlds carrying untold possibilities.³³

Thoreau had a living faith found in walking, found in the particulars of his situation and what they could tell him in passing (and in their still eternity, day by day). He found faith in what these telling particulars could voice, and what a friend or two could tell. He would see

these occasions shine sideways or transversally, backward and forward in time, up toward heaven and down toward the dark of a river bottom. He believed we have not yet begun to see and hear and taste the things of the world and their inter-animations, and have not yet acknowledged that our salvation lies in translating ourselves out of the reified prose of the world -- without losing touch with the earlier world now transfigured. These radiant inter-animating particulars strike through a river, or a day's travel on it, through its shad and weeds and wavelets and winds, its dams and bargemen, its alders and cranberries, its apple trees and histories of good and evil.³⁴

Levinas testifies to a call bringing the body to a quick regard for this other person. He shares with Thoreau an ideal of receptivity, responsiveness, getting beyond indifference, blindness, and violence toward what is other. Thoreau testifies to a call that brings the body to an alert regard for the human and non-human, in the vast surround of creation. Rocks, scudding clouds, have voice that can sing or demand or cajole. By responding, we transfigure them toward being more *intimately* other. Mower expands:

It is the preservation of their alterity which sustains a dynamic connection with things of the world in a kind of dialogue. To remove their alterity makes them "just one more thing" or just another feature of the world. The shad or melons are familiar, everyday, food, boating companions, and underwhelming. But there is also a dimension of them that we respond to as strange, bewildering, wild, and unsettling. It is this situation of opposites simultaneously existing that makes the shad, melons, and cranberries things of importance, important to relate to. Perhaps all things (living or not) have this feature. At the very least, Thoreau lets this neighborly uncanniness extend to certain animals and also to natural features of the world.

The story of the woman dropping her brick can be seen (on one interpretation) to take part in a double transfiguration. The ex-tormentor is seen in his *need* (obscuring his earlier sadism); she

is seen in her *benevolence* and *forgiveness* (obscuring her understandable need for revenge). Just so, the shad are transformed even as Thoreau is transformed in attending them.

X. THE CONCORD

Its earlier inhabitants knew Concord River as “Musketaquid.” Now it is caught in a leisurely moment before the brothers begin their week on its waters. They will row upstream to its source far North up the Merrimack, high in the mountains, dusted in snow.

Compared with the other tributaries of the Merrimack, it appears to have been properly named Musketaquid, or Meadow River, by the Indians. For the most part, it creeps through broad meadows, adorned with scattered oaks, where the cranberry is found in abundance, covering the ground like a mossbed.³⁵

Within the first leaves of the book we learn that the river is not unto itself alone but belongs to a larger waterway, one tributary among others.³⁶ We can see it, of course, in a pedestrian way as belonging just to the environs of Concord, but Thoreau wants to expand our attention. He leads us elsewhere, down to the Merrimack, that attenuated river that stretches North to disappear in the snowy heights of *Agiocochook*, Mt. Washington, and then descends so many miles South to be swallowed in the vast Atlantic. And he leads us also to an attenuated elsewhere in *time*, even back to the Nile (as he suggests in “Concord’s” first sentence) -- not to mention back in time to those earlier associates of the oak adorned Meadow River, those dwellers who called it *Musketaquid*.

The Concord flows as a network of strands, a reticulation, a tributary that is part meadow, part river. We learn that river and meadow are intermixed, especially in spring floods, to form a broad marshland, an amphibious or anomalous zone. There we find the birds of the air who belong also to water, the brothers who will belong to both land and water, the sturdy dory painted blue above water line and green below, to mark its belonging to sky and water and

marsh. All these flow with and against meadowed currents of water and wind. Thoreau gives us singularities, persons and non-persons, that resonate outward and downward, spatially and temporally, to ever-expanding networks in relational, ecological resonance.

Anomalous, amphibious zones are zones of flow and movement, neither unambiguously here nor there, this nor that, zones for outlaws and nomads. In Thoreau's *Cape Cod* they are the zones of scampering crabs half of the sea, half of the sands, anxiously and sideways inhabiting that changeling zone where in walking one is never sure if one belongs to the curling, rippling flood advancing to inundate the sands, or instead to the wet-dry *terra firma* only momentarily awash, the beach sounding gentle hisses as strange waters advance and retreat.³⁷

Concord River, we're told, is well stocked with shad and alwives. Salmon would be present too, but for the downstream falls too precipitous to leap. Soon the brothers encounter the new settlers' crafted falls on the river, made to drive mills. As Henry observes, these barriers will stop the upward flow of fish in their natural transcendence from below, until they too become extinct. Fish and non-fish inhabit anomalous zones between life and death, death and life. Our moral worlds too are unstable, shifting, half way between heaven and hell.³⁸ We can find ourselves awash in an ethical no-man's land where shadows of persons pass in the fog, indifferent to the face of the other, indifferent to care and delight, vacantly unresponsive – where exchanges among strangers become only mechanical or violent.

XI. WORLDS WITHIN WAVELETS

Here is a moment from *A Week on the Concord* of redemptive writing, a renewal of hope and delight even amidst dangers and beyond bare, imagination-stripped comprehension.

Many waves are there agitated by the wind, keeping nature fresh, the spray blowing in your face, reeds and rushes waving; ducks by the hundred, all uneasy in the surf, in the raw wind, just ready to rise, and now going off with a clatter and a whistling like riggers straight for

Labrador, flying against the stiff gale with reefed wings, or else circling round first, with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the surf, to reconnoitre you before they leave these parts; gulls wheeling overhead, muskrats swimming for dear life, wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by that you know of, their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks; and countless mice and moles and winged titmice along the sunny, windy shore; cranberries tossed on the waves and heaving up on the beach, their little red skiffs beating about among the alders; -- such healthy natural tumult as proves the last day is not yet at hand.

Such description sustains an elsewhere indefinitely extending, a beckoning otherness of wonder, risk, allure, and invitation (if not demand).³⁹ It sustains a vision of hope and redemption from affliction in a series of gentle moments that are uncanny and ethical insofar as there are moments of attentive care. It is as if we are told simple parables of “stupid goodness, as beautiful and powerful as dew,” glance by glance -- word by skimming word. Environmentalists can applaud this unabashed celebration of more-than-Newtonian excess. We have ethics as care as first philosophy in a poetic witness to the face of the River -- ethics narrated in tiny parables, etched in the moment, fleetingly in the watery instant. Such slaughter-scored memory is for the moment supervened in a celebration of the many fruits of uncanny goodness.

The wind is “*keeping nature fresh*”, renewing it and renewing us through its touch, “*spray blowing in your face.*” Muskrats “*swim for dear life,*” for life is simultaneously dear, bounteous, and dangerous, an amorphous, shape-shifting place of flow and change, for better and worse. We have “*ducks by the hundred, all uneasy in the surf, in the raw wind, just ready to rise*”, ready in their uneasiness to rise toward something higher. We too are “*uneasy in the surf*” ready to rise. They’re “*now going off with a clatter and a whistling like riggers straight for Labrador, flying against the stiff gale with reefed wings.*” There’s no gap between sail

riggers and ducks wheeling aloft, nor between where we are and where they are, all in a single arcing ascent, in a kind of mystic ecstasy. The flock of hundreds might “*circle round first, with all their paddles briskly moving, just over the surf, to reconnoiter you before they leave these parts.*” Or else having reconsidered, they settle down again. In any case, they have a facing relation with us.

Gulls are “*wheeling*”, even as the river and its words wheel on and on. Our muskrats are “*wet and cold, with no fire to warm them by.*” Thoreau adds *sotto voce* “*so far as we know*” -- a rather offhand way to ask what we in fact know of the other, or each other, or of the unfoldings before us. They swim “*for dear life*”, hurrying in fright to the secure haven of “*their labored homes rising here and there like haystacks.*” Home is the place of hospitality.⁴⁰

Cranberries are cranberries, but not only that as the poet’s eye finds them “*tossed on the waves and heaving up on the beach, their little red skiffs beating about among the alders*”. They may sail through the chop as if in heaven. Or be tossed up on the beach as wrecks. Perhaps some are “beating about” to windward up the Merrimack toward *Agiocochook*, “Home of the Great Spirit,” even while they are *also* skiffs seeking safe harbor by an alder, and are *also* just cranberries rising and falling, bobbing on wavelets on the edge of a watery meadow, an edge of the Concord.

This is the active face of the river, each wrinkle, crease, a familiar trail calling out our attention – calling for our concern in matters of life and death, safety and danger, adventure and shipwreck. Despite the fact that it is not exactly uttering prohibitions from a height, this is nevertheless surely a face calling out for our attentive concern – out *ethical* concern. Looking out across the wind-swept marshes, Thoreau finds “*such healthy natural tumult [as] proves the last day is not yet at hand.*” He might have added “Let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.”⁴¹ And with Job, whose suffering melts away, we have “transcendence at the borders of the wondrous.”⁴²

CONCLUSION

We can now return to issues we've raised and pondered in traversing the terrain. Having Thoreau in stride with Levinas has allowed us to minimize the differences between the claims of the face of a river, its eddies floating cranberries in peril of shipwreck, and the claims issuing from the face of a needy stranger. Together, Levinas and Thoreau solidify the sense that we are claimed by persons and often by non-persons, by particulars of creation and by their settings -- quite apart from our having access to a general theory that fixes value or specifies ways to formally legitimate our felt-sense of subjection to such particular ethical claims.

Furthermore, we have found no reason to believe that a Levinas-style ethics that gives attention to the *human* face in any way diminishes the need for a Thoreau-style attention to the expanses of creation -- its creatures, things, and natural settings. And we've seen that attention to rivers, stars, woodlots, mountains, does not need to deflect our standing alertness to the call of the human face. We've seen, too, that preservative care is worthy as response to the call of speechless things, as each thing elicits celebration for itself and for the sustaining surround.⁴³ Alertness to all creatures and things of creation is sustained by a faith in possibilities that open before us, faith in the arrival of inexplicable, gratuitous good.

** ** **

The surface of earth can be rendered with the mobile expressiveness of a face, each wrinkle, fold, and pore, each eye and ear, holding multiple crossings and paths to attend to. One by one, they call with the *insistence* of a face. Dispersed throughout creation, across the face of a river, across the infinite wonder and terror of this aged-and-new wrinkled planet's face, they speak. We have been stopped, impressed and silenced -- not least, so I trust, silenced as Thoreau sings, witness to joys and delights among the ephemeral particulars of creation, even as he senses continuing catastrophe. Levinas may be less lyrical in praise of creation, but he joins Thoreau in giving despair no quarter.

We inhabit a changeling reality, affording, in turn, benedictory, condemnatory, and invitational address.⁴⁴ It is a difficult reality, and far from univocal.⁴⁵ Social and political worlds are difficult, painful enough on their own to sadden a countenance. But Thoreau especially will remind us that we are placed in a wider creation. At one point Levinas confesses that existence itself is something of a miracle.⁴⁶ Whether of seashores, riverbanks, glacial-swept peaks, or a thunder-rent world, anomalous realities call for ethical-poetic recounting, for renditions that give a marvelous echo of those particular things rendered, things that plea for preservative embrace.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing is invitational and conversational. If we are rational or knowing or political animals, if our primary capacity is language use, cultural construction, tool use, or reverencing, each of these distinctively human capabilities emerges in the nexus of our being passionately conversational beings -- beings who negotiate the truths of our condition through earnest, playful, practical, tragic, and comic conversing. This conversing seems destined to invite ever-wider circles of participants to enter, listening often cross-generationally to ongoing and emerging flows, adding to a conversation's direction and depth. Jim Hatley invited my thoughts; I invited Lyman Mower to join in (it was he who first made the startling suggestion that Thoreau and Levinas might converse fruitfully). In earlier talks, Clark West invited me to think of Thoreau's narration of Hannah Duston's capture and killings in early New England as the Fall of America, and he prompted me to think twice about the complexity of Levinas' retelling of the story of the woman with bread and a brick who refrains from killing the guard who had tormented (or tortured) her. Some men are islands but luckily not all, or not all the time, and become conversing and conversant. I must add that the writings of Hilary Putnam, Michael

Morgan, Diane Perpich, and Bob Plant have been extremely helpful; so also have last minute conversations with Carson Webb and Claire Katz, and the writing, editorial initiative, and concrete suggestions of Jim Hatley and his co-editors.

NOTES

¹ Hilary Putnam, "Jewish Ethics?", *The Blackwell Companion to Religious Ethics*, Blackwell (2005: 159-175).

² Although he shunned the academy, Thoreau was a student all his life, devoting himself to study of classical Greek texts, scientific reports and observations, and grand narratives of natural history (Humbolt, Darwin). Lyman Mower directs us to Thoreau's celebration of study in the chapter in *Walden* called, simply, "Reading".

It is worth the expense of youthful days and costly hours, if you learn only some words of an ancient language, which are raised out of the trivialness of the street, to be perpetual suggestions and provocations Men sometimes speak as if the study of the classics would at length make way for more modern and practical studies; but the adventurous student will always study classics, in whatever language they may be written and however ancient they may be They are the only oracles which are not decayed

If the face of a book is a timeless oracle, perhaps a human face is, too. To be immersed in literature is part of a satisfying life, a portal to contrasting ways of political, personal, economic, and cultural life. Also, there must be subtle connections between learning a foreign language and learning the sophisticated codes of natural and cultural history.

³ See the discussion in John Sallis, "Levinas and the Elemental," *Radicalizing Levinas*, ed. Atterton and Calarco, SUNY, 2010, 90.

⁴ *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Duquesne, 1969, 115.

⁵ Jim Hatley, private correspondence.

⁶ From a different angle, Levinas wrestled a burden of western metaphysics, its having created too great a distance between the abstractions of Athens, and the immediacy one might feel reading or thinking of ethics in a *Biblical* vein, or in the genre of novels that present the felt-texture of human action, responsiveness, and conversational exchange.

⁷ See *Thoreau and his Significance for Philosophy*, ed. Rick Furtak and Jonathon Ellsworth, Fordham (forthcoming).

⁸ From the start, Mower has been part of this conversation joining Levinas and Thoreau. I quote from his marginal notes to various drafts of this essay, but this contributions go far deeper.

⁹ Stewart Hampshire separates these three aspects: prohibitions, virtues, and ways of life, in *Morality and Pessimism*, Cambridge (1972), My taxonomy will expand on this, adding Cavell's moral perfectionism. I set aside (as Hampshire does) the connections between these taxonomies and various theories of how any feature of morality might be justified – for instance, utilitarian, Kantian, or virtue theoretic, accounts of ethics.

¹⁰ My colleague John Caputo differs with me here. He reads Levinas as holding a theory of obligation, and expands on the 'scandal' that such a theory produces: "If I understand an obligation, if it is a universal and intelligible principle, then I have made it mine, one of my projects,, something I have appropriated and made my own, and so not an

obligation at all, but another piece of my freedom, another good idea I have and want to pursue. If I do not understand an obligation, then it is arbitrary; and then I am unable to distinguish among obligations, to distinguish, say, the command that Yahweh gave to Abraham ('that Isaac die') from the command issued to the Nazi guards ('that the Jews die')" John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, Indiana 1993, 8-9, discussed in Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, Stanford, 2008, 97. An adequate response to Caputo would have to stress that for Levinas, 1) obligation is an event, not an intelligible universal principle or one of my projects or a good idea I endorse; 2) there are obligations we do not (fully) understand and yet are not thereby arbitrary. Do I understand fully my non-arbitrary impulse to protect my child from harm? How could one "understand" that "obligation" that "ethical event", beyond saying, "I'm human, after all!" The difference between Yahweh's command to Abraham and a Nazi's command to kill Jews is made plain by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*: Abraham must love Isaac every minute and know he will get him back. See my discussions in *Knights of Faith and Resignation*, Suny, 1991, 82-9, and in *Selves in Discord and Resolve*, Routledge, 1996, Chs 4, 5.

¹¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Blackwell (1995).

¹² Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden, Expanded Edition*, Northpoint, 1981; Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Chicago (1990)

¹³ See Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Harvard (1982).

¹⁴ The serenity of stars can occasion aesthetic or sublime delight that can simultaneously speak, as Kant saw, to a viewer's capacity for reflective judgment – clouding over a night sky with smog might be seen as violation of care for the sublime or beautiful, that is connected, in Kant's view, with our dignity as rational beings.

¹⁵ For an essay on the overlap of the aesthetic and the ethical as a non-forensic 'vision' or sensibility, and for an account of the education of the senses and perception in a never-ending achievement of moral sensibility, see Sabina Lovibond, *Ethical Formation*, Harvard University Press (2002). Hilary Putnam contrasts ethics as legislation/justification, and ethics as following hints toward becoming my next and better self (Cavell's 'moral perfectionism' in *Jewish Ethics as a Guide to Life*, Indiana (2008: 72). See also Diane Perpich, "Getting down to cases: Can a Levinasian ethics generate norms", in *Essays on Levinas and Law*, Desmond Manderson, ed., Palgrave (2009: 21-38). Patrick Stokes discusses Kierkegaard's 'perceptualist ethics' in *Kierkegaard's Mirrors* (Palgrave (2010: 180 *et passim*). See my review in *The Kierkegaard Newsletter*, November, 2010.

¹⁶ Personal communication. See James Hatley, *Suffering Witness: The Quandry of Responsibility After the Irreparable*, SUNY (2000).

¹⁷ Levinas alludes often to this incident from the '60s Russian novel: Vasily Grossman, *Fate and Life* trans. Robert Chandler, Harper and Row (1985). Levinas says to an interviewer, "To understand this universe, you should read Vassily Grossman." See *Is it Righteous to Be?* ed. Jill Robbins (2001: 39). This haunting story is given thorough discussion in Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, Cambridge (2007, 1-15). Compare a Biblical text: The prisoners had been flogged. The doors are mysteriously opened. Paul pauses, remains, that the prison-keeper not be slain for dereliction. [Acts 16:23-34] We hear the echo of the gospel hymn. *The prison doors have been opened! – What are we doing inside?* [I thank Marcia Robinson for the Biblical citation and for remembering the hymn.]

¹⁸ Another aspect shift might bring us to Kierkegaard's notion of being *victorious in weakness*. See Kierkegaard's "The Joy of it: That the Weaker you become, the Stronger God becomes in you" in *Christian Discourses*, trans. Howard V. And Eda Hong, Princeton (1997).

¹⁹ Lyman Mower points out that paradox is at the heart of Biblical ethics for both Levinas and Thoreau. Thoreau is himself fascinated with the uncanniness of prophetic demands (of Jesus, of Joel, of Isaiah). To my ear, the parable of

the altruistic, forgiving, murderous, tormented woman bears comparison with Tony Morrison's murderous and heroic Sethe in *Beloved*, Everyman (2006).

²⁰ Michael Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, gives the most extended effort I know of to place Levinas in dialogue with moral philosophers in the tradition of Nagel, Rawls, or Korsgaard. Perhaps the face to face ethical demand can provide a *deliberative standard* against which we can measure morality, immorality, or relative morality in everyday dilemmas. (Morgan, 262.) I suspect that Levinas is suspicious of moving too quickly from the immediacy of ethical felt-necessity to the enunciation of a standard to guide ethical deliberation. To pursue this matter further would take another, and different paper. See Perpich, "Getting down to cases: Can a levinasian ethics generate norms".

²¹ Ethics in the Anglophone tradition is adding a narrativist (if not Biblical) sector in its explorations, as evidenced in the work of Iris Murdoch on moral vision and attentive care, Martha Nussbaum on moral emotions embedded in narratives, Stanley Cavell on theater and cinema as vehicles for making us morally intelligible to each other, and Robert Pippin tracing of subtle moral shifts in consciousness in the narratives of Henry James.

²² Remember that his is not a cry from an interior ego, or mysterious center of will or rational dignity..

²³ Here I rely on Glenn Gray's stark account of this practice *In The Warriors, Reflections on Men in Battle*, Harcourt Brace (1959: 180). The scenario is Levinasian even as it diverges from Grossman's memory to enter Glenn Gray's.

²⁴ Exodus: 4: 24.

²⁵ See *Is it Righteous to Be?* (217-18), discussed by Michael Morgan *Discovering Levinas* (8).

²⁶ Mower adds, "There are sensible, non-strained ways of reading Levinas that make him more "inclusive" of animals [having a face']. To complicate Thoreau as well, certainly not all animals, clouds, and mountains face him in address."

²⁷ You might think that because my outrage will be directed at the human agents who fouled the beach, my moral response is not responsive to the non-living sea. But if I see the ocean as part of creation, its befouling is a desecration – the despoiling of something cherished and perhaps holy. Thus the sea is more than a target of aesthetic sensibility only, and there is more than aesthetic value to be preserved.

²⁸ *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, ed, Carl F. Hove, William L. Howarth, and Elizabeth Hall Witherell, intro John McPhee, Princeton, 1980,

²⁹ Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Sean Hand, John Hopkins (1990, 152). This encounter is discussed, in quite a different register in "Faced by Animals", Matthew Calarco in *Radicalizing Levinas*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Calarco, SUNY (2010, 113-133). Levinas refers to this dog as "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany."

³⁰ For a very different reading of the case of Bobby, see John Llewelyn, "Am I obsessed by Bobby? (Humanism of the Other Animal)", *Rereading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley, Indiana 1991, ch 14. Llewelyn struggles to make this delightful animal and companion, a neighbor, or Rational (Kantian) Animal (Levinas calls Bobby "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany") a creature with a face that can demand not to be harmed. But clearly, there is no question of any of Levinas' companions *harming* Bobby. The question is not, do non-human animals (Bobby, for instance) demand our ethical regard, say to us "Do not kill!" The central issue is how it can be that the delightful encounter with Bobby bestows on Levinas and his companions their humanity: how Bobby's comportment of regard toward *them* let's them feel (and become) human again.

³¹ These New Englanders had closer in mind the Kantian positing of regulative (and transcendental) Ideas. Yet that's still not quite what Thoreau would endorse.

³² The quirky 'Descendentalism' is Joel Porte's, *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed*, Yale (2004).

³³ Consider the line from *Walden* that has God “culminating in the present moment” (Ch 2). We might say God descends to inhabit the moment, *this* moment, on earth. The so-called “Transcendentalism” of *A Week on the Concord* is given (such as it is) through rendering such moments of transcendent-immanent descended meaning, radiant in the endless and timeless mobility of this writer’s words, his travels, his delivery of creations radiant things.

³⁴ Ephesians 3:18 calls us to regard the “breadth, and length, and height, and depth” of the divine. Relevant too, are lines from the Psalms and from the Whirlwind in The Book of Job.

³⁵ *A Week*, 9.

³⁶ Acoustical shadows of John Donne, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less . . .”

³⁷ For clams and jellyfish as anomalous creatures, see Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, Thomas Crowell (1834: ch. IV, 81).

³⁸ I discuss the respect in which John Brown comes to inhabit an anomalous zone where he both dies and lives in “Thoreau’s Translations: John Brown, Apples, Lilies,” in *The Concord Saunterer* July 2009, reappearing in *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum (2009: ch 12).

³⁹ I endorse Rousseau’s position (“On Language”) that poetic description and apprehension is prior to any sort of stripped-down literalism *from* which poetic apprehension is thought to emerge. For an account of how ‘poetry’ and ‘science’ interweave in Thoreau (and others) see see Laura Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos: Alexander von Humbolt and the Shaping of America*, Chicago (2009). For a marvelous geological, biological, and cultural study of New England stone walls that relays science and elicits poetic wonder and care, see Robert Thorsten, *Stone by Stone: The Magnificent History of New England Stone Walls*, Walker and Company (2004).

⁴⁰ See Bob Plant, Wittgenstein and Levinas, Routledge, 2005, xxx

⁴¹ Romans 13:12, KJV. My friend Carson Webb points out that the KJV’s use of the word “armor” fits nicely with Thoreau’s mention of a tumult. And he adds that Paul writes ‘of the armor of light’ with the expectation that the last day is indeed at hand – not, as Thoreau has it, “not yet at hand.” Webb suggests that Paul’s sense of urgency can be cast aside while maintaining the light that shines (for Thoreau) prior to the dark last day -- (pace Paul, whose last day will be light).

⁴² See my discussion of The Book of Job in *Selves in Discourse and Resolve: Kierkegaard’s Moral-Religious Psychology, from Either/Or to Sickness Unto Death*, 36-40.

⁴³ Spinoza calls for a recognition that each being has a drive toward self-preservation that deserves recognition.

⁴⁴ In medieval lore, changelings were elves or trolls placed in human care in a secret substitution for an infant human, stolen child. Thus the child raised by humans was anomalous, had special, unnerving, mysterious provenance and present powers.

⁴⁵ I owe the phrase “the difficulty of reality” to Cora Diamond. See her chapter of that title in Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond, *Philosophy and Animal Life*, Columbia (2008: 43-90).

⁴⁶ See “The Meaning of Religious Practice,” trans. Peter Atterton, Mathew Calarco, and Joelle Hansel, *Modern Judaism* 25 (2005) 285-9, for Levinas’ thought that existence can strike one as a miracle.