

## A Translator's Introduction to Levinas

*Toward the Outside: Concepts and Themes in Emmanuel Levinas*

By Michael B. Smith

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*Review by Wade Roberts*

As Michael B. Smith reminds us, Levinas had a special affection for commentaries, and nowhere is his mastery of the genre more evident than in his Talmudic essays, which are polished works of hermeneutic craftsmanship; behind every sentence, indeed every word, of the great rabbinical meditations he uncovers a new universe of ideas, an opening towards infinity. His interpretations have the virtue of demonstrating a faithfulness to the texts, to the contours of their movement and logic, while at the same time exhibiting a didactic quality, reminding us about the importance of moral obligation without lapsing into the familiar drone of platitudinous instruction. Between the accumulated wisdom of history and the singular encounter of the Other, we find the trace of alterity in the teachings of sages, in the covenants of the prophets and the faces of the destitute, communicated in Levinas's startlingly beautiful and evocative prose.

In his recently published study of Levinas, Michael B. Smith (who already has exquisite translations of Levinas's *Alterity and Transcendence* as well as *Outside the Subject* to his credit) has likewise produced an admirable commentary which is provocative and elegantly written. He intends to "identify possible points of entry, to unravel certain texts along the lines of questions I would like to put to them" (14), a modest description which hardly does justice to the comprehensive nature of his study. It is divided into three parts: the first deals with important concepts in the Levinasian oeuvre, the second examines major themes in Levinas, and the final section is dedicated to explication of selected texts which follow the arc of Levinas's prolific career. Part One takes a strikingly original approach to the work of Levinas. Smith notes that "it is within the linguistically polarized space of...opposing concepts that Levinas's most intense philosophical developments unfold" (17). Therefore, he begins with an examination of ideas which are paired together in Levinas's essays, often in productive tension, such as totality and infinity, the same and other, ontology/metaphysics, and

the saying/the said. At the same time, however, he includes a discussion of concepts which are less readily distinguishable (i.e. the Sacred and the Holy). His discussion of the totality/infinity conceptual pair is especially useful, with its focus on two lesser known essays written by Levinas in 1968 for the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, entitled (unsurprisingly) “Totalité et Totalisation” and “Infini”, which wonderfully distill Levinas’s understanding of how the respective concepts have functioned in the history of Western philosophy. In addition, this chapter contains an excellent, section by section reading of the finest short introduction to *Totality and Infinity* itself, “Philosophy and the Idea of the Infinite”, where the classic Levinasian opposition between the Same and Other takes center stage. Smith’s discussion of the saying and the said is also illuminating; his contention that the distinction arose out of earlier reflections on the communicative and thematic uses of language is suggestive and interesting. (44)

Part Two is similarly instructive, with sustained examinations of major themes in Levinas’s work, including chapters on Judaism, hypostasis and grammar, proximity and temporality and the Holocaust. In addition, the second part contains introductory discussions of Levinas’s relationships with Husserl and Heidegger. One of the most valuable aspects of Part Two, however, is Smith’s exceptionally careful explication of Derrida’s essays on Levinas, including a masterful presentation of Derrida’s earliest (and arguably most famous) article on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics” (140-157). Although Smith cautions the reader that he is only attempting to give an overview of the issues and questions at stake, his reading is both exceedingly fair to Derrida (commending, for example, Derrida’s “marvelously alert account...of the untranslatable French *autrui*” (144)) as well as critical of points where, on Smith’s interpretation, Derrida’s reading misfires, or fails to acknowledge Levinas’s resources for articulating a cogent response. Likewise, Smith offers an interesting reading of Derrida’s *Adieu* (167-178), in which he detects a more conciliatory tone, especially in terms of Derrida’s receptivity to the very Levinasian theme of hospitality.

The third part of the book consists of Smith’s commentaries on key articles and aspects of major studies. He traces the development of central themes, such as the *il y a*, the anonymous rumbling of being introduced in the (relatively) early text *Existence and Existents*, the struggle between war and peace which famously prefaces *Totality and Infinity*, the role of Messianism in Levinas’s *Difficult Freedom*, and a discussion of “Language and Proximity,” a 1967 essay which contains early formulations of concepts that

figure prominently in *Otherwise than Being*. Smith's reading of *Existents and Existence* (186-209) is especially impressive; in this chapter, he makes a compelling argument that important aspects of Levinas's research project are already present in the 1947 essay, such as his characterization of the present as caught up in or riveted to itself (a description which bears remarkable similarity to Levinas's characterization of being in later essays) (197).

In the final analysis, Smith has produced a commendable introduction to Levinas which approaches the text from a refreshingly original perspective, or rather series of perspectives. Levinas's passion for commentary is clearly shared by Smith, and it shines through in his admirable study. It is impossible to avoid the feeling that he has inhabited Levinas's texts, that he has explored the intricacies and paradoxes of Levinas's enigmatic prose as only a translator can. Indeed, precisely due to his familiarity he is able to capture the quiet forcefulness of Levinas's work, to articulate what is, ultimately, so strangely compelling about Levinas's writing: namely, its attempt to say the unsayable.