R.S.V.P.

‘Let us remember however that Levinas defines the first phenomenon of death as “responselessness” in a passage in which he declares that “intentionality is not the secret of what is human” (so many paradoxical and provocative traits appear on the way to recalling the origin of responsibility): “The human esse is not conatus but disinterestedness and adieu” (25).’

(Jacques Derrida, The Gift of Death, 47)

‘I am unable to think what is happening to him or happening to me today, namely, this interruption or a certain nonresponse in a response that will never come to an end for me as long as I live.’

(Jacques Derrida, ‘Adieu’, 4)

For the reader of English, an untimely correspondence brought Jacques Derrida’s words on Emmanuel Levinas (and others) and death, and on Levinas’s death, into a quite unnerving proximity: The Gift of Death (David Wills’s translation of Donner la mort) was published in 1995 and, before the end of this year, Derrida delivered the oration at Levinas’s funeral.¹ What makes this correspondence—the agreement in theme—between these texts so untimely (so inopportune) is, of course, their timeliness, the nearness of the one to the other in time. Yet what makes this timeliness un-timely is the theme upon which these texts correspond: death—though this is a particular understanding of death, as ‘interruption or a certain nonresponse,’ or, as Derrida paraphrases further, ‘not first of all annihilation, nonbeing, or nothingness, but a certain experience for the survivor of the “without-response”’ (‘Adieu’, 5).² Having spent more than thirty years responding to Levinas, and elaborating on what it means to respond to Levinas, Derrida is confronted then with the experience of the ‘without-response’ that Levinas defined as death. We might state the dilemma confronting Derrida differently, with a question that he can not put into words: if ‘I am responsible for the other insofar as he is mortal,’ as Levinas has told me, does the lapse into responselessness revoke my responsibility (Levinas, La Mort et le temps, qtd. ‘Adieu’, 5)? Before the question could have been phrased, Derrida’s answer is already an emphatic denial: the response, and therefore the responsibility, ‘will never come to an end for me as long as I live’ (4).

If the responsibility never ends, even in the face of the nonresponse of death, might this prompt us to ask whether responsibility ever really begins: ‘so many paradoxical and provocative traits appear on the way to recalling the origin of responsibility’ (Gift, 47)? This essay argues that what might otherwise be called the beginning of the correspondence was never a beginning, as the structure of the correspondence renders thought of an origin impossible. By this I mean not only that both Derrida and Levinas problematize thought of origin in the determination of
responsibility, as has been well documented, but also that the responses between them have never taken the form of the refutation or reply. As we shall see, the correspondence in their writings provides points of convergence for the more general thematic of the address with which they are both, in their own way, concerned—including questions of the textuality of the response, and of the problematic of responsibility (if a response addresses a responsibility, can it also be addressed to an other?).

Not even ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ which has been read as Derrida’s first response to Levinas’s earlier work (culminating in Totality and Infinity), should be considered as such without taking into account Derrida’s admission that before publication his essay had already been compromised by the release of two more recent essays:

This essay was already written when two important texts by Emmanuel Levinas appeared: “La trace de l’autre” in Tijdschrift voor Filosofie, September 1963; and “La signification et le sens,” Revue de métaphysique et de morale, 1964, no.2. Unfortunately we can make but brief allusions to these texts here. (Writing and Difference, 311n1)

Though he insists that his essay ‘was already written’ when the two more recent texts by Levinas appeared, Derrida adds that ‘brief allusions to these texts’ have been made. In other words, the essay has been re-written, albeit slightly, to attempt to take the recent material into account. ‘Unfortunately we can make but brief allusions’: as we shall see, this rewriting will indeed come to have been un-fortunate (mal-heureux), as it will have already delayed Derrida’s response, putting it out-of-time with Levinas’s work. Thus, from this beginning that is already out-of-time, an un-timeliness has characterized their correspondence—this un-timeliness which has enabled Derrida at the end, in the face of responselessness, to deny that the response comes to an end.

By highlighting the proximity in time between the availability in English of The Gift of Death and Levinas’s death (and Derrida’s ‘Adieu’), we foreground two key features of Derrida’s response to Levinas, the first of which is simply that it corresponds. The valuable commentaries made by Robert Bernasconi, Simon Critchley and John Llewelyn show that there has never been a stable ground for the responses of Derrida and Levinas to each other, such that we cannot ask who it is that responds to whom: in ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ Derrida suggests that his questions are not strictly speaking his own, since ‘the route followed by Levinas’s thought is such that all our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue’ (109). This does not mean that Derrida and Levinas are in full agreement; rather, it means that neither can take a position in relation to the other, since both wish to perform the movement toward the other that constitutes the ethical relation. Here then is the second feature that we have foregrounded: the work(s) of Derrida and Levinas perform the movements they describe. The proximity of The Gift of Death to ‘Adieu’ is so deeply unnerving—shall we say here, unheimlich—precisely because they perform the relation to the other, Derrida’s relation to Levinas, and the gift of death that forms part of that relation. In what follows, I shall explain why the end ‘that shall never come to an end’ remains so similar—indeed, why the end corresponds—to the un-timely beginning of this correspondence, by looking at the way in which Derrida and Levinas have performed much the same movement in relation to each other across a number of works; a movement which, to use Critchley’s phrase, works by not working. Perhaps, in this
way, I shall also be able to make what was so unheimlich about The Gift of Death and ‘Adieu’ in 1995 seem more familiar.

We have noted the correspondence in theme between The Gift of Death (Donner la mort) and ‘Adieu,’ but we should stress the different ways these two texts reach out to the other. There is of course a functional similarity between the texts, in that both are written in memoriam. While I have been concentrating so far on The Gift of Death as an immediate source for Derrida’s words on Levinas and death prior to Levinas’s death, the initial focus of Derrida’s ruminations on response, responsibility and death is the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka, who died after police interrogation in 1977. The Gift of Death, written more than a decade after Patočka’s death, remembers the Czech philosopher, yet it cannot address itself directly to him. Derrida clearly makes the case that Patočka has already received the gift of death—indeed, he had in his own way, and responsibly, given death to himself (10). While The Gift of Death concentrates our attention initially on the life and death of one philosopher, then, it must be addressed at the same time to another. The first three sentences of the book register its directions:

In one of his Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History Jan Patočka relates secrecy, or more precisely the mystery of the sacred, to responsibility. He opposes one to the other; or rather underscores their heterogeneity. Somewhat in the manner of Levinas he warns against an experience of the sacred as an enthusiasm or fervor for fusion. (1)

Since Patočka’s warnings against enthusiasm for fusion are ‘in the manner of Levinas,’ it will be easier for Derrida to direct his comments on Patočka to Levinas, thereby allowing him to give the gift of death to the other without exceeding the movement of an ethical relation to the other. As we have seen, however, Levinas receives not only The Gift of Death but the gift of death, and Derrida is invited to bid ‘Adieu.’ In bidding ‘adieu,’ Derrida is faced yet again with the problem presented by The Gift of Death, that is, of a movement to an other who is already without-response. Yet rather than take the direction he has taken in The Gift of Death, Derrida confronts the scandal of the funeral oration—‘a scandal (“is it really possible that he’s dead?”) of non-response and of my responsibility’ (Levinas, La Mort et le temps, qtd. ‘Adieu’, 5)—by directly asking the question of direction and of the address: ‘whom would one allow oneself to do so?’ (1). Rather than redirecting his comments, as he did in The Gift of Death, Derrida insists in ‘Adieu’ that the response never ends, and that death as a non-response is also the guarantee of my responsibility. In making the point, he takes a quotation from The Gift of Death which is a quotation from Levinas: ‘I am responsible for the other inasmuch as he is mortal”—this passage from page 38 of La Mort et le temps is quoted on page 46 of The Gift of Death and, as we have seen, reprinted again on page 5 of ‘Adieu.’ This quotation of a quotation is complicated by Levinas’s placement of quotation marks around the proposition in his own work, setting the statement apart from the remainder of his work as a proposition:

I am responsible for the death of the other to the extent of including myself in that death. That can be shown in a more acceptable proposition: “I am responsible for the other inasmuch as the other is mortal.” It is the other’s death that is the foremost death. (qtd. The Gift of Death, 46)
In *The Gift of Death*, as can be seen here, this passage is reprinted in full, thus retaining the context in which the proposition is made. Derrida responds to the proposition with a form of non-response, suggesting that we can only approach Levinas’s thinking about *adieu* by displacing the ‘logic or topology’ that prevents ‘good sense’ from thinking or ‘living’ the same, but that we ‘cannot effect such a displacement here’ (47). Instead, in the passage from which I have taken the first of the two epigrams framing this essay, he notes that the *adieu* can mean at least three things: the salutation or benediction given—‘and in certain circumstances in French it happens that one says *adieu* at the moment of meeting rather than separation’ (47)—as well as at the moment of separation or death, and the *a-dieu*, before God, which makes every relation to an other, always, an ‘*adieu*.’

We are not surprised, then, to find that when Derrida bids ‘*adieu*,’ he is doing something other than granting to Levinas a death that is nothingness without return. This ‘*adieu*’ is inflected with the address to Levinas in *The Gift of Death*, making it also an insistence that this address in the face of death is already, before God, always, this ‘*a-dieu*.’

In ‘*Adieu*,’ however, Derrida cites Levinas’s proposition out of the context of the passage, and without the punctuation, which marks it as a proposition. Indeed, many of the number of quotations which flesh out the funeral oration with the memory of Levinas are fragmented or, as in the following example, interrupted by a parenthesis which makes another quotation:

> The Other who expresses himself is entrusted to me (and there is no debt with regard to the Other—for that which is due cannot be paid: one will never be even) [further on it will be a question of a “duty beyond all debt” for the I who is what it is, singular and identifiable, only through the impossibility of being able to be replaced, even though it is precisely here that the “responsibility for the Other,” the “responsibility of the hostage,” is an experience of substitution and sacrifice]. The Other individuates me in that responsibility that I have for him. The death of the Other who dies affects me in my very identity as a responsible I (...) made up of unspeakable responsibility. This is how I am affected by the death of the Other; this is my relation with his death. It is, in my relation, my deference toward someone who no longer responds, already a guilt of the survivor. [MT, pp.14-15; quotation in brackets, p.25] (‘*Adieu*’, 6)

This interruption, which interrupts Levinas’s words on responsibility, is not irresponsible. On the following page, Derrida raises the Levinasian question, after Maurice Blanchot, of the interruption, and fleshes out the question further with a recollection of Levinas:

> I cannot speak of the interruption without recalling, like many among you no doubt, the anxiety of interruption that I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the “without-response,” of the other whom he tried to call out to and hold on to with an “allo, allo” between each sentence, and sometimes even in midsentence. (7)
The interruption of a quotation, with a clarification and a further quotation from Levinas, is indeed like the ‘allo, allo’ with which Derrida can still hear Levinas calling out to him. In other words, Derrida does not simply cite Levinas as one cites the dead object of a work; he performs the ‘guilt of the survivor,’ this ‘deference toward someone who no longer responds’ that he describes. In deference to Levinas, he allows Levinas’s words to be interrupted by . . . Levinas? Thus, the question of the address—‘to whom’ and ‘in whose name’—resonates throughout Derrida’s oration as a form of deference, but also as a form of the theorisation to which, in the ‘Envois,’ Derrida professes adoration:

Ryle, Russell, etc., and the question of knowing whether I am calling my dog or if I am mentioning the name of which he is the bearer, if I am utilizing or if I am naming his name. I adore these theorizations, often Oxonian moreover, their extraordinary and necessary subtlety as much as their imperturbable ingenuity, psychoanalytically speaking; they will always be confident in the law of quotation marks. (Post Card, 98)

If the ‘adieu’ is inflected with the address to Levinas in The Gift of Death, as I remarked a few lines back, it nevertheless distinguishes itself from the commentary on the ‘adieu,’ which seemed to adhere to the propriety of Levinas’s work, grounding it in his name, as a way of addressing Derrida’s commentary to an other capable of responding. The use of quotation marks in ‘A dieu’ brings the name of Levinas into question, in the same way that the name of ‘Freud’ had been brought into question in The Post Card. What we must recognise is, of course, that Derrida is himself ‘confident in the law of quotation marks,’ and that by performing Levinas’s thought for us, or by utilising his words in this or that way, Derrida produces echoes of the Oxonian theorisation—whether I am calling Levinas, or if am mentioning the name of which he is the bearer, if I am utilising or if I am naming his name—within the questions ‘to whom’ and ‘in whose name.’ The other side of the theorisation—given Derrida’s refusal to cede to the without-response—is that by bringing Levinas’s name into question, he retains the possibility that this name can be the name of which he (Levinas) is still the bearer, as a form of denial of the death.

Have we not, then, produced a paradox by claiming, in effect, that what marks the difference between the way that The Gift of Death and ‘A dieu’ reach out to the other is that both are addressed to Levinas? The short answer is that this is a paradox, although it demands closer scrutiny, as one of the ‘paradoxical and provocative traits,’ identified by Derrida, ‘on the way to recalling the origin of responsibility’ (Gift of Death, 47). The word ‘paradox’ means contrary to common sense or received thought, and we have seen that when he points out these paradoxical and provocative traits, Derrida opposes logic to the ‘good sense’ that thinks as Levinas does. Any address to Levinas thus addresses what Robert Bernasconi and David Wood have called—as their title for the collection of essays addressed to Levinas—The Provocation of Levinas. To respond to Levinas is to have been provoked into doing so, but by what? The provocation of Levinas is the para-doxy of his thought, inasmuch as it moves outside the parameters of received thought or, as the title of one of his major works suggests, it thinks Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence. The fragility of such work is of course, as Wood suggests in the introduction to The Provocation of Levinas, that ‘Levinas’s writing more than most lives only at the mercy of its reader’ (2). He paraphrases what Derrida has been arguing since ‘Violence and Metaphysics’: ‘To say what he wants to say as he
wants to say it, Levinas has no choice but to enter and deploy the logocentric language of philosophy which constantly threatens his project’ (2). Since Levinas’s thought must enter and deploy the language it also seeks to displace, it must therefore continually remain paradoxical even with relation to itself. This is not the same as saying that Levinas must contradict himself, but calls for us to recognise that the gap between Levinas’s thought and his work—between what he wants to say and how it is said—is implicated in the paradox of the relation between the Saying and the Said. I refer to John Llewelyn’s brief summary of this ‘paradoxicality’:

the saying and the said are (...) inassemblable; they are so incompatible that they resist every attempt to bring them together. They resist (...) the limit case of togetherness of logical contradiction. Statements that contradict each other are mutually contradictory. They are contradictory only because they are posited together in the same time (....) But the saying and the said are neither at the same time nor at different times. They are in different times. So the saying cannot be retrieved in the said. (‘Levinas’, 153)

This paradoxicality of the Saying and the Said is also inscribed in what Levinas writes in Totality and Infinity and Otherwise than Being on the absolute incommensurability of my time with that of the other, whose trace is not strictly prior—for this places the time of the other within the diachrony of the Said—but anterior. In the piece that Llewelyn paraphrases, ‘Tout autrement,’ Levinas addresses the risk identified by Derrida, arguing not only that deconstruction runs a similar risk of collapsing all else into its own ‘severe architecture,’ but also that the similarity in risk attests to the similarity between Derrida’s work and his own. As Llewelyn summarizes, ‘Derrida has a keen ear for the diachrony of the said. He locates that diachrony in the dead time of writing with which the living present of the spoken word is engraved’ (153). The paradox of the address to Levinas situates Derrida’s work, by his own admission, within the paradox of the inassemblability of the Saying and the Said.14

It will be clear now that it is no longer possible to talk about the two texts which frame the un-timely end of the correspondence between Derrida’s and Levinas’s work(s) without reference to the remainder of this correspondence, as the works themselves are at the same time responding to the correspondence to which they contribute. I want to briefly sketch some of this remainder, and to follow the movement that these works take, in the words by Derrida with which I have framed this essay, ‘on the way to recalling the origin of responsibility.’ In other words, I want to look at how these works perform for us the memory of the origin of responsibility (the posteriority of the anterior), yet are at the same time—in the sense that the time of the memory, a posteriori, cannot be in any way simultaneous with the responsibility which it recalls—the responses shaped by the responsibility they describe.

In ‘At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,’ Derrida performs for us—who else? Not Levinas, as we shall see shortly—this question of responsibility, and of how one may respond responsibly to Levinas.15 In The Ethics of Deconstruction, Simon Critchley unravels the spiralling complexity of the essay, beginning with a quotation from Levinas’s ‘The Trace of the Other’: ‘The Work thought to the end requires a radical generosity of the movement in which the Same goes towards the Other. Consequently, it requires an ingratitude from the other’ (qtd. ‘At This Very Moment’, 13). Written as a contribution to a collection of Textes pour Emmanuel Levinas, ‘At This Very Moment’ recognises, as Critchley puts it, that ‘Levinas’s work
works by going out generously from the proper name and signature of Emmanuel Levinas towards the Other. Levinas’s work is not circumscribed by the proper name of Emmanuel Levinas’ (110). Derrida is troubled by the possibility that a text written for Emmanuel Levinas returns the work to its author, thus denying his work its own radical generosity. He is obligated, then, to show not only how Levinas’s work works but how it does not work, yet he remains haunted even then by the possibility that such ingratitude is still proper and in keeping with Levinas’s own work, whence it would return again. Derrida’s (ab)solution is to dispense with his own voice, or to at least write the essay as a double writing and reading, with the one voice masculine and the other the feminine that seems to be excluded by Levinas’s discourse.

While its injunction to demonstrate its ingratitude is taken from ‘The Trace of the Other,’ Derrida’s essay concentrates its attention more closely on Otherwise than Being, and on the way in which the text holds itself together against the force of a thought that would tear it asunder. Derrida is aware that, for Levinas, alterity is arrived at in the total dislocation of the time of the Saying from that of the Said, and he demonstrates his ‘keen ear’ for the diachrony of the Said by showing how ‘this work’ by Levinas performs this dislocation. Using the neologism ‘seriasure’ (sériature), Derrida explains that Levinas’s text binds and unbinds itself between the numerous instances that the phrase ‘at this very moment’ (en ce moment même) has been written. The former of any two of these very moments give the form or a temporal ‘place’ to the thought that it attempts to speak, yet is already interrupted by the ‘very moment’ that is both the same moment as the first and the establishment of a relation or a ‘hooking back’ (échancrure)—that is, a movement—between moments (‘At This Very Moment’, 26).

Derrida thus demonstrates through his own already doubling voice the way in which Levinas’s work complicates the time of its Said, the ‘dia-synchrony’ of the seriasure across which it obligates or creates its own movement with relation to the other (30). What interests me in particular about the way in which Derrida reads Otherwise than Being, however, is that of the many instances of the phrase ‘at this very moment’ that he cites, the following is not among them:

The very discourse that we are holding at this very moment (en ce moment) about signification, diachrony, and the transcendence of the approach beyond Being—a discourse that means to be philosophy—is thematization, synchronization of terms, recourse to systematic language, constant use of the verb to be (être), bringing back into the bosom of Being all signification allegedly conceived beyond Being; but are we duped by this surreptition? The objections are facile, like those that since the birth of philosophy, are thrown at scepticism. (155)

When Critchley cites this passage, he is no longer discussing ‘At This Very Moment,’ so mentions only that the passage ‘would have merited discussion’ in Derrida’s essay. His concern at that very moment in his own work is to show instead how Levinas has often said the same thing in regard to his own project that he has said about Derrida’s. Using the same piece from ‘Tout autrement’ that Llewelyn paraphrases, Critchley points out that what Levinas had said about Derrida’s scepticism in the earlier piece is the same as what he registers in Otherwise than Being as a potential objection to be raised against his own project.

What Critchley does not ask at that moment in his reading of Levinas—since the moment of reading ‘At This Very Moment’ has passed; the thread has been tied—is
why Derrida does not refer to this particular passage from Otherwise than Being in what is an otherwise scrupulous rendering of that work. Here I would direct the reader to Robert Bernasconi’s ‘Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy,’ which I have taken as the catalyst for much of what follows, since its reading of the relation played out between Derrida and Levinas in ‘At This Very Moment’ and Otherwise than Being traverses many of the earlier works which frame this relation. Bernasconi reads the fifth chapter of Otherwise than Being as Levinas’s response to ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ although it does not—indeed, cannot—mention Derrida’s essay directly. What one reads when one reads this chapter, he suggests, is Levinas’s answers to the questions that Derrida asks in his earlier essay, questions that we have already seen may be borrowed from Levinas. Since there is every justification for claiming that Levinas is answering his own questions, Otherwise than Being can be read as overwriting ‘Violence and Metaphysics.’ What we have are claims made individually by Bernasconi, Critchley, and Llewelyn that, in Otherwise than Being, Levinas is addressing Derrida. ‘The curiosity,’ Bernasconi suggests, ‘is that Derrida at no point seems to suspect that he is under discussion there’ (‘Skepticism’, 155). Yet he is not intent on demonstrating Derrida’s blindness to the obvious. Instead, he asks if ‘some necessity’ underlies Derrida’s silence on the question of skepticism in spite of his own detailed reading of the work devoted to this theme (158-9). This necessity is in a sense the integrity of his own ingratitude to Levinas in ‘At This Very Moment,’ since recognising himself in Levinas’s work also demands that Derrida recognise his own ‘gift of “Violence and Metaphysics” as one which Levinas had already accepted and returned to him in Otherwise than Being, so reducing this thought to the order of the same’ (159).

We arrive, then, at a dizzying series of relations, in which Otherwise than Being is read as a response to questions asked by Levinas in Totality and Infinity and by Derrida in ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ though it addresses itself directly to neither, and in which ‘At This Very Moment’ takes its injunction to read Otherwise than Being ungratefully from ‘The Trace of the Other,’ perhaps as a way of not having to address itself to the way in which the former indirectly addresses ‘Violence and Metaphysics.’ It may be no surprise then to find that when Bernasconi reads Otherwise than Being, he asks if in this work Levinas does not sound ‘more like Derrida of 1964 than Levinas of 1961’ (156). This correspondence by which the work(s) of Derrida and Levinas may often be taken for the work of each other is thus precisely the performance of the movement towards the other in the work. While it seems to involve an insidious transgression of what are commonly understood to be the boundaries of the work, this movement conceives the work radically, as Levinas claims in ‘The Trace of the Other,’ as a ‘generosity of the same who in the work goes unto the other’ (349). 16 I now want to follow this movement one more step back toward recalling the origin of responsibility in the correspondence of Derrida’s and Levinas’s work(s), by taking the series of relations I have already outlined one more step back toward Totality and Infinity. By doing this, we shall see that what is thematized in Otherwise than Being and ‘At This Very Moment’ occurs only somewhat incidentally in the un-timely correspondence of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ with ‘The Trace of the Other.’

We have already noted Derrida’s admission that his essay had been compromised by the two essays by Levinas that immediately preceded its release. What I wish to add is the suggestion that these two essays, ‘The Trace of the Other’ (‘La trace de l’autre’) and ‘La signification et le sens,’ represent a move by Levinas to go beyond Totality and Infinity, by introducing thought of the trace—a term absent from the earlier work—into his project. There are moments in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ when Derrida concedes
to Levinas that the thought of the trace ‘cannot include the concept of the work found in Totality and Infinity’ (102), or that by introducing the trace into the thought of God Levinas’s thought is ‘maintained’ between the postulation of divine presence and of the erasure of presence in the trace of God (108). However, the other ‘brief allusions’ to these essays submit them to the same ‘violent’ reading to which Derrida had already submitted Totality and Infinity in what we are told was an already completed version of his essay. We know now well enough—indeed, as Critchley suggests, Derrida’s reading of Levinas ‘has largely determined the reception of Levinas’s thinking, particularly in the English-speaking world’ (Ethics, 11)—that Derrida interrogates Levinas’s position with regard to the phenomenology that he seeks to question. Though Derrida seeks to dissimulate with regard to this interrogation by suggesting that the questions that he asks are already interior to Levinas’s dialogue—an admission which, of course, also implicates Derrida in the violent relation to philosophy—we cannot ignore that when Derrida questions the responsibility of Levinas’s response to philosophy, his understanding of ‘responsibility’ is coterminous with neither the Levinas of 1961 nor the Levinas of 1963 and 1964.

Allow me to explain what I mean by this last claim. Critchley notes that a certain quotation from Paul Valéry—‘profond jadis, jadis jamais assez’ (‘deep past, past never enough’)—recurs throughout Levinas’s work:

In Totality and Infinity, it appears in “The Dwelling,” the chapter that enacts the movement from egoist separation to transcendence or ethics (Tel 145/TI 170). Levinas is seeking to demonstrate (...) the primacy of representational or theoretical consciousness in Husserlian phenomenology. Against the latter, Levinas argues that (...) the subject of consciousness is traced, or haunted, by an anterior structure of subjectivity qua enjoyment, a structure inaccessible to consciousness—a “deep past.” In the 1963 essay “The Trace of the Other,” the same allusion is recalled immediately after the first introduction of the thought of the trace in Levinas’s work (EDE 198 [“Trace of the Other” 355]), as indeed it is in the 1964 essay “La signification et le sens,” where the trace is a sign for an absolute past which has never been present and is beyond memory (H 64). A very similar formulation can be found in Otherwise than Being, where Levinas claims that the ethical self is older than the time of consciousness accessible to memory. (152)

For Levinas, the thought of the trace makes sense of the necessary and paradoxical link between the Saying and the Said, in spite of their absolute un-timeliness. Importantly, as a sign for a ‘deep past’ that is beyond memory, the trace signifies only in the condition of responsibility, in which the ethical relation—the movement toward an other that does not return—is always in the absolute past of responding and of the ‘I am.’ Yet when Derrida reads these works, he already brings to this reading the understanding of the trace upon which he will expand in ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’ (chapter seven in Writing and Difference), where he concentrates upon the degree to which the Freudian memory-trace (Errinerungspur), under a variety of names, is thought of as a retention of the past only after-the-fact (après-coup in French, or the German nachträglich). While the difference is only subtle, one of direction, we can still mark it here: Levinas’s focus is on the degree to which the posteriority of the anterior emphasises its anteriority, whereas Derrida concentrates on the same relation in order to
emphasise its posteriority, and he will later use the term arche-trace to set the trace apart from its absolute past. Caught unawares by the release of Levinas’s work on the trace, and having not yet formulated the arche-trace, Derrida’s reading fissures around the following brief allusion:

What “other” means is phenomenality as disappearance. Is it a question, here, of a “third route excluded by these contradictory ones” (revelation and dissimulation, The Trace of the Other)? But this route cannot appear, cannot be stated as tertiary. If it is called “trace,” the word can emerge only as a metaphor whose philosophical elucidation will ceaselessly call upon “contradictions.” Without which its originality—that which distinguishes it from the Sign (the word conventionally chosen by Levinas)—would not appear. For it must be made to appear. And the phenomenon supposes original contamination by the sign. (Writing and Difference, 129)

When Derrida reads ‘The Trace of the Other’ in ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ he takes the Levinasian trace to be a thought of an originality, which can be read as a necessity—‘it must be made to appear’—but also, therefore, as a ‘contamination by the sign.’ We may note of course that the necessity to which he reduces Levinasian responsibility has been contaminated in advance within his own reading by a thought of responsibility, after Heidegger, as respondence—that is, as a response ‘to this pledge and of this pledge’—which is a posteriority, a coming-after (Gasché, Inventions of Difference, 228).

Despite (or perhaps because of) the obvious subtleties of Derrida’s double reading in ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ then, I suggest that it cannot be thought of as a response to Levinas, since the term around which they fail to correspond is just this: response. If Levinas has been reluctant to address ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ directly in his work—that is, if he has not responded—it is because Derrida’s essay is already out-of-time with regard to his own work. On the one hand, Derrida’s essay arrives in a sense already after Levinas’s own response to Totality and Infinity, and on the other hand its understanding of the time of responsibility and of the response does not correspond with the idea of the ‘deep past’ to which Levinas insistently clings. Paradoxically, this failure to correspond in time will be precisely the key to the movements each of the later works performs—that is to say, they correspond to each other insofar as each attempts to perform the movement that goes out toward the other from the same (a movement, in other words, which insists upon the absolute alterity of the other, its utter inability to be contained by what is said at any moment in any work). What is the status of the response in such a correspondence? Perhaps the best answer is that it is no response at all, that it functions totally outside the strictures of respondence, and perhaps even outside any question of discourse at all. At the last, we may do well simply to turn a keen ear toward the para-doxy of a thought that would intend to think otherwise than contradiction, let alone contradict received thought. For the work in question, the work that is questioned or that brings itself into question—if it is to remain ethical—cannot receive anything and cannot hope to capture thought. In the face of such para-doxy, we might at last wonder about the status of the gift, and of the gift of death in particular. I can only conclude here by throwing out toward the other the same expectation that Derrida finally voices—though it seeks to deny the finality of a death that is responselessness—with his ‘Adieu’ addressed . . . to whom? The address,
however un-timely its correspondence has always been, has been made. Adieu. Hello and goodbye. Be good. R.S.V.P.

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NOTES:

3 As we shall also see, one of the ways in which this correspondence addresses the thematic of the address is, in the manner of a double reading, to foreground the problematic of thematisation in general.
5 Derrida will be aware that heureux (fortune) is inflected in the French not only with the sense of luck or chance, but also of the time of day. ‘Unfortunate’ (malheureux), is thus also untimely.
7 Readers of Freud will be familiar with Alix Strachey’s admission that the term unheimlich (uncanny) does not carry well in translation the idea of that which is both familiar and strange—taken literally, that which is homely and ‘unhomely’ (Standard Edition, v.17, 219). We do, however, find special resonance for reading Levinas by rendering the idea of the strangely familiar perhaps too literally as ‘unhomeliness,’ since he defines that which is prior to Being (Dasein) as living or habitation: that is, as homeliness [see especially section IId, ‘The Dwelling,’ in Totality and Infinity: An Essay On Exteriority, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp.152-74].
8 Levinas’s name is, as far as I can tell, absent from the third chapter of The Gift of Death, ‘Whom to Give to (Knowing Not to Know),’ in which Søren Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling is the focus for Derrida’s reading of the mysterium tremendum. The fourth and final chapter then begins with a reading of Levinas’s critique of Kierkegaard, thus taking up the issues raised in the previous chapter, and putting Levinas forward as the answer to the question the chapter seems to ask itself: ‘Whom to Give to’?
10 We note that ‘common sense’ and ‘good sense’ cannot be synonymous in Levinas’s terminology, since goodness and the ethical imperative precedes the determination of a common ground in the inter-subjective relation. In short, that which is good and that which is common occupy different timeframes.


The priority of the primary event is not an origin in the strict sense of the word, since it is arrived at as an anteriority only a posteriori, in what Levinas calls ‘the posteriority of the anterior’ (*Totality and Infinity*, 54). For closer scrutiny of these points, see Fabio Ciaramelli’s ‘The Riddle of the Pre-Original’, in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York and London, Routledge, 1995), pp.87-94.

This ‘admission,’ the price of entry, is the inability to effect the displacement that would allow for an apprehension of the alterity implied in Levinas’s thought. Derrida does not oppose this thought, since he recognises that such opposition is rendered untenable both by Levinas and by deconstruction. When pressed by André Jacob in an interview to state his objections to Levinas plainly, Derrida insists that his reading of Levinas is ‘not of the order of disagreement or distance,’ or at least that whatever differences there are between them ‘cannot be translated into a difference of content or of philosophical position’ (qtd. Critchley, *Ethics*, 10).


Derrida asks, ‘and if God was an effect of the trace? If the idea of divine presence (life, existence, parousia, etc.), if the name of God was but the movement of erasure of the trace in presence?’ (108). Yet these are not questions that Derrida asks of Levinas’s work, since they seem to be derived from ‘The Trace of the Other.’ We should not be surprised to find that Jill Robbins rounds off her reading of Levinas’s thought of God as a trace with Derrida’s questions, which seem to be more a summary of Levinas’s own questions [Jill Robbins, ‘Tracing Responsibility in Levinas’s Ethical Thought’, in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak (New York and London, Routledge, 1995), pp.173-84].

Recall that from an early stage in his philosophical writings, in *Difficile Liberté*, Levinas defined ‘violence’ as ‘all action that we undergo without collaborating in all its aspects’ [qtd. by Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette, Indiana, Purdue University Press, 1993), p.125n5]. For an important reading of the way in which ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ commits itself to an uncollaborative or ‘violent’ reading, I direct the reader again to Critchley’s *Ethics of Deconstruction*, though we must note that Critchley emphasises that the violence of ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ is but one of the strands in its complex double reading of Levinas’s early work.
