

## ***Ethics With/In Abundance***

Virginal awareness.

*'Creation happens to us, burns itself into us, recasts us in burning – we tremble and are faint, we submit.'* Martin Buber<sup>1</sup>

Chicago, Illinois, 1989. Running almost late, I bounded down the stairs and burst out the side-door, only to freeze immediately. He was one step away, our eyes perfectly level, and perfectly locked. I had surprised him, caught him off guard, he had surprised me, caught me off guard – if there was a difference I do not know how to tell it. Neither of us had been expecting this encounter, that much was clear. There was no one else in that narrow passageway. Would he attack? Would I scream? Would he leap, would I run? We both of us stood frozen, perfectly unmoving. We did not take our eyes from each other. I had never been so completely aware of another, so fully and utterly aware of a stranger's presence. And with his eyes boring into mine I was so fully and completely aware of my own presence, of every strange and trembling fibre of my body, and of his, so wholly foreign and so present. As each of us gazed into the eyes of the other, fully acknowledging each other's presence, as each of us stayed perfectly still, perfectly silent, there began to grow between us – I do not know how else to describe it – a shared respect. Silently, we agreed to honour, then and there, each other's unknown life. Between us there trembled the faintest of a pact. 'Yes,' we said but did not say to each other, 'you are'. And somehow, somehow, that acknowledgement gave each of us more presence. In that moment we were both so burningly alive. Each of us so distinctly a part of that moment. I do not know how long we faced each other. Eventually, our eyes still locked, we began to move apart – together, simultaneously. Slowly, slowly turning my shoulders away from him, I took a single step toward the road, still looking into his eyes. Slowly, slowly he shifted his weight, began to twist his head in my direction as he too edged away. Another step, and another, and then we each let go of the other's gaze, our paces quickening. I paused at the end of that

passageway, looked back. He too had paused, I could see him peering in my direction, although I could no longer see his eyes.

That meeting, that encounter with that scrawny little squirrel on the tree by the door (and I must now confess that ‘he’ could well have been a ‘she’, I’ve really no idea) burned itself into my memory. It blazes up whenever, since then, I have been faced with the preposition ‘for’. As in, ‘responsibility *for* the other’. My encounter with that squirrel, the squirrel’s encounter with me, was in no way a ‘for’ kind of event. It was, rather, a wholly with-each-other sort of event. It was a withly exchange, a withly experience; it was *with* each other that we each acknowledged the other, both realized ourselves (through the touch of the other’s eyes?) as also, and so fully, *other*. There was no ‘for’ in that exchange, but there was a shared acknowledgement, a shared agreement that each was present and fully aware of the other, and there was most definitely a shared coordination of each of our movements, each taking ever so fully into account ‘the advent or event of the other.’<sup>2</sup> Most of my relations with other human creatures have never been so withly, so responsive, so suffused with the mutual awareness of the other as an other.<sup>3</sup> Rarely have I experienced that shared ‘with’; when I have, it was almost unbearable. It did leave me trembling, faint, and so, so aware of my strange self – of the oddity that I am, that you are, that each being is. ‘If I see you as a being, but not necessarily as a human being, then you look very funny.’ So she said in a moment of searing honesty. We are not supposed to look ‘funny’ to each other, but of course we do. The human being is remarkably odd, particularly when viewed simply as a ‘being’ – one among so very many others. And this creation in which we live is still (but for how long?) filled to overflowing with so very many others.

*Might submitting to creation translate into an ethics? Into an ethics with and in abundance? Does an ethics with/in abundance, an ethics swirling, spinning, threaded throughout the innumerable contradictory, irreconcilable, silly, terrible becomings of creation, does it really burn? Does it cause its ethical agents to tremble? Do we faint at the thought – or is it enough,*

*perhaps all we can hope, to become (again and again, each time anew) strangely, faintly ethical creatures, all tangled up with each Other?*

...

I dream of an ethics of non-innocence: an impure blood-soaked ethics, a sweaty panting ethics, a stunned and trembling ethics, an ethics mindful of the gap, the abyss, the meanings and passages through which we do and do not make our way.

...

Maternal musings.

*'... a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable. How could one tolerate a foreigner if one did not know one was a stranger to oneself?'* Julia Kristeva<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning, it is sometimes said, we were each of us thrown into this world.<sup>5</sup> Expelled from an undivided primal place, pushed out of 'the womb of the great mother'.<sup>6</sup> Slipping out of that first dark passage, into the light we journeyed, suddenly emerging each a separate being. In the beginning, dare it be said, we were each of us caught, held in the arms of another, introduced to a world suddenly changed by our new presence. Once upon a time we each of us made new the world, adding, indescribably, to the strange complexities of this brightly, darkly burning creation. Once upon a time we knew the bright light burning on our flesh as wondrous, awful new. Just as once upon a time we knew how to abide in the dark without fear. And once upon a time there were some, it would seem, who knew how to abide with the dark within.<sup>7</sup> Who held the dark within themselves, and sometimes shared that dark with another, a stranger, growing within the shared dark. Once upon a time we were all of us at home in and with the dark. Once upon a time we shared the dark with one another, and in the dark we grew. From that shared dark we each emerged, into the strange shared light where we were held in mothering arms.

'All reality is an activity in which I share without being able to appropriate for myself. Where there is no sharing there is no reality.'<sup>8</sup> Thou shall share, says the mother within and to us all. Being and sharing:

to be is to partake of this frightening burning teeming harsh creation *with all the others*. A creation forever being made new, made different, made strange by the arrivals, the advents of the others, so very many others.<sup>9</sup> They do not survive in a world that is not shared; they do not survive without care. The most virginally pure, the most harsh of whorish facts. Facts the mother knows better than any. To open one's arms to such burning abundance – now in order to hold, to protect, to comfort, now in order to release, to send forth, to let go. Being and sharing. Ontology and ethics – so sensually conjoined. Together they form a most particular, most universal threshold. The mother. Bringer into Being. Sharer of the flesh, the dark, the world. Such a physical figure, imagined in such fantastical ways. Grudgingly, at times resentfully, we acknowledge her contribution to our being. But damn we hate her ethics. We hate her for telling us we are not special, not somehow more deserving, not exempt from the universal requirement *to share reality with the others*. 'Go away,' we say to her, 'do not remind us of a truth we do not like.'

Still, sometimes, perhaps in the dark of night when we are feeling all alone and insignificant, do we not yearn for her touch, for the touch of any mother, for the reassurance that we too are, that we too matter, that we too share in all that is? In those times when we cannot avoid the terrible realization that we have been too long apart from any other, that already we have begun to drift away into nothingness, that we simply cannot translate to ourselves our own strange and wondrous presence in this world. On those nights when we sit frozen, staring into space, unseeing.<sup>10</sup> Wishing there were an other close by, an other to whom we might turn with open arms, an other with whom we might share the vast dark, an other with whom we might, touchingly, confirm our real co-existence. Once again. 'Where there is no sharing there is no reality.'<sup>11</sup>

...

Whorish reflections.

*'What if the sacred were the unconscious perception the human being has of its untenable eroticism: always on the borderline between nature and*

*culture, the animalistic and the verbal, the sensible and the nameable?*  
 Julia Kristeva<sup>12</sup>

What has the sacred to do with ethics? I have written already that the only judgment the sacred ever makes is 'yes', acceptance of all that is as it is, coupled with an incessant demand for more and other. At first glance the sacred is ferociously unethical, could even be wickedly immoral. But perhaps at this (and every?) time Life, the very possibility that life might be maintained, simultaneously becoming 'more' and 'other' here on *this earth*, perhaps life desperately needs that fucking sacred 'yes': that 'yes' which encompasses such putative opposites as nature and culture, animal and human, eros and logos. But oh we have been so intensively well-cultured, so thoroughly de-natured, or so we tell ourselves. It happens early, it happens strong. A resounding 'no' to all borderline animal sense. It's fine to find kittens adorable (if they have had their shots and been de-fleaed), kittens and mittens and bright copper kettles and packages tied up with string. But at a certain age it happens that we find other subjects adorable. No, not adorable: desirable, desperately, urgently, unspeakably desirable. Such an urge, when it finally reverberates bone-deep, sounds suspiciously like a growl. A decidedly animal sound. A sound no cultured subject is ever taught in any school. Instead we are taught that we are not like that. But what if we are?

When the very possibility of life-with-life on earth abiding rests, dubiously, with human beings, we *must* find a way to express our own living, untenable, simultaneously animal-cultural sense, a way to express our always simultaneously cultural-animal flesh. The whore within me desires, yes, to give to our words an enlivening, sense-drenched eroticism. To give to our flesh those borderline words required to live into the sacred 'yes'. 'No' words we have, 'no' words we use with boring regularity. They can be ponderous or pompous, inane or repetitive, but never suggestive; flat, dry, they are tasteless as chalk so why is it the 'yes' words we choke and gag upon, spit quickly into folded handkerchiefs? Why do we wipe them away so hurriedly, pretend they never touched our lips, never slid around our tongues, never crossed

our minds? Moment by every moment there are words streaming across and through the flesh of me, of you, of all beings that we know of in this world – a world into which we slip so small and while we are yet soaked in blood, bare naked brand new presence whooomph here come the words and before we have even had the chance to yelp our first they have been wrapped around us, dried us off. Now as it was in the beginning head to toe we are named continually. Defined by words, confined to them. Do not tell me that words do not matter us, shape our very being, shape our interactions with all others.

Searching feverishly for the words, the words to loosen the words in which we have been bound, the words to cut through the words that have cut us off from one another. Seeking in the dark shared places for the words which would allow those other words to slide along our skin, light silken touch felt belly deep now burning through our bones. The words with which to lay you down and coax you open wide the words with which you will lie with all your weight upon me and still we will not feel close enough. The gasping words the low rich laughter words the words in which are uttered all the loves which dare not speak their names. Oh but they do dare. And which are the words which would prepare us for that dare? The urgent words, the risky words, the demanding words, the confronting words, the whorable words. The I will not let you go until we have wrestled a blessing each from the other words; the words that leave you limp exhausted tremblingly aware of the boundaries and the over-flowing limits of your flesh your pores your muscles your surface openings curved in upon themselves still welcoming still crying out for more.

‘No,’ you say in shocked and sternly measured tones, ‘too much!’ But I say life without the yes is not life at all. Have we not learned it yet? There is no love without the yes; no love, no life, no possibility of any otherwise. And yes, it is too much. The vast pouring crashing All of it, too much. Alone, we cannot possibly withstand it, cannot survive it for an instant.

Here, take my hand. Come. With me. Stranger. I need you. And you need me. To say yes to your presence. Yes to you. Yes.

...

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...

The figures of the virgin, mother, and whore shift and move about, new shapes are formed, new stories told. Strangely familiar, always new, they brush against our flesh, sear their way into our bones. What are we to make of them? How do they matter us, how do they matter our relations with all others?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 75. It is also worth noting and pondering the fact that in Russian the word *sobytie*, meaning 'event', is, etymologically, 'so-bytue' ('co-existence'). 'Event' as 'coexistence'.

<sup>3</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, trans. Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluhacek (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), p. ix. 'Until today, what we have found is, at best, to integrate the other: in our country, our culture, our house. That does not yet signify meeting *with* the other, speaking *with* the other, loving the other.' Italics added.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, p. 182.

<sup>5</sup> With a wink and a nod to Heidegger ...

<sup>6</sup> See Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 25. 'Every child that is coming into being rests, like all life that is coming into being, in the womb of the great mother, the undivided primal world that precedes form. From her, too, we are separated, and enter into personal life, slipping freely only in the dark hours to be close to her again; night by night this happens to the healthy man.' It does not seem that Martin Buber intended for that passage to be taken literally. He made it clear that he was writing of a child's, a baby's experience of utter connection or relation to the *cosmos*, and then of the lessening of that sense of connection, of the subject's loss of awareness of their own relation to all else. But to which figure did he turn in search of the most adequate metaphor? Through whom did he imagine such connection?

<sup>7</sup> See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, Ca.: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 36-37. '[P]laces of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power ...'

<sup>8</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 63.

<sup>9</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup> 'We have to return to touch if we are to comprehend where touch became frozen in its passage....' Irigaray, 'Divine Women', p. 59.

Numinous Subjects

<sup>11</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, pp. 26-27.