

# PRECARIOUS LIFE

THE POWERS OF MOURNING  
AND VIOLENCE



JUDITH BUTLER



VERSO

London • New York

5

## PRECARIOUS LIFE

... the surplus of every sociality over every solitude.

*Levinas*

At a recent meeting, I listened to a university press director tell a story. It was unclear whether he identified with the point of view from which the story was told, or whether he was relaying the bad news reluctantly. But the story he told was about another meeting, where he was listening, and there a president of a university made the point that no one is reading humanities books anymore, that the humanities have nothing more to offer or, rather, nothing to offer for our times. I'm not sure whether he was saying that the university president was saying that the humanities had lost their moral authority, but it sounded like this was, in fact, someone's view, and

that it was a view to take seriously. There was an ensuing set of discussions at the same meeting in which it was not always possible to tell which view was owned by whom, or whether anyone really was willing to own a view. It was a discussion that turned on the question, Have the humanities undermined themselves, with all their relativism and questioning and "critique," or have the humanities been undermined by all those who *oppose* all that relativism and questioning and "critique"? Someone has undermined the humanities, or some group of people has, but it was unclear who, and it was unclear who thought this was true. I started to wonder whether I was not in the middle of the humanities quandary itself, the one in which no one knows who is speaking and in what voice, and with what intent. Does anyone stand by the words they utter? Can we still trace those words to a speaker or, indeed, a writer? And which message, exactly, was being sent?

Of course, it would be paradoxical if I were now to argue that what we really need is to tether discourse to authors, and in that way we will reestablish both authors and authority. I did my own bit of work, along with many of you, in trying to cut that tether. But what I do think is missing, and what I would like to see and hear return is a consideration of the structure of address itself. Because although I did not know in whose voice this person was speaking, whether the voice was his own or not, I did feel that I was being addressed, and that something called the humanities was being derided from some direction or another. To respond to this address seems an important obligation during these times. This obligation is something other than the rehabilitation of the author—subject *per se*. It is about a mode of response that follows upon having been addressed, a comportment toward the Other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of a failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility. This is an exchange that cannot be assimilated into the schema in which the

subject is over here as a topic to be reflexively interrogated, and the Other is over there, as a theme to be purveyed. The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept not just that we address others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were, in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other's address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one's will and standing by it, stamping one's name upon one's will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. (That is, we miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us.

Indeed, this conception of what is morally binding is not one that I give myself; it does not proceed from my autonomy or my reflexivity. It comes to me from elsewhere, unbidden, unexpected, and unplanned. In fact, it tends to ruin my plans, and if my plans are ruined, that may well be the sign that something is morally binding upon me. We think of presidents as wielding speech acts in willful ways, so when the director of a university press, or the president of a university speaks, we expect to know what they are saying, and to whom they are speaking, and with what intent. We expect the address to be authoritative and, in that sense, to be binding. But presidential speech is strange these days, and it would take a better rhetorician than I am to understand the mysteriousness of its ways. Why should it be, for instance, that Iraq is called a threat to the security of the "civilized world" while missiles flying from North Korea, and even

the attempted hostage-taking of US boats, are called "regional issues"? And if the US President was urged by the majority of the world to withdraw his threat of war, why does he not seem to feel obligated by this address? But given the shambles into which presidential address has fallen, perhaps we should think more seriously about the relation between modes of address and moral authority. This may help us to know what values the humanities have to offer, and what the situation of discourse is in which moral authority becomes binding.

I would like to consider the "face," the notion introduced by Emmanuel Levinas, to explain how it is that others make moral claims upon us, address moral demands to us, ones that we do not ask for, ones that we are not free to refuse. Levinas makes a preliminary demand upon me, but his is not the only demand that I am bound to follow these days. I will trace what seem to me the outlines of a possible Jewish ethic of non-violence. Then I will relate this to some of the more pressing questions of violence and ethics that are upon us now. The Levinasian notion of the "face" has caused critical consternation for a long time. It seems to be that the "face" of what he calls the "Other" makes an ethical demand upon me, and yet we do not know which demand it makes. The "face" of the other cannot be read for a secret meaning, and the imperative it delivers is not immediately translatable into a prescription that might be linguistically formulated and followed.

Levinas writes:

The approach to the face is the most basic mode of responsibility ... The face is not in front of me (*en face de moi*), but above me; it is the other before death, looking through and exposing death. Secondly, the face is the other who asks me not to let him die alone, as if to do so were to become an accomplice in his death. Thus the

face says to me: you shall not kill. In the relation to the face I am exposed as a usurper of the place of the other. The celebrated "right to existence" that Spinoza called the *conatus essendi* and defined as the basic principle of all intelligibility is challenged by the relation to the face. Accordingly, my duty to respond to the other suspends my natural right to self-survival, *le droit vitale*. My ethical relation of love for the other stems from the fact that the self cannot survive by itself alone, cannot find meaning within its own being-in-the-world .... To expose myself to the vulnerability of the face is to put my ontological right to existence into question. In ethics, the other's right to exist has primacy over my own, a primacy epitomized in the ethical edict: you shall not kill, you shall not jeopardize the life of the other.<sup>1</sup>

Levinas writes further:

The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose meaning consists in saying, "thou shalt not kill." Murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity .... It also appears in the Scriptures, to which the humanity of man is exposed inasmuch as it is engaged in the world. But to speak truly, the appearance in being of these "ethical peculiarities"—the humanity of man—is a rupture of being. It is significant, even if being resumes and recovers itself.<sup>2</sup>

So the face, strictly speaking, does not speak, but what the face means is nevertheless conveyed by the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." It conveys this commandment without precisely speaking it. It would seem that we can use this biblical command to understand something of the face's meaning, but something is missing here, since the "face" does not speak in the sense that the mouth does; the

face is neither reducible to the mouth nor, indeed, to anything the mouth has to utter. Someone or something else speaks when the face is likened to a certain kind of speech; it is a speech that does not come from a mouth or, if it does, has no ultimate origin or meaning there. In fact, in an essay entitled "Peace and Proximity," Levinas makes plain that "the face is not exclusively a human face."<sup>3</sup> To explain this, he refers to Vassili Grossman's text *Life and Fate*, which he describes as:

the story ... of the families, wives, and parents of political detainees traveling to the Lubyanka in Moscow for the latest news. A line is formed at the counter, a line where one can see only the backs of others. A woman awaits her turn: [She] had never thought that the human back could be so expressive, and could convey states of mind in such a penetrating way. Persons approaching the counter had a particular way of craning their neck and their back, their raised shoulders with shoulder blades like springs, which seemed to cry, sob, and scream. (PP, 167)

Here the term "face" operates as a catachresis: "face" describes the human back, the craning of the neck, the raising of the shoulder blades like "springs." And these bodily parts, in turn, are said to cry and to sob and to scream, as if they were a face or, rather, a face with a mouth, a throat, or indeed, just a mouth and throat from which vocalizations emerge that do not settle into words. The face is to be found in the back and the neck, but it is not quite a face. The sounds that come from or through the face are agonized, suffering. So we can see already that the "face" seems to consist in a series of displacements such that a face is figured as a back which, in turn, is figured as a scene of agonized vocalization. And though there are many names strung in a row here, they end with a figure for what cannot be named, an utterance that is not, strictly speaking, linguistic. Thus the

face, the name for the face, and the words by which we are to understand its meaning—"Thou shalt not kill"—do not quite deliver the meaning of the face, since at the end of the line, it seems, it is precisely the wordless vocalization of suffering that marks the limits of linguistic translation here. The face, if we are to put words to its meaning, will be that for which no words really work; the face seems to be a kind of sound, the sound of language evacuating its sense, the sonorous substratum of vocalization that precedes and limits the delivery of any semantic sense.

At the end of this description, Levinas appends the following lines, which do not quite accomplish the sentence form: "The face as the extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakens to the precariousness of the other" (PP, 167). Both statements are similes, and they both avoid the verb, especially the copula. They do not say that the face *is* that precariousness, or that peace *is* the mode of being awake to an Other's precariousness. Both phrases are substitutions that refuse any commitment to the order of being. Levinas tells us, in fact, that "humanity is a rupture of being" and in the previous remarks he performs that suspension and rupture in an utterance that is both less and more than a sentence form. To respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself. This cannot be an awakens, to use his word, to my own life, and then an extrapolation from an understanding of my own precariousness to an understanding of another's precarious life. It has to be an understanding of the precariousness of the Other. This is what makes the face belong to the sphere of ethics. Levinas writes, "the face of the other in its precariousness and defenselessness, is for me at once the temptation to kill and the call to peace, the 'You shall not kill'" (PP, 167). This last remark suggests something quite disarming in several senses. Why would it be that the very precariousness of the Other

would produce for me a temptation to kill? Or why would it produce the temptation to kill *at the same time* that it delivers a demand for peace? Is there something about my apprehension of the Other's precariousness that makes me want to kill the Other? Is it the simple vulnerability of the Other that becomes a murderous temptation for me? If the Other, the Other's face, which after all carries the meaning of this precariousness, at once tempts me with murder and prohibits me from acting upon it, then the face operates to produce a struggle for me, and establishes this struggle at the heart of ethics. It would seem that it is God's voice that is represented by the human voice, since it is God who says, through Moses, "Thou shalt not kill." The face that at once makes me murderous and prohibits me from murder is the one that speaks in a voice that is not its own, speaks in a voice that is no human voice.<sup>4</sup> So the face makes various utterances at once: it bespeaks an agony, an injurability, at the same time that it bespeaks a divine prohibition against killing.<sup>5</sup>

Earlier in "Peace and Proximity," Levinas considers the vocation of Europe, and wonders whether the "Thou shalt not kill" is not precisely what one should hear in the very meaning of European culture. It is unclear where his Europe begins or ends, whether it has geographical boundaries, or whether it is produced every time the commandment is spoken or conveyed. This is, already, a curious Europe whose meaning is conjectured to consist in the words of the Hebrew God, whose civilizational status, as it were, depends upon the transmission of divine interdictions from the Bible. It is Europe in which Hebraism has taken the place of Hellenism, and Islam remains unspeakable. Perhaps Levinas is telling us that the only Europe that ought to be called Europe is the one that elevates the Old Testament over civil and secular law. In any case, he seems to be

returning to the primacy of interdiction to the meaning of civilization itself. And though we might be tempted to understand this as a nefarious Eurocentrism, it is probably also important to see that there is no recognizable Europe that can be derived from his view. In fact, it is not the existence of the interdiction against murder that makes Europe Europe, but the anxiety and the desire that the interdiction produces. As he continues to explain how this commandment works, he refers to Genesis, chapter 32, in which Jacob learns of his brother and rival Esau's imminent approach. Levinas writes, "Jacob is troubled by the news that his brother Esau—friend or foe—is marching to meet him 'at the head of four hundred men.' Verse 8 tells us: 'Jacob was greatly afraid and anxious.'" Levinas then turns to the commentator Rashi to understand "the difference between fright and anxiety," and concludes that "[Jacob] was frightened of his own death but was anxious he might have to kill" (PP, 164).

Of course, it is unclear still why Levinas would assume that one of the first or primary responses to another's precariousness is the desire to kill. Why would it be that the spring of the shoulder blades, the craning of the neck, the agonized vocalization conveying another's suffering would prompt in anyone a lust for violence? It must be that Esau over there, with his four hundred men, threatens to kill me, or looks like he will, and that in relation to that menacing Other or, indeed, the one whose face represents a menace, I must defend myself to preserve my life. Levinas explains, though, that murdering in the name of self-preservation is not justified, that self-preservation is never a sufficient condition for the ethical justification of violence. This seems, then, like an extreme pacifism, an absolute pacifism, and it may well be. We may or may not want to accept these consequences, but we should consider the dilemma they pose as constitutive of the ethical anxiety: "Frightened for his own life, but anxious he might have to kill." There is fear for one's own survival, and there is anxiety

about hurting the Other, and these two impulses are at war with each other, like siblings fighting. But they are at war with each other in order *not* to be at war, and this seems to be the point. For the non-violence that Levinas seems to promote does not come from a peaceful place, but rather from a constant tension between the fear of undergoing violence and the fear of inflicting violence. I could put an end to my fear of my own death by obliterating the other, although I would have to keep obliterating, especially if there are four hundred men behind him, and they all have families and friends, if not a nation or two behind them. I could put an end to my anxiety about becoming a murderer by reconciling myself to the ethical justification for inflicting violence and death under such conditions. I could bring out the utilitarian calculus, or appeal to the intrinsic rights of individuals to protect and preserve their own rights. We can imagine uses of both consequentialist and deontological justifications that would give me many opportunities to inflict violence righteously. A consequentialist might argue that it would be for the good of the many. A deontologist might appeal to the intrinsic worth of my own life. They could also be used to dispute the primacy of the interdiction on murder, an interdiction in the face of which I would continue to feel my anxiety.

Although Levinas counsels that self-preservation is not a good enough reason to kill, he also presumes that the desire to kill is primary to human beings. If the first impulse towards the other's vulnerability is the desire to kill, the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse. In psychoanalytic terms, that would mean marshaling the desire to kill in the service of an internal desire to kill one's own aggression and sense of priority. The result would probably be neurotic, but it may be that psychoanalysis meets a limit here. For Levinas, it is the ethical itself that gets one out of the circuitry of bad conscience, the logic by which the prohibition against aggression becomes the internal conduit for aggression itself. Aggression is then

turned back upon oneself in the form of super-egoic cruelty. If the ethical moves us beyond bad conscience, it is because bad conscience is, after all, only a negative version of narcissism, and so still a form of narcissism. The face of the Other comes to me from outside, and interrupts that narcissistic circuit. The face of the Other calls me out of narcissism towards something finally more important.

Levinas writes:

The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. I can wish. And yet this power is quite the contrary of power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me . . . . I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face. The temptation of total negation . . . this is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse. (9)

*It is also the situation of discourse . . .*

... this last is no idle claim. Levinas explains in one interview that "face and discourse are tied. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse" (*EL*, 87). Since what the face "says" is "Thou shalt not kill," it would appear that it is through this primary commandment that speaking first comes into being, so that speaking first comes into being against the backdrop of this possible murder. More generally, discourse makes an ethical claim upon us precisely because, prior to speaking, something is spoken to us. In a simple sense, and perhaps not quite as Levinas intended, we are first spoken to, addressed, by an Other, before we assume language for ourselves. And we can conclude further that it is only on the condition that we are addressed that we are able to make use of

language. It is in this sense that the Other is the condition of discourse. If the Other is obliterated, so too is language, since language cannot survive outside of the conditions of address.

But let us remember that Levinas has also told us that the face—which is the face of the Other, and so the ethical demand made by the Other—is that vocalization of agony that is not yet language or no longer language, the one by which we are awakened to the precariousness of the Other's life, the one that rouses at once the temptation to murder and the interdiction against it. Why would it be that the inability to kill is the situation of discourse? Is it rather that the tension between fear for one's own life and anxiety about becoming a murderer constitutes the ambivalence that is the situation of discourse? That situation is one in which we are addressed, in which the Other directs language towards us. That language communicates the precariousness of life that establishes the ongoing tension of a non-violent ethics. The situation of discourse is not the same as what is said or, indeed, what is sayable. For Levinas, the situation of discourse consists in the fact that language arrives as an address we do not will, and by which we are, in an original sense, captured, if not, in Levinas's terms, held hostage. So there is a certain violence already in being addressed, given a name, subject to a set of impositions, compelled to respond to an exacting alterity. No one controls the terms by which one is addressed, at least not in the most fundamental way. To be addressed is to be, from the start, deprived of will, and to have that deprivation exist as the basis of one's situation in discourse.

Within the ethical frame of the Levinasian position, we begin by positing a dyad. But the sphere of politics, in his terms, is one in which there are always more than two subjects at play in the scene. Indeed, I may decide *not* to invoke my own desire to preserve my life as a justification for violence, but what if violence is done to someone I love? What if there is an Other who does violence to another Other?

To which Other do I respond ethically? Which Other do I put before myself? Or do I then stand by? Derrida claims that to try and respond to every Other can only result in a situation of radical irresponsibility. And the Spinozists, the Nietzscheans, the utilitarians, and the Freudians all ask, "Can I invoke the imperative to preserve the life of the Other even if I cannot invoke this right of self-preservation for myself?" And is it really possible to sidestep self-preservation in the way that Levinas implies? Spinoza writes in *The Ethics* that the desire to live the right life requires the desire to live, to persist in one's own being, suggesting that ethics must always marshal some life drives, even if, as a super-egoic state, ethics threatens to become a pure culture of the death drive. It is possible, even easy, to read Levinas as an elevated masochist and it does not help us to avert that conclusion when we consider that, when asked what he thought of psychoanalysis, he is said to have responded, *is that not a form of pornography?*

But the reason to consider Levinas in the context of today is at least twofold. First, he gives us a way of thinking about the relationship between representation and humanization, a relationship that is not as straightforward as we might like to think. If critical thinking has something to say about or to the present situation, it may well be in the domain of representation where humanization and dehumanization occur ceaselessly. Second, he offers, within a tradition of Jewish philosophy, an account of the relationship between violence and ethics that has some important implications for thinking through what an ethic of Jewish non-violence might be. This strikes me as a timely and urgent question for many of us, especially those of us supporting the emergent moment of post-Zionism within Judaism. For now, I would like to reconsider first the problematic of humanization if we approach it through the figure of the face.

When we consider the ordinary ways that we think about humanization and dehumanization, we find the assumption that those who gain representation, especially self-representation, have a better chance of being humanized, and those who have no chance to represent themselves run a greater risk of being treated as less than human, regarded as less than human, or indeed, not regarded at all. We have a paradox before us because Levinas has made clear that the face is not exclusively a human face, and yet it is a condition for humanization.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there is the use of the face, within the media, in order to effect a dehumanization. It would seem that personification does not always humanize. For Levinas, it may well evacuate the face that does humanize; and I hope to show, personification sometimes performs its own dehumanization. How do we come to know the difference between the inhuman but humanizing face, for Levinas, and the dehumanization that can also take place through the face? →

We may have to think of different ways that violence can happen: one is precisely *through* the production of the face, the face of Osama bin Laden, the face of Yasser Arafat, the face of Saddam Hussein. What has been done with these faces in the media? They are framed, surely, but they are also playing to the frame. And the result is invariably tendentious. These are media portraits that are often marshaled in the service of war, as if bin Laden's face were the face of terror itself, as if Arafat were the face of deception, as if Hussein's face were the face of contemporary tyranny. And then there is the face of Colin Powell, as it is framed and circulated, seated before the shrouded canvas of Picasso's *Guernica*: a face that is foregrounded, we might say, against a background of effacement. Then there are the faces of the Afghan girls who stripped off, or let fall, their burkas. One week last winter, I visited a political theorist who proudly displayed these faces on his refrigerator door, right next to some apparently valuable supermarket coupons, as a sign of the success of democracy. A few days ←



later, I attended a conference in which I heard a talk about the important cultural meanings of the burka, the way in which it signifies belonging-ness to a community and religion, a family, an extended history of kin relations, an exercise of modesty and pride, a protection against shame, and operates as well as a veil behind which, and through which, feminine agency can and does work.<sup>7</sup> The fear of the speaker was that the destruction of the burka, as if it were a sign of repression, backwardness or, indeed, a resistance to cultural modernity itself, would result in a significant decimation of Islamic culture and the extension of US cultural assumptions about how sexuality and agency ought to be organized and represented. According to the triumphalist photos that dominated the front page of the *New York Times*, these young women bared their faces as an act of liberation, an act of gratitude to the US military, and an expression of a pleasure that had become suddenly and ecstatically permissible. The American viewer was ready, as it were, to see the face, and it was to the camera, and for the camera, after all, that the face was finally bared, where it became, in a flash, a symbol of successfully exported American cultural progress. It became bared to us, at that moment, and we were, as it were, in possession of the face; not only did our cameras capture it, but we arranged for the face to capture our triumph, and act as the rationale for our violence, the incursion on sovereignty, the deaths of civilians. Where is loss in that face? And where is the suffering over war? Indeed, the photographed face seemed to conceal or displace the face in the Levinasian sense, since we saw and heard through that face no vocalization of grief or agony, no sense of the precariousness of life.

So we seem to be charting a certain ambivalence. In a strange way, all of these faces humanize the events of the last year or so; they give a human face to Afghan women; they give a face to terror; they give a

face to evil. But is the face humanizing in each and every instance? And if it is humanizing in some instances, in what form does this humanization occur, and is there also a dehumanization performed in and through the face? Do we encounter those faces in the Levinasian sense, or are these, in various ways, images that, through their frame, produce the paradigmatically human, become the very cultural means through which the paradigmatically human is established? Although it is tempting to think that the images themselves establish the visual norm for the human, one that ought to be emulated or embodied, this would be a mistake, since in the case of bin Laden or Saddam Hussein the paradigmatically human is understood to reside outside the frame; this is the human face in its deformity and extremity, not the one with which you are asked to identify. Indeed, the disidentification is incited through the hyperbolic absorption of evil into the face itself, the eyes. And if we are to understand ourselves as interpellated anywhere in these images, it is precisely as the unrepresented viewer, the one who looks on, the one who is captured by no image at all, but whose charge it is to capture and subdue, if not eviscerate, the image at hand. Similarly, although we might want to champion the suddenly bared faces of the young Afghan women as the celebration of the human, we have to ask in what narrative function these images are mobilized, whether the incursion into Afghanistan was really in the name of feminism, and in what form of feminism did it belatedly clothe itself. Most importantly, though, it seems we have to ask what scenes of pain and grief these images cover over and derealize. Indeed, all of these images seem to suspend the precariousness of life; they either represent American triumph, or provide an incitement for American military triumph in the future. *They are the spoils of war or they are the targets of war.* And in this sense, we might say that the face is, in every instance, defaced, and that this is one of the representational and philosophical consequences of war itself.

It is important to distinguish among kinds of unrepresentability. In the first instance, there is the Levinasian view according to which there is a "face" which no face can fully exhaust, the face understood as human suffering, as the cry of human suffering, which can take no direct representation. Here the "face" is always a figure for something that is not literally a face. Other human expressions, however, seem to be figurable as a "face" even though they are not faces, but sounds or emissions of another order. The cry that is represented through the figure of the face is one that confounds the senses and produces a clearly improper comparison: that cannot be right, for the face is not a sound. And yet, the face can stand for the sound precisely because it is *not* the sound. In this sense, the figure underscores the incommensurability of the face with whatever it represents. Strictly speaking, then, the face does not represent anything, in the sense that it fails to capture and deliver that to which it refers.

For Levinas, then, the human is not *represented by* the face. Rather, the human is indirectly affirmed in that very disjunction that makes representation impossible, and this disjunction is conveyed in the impossible representation. For representation to convey the human, then, representation must not only fail, but it must *show* its failure. There is something unrepresentable that we nevertheless seek to represent, and that paradox must be retained in the representation we give.

In this sense, the human is not identified with what is represented but neither is it identified with the unrepresentable; it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice. The face is not "effaced" in this failure of representation, but is constituted in that very possibility. Something altogether different happens, however, when the face operates in the service of a personification that claims

to "capture" the human being in question. For Levinas, the human cannot be captured through the representation, and we can see that some loss of the human takes place when it is "captured" by the image.<sup>8</sup>

An example of that kind of "capture" takes place when evil is personified through the face. A certain commensurability is asserted between that ostensible evil and the face. This face *is* evil, and the evil that the face *is* extends to the evil that belongs to humans in general—generalized evil. We personify the evil or military triumph through a face that is supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands. In this case, we cannot hear the face through the face. The face here masks the sounds of human suffering and the proximity we might have to the precariousness of life itself.

The face over there, though, the one whose meaning is portrayed as captured by evil is precisely the one that is not human, not in the Levinasian sense. The "I" who sees that face is not identified with it: the face represents that for which no identification is possible, an accomplishment of dehumanization and a condition for violence.

Of course, a fuller elaboration of this topic would have to parse the various ways that representation works in relation to humanization and dehumanization. Sometimes there are triumphalist images that give us the idea of the human with whom we are to identify, for instance the patriotic hero who expands our own ego boundary ecstatically into that of the nation. No understanding of the relationship between the image and humanization can take place without a consideration of the conditions and meanings of identification and disidentification. It is worth noting, however, that identification always relies upon a difference that it seeks to overcome, and that its aim is accomplished only by reintroducing the difference it claims to have vanquished. The one with whom I identify is not me, and that "not being me" is the condition of the identification. Otherwise, as

Jacqueline Rose reminds us, identification collapses into identity, which spells the death of identification itself.<sup>9</sup> This difference internal to identification is crucial, and, in a way, it shows us that dis-identification is part of the common practice of identification itself. The triumphalist image can communicate an impossible overcoming of this difference, a kind of identification that believes that it has overcome the difference that is the condition of its own possibility. The critical image, if we can speak that way, works this difference in the same way as the Levinasian image; it must not only fail to capture its referent, but *show* this failing.

The demand for a truer image, for more images, for images that convey the full horror and reality of the suffering has its place and importance. The erasure of that suffering through the prohibition of images and representations more generally circumscribes the sphere of appearance, what we can see and what we can know. But it would be a mistake to think that we only need to find the right and true images, and that a certain reality will then be conveyed. The reality is not conveyed by what is represented within the image, but through the challenge to representation that reality delivers.<sup>10</sup>

The media's evacuation of the human through the image has to be understood, though, in terms of the broader problem that normative schemes of intelligibility establish what will and will not be human, what will be a livable life, what will be a grievable death. These normative schemes operate not only by producing ideals of the human that differentiate among those who are more and less human. Sometimes they produce images of the less than human, in the guise of the human, to show how the less than human disguises itself, and threatens to deceive those of us who might think we recognize another human there, in that face. But sometimes these normative schemes work precisely through providing no image, no name, no narrative, so that there never was a life, and there never was a death.

These are two distinct forms of normative power: one operates through producing a symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclosing our apprehension of the human in the scene; the other works through radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place. In the first instance, something that has already emerged into the realm of appearance needs to be disputed as recognizably human; in the second instance, the public realm of appearance is itself constituted on the basis of the exclusion of that image. The task at hand is to establish modes of public seeing and hearing that might well respond to the cry of the human within the sphere of appearance, a sphere in which the trace of the cry has become hyperbolically inflated to rationalize a gluttonous nationalism, or fully obliterated, where both alternatives turn out to be the same. We might consider this as one of the philosophical and representational implications of war, because politics—and power—work in part through regulating what can appear, what can be heard.

Of course, these schemas of intelligibility are tacitly and forcefully mandated by those corporations that monopolize control over the mainstream media with strong interests in maintaining US military power. The war coverage has brought into relief the need for a broad de-monopolizing of media interests, legislation for which has been, predictably, highly contested on Capitol Hill. We think of these interests as controlling rights of ownership, but they are also, simultaneously, deciding what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality. They do not show violence, but there is a violence in the frame in what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain lives and deaths either remain unrepresentable or become represented in ways that effects their capture (once again) by the war effort. The first is an effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself.

What is the relation between the violence by which these ungrivable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Is the prohibition on grieving the continuation of the violence itself? And does the prohibition on grieving demand a tight control on the reproduction of images and words? How does the prohibition on grieving emerge as a circumscription of representability, so that our national melancholia becomes tightly fitted into the frame for what can be said, what can be shown? Is this not the site where we can read, if we still read, the way that melancholia becomes inscribed as the limits of what can be thought? The derealization of loss—the insensitivity to human suffering and death—becomes the mechanism through which dehumanization is accomplished. This derealization takes place neither inside nor outside the image, but through the very framing by which the image is contained.

In the initial campaign of the war against Iraq, the US government advertised its military feats as an overwhelming visual phenomenon. That the US government and military called this a “shock and awe” strategy suggests that they were producing a visual spectacle that numbs the senses and, like the sublime itself, puts out of play the very capacity to think. This production takes place not only for the Iraqi population on the ground, whose senses are supposed to be done in by this spectacle, but also for the consumers of war who rely on CNN or Fox, the network that regularly interspersed its war coverage on television with the claim that it is the “most trustworthy” news source on the war. The “shock and awe” strategy seeks not only to produce an aesthetic dimension to war, but to exploit and instrumentalize the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself. CNN has provided much of these visual aesthetics. And although the *New York Times* belatedly came out against the war, it also adorned its front pages on a daily basis with romantic images of military ordnance against the setting sun in Iraq or “bombs

bursting in air” above the streets and homes of Baghdad (which are not surprisingly occluded from view). Of course, it was the spectacular destruction of the World Trade Center that first made a claim upon the “shock and awe” effect, and the US recently displayed for all the world to see that it can and will be equally destructive. The media becomes entranced by the sublimity of destruction, and voices of dissent and opposition must find a way to intervene upon this desensitizing dream machine in which the massive destruction of lives and homes, sources of water, electricity, and heat, are produced as a delirious sign of a resuscitated US military power.

Indeed, the graphic photos of US soldiers dead and decapitated in Iraq, and then the photos of children maimed and killed by US bombs, were both refused by the mainstream media, supplanted with footage that always took the aerial view, an aerial view whose perspective is established and maintained by state power. And yet, the moment the bodies executed by the Hussein regime were uncovered, they made it to the front page of the *New York Times*, since those bodies must be grieved. The outrage over their deaths motivates the war effort, as it moves on to its managerial phase, which differs very little from what is commonly called “an occupation.”

Tragically, it seems that the US seeks to preempt violence against itself by waging violence first, but the violence it fears is the violence it engenders. I do not mean to suggest by this that the US is responsible in some causal way for the attacks on its citizens. And I do not exonerate Palestinian suicide bombers, regardless of the terrible conditions that animate their murderous acts. There is, however, some distance to be traveled between living in terrible conditions, suffering serious, even unbearable injuries, and resolving on murderous acts. President Bush traveled that distance quickly, calling for “an end to grief” after a mere ten days of flamboyant mourning. Suffering can yield an experience of humility, of vulnerability, of

impressionability and dependence, and these can become resources, if we do not "resolve" them too quickly; they can move us beyond and against the vocation of the paranoid victim who regenerates infinitely the justifications for war. It is as much a matter of wrestling ethically with one's own murderous impulses, impulses that seek to quell an overwhelming fear, as it is a matter of apprehending the suffering of others and taking stock of the suffering one has inflicted.

In the Vietnam War, it was the pictures of the children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see, and they disrupted the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself. Despite their graphic effectivity, the images pointed somewhere else, beyond themselves, to a life and to a precariousness that they could not show. It was from that apprehension of the precariousness of those lives we destroyed that many US citizens came to develop an important and vital consensus against the war. But if we continue to discount the words that deliver that message to us, and if the media will not run those pictures, and if those lives remain unnameable and ungrievable, if they do not appear in their precariousness and their destruction, we will not be moved. We will not return to a sense of ethical outrage that is, distinctively, for an Other, in the name of an Other. We cannot, under contemporary conditions of representation, hear the agonized cry or be compelled or commanded by the face. We have been turned away from the face, sometimes through the very image of the face, one that is meant to convey the inhuman, the already dead, that which is not precariousness and cannot, therefore, be killed; this is the face that we are nevertheless asked to kill, as if ridding the world of this face would return us to the human rather than

→  
 faces crowd in these images

consummate our own inhumanity. One would need to hear the face as it speaks in something other than language to know the precariousness of life that is at stake. But what media will let us know and feel that frailty, know and feel at the limits of representation as it is currently cultivated and maintained? If the humanities has a future as cultural criticism, and cultural criticism has a task at the present moment, it is no doubt to return us to the human where we do not expect to find it, in its frailty and at the limits of its capacity to make sense. We would have to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense. This might prompt us, affectively, to reinvigorate the intellectual projects of critique, of questioning, of coming to understand the difficulties and demands of cultural translation and dissent, and to create a sense of the public in which oppositional voices are not feared, degraded or dismissed, but valued for the instigation to a sensate democracy they occasionally perform.