

The Self Found Elsewhere: Phenomenological Faith meets Deconstructive Doubt

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Abstract: The phenomenological approach taken in our lifetime by Emmanuel Levinas – and, in broad continuity, by Jean-Luc-Marion – envisages an original disruption of the self by an “other”, thereby opening the phenomenological insights of Edmund Husserl to consonance with religious faith. But this description of an “other-oriented” self, and implicitly a God nameable as wholly Other, does not obviously escape assimilation to the futile essentialism by which, in the light of deconstructive critique, any self-oriented-to-other remains oriented to “the same”, or to itself. On the other hand, the deconstructive insight itself seems unavailable for proposing a self which, under disruption by the other, retains those minimal attributes of identity and self-present subjectivity consonant with moral accountability for the human self, and in the case the divine, a self-identity *as* Other. Is a harmonisation of both approaches possible, mediating, despite everything, between their founding assumptions? Focussing on Levinas (for phenomenology) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe (for deconstruction), this article proposes that a particular meta-representational framing – *en abyme* representation – can accommodate equally the radically differing perspectives from which the two approaches offer the description of “the subject as another” (or, “self as other”). The approaches thus come to be seen as bridged, in a mode preservative of the essentialist and deconstructive resources in both, and thereby of the complex thread linking phenomenological faith and deconstructive doubt.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE CONTOURS OF THE PROBLEM

IN AN EPISODE OF “YES MINISTER”, the telling television series on government at Westminster, the affable but alert Bernard Woolley, personal private secretary to the Minister, Jim Hacker, finds his loyalties put to the test during an ongoing argument between the Minister and the Minister’s public service chief, the oleaginous but unforgiving Sir Humphrey Appleby. Each is Bernard’s master, under a

different hat, and choosing between them impossible. So when Bernard intimates support for the Minister, Hacker is grateful but disbelieving: "You mean that when the chips are down, you'll be on my side, not Humphrey's?". Bernard astutely offers an alternative construal: "Minister, it's my job to see that the chips stay up!"¹ For those of us who would like to take up, or keep together, allegiances both to religious faith and also recent philosophy (or, "post-philosophy"), I suspect a challenge analogous to Bernard's is at hand. In what follows, I would like to suggest a way in which the "chips might be kept up" between poststructuralism, on one side, and, on the other, its apparently irreconcilably opposed, faith-oriented interlocutor: extra-ontological phenomenology. I think that a bridging perspective is available between the two dispensations, in the form of a meta-representational figure linking their respective representations of the subject of experience, in its displacement (loss, and sometimes recovery). The perspective proposes itself, not as one that *must* be used by an adherent of either dispensation, but one that *can* be – thereby not at least becoming, in topical parlance, "a bridge to nowhere". The territory is one in which challenges notoriously outstrip their answers, but in which, for all that, the effort at keeping the question alive remains no less valuable.

1.1 Deconstruction, Phenomenology, and Extra- Ontological Phenomenology

The contours of the question are these. In ways refused by a deconstructive dispensation, phenomenology, still confident of the encounter with the "thing itself", embraces the possibility that consciousness can encounter both the self-subject and the other. This encounter takes place in that realm of intelligibility or pre-intelligibility where an object is determined, or at least sought, in terms of its essence. By "its essence" is classically meant "the essence of its being", "being" in turn connoting the more or less substantial underlay of "isness" shared by existent "entities" (a word derived from the Greek *ontos*, referring to being). Extra-ontological phenomenology significantly revises the classical phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, proposing instead that, in its most important encounters – with the other human as such, and with the self as such – consciousness finds itself attending to other than objects or entities as such. Its engagement in these cases occurs, often

1. See "The Right to Know," in Jonathan Lynn and Antony Jay (eds.) *The Complete Yes Minister: The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister, by the Right Hon. James Hacker MP* (London: BBC Books, 1984) 146.

unnoticed by itself, in a dimension other than being: behind it, or around it, or in excess of it. As leading proponents of this new account, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion have borrowed from phenomenology before leaving home. As for Husserl, so, with variations, for Levinas and Marion: the existence of objects is determined in and as their *givenness* to consciousness, in satisfaction of the objectification for which consciousness strives. However, for Levinas and Marion, when the represented object is itself another consciousness, this givenness exceeds any objectification by consciousness, so that the presence of another to myself always precedes and exceeds the "is" or "what" of "what it is" to my consciousness.

Levinas explicates this priority and difference in terms of the Face of the other. Construed phenomenologically, this Face represents infinitely more than a collection of features signifying identity, expression, and so on. Its gaze signifies no less than the encounter of consciousness with infinity, met in the "infinite height" of the other. Moreover, signified in yet beyond the Face of each particular other, is the divine Other – by implication, otherness as such and as source. This divine infinite is always structurally elusive, never reducible to that "Same" in terms of which, ineluctably, the self assimilates any "other" to itself. At most, for Levinas, as one scholar implies, God may be nameable as "the One who has left a trace behind in the Other who knocks at my door."²

Might the assertions which this type of phenomenology makes of a "given" other, distinct from and having priority either ontologically or ethically to the self, be brought into engagement with the poststructuralist assertion? The latter in general proposes the "Other" as having no more self-identical existence than the Same, and being no more original or originating. Its givenness to experience is a concomitant of difference – or, more precisely *différance*, the effect of original disruption of the unity of meaning in any text or its purported subject. But the "other" in virtue of which this disruption is encountered and credited is not thereby to be taken as itself unified. For poststructuralism, experience is mediated by language, language confirms its own non-susceptibility to structure, and this non-susceptibility, as "difference at the origin" would apply equally to the other as to the same, or the self.

2. Adriaan Peperzak, *To the Other: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (West Lafayette IN: Purdue University Press, 1993) 35.

1.2 The Self "Given as Other": Thereby Lost, or Thereby Found?

Poststructuralism might be expected, then, to approach extra-ontological phenomenology with both fascination and an ultimate reluctance. Fascination, because, from one perspective, poststructuralism takes its own departure from a rejection of the claims of language to offer encounter with its subjects, precisely insofar as those subjects are in fee to otherness. Reluctance, because, in the end, poststructuralism cannot but see "the given other", "the subject given as other" and indeed "givenness" itself, as impossible of assertion in language, except at the price of these also becoming deconstructible subjects.

Extra-ontological phenomenology, on its part, might see poststructuralism as simply incapable of reference to anything outside the text, and equally of leaving undivided anything it addresses within the text. "Poststructurally precluded", in this view, would be both the possibility of any recognition of either a real Other, or a real self-as-subject, *and* the possibility of an ethical response to an other which such recognition might have beckoned. In this light, the dispute between the two dispensations focusses itself around the capability of a subject for sustaining "ipseity" or self-identity, whether as itself, or "in another", or as that subject who "is" the other (albeit an other "otherwise said than as the subject"). For poststructuralism (or, as I have been colloquially terming it here, "deconstruction") to address any subject, or crypto-subject, and no less an other, is already to effect a postponement of its subjectivity to a realm of other and still further otherness. By contrast, extra-ontological phenomenology is confident that no less than a re-sourced subjectivity becomes manifest if phenomenological attention is paid to the recognition of a reversed order of address, in which is prioritised the address *by* an other *to* the self. There is manifest, in this address, the subject in genuine selfhood. There is also confirmation of the other, in its givenness, as sustainable in its own ipseity, beyond the "leakage" of that ipseity that is its own alterity.

1.3 "Subject Lost" and "Subject Extra-Ontologically Returned": Bridging these Depictions "Meta-Representationally"

Granted this, what might be the shape of possible rapprochement between poststructuralism and extra-ontological phenomenology?

One approach to such rapprochement might be sought along a particular thin axis that links the two dispensations, connecting their

respective accounts of subjectivity, and of its loss. This axis is elaborated, and at the same time given some thickness, through a particular meta-representation, or representation of representation itself. There is yielded therein, I suggest, coincidence between the two dispensations. In particular, this means a coincidence between their respective depictions of the interaction of self and other (and, in turn, the self-loss attending this interaction). Philosophically (or, post-philosophically) speaking, this meta-representation effects an accommodation of two at first sight incompatible subjects: the deconstructed subject (admittedly, a particular version thereof, as found in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: the subject-in-loss), and the extra-ontological subject (the subject-in-loss-and-recovery, this recovery occurring in a dimension otherwise-than-being). Theologically (or again, post-theologically) speaking, the coincidence occurs between a dispensation envisaging an Other engendering self-loss in the subjects which it disrupts, and a dispensation refusing that possibility. Within each dispensation, the bridging which the coincidence evidences is accomplished in both philosophical and theological registers, and involves, for each register, the equating of ostensibly radically different representations. Its designation as achieving a “meta-representational accommodation” between these representations is not, as can be seen below, without susceptibility to challenge as regards either word in the term. But we are speaking at the limits of language. My examination of the extra-ontological aspect of subjectivity goes by way of Levinas; the implication should be taken that the “bridge” could be made in the same general terms to Marion’s phenomenological theology, though a separate treatment would be needed to do justice to details unique to Marion, including his emphasis on the *givenness* of the other.

2. TOUCHPOINTS ON SUBJECTAL DETERIORATION: LEVINAS AND LACOUÉ-LABARTHE

In treating Levinas, I narrow my attentions to the second of his programmatic works, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, and more or less to a single line therein.³ Levinas makes a particular concept of human subjectivity, developed around the extra-ontological subject and extra-ontological other, the vehicle for the overall argument in this work. Let us see how this concept might fare in relation to deconstructive critique. Useful here is an article by Robert Bernasconi,

3. Emmanuel Levinas: *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans, Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1981). Hereafter OB, following Bernasconi. First published in the French as *Autrement qu’être ou au delà de l’essence* in 1974. Hereafter AE, following Bernasconi.

called "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien".⁴ Bernasconi brings Levinas and Jacques Derrida into engagement, showing in particular how Levinasian subjectivity in *Otherwise than Being* might be seen to develop in response to Derrida's critique, in his well-know essay, "Violence and Metaphysics", of Levinas' first programmatic text, *Totality and Infinity*.⁵

2.1 Levinas: I am "Another" until I am "For the Other", in which "Undoing" I become Me

Bernasconi says:

In *Otherwise than Being*, the attempt to go beyond essence proceeds less with reference to the alterity of the other human being than to subjectivity.... "It will then be necessary to show that the exception of the 'other than being,' beyond non-being, signifies subjectivity or humanity, the *oneself* (*soi-même*)."⁶ (AE 9/OB 8)

This subjectivity involves a turning to the other in responsibility, as an orientation inherent in the experience of self had by any "I" as such, that is (in more generalised terms), by the *oneself*. The subject is thus always already an "I for the other", constituted in virtue of this as "I am Other" and yet, as Bernasconi reminds us, "in clear contrast to Husserl, Other without alienation" (AE 139/OB 109). Bernasconi continues:

This takes place in giving, which is in turn possible only because of corporeality: "the body...makes me other without alienation" (AE 181/OB 142). The most telling sentence runs as follows: "In substitution, my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through this substitution that I am not 'another,' but 'me'." (AE 163/OB 127). This is the meaning of the contradictory trope of the-one-for-the-other (AE 126/OB 100).⁷

4. Robert Bernasconi, "The Alterity of the Stranger and the Experience of the Alien", in Jeffrey Bloechl (ed.), *The Trace of the Other and the Face of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 62-89.

5. Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas", trans. Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 79-153.

6. Bernasconi, "The Alterity", 76. Here and hereafter, where "AE" and "OB" appear in the text, they reproduce Bernasconi's referencing of quotations. See my n.3.

7. Bernasconi, "The Alterity", 77.

2.2 Levinas' "I am 'Another'" and Deconstructive Subjectal Loss

Significant, here, is the observation, "...my being that belongs to me and not to another is undone, and it is through this substitution that I am not 'another' but me". Let me reflect on this radically creative bridge which Levinas builds between ipseity and alterity, and its relation to what deconstruction makes of the "I".

Two points can be made at the outset. First to be noted is how the extra-ontological formulation, in its first half, mimics a deconstructive frame. This can be seen by simply replacing (substituting!) the word "substitution" in its first occurrence, by a reference to deconstruction: "In *deconstructive play*, my being that belongs not to me but to another is undone...." The effect that Levinas identifies, deconstructive theory could evidently accede to, while obviously still demurring from the "redoing" of ipseity envisaged in the second half of Levinas' sentence: "...it is through this substitution that I am not 'another', but me." Where Levinas can assert this return to the subject of its subjectivity in and through the other, a poststructuralist would not but see the substitution it proposes, akin to Rimbaud's celebrated formulation, " 'I is an other" (Je est un autre), as susceptible to the radical dissociation of the self which that formulation cannot refuse.⁸ For there is here no "lodgement" of the "I"; its "identification" with an "other" fails because the identification of that other is not itself separately available. The displacement of the subject perpetuates itself infinitely, either "linearly" – "I is another, is another, is another..." – or else in unending oscillation – "I is an other, is I, is an other, is I, is another" and so on. Whether or not a subjectal restoration is in train, then, there seems anyway *also* in train a subjectal deterioration which cannot be arrested. Does this deteriorating subject exist side by side with its counterpart restored "otherwise", does one dynamic thwart the other, or, how else do they interact, if at all?

2.3 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Coalescence with Levinas on the "Undoing" of Self?

So this point about the mobility of self-representation, its implicit displacement into otherness, as concomitant of its entanglement in being, before its recovery otherwise, cannot be refused by Levinasian subjectivity. Let us suppose it *is* this context which becomes unavoidable in relation to Levinas's reference to an I that is "undone",

8. "Je est un autre." See Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres complètes*, introd. and notes Antoine Adam, rev. ed., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1972) 248-49.

and, by implication, under constant “undoing”, which is also a “re-doing”. It is possible then to find corresponding deconstructive analysis which refers to just this effect. I am thinking specifically of analyses whose interest in the subject focuses, not on its absence, in an “always prior loss”, but on the event of its ongoing loss, at the moments when it bids to return. Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy contribute here, but it is Philippe-Lacoue Labarthe to whom we owe the most intricate and persistent essays in such analysis.⁹ Lacoue-Labarthe addresses experience specifically as it is rendered within writing, wherein it is extruded between writing as philosophy, verifying the subject, and writing as literature, fictionalising the subject. Caught between these, the subject itself is lost, or, as I have argued elsewhere, is more tantalisingly visible as a “subject-in-loss”, as in regeneration that is simultaneously degeneration.¹⁰

Here for example, is Lacoue-Labarthe speaking in his text, “The Fable”, an exploration of Nietzsche’s “How the True World became a Fable”.¹¹ Lacoue-Labarthe is interested in a particular feature in the terrain of text-production, in which *mythos* (myth or fable) and *logos* (logic or “true meaning”) both compete and conspire in the decomposition of both the “I” who writes and what is written. His account becomes an identification of deconstruction itself written otherwise. Deconstruction is, as Derrida has told us many times, play. But, from *within* the effort to sustain essence, retain origins, and vindicate logos, it can equally present as a foreign force:

Logos is absolute mastery and there is nothing outside of it, not even literature, to which it has given a “meaning”. Unless, perhaps, not writing exactly what we wanted to write, we experience a weakness, a powerlessness that is no longer the effect of an excess of power but rather like the obscure work of a force that is foreign to what we say, to the consciousness we have of it, to the will to say it, a hidden incessant resistance that is absolutely impossible to control, and on which we can barely gain ground at the price of great efforts. We write, we are dispossessed, something is ceaselessly fleeing, outside of us, slowly deteriorating.... If writing has this privilege (writing, the act and torment of writing,

9. The key works are Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. Christopher Fynsk, introd. Jacques Derrida (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), and Thomas Trezise (ed.), *The Subject of Philosophy* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

10. John Martis, *Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe: Representation and the Loss of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954) 486.

in which something else is also at stake), it is not because – as people say a bit hastily these days, by simply reversing or not at all reversing metaphysical oppositions – we are finally delivered from the world, from presence (and from representation), but because writing is first of all that reflection of experience wherein reflection (and experience) is constantly undone, because it is the most painful of failures and because, in it, the radical alterity of “force” reveals itself most painfully.¹²

“...writing is first of all that reflection of experience in wherein reflection (and experience) is constantly undone....” And this undoing extends to the undoing of the subject: “We write, we are dispossessed....” Considering the contours of these undosings, might they be matched to those of Levinas with regard to the subject and experience?

The two accounts coincide – or perhaps, at this stage, “coalesce” is a less ambitious word – at their descriptions of the juncture at which consciousness seeks to render encounter as experience. It is within the challenge to represent that experience, or, as Levinas would have it, even in the anticipation of that challenge, as its precondition, that consciousness is robbed of its self-lodging, dispossessed.¹³ Granted that in Lacoue-Labarthe’s reading this dispossession is definitive, in Levinas it is the occasion simultaneously of a repossession, which, while never assimilable to representation within being, must be located there if one is to describe it: “it is through this substitution that I am not ‘another’, but ‘me’.”¹⁴

This point about erasure evokes another locus of coincidence between the two dispensations: the self-contradiction courted by a written text that attempts to argue for writing as failing to deliver its subject as such. In Levinas’ case this potential self-contradiction, or turning of the declaration against itself, applies additionally to the claim for subjectal return: the declaration that the existent, returned subject is “otherwise” than is said.

12. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “The Fable”, trans. Hugh J. Silverman, in Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, 11-12.

13. One thinks here of Immanuel Kant, and the way in which an object presented to the mind stirs the imagination and understanding to efforts at conceptualisation, through which process the conceptualising subject is *also* imaged as such to itself. Thus Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy say, “Insofar as [Kantian] reflection operates in the judgement of taste as the free play of the imagination (that is, as a function of synthesis in its *pure* state, producing no object whatsoever), it brings about the unity of the subject only insofar as the subject sees itself in the image (*Bild*) of something without either a concept or an end.” See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany NY: SUNY Press, 1988) 31.

14. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 127 (see n.7).

3. REPRESENTING SUBJECTAL LOSS AND SUBJECTAL RECOVERY: *EN ABYME* META-REPRESENTATION

The challenge, then, becomes that of finding a meta-representational account – a representation of representation – that equally accommodates the two dispensations above in their coincidence but also in their dissimilarity. The account must firstly lend itself to the signification of what they jointly, yet differently notice: loss of the subject mediated within representation. Secondly, it must be adequate to what they jointly assume: the assertion of this loss as surviving its own potential self-contradiction, or self-erasure, during representation. Finally, it must also be open to, provision of the following signification, which only one of the dispensations asserts: that of a return of the subject. This “return” will itself be amenable to interpretation in either of two modes. One would correspond to the “direct” and “declarable” return which for any deconstructively lost subject, is the counterpart of loss, as, as it were, the “shadow” of that loss. The other would effect the paradoxical signification of the “return”, “otherwise than being”, of a subject which was never in the first place successfully constituted within being.

Intricate as these requirements appear, I would like to explore a specific meta-representational theorisation by means of which they might be met. I wonder if the loss of the subject might meta-representationally be proposed to occur *en abyme* in statements presenting such loss, and whether such *en abyme* representation, correctly applied, has resources for accommodating a declaration of subjectal loss that is effective and non self-contradictory, in a manner satisfying both Lacoue-Labarthe (propounding deconstructive loss) and Levinas (propounding subjectal loss, but differently). Not only that, but I wonder if this mode also accommodates a “delayed” recovery of the subject, in a dimension distinct from this loss, that might signify Levinas’ returned subject, “otherwise than being”.

3.1 *En Abyme* Representation:

Representation of the Whole within some Part of the Whole

Representation *en abyme* is a mode that finds mention in Derrida’s work, *Dissemination*, where it becomes a figure for the endlessly deferred signification of the blank spaces on a page. The figure itself is well explained in a note by the translator, Barbara Johnson:

The expression *en abyme*, popularized by [Andre] Gide, was originally used in heraldry to designate the status of the figure of a

small shield used to decorate a shield. Now used whenever some part of the whole can be seen as a representation of the whole, often *ad infinitum*, as in the Quaker Oats box, on which a man holds up a Quaker Oats box, on which a man.... etc.¹⁵



*en abyme*¹⁶

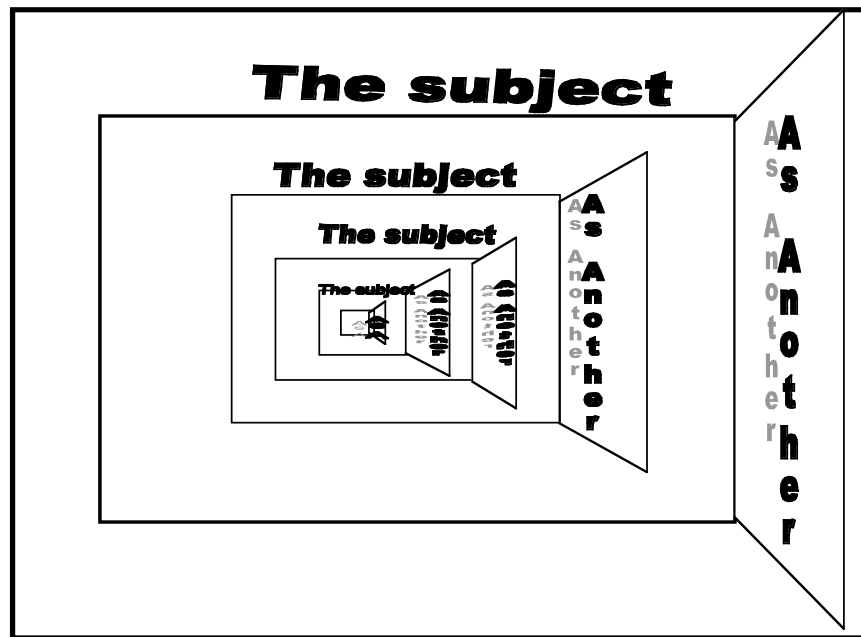
Representation *en abyme* is, in Gide's terms, or Johnson's, formally pictorial – the motif of a shield painted within a shield, or a Quaker Oats depicted box within a Quaker Oats box, etc. However, I can see no problem with employing it as an analogised representational frame here for that textual representation wherein a statement finds itself to be "imaged within itself" as self-representational, that is, finds itself to be one subject of an assertion made of a number of subjects which constitute the ambit of its reference. More than this would, of course, be required to complete the analogy: a self-referential statement would not, *merely* by that fact, have its meaning deferred *en abyme*; if, say, the statement convicted itself directly of having no referential power, as say would occur with the statement "All statements are meaningless", a simple termination of the deferral would occur.¹⁷ I cannot examine that further here.

15. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 265 (TN).

16 FORUM Serial Computer » Espace détente » Détente » vache qui rit : images récursives/en abyme/fractales/"droste" at http://serialcomputer.mesdiscussions.net/serialcomputer/Espace-detente/Detente/images-recursives-fractales-sujet_32_1.htm

17. In this case, to continue the pictorial analogy, the "image" of the statement found "within" itself, i.e., within its ambit of reference, fails to generate a further image, that is, a further ambit of statements "within" which it can itself be found. Being itself meaningless, it cannot have its intended effect of attributing meaninglessness to even one

The subject



But, in cases where the statement through self-reference deflects or defers its own meaning, the postulation of *en abyme* representation becomes promising. In point particularly is the declaration “The subject is another”. Clearly, here, the term “the subject” becomes successively replaceable by the “another” which it is, and this applies to the declaration itself: *its* subject is not “the subject” which is another, but the *subject as another* which is another, and so on. In turn it is this phrase *the subject as another* which can be tested as *en abyme* motif, one which might deliver the subject in and as its infinite deferral, but also possible recovery. Let us see.

other single statement. So there is no deferral here, merely a truncated *en abyme* that has stopped at the first reflected miniature, revealing that as empty, devoid of features. Peering into the shield within a shield, one finds no further shield, only a void.

3.2 *En Abyme* Representation of "The Subject as Another"

Some preliminary observations might be pertinent. As a motif representative of the subject, "The subject as another" is something on which both Lacoue-Labathe and Levinas can agree. Though their respective dispensations involve further conditions against which we can presently test this figure, it is evident that the *en abyme* effect works both to represent the motif "the subject as another" and simultaneously to defer and withhold *ad infinitum* the representation of the motif. This is precisely because each representation of the "subject as another" might both be accepted as a "full" manifestation of the "what" of the subject, its essence, and *also* be taken as an incomplete representation of that essence because "part" of the essence, or "what", is constituted in reference to the subject. The meaning of this part thereby demands referral to the whole representation, "the subject as another", which in turn requires referral to the subject, so that the representation is now of "the subject as another as another" and so on. We have, in other words, the infinite referral and deferral of the subject – something any *en abyme* representation effects, and which is, in fact, the essence of its mechanism. This an important point, which I treat further below.

Meanwhile, I note that "subject" here can, with only slight semantic accommodation, refer to the subject *who writes*, or *who says*, the sentence, i.e., "I, the subject saying (or writing) the phrase 'the subject as another'". This promises well for the possibility of a generalised account bridging Levinas and Lacoue-Labarthe, since, while for the former displaced subjectivity refers purely to the personal subject, for Lacoue-Labarthe its ambit is both the human subject and the objects which that subject treats, and which are also, as treated, subjects.

Here, then, is a subject "captured" in its very self-difference – a subject constituted in infinite deferral, in a meta-representational mode that transforms the representation "the subject as another." I will suggest that this "subject *as* subject-in-loss" exhibits two features particular to Lacoue-Labartheian subjectal loss: the loss of the subject "into" genuine indeterminacy, as it were, rather than merely through displacement into a specific other; and relatedly, the non-recuperability of the subject thus in loss. Equally, though, I shall consider how the same *en abyme* frame, necessarily interpreted differently, might accommodate Levinasian requirements in terms of the subject: that it is through a concrete other that the substitution of the I occurs, and that it is "through this substitution that I become, not another, but me". This latter expression finds itself represented in the *en abyme* framing in the

following – equivalent – form: “the subject, as another, is thereby itself”.

3.3 Lacoue-Labarthe and *En Abyme* Representation of Subjectal Loss

3.3.1 Infinitised Dispossession of the Writer

First, does the model, in congruence with Lacoue-Labarthe’s account, retain indeterminacy with respect to the “other” into which the subject is represented as being displaced? *En abyme* representation here occurs through a metaphor that is formally spacial rather than temporal, elaborated as a set of inset motifs, in each of which the subject is substituted by “the subject as another.” To capture the temporal emphasis in Lacoue-Labarthe’s account of subjectal displacement – the loss of the self from one moment to the next, corresponding to the act of writing (“We write, we are dispossessed, something is escaping outside us, ceaselessly fleeing....”) – would seemingly necessitate a further step. However, the transition to this temporally oriented interpretation might obviously be easily made if each inset repetition of the motif is taken as a temporal snapshot of the subject under substitution, the whole series being captured through the occurrence of the inseting *ad infinitum*: “the subject as another”, “the subject as another, as another”, and so on. Seen thus, the repeated substitution of the subject becomes very plausibly Lacoue-Labarthe’s “subject in serial dispossession”, with displacement into another being a trope for this dispossession, rather than any point of reference for a figuring of an other as such.

3.3.2 Non-Return of the Subject

Related to this is the question of non-recuperability of the subject within the *en abyme* representation under consideration. What is germane in answer here is precisely the point which has just been made: the substitution through which *en abyme* representation effects an infinitely reinscribed loss of the subject is not substitution by a particular other. Hence, focussing on what happens *within* the outermost frame, as it were, the infinite and receding occurrences of frames within frames, it is perfectly plausible to see the subject as unrecovered within this representation, its identity deferred infinitely to a destination without arrival. The situation would be different, I think, if the subject were always in substitution by a particular other, in which case recuperation of a subject arguably occurs, as erection of the “subject-as-other” dyad. Instead, *en abyme*

representation is apt to signify unchecked and unrecuperable loss of the subject in an *ad infinitum* substitution of subject for other, an unending *repetition otherwise*.

3.4 Levinas and *En Abyeme* Representation of Subjectal Loss

Next, might this depiction of infinite displacement of subject to "otherness" hold as apt description for ontologically displaced subjectivity in Levinas? Levinas is complex here: what constitutes the displacement, or "loss of self" can be understood once its correlative state is identified; the regaining of self. That regaining occurs as the undoing in which there occurs the giving of myself to another, in virtue of which, paradoxically, "I am not another but me." I shall treat this recovery presently, but the precursive lost self, before recovery – the "I" who, when I belong to myself, am another – is clearly, in Levinasian terms, an "I" not displaced as a specific "other". Or, even if so displaced initially, it is available for the further constant displacement occasioned by refusal to give itself over to each new other, as the Face that is the concrete infinite. In effect, it is an "I" lost thus: "I" (while ever I belong to myself), as another, as another.... Again, *en abyme* representation appears to signify this loss effectively.

3.5 *En Abyeme* Representation of Subjectal Return "otherwise"

Given its thoroughgoing efficacy in representing deconstructive subjectal loss, à la Lacoue-Labarthe, and Levinasian subjectal displacement, how might *en abyme* framing bid to represent the recuperation of the subject "otherwise than being"? Is there room in this figure to represent such recuperation? I think that there is.

The propensity for recuperation in a mode distinct from that of loss is a concomitant of a simple but significant feature of the *en abyme* figuring: its structural correspondence to the particular representation in question here, of "the subject as another." In fact, it is this figuring that – uniquely, as far as I can see – succeeds where others fail by matching mode to content when it presents or proposes, *as its subject*, the subject as lost. In that sense, the *anatomy* of the representational mode, its *mechanism*, as it were, prescinding from any specific content, corresponds to the presentation of the subject as *another referred to itself*. This occurs precisely because each deferral of the subject within the representation is also simultaneously a referral to the whole. In other words, as meta-representation, *en abyme* representation is specifically structured to recuperate (to representation) representations in endless deferral, that is, representations which represent their subjects "as

another." Defying the deferral, but also allowing it on its own terms (that is, the terms of the deferral), the *en abyme* mechanism recuperates the subject on *its* own terms (that is, the terms of the mechanism) as a "whole" representation. Vitaly, in thus recuperating the lost subject, *en abyme* representation "affirms" such a subject, but through an affirmation that stands "otherwise to" a simultaneous representation of the subject *in and as loss*. All this the meta-representation achieves for *any subject identified through a self-differentiation which includes self-referral* – such subjects include a heraldic motif of shield-within-a-shield, a "Quaker Oats box" depicting a man holding a Quaker Oats box, or (textually) a statement such as "God is other". But it is when the subject of the meta-representation is, textually, itself the *generalised declaration of self-differentiation as self-referral* – "the subject as another" – that correspondence between mechanism and content becomes complete. Then, as it were, the manifestation of the return of the *always-deferred-subject*, "otherwise" than as its infinite deferral, becomes the *mechanism itself*, its coherence a counterpoint to the loss. In *that* sense, the mechanism captures the "subject as another" *as*, not deferred subject, but subject. This occurs *without however any gainsaying of the ad infinitum* displacement of the subject that the mechanism *also* confirms. That is, it occurs outside the particular and successive workings comprising continuously renewed deferral.

So, where does this situate the Levinasian subject, in its return "otherwise than being?" It has been my purpose to show, not specifically that *en abyme* representation entails a Levinasian subject, but that it allows for this subject. I think a persuasive case can be made that the loss of the subject *en abyme* has its locus in being. After all, this loss is effected "within" the *en abyme* mechanism, or through its agency, through its infinite deferral, within the province of what is directly represented (or, in Levinas' equivalent, "the said"). Correspondingly, and by contrast, the "capture" of the subject might effectively be represented as occurring "otherwise than being", because manifest as a total effect of the mechanism that is yet itself "outside" the mechanism, that is, beyond and distinct from its series of infinite deferrals. In other words, *en abyme* representation of the subject-in-displacement does not refuse the possibility that this depicted subject, in continual substitution by the other, also "returns to itself", albeit "otherwise than being" in terms congruent with Levinas' account.

4. CONCLUSION: PURSUING PROXIMITIES (DESPITE EVERYTHING)

I end with a geographical metaphor, which can metamorphose itself in turn to the image with which I began. To those who inhabit the ideational terrains of deconstruction and extra-ontological phenomenology, these two are vastly different lands, attracting their occupants to project self-protective scepticism across the intervening gulf. I have tried to provide, as it were, a balloon – a single perspective and a meta-representational height – from which it might be ascertained that the coastlines of the two seem shaped to fit each other, perhaps from some immemorial past where the confidence of faith and the scepticism of philosophy were one, and their adherents a single clan. Where one coastline shows indentation, corresponding to a lost subject, the other juts, with a newly provided subject, encouraging us to think of the gulf as bridgeable, or even removable. To adapt a Nietzschean metaphor, might work be undertaken to “drink up the sea”,¹⁸ disilluioning disillusion in ways in which the great disillusionist himself might not have minded (he who once also said that “nothing decisive is constructed, except by building upon a ‘despite everything.’”)?¹⁹ That would seem to require a common theory within which extra-ontological phenomenology became recast to countenance the deconstructive loss of the subject, and, for its part, poststructuralism opened its horizons to acknowledge subjectal return, albeit “otherwise”. My exploration here has sought to indicate, at least, room for such work as available, and rapprochement between the two dispensations as a worthy quest. That means, in broader terms, we can hope awhile yet not to have to choose between those two longtime friends-as-foes: faith at its most demanding and philosophy at its most helpfully distrustful. For the moment at least, then, “the chips stay up”.

18. The question “How were we able to drink up the sea?”, from the Madman’s speech on the death of God in *The Gay Science*, refers to an evident disappearance, of the gulf between appearance and reality, that is not unrelated to the disagreement between deconstruction and extra-ontological phenomenology. See Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, 95.

19 Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*; quoted in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, “Apocryphal Nietzsche”, in *The Subject of Philosophy*, 37.