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Epiphanies of Flesh: The Ineffable Truth of the Face and the Ethics of Bare Life [**]

Abstract: This paper reconsiders Emmanuel Levinas's phenomenology of the face in dialogue with Giorgio Agamben's reflections on bare life and Rainer Maria Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo*. It argues that the "ineffable truth" of the face – its resistance to representation – can only be understood when conceived as incarnation, as *flesh* that simultaneously reveals and conceals transcendence. By bringing together Levinas's notion of *illeity* and Agamben's meditation on the threshold between human and animal, the study contends that ethical exposure and biopolitical abandonment share a common locus: the vulnerability of the body. Reading Rilke's fragmentary torso as an "epiphany of flesh," the essay suggests that the command *You must change your life* is not a moral injunction but an appeal issued by exposed life itself – an address that precedes subjectivity and transcends the human. The paper thus seeks to rethink the ethical significance of the face beyond anthropological limits, proposing that incarnate life in all its ambiguity is the true site of transcendence, where ethics and ontology, vulnerability and authority, become indissociable.

Keywords: incarnated transcendence; face; bare life; vulnerability; illeity; alterity.

Preliminary Remarks

To think the human today, Agamben suggests (Agamben 2004, 16), is to work through the fractures that constitute it. "What is man," he asks, "if he is always the place – and, at the same time, the result – of ceaseless divisions and caesurae?" Rather than assuming an essence, Agamben invites us to trace the operations through which humanity has been continually separated from what is deemed nonhuman – the divisions between man and animal, reason and instinct, *bios* and *zoē*, politics and life. These distinctions, he warns, are not merely conceptual; they are the hidden engines of our ethical, juridical, and even theological life. Perhaps, he writes in the same passage, "the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal." (Agamben 2004, 16) To begin from this key insight is to acknowledge that the

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human is not a stable given, but a zone of exposure – a fragile interval between word and flesh, transcendence and biology. It is precisely within this interval that the question of the face arises. For Levinas, the face is not an anatomical surface but an epiphany of transcendence – the manifestation of an alterity that precedes any kind of representation and calls the self to be resposible. Yet this epiphany is not purely immaterial: the face is also incarnation, the visible form of vulnerability, the place where transcendence becomes flesh. In its very fragility, the face bears the mark of the infinite; it is the threshold where the divine and the mortal, the ethical and the biological, momentarily coincide. The same threshold that makes ethical relation possible also reveals the risk of its effacement: if man is the being who ceaselessly separates himself from the animal, can the animal ever "have" a face? What follows is an attempt to reopen this question, not by defending the uniqueness of the human, but by extending the Levinasian insight beyond its anthropological frame. Once we abandon the metaphysical language of totality and the human "monopoly" over the face, we are compelled to admit that the animal, too, can present an irreducible exteriority that obligates us ethically. In Levinasian terms, the animal manifests an exposure – a mode of appearing that precedes cognition and places us under responsibility.

Such a hermeneutic shift carries decisive implications. Redefining the concept of the face so as to include nonhuman beings entails a profound re-evaluation of our ethical responsibilities and our modes of coexistence with them. It requires not only a reconsideration of the animal's moral and legal status – with implications for animal rights and environmental ethics – but also a reconfiguration of how we conceptualize community itself. In this framework, community is no longer grounded solely in human belonging but in the mutual acknowledgment of a plurality of faces, human and nonhuman alike, that call one another into responsibility and care. Moreover, this redefinition of the face can bridge Levinas and Agamben perspectives on alterity and vulnerability. Agamben concept of zoe, of bare life, a form of existence stripped of protection, recognition, and address is of importance in this context. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben defines bare life as the life that can be killed but not sacrificed, a life reduced to its sheer biological existence and deprived of all juridical and symbolic mediation (Agamben 1998, 11). In *The Open: Man and Animal*, he extends this notion to the threshold where the human and the animal become indistinguishable: bare life arises wherever life itself is exposed without shelter, suspended between protection and abandonment (Agamben 2004, 79-80).

To bring Agamben into conversation with Levinas is therefore to confront two different yet, as I will try to show, intersecting modalities

of exposure. For Levinas, exposure signifies transcendence – the face that commands and obliges beyond concept and law. For Agamben, exposure marks the limit where the political and the biological collapse into one another – where life remains visible but voiceless. And yet, rather than opposing these two visions, perhaps we should ask a different question: should not life itself – sheer life in all its ambiguity, as Agamben describes it – be regarded as face in the Levinasian sense? In this study, I will attempt to argue, by reading Rainer Maria Rilke's celebrated poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, that if Levinas's notion of the face is understood correctly – that is, in the broader perspective of his conception of alterity as *illeity*[1] – we are compelled to recognize that, once we abandon the metaphysical language of totality and the anthropological difference, we must admit flesh itself as face.

The ultimate consequence of this position is what might be called a de-anthropologization of ethics: if responsibility arises as a response to the face of the Other, then wherever there is a face, there is an ethical demand. To recognize the face of the animal, therefore, is to admit that ethics cannot be delineated by the more than questionable traditional boundaries of species. Redefining the face thus becomes not merely an interpretive exercise but a practical challenge – that of reimagining our institutions, laws, and habits in a world where the illeity of nonhuman beings and the exposure of bare life alike compel us to rethink what it means to be human.

The "Face-Poor" Animal

In one of his last interviews, Emmanuel Levinas touches upon a question that – quite surprisingly – he had omitted to discuss throughout the decades in which he developed his reflection on alterity: the problem of the animal. In a response marked by deliberate ambiguity to the question of whether the animal "has a face," Levinas remarks: "One cannot entirely refuse the face to an animal. […] And yet, the priority here lies not in the animal, but in the human face. We understand the animal, the face of an animal, on the basis of Dasein. The phenomenon of the face does not appear in its purest form in the dog." (Levinas 1988, 169). In the same interview, Levinas even takes a step back from this statement, adding: "I do not know whether a snake has a face. I cannot answer this question. A more specific analysis is needed." (Levinas 1988, 171)

But is the face – whether human or animal – which Levinas himself calls "a living presence" (Levinas 1979, 66) a fundamental event that is "transcendent and absent from this world" (Levinas 1979, 75) and elsewhere a non-phenomenon, something that "is present in its refusal to be contained" (Levinas 1979, 194) "the very collapse of

phenomenality" (Levinas 2006, 88) – something that can only be revealed at the end of a laborious hermeneutical analysis? Does not the face, as such, precede every saying? If we admit, with Levinas, that the face is "a fundamental event," even a "non-phenomenon," that is, an irruption that shatters the order of appearance and representation (Levinas 1979, 118), then his hesitation in front of the animal's face becomes symptomatic. For to suspend the recognition of the face until the moment of a "more specific analysis" implicitly assumes that the alterity of the animal must first be filtered through conceptual determinations, that access to the face is mediated by sophisticated interpretation. This, however, seems to contradict the very core of Levinas's ethics, according to which the face precedes all knowledge, theory, or discourse. (Levinas 1979, 66)

The problem is thus one of coherence: if the human face precedes every category and constrains me prior to any reflection, why should the face of the animal require a supplementary analysis? Does this hermeneutic "postponement" not imply a hierarchization of alterity, an attempt to classify what should remain incommensurable? Levinas risks reintroducing, at the heart of his own philosophy, an irreducible contradiction: the human is the "bearer" of the face in its full sense, while the animal would represent only a problematic case, situated at the edge of the phenomenon.

From this perspective, the tension within Levinas's discourse reveals itself as an aporia between two kinds of fidelity: on the one hand, fidelity to his own definition of the face as an event preceding every saying; on the other, fidelity to a metaphysical tradition – from Aristotle to Heidegger – that reserves for man the privileged position in relation to animality, a question I have discussed at length in another article (Sandu 2014, 19-33). The question becomes therefore inevitable: can a radicalized Levinasian ethics ignore the dog's gaze or the snake's enigmatic opacity? Or, on the contrary, does it compel us to recognize that the face – precisely because it is "irreducible to phenomenality" (Levinas 1979, 212) – cannot be limited by concepts such as species, and must be thought instead as an ethical opening traversing life itself? In the development of this study, I will attempt to show that those who have criticized Levinas's anthropocentrism (such as Derrida[2] and others) are at least partially justified when they claim that Levinas – like Heidegger himself, whom he indirectly echoes in this very passage – remains indebted to the metaphysical discourse he otherwise contests at every turn. Just as Heidegger characterizes the animal as *weltarm*, "world-poor," Levinas seems to describe it as "face-poor."

Heidegger, in his famous 1929–30 lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, argues for an ontological abyss between the animal – absorbed in the world it loses precisely at the moment of

having it – and man, the world-forming being, whose existence is defined by openness (*Erschlossenheit*), which grants access to Being as a whole (Heidegger 1995, 177–80). Based on this essential difference between man and animal – a difference implicitly assumed in the reduction of *life* to *existentiality* – Heidegger practically denies man's own animality, attempting to conceive the human body not as organism but as something grounded in the *ek-static* nature of existence. In this way, he ultimately remains entangled in the very aporias of embodiment that characterize the Husserlian tradition, as I have shown elsewhere (Sandu 2018). He ultimately concludes, in *Wegmarken*, that even "what we attribute to the human being as *animalitas*, on the basis of comparison with 'beasts,' is grounded in the essence of *ek-sistence*" (Heidegger 1998, 247). In other words, there is a primacy of human existence over life, one that forbids us from understanding life in and through itself.

The notion of a "face-poor" animal, clearly indebted to this Heideggerian framework, remains nonetheless – as I have already suggested – in tension with the central principle of Levinas's concept, namely the non-phenomenality and uniqueness of the face. Moreover, it is problematic to speak of "understanding" the face or of "understanding something as face," since such phrasing would imply, to some extent at least, that – like any other phenomenon constituted by me – the face of the Other is what it is only in relation to myself, that is, insofar as I understand it *as* face. Yet such an understanding of the face is explicitly rejected by Levinas on multiple occasions: "The face of the Other at every moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea molded on my measure and on the measure of its ideatum – an adequate idea. It does not manifest itself through these qualities but *kath'auto*, in and of itself. It expresses itself. Contrary to contemporary ontology, the face proposes a notion of truth that is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neutral, but an expression: the being tears through all its envelopes in order to expose, in its 'form,' the totality of its 'content,' thus abolishing, finally, the very distinction between form and content" (Levinas 1979, 50-51). In fact, Levinas's entire philosophy gravitates around the idea of the face, which "puts us into question," calls us from an inaccessible beyond, and manifests through itself the uniqueness and vulnerability of the Other, demanding from us ethical responsibility and care. In one of the most frequently cited passages from *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes: "The strangeness of the Other – the irreducibility of the Other to the Same, to my thoughts and possessions – is accomplished precisely through this calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics" (Levinas 1979, 43).

These extremely dense passages, which describe the radical asymmetry between the self and the Other, focuses precisely on the strangeness and irreducibility of alterity, emphasizing the idea that the

encounter with the Other disrupts the spontaneity of the self – which is, in fact, the distinctive mark of modern subjectivity. This spontaneity of the subject, now called into question, is precisely what made possible the traditional ontology that reduces the Other to the Same through the "interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." (Levinas 1979, 43) Levinas insists that the Other is profoundly distinct and irreducible to the self, and that he cannot be assimilated or understood within or on the basis of my own perspective. The Other exists beyond the limits of my categories of understanding – "over him I have no power […] neither he nor I belong to a genus," (Levinas 1979, 39) Levinas writes – and any effort to integrate the Other into my existing sphere of knowledge undermines his unique and irreducible individuality and thus constitutes the most fundamental form of violence. In doing so, what is silenced – or worse, suppressed – is precisely his difference, his very alterity.

The Face as Interpellation

The way in which the Other undermines and calls into question my spontaneity, Levinas emphasizes, is accomplished through what he calls *face*. Yet to understand the face merely in anatomical terms would be, as I have already implicitly argued, a fundamental error. The face is not reducible to the visible configuration or features – eyes, nose, mouth – for it does not appear in such a way. The encounter with the face does not occur in a way that would allow it to be treated as an object upon which I might exercise my intentionality or direct a deliberate gaze. On the contrary, the face eludes every attempt at objectification; it cannot be exhausted, simplified, or defined by the categories imposed through representation. It appears as a presence that resists all conceptual framing and that, precisely through its refusal to be reduced to an object, confronts me with its radical alterity. In this sense, the face is not a form but an event – an irruption of alterity within immanence, where transcendence becomes flesh. – an opening toward a beyond that destabilizes spontaneity and compels me to assume ethical responsibility. It is not an object or a thing, but a presence – a paradoxical presence that can be neither grasped nor denied, a presence that effaces itself at the very moment it appears, or rather, that reveals itself as that which cannot be seen. At first glance, this formulation may seem paradoxical, even absurd: how can one speak of a phenomenon or a presence that not only appears and withdraws simultaneously, but appears *by* withdrawing? Yet such a phenomenon finds a powerful illustration in the biblical episode of the Supper at Emmaus (Luke 24:30–31). There, Christ is recognized by his disciples only in the act of breaking bread, but at the very moment of recognition "He vanished

from their sight." Full manifestation coincides with radical withdrawal – presence reveals itself precisely through disappearance. For this reason, the face is fundamentally transcendent and presents itself as an interpellation or an infinite demand – functioning as an interruption of our self-centered existence. The encounter with the face of the Other radically destabilizes our egoism and compels us to acknowledge the existence and needs of another. If such a radical encounter of the other is at all possible is, of course a complicated question, as some commentators point out (Derrida 1964, 425–473).

But if we agree that the face can manifest itself as an inaccessible presence and cannot be reduced to the horizon of our understanding, than the idea that we must first *recognize* the face of the Other as a face becomes deeply problematic, for it contradicts the fundamental nature of the encounter and the ethical imperative it entails. Levinas insists that the encounter with the face is necessarily pre-reflective and unmediated. For this reason, ethical responsibility is not the result of a deliberate act of judgment, not the rational conclusion of an analysis, but arises from the very presence of the Other who looks at me and calls me. Responsibility thus emerges not as a contract or a choice, but as an *originary duty* that even precedes my freedom. Before the face, I am already responsible prior to deciding to be so; my duty toward the Other does not derive from a general norm or moral principle, but from the exposed vulnerability of the Other that summons me to respond. Responsibility, in this sense, is not a task I assume voluntarily, but an exigency that precedes and constitutes me as an ethical subject.

Understood in this way, Levinasian responsibility is not conditioned by recognition or knowledge but is a response to an appeal that cannot be avoided. It is limitless, since it is never exhausted by the fulfillment of a determinate duty but renews itself endlessly with each encounter with the Other. Yet one aspect deserves emphasis here: before the face, I am not confronted with a power that constrains me, but with a fragility that obliges me precisely through its lack of means. Vulnerability thus becomes a surplus of authority – it does not dominate, but interpellates me. Consequently, to claim that some prior recognition is necessary before admitting the face is to miss the essence of Levinasian ethics, whose very root lies in the immediacy of the face-to-face encounter.

The encounter with the Other – which is, strictly speaking, a fundamentally asymmetrical relation – thus takes the form of an epiphany, an appeal that differs radically from sensory experience, since it is neither relative nor self-centered. The Other is not merely another being among beings but "otherwise than being," a mode of presence that cannot be reduced to the ontological order. For this reason, a mere description of anatomical features does not bring us face to face in the

Levinasian sense. As Levinas remarks in an interview, "when we see a nose, eyes, a forehead, and a chin, and can describe them, we turn toward the Other as toward an object" (YouTube 2014).

We are therefore left with this question: How to conceive the face, since it is not, strictly speaking, something? Or, rather, what makes a face *a face*? Here lies one of the greatest difficulties of Levinas's thought. If the face could be defined through a set of anatomical traits, it would immediately enter the regime of objectivity, becoming one thing among others. How can one speak of the face without turning it into "content" for consciousness? How can one designate what, by definition, refuses designation? This tension explains, I think, the deliberate ambiguity of Levinas's language: the face appears as a presence that withdraws, a visibility that points toward the invisible, a proximity that constantly sends me beyond itself. To say what the face *is* is already to lose it, to objectify it – and yet we must speak of it. Levinas thus finds himself caught between the demand to give a conceptual account of the face and the necessity of preserving its irreducible transcendence. This "necessary impossibility" marks the point at which philosophy fractures and transforms itself into ethics.

From the Levinasian standpoint, the difficulty does not lie merely in describing the face without objectifying it, but also in the fact that we cannot even draw, *ab initio*, the boundary between what counts as a face and what does not. If we could determine in advance what belongs to the category of the face, we would already be operating with a conceptual framework – the traditional understanding of ontological difference – that reduces alterity to the order of my own understanding. Levinas insists, instead, that the face manifests itself originally as an epiphany, as an event that meets and interpellates me, not as an object identifiable by pre-established criteria. This impossibility of determining in advance "what a face is" marks a decisive rupture with any phenomenology of perception or ontology of beings. In place of a theoretical delimitation, Levinas proposes the immediate experience of encounter. In this sense, the face is never simply what I "have before me," but always what overwhelms, surprises, and dislocates me. The impossibility of defining in advance what the face is, then, is not an accidental limitation of thought but, from the Levinasian perspective, the very expression of its transcendence: the face preserves its alterity precisely through its resistance to classification or prior definition. It is not "this thing and not another," but the mode through which alterity manifests itself without ever being reducible to a form.

In the same short interview, however, Levinas offers a clue to this problem when he speaks of the first word of the face: "Thou shalt not kill." In this formulation is concentrated the paradox of his entire conception. The face does not impose itself as a visible form, but as a

command, as an appeal addressed directly to me. Paradoxically, we might say that the face is not something one *sees*, but something one *hears*. To make this claim is to underline that it does not belong to the phenomenal order, but to the ethical one. Vision implies possession and knowledge; hearing, by contrast, implies receptivity to a word that comes from beyond myself. The face is therefore not a phenomenon upon which I can exercise intentionality or constitute in advance, but an address that exceeds and summons me beyond all interpretation.

That the face as voice requires no hermeneutics to be understood indicates its immediate and imperative character. The command "Thou shalt not kill" does not need to be deduced, explained, or justified within any preexisting conceptual framework – it imposes itself prior to all dianoetic mediation. Hence, the experience of the face is not cognitive but ethical: it does not demand to be interpreted, but to be heard – and followed.

The face as the Torso

An illuminating ilustration of the phenomenon of the face can be found in Rainer Maria Rilke's poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo* (Rilke 1957, 233), which I shall quote here in full:

> Never will we know his fabulous head
> where the eyes' apples slowly ripened. Yet
> his torso glows: a candelabrum set
> before his gaze which is pushed back and hid,
> restrained and shining. Else the curving breast
> could not thus blind you, nor through the soft turn
> of the loins could this smile easily have passed
> into the bright groins where the genitals burned.
> Else stood this stone a fragment and defaced,
> with lucent body from the shoulders falling,
> too short, not gleaming like a lion's fell;
> nor would this star have shaken the shackles off,
> bursting with light, until there is no place
> that does not see you. You must change your life.

The final line of this poem – which I shall choose as the starting point for my interpretation – is of particular significance. Rilke describes a torso – a fragment of the human body deprived of limbs and, above all, of its head – as something that "gleaming like a lion's fell," a stone that nevertheless radiates an inner gaze, one that exerts its force upon the beholder. This mutilated body, though evidently lacking the anatomical face, *looks back* at us. More than that, it sees us with all its parts – it emanates a presence and issues a call.

In his reading of the poem, Peter Sloterdijk speaks of a "command from the stone" (Sloterdijk 2013, 19) and interprets it as the expression of a primordial religiosity. Yet what emerges here is not so much the command of the stone as the command of what the work of art, hewn in stone, brings forth in its purest form: a command of the flesh itself. It is the naked, utterly defenseless flesh of a body without limbs or head, stripped of everything that could immediately be recognized as a face in the anatomical sense. The gaze of the Other no longer arises from a biological visage but from the exposed flesh itself – a flesh that sees us insofar as we see it, and that commands us not to kill. Every nude, Levinas reminds us, signifies by itself; the torso is the *nudity of nudity*, the excess of exposure that resists form yet overflows with signification (Levinas 1998, 19). The face, as the visibility of transcendence, is already present in this surplus of nakedness, in this "zero point of representation." The torso thus constitutes a prehistory of the subject – a moment anterior to comprehension – where the ethical imperative does not arise from understanding, but precedes it. The imperative *You must change your life* is, in this sense, nothing other than the gaze of the nude itself that resonates within me: a heteronomous command, an appeal that comes from the Other before it can be formulated by the self.

Rilke's closing line has often been read as an anthropotechnic call to self-transformation, as Sloterdijk proposes. Yet its resonance is far deeper. The imperative can equally be heard as a rephrasing of Levinas's ethical command *Thou shalt not kill*. To change one's life means, here, to let oneself be interpellated by the Other – to open oneself to alterity. The etymological kinship between the German *ändern* (to change) and *der Andere* (the Other) underscores this link: to change one's life is to let the Other enter it, to be transformed by the presence of the Other. The fact that the poem bears the title *Archaic Torso of Apollo* is not at all irrelevant. We have no certainty that the fragment described belongs to the god; only the poet's title asserts it. But this assertion matters: Rilke invites us not to see a mere fragment of stone, but to recognize in the vulnerability of flesh the manifestation of the divine. If the torso is indeed Apollo's, then divine perfection does not vanish with the loss of head and limbs; it continues to shine through the broken matter. The mutilated body thus becomes the paradoxical site where divinity reveals itself through exposure – where fragility itself becomes radiant: "We cannot know his legendary head...
yet his torso is still suffused with brilliance from inside." Even though the anatomical face is gone, the light of the gaze has not disappeared; it now shines through the chest, through the gentle twist of the hips, through the transparency of the shoulders. The fractured stone glistens like a wild beast's fur and bursts like a star only because it condenses within itself a gaze that touches us from every direction. The face no longer "belongs" to the head, nor to physiognomy as such – it is radically *disfigured*, diffused

throughout the flesh: The torso *is* face: not as form, but as exposure, as vulnerability that commands. In this sense, Rilke's torso illustrates Levinas's claim that the encounter with the face is the very origin of morality (Levinas 1979, 245). The flesh becomes the site of transcendence; it speaks without speech, sees without eyes, and commands without authority. The "You" addressed in the poem is not summoned by a divine will, but by the sheer presence of exposed life – which is not, as I will try to argue, very far from Agamben *bare life*. In a sense, the imperative of the last verse can be heard as issuing from *zoē* itself. *Bare life*, stripped of all symbolic mediation, of any kind of *bios*, reveals itself as *face*: a visibility that no longer represents but calls, an ethical resonance that precedes all cognition. As Levinas writes, "in this proximity of the face, the subservience of obedience precedes the hearing of the order. An obedience preceding the hearing of the order – which measures or indicates an extreme urgency of the commandment" (Levinas 1998, 151). The ambiguous status of Rilke's final verse exemplifies this sui generis form of subjectivation: the transformation of the self into *adonné*, the accusative of ethical consciousness – one who is summoned, rather than autonomous. The face, therefore, is not the image of a known deity; it is the interpellation of an unknown god who has no face, and yet – through the suffering flesh – has a body. In the *Archaic Torso of Apollo*, the divine does not look at us from above; it irradiates from below, from the fractured matter that mirrors our own exposed condition. The stone, luminous and wounded, reveals the ineffable truth of the face: that vulnerability itself is sacred, and that transcendence is inscribed in the very flesh that perishes.

The Command of the Flesh

In a short but deeply personal essay entitled *The Name of a Dog* (Levinas 1990, 150), Levinas recalls an episode from his time as a prisoner of war, where a stray dog named Bobby would greet the prisoners every evening as they returned from work. Jumping with joy, recognizing them – *as men* – despite their wretched state and the degradation to which they were subjected, Bobby offered a form of acknowledgment that no other human extended to them. For Levinas, Bobby was "the last Kantian in Nazi Germany." (Levinas 1990, 154) This recognition did not arise from human projection but from the animal's own gaze – a gaze capable of restoring humanity, of recognizing the *illeity* of the others precisely where it has been denied. What Levinas discovers in this brief exchange is that *illeity* – the "he-ness" or transcendence of the Other that exceeds any reciprocal recognition – can manifest even through an animal gaze. It is a glance devoid of concept or language, yet charged with responsibility. In this sense, the animal becomes the last witness of humanity, the last bearer of the ethical relation when all others have withdrawn into indifference.

From this perspective, both Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* and Levinas's memory of Bobby reveal that the face is not reducible to the visible configuration of features, nor is it reserved exclusively for the human. If we take Rilke's poem as a point of departure, the face is revealed not as a collection of anatomical traits but as a force of interpellation that radiates from the flesh itself, from the tension of *bare life*. The face is here the energy of the body the sheer life which, though reduced to a fragment, "sees" and addresses me. Understood in this way, the face is not what appears, but what overturns the very order of appearance – a visibility that consumes itself in withdrawal, becoming an appeal precisely through its retreat. In Rilke's torso, stone becomes flesh and flesh becomes the bearer of the infinite – a presence both vulnerable and exposed, yet absolutely commanding. The face is thus no longer the "face" in the anatomical sense, but the event through which alterity manifests itself as infinity within the finite body – the epiphany of a vulnerable presence, of a gaze that, through its very fragility, becomes ethical authority.

To acknowledge this is to open ourselves to an ethics that no longer begins from the distinction between man and animal, but from the sui generis appeal of the face – an appeal that always demands transformation, and that, in its radicalism, coincides with the primal interdiction: *Thou shalt not kill.*

In this light, Rilke's *Archaic Torso of Apollo* can be read, I think, as the poetic bridge between Levinas and Agamben. The fragmentary body that Rilke describes – the mutilated yet radiant torso – is not a symbol of divine perfection lost, but the manifestation of a presence that exceeds both form and function. The statue's "gaze," which emanates from a body that no longer has a head or eyes, performs precisely the paradox Levinas attributes to the face: it "looks" at us without looking, it commands without speech, it imposes an ethical demand without mediation.

Yet what Rilke's poem reveals is that this commanding visibility arises from what Agamben would call *bare life*: the exposed, vulnerable, non-representational materiality of flesh. The torso "sees" and "speaks" not because it retains the marks of individuality, but because, in its very incompleteness, it exposes the pure potentiality of life – *zoē* as epiphany. It is precisely the absence of the head, the destruction of the representational center, which opens the space for a new kind of transcendence: one that does not descend from the divine, but emanates from the living matter itself. Rilke lingers, strikingly, on the torso's animal features – the gleam of its stone "fur" and the allusion to the "dark center where procreation flared." These are not incidental details, nor mere ornamental images of sensuality. They mark the precise point where the poem transgresses the boundaries between the divine, the human, and the animal. The radiance of the stone's "pelt" and the evocation of sexuality both gesture toward what Agamben would call bare life – the stratum of existence where the

biological and the spiritual are no longer separable. In Rilke's description, eroticism and animality do not profane the divine; they become its medium. The luminous fur of the torso is not the residue of bestiality but the sign of an incarnate transcendence, a revelation of divinity through flesh. Likewise, the "dark center" of sexuality is not a descent into materiality but a point of condensation – the place where the vitality of the living body bursts forth as light, commanding: Thou shalt not kill! What shines here is not ideal form but the energy of life itself, the animal pulse that survives even in the broken stone. Rilke thus reverses the classical hierarchy of purity and corruption: what appears most "animal," most corporeal, becomes the bearer of the sacred. The divine, far from withdrawing into abstraction, irradiates from the very zones that Western metaphysics sought to exclude – sex, fur, flesh. The poem invites us to see that transcendence does not hover above life but gleams within its most vulnerable form.

Agamben's lapidary claim – that "the most luminous sphere of our relations with the divine depends, in some way, on that darker one which separates us from the animal" – finds in Rilke its poetic elucidation and refinement. For *Archaïscher Torso Apollos* reveals that this dark sphere is not merely the limit that divides, but the threshold that illuminates. The animal element, far from excluding us from the divine, grounds our access to it: the divine shines only through what is exposed, wounded, and alive. In Rilke's vision, the broken statue becomes the site where the sacred and the bestial, the ethical and the erotic, the human and the animal, converge in a single luminous command. The torso does not represent Apollo; it *is* Apollo – not as god, but as life's incandescent remainder, where flesh and divinity become indistinguishable.

Notes

[1] The concept of *illeity* (*illeité*, from the Latin ille, "that one," "he/she") is one of the central notions of Emmanuel Levinas's later thought. It appears most prominently in *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (1974), where Levinas seeks to extend the analysis begun in *Totalité et infini* (1961). Levinas deliberately chooses an impersonal form that avoids both the intimacy of the "you" and the neutrality of the ordinary "he." The term designates a mode of presence that resists reduction to category, object, or phenomenon, and that cannot be enclosed within a conventional intersubjective relation. Illeity thus refers to a way of being present that escapes all thematization. It is not an object of knowledge, nor a symmetrical subject standing opposite to me. Rather, it marks absolute transcendence: the Other is not "in the world" as I am, but exceeds me, calling me from an ungraspable exteriority.

[2] In his attempt to challenge the anthropocentrism underlying the traditional understanding of the anthropological difference, Derrida introduces a new concept— "a double clone or a portmanteau word, a sort of monstrous hybrid, a chimera." The term, which does not exist in French but is pronounced identically to the plural *animaux* ("animals"), is formed by fusing *animal* ("animal") and *mot* ("word"): *animot*. "*Ecce animot. Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals*" (Derrida 2002, 409).
Through this neologism, Derrida signals that the word *animal* can only be used *sous rapture* – that is, under erasure – acknowledging and assuming its hermeneutical inadequacy. The

homogeneous unity the term seems to designate is, in fact, purely fictional, an artifact of language that conceals an irreducible multiplicity of living beings.

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