EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

Transcending Words: Concerning Word-Erasing*

The Surrealist project goes beyond the claims of a literary school. Its purpose is to identify metaphysical freedom and poetic freedom. The whimsical fantasy of the dream-work, in its very absurdity, does not evolve out of a fatalistic thwarting of human dignity but maneuvers according to a process of emancipation. The dream is not a privilege bestowed by genius. The non-sensical is the most commonly shared thing there is. Yet, Breton's first manifesto displayed, on the one hand, a naive confidence in the clandestine and miraculous forces at work in the Unconscious. His references concerning Freud still read like allusions to some mythological realm ripe with promises of hidden treasures. On the other hand, his critique of the conscious mechanisms of thought did not so much proceed out of their analysis as out of his following them into the dead-end prospects where their use eventually led.

Michel Leiris who belonged for a while to the Surrealist group also extolled in his last book—albeit in his own way—the great power of the dream-work. Only instead of positing some would-be mystical power in the Unconscious, he finds actual causes to his dream. Reasons drawn from conscious life. At first glance, his images owe their richness and their seemingly unexpected quality to the *process of idea-association* of which Michel Leiris religiously describes the "latent birth."

Throughout the first half of the book, the reader witnesses a prodigious amplifying movement of Rimbaud's famous sonnet. Only the

*This article, "La Transcendance des mots," first appeared in *Les Temps modernes*, no. 44 (1949); 1090–95.

YFS 81, *On Leiris*, ed. Blanchard, © 1992 by Yale University.

suggested correspondences are no longer mysterious. They are narrated through their genesis. Michel Leiris deals more in word chemistry than in verbal alchemy. From page 128 on, that chemistry is applied to facts, situations, memories. It properly becomes the narrative content, being both the work of art it puts forward and a reflection on the essence of that art; a process which is certainly linked to the tradition of French poetry from Mallarmé to Blanchot, a tradition in which the emotional impulse constituting the work content is the very same impulse behind the creation of that content.

In the very last part of his book, Michel Leiris reveals the process at work within his art: *bifurs* or word-erasing [*biffures*] which lends its title to the book as well as gives a meaning to the astonishing rehabilitation of word-association. *Bifurs*—for sensations, words and memories continually cut thought away from the direction toward which it seemingly steered and take it further into unsuspected paths; word-erasures [*biffures*]—for the univocal meaning in those elements is ceaselessly corrected and overinscribed. Yet the point of these *bifurs* or word-erasing is not so much about exploring the new paths thus opened, or even about pondering their corrected meaning, but rather about pinpointing thought at the rare moment when it sideslips into something other than itself. Only because of this basic ambiguity at the heart of the *bifur,* is the process of word-association made possible.

Whereas we are prone to reduce the signifying function to word-association and to think that the multiplicity of meaning produced by the verbal or other sign can be explained away by the network of associations where that verbal sign is located, instead with the notion of *bifur,* the process of word-association loses its fundamental role. Thought is originally word-erasing—that is to say, symbolic. And because thought is symbolic, ideas can hook up with one another and create a connecting network. Hence, whether this network is produced by the circumstances under which the word was learned or by its vocal similarities with other words, or even by its written form—thus enriched with everything the signs of writing themselves conjure up, this network owes its value not so much to the fact that it connects one thought to another but rather to the fact that it guarantees the presence of one given thought *within* another. Just as animals in fairy tales do not merely convey a moral lesson but, by their tangible presence, give richness to the idea suggested, thought, at the very time of its erasure, retains the validity of its erased meaning. The various meanings thus

interact with one another. Surrealist freedom is not opposed to other thought mechanisms—it is, on the contrary, their overriding principle.

The process of word-association, once understood in the context of word-erasing becomes a system of thinking which stands beyond the classical categories of representation and identity. The overreaching of thought is indeed reminiscent of duration according to Bergson—although Bergson's conception turns this negation of identity into a representational process of becoming. The originality of word-erasing lies in its positing of multiplicity as simultaneous and conscience as irreducibly ambiguous. Michel Leiris's memories such as they are narrated according to his "rule of the game" does not give the impression—curiously enough—of a temporal scheme. Rather, the ambiguity of word-erasing creates a space.

A parallel between the process of word-erasing and the works of modern painters would prove to be interesting. There has been a recent exhibit of Charles Lapicque's paintings. By destroying perspective as the order of perceiving, approaching, and as the practical means of acceding to objects, Charles Lapicque creates a space which is above all the order of a simultaneity—process similar to a literary description leading into a tableau not by reproducing a continuous stretch but by putting together selected details into an order which is determined by the nature of those details and by their power of suggestion. Space as such does not accommodate things. Rather, things sketch out space from their erasure. In turn, the space in each object sheds volume. The line of ambiguity steps out from behind the line of fixity. Lines throw off their skeletal functioning in order to become the infinite process of a possible coming together. Shapes play variations on their essential themes similar to the ocean foam which Charles Lapicque is now working on and in which sensitive matter condenses into infinite suggestions ranging from one form to another. Variation on themes, yet not musical ones, for it knows nothing of duration; only simultaneous and spatial. On account of its being unique, the very form of a painting would stop the game of word-erasing. A Lapicque painting is accompanied by variations which do not act as *studies* leading toward the *ne varietur* end-version of the work, but which all stand on the same ground. Open-endedness, instead of completion, paradoxically appears to be the fundamental category of modern art.

However, doesn't the spatial quality in the play of word-erasing come from its visual aspect? The profusion of word-erasures is indeed

the return of consciousness to sensory experience, the return of the sensory world to its own sensory essence, its aesthetic experience. Yet, again, isn't it true that the particular brand of symbolism imbedded in the aesthetic essence of reality owes its explanation to the very nature of visual experience under which Western civilization eventually subsumes any kind of spiritual life? The aesthetic essence deals with ideas, it is luminescent, it seeks clarity and evidence. It ends up in the unveiled world of phenomena. Everything is immanent to it.

Seeing means being in a self-sufficient world that is completely here. Any vision reaching beyond the realm of given facts remains within that realm. The infinity of space, just like the infinity of the signifier to which the sign refers, remains no less earthbound. Vision is a link to being in such a way that being once seen precisely appears as a world. Sounds in turn are given to intuition and can be given out. This is where the primacy of vision lies in relation to the other senses. And the universality of art also rests on that primacy of vision. It produces beauty in nature, it calms and soothes it. The arts, even those based on sound, produce silence.

A silence which can sometimes be in bad faith or weighty or frightful. We identify as the need for criticism that need which yearns to reach out to someone, in spite of and beyond the peaceful wholeness of beauty.

Sound—and conscience conceived as hearing—includes within itself the splitting apart of the always completed world of vision and art. Sound as a whole rings out, detonates, and is scandalous. Whereas, in the realm of vision, forms embrace and soothe their contents, sound is like the sensory world overflowing itself, forms being unable to hold their contents—the world ripping asunder—that by which *this* world *here* extends a dimension which cannot be converted into vision. In that sense, sound is the intrinsic symbolical function—the flight beyond the given. Yet, the reason it can still keep the appearance of a phenomenon, as *here,* is that its transcending function only holds sway in the verbal sound. The sound and rumor of nature are deceptive words. To truly hear a sound is to hear a vocable. Pure sound is the Word.

Philosophy and contemporary sociology have accustomed us to underestimating the direct social contact of people speaking, in order to favor silence or the complex relations determined by civilization and its categories, such as customs, law, and culture. A scornful bias against words which is the result of the pitfalls intrinsic to language—

its many faceted ability to turn into chatter and impediment. Such a scorn however cannot have the best of the situation whose privilege is granted to Robinson in the beauty of tropical landscape when, having broken no ties with civilization either by his tools, or his morals, or his calendar, he experiences the greatest event of his life on the island: the moment at last when a man, speaking, takes the place of the unspeakable sadness of echo.

This means that the other's actual presence does have its importance in social interaction. More importantly, however, it means that, far from expressing a pure and simple coexistence with the "I" or far from being justified by the romantic metaphor of "living presence," that presence is achieved through hearing and draws its meaning from the role, played by the spoken word, of a transcendental origin. It is because the word will not become incarnate that it achieves its presence among us. The presence of the Other is a teaching presence. That is why the word as teaching is more than the experience of the real, why also the master does more than mind midwifery. Indeed it tears the experience away from its aesthetic complacency, from its position *here* where it peacefully lies. It transforms it into a being by calling upon it. In this sense, we might have once said that criticism—as a living being speaking to another living being—brings back the image where art delights, to the genuinely real being. The language of criticism pulls us out of that dreaming which also harbors artistic language. Of course, in its written form, it continually calls for more criticism; books keep calling for more books. Yet the proliferation of the printed word stops or reaches its highest point when the living word comes into it, at the moment, again, when criticism blossoms into teaching.

The privilege which the living word, made the ear, has over the image-word or the already picturesque sign also appears when the act of speaking is considered.

For is speaking only putting words into signs as the writings suggest? Disfigured words, *"paroles gelées"* [frozen words] where language is already turned into documents and vestiges. The living word fights against thought turning into remains, it fights against words coming out when there is no one to listen to them. Oral expression entails the impossibility of being in itself, of keeping its thought to itself. It consequently involves a lack in the position of the subject in which the "I" enjoys a given world. Speaking means interrupting my existence as both subject and master, yet without exposing me since it leaves me as

simultaneously subject and object. My voice brings the context in which that dialectical configuration is concretely carried out. The speaking subject does not set up the world in relation to him/herself and does not position him/herself just simply in the midst of his/her self-representation as does the artist; the speaking subject does it in relation to the Other. This privilege of the Other can be understood as soon as we admit that the foremost fact of life is neither the *in-itself* nor the *for-itself* but the *"pour l'autre"* [*for the other*]; or, again, as soon as human existence becomes being. Through the spoken word, the subject who posits himself also exposes himself and, in a sense, prays.

According to the foregoing comments, indeed too cursory for so serious a subject, the very moment of expression becomes located outside of its traditional subordination to thought. The common idea according to which words are only good for communicating—or concealing—thought, relies on such an ancient and venerable tradition that no one dares challenge it. It is our supposition that Michel Leiris's word-erasing magnificently exhausts all the possibilities of developing and furthering thinking thought when the latter touches upon the sensory matter that molds words. Yet, those possibilities still rely on the privilege given to thought as it is expressed in the age-old language of "whatever can be properly thought out" ("Ce qui se conçoit bien . . . ").* For Michel Leiris, in the final analysis, the wealth brought out by language can be measured only by its counterpart in thought content.

—Translated by Didier Maleuvre

*Probable reference to the French saying: "Ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce bien" [Whatever can be properly thought out can also be properly spoken].—Translator's note.