

DE L'INFINI

A FOREIGNER'S METAPHYSICS

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2022



And what if we brought the foreigner back from (outside) the margins? One cannot deny that our understanding of foreignness is narrowed down to a political, if not an administrative understanding of spaces. It is this false simplicity that we shall try to contradict in this essay, by opening an exploration of the theme of foreignness. A brief discussion of certain figures of foreignness in history will set the scene, before focusing back on the foreigner proper, and her existential condition. Transcending the individual, we shall extrapolate a series of arguments by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida to *reconstruct* a series of cultural motifs common to all societies, in order to discover their genesis in or around concerns of foreignness. And we shall finally go back to the basics to unveil the kind of metaphysics the foreigner may be able to invent.

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INTRODUCTION: IN-FINIR

In the beginning, there *never* was the foreigner.

Foreignness is not in nature. No animal has ever been foreign. It is not a *quality* in the old sense of the word; it describes an entity neither in its physicality nor in its inner features. Foreignness is more than cultural: not only nature is altogether bereft of foreignness, but any particular human culture would also, surely have the same pretension, in the fantasy of its autonomous genesis. In certain countries of the world, it is impossible to be born a foreigner, and in the others, it is time that shall resolve and rectify this abnormality. Foreignness is trans-cultural, at best; the fruit of a humanity that has consistently turned towards the passions of the political, from its proto-form in the exclusive communities of small scales, to the normative and generic model of the nation-state that obsesses us today. The foreigner would be, more than a faraway offspring of a history of the cosmos, the result of a variety of minute turns in the evolution of human societies. There would be nothing fundamental in foreignness.

And yet. These very cosmic and political developments have given rise to the spread of foreignness as a subjective experience. A deep exploration of our collective imagination is not required to recall the familiar figures of outsiders, from the ancient myths till our times of so-called cosmopolitanism. And this shared experience has given rise, or may give rise, to a set of coherent perspectives on a number of concerns of politics, culture, administration, the arts or philosophy. These specificities, too consistent to be addressed individually, demonstrate how an initially hollow category may have become a trait of the *human condition* – or, to start modestly, of the condition of certain humans. If the human does not choose the happening of her existence in history, the other dimension, space, remains the plane of development for her liberty. And this option has been ardently chosen, by the millions, for thousands of years now. It is this progressively common history, this soon undeniable condition, which calls for a general reflection – a reflection on its foundations, its past, its reach, its idiosyncrasies, its language and its inspirations. After racial perspectives, after the explorations of gender, we must maintain the ambition of finding in the condition of *some* humans insights and visions possibly profitable to *all* humans. Foreignness must become the centre of a discourse.

A discourse, indeed. Not a system. Not a theory. Not a claim. A discourse, with its multiple voices, external and internal. A terrain, with entry doors from all possible directions, from the

existing disciplines, from the administrative and material realities of our societies, from religious and spiritual traditions, from the arts, and from those destinations still bereft of a name. This discourse, this fundamental term-experience, must be deployed, demonstrated, enacted, to reach the ears and hearts of those who tomorrow will feed it. But foreignness is not a field, not a discipline, and hardly a singular topic. If at all, foreignness is a *theme*, and a theme is something one *explores*. We should perhaps hear, again, the latest lessons of our intellectual traditions – we should note, for instance, that deep understanding of language, and of time, are now unavoidable for any serious intellectual undertaking. We should hear, that the advent of liberal democracies in welfare states still invalidates the format of the *conclusion* as the sufficient aim of any reflection. That, all explorations – political, cultural or otherwise – are valuable only inasmuch they permit a possibility of self-transcendence – that is, inasmuch this possibility is their basis. Foreignness, in its inception, must follow this understanding. This essay is not a claim, it is not a *thesis*: it is a trajectory.

A trajectory. And a trajectory is not the arithmetic addition of destinations. In a journey, each place follows from the previous. And each step already contains all the precedents. It is such an organic progression, highly contextual and personal, that we shall attempt in the present discussion of foreignness. While it is a set of philosophical viewpoints and improvements that will occupy the centre of this reflection, another type of discourse will be inevitable to set the scene. It is naturally with a history of foreigners, that we must start. A history of foreigners? The name is ambitious, pretentious, perhaps even pedant. A few pages will not suffice to cover thousands of years of accounts, mostly undocumented, over the five continents. A ‘history of foreignness’ would thus be necessarily very limited, not to say curated, and this partiality will have to be kept in mind in its process. But the rarity of general studies on foreigners across history reveals how this theme is void of even its first stones. With the help of a work published less than three decades ago, we shall briefly discuss the traces and stories of notable foreigners in and around modern-day Europe, and more specifically, the political and philosophical voices that were deployed to arrange the situation of foreigners in each society. This history will move our attention all the way to psychoanalysis and the emergence of the contemporary subject. The second chapter will be an existentialist analysis of the condition of foreignness, through a critical assessment of the foundational claims of Heidegger on phenomenological existentialism first, and then with an inflection on a very specific instance of foreignness – that of the author of these lines. This critical evaluation of the existentialist framework will lead to a search for foreignness in another locus, transcending the individual: the collective. We shall try to reformulate various layers of collective life to find within them the marks of foreignness. Four concepts will attract our attention: *culture*, *ethics*, *language* and *philosophy*. An

outlook on philosophy, or a philosophical outlook, which will ultimately bring foreignness back to the individual, not anymore in the solitary climate of the existentialist angle, but to the individual understood as the source of fundamental, and potentially new, perspectives on primordial questions. In the fourth and final chapter, we will thus reflect on the kind of metaphysical insights the foreigner can bring up, with a particular attention to space, time and knowledge.

It will, thus, be question *de l'infini*. 'De l'infini', as in the style of the old French treatises, a tradition at which Jacques Derrida winked with his *De la Grammatology – Of Grammatology*. But here, 'de' is also to be taken as the preposition of provenance: *de l'infini* also means *from* the infinite. It is this perspective – this ambitious possibility – that we shall attempt to actualize in the present subject: unveiling the discourse that may come *from the infinite*. An actualization, indeed, because this very idea is indebted to one man, and in particular to one work: Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. The 1961 text was subtitled *An Essay on Exteriority*. The Infinite, for Levinas, is the other name of the exteriority or transcendence that shines from the Other's face. It is what surrounds and resists Totality, the hastily conquered realm of the reductive Same. It is this very exteriority, the possibility of an outside, which possesses the soul of this reflection, and more: the possibility of a voice from the outside. With Levinas, and with his reformulation and his elaboration through the works of Derrida, we shall replace the *instance* of the foreigner within this setting of the play of interiority-exteriority. And we shall try to evaluate the developments of this subjectivity, of this temporality, of these propositions *of* and *from* the foreigner, *for* the inhabitants of the inside. And all this, through the voice of the 'P' of this text, a foreigner himself.

A discussion on the infinite, therefore, but a discussion nonetheless bordered by limits. The limits of space, the space of a text. And also its corollary, the limits of time, altogether imposed on a foreigner writing about foreignness. *The time of a thesis*, as Derrida once called it – the time of this thesis, in the years that prepared it in the underground of my unconscious, or in the months officially dedicated to it but practically used for virtually everything else... A short time, thus, to assess this vast a topic; too short a time also, perhaps, to avoid a few tens of pages of paraphrase *in lieu* of a 'history of foreignness,' or to give better than a hasty and approximate account (critical, sometimes not even) of authors as complex as Heidegger, or as literarily delightful as Levinas and Derrida. Only years of patient readings, and re-readings, may suffice and allow one to enter the stage of this incredible play more seriously. But this is an attempt, an entry disguised in the form of a modest body of naïve suggestions. A body, an object, an offering *from the outside*, submitted to your

rigor, to your knowledge, to the borders of your imagination, to the sensibility of your creativity.
And especially to the latter.

I. FOREIGNER, THERE : HISTORY OF A POLITICAL CAPTURE

Stories from a History

What is the history of 'foreigner'?

The question is obvious, and fundamental. But the response is far from being evident. What did the pantheon of western philosophy have to say about the concept of the foreigner? How did they conceive of what makes something or someone 'foreign'? Early on, with Plato and especially Aristotle, the philosopher enters the conversations of the *polis*. The philosopher, an offspring of ancient contemplative and ascetic traditions, is now dedicating a great extent of his thought to largely practical, political and administrative questions. Here, his purpose is rather clear: the philosopher does not aim only, or primarily, at leaving humanity with a set of profound reflections on the central questions of life, but rather, to start influencing for the better his very society, within the time of his personal lifetime. The philosopher suddenly has political aims. Truly, philosophy would remain largely speculative, from metaphysics to aesthetics, epistemology and theoretical ethics, but the practical preoccupations of a number of philosophers would also contribute to confining a variety of concepts within certain intellectual frames. The concept of foreignness is one of such victims. When the foreigner is discussed, from Aristotle to the Renaissance, Kant and Hegel, it is mainly through an administrative or juridical lens: the problem is not 'what is the foreigner' but 'what do we do with the foreigner'. All of them, with a few exceptions, bought into the commonsensical meaning of the foreigner, as the outsider, the human individual not belonging to a specific territory. It looks as if none of the major thinkers of western philosophy has attempted to scratch the outer crust of this rather meager definition. Truly, some views of the foreigner were more critical. The Judeo-Christian approach would invite its followers to maintaining a profound feeling of moral respect for the foreigners; Renaissance travelers like Montaigne would sense, through their experiences and encounters, the intersubjective subtlety of the concept; and the political dreamers of the Enlightenment, such as Kant, would melt the foreigner into the universal (and therefore, indiscriminate) concept of the cosmopolitan. But nonetheless, throughout, the foreigner became object of an extensive literature, but not the foreign. If Heidegger deplored a history of metaphysics as oblivion of Being, we could, today, regret a history of the foreigner that forgot the foreign. Only such a hypothesis could explain how, as recently as twenty-five years ago,

Julia Kristeva's study on foreignness¹ would have to start from scratch: it is, primarily, a history of the conditions and treatments of foreigners in the European history. And it is certainly the first in this genre. The blame is, naturally, not to put on Kristeva herself, but on an intellectual tradition, or rather, an intellectual inclination, which did not attempt the encyclopedic project of a cumulative history of foreigners, not to mention the philosophical ambition of an unpacking of the *concept* of foreignness altogether. Undeniably, Kristeva's study as well as the present work do not appear in a vacuum: they owe to the descriptive and prescriptive literatures that have attested of the situation of foreigners in each era. But this also means that the question must be transformed, to focus on the various adventures that each historical period has reserved to the foreigner:

What is the story of the foreigner?

Where can we find this story? In some of the earliest literary works of the humanity, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (1800 BCE) to the *Odyssey* (800 BCE), the trope of the foreigner appears already as particularly favored. The artistic context is still one of widely mythological and fantastical narratives, and one could speculate that the desired effect was not primarily to help the audience project itself onto the new existential condition of the hero, as a foreigner in faraway lands. But the environment is already there, and this must be noticed. Foreigners, by definition, date back to the earliest forms of human regroupments. The setting of an inside implied the formation of an outside. Attempting an exhaustive collection of foreigners' narratives, imagined or lived, would thus be a gargantuan fantasy. But it is indeed there that one must start. Besides starting to preserve their intellectual heritage more effectively, the context of Ancient Greece offers some of the earliest refined reflections – and practices – of social arrangements and of a political life. It is, therefore, the logical beginning for our (hi)story of the foreigner. But its imaginary develops earlier, through a relatively independent alternative lineage, with the early Judaic tradition. The Antiquity would thus be remarkable for a set of varied and original takes on the status of foreigners, in and around the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea: in the Judaic tradition, in Greece and finally with the early Christians. Passing through the Middle Ages, the foreigner enters the Modern era with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment century, seeing her destiny joining that of the cosmopolitan dream. With the Hegelian system, Romanticism, the psychoanalytic project of Freud and the existential preoccupation of Heidegger, the philosopher slowly invites to see, as Kristeva suggests, the foreigner within ourselves. It is this historical progression that I shall try to briefly track in this chapter.

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). It was published in French in 1988.

1. Foreigners of the Antiquity

The fact is undeniable: the earliest community of what would later be conceived as the Western civilization is a culture profoundly marked by the event of foreignness. From its very formation, the Jewish people is elected, implying the earliest forms of exclusive nationalism, but also, of a cultural construction across geographical origins. The Judaic election is not just a historical destiny or an individual imposition, but the fruit of a choice: from its inception till its present form, the elected people must always reaffirm and actualize the inner quality that justifies its selection. The Jewish community evolves in a subtle dialectic of porosity:

“No bastard (*mamzer*) is to be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh. No Ammonite or Moabite is to be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh, not even their descendants to the tenth generation may be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh, and this is for all time; because they did not come to meet you with bread and water when you were on your way out of Egypt...”²

But other foreigners are invited: “You are not to regard the Edomite as detestable, for he is your brother; nor the Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land. The third generation of children born to these may be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh.”³ More deeply, the collective memory of the Judaic community carries the sketches of foreignness. The Jews are a people of foreigners, of migrants who left Egypt during the Exile, and several passages use this historical anchoring to support an ethics oriented towards foreigners: “You must not molest the stranger or oppress him, for you lived as strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁴ In Deuteronomy 10:19, the recommended attitude is even extended to full-fledged “love” for the foreigner. Abraham himself is several times presented as the first “proselyte” or “convert,”⁵ having left family and land to respond to the call of God. The role of the converts is particularly central, as the main initial condition of the Jewish people: the Talmudic treatise Pessahim 87b recounts Eleazar as saying “God, blessed by His name, has exiled Israel from among the nations solely with the aim that proselytes might join Him.”⁶ The idea is kept in the very lexicon of the foreigner. In Hebrew, the stranger is known as *ger*, translated as either “proselyte” or “stranger.” The term is indeed carrying the dual meaning; the composed *ger-tochan*

² Nehemiah 10:31. All the biblical references are cited from the Jerusalem Bible.

³ Deuteronomy 23:3-9.

⁴ Exodus 22:21.

⁵ Genesis 12:1

⁶ B. Rojzman, personal letter to Julia Kristeva, quoted in Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, 69.

refers to the resident foreigner while *ger* alone refers to the converted-naturalized foreigner.⁷ After Abraham as the first proselyte, the figure of foreignness returns in the history of the Jewish leaders with the episode of Ruth the Moabitess. Daughter of Elimelech, who fled Judaea when his help was needed, Ruth would paradoxically become, while a stranger, wife of Boaz and matriarch of the Judaic kingdom. Most notably, she was the great grand-mother of David, King of Judah. But unlike Abraham, Ruth did not leave her land as a response to a call, but as an exercise of her free will, deciding to go against the law that forbade alliances with Moabites, to become the matriarch of the Jews. Thus, from its earliest mention in the Western civilization, the figure of the foreigner is already connected with (proto-existentialist?) notions of free-will. The universalist tone of Judaism – the Torah is aimed at all humans – should also be recalled, in view of its later elaboration in the universal community of the Christians. But before this, we must move to a land westward, the early nation-states of Greece, where the cultural understanding of the foreigner would follow its own trajectory, relatively independent from the Judaic tradition, until the advent of their historical junction: Christianity.

In the mythological imaginary of Archaic Greece (c. 800-510 BCE), the figure of the stranger finds prominence first in the *hieroi logoi* or sacred narrative of the *Daughters of Danaus*. This classical narrative tells the adventures of Danaus' fifty daughters, who were supposed to marry the fifty sons of Aegyptus, Danaus' twin brother and the king of Egypt. All of them but one received a punishment for eternity, after killing their groom on the wedding night. In 463 BCE, Aeschylus, elaborating on the cultural heritage of the Archaic age, modifies the myth and writes a trilogy, comprising *The Suppliants*, *The Egyptians* and *The Danaids*. Fleeing their forced marriage in Egypt, the fifty daughters turn to King Pelasgus, of the city of Argos, in the Aegean region. After receiving the democratic support of his population on the matter, Pelasgus accepts to welcome them, in spite of Egyptian protests. Ultimately, most of the Daughters do commit their final heinous crime, but two avoid it. Anymone accepts to marry Poseidon, while Hypermnestra becomes the matriarch of the dynasty from which Heracles would be issued. Ambiguity of the stranger: the incomprehensible folly of acts, the refusal of the social contracts, but also the fusional and historical alliances. Kristeva speculates: "the Greek mind condemns foreignness only when the latter tended to defy the common mean."⁸ Alternatively, the narrative of extraction to which the stranger is subjected, as well as the highlighted violence of marital passion, may have come to reaffirm family alliance as the foundation

⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁸ Ibid., 45.