

HOME - PHILOSOPHICAL, THEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

The first part of this paper will use approaches taken by Emmanuel Levinas to address apparent ambiguities towards home shown in the New Testament. There have been attempts to explain these ambiguities in sociological terms (Horsley, 1989 versus Theissen, 1978; Crosby, 1988; Koenig, 1985) but Levinas' understanding of "leaving home" can be used to provide philosophical explanations which satisfy twentieth century readers and may indeed, have made even more sense in the first century. There are ironies here, of course. Levinas is a twentieth century Jew, who is steeped in Jewish tradition (Levinas, 1990), but who philosophises in the Greek tradition. Does he throw light on the thought-patterns of first century Christians, many of whom lived at the intersection of Jewish and Greek thought? It is argued here that he does!

The second part of the paper is concerned with the insights offered to current literary theory by Levinas's elucidation of notions of identity and alterity. In particular, it examines three potent images that Levinas employs in his discussion of the relationship of the self to the other, and these images concern the nature of home, the journey home, and the speaking face of the other who calls us from, or possibly to home.

I

New Testament Ambiguities

1. The New Testament's ambiguity towards home is obvious at one level. There are strong commands to leave all, including home, to follow Jesus (e.g. Mk. 10:28 and parallels; Lk. 9:61-2; and we are reminded that we have not here a lasting city (Heb. 13:13). In contrast, there is the identification of the early assemblies with households. The "churches", the ekklesiai or assemblies, were households, extended

families of children, slaves and dependents normally under the direction of the head of the family and his wife (Meeks, 1983; Foucault, 1985). Home is, then, central to the organizational structures of first century Christianity. The Gospels pick up this stress with their emphasis on stewardship and good household management.

Luke's Chapter Twelve illustrates the ambiguity well. The chapter begins with Jesus addressing a crowd of thousands. In an aside to the disciples he condemns the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and asks for the disciples' open support. Such support will be acknowledged "in the presence of God's angels" (v.8). A man in the crowd asks Jesus to judge a case of disputed inheritance, but Jesus will have nothing to do with it and counsels against avarice. He then launches into parables stressing absolute trust in God, concluding with "Sell your possessions and give to those in need" (v.33).

The chapter changes theme sharply at v.35. Jesus instructs his listeners to be faithful servants of their master. He praises the trustworthy steward who has been put in charge of the household and who makes sure that the members of the household receive the proper amount of food at the proper time. The world of the first part of the chapter is one of eschatological judgment and of refusal to set one's heart on storehouses and barns. That of the second part of the chapter is one of the here and now concerns of administering a large household for the good of all its members.

2. A less obvious ambiguity in the New Testament is that between hospitality and exclusivism. The boundaries of the communities were generally well-defined and strong. There was some porosity of boundary for the Pauline communities (Meeks, 1983) but little for other communities, as Elliott (1981) demonstrates for the community of I Peter. In general, hospitality for the stranger was reserved for the stranger among "the brothers" (e.g. Heb. 13:2 and 3 Jo.5.)

The more open hospitality of the Jewish scriptures (e.g. Deut. 10:18) was tempered by the needs to ward off threats from without and to foster unity within. There is hospitality for the stranger, but only if the stranger shares one's own world view. The Jewish household of Yahweh could include the whole world (Ex. 19:5, Ps. 24:1-2. See also Crosby, 1988): the Christian household seems to have shrunk.

The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas is an ethicist who has won a solid following in France. A Lithuanian Jew he has experienced "the stalag" and hence, speaks with enormous authority (Levinas, 1978).

The key to Levinas' philosophy is his removal of the self from the central position it has held in the Western philosophical tradition (Jopling, 1991). In its place is the other. Levinas argues that prior to all thematization, to all intentionality, there exists in me a call to be one-for-the-other. I am called to be responsible in a radical way, not counting the cost, nor weighing up rights, nor being repelled by ingratitude. I am called to be a hostage, responsible for the very cruelty of those who hold me. This call to be neighbour is inspired in me, breathed into me, by the Good. There is, then, in me, a "trace" of the Infinite, but I am not called to serve a hidden God, but the neighbour whom I see before me. It is the face of the neighbour which prompts the call to proximity. It awakes an anarchic disposition, which is prior to all philosophical distinctions (Levinas, 1981). As Paul argues that we are called to freedom, Levinas argues that we are called to responsibility. This call precedes all distinctions between freedom and non-freedom. It precedes all acts of saying but can be sensed in the attempts to say. Communication can be understood as cognition shaped by intentionality into the articulation of clear utterances. But, prior to all this and beyond such thematizations, it is a reaching for proximity and allegiance.

This anarchic call to be for the other does not negate the material things of life. Eating, wearing clothes, enjoying one's home are "sincere", that is, they are not for the sake of living, they are living. The world of living is "where Abraham grazed his flocks, Isaak dug his wells, Jacob set up his household" (Levinas, 1978, 44).

Because the things of this world are so good, the call to service is even sharper. I am called to interrupt pleasure, "to take the bread out of one's own mouth" (Levinas, 1981, 56). Levinas is fond of this image and it is central to his thought. This world, this bread is life, but I am called to sacrifice life for the other. Other strong images are those of leaving a shelter for the other, of exposing oneself to the elements for the other, of leaving home for the other. Levinas argues that it is the mark of modernity to be called to leave home. No person can be content to take shelter in a particular culture. We are often called to be neighbour by people who do not share our culture (Levinas, 1981).

In such cases, the neighbour is clearly very different from me, is "other". But central to Levinas' thinking is alterity, that is, every other person is other and is to be served precisely as other. The other person is not known by me, is not my construct or my theme. The call to be neighbour precedes all knowledge (Cf. Lonergan, 1990). Such terms as "communion" are suspect. They imply that I have filtered out of the other what I perceive to be common to us: common interests, common goals or, perhaps, the experience of sharing a common meal (Levinas, 1978, 1985).

Levinas and the New Testament

The demands which Levinas makes seem quite as sharp as those of the New Testament. His analyses explicate its ambiguities.

1. Leaving home is fundamentally a journey of the soul and not necessarily of the body. It is a response to the call to journey in search of recognising alterity and sacrificing my self for the other. This is the beginning of a journey into infinity (Levinas, 1985), similar to Abraham's setting out from Ur into an unknown future, and quite dissimilar to the Western pre-occupation with returning home (Robbins, 1991).

Paradoxically, the journey may require that I do not leave my home of bricks and mortar but act as a faithful steward within it, a host for the guest in my home who is the other. I am called to leave my inner, comfortable egocentrism and to sacrifice this for the other. This is, incidentally, the only way in which I can find my true self (Levinas, 1981).

Levinas reconciles, then, the call to leave home with the call to serve within a home.

2. Levinas dissolves the ambiguity between hospitality and exclusivism more dramatically. He rejects exclusivism. One is called to welcome the stranger (Levinas, 1982; Keifert, 1991). For Levinas, every other person is a stranger. He or she cannot be pared down to my specifications. But Levinas must not be softened here. He is not allowing exclusion of foreigners and aliens in exchange for a welcome to more palatable strangers. Rather, he is unrelenting in his insistence that there must be no boundaries between people. The stranger must be welcomed. This will mean a surrender of material things. It will

also mean facing the challenge of recognising, respecting and communicating with the absolute otherness of the other. As noted, in the modern world there can be no escape from welcoming strangers who clearly do not belong to my ekklesia, and welcoming their minds as well as their bodies.

II

Images of Home and Homecoming

In a number of recent Australian plays it is possible to see a preoccupation with representations of home and a questioning of what the idea of home means on a personal and national level. Of particular interest are the images used to establish the location of home for particular characters and groups and the underlying attitudes and emotions these images reveal.

The construct of 'home' is a particularly important and interesting one for a post-colonial society such as Australia's. 'Post-colonial' is used here, not to suggest a society that has emerged from, or is a sequel to colonialism, but to describe a society that is engaged with, and still exploring and contesting the long-term effects of the power and meaning of colonialism.

One of the most important effects of colonialism was to establish a world view in which the colony was at the periphery of a circle spinning around, and drawn inevitably towards, an imperial centre. According to this paradigm, the colony is able to realize its identity only through its difference to the metropolitan centre. It is marginalized and made other by the imperial authority, and it is against the political and cultural hegemony of this authority that it struggles to establish its own identity.

Australia, like Canada, however, is more accurately described as a "settler society", where the colonized act in turn as colonizers of the indigenous people, seeking to obliterate their culture and autonomy by imposing practices and values derived from the distant imperial centre, which the new colony, as a fragment of the old, is forced to mimic.

In such a context, then, it is not surprising that issues of place and displacement, identity and alterity are a pervasive concern in Australian literature or that, in the drama, the myths of home are explored in resonant images.

In the short space available here it is possible only to refer to a small number of these images in so far as they are used by and of

specific communities, and then raise some questions about how Levinas's ideas might affect our reading of them. The three 'communities' chosen are three groups that emerge as distinct foci in the plays: these are migrants with a strong identification with Europe and European-derived social structures, Aborigines, and artists.

Where is Home in a "New World"?

Louis Hartz in *The Founding of New Societies* (1964) sees new societies developing from a process of fragmentation from the Old World; each fragment seeking to replicate the society from which it has broken off. Where then, does a group nourished on the memories and values brought over to a new country from an older society identify as home? In an article entitled 'Imagination's Home', written in 1979, Vincent Buckley explores the concept of what he terms a 'source-country' from which people derive their most meaningful images, feelings, and even religious impulses. For him this 'source-country' is Ireland, and he explains, "the country is a source in the sense that the psyche grows from and in it, and remains profoundly attuned to it". A 'source country', he suggests, provides, among other things, a shared language, lifestyle and mythology; he concludes that, for migrants, "most of these things could not be brought to Australia. What remained was the ache of their absence" (p.25).

For many of the uprooted Irish who came to Australia there was one thing that could be brought over as a substitute for the shared language, patterns of life and meaningful mythology of their native land, and this was the Roman Catholic religion as practised in Ireland. As they struggled to find an identity in a new environment, these settlers' allegiances to Irish Catholicism marked them as a group set apart, united in their distrust of the English and, especially, Protestants. By thus defining themselves largely in relation to the dominant 'other' they constituted themselves as a community with a shared history and a shared language to be passed on to their children.

Heirs of no actual country, theirs is truly an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's sense, with their negotiated reading of the past and their specialized language, full of powerful significations for the initiated, acting as strong cohesive forces (Anderson, 1983).

Other migrant groups with strong associations with Europe, whether Anglo-centred, Greek, Italian or Polish, set up similarly

constructed communities within which they could feel 'at home' and safely distinguished from the excluded 'other'; and in plays exploring the relationships of these cultural exiles to their new country we see images of security and certainty linked with a home that is necessarily located in the past. But in plays such as these, this 'home', while a place of comfort and safety for the elders, provides little nourishment for younger generations. The security is seen as imprisoning, the certainty as intolerance. If 'home' is in the past, then it can only preserve the same, cut us off from the other and preclude the dialogue that Levinas sees as crucial to all our relations with the other.

What is the nature of the journey "Home"?

In his 1963 essay, 'The Trace of the Other', Levinas alludes to the potent myth of Odysseus' journeyings on his way home to Ithaca and opposes this with the story of Abraham, called forth by God out of his native land into an unfamiliar country. The major difference between these two kinds of journey is that, however far he may travel and whatever adventures befall him, Odysseus is returning to the known, the familiar, the past. Abraham, however, is leaving his fatherland, all that is comfortable, secure and predictable, and heading into unknown territory. Levinas uses these contrasting stories to make a point about what he saw as the staleness of Western philosophy with its predilection for sameness and closure as opposed to a readiness to confront and open oneself to the unknown, the other.

Journeying home is most often seen as a journeying back to the site of one's past, to old certainties and remembered patterns of life. But what is the journey home for a people dispossessed and scattered, with authority structures destroyed and cultural ties broken? In Aboriginal drama the dominant image in play after play is one of loss and disorientation. In *The Cherry Pickers* (1968) by Kevin Gilbert, the first play written in English by an Aboriginal playwright, one of the characters articulates something of the anguish of a dispossessed people despairing of finding a way to belong in their own country:

... our people are dying. We've lost our way. Their hearts are breaking because they've been denied Justice and human rights, because they have been denied their rightful place in this our land ... We've got to find our place!! Our rightful place. Not a 'place' where we've been kicked and trodden,

smashed and starved, killed and conquered until we've taken the shape of whitemen - imitation whitemen. ... I've looked at life, the world, the whiteman's way. I've looked through a whiteman's eyes and I was lost (p.59, p.65).

If the Aboriginal communities are 'lost' in contemporary Australia, then, according to Aboriginal tradition, it is the task of the artist to provide a way of returning home. In *Dark Side of the Dream* Hodge and Mishra take up the image of disorientation and develop it further by talking of the need for 'mapping' and the provision of routes and pathways back home. They see this as a strategy traditionally used by the Aboriginal artist working, in whatever medium, to provide:

maps that are designed to represent broad stretches of space and time, to give meaning and perspective, direction and hope on the bewildering journey of the life of themselves and their people (p.97).

Mudrooroo Narogin has written of the Aboriginal artist standing, like a Janus figure, with one face looking back to the past, and the other looking to the future which may be a mystery, but, as he says, "writers are torches lighting up that mystery. They can show us the path or paths along which to travel just as much as the song cycles of our ancestors mapped out the waterholes. Writers through their writings make us aware of the past, the present and the future." (Narogin, 1990, 29)

Although the journey home for contemporary Aboriginal writers involves a rediscovery and a reconstitution of the past, it is pre-eminently a journey out into the future. In linear European notions of time and history "going back" implies a regression, a covering of the same ground. Aboriginal history, however, from the Dreaming, is conceived in circular terms with continuities across time and space that western minds find hard to conceive. In Levinas's notion of the Infinite which must be 'implanted' in me, 'thought' in me, or, perhaps, 'dreamed' in me from the beginning, and in his notion of the other for whom I am eternally responsible, there are perhaps correspondences with the spirituality which is intrinsic to the Aboriginality which writers like Kevin Gilbert, Jack Davis and Mudrooroo Narogin see it is the task of the artist to recuperate.

The Artist and the Face

In the western tradition the role of the artist is not normally given the ethical dimension that is common in Aboriginal society. Indeed the artist is frequently depicted in literature, not as the wise elder reflecting on social life and mapping the future for the community, but rather as the equivalent of an adolescent seeking to break away from home in order to understand and fulfil himself. For the colonial artist this often involves responding to the call of the metropolis and quitting the restrictions of the provinces for the freedom of exile.

Patrick White, Barry Oakley, Ray Lawler, Alma de Groen and Hannie Rayson all introduce characters into their plays who choose to practise their art in exile, and their plays raise questions about the artist's relationship to his own and the wider community, and especially about where he or she can meaningfully call home. For each of these artists, exile proves to be a time of learning. For most, it is only when they have left home that they are able to understand and value what it is that they were running away from. The exile's predicament is summed up aptly by a character in Alma de Groen's play *Going Home* who muses, "I don't know why people leave home. Perhaps they don't believe it is home until they've wandered the world and learnt better" (66). This suggests an ego-centred journeying much more akin to the travels of Odysseus than Abraham's courageous answering of the call to encounter the other. However, in Patrick White's depiction of the maturation of the Artist as a Young Man in *The Ham Funeral*, there are hints at an ethical response that resonates intriguingly with Levinas's notion of the dialogic encounter with the face of the other, a face that is essentially the face of the stranger, the widow, the forsaken.

For the Young Man in this play, the mystery of human sexuality and mortality is something that he, in his immaturity, has not been able to come to terms with. In order to grow, he is forced down from the security of his room and has to deal with the uncompromising bulk of his dead landlord. He takes on the responsibility of summoning the dead man's relatives and encounters the grotesque vitality of the street-ladies who discover an aborted foetus among the fishbones and old love-letters in the dustbin. His education encompasses observing the voracity of the spiteful relatives and dealing with the landlady's determination to love him for the lost child or lover she sees in him.

From these experiences the Young Man grows up to a partial

understanding of the complexity of life. In his initial brutal rejection of the Landlady's love, his disgust for human passion had overwhelmed him. Leaving "a fat woman ... crying on the flags, a last slobber of passion on her mouth", he momentarily believed himself free, but honesty makes him reconsider:

... or has the prig simply taken over? I am a poet, I said. I shall possess the infinite. Or am I just an ineffectual prig, looking at the world through a telescope ... through the wrong end? (p.68).

He comes to accept that life is not all "noble instincts, romantic appearance and generous acts", but that on many future occasions he will "wrestle with the figures in the basement" (p.69), understanding that passion and compassion are frequently locked together. Now he is able to recognize the poverty of

... the pale, exquisite verses of adolescence ... At least the landlady's poem speaks ... after the fashion of imperfect flesh. Lunging and plunging, she raped life, and won ... whereas my attempts have amounted to little more than acts of self-abuse in an empty room (p.71).

Having achieved clear-sightedness and understanding, he descends voluntarily to the basement to make his peace with Mrs. Lusty. In saying goodbye he kisses her, and later remembers, "How warm her face was ... and touching ... lovely in its way ... the way of those who've lived, and confessed, and survived their own confession" (p.73). In seeing the beauty of the landlady's face, despite its coarseness and imperfection, he has come to the important realization that the landlady's 'poem', her passionate life, is worth more than all his anaemic, adolescent versifying. As an artist, he has discovered that, to have life, art must take into account the visceral and flawed as well as the cerebral and perfect.

At last the Young Man recognizes that " ... all the time, life of a kind has been seeping through the cracks in this house ... flowing through the streets in waves of faces" (p.71). The final moment of the play sees him leaving the security of the house and marvelling, "The night was never stiller, or closer, I could put out my hand and touch it ... like a face ... (p.74). This new-found ability to love Lawson's, and perhaps Levinas's (?) "faces in the street" shows us that the Young

Man is now prepared to engage in life, which implies an ethical response to others. White clearly means us to see this as a first requisite for artists, and perhaps all humans, if their work is ultimately to be more than self-indulgent posturing.

Patrick White's play has been discussed at length because it seems to offer some intriguing resonances with Levinas's thought, particularly in relation to our encounter with the unlovely other who, despite our self-absorption, nevertheless demands our love and compassion. While Levinas is writing as a philosopher and Judaic scholar, the images and allusions he uses are capable of transcending texts and enriching many other discourses. In his discussion of identity and alterity, the past and the future, and, in particular, the nature of 'home', Levinas raises questions about an area that is the writer's central concern: the myths we live by and the images we use to give expression to them.

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