"We Embraced Each Other by Our Names": Lévinas, Derrida, and the Ethics of Naming

Christian Moraru
University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Emmanuel Lévinas' and Jacques Derrida's theories of names and naming are discussed in a context that casts light upon the complex relationships among names and the named on the one hand, and onomastics and other fields and discourses on the other. Such other fields are anthropology, (cultural) history, politics, and ethics. Lévinas' phenomenological view of naming and Derrida's use of Lévinas in a markedly "post-structuralist" analysis both stress the moral dimension of onomastic acts, how much is at stake in the way we deal with other people's names.

Positioned at the crossroads of anthropology and ethnography, history and geography, folklore and linguistics, onomastics has traditionally raised complex issues on names, their origins, meanings, and social roles. In the wake of the structuralist revolution, continental philosophy and critical theory have further compounded this interdisciplinarity by putting a strong moral and political spin on the traditional analyses of names. In what follows, I wish to review some of the newly emerged questions, discuss their nature, and examine the more consequential answers provided by two leading philosophers of naming, Emmanuel Lévinas and Jacques Derrida, in their recently translated works on proper names (Lévinas 1996; Derrida 1997). Specifically, I would ask in my turn, what does Derrida mean by "politics" or "political" when he talks about "the politics of the proper name" (1988, 1)? Why are proper names political, and in what sense is our response to others' names an ethical and political act, as Lévinas and Derrida argue? What does Derrida have in mind when he insists, full of admiration, that great thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud "put [their] name[s] on the line" (7)? Also, what kind of "line" might that be, and what sort of "battle" might these honored "proper names" (Derrida 1976, 107) be fighting in an age when the very meaning, the good name of politics is on the wane, as some have contended? Finally,

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reading between the lines of Lévinas's and Derrida's difficult texts, as it were, I wish to trace the kind of "line" we are urged to put our names on, the *proper* politics of naming. But before getting into the details of Lévinas's and Derrida's elaborate arguments, let me make a detour through a territory closer to home that may help us gauge the relevance of the problems the two philosophers bring to the fore.

While I am completing this piece, tens of thousands of ethnic Albanians are laying their proper names on the line—the line of life and death—whether they like it or not. As they are being chased out of their homes and land at gunpoint by Serb troops, their names are being ripped off them quite literally. At the Yugoslav border, the Kosovar Albanians are forced to turn in their IDs. Likewise, those who own cars must surrender the license plates and their driver's licenses. "When your driver's license goes, so goes your identity," Jean Baudrillard jestingly contends in a different context (1996, 112). But this is no joke. "What's in a name," sounds the famous interrogation. Well, apparently everything, according to the Yugoslav authorities. Names are here no longer simply "metonymies": they do not just "stand for" what they name, for particular identities. Names constitute, ultimately *are* identities. The name has become its own, living referent, flesh and blood, body. In this (extreme) case, names foreground, according to the totalitarian politics of onomastics at work here, primarily the ethnicity of the named and subsequently the right to live in Kosovo, their homeland. True, what the Serb military and customs officers are carrying out these days may look like black magic since they appear to believe that they can change what, who, or how people are, by robbing them of their IDs (the documents "naming" the Kosovars), indeed, by somehow un-naming them. (It may be worth recalling, at this point, that *metonymy* etymologically means 'change of name'.) This procedure, though, does not strike me as different from its Nazi counterpart, for all the latter's efforts to reinforce the original names on the Jewish bearers in order to more effectively police "what's in the name." In both cases, the "politics of the proper name" is conspicuously and tragically there; its violent visibility is simply frightening.

When judged against this contemporary backdrop, Lévinas's and Derrida's political discussion of names gains rather than loses in force and urgency. Granted, Lévinas's *Proper Names* (a translation of *Noms propres*, published in 1975, and *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, which came out in 1976) gathers essays the French philosopher published between the late fifties and the mid-seventies. Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*, on

the other hand, is a more recent work, also a translation of the French original, *Politiques de l'amitié*, published in 1994 yet bringing out its author's longstanding interest in the "naming scene" in literature and philosophy (Moraru 67). Nonetheless, both essays take up similar issues of naming. What is more, they both draw from the most traumatic collective experiences of the twentieth century—the Holocaust and communism—to work out a new "onomastic politics" where, simply put, naming no longer provides a bureaucratic tool for controlling the other, but a way to "embrace" him or her—strange as it may sound, a token of "friendship," ultimately.

As a matter of fact, the suggestion of this alternative—onomastic, ethical, political ultimately—gets somewhat lost in translation. Importantly, Derrida is talking about *politiques* of friendship, and the plural form makes here a great difference. Specifically, the French philosopher is contrasting two kinds of politics: a unifying, authoritarian, even enslaving one and another where friendship as a "response" to the call of the "other" specifically, if intriguingly, works through names, involves them in a fundamental fashion. The clearest, albeit extreme illustration of the former, which controls naming to discipline the named and hence the identity of the "other," is twentieth-century totalitarianism from Hitler's national-socialism to the latter-day socialist-nationalisms of a Ceausescu or Milosevic. To unpack his alternative, Derrida goes back to Lévinas. Of course, this is not the first time he turns to Lévinas. In fact, Derrida's entire philosophy, particularly its spectacular turn to ethical matters, could be reconstructed as a continuous dialogue with Lévinas, viz., with Lévinas's interpretations of philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger.

This exchange began with the famous essay "Violence and Metaphysics" from *Writing and Difference*. There, Derrida dwells at length on how Lévinas takes up Heidegger to sketch out a philosophy—and an ethics—of "being" more effectively revolving around the presence of the "other" and the constitutional responsibility we bear towards this presence (Derrida 1967, 134). Lévinas's thought is an important source for Derrida. It is, namely, both a target and a guide for what will come to be known as "deconstruction," a critical endeavor aimed at the "binaries" or conceptual dualisms shaping, according to Derrida, the whole history of Western metaphysics and culture from Plato to Descartes to Husserl (Lévinas's major inspiration), and the structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. Now, the distinction or "hierarchical opposition" between the "self" and the "other" is among the binaries

Derrida dissolves with Lévinas's help. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and elsewhere, Lévinas explains how and on what level—the level of "sensibility" as opposed to "totalizing" reason—we are likely to meet the "other," whence act "responsibly"/"altruistically" in a world we must share with other "selves." If it is truly to happen, this meeting has to be a genuine "encounter," outside the stereotypes and categories reinforced by traditional metaphysics. Simply put, Derrida sets out to dismantle these rubrics of thought by showing how that which they claim to isolate (define) is already "infected" by the elements they purport to exclude: their conceptual "other." For example, the self is somehow already on the way to the "other" as an alter ego, according to Derrida's reading of Lévinas (Derrida, 1967, 187). We shall see, this situation bears on who we are and on how our names bear out, in their turn, our identity.

Many years after "Violence and Metaphysics," *Politics of Friendship* carries on and keeps fine-tuning Derrida's conversation with Lévinas. While less explicitly summoned, Lévinas's figure looms high and vibrant in the backdrop of Derrida's thoughts on names, naming, the interpersonal, and the political conclusions a terrifying history impels him to draw. But Lévinas is more than an implicit presence in Derrida's book. It is worth recalling, I believe, that *Proper Names* was released by Stanford only a few months prior to *Politics of Friendship*. Furthermore, Lévinas's book appeared in the same series where Derrida's *On the Name* had come out only one year before. Thus, all of these titles make up a fairly coherent discourse on onomastics, philosophy, and culture, a discourse in which Lévinas's approach to the concept of "otherness" and history, and Derrida's analysis of naming as a political act call for a discussion that must not lose sight of their mutual and far-reaching implications. Indeed, they provide illuminating, unavoidable contexts for each other.

Proper Names, to begin with, celebrates the "great names" that have placed themselves on the line of modern European intellectual history from Kierkegaard, Proust, Martin Buber (the other great philosopher of the "other"), Edmond Jabès to—no surprise here—Derrida himself (Lévinas 1996, 55-62). In this view, the book is a commemoration. This is what proper names are for, after all: we resort to them to remember and commemorate, to recall those no longer with us but still close to us in ways that more often than not defy immediate comprehension—and, as we shall see, Derrida will pick up, through Michel de Montaigne, on this fundamental function of names. For now, it is worth noting that, in

fact, Lévinas seems to be distinguishing between linguistic signs in general and names while addressing the collapse of language and meaning in our time. "Signifiers" and "signifieds," he contends, like so many other theorists and critics after structuralism, play a "sign game" which has "neither sense nor stakes" any more (4)—"Hence the wearing away of the signified, releasing a system of signs, of signifiers without signifieds, of a language that no full meaning guides," as Lévinas concludes in his own essay on Derrida included in *Proper Names* (1996, 58). In effect, the celebrated names enumerated above have earned their name for having admirably accounted for our "general alienation from the meaning" and the corresponding "painful break with discourse" as reflected in the modern obsession with "the inexpressible, the ineffable, the unsaid" (4). But there is hope, Lévinas suggests in the Forward to his book. Perhaps, he ventures, "the names of persons whose *saying* signifies a face—proper names, in the middle of these common names and commonplaces—can resist the dissolution of meaning and help us to speak." Perhaps, he goes on, "they will enable us to divine, behind the downfall of discourse, the end of a certain *intelligibility* but the dawning of a new one" (4). "What is coming to a close," Lévinas suggest, could be a

> rationality tied *exclusively* to the being that is sustained by words, the *Said* of the Saying, the Said conveying fields of knowledge and truths in the form of unchanging identities, merging with the self-sufficient Identity or a being or system—complete, perfect, denying or absorbing the differences that appear to bear or limit it. (4-5)

The end of this Hegelian type of identity wherein the identical and the non-identical are made to coincide has been ceaselessly announced, however, by countless "names" worth recalling, from Gabriel Marcel to Buber, Derrida, and Lévinas himself. "Being," they maintain, is rather "relation to the other than self, and awakening" (5). In other words, if we are to truly "be," we are born into a fundamental accountability for and to the other (6). And, as a whole series of twentieth-century critics and writers from Mikhail M. Bakhtin to Paul Auster have insisted, literary language is the medium per se wherein—and through which—this responsibility redeems its implied, generous promise. This is, in fact, that which Lévinas intimates in the Jewish tradition ("habitation justified by movement toward the other is essentially Jewish," he avers) and more specifically in how writers like Paul Celan handle names to "found" things poetically:

> Things will indeed appear, the said of this poetic saying, but in the movement that carries them toward the other, as figures of this movement. 'All things, all beings, as they journey toward the other, will be figures, for the poem, of that other...around me who calls out and *gives it a name* [my italics, CM] it can gather.' The centrifugal movement of the *for the other*—might it be the mobile axis of being? Or its rupture? Or its meaning? The fact of speaking to the other—the poem—precedes all thematization; it is in that act that qualities gather themselves into things. But the poem thus leaves the real its 'otherness,' which pure imagination tears away from it; the poem 'lets otherness's ownmost also speak: the time of the other.' (43-44)

Lévinas's reflection on the umbilical tie between the self and the other furnishes the ethical template for Derrida's *alternate* ("other") politics of friendship where the Greek love—pre-Socratic and, lately, Heideggerian *philia*—and friendship as commemoration and remembrance through names open up unforeseen possibilities. Let us follow, at this point, the thread of Derrida's thought closely. One "answers for self"—for what we are, do, say—Derrida insists. But this basic statement holds true, as he reminds us, "beyond the simple present" (1997, 250) because the "'self' supposes unity;" that is, "memory that answers." Notably, this unity has nothing to do with the "unitary subject," a notion that Derrida has worked hard to call into question. Now, my name, my proper name, plays a major role in endowing this unity with ethical consciousness. That is to say, I may be, empirically speaking, a compound personality (Dostoevsky), a "multiplicity" (Nietzsche), or a "split" subject (Lacan), but my proper name formally assigns a unique "source" to all my deeds, becoming as it does "the agency to which the recognition of this identity is confided." "'I' am assumed," Derrida specifies, "to be responsible for 'myself'—that is, for every thing imputable to that which bears my name" (1997, 250). This imputability, he continues,

> presupposes freedom, to be sure, a non-present freedom; but also that which bears my name remains the 'same,' not only from one moment to the next, from one state of that which bears my name to another, but even beyond life or presence in general—for example, beyond the self-presence of what bears that name. The agency called 'the proper name' cannot necessarily be reduced to the registered name, patronymic or social reference, although these phenomena are most often its determining manifestation. (251)

The last specification would have remained rather obscure had the philosopher not cleared it up by going back to Montaigne. For the

author of the famous *Essays* explains in his fragment "On Friendship" how proper names necessarily mediate the encounters between the named, between me and you, the self and the other. Names unfold, Montaigne proposes, a "friendly" world. In this world, the named are already inscribed in an emotional partnership before they actually get to meet and formally "make friends" by introducing to one another. "I met him," Montaigne says about his friend La Boétie,

> and first made me acquainted with his name, thus preparing for that loving friendship.... We were seeking each other before we set eyes on each other—both because of the reports we each had heard, which made a more violent assault on our emotions than was reasonable from what they had said, and I believe, because of some decree of Heaven: we embraced each other by our names. (quoted in Derrida 1997, 251)

What we are facing here is, Derrida claims, the urgent imperative of (re)thinking names in general and proper names in particular as inseparable from the problematic of friendship. Linguistics, semiotics, onomastics, ethics, politics—they merge into a seamless continuum of thought. It is inherently "onomastic," one could argue, to respond to the call of the other—and thus to prove our responsibility towards others—through friendship. Proper names both precede and foster friendship. They facilitate the recognition of our identity, as Derrida specifies above, at the same time that they lay out a model of social behavior, of how we (should) treat others and, in doing so, how in being what we are we must needs relate to other human beings (251).

This relation may be synchronic, linking us up to our contemporaries. Concurrently, it may be diachronic, too, connecting us to those who came before us, to history and culture in general, and this may very well be why Derrida emphasizes that the proper name need not be confined to the "registered," officially recognized names. Arguably, *onomata* best individualize the "known," but they make up only for a part of the latter's territory. The name as an exemplary case of the *noun*, Derrida contends, goes down in history—and reaches up to us from it. As such, the name becomes a badge of *re-noun* and thereby an instrument of public memory, again, an essential way of reconstituting a tradition, of organizing and preserving a culture. For the "vertical" ethic of remembrance reconstitutes the "horizontal" ethic of social intercourse as the dead prove our "friends" as much as the living. In fact, friendship towards the former may be even more crucial to the

survival of a culture than friendship towards the latter. And, remarkably, this happens, time and again, through names, as Derrida maintains repeatedly in the first chapters of *Politics of Friendship*: "Oligarchies: Naming, Enumerating, Counting," "Loving in Friendship: Perhaps—the Noun and the Adverb," "This Mad 'Truth': The Just Name of Friendship," and "The Phantom Friend Returning (in the Name of 'Democracy')" (1-111).

The very titles of these sections set forth fairly accurately the importance Derrida bestows on the ethics-politics-onomastics configuration, more specifically on how a "certain" politics becomes a compelling alternative once names do fulfill their seminal yet seldom acknowledged social and celebrating function. Drawing from Aristotle and Cicero, Derrida points out that since we cannot have an infinite number of friends, it is those whose names we remember that count as friends. They may be people whom we have known personally or persons that have gained a name for themselves: "those whose legendary friendship traditions *cites*, the name and the renown, the name according to the renown" (3). The renowned, whom I may not have met and properly made friends with, is the friend that offers his or her friendship even after he or she has passed away. This is how the re-nowned, having renamed themselves through their achievements, become heritage, tradition, culture: inheriting a culture is inheriting a set of proper (distinguished) names. Indeed, "the name constitutes the very structure of testamentary survivance" (292) because it is

> in the power of the name to be able to survive the bearer of the name, and thus open up, from the very first nomination, the space of the epitaph in which we have recognized the very space of the *great* discourses of friendship. (229)

And this is why culture implies the survival of long gone friends, their "testamental *revenance*" (3). This is how they come back to guide and nurture us, their "legatees" (291).

However, in doing this, they embrace us—and we embrace them—within the fairly monological realm of "sameness," as Derrida stresses. And this is of course limiting. Yet by looking into the seemingly clear-cut argument of Cicero and by drawing from Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, Derrida shows how the "same here is none other than the other" (1997, 7). Notably, we must love the "other" before even

hoping that we will receive the same love in return. Thus, friendship-as-love before and actually without the expectation of being "befriended" in exchange; friendship-as-commemoration after the friend's death; "friendship-as-surviving," which means that the friend is never physically "there" (291); finally, care for the friend without, as Aristotle recommends, the friend's knowledge: all these entail a close relationship to somebody who is either no longer alive, or alive but absent, or alive and present but unaware of my friendship, or, lastly, not necessarily part of my circle of relatives, "family" (of spirit or otherwise), acquaintances, "neighbors" (293), group, or even "friends" proper, as Derrida argues in his commentary on Nietzsche's notion of friendship-as-enmity (66-67). This somebody is Lévinas's "other," or "the phantom of the other," as Derrida puts it (73), a figure whom we thus befriend whether we are aware of this or not. In the act of naming, of invoking the name, in my "call" or friendly interpellation, I get closer to this "other" yet without forcing (my)self upon his or her identity. This is the politics of naming that implicitly operates as a politics of friendship—and politics simply speaking—according to Derrida. As he tells us, "everything in the political question of friendship seems to be suspended on the secret of a name" (1997, 77). The name is cause for friendship, as Derrida maintains later on (292). Or, as he contends in his discussion of friendship in Nietzsche and Blake, the name gives this endeared notion its "true name," setting forth as it does a relationship that, again, paradoxically includes the "ultimate" other, my "enemy."

But if the enemy respects "the true name of friendship," Derrida adds,

> he will respect my own name. He will hear what my name should, even if it does not, properly name: the irreplaceable singularity which bears it, and to which the enemy then bears himself and refers. If he hears my order, if he addresses me, me myself, he respects me, at hate's distance, me beyond me, beyond my own consciousness. And if he desires my death, at least he desires it, perhaps, him, mine, singularly. The declared friend would not accomplish as much in simply declaring himself a friend while missing out on the name: that which imparts the name both to friendship and to singularity. That which deserves the name.
>
> Every time, then, the issue involves the names. The name borne. The name which is imparted. The person imparting the name to the person to whom the name is handed down. (1997, 72)

This "issue" of naming, Derrida goes on, "involves reference and respect" (72), which "haunt" one another the very moment our names are named by others and therefore "put on the line." To come full circle now at the end of my discussion of Lévinas's and Derrida's reflexions on ethics, politics, and onomastics, the violation and dishonor of names bespeak a profound and "unnatural" kind of aggression. As Derrida implies above, even my mortal foe's hate may find ways of channelling itself as to respect who I am, my "singularity." For one thing, the French philosopher is not gesturing towards a vague paradise of utopian amiability. What he is saying, though, in light of the horrendous predicament of proper names I was referring to in the opening of this essay, is that when names come first and foremost under attack something very disturbing is about to happen, beyond the enmity Derrida allowed for, and beyond comprehension ultimately: the complete and irrevocable obliteration of the other, expelling the other from a certain shared space, from culture, memory, and history.

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