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Review of R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death.*

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R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006. xiii + 311 pp. ISBN 0801883113.

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R. Clifton Spargo's *Vigilant Memory* is ambitious in its scope. Although the title suggests it is a study of Levinas in light of the Holocaust, it is also a multifaceted defense and critique of Levinas, a response to Alain Badiou's criticism of Levinas's ethics as apolitical, a warning against the "fallacies of Western democratic culture" (120), and a plea for a politically viable ethics. Along the way, Spargo also makes an argument for reading the Holocaust as essentially related to, but not determinative of, Levinas's ethics. Amassing a staggering arsenal of scholarly references and an ambitious collection of examples from film, theater, literature and television, Spargo is equally at ease deconstructing Levinas, the Iraq War, the New Testament, *The Bald Soprano*, *Sex and the City*, and Bill O'Reilly. He writes authoritatively and lucidly across topics, demonstrating an impressive breadth of knowledge. This is not a study of Levinasian minutiae, though Spargo is not afraid to delve into the thicket of Levinas's prose. *Vigilant Memory* is a genuine effort to test the viability and the limits of Levinasian ethics in the twenty-first century and to ask "in what sense an ethics would be said to have force in a political world" (18). In the recent explosion of Levinas scholarship, *Vigilant Memory* provides a welcome divergence from the predominately two-way street traveled by Levinas apologists on one side and detractors on the other. Spargo cuts both ways, engaging the religious and the political dimensions of Levinas's thought in order to carve out a more nuanced -- and more ambiguous -- middle ground. Describing his intention and method, Spargo explains, "*Vigilant Memory* sketches what might be called a *critical ethics*, based in a rereading of Levinas's philosophy according to its patterns of submerged argument and its not altogether consistent figurative logic, but finally also according to its unrealized, sometime contradictory politics" (7). What we get is a complicated picture of Levinas and a healthy dispelling of the air of inscrutability or aura of divinity surrounding his work.

Spargo hopes to find in Levinas resources for a viable, politically motivated ethics. He explains, "even if he does not delineate a practical political ethics, Levinas implies that the suffering of the other ... must have a political meaning" (24). Conservative readers of Levinas might instinctively recoil from the suggestion that the other can provide any basis for "meaning," political or otherwise, but Spargo plans to seize on the "sociality" underpinning responsibility without dragging along Levinas's emphases on the invisibility of the "face." This entails a meticulous examination and employment of specific terms in Levinas and an equally careful avoidance and critique of others. It is an embrace of the spirit, not the letter, of Levinas's work.

Ultimately, Spargo uses aspects of Levinas's ethics to articulate a form of memory that retains a genuine relationship to history without devolving into particularistic, nationalist obsessions with specific manifestations of injustice experienced or committed by identifiable groups. This is a form of "vigilant memory" that Spargo associates with "mourning," and that he identifies with Levinas's descriptions of subjectivity as traumatically de-phased and displaced. Spargo's claim is that Levinas can help us transition from an account of particular trauma to a broader notion of violence and injustice. This amounts to the surprising claim that something widely viewed as a

critical weakness in Levinas -- namely, the gap between ethics and politics -- is in fact the fertile space of a radical political possibility.

In a short review it will be impossible to do justice to Spargo's dense and intricately woven argument. Each of Spargo's substantial chapters pivots around discrete sets of texts, terms, and influences in Levinas's philosophy, spanning from his early essays in the 1940s to his late work in the 1980s. Any single chapter merits a much longer study. Here, I will only be able to describe the frame of Spargo's concerns, point out the main thrust of each of his four chapters, and conclude with a few questions about his methodology.

In overview, the first two chapters proceed by emphasizing the ethical/political payoff of Levinas's descriptions of "death" and "bad conscience" (*mauvaise conscience*), both of which Spargo relates to "mourning." The last two chapters focus on the ethical-political promise and ultimate shortfalls of Levinas's emphases on "victim" and "stranger." We might interpret this trajectory from "mourning" and "bad conscience" to "victim" and "stranger" as Spargo's effort to derive increasingly politicized categories from Levinas, drawing Levinas out from the private to the public. Following in the footsteps of recent work by Simon Critchley and Howard Caygill, Spargo begins by pressing on the ethical-political point of vulnerability in Levinas's work, the transition between the ethical situation of the face-to-face (which is defined by a radical intimacy between two) and the political situation Levinas associates with justice and the intervention of a third person (*le tier*).

In the *Introduction*, Spargo frames this soft spot in terms of Badiou's critique of Levinas. This critique largely defines the parameters of Spargo's project and should be kept in clear focus while reading *Vigilant Memory*. Badiou's critique has two parts. First, he accuses Levinas of disguising theology as ethics and fueling the divide between ethics and politics. Like Dominique Janicaud, Badiou sees Levinasian ethics as riddled with ominous capitalizations, each of which says "Other" but means "God." If the "Other" is "God" (and Badiou thinks this *must* be the case to make sense of Levinas at all) then Levinas's ethics of difference is merely metaphysical, "a mystificatory version of difference" (6). Second, Badiou thinks Levinas remains rooted in a culturally limited, nationalistic view of others, arguing that Levinas is in fact intolerant of genuine difference. This criticism amounts to the claim that not all others count or count equally in Levinas's ethics. In the first instance, Levinasian ethics is impractical. In the second instance, Levinasian ethics is unethical. In either case, the final judgment is that Levinasian ethics is useless.

Spargo thinks Badiou oversimplifies Levinas, but he also thinks that Badiou's criticisms have to be taken seriously. In the opening pages, he insists that in light of Badiou's critique, "Levinas must be made answerable ... to an apolitical or post-political trajectory that has seemed, for detractors as well as enthusiasts, to characterize his ethics" (7). Part of Spargo's project is to rescue Levinasian ethics from the equally dangerous pitfalls of religious mystification (which renders his ethics too abstract to be useful) and identity politics (which renders his ethics too particular to be useful outside of a given cultural, historical or national frame). To this end, he defends the idea that "ethics begets critique" (17). Ethics has no edifying potential in this model; it is not a prescriptive system of rules, an account of virtue, or a theory of duty. Rather, ethics is simply the destabilization of every manifestation of closure or totality. The view of ethics as

interruptive is structurally similar to the dynamic Levinas describes in *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence* between the articulate power of the "Said" and the erosive force of the "Saying." Spargo does not investigate the linguistic turn of the late Levinas. Instead, he focuses on the "anarchic dimension" (17) of responsibility.

In the first chapter, "Ethics as Unquieted Memory," Spargo focuses on mourning, echoing themes from his earlier *The Ethics of Mourning* (2004). Here, he examines the place of death, emotion, and memory in Levinas, giving special attention to Levinas's reading of the *Phaedo* in his 1975-6 lecture course, "Death and Time." This chapter is exceptional for its powerful description of Levinas's account of death in relation to Heideggerian anxiety. As Spargo rightly emphasizes, for Levinas it is the *other's* death that is upending in a way that permanently ruptures any capacity to secure or anchor identity. In Levinas, death does not open onto any project for the ego. This is distinct from the Heideggerian conception of anxiety about one's own death that ultimately helps one refocus one's life and face one's own finitude with a newly resolute engagement. Spargo brilliantly underscores the social implications of Levinas's account of death in contrast to the solitary inwardness of Heidegger's account.

Spargo's goal is to enlist Levinas in demonstrating the way mourning has an ethical structure insofar as it entails a social orientation, a preoccupation with another that trumps any concern for oneself. Spargo argues that mourning opens a subject to a "wider political realm of responsibility" (35). This involves a complex linkage of the traumatic imagery Spargo identifies as governing Levinas's account of subjectivity. Implicitly drawing on the Freudian distinction between mourning (which is ultimately a work of detaching from a lost object in the service of a healthy reattachment to the world) and melancholia (in which the subject remains buried and consumed in grief), Spargo argues that mourning transcends any particular attachment or content and opens a subject to a more generalized sense of anguish. Although Spargo wants to differentiate his notion of "mourning" from Freudian "therapeutic detachment" (39), like Freud he finds a silver lining in the structure of healthy, non-pathological grief. Mourning becomes a mood that pivots a person outward by rending her open. Spargo writes, "mourning performs a dislocation within memory, what Levinas also refers to as a de-posing of identity" (60). Spargo reads mourning as synonymous with Levinas's traumatic account of subjectivity and particularly with "the basic posture of vulnerability Levinas locates at the center of ethics" (36). He therefore finds a coincidence between the constitution of a mournful subject and the constitution of an ethical subject. Spargo claims that Levinas's description of traumatic subjectivity mirrors the structure of mourning, and both of them occasion a unique space of non-specific, a-historical, memory, "an exceptional interval within continuous historical time" (191).

The second chapter examines the theme of "bad conscience" (*mauvaise conscience*) in Levinas and its relationship to Nietzsche's critique of morality. Spargo argues that mourning and bad conscience are essentially interchangeable in Levinas's work, both of them attesting to the ethical interruption of identity. However, in bad conscience Spargo finds "a more definite historical shape to the burden of mournful subjectivity" (82). If the first chapter articulates the de-phasing of identity critical to an expansive sense of responsibility, the second chapter links that responsibility with the memory of concrete historical failures and catastrophes that inform our present and future sense of obligation and political commitment. Spargo therefore describes Levinasian bad conscience as a re-evaluation and reclamation of Nietzsche's historically driven

social critique in *Beyond Good and Evil*. Rather than lament the coincident dawn of guilt and memory, Spargo describes Levinas exalting this very moment, generating a historically grounded ethics and transforming "bad conscience" into "a figure for the radical failure within history that nevertheless determines the future of responsibility and the aspirations of justice" (125).

Spargo believes that bad conscience is directly tied to the Holocaust in Levinas's work, but also that bad conscience comes to stand for the memory of injustice that has a universal force. The chapter moves into accounts of survivors' guilt, violence, shame, and the relationship between Levinas, Agamben, and Levi. Throughout this chapter Spargo hopes to foreground the relationship between Levinas's ethics and the Holocaust without suggesting that the Holocaust is entirely determinative of Levinas's project. Spargo's goal is to move toward an account of ethics that is historically grounded in a specific occasion of injustice (and specifically genocide) without glossing over the differences between atrocities or making Levinasian ethics narrowly related to his own biography. This is a difficult balance to strike, and this chapter ends somewhat abruptly without providing a satisfying conclusion. One of the central difficulties of this chapter revolves around Levinas's complicated use of the term "conscience" and the lack of any French distinction between "conscience" and "consciousness." Levinas's invocation of "mauvaise conscience" needs to be read in light of his ongoing critique of Husserlian phenomenology and his suspicion of the tradition of defining subjectivity in terms of consciousness or knowledge. The complex relationship with Husserlian phenomenology is not something Spargo pursues, and that leaves the foregrounding of conscience in this chapter on somewhat shaky ground.

The second difficulty Spargo encounters in Chapter Two lies in walking the line between insisting that Levinas's ethics does relate to his own historical experience of the Holocaust and insisting that the Holocaust is *not* "the precipitate cause of Levinas's ethics, as if his entire project were traumatically determined by Holocaust consciousness" (20). Spargo believes the danger in making the Holocaust *the* determinative source of Levinas's ethics is that it renders the Holocaust meaningful, as if suffering is justified as the price for ethics. A second danger is that it limits Levinas's ethics to a particular historical situation and cultural identity, and a third danger is that the Holocaust becomes the exceptional, privileged example of political horror and genocide (blinding us to other genocides). Spargo's efforts to expand Levinas's ethics beyond the narrow confines of Holocaust studies are necessary and admirable. Yet it is unclear where he wants to situate the Holocaust relative to Levinas in the end. The middle-of-the-road position that the Holocaust influenced Levinas's ethics to a degree, but not too much, does not seem satisfying and does not take seriously enough Levinas's own claims about the profound influence of Nazi horror on his thought. Viewing the Holocaust as a limiting factor, as if the appeal to direct experience necessarily undermines any viable ethical theory, risks overlooking the appeal to the particular and the personal animating so much of Levinas's work, which never claims to offer any ethical *theory*.

There is an elegant symmetry to Spargo's book. The first half establishes the ethical/political pay-off of Levinas's emphases on mourning and bad conscience and argues that these concepts help us transition from the private to the public. The second half investigates Levinas's potentially dangerous rhetoric of the victim and the stranger and how these concepts limit or cripple our ability to transition from ethics to politics. Spargo is worried that Levinas is too quick to employ the victim in the service of ethics and too quick to establish the stranger as a

counterpart to the neighbor. In this sense, Spargo is looking for a more radical Levinas, one in which suffering is more useless and the stranger is more strange than Levinas ultimately allows.

In the second half of the book, Spargo's critique of Western liberal democracy comes increasingly to the center as he transitions from engaging Levinas in his efforts to define a political ethics to disentangling his project from Levinas. Chapters Three and Four critique Levinas's language of the "victim" and the "stranger" in order to ask whether they lend themselves to a dangerous and ultimately unethical identity politics. In large part, these last two chapters return to critiques Badiou levels against Levinas to show that Badiou in fact has a point, and that we cannot naively or idealistically put Levinas into the service of politics. In as much as the first two chapters delve into the intricacies of Levinas, Chapters Three and Four attempt to find a way out.

History is a story told by victors, and in his third chapter, Spargo enlists Levinas in a quest to retrieve an alternative history told in the voice of the victims. Spargo's main goal, however, is to separate the victim from "cultural usefulness" (127). Following a promising thread in Levinas, he welcomes an ethics from the perspective of the victim, but only if such an ethics proceeds without making the victim a sacrificial site for the advent of ethics. This is a complicated chapter. Relying on two of Levinas's seminal essays, "Substitution" (1968) (which became, in a revised form, the centerpiece of *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*) and "Useless Suffering" (1982), Spargo underscores the promise of Levinas's work in opening a genuine space for the perspective of the victim. And yet, he also emphasizes the Christological premises inherent in Levinas's imagery (with a host of ammunition from the history of theology and quotations from the New Testament). Spargo follows what he sees as a positive current in Levinas's thought -- an emphasis on passivity and the uselessness of suffering -- but also a countercurrent in which the victim is re-inscribed in a logic of sacrifice. What is promising in the Levinasian project is the idea that "ethics ... must begin from the victim and not from the simplifying, utopian wish that a historical act of victimization had never occurred" (178). The question for Spargo is how to allow ethics to open from the perspective of the victim without appropriating the victim as the sacrificial lamb to ethics.

The fourth chapter revolves around Levinas's discussion of the stranger and Spargo's suspicion that this category is ultimately linked to a prior experience of identity -- the experience of the *near* or the neighbor. Spargo traces a "shift in vocabulary from *stranger* to *neighbor*" (216) through Levinas's work, arguing that this shift reflects an increasing focus on "proximity" that winds up privileging those who are near to us, at the expense of those who are farther away. Spargo sees this as a conservative trend in Levinas's work that has the disturbing effect of limiting the realm of significant "others" and relegating ethics to "the side of intimacy, attached to the realm of familial, private commitments ..." (218). This criticism is related to Simon Critchley's recent critique of Levinas's emphasis on the family, an emphasis Critchley thinks ultimately diminishes the reach of ethics and renders Levinasian ethics overtly at odds with the public realm and politics. At the end of the chapter, Spargo directly invokes Levinas's infamous 1982 radio discussion, "Ethics and Politics," about Israel and Palestine, as an example of Levinas's distressing refusal to discuss the specific political crimes of Israel, a symptom of his limited vision of the "stranger," and proof that his "politics seem to lag grossly behind the rigor of his ethics" (238). The question then arises how much we can put Levinasian responsibility

into practice. Spargo ends this chapter by suggesting that Levinas's philosophy is fraught with an internal tension that calls us to seize the promise of a radical notion of responsibility and expand it beyond anything Levinas was able to articulate himself.

By the end of the book, it is clear that Spargo thinks Levinas and Badiou are not as much at odds as they might seem. In Badiou, Spargo finds a Levinasian emphasis on interruption that allows for "newly forging the terms of universalism" (23). In Levinas, he unearths a Badiouian "universalistic aspiration" (23) to define responsibility outside any parameters of "relativized difference," "culture or identity-position" (24). The task Spargo sets himself is to describe a thin, but critical, form of universality implicit in Levinas's account of ethical subjectivity that might save Levinas's ethics from any culturally or historically limited identity politics. Mournful memory is meant to provide a space of inner destabilization through which the subject emerges as displaced from herself and increasingly capable of being responsible for others. The substantial challenge Spargo faces is how to square any account of universality, however thin, with Levinas's relentless critique of universals and his refusal to draw paradigmatic or universal lessons from any experience of rupture or trauma. How do we derive an impersonal "fact of injustice" (29) from the specificity of the other's face? It is striking that Spargo's book largely sidesteps the language of being face-to-face and has no indexed entry for the word "face" at all.

Levinas is often criticized for describing a subject who is so deeply traumatized and heavily responsible she will essentially buckle under her own weight. Hilary Putnam sees this excessive focus on trauma as Levinas's Achilles' heel, arguing that we need less mourning and a little bit more levity and happiness if we are going to have subjects who are not simply ethically wounded, but ethically able. I don't think Spargo provides a helpful solution to this dilemma, and I worry that his fixation on mourning as the paradigm for ethics might exacerbate the problem. I suspect there is more to Levinasian subjectivity than mourning. There must be a way in which the subject who goes deeper inside and finds an excess of internal, emotional space in mourning also comes outside. Mourning hollows her out, but life opens her up, in the incessant flaring up of faces Levinas describes as a visceral infinity. It is this second part of the equation, the heat of more life rather than the cold of infinite mourning, that Spargo risks underestimating. In Levinas the subject is called out beyond death, called in Rosenzweig's words so crucial to Levinas: "INTO LIFE!"

Beginning from the ethically lucrative terms of mourning and bad conscience, Spargo envisions a path into and ultimately out of Levinas, one leading toward an ethics tied to a memory of injustice that turns us away from private concerns, transcends any particular historical or cultural identity and opens us to myriad others for whom we are increasingly responsible. Spargo describes this as "a political horizon for ethics that cannot rest in communal, ethnic, or nationalistic self-concern" (75). This is a noble vision of ethics that tries to ground the motivational force for our commitments in a unique variety of politicized memory. On the whole, *Vigilant Memory* is an impressively well-documented, well-researched study of a political subplot we might yet wrest from Levinas. Spargo makes a genuine effort to diverge from traditional Levinas scholarship, to forge a new working relationship with Levinas that is more nuanced and more complicated than the starkly oppositional defenses and condemnations Levinas's ethics have so often inspired. It is time for such new engagements with Levinas. Spargo shows there is much work left to be done. In this light, his book is a hopeful signal that

we are on the cusp of a new Levinas -- one who might be read with increasing ambition, creativity, and a healthy dose of irreverence.