Fourth Neelan Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture

WHOSE FACE IS THAT I SEE ?

Remembering the Unfallen

by

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at the
Sri Lanka Foundation Institute Auditorium
July 29, 2003

International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I consider the invitation you have extended to me, to address you on this very special day of remembrance, a singular honor. To all those who were responsible for choosing me to deliver the Neelan Tiruchelvam Memorial Lecture, especially to you Mrs. Sithi Tiruchelvam, I express my warmest gratitude.

July 29th, 1983. We are here to remember that grim Friday and the twenty-years that have unraveled from it. For many Sri Lankans, that was the day when our world went spinning from God's hand; either in its pre-ordained arc or completely out of control. For some of us, that day of abandonment would return in another form on another day and year, in the loss of a friend, a father, a brother, a sister, a mother, a son or of a husband to the violence unleashed by July 29th. I lost a friend, not on July 29th but because of July 29th, and of whom there is so much to say, but for which I don't have the heart today. I speak of the death of Neelan. For those among us who had the good fortune to come near this gracious man, our loss is such that we are unable to find public words for what happened to him and to us on that day. In more ways than one, he left us speechless. His absence will remain for me, I am certain, forever unthinkable; his face, unforgettable.

For these and other reasons, which I am sure you can well understand, I can speak of the last twenty years in words that can only betray the indecency of language, its gross inadequacy and its failed eloquence in the face of the sensory intensity of the events of history. Even if our words betray this insufficiency of language, we cannot accept this lack as a sufficient response to the fallen. We must keep trying to grasp what

happened. I must confess that at best I can only roughly grasp the subject of these past twenty years. By *roughly,* I mean both untenderly and approximately; and for that I ask your pardon.

Grateful as I am for the honor, the privilege and the trust you have bestowed on me, I cannot but wish that the circumstances were different: that this day, twenty years ago, had marked the beginning of inter-ethnic civility rather than an ignominious civil war; that the first president of our republic had been wiser than he was wily; that the second president had not ushered in a period of murder so abominable that the tongue could not utter what the eye allowed into consciousness; that some of our rivers of exquisite beauty had not, even if only for a shudderingly brief time, become clogged with bodies and foam with blood—"Sinhala blood"; that both these presidents had not exploited legend, in the pursuit of power; that a third had not been so overtaken with face-saving so that the face-to-face had to be endlessly deferred; that our Tamil politicians' only instruments had not been the harp and fiddle on which they played mostly one tune and its thematic variations. It was called the language-issue. Neelan Tiruchelvam, who had a much broader vision, wasconspicuous exception in this regard. Of course, in art these instruments do function to instruct and delight. But when I say of some politicians that they fiddle and harp, I mean that they pulled strings to get on, to better themselves. This applies, not only to some politicians, but it also applies to newspaper editors, intellectuals, as well as academics on both sides of the ethnic divide. Here again Neelan was an exception.

I wish: that our civic leaders could walk the streets with only a handful of unarmed acolytes without fear of being ambushed or assassinated; that over these twenty years the whimsical largess of politicians distributed to private armies of thugs had not become one of the innumerable perquisites of power; that their children had not come to assume that power, aimless power, was their patrimony, and violence, gratuitous violence, their birthright; that our people had not turned its ear to the hasty 'prejudicate opinion' of capricious politicians whose judgments have been—to borrow a phrase from Dryden—"a mere lottery;" that there had been fewer leaders like the late Cyril Matthews who cheated our citizens into passion and many more like Neelan Tiruchelvam who tried to reason them into truth; that 65,000 plus lives had not been lost in and out battle; that Sinhala soldiers had not dishonored their own mothers and sisters by raping Tamil women, and

worse, then subduing their bodies under rubble, sand and water, in unmarked graves; that so many young Tamil women had not been duped into enslavement and prostitution *en route* to places of asylum; that Tamil had not become alliteratively yoked to terrorism in the minds of so many, here and abroad.

Nevertheless, even though the past is forever at the elbow of the present, being in the present obliges one to look to the future as well. I see a few rays of hope at the end of the tunnel. In fact I have noticed that many a bigot of twenty years ago has washed his mind off the grubby prejudices that had stunted this nation's material and spiritual growth over these two decades and longer. This is heartening. I hope—and I am sure that you will join me in hoping—that in the year, 2023, a new generation will be celebrating twenty years of peace rather than reminiscing two score years of strife. I gather that the LTTE has finally seen, among other things, its folly in having evacuated the Muslims from the North. That is a good start. The LTTE and the Sri Lankan government have begun talking to each other. This is another good start. I see the day when our public's opinion will no longer be constituted by the prejudiced voice and a prejudging ear of politician, priest, private citizen or press. I see some monks in saffron robes opting for the *dhamma* of the Buddha and not the *dharma* of war. This is encouraging. I have taken note of the fact that Tamils and Sinhala exiles in Europe, North America and Australia have found common ground in so many aspects of their lives that has undermined their differences. That some times this common ground lies in the realization of the fact that Europeans cannot tell the difference between Aryan and Dravidian, Tamils and Sinhalese, and to some of whom, all the denizens who hail from this isle of splendor are but "niggers." This is sad, on the one hand, but sobering on the other. Many Tamil young men and women—and Sinhalese too—have opted to combat such racism in the manner they know best, by excelling in whatever they undertake. This is exhilarating. It is small comfort, but comfort no less, to see that in Sri Lanka, unlike in many other parts of the world, civility is challenged but far from dead. I long for that day when, in the North and the East, no young man or woman will have to ever look upon a landscape ignited by bombs and artillery but cast their eyes on a horizon where sky and harvest meet; and in the south, gaze, as I did as a child in Kandy, upon rivers and lakes flecked with powdery sunlight, and upon ripples enkindled by the noses of fish gently surfacing to feed at dawn.

As you will notice, even though I have tried to recover myself from looking at the grim past of the last twenty years and espy a hope-filled future, I have found myself, once again, reorienting my gaze toward the past. To the critical among you, and to my own critical self, my reminiscence of a past that I want reproduced in the future is as much nostalgia as it is memory. Nostalgia is an *attraction* to a real or an imagined past. Memory, by contrast, need not hold any such attraction to the past. What possible attraction could the holocaust hold for a survivor of Auschwitz; or for a Tamil shop-owner on Sea Street who saw his belongings go up in flames in 1983; or for a so-called untouchable in Jaffna, who could not enter the Nallur temple in years gone by; or for a Sinhala mother from Kelaniya whose son was murdered during President Premadas's rule by personnel of the armed forces? There can be no nostalgia where there is no attraction.

Neither is *tradition* coterminous with memory. Those who follow a tradition, for instance, are confident in its own validity and are not likely to appeal to memory to defend that tradition. Instead, the appeal is to custom, established institutions, literary works, cultural artifacts, collective consciousness, and so on. In the normal course of human events, one does not turn inward to defend tradition. Tradition is "out there," so to speak, greater than any one individual, greater even than the sum total of all individuals in a society.

It is assumed that the defense of tradition, and even that of nostalgia, lies outside the self, in phenomena that are believed to be objective. For the purpose at hand, if we limit memory to all that is "remembered" minus nostalgia and tradition, then we have in memory, something very fragile, vulnerable, insecure, and forever on trial. The anthropologist Johannes Fabian went so far as to claim that, strictly speaking, we do not remember the past; rather, we remember the present. That is, we remember that which *from* the past continues to live within our situation in the world. Memory is not memory if it is dead; it may be tradition or nostalgia or even history, but it is no longer memory. Whatever the expression "living memory" might mean, it cannot be the opposite of "dead memory." If that were the contrast, then dead memory would be an oxymoron that would make living memory, a mere redundancy. Memory can be nothing else but alive. In so far as memory belongs to the *here and the now*, it is one with the present. But what is the *present*? Of the three, the past, the present and the future, it is

the present that has vexed the philosopher the most. And memory, not unlike the present, is evanescent and inscrutable. Memory is not a *fait acomplis* that belongs to the past, nor is it a possibility that points to the future. The past and the future are characterized by their continuity in time. There is never a doubt that the past and the future are part of time. Not so with the present. The present is discontinuity actualized, and if you looked closely, you will find that it is not a part of time but is apart from time. You can infer the past. You can infer the future. But you cannot infer the present. Inference is a logical operation in time. History is a narrative, and hence, a logical operation, a logical argument that unfolds inferentially. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that it easier to justify the claim that history, by virtue of being a narrative of the past, belongs to the past, than it is to establish thatmemory concerns the past. If we can remember only the present qua present, then there is nothing to infer about the present qua present. It simply *is*. Memory, *living* memory, is not something that was there and then; rather it is something here and now. History is made real, or realized, by the consensus of a group or community about the claims put forth by that history. In other words, history is independent of what you or I or any particular individual thinks about it, even though it is not independent of thought in general. History does not rest on a single person's experience or fancy. Its claims are some times supported by facts and sometimes unsupported by them. Never mind! History is primarily a discourse that is based on truth claims arrived at by consensus. Memory, by contrast, is based on experiences that are unique; it emerges in individuals, and is not beholden to the community's opinion regarding its truth-value. To the extent that memory is unrealized by the group, it is not real; it is actual.

Nothing more brings this fact home more vividly than the memory of trauma and pain. The memory of trauma is itself traumatic; the memory of pain itself is painful. In pain there is neither before nor after; all you have is nothing but the infinity of now. In fact, it would be impossible to distinguish memory from pain and vise versa. They are mutually immanent. Perhaps we should call it "memoro-pain," or Latinate it entirely and call it, "memorium-doloro."

It is not surprising to find so many of us seeking relief from painful memories. To some, relief comes in the form of psycho-somatic or somato-psychic disorders. Psychoanalysts call this displacement. Others find relief

in work, mere work. Some find relief in the creative arts and sciences. This kind of displacement is called sublimation in psychoanalysis. There are myriad of ways in which memory can be suppressed or repressed. It can also be rendered into narrative, and thereby, made available for consensus and for the realization by the community. What is said by the subject trying to express his or her *Memorium doloro,* however, can never sarisfy the subject. The subject bearing the *memorium doloro* will invariably find it far too sublime to be sublimated into mere narrative. The urgency and magnitude of the telling will be deflated by the told.

Memory can also be banished into nostalgia, tradition or even oblivion. This is too is most often done by language. Of all the forces of language that do banish memory into nostalgia, tradition or oblivion, the cliché is the most powerful one. This, however, I shall argue, is also the most pernicious way of overcoming *memoriam doloro.*

Words,phrases as well as entire narratives are vulnerable to becoming clichés. Among words, "terror" and "terrorism" are words that have, by their over-generalization and overuse, become clichés. But what exactly is a cliché? What does it do? Have you ever tried to define a cliché? The OED defines it as a stereotypic expression or a hackneyed word or phrase; Webster defines it as an expression or an idea that has become trite. If you take a look at the *Introduction* to Eric Partridges *Dictionary of Clichés* you will find the author having to resort to clichés in order to describe clichés: stereotyped, hackneyed, trite, tattered and outworn being the most common. The well-known literary critic, Christopher Hill, correctly asks: "what as a metaphor could be more hackneyed than *hackneyed,* outworn than *outworn,* tattered than *tattered*, trite than *trite?*"[1] And, I might add, what could be more stereotypic than *stereotypic*?" Then there are phrases. You must surely agree that the phrase *seen better days* has seen better days; and *take it to heart* is by now almost impossible to take to heart. Let us not, even for a moment, entertain the idea that clichés are weak. On the contrary, clichés are extremely powerful, almost undefeatable; like the *asuras* of mythology whose every drop of shed blood becomes in turn an *asura.* What is true of *asuras* is also true of clichés; every definition of cliché entails, if not becomes, a cliché. They are both virtually impossible to overpower; they proliferate in different embodiments. Clichés undermine every word or phrase they inhabit, they weaken the word within which they lie. I repeat,

"They *lie*," to use that most productive pun in the English language that William Shakespeare worked up to the highest pitch. I know I digress, but I can't resist that Sonnet of his that should drive home to every middle-aged flirt, the simple truth about the complex lie:

> When my love swears that she is made of truth,
> I do believe her though I know she lyes,
> That she might thinke me some untutored youth,
> Unlearned in the world's false subtilties.
> This vainely thinking that she thinkes me young,
> Although she knows my days are past the best,
> Simply I credit her false speaking tongue,
> On both sides thus is simple truth suppresst:
> But wherefore sayes she not she is unjust?
> And wherefore say not I that I am old?
> O loves best habit is in seeming trust,
> And age in love, loves not t'have yeares told.
> Therefore I lye with her, and she with me,
> And in our faults by lyes we flattered be.

Clichés lie in the thicket of language. They lie in wait for those among us who are too lazy or too traumatized to search for the right word or wording that would express how we feel, how we are, and lead us out of the shadows into the light of day. Clichés do not ambush us as much as offer to cheerily lead us into light. What they really do, however, is lead us into "the dreary desert sand of dead habit" where our senses will be scorched into eventual insensitivity.

How does one hold a cliché at bay or overcome it in battle? One way to do it is George's way. (Let me make it clear that the George to whom this anecdote of Marshall McLuhan is attributed is not our malapropian President, George Bush.) A teacher at school asked her class to write a sentence on each of ten words. Among the ten was the word, cliché. One boy named George, read out the sentence he had written in his little blue exercise book in which he had used the word, cliché. It went like this:

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1 Christopher Ricks. The Force of Poetry. Oxford:Oxford University Press, 1984.

'The boy returned home with a cliché on his face'.

When the puzzled teacher asked him to explain what he meant by cliché, he piped up and said: Why, the dictionary defines a cliché as a "worn out expression."

What George had done, either out of ingenuity or ignorance, was not to banish or belittle the cliché but co-opt it into a new game and put it in the service of a new design. This is exactly what Michel Foucault meant by genealogical analysis. Such an analysis asks us to "violently or surreptitiously appropriate [a word or phrase] in order to impose direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game." It entails "a reversal of forces, the usurpation of power, [and] the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who [have come to use it as cliché.]

Before I leave the subject of cliché and return to "terror," and the "face," (which is after all, the title of this presentation, which I know you are waiting for me to justify) I cannot resist the temptation of introducing you to another master-saboteur of cliché, the folk singer and lyricist, Bob Dylan. This example will also be our segue back to the face. Again, I am indebted to Christopher Ricks from whom I'll quote at some length. In Bob Dylan's song, *Master of War,* there is the following verse:

> A world war can be won
> You want me to believe
> But I see through your eyes
> And see through your brain
> Like I see through the water
> That runs down my drain.

This is an anti-war song, addressed, presumably to the prevaricating American leadership of the Vietnam era. In the first verse of the song, he had sung, "I just want you to know / I see though your masks,"

> So that when we hear 'But I see through your eyes,' we see that it does not mean the blandly magnanimous thing ('from your point of view'), but the stubborn opposite: I see what your eyes are trying to hide. The cliché has been alerted, and we are alerted to its clichéness, seeing the words from a new

> perspective, a different point of view, and seeing penetratingly through them. (Ricks 1967:367)

"Terror," "terrorism" and "terrorists" have become commonplace. How do we rescue them from their state of clichéness? There is no single formula for accomplishing this. The alertness to the tendency of language to take habit and to check this by inciting its potential for re-vivification is one way to go about it. Not all of us are, however, as poetically inclined as Bob Dylan, linguistically agile as William Shakespeare, or fortuitously blest as little George. But all of us who have lived through twenty terrible years, who have seen if not heard of terrible acts of unspeakable atrocities, must not forget the details, most of all the details of face. For it is only in the details of the face that one can return to the uniqueness and aberrancy of each act of terror. Only these can put clichés and cliché-mongers—including us—on notice. To abandon the suffering of our fellow-citizens and loved ones to cliché, and to find refuge for our own *memoriam dolora* in cliché, would be to abrogate our responsibility to the fallen as well as to ourselves.

A close cousin of the cliché is euphemism. It serves as, what George Orwell called "doublethink." Doublethink is deliberately perverse thinking in terms that reverse or distort the truth to make it more acceptable. Orwell called such euphemistic speech, "Newspeak." One should not think that "Newspeak" is limited only to government and the news-disseminating media. It may also be encountered in differently inflected dialects among which are Sociologese, Psychologese, Legalese and even Anthropologese. I shall leave it to you to coin the appropriate names for the dialects spoken by economists and political scientists, except to note that the dialects they speak are more prestigious, than the others I have mentioned, their claims more universal and are preferred by those who speak Newspeak. Furthermore, it is no accident that English provides the friendliest climate for Newspeak to flourish. After all, it is the global language, the language of commerce and science, the language of capital, and the language that claims to be universal in more ways than one.

Father Amilraj is a Jesuit priest whom I first met twenty years ago when he assisted me in my fieldwork among Sri Lankan Tamils of Indian origin who had been repatriated to South India and had become bonded laborers there. He recently visited me in New York, after working for over

twenty years in trying conditions among the poorest of the poor, teaching them how to organize themselves politically and fight their way out of bondage through non-violent methods of protest and through the courts. In our very first conversation in New York, he surprised me with the assertion that "English is the most evil of all languages." I asked him to expand on this curious assertion. He had been exposed to just a week's worth of American television, but had seen enough, it turned out, to surmise that the English language was the language in which it was easiest to be evasive and to lie. Even though his conclusion was reached by his evaluation of war-related political-speak, in which euphemisms, misrepresentations and falsehoods abound, it reveals considerable perspicuity on his part. English, besides being the dominant and the most widely used language in the world, is also the language spoken by the most powerful men in the world. I am referring to the political leaders of the United States and the United Kingdom. Each war, since Vietnam, if not earlier, has spawned a plethora of mendacious euphemisms and dissembling words and phrases in the English language. If power corrupts, then it only stands to reason that the powerful corrupt the language they speak. Even as the German of Goethe and Holderline was demeaned and brutalized by Hitler and Goebels, the political inhumanity of the past and the present has indeed demeaned and brutalized a considerable part of the English language with its global overlordship. Unlike the poet who must speak the language with passionate asceticism, the politician uses it with pointed indulgence. And the ever-willing media, unpoetic in its own right, lends the politician's indulgence a hand. That which cannot be contained by misleading euphemisms and double-speak, is bled by over-use and cliché.

We live in a world where the knowledge of atrocity and the blitheness of song go on co-existing. Forced levity and grim desperation betray the lacerated spirit of people all over the world where civil wars have raged and ethnic hate has ravaged its people. The purpose of atrocity so vile has been to erase, wipe, and annihilate the victim so that no form of commemoration of that erasure can serve to render it less complete. To the extent that we do entertain such commemorations we do so believing that it might, at least momentarily, assuage our sense of hopelessness. Nothing more. But we the unfallen cannot escape our responsibility to those who have died, be it for cause, kind or country, in virtue or villainy, of coincidence or culpability, in innocence or iniquity. The only way in which we can be responsible for the

fallen and to ourselves is by remembering them, not as numbers, nor as mere names, not even as Tamil, Sinhalese or Muslim, but as faces that we can recall and look into once more.

Which brings me back to the title of this evening's talk: *Whose Face is that I see?* It may well strike you as queer. Given that I am a professor of anthropology, perhaps you may expect me to say something new about an old but by now defunct and discredited area of inquiry peculiar to my discipline, the shapes and sizes of the human head, of which, the most unforgettable part is, of course, the face. Let me hasten to assure you that I do not have any intention of speaking of the face as a physical anthropologist of yore might have. Neither craniology nor phrenology interest me. But the face as a site of expression holds endless fascination for me; and it is no accident that of all expressive behavior, facial expression has received the most attention. We humans use patterned facial movements, as do many nonhuman primates, as the main mode of displaying signals that are emotion-specific. In South Asian dance forms, especially in *kathakkali,* every facial muscle is put at the service of art and expressive conventions. Scientists who have studied the facial expression of fetuses as young as eight weeks have found them to be sensitive to stimulation of their skin, especially in the area around the mouth, that very important orifice of the face that serves as the portal for the emergence of the gems and the germs of language, from expressive poems to the worn out expressions called cliché, the sentences of Abraham Lincoln and those of George Bush.

Have you ever seen a newborn infant discriminate between bitter, salty, and sweet? I tried it with my sons. It was a wonderfully amusing sight to see them betray, by their facial expressions, their innate preference for sweet tastes over sour or salty ones. Researchers tell us that the olfactory sense—itself intimately connected with our sense of taste—and the ability to expressively discriminate among odors are manifested earlier than most would imagine. Six-day-old infants can tell the smell of their own mother's breast from that of another mother.

If infants display, they also read facial expressions. As any of you who have spent any time around them knows, infants are quite partial for the sight of the human face. In the very first month after birth, they can tell one face from another by attending to the characteristics of eyes, nose, and mouth. I know of a little girl who took far more kindly to her grandmother with

her dentures off than with them on. Perhaps she appeared more harmless without them. By two months infants smile most readily in response to the sound of human voices, and by the third or fourth month they smile easily at the sight of a human face, especially one that is talking to or smiling at the infant. This is known as the social smile. It signals the beginning of the infant's emotional responses to other human beings. Researchers believe that infants know their mothers by sight even before the first month; and by the third month are able to discriminate between some facial expressions of the mother, among which are joy, sorrow and most significantly, for this memorial event, fear.

By the seventh month, an infant can recognize a familiar face from different perspectives: frontally or laterally. Infants can even identify the same facial expression on the faces of different people, different expression on the face of the same person, and can tell male from female faces. To read is to recognize. Recognition seems to indicate selective retention of some and forgetting of other elements of experience.

In light of all that we know about the human face and an infant's ability to read it, consider the following account of an incident that occurred when the Indian troops were in Jaffna, told to me by a thirteen-year-old asylum-seeker named Shoba, whom I interviewed in Seattle in 1989. I have written about this incident in *Charred Lullabies,* but in rummaging through my notes looking for a record of an unrelated dialogue that I had promised a film-maker friend of Radhika Coomaraswamy, I found the notes of my interview of Shoba instead. It is quite odd but almost certain that when an ethnographer returns, after a considerable length of time, to an original transcription of an interview and the translation of it that immediately followed, he or she will find that translation wanting. The translation rendered in my book was no exception, as you will see.

The Indian army had ordered the residents of the neighborhood to vacate their homes, so that its soldiers, in response to a tip-off, could carry out a search for the rumored Tigers and their weapons. One old woman had refused to leave; she merely huddled in a corner and whimpered as if terrified. Since the North Indian soldiers did not speak Tamil, they brought a South Indian officer—a Malayalee— known for his compassionate manner, to help them out. He ducked into the woman's low-doored hut and bent down to assure her, in the little Tamil he knew, that she would be safe under

his protection, and pleaded with her to leave the hut with him. Without warning, the woman pulled out a machine gun that had been concealed under the drape of her sari and cut the officer down. She in turn was killed by a spray of bullets fired by of one of the two Indian *jawans* who had been waiting outside for the Captain.

Even though the killing had taken place in another area of the peninsula, it was widely known that whenever a soldier was killed, the army would go on a rampage. (The Indian army was no different from the Sri Lankan, and the Sri Lankan army from the American army in Vietnam, in this respect. There are no nice armies. Armies at best are necessary evils, and seldom at that.) Furthermore, Shoba's father had heard that those neighborhoods that "stole electricity" by jerry-rigging connections to the main electricity line were thought to be LTTE sympathizers who were rewarded with LTTE expertise. As predicted by her father, that afternoon around four o'clock, a lorry full of soldiers came to the neighborhood. The men had been tipped off to the Indians' arrival and had fled. The soldiers ordered everybody to step out of their homes, and the homes were searched. After the search was finished, the residents, most of them women, and a few children, were told to go back in. Then a soldier came out of a house dragging a woman and her infant son. Shoba ran into the backyard to peek through the palm-frond fence (or kiduhu) and see what was happening. This is what she saw: A *jawan* asked the woman where the man of the house was. She said that she did not know. He shot her in the face, with a pistol. The woman fell backwards, dead, still holding on to her infant. When her hands let loose of her child and fell to her sides, the child, still seated on its mother's stomach, looked at its mother's face and started to scream. The soldiers left the child and its dead mother on the ground and walked out of the front gate. A few moments later, one of the soldiers returned to the screaming infant and shot him/her with one bullet in the back of the head. Suddenly there was not a sound to be heard.

There are a few minor amendments that I made in the translation I just read you. One detail that I had missed in my earlier translation, however, is the phrase, "the child . . .looked at her mother's face . . .." Clearly, I had missed its significance as well.

This detail triggers a whole set of questions. Did the soldier who shot the woman see that mother's face in its uniqueness, in its unlikeness

to all the other faces he had seen? Or had he seen just one more Tamil woman's terrified face? Did the old woman who shot the Malayalee officer see his officer's face, or did she see only the face of the generic enemy? Had the soldier who shot the infant in the back of the head looked at and seen the child's face, and all that it conveyed, would the story have ended differently? We don't know for sure, but it possibly would have, if he had really looked at, into and beyond the child's face. Yet, in this instance, it is only the mother and her baby who beheld one another, each seeing the other's face in all of its beauty and uniqueness. From what we know of how infants perceive and react to faces, we can be certain that the last thing the infant saw in her mother's face was not just fear, but terror; and we will never know how many things the mother saw in her baby's face.

I intend to speak neither about faces in general nor, in the final analysis, of any face in particular, even though I have and will use the examples of some faces that are etched in my own mind as a means of making my larger point about the face clearer. If I do not wish to speak of the face as if it were an abstraction, then neither do I wish to speak of it as a mere particular, one among many faces. I do wish to speak of each face I see, of each face that beckons me to respond to its unlikeness to all other faces. And I urge each one of you to do the same for yourselves. In other words, I do wish to speak about the face, as an ethicist should. I wish to speak of its unforgettability, its profundity and its mystery.

Fortunately or unfortunately, this infant victim, whose name or gender even Shoba did not know, did not live long enough to know what it was to live with the memory of a terror-stricken face. But how many other children have seen and survived, yet cannot bear witness to such terror, except in ways that neither they nor others they would encounter could understand? What named and unnamed disorders will be theirs to live through? What of their children and their children's children? How will the sight of a terrified face be passed on from generation to generation? How transformed? How will it be displaced, sublimated, repressed or resolved? How would we know what the face says, if it contains the unspeakable? And when we go beyond the written and the spoken language and learn to read faces and thereby know what is being said, what is to prevent us from dismissing it as the "said" instead of responding to the "saying?" To judge something as passed is to relegate it to the "said," and thereby read it as if it were cliché. If that is

how we see a face or remember a face, then we will have allowed ourselves to see that face and all that it says as cliché. But if we can look at that face with all the awe and humility it deserves, then we will be engaged in the understanding of the "saying" rather than the said, the quickened present instead of the dead past or the past as dead, we will have read that face as an ethicist should.

What do I mean when I say, I speak of the face, as an ethicist should? Or what might I mean when I call upon each one of us to look at the face of another, as an ethicist would? This idea of the face or *le visage* comes from the writings of the French philosopher, the late Emmanuel Levinas. Neither time nor conversance allows me to explicate Levinas's theory of *Le Visage* in all its complex theoretical ramifications. Let it be sufficient to note that Levinas considered the face to be that part of the body of other people that is most readily and most often visible. It is also the most expressive part of the body, and the part of the body that is most intently read.

The French *le visage* connotes something more than the English *face. Le Visage* refers to seeing and being seen. It is closer to the Sanskrit *darshan* than it is to the Tamil *mukam*, the Sinhala *muna* or the English *face. Darshan,* as you most likely know, is beholding and being beheld by the deity. As Purnima Mankekar, following Diana Eck phrases it, "*darshan* is not simply a passive act of seeing but seeing and being beheld by the deity." (1999:200) In fact, in Tamil, *par,* and its derivatives *parvai* and *parttal* are not only closer renditions of *le visage* than is *mukam* or even *darshan,* but convey even more of what I, following Levinas would like to convey than even *le visage* does. *Par* (*Balanne*, in Sinhala) is the imperative, *look* or *see.* But it also means to *meet*, as in, "*avarai vitiyil parttuppecinen"* "I *met* him on the street and spoke to him." The noun *parvai* refers not only to the act of *looking*, *seeing* or *viewing* (as in "His body lay in state for *viewing* by the public," [*avarudaya pudavudal podumakkalin parvaikkaka mantapattil vaikkappattiruntatu*]) but also the act of being *looked at* (as in "Her glance or look *touched* me" [*avaludaiya parvai en mel pattatu*]. *Parvai* also refers to one's appearance, as we would say in the local dialect, "He is a good looker" [*avanukku or parvaiana muka amaippu undu*]. *Parvai* may be used to refer to a *point of view*, an *approach* or to the act of *examining* or *supervising*, and even to the act of *choosing* (as in "We are choosing a bridegroom for her" [*nankal ivalukku mappillai parkkirom*]).

Ah, the *face* as *parvai* and all its connotations: the countenance, the encounter, the appearance, the examination, the seeing, the being seen, the point of view, the approach, the looking for, and the choosing! How rich a word it is, especially in Tamil and Sinhala! But we must, to all these secular connotations, add the sense of the Sanskrit *darshan*, the encounter of seeing and being seen by the divine. Suffice it to say the divine or God need not be necessarily a religious idea. The "divine" or "God" are but provisional labels for phenomena that are too deep to fathom and yet invite us to explore. As such, they are but placeholders for something or things that cannot be reduced to the familiar, for they cannot be fit into the categories that we already possess, in short they are unnamable. The divine is in the face of my radical Other that I cannot presume to understand by reducing it to what I already know or already am, in short, by reducing the Other to the Same. And yet the Other's face is such that I but ignore what it is saying, and cannot reduce the Saying to the Said

Allow me to return to ethnography. And again I ask you to kindly bear with me as I read a somewhat lengthy excerpt [with minor changes] from my book, *Charred Lullabies* in which the face figures so centrally.

In 1990, I spoke with Kamalam in a refugee camp in India. Having lost her son in an army raid five years earlier, and having lost every last photograph of him with her house—it went up in flames when a helicopter gunship dropped a gasoline bomb on it—she confessed that she could no longer remember what her son's face looked like. His features had become vague and confused. She remembered his gait, his school uniform, even his bicycle, but she could not recall his face. She wished she had looked and looked and looked at his face longer and more intently when he had been alive so that it would have been ineradicably etched in her mind. All the albums containing his photograph had been burned with the house. This did not, however, prevent her from seeing her son appear in the face of every young man who came to the camp. Some of them were pacifists, some were seasoned fighters, some were terrorists, some were politicians, some were entrepreneurs, and some were just boys. But traces of her son's face appeared and disappeared in all of them. The more they ruffled the clarity of her memory, the more she longed to be able to see her son again, clearly; but the ever-changing faces of the present got in the way of her enframing the face of her son, in memory or in expectation. In my

interview with her in her refugee camp at Mandapam she complained of her eyesight, blaming it for her inability to recall her son's face clearly. Instead of projecting her loss onto her missing son, she introjected the loss of her son to the loss of eyesight. She had just turned thirty-five. As for why her eyes had dimmed, she blamed the sea by which she sat from sunrise to sundown. I asked her why she stared at the sea. She said that at first she did so because she had been told that Jaffna was only twenty miles away and that on a clear day she might be able to see it. When some of her fellow refugees found out what she was doing, they disabused her of that hope. Some other refugees reminded her that even if she could see the shores of Jaffna, her home was not in Jaffna but in Vavuniya, which was farther south. This had reminded her that her home was not even in Vavuniya, for she was born in the hills of the tea country, in the south-central highlands of Sri Lanka.

> "You are not from Jaffna," they tell me. "You are from Vavuniya." I tell them, "Look here, I am not even from Vavuniya but one who was born on the tea estates." The biggest mistake my father made was to take us to Vavuniya. "Yes," I say, "I am a *tottakkattan*." "She is an Indian Tamil!" they say, as if they have seen a ghost. "But the camp authorities think she is Sri Lankan," says one of the kankanis. "Look here," I say, "you are here in Mandapam. This is the same camp from which *my* ancestors left for the tea estates one hundred years ago."

Thus she presents the past. She stares determinedly, expecting the tall mountains of the tea country to make their appearance over the horizon and vindicate her anger. She says that of course, she knows that this is not going to happen. "But anger does strange things to your mind. I know that the distance is too far and what is gone is gone, but I don't have to think," she says. Occasionally a wave from the distant past rolls toward her. But most of the time she lives thinking, "What happened, what will happen, who knows." Then she poignantly adds, "I don't say, 'Tomorrow my son might come.' I say, 'Here he comes. Here I see his face.' That is the way I see. That is how my life is."

Postscript: In the summer of 1994 I attempted to track down Kamalam. The camp by the sea was being dismantled. Kamalam's batch of refugees

had long since left—escaped, died, or returned to Sri Lanka to live or die. Arrangements for the remaining refugees to be sent back to Sri Lanka were well under way. Where Kamalam had stood the last time I saw her, a russet-colored dog kept watch. The only one to remember Kamalam was an Indian fisherman. According to him, the hours that Kamalam spent looking at the sea began earlier and earlier and lasted later and later until toward the end she spent all night and day by the ocean's edge. She did not know one day from the next. She said that she was waiting for her ancestors who had left to work on the hills of the tea estates. Not for her son—she never mentioned her son—but for her great-grandfather and great-grandmother. "They went for *perattu*,"[2] she would say. "Behold, they will

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2 Kamalam saw her son's face. She saw through it and beyond it. In so doing she saw the faces of other mothers' sons approach her. Her son was her god; she saw god's face in her son; and by extension, she saw the divine in all of them. One way to look at the progression of her vision is to see her reducing her world, her totality, to what is most familiar to her, herself and her's. We may say that she sees her entire world as her son, who we could argue, is after all nothing but an extension of herself. Levinas, following a philosophical tradition as old as Plato, considers this movement as seeing the Other as the Same, in which the Same is another term for the self or the subject, as a form of egology. In the Hegelian dialectic, for instance, the Other is acknowledged, only to be appropriated, possessed or suppressed. The Same is primary. What is popularly known as agency-theory these days is no more than an egology. This kind of appropriation of the Other by the Same or the self has a long tradition, not only in western thought, but also in some eastern philosophical schools of thought. Alternately, one could say that Kamalam moves away from herself, away from her son, away towards other faces, away towards her god, towards the divine, towards the mostly unknown and unknowable. This second interpretation finds support in the fact that Kamalam does not see more clearly, but less clearly, she moves from greater certainty to less certainty, she moves from a reducible and comprehensive Totality to an irreducible, incomprehensible Infinity. The god or *deivam* that she sees has no name. It is not Siva, not Vishnu, not Jesus Christ. Again, to be sure, what Levinas calls the divine need not be a theistic or even a religious concept; it refers to something we know only darkly, dimly, vaguely. The divine or god stands for what she does not understand. At most, it is something vaguely familiar that leads her into the increasingly unfamiliar, the distant, the not-mine, and the not-self, in short, the Other. To phrase it differently, the duality is no longer between a particular being and a totalizing Being, but between the self-same and the infinitely different, in short, between the conceit of Totality and the humbling effect of Infinity.

come! (*Ito parunka, vantiruvanka*)." For her, neither death nor distance had consumed them. People who knew her had tried to take her with them when they left, but she had refused to go. "Then," continued the fisherman, "one day, she was gone. Some say soldiers took her away. Some say she went to the hills of Kodaikanal to work on the new potato farms. Others say she went with the sea. My wife thinks she is still around. I think she'll come back." As for me, I still see her

> . . . listening
> to the surf as it falls.
> the power and inexhaustible freshness of the sea,
> the suck and inner boom
> as a wave tears free and crashes back
> in overlapping thunders going away down the beach
> It is the most we know of time
> and it is our undermusic of eternity.
> *(Galway Kinnell)*

Knowledge of all kinds partakes in what we might call, ontological imperialism, the hidden purpose of which is to offset the shock of Otherness. To know is to tame, to appropriate, to make it one's own; to understand is to, conquer, colonize or convert. There is no doubt that we do need knowledge in life, if not to conquer, colonize and convert, then simply to live. The will to know, however, may not have limits but it does have its limitations. Can we reverse matters, and privilege the Other over the Same and thereby escape totality-thinking? No. That would only lead to the invasion of the Same by the Other, and thereby, ultimately end up in the suppression of one term by the other.

What is our task then? What is the central difficulty we face? We need a way of being in the world in such a way that Self and Other are both preserved as independent and self-sufficient; but yet, in relationship with one another. This is easier said than done.

There was a time in Jaffna when smoldering corpses by the side of the road was such a common sight that even death ceased to horrify and wore a cliché on its face. To illustrate the casualness with death was treated, let me read a transcription of a conversation between two Vellalah ladies as reported to me:

1st Lady: Whose body is that burning over there?
2nd Lady: I think it is that Nalavan?
1st Lady: Which Nalavan? The one who taps your trees?
2nd Lady: No, not that one. It is that Christian fellow, the islander. A big family too.
1st Lady: Pavam! By the way, can you send your Nalavan to pluck mangos from our trees? They are ripe beyond bearing and my boy (helper), I lost him last year, you know? They shot him too. There is such a shortage of help these days. It is such a hassle!

Leaving aside the casualness of the conversation, the detachment from the victim and the indifference to detail, it is a dialogue about knowledge. It is an answer to the question: who is that man? What relation does the dead man, that Other, bear to me—the self, the same? The response, as would be expected, brings the Other into the self's sphere of sufficient familiarity—no more, no less—thus making the Other comprehensible from the perspective of the Self and thereby reducing its true Otherness.

This vignette occupies one extreme of knowledge, marked by unconcern, incuriosity, apathy, emotional inertia and indifference. The knowledge gained is sufficient, plenty, enough, even more than enough. The relationship is attenuated, but easily extended by replacement, as expected. If my helper leaves me today, your helper could take his place tomorrow. Life goes on. Kamalam's relationship to her son occupies the other extreme: intense, intimate, ardent, feverish, wrenching and love-fraught. Irreplaceable. Unfathomable. You can almost hear her moan:

Oh my dear one, I shall grieve for you
For the rest of my life with slightly
Varying cadence, oh my dear one.
(From Geoffrey Hill's *King Log*)

The Second Lady says of her "boy" or helper, "I lost him." Kamalam, in a deeply significant sense did not lose him. On what basis do I make such a claim? I do so on the basis of the wisdom compacted into a single copla written by the poet English poet, Geoffrey Hill. He wrote:

"One cannot lose what one has not possessed."
So much for that abrasive gem.
I can lose what I want. I want you.

Even though it may seem counter-intuitive, we cannot lose the ones we truly love, because we can lose only what we possess, and we can never possess someone we truly love. We truly love someone when we love that person for what he or she is, not because that person can be made into me or mine. The mother who loved her son beyond everything else was able to love him so, and still love him and want him, only because she never possessed him. The wife who loses her husband, whom she loved beyond everything else and still loves him, never possessed him. The last line in the poem is made up of two brief sentences. The first sentence reads: "I can lose what I want." The tone is petulant. Almost childish. "I can lose what I want!" Lady # 2 can lose the servant that she wants, unwillingly or even willfully. It is the flip side of "I can have whatever I want." Again, childish, petulant and spoiled. The sentiment is entitlement, not love. Whether she loses or has what she wants, the relationship will be one in which neither partner is truly free, free of label and role incumbency. This first sentence, then—"I can lose what I want,"— is to be read as distinct from the second sentence, even though they both occur in the same line. For the second sentence reads: "I want you." In it you feel the ache of love and longing. Not "I need you," but "I want you." The chasm that separates the first from the second is as wide a canyon.

What is the difference? Our Vellala ladies *need* their other, their servant. But Kamalam *desires* her son; and the widow *desires* her departed husband. Needs indicate a lack or an absence that can be filled. Desire is insatiable. Levinas puts it aphoristically: "Desire is desire for the absolutely Other." (1969:23) One's desire for the Other cannot be satisfied, whereas one's need for the other, can. The Other is desired as Other, desired for his or her Otherness. By contrast, one needs the other, because he or she can be reduced to the Same, to the needs of the self. The Levinasian scholar, Colin Davis, phrases it in the following way: "The loved one is *caressed*, not *possessed*."

By capitalizing the "O" in "Other," the Self-Other relationship is made into one of reverence not mere relevance. The Other is neither an object of

knowledge nor of experience. Knowledge is *my* knowledge, experience is *my* experience. The Other *qua* Other, exceeds *me* and *mine.*

The face, for one who is prepared to look, is uncommon, even uncanny. It could be disturbing and disquieting in its uniqueness. Bernard Waldenfels describes the human face as "the foyer of such bewilderments, lurking at the borderlines that separate the normal from the anomalous (2002:63). I have used the example of Kamalam's son's face as that which triggers her desire for her son whom she wishes not to possess but to caress, as an illustration of an Otherness that lurks at the border of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown.

Neither you nor I would recognize Kamalam's son's face, nor would we able to recognize the face of the infant described to me by Shoba. In order to bring it closer to home, I would like to leave you with the lesson of the face by summoning before your eyes the face of a man whom all of us, even those who have seen him but once, would instantly recognize. I speak of the face of the unforgettable Neelan Tiruchelvam. I hope you will pardon me if I make this personal. I remember the first time I saw Neelan's face. I also remember the second, third and the n^{th} time I saw, and recognized his face, probably recognizing his face differently on each subsequent occasion. Yet there remained an Otherness in him that defied my need to subject this man to *my* definition of who he was. What was the source of this Otherness that I failed to comprehend? In order to answer this question as accurately as I can, I need to adhere to the facts as they unfolded. Strictly speaking, it began the other way around. Neelan was the first to see my face. Or rather, I felt that Neelan saw my face first. And I use "face" in the extended sense that I have developed thus far. He saw in me something that transcended the familiar, something that exceeded all that he knew about me from my writing, from others' accounts about me and even my own accounts of myself. In fact, he was not that interested in the facts of my persona and my life that were readily available and easily drawn from the totality of his world. What I strongly felt in our encounter was his dethronement of all prejudgements; the "is" of his knowledge gave way to the "ought" in his wisdom. His interest in me was extra-ordinary, uncommon. Not only did he dethrone his prejudgments but he also made me the sovereign of the moment and himself my diligent and discerning servant, concerned of my needs. This great man seemed to see in me virtues that eluded my own

awareness. He made himself responsible for me and responsive to me. He had summoned the fundamental asymmetry into the relationship that obtained between self and Other, not the illusory asymmetry that inheres in the relationship between the Lord and bondsman.

As I said, what began in one direction, reversed itself in short order. Here was a man before me in whose face I could see that he was so much more than he appeared to be. Here was a man who was quick to dispense with familiar formalities and formal familiarities. And yet, he was capable of exalting me, not by flattery but by the sincerest reverence for the incomprehensible in me, the Other in myself. Before me sat a man who I knew would be willing to dedicate his life to, and if need be lay down his life for, his fellow-man. Conversely, if he but fleetingly expected another's sacrifice in return, would have considered himself a murderer. Here was a face or a *parvai* that served as the foyer in which so much that was unique and incomprehensible was assembled. Given the times of our meetings— they were dangerous ones— he never tired of making himself responsible for my safety, my well-being, my life. I am sure that I am not the only one who has had this experience with Neelan. Others have spoken of him likewise. As far as Neelan was concerned, the very existence of another, made him responsible for that Other. His passion was disinterested; he never calculated the cost. His *parvai* was an *enigma*, an invisible revelation, and an epiphany. Above all, his *parvai* was unfailingly ethical.

If terror is to be hunted down, it must be banished from cliché. We need to rely not on the told, but in the telling. We have heard it told and told ourselves of acts of terror in ways that incite rage and revenge, hate and pride, pity and compassion, action and stunned repose. But we need to find new ways of speaking of terror so as to hold terror itself at bay, to check its advance into the general and the commonplace, to restrict it to the particular. If terror is not to become cliché, it must be remembered in the details of its manifestations, the details of face. I hope that some day, the Indian soldier who shot the mother who was holding her baby will come to know terror, know it as it was in that mother's face; or come to know all that is unnamable—which, for want of another word, could only be called "divine"—as it was in the baby's face that he never looked at before shooting it in the back of its head. In Neelan's face, I never saw fear, let alone terror, but what I did see was faith, hope and love. If there were only three antidotes

to terror that one could choose, one couldn't do better than ask for faith, hope and love. If, however, faith, hope and love themselves were not to become clichés, they must be remembered in and learned from the details of face. For me at least, such details appear and reappear in the memory of Neelan Tiruchelvam's face.

These thoughts are my humble offering on this day, the twentieth anniversary of July 28th 1983, to you Sithi, Nirgunan and Mitran, to all of you in this hall this evening who are fortunate to be numbered among the unfallen, to the memory of the slain, and most of all to the memory of our dear friend, Neelan Tiruchelvam. Thank you for coming, thank you for listening, and thank you for your time and your patience.

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