

**Back to the Other Levinas:**  
**Reflections prompted by Alain P. Toumayan's**  
***Encountering the Other: The Artwork and the Problem of***  
***Difference in Blanchot and Levinas.***

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Since the exultant reception of Levinas' work, particularly in the United States, an imposing obstacle to this oeuvre has steadily been erected. It is not Levinas' complicated, often unstated philosophical disputations, nor his exhortatory style, nor even the originality of his argument that constitute the most formidable obstructions to his work today. On the contrary, the greatest difficulty today is the ease with which Levinas is arrogated, a facility that risks making him so accessible as to be wholly irrelevant. The ubiquity in contemporary intellectual circles of an "ethics of the other" leads, from ever diverse paths, directly to Levinas; and it is just this that prevents us from reading him well.

For some time the greatest obstacle to Levinas' work has been the glib and vague moralising piled upon it. Most often what we hear about Levinas from those who speak in his name are agitated appeals for a "responsibility for the other," appeals which remain not only politically but even ethically unspecified. Those who have sung Levinas' praises most heartily tend to belong notionally to the Left. After all, from where could the orphan, the

widow, the poor – the stranger, “the Other” – appear but from the Left? Tellingly, however, the Levinasian Left is usually rather “depoliticized,” following Levinas’ own precarious suspension of the compromises and calculations of politics, expressed in his appeal, *Politique après!*<sup>1</sup> The irony here is that Levinas begins his critique of Husserl with a potent critique of the “purely theoretical” method of the phenomenological reduction but ends up with an ethics that is so impassive, indeed formal, that it risks itself becoming pure theory.<sup>2</sup> Levinas is thus not altogether exculpated from the anaemic realisation of his thought. The ineffectuality results not merely because Levinas never *extended* his vision of ethics into the field of manifold, often antagonistic relations – that is, into life – but also because he wrote *too much, too often and, ironically, too reductively* about the enigma of the other. Reading Levinas’ later essays, most of which, it is important to recall, he was invited to deliver to generally Christian seminaries in northern continental Europe, one could get the impression that for Levinas there is very little to life beside an obsessive relation with the other that is wholly determined ethically, supplemented perhaps by an almost secret reference to the real authority behind the face, be it God or the impersonal “third” of *illegitimacy*. It is of course in this secret reference to the authority behind the face that the true Levinas should be sought, as Derrida already pointed out in 1964, and not in a fetishised relation of responsibility to any particular other person.<sup>3</sup> Thus it is the transcendence of the anonymous and/or the divine that is the real and non-ethical source of (ethical) subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

That is why, despite the admittedly “somewhat narrow focus” adopted by Alain P. Toumayan (2), many readers of Levinas will benefit from his re-focusing our attention on the latter’s work. The modesty of intent allows Toumayan to examine the “mutual inspiration” of Blanchot and Levinas in considerable detail, a task wholly justified by the novelty and authority of their writings.<sup>5</sup> Reading Toumayan one could pinch oneself to remember that Levinas is, after all, arguably the most obsessive moral perfectionist in the western philosophical tradition. The virtue of this book is that it hardly touches on Levinas the moralist. Such forgetfulness is a welcome relief, and helps bring back into relief dimensions of Levinas’ thinking that have often been unduly subordinated “to the Other.”

### Art or Ethics?

Toumayan’s focus is on the work of art, aesthetics as it is developed through the encounter between Levinas and Blanchot. One of his great strengths is to engage Levinas as a philosopher of the real, a thinker inquiring into the most intimate and extreme conditions of human life, rather than

the plain moralist with stock platitudes that lack all specification. If Levinas is to retain any of the vitality that unquestionably animates his greatest works, it will have to be despite the moral reductionism that characterises his academic popularity. Toumayan helps us return to the dynamic Levinas, to the site of the great human tension where we are enjoined to work out why life is, as Levinas insists, less important than the imperatives of life, though at a stage when such imperatives have not yet resolved their original, animating ambiguity. We are taken back to the vibrant beginnings of Levinas thought, to a Levinas who is still on the way to ethics, before he has discovered the Shibboleth of “responsibility for the Other.” We return to a time of uncertainty, where responsibility – subjectivity – is not yet betrayed by being aligned exclusively with *autrui*, the other person. Though such is not Toumayan’s stated intention, his book helps us overcome the greatest challenge facing readers of Levinas today, to deface the Other and demoralise responsibility.

The vitality and intrigue of this nascent stage to Levinas’ thinking lies in his struggle to find a way out of nihilistic, impersonal existence and to overcome materialistic solipsism. The way out has not yet been marked *l'éthique*; eroticism, myth and especially art are engaging temptations to which Levinas is still prepared to yield. The key work of Levinas analysed by Toumayan is, with good reason, an essay from 1947, *Existence and Existents*, one of the few true masterpieces of phenomenological thinking, “written down for the most part in captivity” during the War.<sup>6</sup> At the centre of this book lies Levinas’ much discussed and equally misunderstood concept of the *il y a*, the amorphous, undifferentiated background of *there is* existence upon which our world of identifiable, illuminated objects appears. The *il y a* is the remainder of life which remains when both being and nothingness have been drained out of it, a mythic region of “existence without a world” which Levinas describes as the real substratum of meaningful human life.<sup>7</sup>

One of Toumayan’s central and most persuasive claims is that the encounter between Blanchot and Levinas takes place in this abyssal realm of *il y a* existence.<sup>8</sup> It was Levinas who discovered the *il y a* as a site for exploring the exoticism of life, how the clarity of being gives way to an opacity of existence, an opacity that even death does not overcome. That, according to Levinas, is the flaw with both Hegel’s conceptual dialectic and Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology. The latter, according to Levinas, tames the exoticism of life by feigning to disclose the totality of being and to master death by acceding to the null truth of “being-as-a-whole.” Moreover this pretension to mastery is repeated more grievously on the plane of ethics when Dasein lays hold of the power for disclosing the Other as but a

participant in one's own anxiously self-absorbed appropriation of the truth of being.<sup>9</sup> Hegel likewise identifies the concept of being with that of nothingness, making both equally adequate to comprehension. He too seeks to expunge the otherness of the real, to domesticate its uncanny spectre through the use of concepts. The descriptions of the excess of *il y a* existence over being-in-the-world thus provide Levinas with a way of contesting and resisting philosophical intellectualism, replacing it with an account of the real that neither the phenomenology of being nor the dialectic of reason can appropriate.

But if Levinas first taught that the real is not a philosophical concept, the point was not to return to this "undetermined menace."<sup>10</sup> The task of abiding in such horror was taken up by Blanchot, who saw the *il y a* as the very space of literature, the occasion when writing betrays its marriage to meaning in search of a life of its own. The *il y a*, recall, is existence deprived of light and intelligibility, beyond or indeed otherwise than being in the world. So when Blanchot challenges the way ordinary language appropriates and thus annihilates existing things for the sake of its general economy of meaning it is not surprising that the other language that emerges, literature, can only occupy a space of darkness and contestation, of language existing in the twilight of meaning where it loses its mastery over the objects it identifies. The interesting thing is that Levinas and Blanchot meet like opposing secret agents at the border of the *il y a*, each one suspicious of the other's destination. If for Levinas the *il y a* is troubling, haunting, the abject that must be overcome or repressed for the world to be accomplished, for Blanchot this very spectrality becomes an obsession, a fascination, the only real space for the essential solitude of the writer, for here alone do words outlast their instrumental meaning. The *il y a* presents a fundamental choice for those who cross it: art or ethics? Levinas turns away from the *il y a* toward ethics, for it is the ethical relation with an other that sends the unworld of the *il y a* to the background and replaces it with a stable, intersubjective world. Ethics thus spans the distance between the foundational chaos of the *il y a* and the everyday, objective or intersubjective world. For his part Blanchot heads straight for the *il y a*. For him this unworldly origin is the writer's goal, for literature begins only when the ordinary, representational power of language fails and another language is presented in its place, the other language of the *il y a*, "that deep fund of impotence to which everything reverts [ce fond d'impuissance où tout retombe]."<sup>11</sup> That is why Levinas criticised his friend for *not* taking leave of the *il y a*, while Blanchot criticised Levinas for doing exactly that.<sup>12</sup> All this is clear from Toumayan's study. We might, however, venture two further steps, one forward and one sideward.

### Art and Ethics

If indeed Blanchot “reproduces the basic terms” of Levinas’ account of the *il y a* while “reversing its direction,” moving toward the *il y a* rather than away from it, looking ahead we can observe an interesting reversal of just this reversal (155). In the 1970’s, Levinas having spent some three decades putting the distance of ethics between himself and the chaotic horror of the *il y a*, the *il y a* returns to the ethically rendered world to disturb and threaten all of its accomplishments. In *Otherwise than Being* the *il y a* is no longer, as Toumayan acknowledges, a transcendental stratum to be surpassed by the ethical subject. By now Levinas has abandoned the transcendental method that still determined his earlier thought and there is no longer any talk of a pre-ethical self, a transcendental subject who would accomplish the world by moving beyond its original isolated encounter with the *il y a*. Now, rather, ethics itself is the original, unsurpassable condition; there is no self prior to the ethical relation, not even one facing off against the *il y a*.<sup>13</sup> However this does not mean, as one might expect, that the *il y a* disappears once and for all or has been vanquished. There remains the threat that the ethical world may yet collapse, reduced to vicious chaos. From where does this danger come? How can the *il y a* still threaten the ethical relation if that relation is original? The reason is that while responsibility-for-the-other is indeed now in the original position and therefore there is no neutral existence to be overcome, this responsibility-for-the-other itself runs the risk of radical indeterminacy in which the Other is confused with the *il y a* itself.<sup>14</sup> The *il y a* thus returns in Levinas’ later work not as the original chaos out of which order is accomplished ethically but as Levinas’ acknowledgement that “the Other” to whom one is “immemorially” related is no longer assured its human face. To be sure, “ethics” precedes the isolated existence of individuals and the first given is, as Toumayan shows, the givenness of a relation. But on condition that this original relation no longer be restricted to ethics or responsibility but appear, rather, in its original, confused neutrality. Thus the *il y a*, as it appears at the end of Levinas’ work no less than at the beginning, threatens to overwhelm the ethical relation with its impersonal, chaotic otherness.

It is just this that Blanchot understands and hence he rejects Levinas’ exclusively ethical approach to the other. And yet while Blanchot is thus in a way more loyal or open to the otherness of the *il y a*, refusing to let the moral authority of the stranger commandeer its unappropriable strangeness and transcendence, he too acknowledges that this otherness assails the human relation in a privileged manner:

Each time we project strangeness onto a non-human being or refer

the movement of the unknown back to the universe, we disburden ourselves of the weight of the human ... whose presence gives us all measure of strangeness. (*IC* 60, trans. modified)

Where, then, if not in “ethics” or “responsibility,” does the otherness of the *il y a* impose itself on the human relation? For Blanchot, it is in friendship and community rather than “the language of ordinary morality” that this otherness intrudes upon us (*WD* 25-6). The argument here is that the language of “ethics” or “responsibility-for-the-other” falsely attempts to purify and determine the relation with the other and thus responds to it “only abusively, naming it by its contrary” (*WD* 25-6). Having abandoned identity, the relation to the other can no longer refer to action, agency or the ability to calculate “in the most facile way possible” consequences that can only be put to “the service of order” (*WD* 25-6). Thus Blanchot finds “only secondary meanings” in the terms *ethics* and *responsibility*, preferring instead the neutral relations of friendship and community (*IC* 60). In friendship the “*common strangeness*” abides so that “*what separates becomes relation*” without determining this relation in terms of the instrumentality of the world (*F* 291), while community itself is the sharing of a “relation of transcendence” that lacks all identity and thus can likewise never be put to work (*UC* 10).<sup>15</sup>

Levinas and Blanchot thus diverge at the *il y a* only to cross paths again at the same spot; Levinas uncharacteristically acknowledging that the other person must be abandoned to the indeterminacy of transcendence and Blanchot likewise acknowledging that its neutral, impersonal otherness is perhaps most intimately attested in human conversation, friendship and community. Toumayan is thus right that Blanchot opens by reversing the direction of Levinas’ argument. But looking ahead we see that this reversal is itself reversed, first by Levinas when he admits to the defacement of the other to the point of a “possible confusion with the agitation of the *there is [il y a]*” and then by Blanchot when he accepts the impersonal but all too human character of the encounter with the *il y a*.<sup>16</sup> All this must be acknowledged if we are to accept that there is never literature without ethics, just as there is never ethics without a range of equally original, antithetical relations to the real. There can therefore be no absolute priority to the ethical relation but only a relation that is immemorially compromised by the ambiguities of the real. Only in thus moving beyond ethics can we go back to Levinas.

### The Myth of Levinas’ Ethics

A second step, sideways from Toumayan’s book, affords an altogether different angle on the ambiguous origins of Levinas’ work. Here it is *Totality*

and *Infinity* that provides the correct distance by which to gain perspective on the *il y a*. In this work Levinas modifies the *il y a* in a slight way that nevertheless sends us to an entirely different landscape. In this magnificent book the *il y a* continues to serve a transcendental function, providing Levinas with the background condition from which an isolated subject emerges in order to accomplish an ethical world. However what is interesting in *Totality and Infinity* is the mythic status given to this pre-worldly existence under the title of “the element.”<sup>17</sup> Not that one should be surprised. As Levinas himself says, that which is “outside of being and the world... must be called mythical.”<sup>18</sup>

What sort of a myth is this? Toumayan refers to Catherine Chalié, one of France’s foremost Levinas scholars, who suggests that the *il y a* recalls the *tōhū wābōhū*, the “unformed and void” (JPS trans. Gen. 1:2) upon which the act of creation takes place.<sup>19</sup> We shall do well to explore the biblical story of creation in more detail, for Levinas’ account of the emergence of the self out of “mythic,” “elemental” existence parallels in a profound way the biblical myth of the world’s hard won order wrested from the powerful forces of chaos and evil that precede creation. Moreover, the Bible no less than Levinas suggests that the created order is vulnerable to collapsing into the original chaotic disorder and evil upon which it is founded.

What is the biblical conception of creation? This question, far too manifold and beyond my capacities to explore, can nonetheless be approached with a view to learning a great deal about the theological origins to Levinas’ thought, and perhaps even to shed light on an obscure theological spectre to Blanchot’s avowed atheism. Jon D. Levenson’s remarkable book, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, clears the ground of our “ontotheological” misreading of creationism in the Bible as *creatio ex nihilo* and presents in its place a resounding account of the dramatic risk that the created world runs as it hovers over the brink of chaos.<sup>20</sup> Levenson shows that for a major voice in the Bible creation takes place not out of nothing but in opposition to “disorder, injustice, affliction, and chaos, which are, in the Israelite worldview, one.”<sup>21</sup> The alternative to a created world is not the abstract philosophical concept of nothing or nothingness. Rather, “creation is a positive that stands in pronounced opposition to the harsh negative of chaos. The world is good; the chaos that it replaces or suppresses is evil.”<sup>22</sup> My claim is that Levinas deploys profound biblical intuitions in acknowledging and describing the *il y a*, which fits the bill described by Levenson as the disordered, chaotic and thus evil “substratum of creation.”<sup>23</sup> In the Bible, as in the world Levinas describes as “accomplished” or “created” from the abyssal horror of the *il y a*, we observe the “fragility of the created order and its vulnerability to chaos,” from which follows “the

role of humanity in forming and sustaining the world order” through its endeavour “to neutralize the powerful and ongoing threat of chaos.”<sup>24</sup> The role of chaos in the Bible, the *tōhū wābōhū* or “unformed and void” of Genesis 1:2, is precisely the role played by the *il y a* in Levinas’ ethics.<sup>25</sup> It is the persistent threat of deforming, indeed unforming or decreasing the world, a world whose order is only retained by continually warding off the threat of chaos, for Levinas through ethics and for the Bible through the covenantal relation that includes moral and cultic obligations. Accordingly, “creation becomes the corollary of covenant”; “the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing [Levinas might add: *pace* Hegel and Heidegger, *pace* philosophy] but the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order.”<sup>26</sup> This narrative of chaos followed by order followed by a covenant invested with the task of keeping the chaos at bay should now be seen as the template for what Paul Davies rightly calls Levinas’ “linear narrative” in which *il y a* is followed by “hypostasis” then by the “ethics” that accomplishes or creates the world.<sup>27</sup> The *il y a* is thus a theologico-mythic origin, the primordial chaos of the “unformed and void” from which a created world emerges on the basis of a covenantal or ethical relationship.<sup>28</sup> Moreover the moral charge of the *il y a* is one of radical evil precisely because it is opposed to the created order of the world in which human life ought to flourish (see Gen. 1: 28-29).

Not just the argument, but also the imagery of biblical chaos anticipates the *il y a*. Toumayan has shown how reliant Levinas and Blanchot are on aquatic images in order to describe their experience of the *il y a* – think of Thomas’ entry into the sea which leads him to the obscurity of existence, the other night, the space of literature and finally the disaster itself. Likewise the imagery used by the biblical authors, inherited and modified from Babylonian and Canaanite mythology, is for the most part a sea of symbols and figures, gods and elements that dramatise the threatening and sometimes actual experience of the world’s dissolution. The threat of oceanic chaos is overcome provisionally in the act of creation but persists into our own time – one cannot but think of the recent *tsunamis*; terrible reminders of the vulnerability of our ordered or, in biblical terms, created world and of the horror that assaults when that order is suspended by the opposing force of oceanic chaos – and is finally vanquished only in redemption, *Endzeit gleicht Urzeit*, when the primordial waters are definitively subdued. Not only is there “water” in the beginning alongside the “unformed and void” and “darkness” of Genesis 2:1, all three commingled in opposition to “the wind of God” that creates light and order and then pronounces this order “good,” but there are significant further accounts in the Bible that tell, in decidedly aquatic imagery, of a primordial combat myth when chaos



was subjugated and replaced with order:

it was You who drove back the sea with Your might,  
 who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters;  
 it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan [who resides in  
 the sea],  
 who left him as food for the denizens of the desert.  
 (Ps. 74: 13-14)<sup>29</sup>

“The immediate background of this passage,” says Levenson, “is a Canaanite myth... (ca. 14th century B.C.E.), in which the god Baal defeated the ocean, there conceived as masculine and known variously as Prince Yamm (‘Sea’), Judge River, Lotan (the biblical ‘Leviathan’), the twisting seven-headed dragon, and ‘Tannin,’ some other sort of monster.”<sup>30</sup> The story of the Flood, long recognised to recapitulate the story of creation on a more explicitly moral plane, again shows how the chaotic forces of water are opposed to the moral order of creation.

All the fountains of the great deep burst apart,  
 And the floodgates of the sky broke open. (Gen. 7:11)

Another striking and important source for the primordial but provisional suppression of oceanic chaos which produces a stable, created world is Isaiah 51:<sup>31</sup>

Awake, awake, clothe yourself with splendor,  
 O arm of the LORD!  
 Awake as in days of old [*qedem*],  
 As in former ages!  
 It was you who hacked Rahab in pieces,  
 That pierced the Dragon [*tannin*].  
 It was you that dried up the Sea [*yām*],  
 The waters of the great deep [*tēhôm*];  
 That made the abysses of the Sea  
 A road the redeemed might walk. (Isa. 51:9-10)

All the references to the Dragon (*tannin*), the Sea (*yam*) and the great deep (*tēhôm*) explicitly recall the opening account of creation in Genesis 1, reminding us that the order of our created world has been wrested from primordial chaos and, as the prophet attests, can in fact collapse, abandoning us to the disaster. Levinas would agree, and his rejection of Blanchot’s abiding in the disaster affirms an ethical world vulnerable to the ongoing threat of the *il y a* or the *tōhû wābōhû*. Levinas’ plea to leave the *il y a* for the sake of an ethically created world places him in line with the prophets

(including some Psalmists and Job) who enjoin us *and* God to activate our ethical agency against the evil chaos that subtends our fragile, created world. Of course Levinas remains modern, and intriguingly emphasises our *political* purpose when he invests all the agency for sustaining the covenantal, ethical world with human beings, in the first person singular, and not with God.<sup>32</sup>

This antediluvian prehistory to Levinas helps us understand why the *il y a* is both the furthest thing from God and the spectral identity with which one is always at risk of confusing him. Here the pagan, gnostic and atheistic temptations assert themselves all at once.

The pagan temptation is not that which regards the *il y a* as a vital agency, a god or hostile but anonymous “counter-intentionality” working against the ethically created world. This degree of autonomous evil can be borne by monotheism, and indeed “the combat between God and evil” is recalled “throughout the Bible.”<sup>33</sup> The temptation of paganism, rather, arises when such powers are invested with a transcendence and a power equal to that of the God; for Levinas this temptation would be the equalisation of the authority of the Other with that of the *il y a* and of the freedom of the ethical subject with that of the elemental. This full blown paganism is rejected by Levinas, just as the redactors of the Bible reject it by subordinating these powers to the creative work of God when they strip the sea monsters of their names in Genesis 1:21 and insist that they are created rather than primordial. “In Genesis 1, the waters have not only been neutralized but demythologized and even depersonalized.”<sup>34</sup> The monotheistic breakthrough thus consists not in the denial of forces opposed to God but in their denigration and subordination, just as Levinas’ ethical monotheism consists not in denying evil but in successfully warding it off through the ethical relation. Were Levinas to succumb to paganism then the transcendence of the Other would be constantly indistinguishable from the transcendence of the *il y a* (rather than only occasionally, as Levinas in fact admits) and the ethical subject would never attain the freedom to overcome the mythic elemental in which the self first finds itself. We would be left with determinism, moral neutrality and no *possibility* of progress, a cycle where the moral and anti-moral forces cancel each other and thus a world whose ethical order is but a ruse, as Levinas dreaded. If the Other failed to distinguish itself from the *il y a*, at least for the most part, then the goodness of creation would founder, the ethically accomplished world would decrease to the neutrality of existence. It would result in a self essentially riveted to its elemental, animal existence, lacking sufficient agency to accomplish an ethical world.

Nevertheless, the superiority of creation over chaos does not imply the elimination of the mythic but its domestication, both for the Bible and for

Levinas. The forces of evil are not annihilated or utterly subordinated to God; they are provisionally subdued through the covenant of creation; just like ethics, for Levinas, is borne on the abyss of the *il y a*. Levinas thus accepts a mythical version of monotheism in which evil is a force to be contended with throughout the duration of history. Monotheism is not in the last instance the idea that there is no power save God's but a commitment to the ultimately better power of YHWH over those that oppose him. "This is a theology with absolute faith in God's *ultimate* goodness, but a rather qualified faith in his *proximate* goodness."<sup>35</sup> This view is expressed by Levinas when he persistently acknowledges the autonomous power of the elemental and the *il y a* while asserting that ethics can and must put a distance between the human world and the evil in existence. That is why ethics is not simply an accomplishment that has brought about the world but at the same time also a task which always awaits. Nowhere does Levinas say that the *il y a* is left behind at creation or annihilated, precisely because his implicit view of monotheism sees evil as persistently opposed to creation and kept at bay only, and not necessarily, through ethics. Levinas thus takes up the thread of his Jewish precursors in order to advance an ethical, mythical monotheism which seeks to neutralise though not eliminate the forces of evil. It was Rosenzweig who first discovered Hegel's early manifesto for "a mythology of reason," but it is Levinas who takes the mythic into the heart of phenomenology by retelling the old Jewish drama of covenantal opposition to the persistence of evil.<sup>36</sup>

As for the gnostic temptation, it too arises by failing to appreciate the theological significance of the *il y a* at the very earliest stages of Levinas' thought. Here the mistake is to take Levinas for a modern gnostic for whom, as he somewhere says, "Being is Evil."<sup>37</sup> The only but crucial reason why Levinas is not a gnostic is because the evil of being is opposed precisely to the goodness of the world and not to that of another world; being is evil because it is the world robbed of its ethical accomplishment and returned to its chaotic *il y a* origins. The answer to the evil of being is thus not the other-worldly salvation of a *gnosis* that gives up on the world but on the contrary an ethical or covenantal commitment to the world in place of anonymous, evil being.

However Blanchot does not succumb to either of these temptations. Nor, despite explicit sympathies, does he fall for the lure of atheism, at least not in the sense of claiming a belief or taking an epistemic stance against faith. For him the temptation to view death or finitude as an absolute that can and therefore must be mastered never surpasses the endless, indeed infinite uncertainty of dying. The mythical theology that I claim infuses the *il y a* goes a long way to explaining why, for Blanchot, the neutral

also appears as a “counter spirituality,” as Kevin Hart argues, in which the sacred is bound to darkness, neutrality and impersonality.<sup>38</sup> Would the “darkness over the surface of the deep” that accompanies the “unformed void” before creation be that “other night” which is excluded from the diurnal order of the world? If for Blanchot God and theology, *autrui* and ethics, remain fundamentally impersonal and neutral this is not because of any certainty or polemic but because of a passivity that he could not overcome. Blanchotian atheism should be situated beyond the distinction between belief and disbelief or, as he might have put it, where the ordinary language of atheism functions only abusively, by way of its contrary, and in the most facile way possible by putting the experience of the disaster to the service of knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Are we too left with an experience of transcendence whose uncertainties bind us to the impotence of an allegedly depoliticised theory? On the contrary. It seems to me that by resituating the *il y a* in mythico-theological terms we pave the way toward a reclaiming of precisely the fields of life disavowed by Levinas and Blanchot: history and politics. Here the task that awaits is to develop a political mythical theology, but with careful attention to how transcendence makes multiplicity its only proper expression. By situating evil in the heart of transcendence we situate ourselves within the battle against it. The task ahead is to show how the transcendence of the good is distinguishable from evil by a covenantal commitment to its *interpretation*. In that way mythical theology can become part of history and our response to transcendence can remain politically engaged even as we take responsibility for its meaning.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The title of Levinas’ essay written for *Les Temps modernes* in the aftermath of Saadaat’s historical visit to Jerusalem in 1979, published in *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. Gary D. Mole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 188-95. Cf. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonse Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1994) which calls for an “ethics, beyond politics” (p. 121). Zygmunt Bauman highlights the severe limitation to Levinas’ ethics when it comes to confronting the specific, actual challenges of modern political life; see his “The World Inhospitable to Levinas,” *Philosophy Today* 43 (2), pp. 151-67.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans.

André Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 158 and *passim*. Is not the vigorous critique outlined in this “Conclusion” undone when ethics is reduced to the structure of subjectivity, such that “Substitution is not an act; it is a passivity incontrovertible into an act” (*Otherwise than Being*, p. 117)?

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> This is the thrust of Jean-Luc Marion’s critique of Levinas; see for example, Marion, “From the Other to the Individual,” trans. Robyn Horner in Regina Schwartz, ed., *Transcendence: philosophy, literature, and theology approach the beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 43-60.

<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as a recent essay by Toumayan attests, situating Levinas at the threshold of artistic inspiration reveals the psychological complexity to Levinas’ moral phenomenology; see his admirable essay “‘I more than the others’: Dostoevsky and Levinas,” *Yale French Studies*, 104 (2004), pp. 55-66.

<sup>6</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 5. Note the significant difference between the English title and the French original, *De l’existence à l’existant*, which alone captures the argument of the book.

<sup>7</sup> The title of chapter IV of *Existence and Existence* in which the *il y a* is described.

<sup>8</sup> It should be mentioned that this view, to my mind largely correct, is also taken by Paul Davies, “A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas,” in ed. David Wood, *Philosophers’ Poets* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 37-69 and Simon Critchley, *Very Little...Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), ch. 1, “Il y a.”

<sup>9</sup> This, at least, is Levinas’ critique of the “neutral” ontology of *Being and Time*, leaving aside for the moment its unlikely success. For a discussion see my doctoral dissertation, *How is Ethics Possible?* Monash University, Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, 1998, ch. 5 and my “Il y a du quotidien: Levinas and Heidegger on the self,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 28 (2002) pp. 578-604.

<sup>10</sup> Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Toumayan, *Encountering the Other*, p. 130

<sup>12</sup> See the references to Levinas and Blanchot in Toumayan, *Encountering the Other*, p. 206 note 14.

<sup>13</sup> Indeed Toumayan emphasises this throughout his book by tracking “the concept of difference” in Levinas and Blanchot.

<sup>14</sup> “The rumbling of the ‘there is’ is the non-sense in which essence turns, and in which thus turns the justice issued out of signification. There is ambiguity of sense and non-sense in being, sense turning into non-sense. It cannot be taken lightly” (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 163). I take Levinas here to be acknowledging that justice (what he calls “the signification of the-one-for-the-other,” or “subjectivity”) and ontology (what he calls “essence” and aligns with theory, knowledge and appearance) are both backgrounded by the chaotic non-sense of the *il y a*. That is

why the separation of justice from ontology risks plunging the former back into the *il y a* even as it attains its difference from ontology. See also the decisive passage in Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to the Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 69. Critchley discusses this in *Very Little...Almost Nothing*, p. 78 and note 49.

<sup>15</sup> See also Jean-Luc Nancy's inspirational reflections, especially in *The Inoperative Community* trans. Peter Connor et al., ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) and "Sharing Voices," in ed. Gayle L. Ormiston, *Transforming the Hermeneutic Contest: From Nietzsche to Nancy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 211-59.

<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," *Of God Who Comes to the Mind*, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), pp. 130-42.

<sup>18</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 142. Levinas avoids explicitly identifying the element with the *il y a*, though he does everything to assure their indistinguishability. "The element extends into the there is [*il y a*]" (p. 142) suggests a difference, but this falls away when we learn that the element, just like the *il y a*, is "existence without existent, the impersonal par excellence" (p. 142), that it "comes to us from nowhere" and "remains entirely anonymous" (p. 132). The only difference is that the element is enjoyed through the body's sensibility while the *il y a* is endured through consciousness. However both function as the background upon which the hypostasis of a subject takes place, and both, as I will emphasise, persistently threaten to draw the subject toward participation in their amorphous reality.

<sup>19</sup> Chalier leaves us with the suggestive remark that the "unformed and void" upon which the world of light and order is created, is "l'une de ses possibilités constantes" for the world, and indeed "l'une de ses plus dramatiques tentations même," *Levinas: l'utopie de l'humain* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), p. 42. The analysis that follows of Jon D. Levenson's book, beginning with the title of that book, suggests that in this remark Chalier, like her teacher Levinas, displays far stronger biblical intuitions than she is aware or prepared to acknowledge.

<sup>20</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. The "dramatic risk" of creation should be understood in Levenson's sense of "dramatic" and Levinas' sense of "risk," a term which Levenson also employs in describing the act of faith that responds to the fragile drama of divine omnipotence (p. 156).

<sup>21</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xix.

<sup>22</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xx.

<sup>23</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xx.

<sup>24</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. xxix.

<sup>25</sup> "Genesis 1:2 thus describes the "world," if we may call it that, just before the cosmogony began" (Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 121). Levinas' *From Existence to the Existent* and *Totality and Infinity* should thus be understood as a phenomenological moral cosmogony, a view which remythologises Levinas

and thus resituates his work in the social and political field of historical action rather than the dehistoricised and depoliticised purely ethical relation.

- <sup>26</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, respectively, p. 14, p. 12.
- <sup>27</sup> Paul Davies, "A linear narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the work of Levinas," in *Philosophers' Poets*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 37-69. Note too that Conclusion 4 of *Totality and Infinity* is called "Creation" and argues that the world accomplished through ethics is best described as a created world because of its break from the impersonal realm of neutral existence.
- <sup>28</sup> *Existence and Existents*, p. 61. This also explains Levinas' reliance, in his description of the *il y a*, on Levy-Bruhl's account of mystical participation in "primitive" societies. Like the *il y a*, primitive mysticism takes place "before all Revelation, before the light comes," where it is allied with death and impersonal existence (*Existence and Existents*, p. 61).
- <sup>29</sup> Cited by Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 7. All the biblical passages referred to here are cited by Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 7-11.
- <sup>30</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 8. The Tanin is polemically subordinated to being but one of God's creations in Genesis 1:21 (JPS translates the *taninim* as "the great sea monsters"), which Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* treats as a demythologization of the original Near Eastern cosmogonic combat myth.
- <sup>31</sup> Here "produce" is the apt term that should be understood as Levinas himself uses the term in *Totality and Infinity* to suggest both the accomplishing but also the dramatising of the world's order out of chaos; see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 26.
- <sup>32</sup> In this respect Levinas belongs to the Lithuanian tradition of Orthodox Jewish theology whose modern exponents include Joseph B. Soleveitchick, Yeshayahu Leibowitz and David Hartman (see, for example, my "Lacking All Interest: Levinas, Leibowitz, and the Pure Practice of Religion," *Harvard Theological Review* 97:1 (2004), 1-32. As Levenson well shows (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, ch. 3), the theologoumenon of primordial evil finds a "correspondence" in Jewish anthropology (in the persistence of the *yetzer ha'rah*, the Evil Impulse) and eschatology (in the war with Amalek throughout the ages), so that the transfer of agency from God to the ethical subject is effected on established lines of correspondence. Levinas' phenomenology is the perfect vehicle for this transference since phenomenology always claimed to return to the basic structures of consciousness, perception or being, in short, to the basic structure of experience, so that it is precisely in phenomenology that we should expect to find a correspondence between the theological, psychological and historical narrations of the relationship between evil and an ultimately (if not originally) good world.
- <sup>33</sup> Israel Knohl, *The Divine Symphony: the Bible's Many Voices* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003) notes the many biblical passages where evil is given mythic autonomy; see p. 13 and note 24 p. 165. Cf. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 122.
- <sup>34</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 122; see too Knohl, *Divine*

*Symphony*, p. 13.

- <sup>35</sup> Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 45.
- <sup>36</sup> Hegel proclaimed: "Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of imagination and art, this is what we require!...a mythology of reason." Quoted in Eric L. Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 131.
- <sup>37</sup> This is the suggestive mistake made by Phillip Blond, "Emmanuel Levinas: God and Philosophy," in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. Phillip Blond (New York: Routledge, 1998).
- <sup>38</sup> The term is used by Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 223-30; see also his "The Counter-spiritual Life," in Kevin Hart and Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Power of Contestation: Perspectives on Maurice Blanchot* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 156-177.
- <sup>39</sup> That is what I think is residually wrong with Simon Critchley's reading of the *il y a*. Critchley learns out of the essential ambiguity of the Other that its authority cannot be appropriated solely (if at all) for "ethics," and this seems to me largely correct. As the *il y a* becomes indistinguishable from *illeity* "ethics" itself becomes indistinguishable from the neutrality of what Blanchot calls "literature." Here the danger is thus not of an atheistic reading; that is perfectly legitimate given the fundamental ambiguity of "the Other." Here too however both Levinas and the Bible are to be preferred; the *il y a* is in a profound way only experienced atheistically, without God, just as evil in the Bible arises in the absence of God, which is why the prophets call on God *to come back* at just these times. The temptation of atheism, then, is falsely construed when it is taken as an assertion of cosmic loneliness and a denial of God's support, for just this religious experience of abandonment is attested by the presence, autonomy and indeed transcendence of evil. The mistake here, however, as often, is one of dogmatic atheism; not the acknowledgement of the transcendence of evil but the unfounded insistence that evil and death are the *only* forms of transcendence. The mistake of dogmatic atheists is to insist with as much certainty as naïve theists that the ambiguities of transcendence can be named once and for all. Between the two dogmatisms lies the true and uncertain life, religious or secular, open to other names for the sense of transcendence. For Critchley's view, see *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death*, pp. 76-83.