

Aesthet(h)ics:

On Levinas' Shadow

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*So if we are visited in our state by someone who has the skill to transform himself into all sorts of characters and represent all sorts of things, and he wants to show off himself and his poems to us, we shall treat him with all the reverence due to a priest and giver of rare pleasure, but shall tell him that he and his kind have no place in our city, being forbidden by our code, and send him elsewhere, after anointing him with myrrh and crowning him
Plato, Republic, Book III, 398a*

Emmanuel Levinas' aesthetics has been critically discussed much less than other components of his philosophy. In one way, this is not surprising, given Levinas' wider post-war project. Nevertheless, in the late 1940s, the very time his influential later philosophy was taking shape, Levinas published a series of papers on literary criticism, and on the nature of art.¹ *Existents and Existence*, the text where Levinas first announces his project of "leaving the climate" of Heidegger's thought, contains in its heart a remarkable discussion of modernist painting.² Levinas' aesthetics, moreover, represents a provocative standpoint within modern aesthetic theory in its own right. As such, it stands as a partial corrective to the comparative –

and surely surprising – dearth of phenomenological analyses of art, which at the same time contrasts markedly with Heidegger’s renowned position in “The Origin of the Work of Art.”

From a critical perspective, however, an examination of Levinas’ aesthetics is interesting in another, and perhaps deeper way. As critics have intimated,³ Levinas’ aesthetics arguably marks what could be called (invoking the late Jacques Derrida) a “supplement” within his texts. As is well known, Levinas’ post-war works defend his own post-Husserlian version of what Kant called “the primacy of practical reason” which he calls – in a more classical vein – “ethics as first philosophy.”⁴ In this light, Levinas’ texts feature an axiological devaluation of aesthetics in comparison with the ethical encounter with the Other. What this paper will argue – in line with but beyond Derrida’s masterful “Violence and Metaphysics”⁵ – is that aesthetic experience as analysed by Levinas has an *uncanny* structural proximity to his analyses of “ethics.” And recognition of this primacy might well cause us to reconsider Levinas’ *classically* “Greek” as much as Judaic devaluation of aesthetics as one dimension of human experience.

Part I takes a poem (“Sleep,” by Kenneth Slessor) as the basis to construct Levinas’ account of the aesthetical or art-quality of artworks. Part II examines what Levinas takes his analysis of the work of art to point towards in terms of a more general [de]ontology, wherein the reality given in phenomenological (ap)perception is doubled by *its own* “shadow.” Part III questions not Levinas’ aesthetics but how it *signifies* in terms of his avowed project of elevating ethics as “first philosophy.”

I. From Slessor’s Sleep to Levinas’ Aesthetics: Exoticism, Materiality, and Participation

In line with Kant’s well-known remarks on the “exemplarity” of works of art,⁶ I want to begin by analysing a particular work of art, as a way towards Levinas’ aesthetics. The example is the poem *Sleep*, by Australian modernist Kenneth Slessor:

Do you give yourself to me utterly,
Body and no body, flesh and no-flesh,
Not as a fugitive might, blindly or bitterly,
But as a child might, with no other wish?
Yes, *Utterly*.

Then I shall bear you down my estuary,
Carry you and ferry you to burial mysteriously,

Take you and receive you,
 Consume you, engulf you,
 In the huge wave, my belly, lave you,
 With huger waves continually.

And you shall cling and clamber there
 And slumber there,
 Beat with my blood's beat, hear my heart move
 Blindly in bones that ride above you,
 Delve in my flesh, dissolved and bedded,
 Through viewless valves embodied so...⁷

My choice of this example is a motivated one in ways that will become clear. The question I want to address in Part I is this: *from whence comes the art-quality of this work of art? Or: in what does the poetry of Sleep's poetry consist?*

Slessor himself makes the following critical remarks. "Sleep"

is explained by the title. It imagines the nightly human mystery of going to sleep as a surrender to complete selflessness, in the form of a return to the unconsciousness of a child in the mother's body. Thus the nature of sleeping is pictured as the oblivion of pre-life ... Technically, this poem is an experiment in the narcotic effect of the repetition of certain consonant-structures and vowel-sounds. The significant vowel sound is the long "U" in such words and phrases as "hear you," "engulf you," "huge cave" and "huger waves" ... There are also many internal rhymes and assonances such as "ferry" and "burial," "cave," "lave," "waves," "slumber," "dumb" ... and so on.⁸

Slessor's comments proceed, in a traditional manner, to divide the *content* of the poem from issues concerning its "technique" or form.

At the level of content, the poem imagines the common, ineffable moment when humans pass from consciousness and wakefulness to the unconsciousness of sleep. It deals with this through an extended metaphor: that of a mother addressing a child. We will return at the close to this "figure of speech." For now, what is important is that even the most cursory reflection is enough to establish that the poem's art-quality cannot be meaningfully explained through considering only its content, however mysterious this content might be. One can imagine any number of alternative ways that *Sleep's* topic could be raised, up to the thoroughly "anaesthetic" approach of the physician. What is at stake in *Sleep's art-quality*, then, is not the signified or "said" phenomenon the poem mimetically represents or invokes. To approach *Sleep* in its singularity as an *art* work will be to approach its

“technique” or presentation.

Now, notably, this is the first point that Levinas’ aesthetics insists upon. For Levinas, the confrontation of a subject with a work of art is never an untroubled act of apperception. (Again, we will be returning to this). Levinas’ writings on aesthetics instead assert that the confrontation with a work of art involves a troubling of subjects’ sense of what Heidegger called “world.”⁹ According to Levinas – here at least in tune also with Kant¹⁰ – this is because any work of art, as such, is always in some way exterior or foreign to our standard circle of experience. An interesting comparison holds here, in fact, between Levinas’ aesthetics and the understanding of art implicit in Marcel Duchamp’s famous gesture of presenting a urinal – the *most banal* of objects – as a work of art. Levinas contends that the elementary action of the artist is that of *setting apart* a thing – the work itself – from other objects, thus divesting it from its existential environment. This founding aesthetic gesture of “setting aside” an artwork “brings about the coexistence of worlds that are mutually alien.”¹¹ Even in photography, the most mimetic of arts, Levinas would argue, this “positive aesthetic function” is at work: “the way of interposing an image between ourselves and the thing has the effect of extracting the thing from the perspective of the world.”¹² Levinas calls the resultant, “de-worlded” status of the work – independently of its “content” – its “exoticism.” According to him, this “exoticism” is the key to understanding the lasting *fascination* artworks have upon us, even when (as in still lifes) they are framed as wholly mimetic representations. Light is also cast on the otherwise puzzling phenomenon that “everything that belongs to past worlds, the archaic, the ancient (“the forever bygone past of ruins”¹³) produces an aesthetic impression.”¹⁴

Two sets of questions arise at this point which go to the heart of Levinas’ aesthetics, and perhaps to that of his wider *oeuvre* – as will be shown in the final section of the present paper. The first concerns the *mode* or *way* in which the artwork stands out from other objects. What, more precisely, is involved in this “exoticism” – and we are tempted to say “exteriority” – of works of art that Levinas evokes? And what, if anything, does it reveal? Is Levinas’ position to be aligned with that vein of philosophical aesthetics running from Book X of Plato’s *Republic* up to Nietzsche’s remarks about art as posing redemptive illusions, but *illusions* nevertheless? Or is Levinas’ position to be read instead in that line that runs from Aristotle’s prioritisation of poetry over history in the *Poetics*, through to Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art,” which treats art as revelatory of registers of truth usually hidden from subjects?

The second set of questions concern what can be called heuristically the “subjective” moment to the *experience* of works of art. If Levinas main-

tains that in some way our normal phenomenological way of being-in-the-world is troubled by the exoticism of the artwork, what precisely is at stake in this “troubling” of the subject? How, if at all, can it be phenomenologically specified?

To recall, Slessor states that his poem *Sleep* involves a “technical” experiment with the *phonic character* of the signifiers the poem comprises. The poem involves the repetition in particular of “certain vowel sounds,” particularly the long “U,” which as it were crests in lines 6 through 17. It is to the efficacy of this “technical” device – contrasted with the sharp consonant-formations in the final verse – that Slessor assigns the subjective impression he hoped to achieve in the poem: what he describes as a type of “narcosis,” itself evocative – as we can add – of falling asleep.

Slessor’s remarks then point directly towards Levinas’ second, central aesthetic concept: that of the “materiality” of the elements that comprise any work of art: whether they are words (in poetry), images (in painting), gestures (in acting), sounds (in music), or shapes hewn in stone. Talking of poetry, Levinas reflects that “word cannot be separated from meaning. But there is first the materiality of the sound that fills it, by which it ... is capable of having rhythm, rhyme, meter, alliteration, etc.”¹⁵ His meaning here can be specified through juxtaposing this observation with the central concern of Jacques Derrida’s early work: the spoken word and its relation to the Western “metaphysics of presence.” Levinas’ account of poetry (and Slessor in his remarks on *Sleep*) effectively point in an opposite direction to Derrida’s analysis of the “transcendental illusion” of a subject “hearing itself speaking” and thereby in sovereign control of her/his meanings.¹⁶ The words of a poem, as audible phonemes and combinations of phonemes, Levinas is saying, always have another, pre-semantic register or potentiality, with which the poet works. Because of their audible, “material” characteristics, words are capable of being aligned and realigned in art in a way that contrasts with, or *contests*, their capabilities as bearers of signification and representation. Like dreams, as understood by Freud or Lacan, so for Levinas poetry must always be in one or other natural language, and minimally resistant to translation. The space for poetry is opened by the capability of the words in natural languages to be attached ambiguously to, or to disseminate, multiple meanings. In more abstract works, a poet may bring together words without regard for *any* meaning at all, simply on grounds of “their sensible proximity to other words” (we are reminded here of Slessor’s “blindly in bones that ride above you,” or “through viewless valves embodied so”). As Mallarmé is reputed to have said: “My dear Degas, one does not make poetry with ideas, but with words.”¹⁷

According to Levinas, then, an essential “detachment from objective

meaning” characterises art. Philosophical aesthetics, he charges, has been insufficiently attentive to “the way in which in art the sensible qualities which constitute it do not lead to an object but are in themselves.”¹⁸ An adequate position on art cannot accordingly be oriented (at least in a simple way, as will be argued shortly) around inherited philosophical philosophemes of *Geist* and/or Truth. Art puts in place a contestation of the sovereignty of these logocentric preoccupations. It is telling here that, against both Hegel and Heidegger (although not Nietzsche), Levinas argues that music is the highest form of art. What singles music out is its *non-representational aspect*: how “in music the way a quality can *divest itself of all objectivity* seems completely natural.”¹⁹ Musical notes do not – at least simply – narrate, represent, describe or disclose anything beyond themselves. They are in this way distinguishable from the colours of a painter’s palette or the sculptor’s stone, whose “bond with things is more intimate.”²⁰ “Sound,” Levinas emphasises, “is the quality most detached from an object ... the musician’s element realises the pure de-conceptualisation of reality.”²¹ Because of this, Levinas goes so far as to elevate the musical term “rhythm” to a synecdoche describing the functioning of art works as such. As Robbins underscores, in Levinas’ aesthetics, rhythm “designates not so much an inner law of the poetic order as the way the poetic order affects us, closed wholes whose elements call to one another like the syllables of a verse.”²²

The implications of Levinas’ aesthetics, in terms of our second concern about the “subjective reception” of artworks, hence begin to emerge. In classic phenomenological fashion, Levinas argues that the “exoticism” of the artwork has an intentional correlate on the side of the subject: a particular “rhythmic” mode in which artworks show themselves *to subjects*, outside of which they cease to appear as art. In agreement with Kant, Levinas argues that a subject’s reception of a work of art differs from both detached *theoria* and involved (moral) *praxis*.²³ Levinas accepts *Being and Time*’s disclosure that both theory and practice are grounded in existential understanding: “the concept is the object grasped, the intelligible object. Already by action, we maintain a living relationship with the object, we conceive it, we grasp it.”²⁴ But it is precisely this elementary “relationship” that Levinas argues is “neutralised” when a subject encounters an artwork.²⁵ Our reception of a work of art, Levinas says, “excludes” the “freedom” evinced in our actively conceiving of objects. It “does not engender a conception, as do scientific cognition and truth, it does not involve Heidegger’s “letting be,” *sein-lassen*.”²⁶

This is why Levinas argues that, if we insist upon speaking of our “contemplation” of works of art, we should also maintain that “exoticism modi-

fies the contemplation itself.” For Levinas, the way of seeing proper to an art work is anything but “disinterested” in the object’s existence. Here again Levinas sides with Nietzsche, as against Kant.²⁷ For Levinas, our reception of a work of art is above all a type of *vulnerability* or *receptivity*. It involves “a hold over us rather than our initiative”: a “fundamental passivity.” In words that invoke Slessor’s reflections on the “narcotic effect” engendered by the “word play” in “Sleep,” by drawing on the ethnology of Levy-Bruhl,²⁸ Levinas can say that before an artwork our subjectivity undergoes a kind of “reversal of power into *participation*” in what we would theoretically or contemplatively “grasp.”²⁹ We will return to this in the final section.

II. From Aesthesis / “Sensation” to Aesthetics: Reality’s Shadow, and the Dis-closure of Art

For Levinas, then, the work of art is an object that has been “de-worlded.” Outside of its existential *environs*, it appears in its “materiality.” It could rightly be said that if for Levinas the work of art is a sign of anything, it is a sign of *itself*. This is why, he says, art does not stand by itself, but calls for or *invites* critical and theoretical reflection. This position in turn provides the basis for a remarkable challenge to the classical and Kantian understandings of the supposed “disinterestedness” of our *reception* of works of art. Like the image of Narcissus on the surface of the water, the materiality of art *draws us in*. As we shall comment in Part III, if this singular experience bears any comparison, it is to *religious experience*. There is then continuity between Levinas’ aesthetics and the Platonic and Nietzschean conceptions of art as tangential to the Truth. Art is *beguiling*, for Levinas. To the extent that artworks *do* (re)present things, this presentative act *itself* transforms what subjects become able to “see” in what is presented. It is this thought that we need to elaborate here. For if, as we have seen, Levinas denies that artworks reveal any truth about the “worldly” nature of objects, he insists that *this is not to say that artworks reveal nothing about “reality.”* It is just that what art reveals, according to his phenomenological aesthetics, is that about an object *that eludes or exceeds its “belonging-ness” within any existential environment.* In Levinas’ telling words, art “expresses the very obscurity of the real.” This “obscurity” is what, in his 1948 essay “Reality and Its Shadow,” he dubs reality’s “shadow.”³⁰

Levinas develops his position in the contemporaneous *Existents and Existence* in conjunction with his distinctive phenomenology of *aesthesis*, “sensibility” or “sensation.” “The movement of art consists in leaving the level of perception so as to reinstate sensation,” Levinas claims.³¹ This claim depends on the differentiation of “sensation” from “perception,” con-

ceived as “the as-yet unorganised quality that Kantian psychology teaches us.”³² Like the later Husserl, Levinas contends that the Kantian subordination of sensation (*Anschauung*) to the faculty of understanding (*Verstand*) is phenomenologically indefensible.³³ It veils or passes over sensation’s *sui generis* “ontological function.”³⁴ Levinas espies this “ontological function” in Husserl’s invocations of “horizontal” syntheses supporting eidetic intuition, particularly in the *Logical Investigations*.³⁵ Sensation involves, according to Levinas, a kind of pre- or proto-eidetic “contact” with the world as an “*hyletic datum*” (from the Greek *hyle*, “matter”). In this “contact” – and in a way that might remind us of certain of Merleau-Ponty’s celebrated analyses – Levinas says “consciousness of the sensed ... coincides with [the sensed].”³⁶ In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas thus talks of the subject’s “living from” its sensible, material world: a world that is only ever *subsequently* constituted by the transcendental activity of consciousness or *Dasein*. Sensation involves a kinaesthetic bodily “enjoyment [*jouissance*]” of “the elements”: “the body is a permanent contestation of the prerogative attributed to consciousness of ‘giving meaning’ to each thing.”³⁷

What art as art does, in the terms of this Levinasian ontology, is “put us in touch” with the level of “reality” *before* the phenomenological world.³⁸ As we saw earlier, Levinas never denies the correctness of Heidegger’s disclosure of how things just *do* normally show up to humans within the horizons set out by their existential concern. But, at this point as at others, Levinas supplements Heidegger, claiming that it also belongs to the human condition to be able to *enjoy* (*jouis*) even the most utilitarian of tools and tasks, or “release their elemental essence.”³⁹ “The world of things,” Levinas claims,

calls for art, in which the intellectual accession to being moves into enjoyment ... tools and implements, which themselves presuppose enjoyment, offer themselves to enjoyment in their turn. They are playthings [*jouits*]; the fine cigarette lighter, the fine car.⁴⁰

In art, Levinas thus qualifies, it *can* be said that a certain “doubling” or “resemblance” of reality takes place, however much we must leave behind all simple understandings of art as *mimesis*. The mode of “resemblance” in play is not one in which the art work, “outside” of what it represents, stands as its double. In Levinas’ more dialectical thought, the aesthetic “image,” in its materiality, shows up how reality *itself* is *always already doubled within itself* – between itself and its *own* “image” or “shadow.” This “shadow,” in Levinas’ earlier terminology, is the pre-worldly or elemental plenitude into which our sense of world and meaning can always collapse or revert. “Here is a familiar thing,” Levinas says rhetorically in “Reality and Its Shadow”:

but its qualities, colour, form and position at the same time remain as it were behind its being, like the old garments of a soul that has withdrawn from them ... There is a duality in the thing itself. A being is that which it is, that which reveals itself in truth and, at the same time, its own image ... and there is a relationship between these two levels.⁴¹

With this in mind, we can also see why Levinas also asserts that the artwork is a symbol *in reverse*. Far from being a vehicle of enlightenment about what it would ostensibly represent, it involves an “obscuring,” “erosion,” or “degradation” of phenomenological sense.⁴² The material “hither side” of reality exposed in art always verges on what Levinas called throughout his career – with and against Heidegger⁴³ – the *il y a* or “there is”: “the third person pronoun in the form of a verb.”⁴⁴ In an account which, despite its author, does invoke Heidegger’s position on the essence of truth (as well as, differently, the “earth” of “The Origin of the Work of Art”⁴⁵), Levinas says that art invokes “the non-truth of being.”⁴⁶

We remarked above both the parity between Levinas’ understanding of the “exoticism” of art and that behind Duchamp’s urinal, and the proximity – if not the debt – of Levinas’ thought on poetry to Mallarmé’s doctrine that poetry is a business of words, not ideas. As Bruns comments, arguably one of the most interesting aspects of Levinas’ aesthetics is how it represents a *post-classical* philosophy of art, yoked as little to tropes of the beautiful or the sublime as we have seen it is to an estimation of Truth. Because of this, it furnishes a much more *articulate* framework with which to approach modernist artworks than other philosophical perspectives, including Heidegger’s “monumental” understanding.⁴⁷ *Existence and Existents*’s remarks on aesthetics, notably, focus upon cubist painting as an exemplar of art. Levinas’ ontology allows him to read this cubist abstraction as a legitimate and revelatory phenomenon in its own right, a “quest” to “preserve the exoticism in artistic reality.” Far from striving towards the perfection of form, whatever this might intimate about nature in its ordered appearing,⁴⁸ cubist paintings show “counter-nature, what is disturbing and foreign of itself”; “materiality as thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness.” Cubist canvasses, Levinas goes so far as to assert, “present reality as it is in itself after the world has come to an end.”⁴⁹

What remains to be analysed, then, is what we might term, borrowing from Levinas himself, a further “doubling” in Levinas aesthetics. As Levinas’ texts on aesthetics cited here, if not all of his later *oeuvre*,⁵⁰ themselves have an unmistakably rhetorical, if not *poetic*, quality. It is as if, at times, these works participated *themselves* in the nature (or counter-nature) of what they would represent. Yet, given the terms of how Levinas *situates*

the aesthetics, as we will now examine, this participation would itself be deeply revealing, and call for theoretical reflection of its own.

III. On Aesthetics and Ethics, or Levinas' Shadow

In his definitive earlier work on Levinas, "Violence and Metaphysics," Derrida is concerned to show the *complexity* of how Levinas' work stands towards "Greek" metaphysics. Levinas' maverick formulation of the face-to-face relation (or non-relation) as involving an ethical dimension which at once resists, and *founds from above*, the categories of Greco-Western philosophy makes us dream, if we would want this, "of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession" of this philosophy. As Derrida later avowed in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, in this formulation of ethics, Levinas' *oeuvre* constitutes an unprecedented event within the history of French ideas.⁵¹ Yet Derrida's reading of Levinas in "Violence and Metaphysics" is a double one. Derrida is interested, here as elsewhere, in the *language* that an advocate of a break with philosophy-as-metaphysics is drawn to use *in order to* instrument this rupture. In line with what Derrida reads as a structural "double bind" – the impossibility to either fully inhabit or to fully *escape* logocentrism⁵² – he shows how Levinas' thought, in its decisive formulations of ethics and the Other, turns upon tropes characteristic of the "Greek" conceptuality it imputably overcomes.⁵³

For all of its peerless virtuosity, however, "Violence and Metaphysics" remains silent about one decisive, and *hierarchical*, opposition that straddles Levinas' later philosophy. "Violence and Metaphysics" does not consider Levinas' lasting differentiation of ethics from *aesthetics*, and his attempt to secure the primacy, and the *purity*, of the former over the latter. Now: it scarcely needs mentioning that such a binary opposition and privileging is as famously "Platonic" as that which Derrida identifies in Levinas' prioritisation of speech over writing. Despite certain ambiguities in *The Phaedrus*, Plato's *Ion* and the *Republic* Book X famously denigrate art and artists as literally "not *knowing* what they are doing." Art is "at third removed" from the Truth of the Ideas, Plato contends.⁵⁴ More than this, as Socrates confides to Glaucon, anxious that his words do not get back to the "tragedians" and the "imitative crowd": "Between ourselves- and you mustn't give me away to the tragedians and other dramatists- [artistic dramatic] representations definitely harm the minds of their audiences, unless they're inoculated against them by knowing their real nature."⁵⁵ The paradox evident in the Platonic devaluation of art is then precisely that which Derrida uncovers again and again in his "deconstruction[s]" of philosophers' attempts to secure the priority of living speech over writing. Art is at once

strictly secondary to philosophy, *yet close enough to be dangerous* – a threat to the highest human activity, and (so) to the best city. We are then left at every moment to wonder *how* something that is so far *beneath* our proper concern could at the same time pose such a “ruinous” threat.

However, the point is this: for all of its real novelty and insights, Levinas’ aesthetics ends, whether knowingly or not, by reproducing something very similar to this oldest of Platonic – and hence *Greek* – schematisations of the place of art in the “plot” of the human condition. The decisive passages on this topic are in *Totality and Infinity*, Part B, Section II. In this text (“Enjoyment and Representation”), Levinas expounds his phenomenological account of “sensation” (*aesthesis*), whose intimate connection with his aesthetics we saw earlier. The final subsection, however, introduces a significant, double *anxiety* into Levinas’ account of the solitary, enjoying ego. The enjoyment subjects are able to take in the elements, Levinas argues, is threatened by what he calls “the indetermination of the future” or of “the morrow.” Because of this indetermination, the egoic subject can *never* fully secure itself in its solipsistic “living from.” At exactly this point, then, Levinas introduces a programmatic contrast between the “ambivalent” aesthetic enjoyment of the ego, and the “absolute” and “infinity” that he will systematically assign to the “uprightness” of ethics only later in *Totality and Infinity*:

The resistance of matter as does not block like the absolute ... it opens up an abyss within enjoyment itself. Enjoyment does not refer to an infinity beyond what nourishes it, but as the virtual vanishing of what presents itself, to the instability of happiness. Nourishment comes as a happy chance. The ambivalence of nourishment, which on the one hand offers itself and contents, but which already withdraws, losing itself in the nowhere, is to be distinguished from the presence of the infinite in the finite and from the structure of the thing.⁵⁶

Secondly, introducing an almost-prophetic tone into his phenomenology, Levinas figures this contrast between *aesthesis* and infinity by way of what might be termed, after Max Weber, a clash of competing gods:

the future of the element as insecurity is lived concretely as the mythical destiny of the elements. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds the egoism of enjoyment ... The separated being must run the risk in which this separation is accomplished, until the moment that the death of these gods will lead it back to atheism and to the true transcendence.⁵⁷

It is the conceptual *politics* of this phenomenological theogony that concern us. Unlike for Kant, there is no question for Levinas of art – whether beautiful or sublime – “symbolising” or recollecting the moral Law or the Good, whose providence might then lead us to postulate an Infinite God, or the Immortality of Soul.⁵⁸ For Levinas, ethics will be secured in a way that allows no contamination of the absolute, infinity, and – later in *Totality and Infinity* – a monotheistic God who leaves His trace in *the face* of the Other, hence safeguarding speech against the “impersonal” “nowhere” of the *il y a*.⁵⁹ *Aesthesis*, by contrast, is aligned by Levinas as “mythical,” on the side of “the Sacred” (versus “the Holy”), and of polytheistic gods who dwell in “the interstices of Being.”⁶⁰ There will then be as little place for art in Levinas’ ethical *politeia* as there was in Socrates’ for the pantomimic artist. What we are confronted with in art, for Levinas as for Plato, is nothing less than a false or *ersatz* transcendence, a dangerous simulacrum – or the danger of simulacra *per se* – that would “double” and so contest the “true transcendence.” At this point moreover, the force of Levinas’ adoption for aesthetics of Levy-Bruhl’s anthropological notion of “participation,” gleaned from observations of non-monotheistic societies, becomes fully clear.⁶¹ Art, Levinas warns us,

brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as lightness and as grace. It frees. To make or appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. *Do not speak*, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace – such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. *Magic recognised everywhere as the devil’s, enjoys as incomprehensible tolerance in poetry.* There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.⁶²

Levinas, as we see, thus goes much further than Sartre’s contemporary aligning of art with ethico-political irresponsibility. He reads art as the historical and *transcendental* inheritance of the paganistic “magic” from which National Socialism drew its demonic appeal. In order, as it were, to cast out this “devil” who would “double” the True God, Levinas understandably then moves to locate the aesthetic as precisely a “*third remove*” from the “Good beyond Being.”⁶³ Art is not above the being given to “atheistic” Greek philosophy – in the dimension of height. It is *below* it, on its “hither side.” As Peperzak has said, for Levinas, even the philosophy that Levinas is better known for critiquing, “has had the merit of protesting against participation ... the error of this philosophy was to identify the sepa-

rate existence with the existence of an egological I, integrating all beings as subordinate moments of the Same.”⁶⁴

If deconstruction has taught us anything concerning such properly Platonic gestures, then, *what should we say concerning Levinas’ double segregation here?* There is not only, as Robbins has demonstrated, Levinas’ own *ambivalence* about the ethical potential of art, as early as in the 1947 piece “The Other in Proust.”⁶⁵ Levinas’ situation is arguably made so acute precisely given the way that he famously contests “Greek” philosophy, in terms of a revamped Platonic(-Judaic) insistence that the Good of ethics is *beyond being*, and so beyond what can be “said” in language, certainly in the calm and level discourse of prose. In the terms of Levinas’ system itself, that is, ethical “saying” or “inspiration” is *like* aesthetical “participation,” in that it is *also* outside (*ou-dela*) the order of what can be said in a theoretical discourse. Despite Levinas’ programmatic intentions, then, it simply cannot surprise us that – as Bruns, Robbins and Josh Cohen have all observed⁶⁶ – the terms of Levinas’ invocations of the (properly *indescribable* or indescribably *proper*) ethical relation mirror, almost term for term, his descriptions of aesthetic “participation.” To recall only the most manifest features: the Other is a being or non-being who, like the artwork, signifies otherwise than in terms of any worldly environs⁶⁷; the subject’s confrontation with the Other is accordingly an experience (or non-experience) that challenges the boundaries and sovereignty of phenomenological (self-)consciousness; this ethical confrontation, like that with art, hence involves a fundamental *passivity* of the subject that would *precede* the transcendental *activity* of constitution⁶⁸; moreover, this ethical passivity is increasingly figured in Levinas’ later works, as Cohen has observed, precisely in sensible or *corporeal* terms (those of “ageing,” “vulnerability,” or even “exposure”).⁶⁹

Perhaps the deepest question we should pose to Levinas’ Greek-Jewish figuring of aesthetics, hence, is exactly the one which Derrida poses to Levinas at the heart of “Violence and Metaphysics.” This is the question of precisely whether and *how*, beyond the semantic “violence” of language which Levinas would decry,⁷⁰ it could yet remain possible to *secure* one further (*ipso facto* “non-conceptual”) distinction – which for Levinas would in fact be *the first* distinction – between ethics, with its One God Who brooks no graven images, and aesthetical “participation,” with *its other* divinities? What would such a distinction be like, and how would it show itself? Further, what “saying” would have to be operating at this level that could, exceptionally, prophetically, secure this foundational distinction before all distinctions, if it were not one that – exactly, like Levinas’ own later texts – would operate in an essentially *poetic* register, repeatedly invoking the un-

sayable Infinity of the Other only to patiently unwind, like Penelope, the threads of its own “said” constructions? In this light, it is difficult not to read Levinas’ later, more nuanced remarks particularly on the poetry of Celan and Agnon as deeply symptomatic testimony to the unsustainability of his own earlier programmatic disavowals of art, and – indeed – to aesthetics’ uncanny “doubling” of his project as a whole:

The absolute poem does not say the meaning of being ... It speaks the defection of all dimension ... The ineluctable: the interruption of the playful order of the beautiful and the play of concepts, and *the play of the world*: interrogation of the Other, a seeking for the Other. A seeking, dedicating itself to the Other in the form of the poem. A chant rises up in the giving, the one-for-the-other, the signifying of signification.⁷¹

Derrida’s earlier response in “Violence and Metaphysics” to Levinas’ attempt to elevate ethics beyond the Being of philosophy is, certainly, a cautionary one. If Levinas, invoking Heraclitus, figures the Truth of Being as “war” or “violence,”⁷² and locates ethics outside its ken, for Derrida the issue is not one simply of “war and peace.” For Derrida, it is a question – or *the question* as such⁷³ – of contrasting, plural *violences*. In this general economy there remains, as Levinas highlights, the violence of the word and totality, which mediates our relations to the Other and the Others. Yet, Derrida suggests, this violence is itself pitted against, and mollifies, what he calls “the pure and worst violence”: that of the primordial “night which precedes or represses discourse,”⁷⁴ and which indeed evokes what Hegel dubbed (criticising Schelling), “the night wherein all cows are black.” To quote Maurice Blanchot, Levinas’ lifelong friend:

When Levinas defines language as contact, he defines it as immediacy, and this has grave consequences. For immediacy is absolute presence – which undermines and overturns everything. Immediacy is the infinite, neither close nor distant, and no longer the desired and demanded, but violent abduction – the ravishment of mystical fusion. Immediacy not only rules out all mediation; it is the infiniteness of a presence such that it can no longer be spoken of, for the relation itself, be it ethical or ontological, has burned up all at once in a night bereft of darkness. In this night there are no longer any terms, there is no longer a relation, no longer a beyond – in this night God himself has annulled himself.⁷⁵

Slessor’s “Sleep,” too, evokes by poetic saying the lapsing of wakefulness into the primordial night and indetermination – “body or no body” – of

sleep.⁷⁶ Yet the poet evokes this night in a metaphor – of perhaps the most intimate human relation: that of the mother and its child. Notably, this “metaphor” of maternity has a privileged place in Levinas’ later invocations of the ethical exigency. In *Otherwise Than Being*, indeed, maternity figures ambiguously, *both* as one metonym for ethical substitution,⁷⁷ and as something like its substance or name “*par excellence*”:

Is not the restlessness of someone persecuted *but a modification of maternity*, the “groaning of entrails,” wounded by those it will bear or has borne? In maternity what signifies is the responsibility for Others, to the point of substitution for Others and suffering both from the effects of persecution and from the persecuting itself in which the persecutor sinks. Maternity, *which is bearing par excellence*, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.⁷⁸

In Slessor’s “Sleep,” too, it is exactly at the point of a radical passivity of the I, when s/he – impossibly – accedes to the address of the [m]Other, that the artwork’s most affecting assonances, alliterations, and rhythms are released. The mother, asymmetrically, addresses the sleeper as her child, in the intimacy of the second person. And this singular I who is also the reader of the artwork, thus interpellated, responds by pledging her/himself without reserve: “Yes, *Utterly*” (Line 5):

’Till daylight, the expulsion and awakening,
The riving and the driving forth,
Life with its remorseless forceps beckoning –
Pangs and betrayal of harsh birth.⁷⁹

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NOTES

¹ These pieces are: Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”, in *Collected Philosophical Essays*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), pp. 1 ff.; Levinas “The Other in Proust” [1948], trans. Sean Hand in *The Levinas Reader* (London: Blackwell, 1989), pp. 161-5; Emmanuel Levinas (1949) “The Transcendence of Words”, pp. 145-9.

² Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), p. 59

³ Cf. esp. Jill Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality and Ethical Infinity”, *L’Esprit Createur*, 35.3 (1995), pp. 66 ff.

- ⁴ Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", in *Writing and Difference* trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 120.
- ⁵ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", esp. "II Phenomenology, Ontology, Metaphysics," pp. 114-35.
- ⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, in *Kant* (London: Britannica, 1952),. §8, pp. 480-482, §18, pp. 491-492, §22, p. 493.
- ⁷ Kenneth Slessor, *Selected Poems* (Melbourne: Angus and Robertson, 1944), p. 106 (lines 1-17).
- ⁸ Slessor, *Selected Poems*, p. 138.
- ⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarie and Robinson (London: Blackwell, 2003), §15, §18.
- ¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* trans. James Creed Meredith, in *Kant* (London: Britannica, 1952), § 5, p. 479.
- ¹¹ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, pp. 54-5.
- ¹² Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 52.
- ¹³ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p.1.
- ¹⁴ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53
- ¹⁵ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53; Cf. Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 4
- ¹⁶ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- ¹⁷ Cf. Gerald Bruns, "Art and Poetry in Emmanuel Levinas' Writings", in eds. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002), p. 207.
- ¹⁸ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53.
- ¹⁹ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53 (my italics).
- ²⁰ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 54.
- ²¹ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 4.
- ²² Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 4; cited at Jill Robbins, "Aesthetic Totality", p. 74.
- ²³ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* trans James Creed Meredith in *Kant* (London: Britannica, 1952), esp. "Introduction," § II-VIII, pp. 464-475.
- ²⁴ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 5.
- ²⁵ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 5.
- ²⁶ Levinas, "Reality and Its Shadow", p. 3.
- ²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, "Aesthetics", in *The Nietzsche Reader*, trans. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1977).
- ²⁸ Robbins, "Aesthetic Totality", p. 74.
- ²⁹ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 4.
- ³⁰ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 3.

- ³¹ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53.
- ³² Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 53.
- ³³ Cf. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
- ³⁴ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 5.
- ³⁵ Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. Richard A. Cohen and Michael B. Smith (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 1998), p. 115 ff.; Cf. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p. 28.
- ³⁶ Levinas, *Discovering Existence*, p. 124.
- ³⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 129.
- ³⁸ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 131 ff.
- ³⁹ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 134.
- ⁴⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 140.
- ⁴¹ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 6. Compare Plato, *Republic*, Book X: "Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image. For example: A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artist, though he knows nothing of their arts; and, if he is a good artist, he may deceive children or simple persons, when he shows them his picture of a carpenter from a distance, and they will fancy that they are looking at a real carpenter." Plato, *Republic*, Book X, 598, p. 374.
- ⁴² Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 7, p. 8.
- ⁴³ Cf. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 111.
- ⁴⁴ Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 57.
- ⁴⁵ Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art", in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), pp. 139-212; cf. Bruns, "Art and Poetry", pp. 220-3.
- ⁴⁶ Levinas, "Reality and its Shadow", p. 8.
- ⁴⁷ Bruns, "Art and Poetry", pp. 212-3, pp. 217-8.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, § 7 – § 8, pp. 471-4.
- ⁴⁹ The previous quotes come from Levinas, *Existence and Existent*, p. 57, p. 58.
- ⁵⁰ Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 337.
- ⁵¹ The quote comes from Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 101; Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), at <http://www2.bc.edu/~cunninph/derrida.htm> accessed 12/1/05: "It will have come, like this call, to disturb, discreetly but irreversibly, the most powerful and established thoughts of the end of this millennium, beginning with those of Husserl and Heidegger, whom Levinas introduced into France some sixty-five years ago!

Indeed, this country, whose hospitality he so loved (and *Totality and Infinity* shows not only that ‘the essence of language is goodness’ but that ‘the essence of language is friendship and hospitality’), this hospitable France, owes him, among so many other things, among so many other significant contributions, at least two irruptive events of thought, two inaugural acts that are difficult to measure today because they have been incorporated into the very element of our philosophical culture, after having transformed its landscape.”

⁵² For an authoritative secondary account of this *motif* in the early Derrida, see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), chapter 1, particularly §1.5.

⁵³ Derrida singles out, in particular, Levinas’ valorisation of the face (*visage*) of the Other as bearer of ethical spirituality (his “making the themes of height, substance and face communicate” (“Violence and Metaphysics”, p. 122); Levinas’ (classically Platonic) priority of speech over writing or production as a means of “expression,” wherein the word of the subject can “attend to itself” (pp. 126-7), and his pre-deconstructive emphasis on the value of “presence” over absence (p. 126).

⁵⁴ Plato, *Republic* Book X, 598 trans. and introduced by H.P. Lee (London: Penguin, 1967, p. 374.

⁵⁵ Plato, *Republic* Book X, 595, p. 371.

⁵⁶ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 141.

⁵⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 142.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, “Postulates of Practical Reason”, *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Kant*, pp. 344-9.

⁵⁹ Cf. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics”, p. 101, p. 135; Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”, pp. 68.

⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 154-5, p. 170. Cf. on this alignment Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”, p. 66, pp. 68-9.

⁶¹ Cf. Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”, p. 69, p. 73, pp. 74-5.

⁶² Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow”, p. 12. (my italics).

⁶³ Cf. Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics”, pp. 105-6.

⁶⁴ Cited at Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”, p. 76.

⁶⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, “The Other in Proust,” p. 165; cf. Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”, pp. 69-71.

⁶⁶ Cf. Robbins, “Aesthetic Totality”; Bruns, “Art and Poetry”; Josh Cohen, *Interrupting Auschwitz: Art, Religion, Philosophy* (New York and London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 72 ff.

⁶⁷ Cf. Levinas, “Is Ontology Fundamental?”, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁶⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (The Hague: Martinus. Nijhoff, 1991), pp. 104-5, p. 143.

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 76, p. 77, p. 88, p. 111, p. 139; also cf. Cohen,

Interrupting Auschwitz, p. 80.

- ⁷⁰ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", pp. 143-6.
- ⁷¹ Levinas, "Paul Celan: From Being to the Other" [1972], in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 46; cf. "Poetry and Resurrection: Notes on Agnon" [1973], in *Proper Names*, esp. p. 12; "Edmund Jabes Today" [1972-1973], in *Proper Names*, pp. 63-4; "A Conversation with Andres Dalmas", in *Proper Names*, p. 155.
- ⁷² Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 21.
- ⁷³ Cf. Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", pp. 98-9.
- ⁷⁴ Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics", p. 133, pp. 145-6.
- ⁷⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster* trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 24.
- ⁷⁶ Cf. Levinas, "From Consciousness to Wakefulness: Starting From Husserl", in *Of God Who Comes To Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). The contrast of sleep and sleeplessness has a certain privilege from quite early on the oeuvre of Levinas, starting from *Existents and Existence*, which contains a phenomenological analysis of insomnia.
- ⁷⁷ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 76: "The sensible – maternity, vulnerability, apprehension – binds the node of incarnation into a plot larger than the apperception of self. In this plot I am bound to others before being tied to my own body."
- ⁷⁸ Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, p. 75 (my italics). I am indebted to Dr. Lisa Guenther of the University of Auckland for drawing my attention to the importance of maternity in Levinas' later work.
- ⁷⁹ Slessor, *Selected Poems*, p. 106 (lines 18-21/end).