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JUDAISM AND ALTERITY IN BLANCHOT AND LEVINAS

A PREOCCUPATION WITH THE QUESTION OF RADICAL OTHERNESS has dominated cultural and religious theory for many years now, due in no small measure to the highly original and influential work of Emmanuel Levinas. His biblically inflected ethics of alterity continues to cast a long shadow over the contemporary intellectual landscape, and as it becomes increasingly difficult to take up moral questions without responding in some way to his provocations, readers of his work have tended to divide themselves into two opposing camps. On the one side, there are commentators whose enthusiastic reception of Levinas borders on the reverential;[1] on the other, there are critics who reject the philosophy of absolute alterity altogether, seeing it, for example, as an obscurantist "pathos of the Infinite"[2] out of place in a properly post-metaphysical age, or as a "theological hostage-taking" of phenomenology that threatens to undermine the real contributions the Husserlian method can still contribute to contemporary thought.[3] To read Levinas, it appears, is to be confronted with a virtually all or nothing alternative, to be forced to declare oneself either wholly for or wholly against the wholly other.

There are, fortunately, exceptions to this rule, thinkers who approach the Levinasian doctrine of alterity with a more subtle blend of affirmation and negation. One of the most notable of these is Jacques Derrida, whose more recent texts, including *The Gift of Death*[4] and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*,[5] have made it difficult to see his much earlier monograph, "Violence and Metaphysics" (1964),[6]

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1 See, for example, Richard A. Cohen's two lucid books on Levinas, *Elevations: The Height of the Good in Rosenzweig and Levinas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) and *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 2001.
2 Richard Rorty, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London, New York: Routledge, 1996), 17.
3 Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," trans. Bernard Prusak, in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham UP, 2000).
4 Trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
5 Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999).
6 In *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). On the relationship between Levinas and Derrida, also see Simon Critchley, *The Ethics and Deconstruction*

as the critical assault on Levinas it was initially taken by many to be. Another is Maurice Blanchot, a lifelong friend and admirer of Levinas and one of his most perceptive readers. Blanchot finds the Levinasian meditation on radical otherness an invaluable corrective to a philosophical tradition marred by an ethically and politically insidious predilection for sameness. Like his friend, he regards the West's suspicion and hatred of the Jew as paradigmatic of this fundamental allergy to difference and even implicitly frames his own thought as a kind of Hebraic reproach to the monistic metaphysics issuing from ancient Greece.

And yet, for reasons I will explore below, Blanchot never quite rallies to the flag of ethics as "first philosophy," consistently refusing to understand the irreducible strangeness of the human other in exclusively moral or ethico-religious terms. The nuanced and at times elusive conversation he carries on with Levinas repays careful study for the sharp challenge it issues both to the piety of much Levinas interpretation and to the equally complacent dismissals of the *tout autre* as a dogmatically religious or theological notion unworthy of philosophical attention.

In "Being Jewish," an essay collected in *The Infinite Conversation* (1969),[7] Blanchot raises the question of the positive significance of Judaism. It has not always been clear, he notes, that such a significance even exists; for simply to reflect on the history of the West is to be forced to confront the negativity that has always characterized the Jewish condition, to be compelled to acknowledge that being Jewish means being accused, persecuted, threatened in one's very existence by a civilization in thrall to the fear and hatred of the other, the different, the foreign. It is to recognize that Jewishness is, in short, "uneasiness and affliction" (IC 123).[8]

(Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) and Robert Bernasconi, "Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, ed. Bernasconi and Critchley (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1991).

[7] *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 123-130. Hereafter cited as IC, followed by page number. On Blanchot's atheism, see IC 246-263, and especially 252-53.

[8] It needs to be noted that in the 1930's Blanchot was affiliated with a number of extremist political journals (*Combat* and *L'Insurgé* being the most notorious) in which the virulently anti-Semitic views of many on the French right-wing often found expression. Though there is still little substantive evidence suggesting that Blanchot himself shared these views (and much suggesting that he did not), his association with anti-Semitic publications, the handful of troubling remarks about certain Jewish figures in his own essays, and his connection to the collaborationist *Nouvelle Revue Française* continue to be subjects of much controversy. For a comprehensive presentation of Blanchot's activity in the 1930's (sympathetic to Blanchot), see the first chapter of Leslie Hill's *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), esp. 21-46. For accounts more critical of Blanchot, see Steven Ungar's *Scandal and Aftereffect: Blanchot and France since 1930* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and Jeffrey Mehlman's "Pour Sainte-Beuve: Maurice Blanchot, 10 March 1942" in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge 1996), 212-31). For Blanchot's reaction to the discovery of the Sainte-Beuve piece, see his letter to Roger

Yet Blanchot insists that this is not all it is, insists that being Jewish is not simply a lack to be lamented or a socially imposed misfortune to be overcome. Well-intentioned as they might be, rigorous attempts (like Sartre's, for example[9]) to defuse the hatred of the Jew by claiming that he is a man like any other, that his Jewishness is nothing but the product of the spiteful gaze of the anti-Semite, unwittingly blind us to the profound truths imparted by Jewish existence in both its past and present incarnations. It is one more sign, Blanchot thinks, of anti-Semitism's depressing ubiquity that intellectuals so often feel compelled to defend the Jews by dissolving their difference in a pale, humanist abstraction, depriving the specifically Jewish character of their existence of any authentic meaning and truth of its own.

While disclaiming the ability to exhaust the vast riches of Jewish experience, the non-Jew and atheist Blanchot nevertheless underscores what he takes to be the challenge posed by the history of the Jews and Judaism. Not surprisingly, he rejects the conventional identification of monotheism, the revelation of the one true God, as the religion's most important legacy, arguing instead that being Jewish exists

> so the idea of exodus and the idea of exile can exist as a legitimate movement; it exists, through exile and through the initiative that is exodus, so that the experience of strangeness may affirm itself close at hand as an irreducible relation; it exists so that, by the authority of this experience, we might learn to speak (IC 125).

What is so striking about this distillation of Judaism's threefold *raison d'être*, which Blanchot proceeds to flesh out by drawing on the work of Jewish thinker André Neher, is the way it might serve as a perfect encapsulation of the main lines of Blanchot's own thought as developed in *The Infinite Conversation*. That is to say, in sketching a portrait of the Jew, Blanchot seems to be giving us at the same time a self-portrait. Of course, a skeptic might respond here with the kind of gibe often directed at participants in the quest for the "historical Jesus," claiming that in gazing down into the well of Jewish tradition Blanchot has seen nothing but his own face, having simply imported his own obsessions with exile, the other, and language as the privileged relation to alterity into religious texts

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Laporte in *The Demand of Writing*, 209-11. Many commentators have also taken the following 1984 remarks of Blanchot's on about Valéry's role in the Dreyfus Affair as an oblique reference to his (Blanchot's) own past. About Valéry, he writes: "I can find nothing that can justify his allowing his name to be associated with the names of those who called, in the worst terms, for the death of the Jews and the elimination of their defenders. There would thus seem to be a moment, in every life, when the unjustifiable prevails and the incomprehensible is given its due." "Intellectuals under Scrutiny," in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 1995), 213.

[9] *Anti-Semite and* Jew, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

whose main concerns lie elsewhere. As a result, the critic could charge, his hearing of Judaism has been highly selective, managing to filter out, among other things, nothing less than the Most High himself.

To be sure, this sort of hermeneutic contestation can not be ruled out in advance; and while Blanchot points to the astonishing absence (or merely nominal presence) of God in so many important Jewish texts to defend his own reticence in this regard, he acknowledges that there may indeed be something arbitrary about his narrowly focused remarks on being-Jewish. But he remains confident nevertheless that the direction taken by these remarks is ultimately in keeping with something essential to Judaism, with a truth best uncovered, he believes, through a sustained meditation upon "the distance that separates man from man when he is in the presence of *Autrui*" (IC 129). For, as we shall see, it is in the thought not so much of God as of the other person (*Autrui*) as infinitely distant, irreducibly separate, or inalienably alien, that the distinctively Jewish (but also universal) themes of exile, the "strangeness" of alterity, and speech all come together in Blanchot's thought.

As Blanchot is well aware, it is impossible to invoke the term "*Autrui*" in this way in an essay on the philosophical significance of Judaism without immediately calling to mind Levinas, who is present both in name and in spirit in "Being Jewish," as he is throughout *The Infinite Conversation*, and indeed, in Blanchot's work as a whole.[10] Undoubtedly, no thinker has done more to move the question of Judaism to the center of contemporary thought than Levinas, Blanchot's friend of nearly 70 years and the inspiration behind much of his interest in the Jewish tradition. The two thinkers clearly share a firm belief in the profundity of the universal challenge, the "metaphysical exigency" (IC 447, fn. 4), that being-Jewish poses to us all, and it is interesting to note in this regard that Levinas, in his 1956 "The Poet's Vision," describes Blanchot's philosophy of art in some of the very same terms Blanchot uses several years later to characterize the positive truth of Jewishness. According to Levinas, art or poetry in Blanchot is a "call to errancy," a truth (or better, a "non-truth") of "nomadism," an affirmation of the "authenticity of exile" which "uproots" the Heideggerian universe, this fundamentally Greek world which remains stubbornly indifferent or altogether deaf to the call issued by the Hebrew scriptures.[11] On Levinas's view, the poet

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[10] The relation between the two thinkers is a vast topic, and in order to limit it to a manageable size, I will exclude, for the most part, consideration of texts published after the appearance of *The Infinite Conversation* in 1969. This means that a discussion of Levinas's *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (trans. Alphonso Lingis [Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1998]), and Blanchot's fascinating reflections on it in *The Writing of the Disaster* (trans. Ann Smock [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995]), will have to be deferred until a later date.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, "The Poet's Vision," in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 127-39.

(Blanchot's, not Heidegger's) and the Jew are fellow travelers, eternal wanderers in a desert where no permanent dwelling is possible.

Yet despite their remarkable convergences, those affinities between Blanchot and Levinas that make it virtually impossible (and ultimately unimportant) to discern who had more influence over whom on such themes as exodus, the Other (*autrui*), and speech as a relation to alterity, the two thinkers stand decidedly apart in certain crucial aspects of their interpretation of these Hebraic motifs. The differences, which I will attempt to elucidate below, are at once extremely significant and extraordinarily subtle—too subtle, we shall see, to be captured simply by saying that Levinas chooses ethics while Blanchot chooses art to be the most important or authentic experience of exilic strangeness. And this is true even if Levinas himself initially frames the debate as one of ethics versus aesthetics, arguing in "The Poet's Word" (1956), for example, that if Blanchot's "nomadism" is to "mean anything other than a consciousness of the lack of seriousness of edification, anything other than derision—the authenticity of art must herald an order of justice, the slave morality that is absent from the Heideggerian city."[12] In other words, Levinas calls upon Blanchot to put to work the powerful critique of all totalizing systems operative in his (Blanchot's) analysis of *l'espace littéraire* on behalf of the ethics and justice that by this point have become Levinas's fundamental obsessions.

Perhaps never as simple as Levinas implies in 1956, the situation clearly becomes more complex with the appearance in *The Infinite Conversation* of three pieces consecrated to *Totality and Infinity*, which together with "Being Jewish" can be read as a partial taking-up of the challenge Levinas issues some thirteen years earlier. While Blanchot continues to exercise a certain critical reserve with respect to his friend's talk of "ethics," he has now adopted as a central preoccupation of his own the experience, or non-experience, that Levinas means to designate with this term—namely, the radical challenge present at the deeply enigmatic heart of the interpersonal relation, the relation to *autrui* alluded to in the text from "Being Jewish" cited above. In consequence, it has become altogether impossible to portray Blanchot's thought as essentially a kind of aestheticism indifferent to Levinas's humanistic concerns (concerns, that is, having to do with human beings, not with the autonomous subject of philosophical humanism, which both thinkers reject).[13] For by explicitly linking his longstanding investigation of alterity to the question of the *other person*, Blanchot, I would argue, begins to fulfill in his own way the injunction to "herald an order of justice." Bringing his

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[12] *Ibid.*, 137.

[13] Blanchot believes that Levinas's remaining attachment to this form of humanism is revealed by his (Levinas's) inconsistent privileging of the categories of speech and interiority in *Totality and Infinity*. See IC 56-57.

thought directly and obviously to bear on the crime of anti-Semitism, for instance, he strikes a decidedly Levinasian chord in "Being Jewish" by describing the injustice perpetrated against the Jews as one which "gives a figure to the repulsion inspired by the Other, the uneasiness before what comes from afar and elsewhere" (IC 129).[14] The very possibility of a "just relation," he asserts in the same text, is bound up with the "exigency of uprooting" that Judaism so vigorously opposes to the "pagan" attachments to place, homeland, blood and soil, attachments which are deeply complicit in the violence inflicted on the Jews, those witnesses to the authenticity of exile and the irreducibility of alterity (IC 125).

In ethically and politically significant remarks like these on anti-Semitism and the nomadic truth of Judaism, Blanchot could scarcely be in more profound agreement with the author of *From the Sacred to the Holy* and *Difficult Freedom*. And yet, an unmistakable skepticism still characterizes his approach in *The Infinite Conversation* to Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*. As we have already indicated, for example, Blanchot's willingness to speak of a "just relation" between human beings is not accompanied by a similar openness to the term "ethics," even if taken in the radically transformed sense Levinas intends. Some possible reasons for this reluctance are put forward explicitly, albeit in an extremely terse and diffident manner, by the interlocutors in the three consecutive dialogues Blanchot devotes to *Totality and Infinity* in *The Infinite Conversation*. At one point, for example, a speaker questions whether "the general name 'ethics' [is] in keeping with the impossible relation that is revealed in the revelation of *autrui*, which, far from being a particular case, precedes any relation of knowledge" (IC 55). While Levinas himself is certainly aware of the inadequacies of using a general word to designate a situation prior to the conceptualizing, thematizing activity that philosophy has always been, Blanchot seems to be suggesting that he is perhaps insufficiently attentive to the difficulties that follow from such terminological inadequacies for a thought that purports to take seriously the inextricability of thought and language.[15]

Another potential objection, perhaps more consequential than the first, is raised by the same interlocutor with reference to Levinas's account of the "experience of impossibility," i.e., of powerlessness before the absolutely inaccessible alterity of *autrui*. According to *Totality and Infinity*, the self is confronted here with a

[14] Levinas makes a similar point in many places, including the dedication of *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, which is cited by Blanchot in "Our Clandestine Companion" (trans. David B. Allison, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard A. Cohen [Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986]), 50.

[15] See Derrida's "Violence and Metaphysics"(in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978]) for a clearer and more robust presentation of this criticism than can be found in Blanchot.

situation in which it is unable to comprehend or appropriate the other in any way whatsoever, a situation in which it is simply no longer able to be able (*ne pouvoir plus pouvoir*), to use one of Levinas's favorite formulations. But what Blanchot seems to wonder is whether this experience really does "come down, ultimately, to a prohibition" (IC 55).

The question is of enormous gravity, says the speaker, only to leave it aside without risking even a preliminary response. It seems safe to say, however, that Blanchot's reticence is meant to imply a suspicion regarding the claim that *autrui*, about whose radical inaccessibility he is in agreement with Levinas, somehow confronts the self with an originary ethical injunction. In other words, he seems to be suggesting that just because it is necessarily *futile* does not mean that the attempt to appropriate the Other in his alterity is forbidden in any genuinely *moral* sense. The inaccessibility or impossibility here, in other words, is not necessarily derivative of, or equivalent to, a moral interdiction, nor is the resistance of *autrui* at root an "ethical resistance."[16] Despite Levinas's best efforts, *Totality and Infinity* has failed to convince on this point, and in the ethical language used in that text to interpret the relation to *autrui*, Blanchot's speakers find "only secondary meanings" (IC 63; cf. 55). As a result, suggests one, even the term *autrui* may finally have to be withdrawn, connotative as it is of an "altruism" that ultimately misconstrues the mysterious "relation without relation" that both joins and dis-joins self and Other.

Closely bound up with Blanchot's suspicion of ethics is his possibly even greater reluctance to follow *Totality and Infinity* in invoking the name of God in conjunction with interpersonal life. What Blanchot finds so valuable in Levinas's attempt to make Greek philosophy tremble by exposing it to its Hebraic other is the picture of the absolute irreciprocity or dissymmetry between self and other that emerges from this confrontation. Again and again in *The Infinite Conversation*, he affirms what Levinas describes as the "curvature of space" that separates the two terms of the relation, the "infinite" distance that stands between them, the absence that persists even and especially when *autrui* is most directly revealed or "present" to the self. And yet, he repeats just as often his conviction that this insight ought to be upheld without reference to the Most High of Jewish or Christian belief, maintained, according to one of the interlocutors in "Knowledge of the Unknown," "independently of the theological context in which it presents itself" (IC 56).

Much is at stake in this difference between Blanchot and Levinas, but once again,

[16] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1969), p.199.

the issue is more complex than it might seem at first glance. Specifically, it is not simply a question of Blanchot's atheism coming into conflict with Levinas's ostensible theism, if for no other reason than that the appellation of "theist" fits Levinas somewhat uncomfortably. For the status of "God" in *Totality and Infinity*, like much else in that abstruse and unsystematic text, is extremely ambiguous.[17] In what is perhaps a belated acknowledgment of the depth of this ambiguity, Blanchot concedes, in a footnote added to the revised version of "Knowledge of the Unknown" included in *The Infinite Conversation*, Derrida's point that Levinas would most likely refuse to accept both terms in the expression "theological context" (IC 441, fn. 2).[18] For the Other in *Totality and Infinity* is supposed to *shatter* every context, manifesting himself apart from every horizon and appearing to the self in what can only be described as a "revelation" utterly irreducible (much like the truth analyzed by Johannes Climacus in Kierkegaard's *Philosophical Fragments*) to any form of maieutic recollection. Moreover, Levinas would probably deny that his appeals to the name of God in his first major work have anything to do with "theology," for him a fundamentally Greco-Christian enterprise too inclined to treat God as the Highest Being rather than that which transcends all ontology. Whatever the name of God might positively mean in *Totality and Infinity*, it does not designate an entity, and a certain "atheism" with regard to the ontotheological deity seems to be a precondition for the genuinely ethical relationship to *autrui*.[19]

Ready to concede, then, the inappropriateness of referring to the "theological context" of Levinas's reflections on the interhuman intrigue, Blanchot nevertheless takes care to keep his distance from the God-talk in *Totality and Infinity*, however non-theological or non-onto-theological he might finally recognize this talk to be. In line with his sense of Judaism's true import as having less to do with its monotheism than with its novel conception of human relations—particularly, the relation to alterity accomplished in human speech—he has one of the interlocutors in "Knowledge of the Unknown" go one step further toward God-lessness than Levinas would seem to be willing to go. With the respectful deference of a parenthetical aside, this speaker asserts that, for him, "everything that can be affirmed of the relation of transcendence—the relation of God to creature"—must be affirmed not only primarily but *exclusively* of the social relation (IC 54). This is a common sentiment running throughout all three dialogues on *Totality and Infinity* in *The Infinite Conversation*, where Blanchot

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[17] On the question of God in Levinas, see the essays collected in Part II of *The Face of the Other and the Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham UP, 2000).

[18] "Violence and Metaphysics," 103.

[19] Derrida explores this theme of in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 101-05 and *passim*.

consistently emphasizes the Levinasian theme that "man alone can be absolutely foreign to me" over and against the other, perhaps irreconcilable, strands in his friend's thought which implicitly suggest that *autrui*, said to be closer than the self is to God, is "simply the locus of some truth necessary to our relation with the true transcendence that would be the divine one" (IC 57).

Rather than simply a question about belief or disbelief in the transcendent deity of biblical tradition, then, what is primarily at issue in the disagreement between Levinas and Blanchot on the name of God is the important differences in the conceptions of the interhuman relation that result depending on whether or not the Most High is brought into the account. Just as Blanchot repudiates the language of ethical obligation, by declining to interpret the inaccessibility of *autrui* in terms of a proximity to the divine he refuses to concede that the relation of self to Other unfolds according to a *hierarchical* model, denying that it is a relation, in either the literal or figurative sense, of pupil to Teacher, servant to Master, or man to God. To be sure, he repeatedly and resoundingly affirms with Levinas that the relation is non-reciprocal, irreversible, non-equalizable; that it is a paradoxical "relation without relation," meaning that an absence always remains at the heart of the Other's presence to the self; and that the two terms are truly "absolute," ab-solving (*absolvere*) themselves from the relation they nevertheless maintain, withdrawing in the very act of approaching one another. And yet, he persists in denying that the enigmatic presence-in-absence or absence-in-presence of *autrui* is founded on some kind of ethical or religious *superiority* the Other might be believed to enjoy over the self. It is here, I would argue, that the key difference between the two thinkers is to be found. But what are the grounds for the disagreement?

This is not an easy question to answer, as much is characteristically left unsaid by Blanchot in *The Infinite Conversation*, but perhaps it is reasonable to conclude that the privileging of *autrui* in *Totality and Infinity* strikes him as derivative of a prior religious decision, a pre-philosophical commitment he simply does not share with Levinas. In "Being Jewish," after all, he reminds us that his inquiry into Judaism certainly does not proceed "from a religious exigency" (IC 125). But Levinas would say the same thing of his own philosophical works (at least if "religion" is taken to presuppose a "theological context" or a prior commitment to authority of some particular tradition), which he consistently takes care to distinguish from his explicitly Jewish writings. In *Totality and Infinity* the elevation of the Other above the self is supposed to be justified by an appeal not to religious authority but to a phenomenological (or quasi-phenomenological) experience that Blanchot, for his part, does not take into direct consideration in *The Infinite Conversation*. "A separation of the I that is not the reciprocal of the transcendence of the other with regard to me is not an eventuality thought of

only by quintessential abstractors," Levinas assures us. Rather, "[i]t imposes itself upon meditation," he avers, "in the name of a *concrete moral experience*: what I permit myself to demand of myself is not comparable with what I have the right to demand of the Other" (TI 53, emphasis added). In other words, it is the material content of lived experience itself that strains against the requirements of "formal logic" for Levinas, who thinks that it is ultimately only in recognizing the moral primacy of the Other over the self—for example, in an experience as quotidian as the "After you, sir!"[20]—that we comprehend the sense in which being "occurs" as multiple. In a conception of the interhuman relation that fails to acknowledge the Other's specifically moral height—even one like Blanchot's which affirms the capacity of *autrui* to render the self powerless, utterly unable to be able—Levinas would refuse to recognize the principle of a genuine pluralism, something that both he and Blanchot consider eminently desirable. That is, he would fail to see the possibility of maintaining irreciprocity and avoiding a dialectical conception of self and Other as two essentially similar freedoms struggling for mutual recognition; for in the final analysis, only moral height, he believes, can ensure the Other's radical difference from the self.

Blanchot, in contrast, regards the alternative as a false one, rejecting *both* Levinasian ethics and Hegelian dialectics (as well as every romantic notion of the fusion of self and Other). Presumably finding only "secondary meanings" in the experience of the "After you, sir!" to which Levinas accords such paramount importance, he wants to expunge the hierarchical connotations of the view of interhuman life developed in *Totality and Infinity*, but without thereby restoring the privilege of unity over plurality, the one over the many, or sameness over difference. For, to have issued a radical challenge to the unquestioned status that "Parmenideanism," the philosophy of the One, has enjoyed in Western (i.e. Greek) metaphysics is the supreme merit of Levinas and the source of Blanchot's genuine admiration for his Jewish friend's work.

So, Blanchot seeks to negotiate a passage between the rock of ethics and the whirlpool of Hegelianism, positing a "redoubling" of the irreciprocity that Levinas situates at the heart of the interpersonal relation, a "double dissymmetry" according to which the self is not only the one confronted by the enigmatic, unidentifiable *autrui* but also, and at the same time, *the Other of this Other* (IC 70). That is to say, the paradoxical character of the Other's presence-in-absence for me also holds with respect to *my* presence *for him*. And with this affirmation, Blanchot shifts the question from the one he thinks Levinas is ultimately incapable of answering—viz., "Who is *autrui*?"—to a question that is more "political" than "ethical." "What of the human 'community,'" his speaker

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[20] See *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Richard Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985), 89.

asks, "when it must respond to this relation of strangeness between man and man—a relation without common measure, an exorbitant relation—that the experience of language leads one to sense" (IC 71)?

The shift proposed here to a meditation on human community rather than interpersonal ethics enjoys at least one important advantage over Levinas's account of the relation to *autrui* as a radically uni-directional movement. Namely, it promises to circumvent the objection often raised by perplexed readers of *Totality and Infinity* who wonder how this work can be considered genuinely philosophical (i.e., universalizable), rather than simply confessional or autobiographical, when it refuses even to acknowledge the legitimacy of asking how the self might appear to the Other. For Levinas, such a question is at bottom one more attempt to reduce alterity to sameness, to place self and Other on equal footing, a move which inevitably opens the way to a dialectic he deems inimical to genuine peace. But for Blanchot, in contrast, the "strangeness" that attends the presence of one human being to another is only intensified, not diminished, by allowing it to have a second source (and a third, and a fourth, etc.) in the self as the Other of the Other. Rather than the enigmatic Stranger who calls *me* to ethical responsibility, the Other, according to Blanchot, should be defined (if "definition" were not entirely out of place here) in more universalizable terms, i.e., in terms that need make no reference to *me*, as "the presence of man precisely insofar as he is always missing from his presence" (IC 71).

And yet, if the elimination of the essentially uni-directional character of the Levinasian story perhaps allows Blanchot to remain closer to both the philosophical ideal of universality and common sense, it is still far from clear that his notion of "double dissymmetry" will ultimately prove successful in the attempt to think human life without positing unity as its telos. Though it may not be a decisive consideration for an aporetic thinker like Blanchot, who insists on the necessity of thinking the human relation "under a double contradiction" (IC 74), his shift from ethics to politics will not escape the logical paradoxes that plague Levinas's ethical enframing of the "relation without relation," since the same paradoxes will necessarily lodge themselves just as firmly in any discourse on "community" that means to describe a *polis* in which no commonality, no unifying or equalizing measure, is ever present.

Even more serious, perhaps, is the way Blanchot's account of the "strangeness" that separates one human being from another without ever privileging either as the divinely-favored *autrui* runs the risk of *annulling* the radical difference it hopes to underscore. That is to say, it is uncertain how a redoubling of dissymmetry would not simply cancel it out, unclear how the reversal of irreversibility would not restore self and Other once again to the same plane,

thereby re-opening the way to dialectics— notwithstanding Blanchot's insistence to the contrary. This is probably how Levinas would respond to the proposals made in *The Infinite Conversation*, at any rate, objecting to the redoubling of irreciprocity as a surreptitious return to Hegelianism and thus an unwitting *attenuation* of the radical alterity that Levinas makes it his mission to protect.

Ironically, though, Blanchot's resistance to Levinas's ethico-religious rhetoric is grounded in a similar desire to do justice to the otherness of the other. That is to say, whereas Levinas finds the references to the ethical height of *autrui* and the supreme religious height of the Deity indispensable to any thought of genuine transcendence, Blanchot suggests that something like the opposite might be closer to the truth. "That *autrui* should be above me, that his speech should be a speech of height, of eminence—these metaphors appease, by putting it into perspective, a difference so radical that it escapes any determination other than itself," he writes (IC 63).

Here we are brushing up against what I take to be both the crux of Blanchot's dissatisfaction with *Totality and Infinity* and a densely impacted version of one of the more serious objections that can be raised against Levinas's thought. Before attempting to elaborate what is at stake in the implicit critique, however, it might be useful to rehearse briefly the Levinasian position Blanchot seems to be challenging, namely, the association of *autrui* with the Infinite that alone answers to what Levinas calls "metaphysical Desire."[21] The question we need to ask, to borrow a concise formulation from Simon Critchley (whose insightful essay on Blanchot and Levinas informs the remarks to follow), is simply: "Why is radical Otherness goodness?"[22] Finding a clear and convincing answer is not an easy task because, in addition to the notorious obscurity of Levinas's prose, there is a remarkable scarcity in his corpus of texts explicitly devoted to justifying the axiological decision that undergirds virtually every theoretical move he makes. Rarely, that is, does he provide us with arguments to substantiate his bedrock belief in the goodness of the *tout autre*, a reticence due, perhaps, to a wariness of philosophical attempts to "ground" a desire that is supposed to precede the subject's capacity to actively assume it or even represent it to itself.

Nevertheless, some insight into the rationale behind Levinas's thinking on this crucial issue can be gained by turning to *Time and the Other* and *Existence and Existents*, early works (both published in 1947) where the freshly-taken decisions that come to orient Levinas's philosophical adventure are all the more visible for

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21 See Section I.A of *Totality and Infinity*.

22 Simon Critchley, "Il y a – holding Levinas's hand to Blanchot's fire," in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, 115-16.

the roughness of their inaugural formulations.[23] Employing a sort of non-Hegelian dialectic that admittedly departs from the phenomenological method to whose spirit he usually claims fidelity, Levinas attempts in these texts to give an account of the emergence of individuated, conscious life from out of an anonymous, undifferentiated "existence without existents." If we can imagine the reversion into nothingness of everything that is (i.e., every *existent*), Levinas argues, we still cannot annihilate in thought *existence itself* in its brute nudity, the simple fact that *there is*—*il y a*—being. And this impersonal "ambience" or "atmosphere," this chaotic, abyssal "field of forces," imposes itself upon thought as being prior to all (Hegelian) negation or (Heideggerian) disclosure—prior, that is to say, to all *truth* (cf. TO 46-48).

Adding dramatic force to his account of this truth-less, utterly undetermined existence, Levinas suggests that it is accessed not only through intellectual abstraction but also, and much more vividly, in the ontological attunement or *Grundstimmung* of horror *of* being, to be distinguished from the fear *for* being, i.e., the Heideggerian *Angst* over the possibility of nothingness. In this existential ordeal of the *il y a*, "[w]hat we call the I is itself submerged by the night," he writes, "invaded, depersonalized, stifled by it"—truly a terrifying limit-experience which is undergone in particularly acute fashion by the insomniac for whom the silent darkness of the night, the total absence of light, becomes an oppressively indeterminate, threatening presence (EE 58). Not unlike in the nausea suffered by Sartre's Roquentin, in the brush with the *il y a* "things and beings strike us as though they no longer composed a world, and were swimming in the chaos of their existence" (EE 59).[24]

Needless to say, this is a profoundly undesirable experience that shatters the subject who undergoes it, a horrifying intimation of the murmuring chaos that precedes the "hypostasis" (Levinas's term for the emergence of the individuated entity), an unwelcome incursion of the anonymous *il y a* from whence all things come and to which all things, upon dying, return. (Philosophy, Levinas says, can offer none of the consolations of religion.[25]) Fortunately, this ordeal (at least in its full flowering) is also relatively rare, typically relegated to the background of our awareness by the meaning-bestowing activity of intentional life in both its "practical" and "theoretical" dimensions. "[E]xistence in the world always has a center; it is never anonymous," writes Levinas (EE 39). Even prior to *In-der-Welt-*

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[23] *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1987). (Hereafter cited in the text as TO, followed by page number); *Existence without Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1978). (Hereafter cited in the text as EE, followed by page number.)

[24] See Michael J. Brogan, "Nausea and the Experience of the '*il y a*': Sartre and Levinas on Brute Existence" in Philosophy Today, 45 (2) [Summer 2001], 144-153.

[25] See *Ethics and Infinity*, 113-22.

sein, in fact, prior, that is, to the subject's organization of its world into a system of ready-to-hand [*zuhanden*] equipment, the Levinasian ego is sheltered from the horrifying neutrality of the *il y a* by the simple pleasures it takes in the elements that sustain its existence, the "nourishments" on which it lives. "Life is *love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun" (TI 112). To a certain extent, these everyday pleasures, the simple happiness of satisfying mundane needs over and over again, are sufficient to keep the *il y a* relatively at bay.

The crucial point to be underscored, however, is that the very success of the ego in securing itself against anonymous existence readily turns into failure, the happiness of need-satisfaction becoming the unhappiness of profound solitude, according to the argument of *Time and the Other*. The self, whether hungry or sated, remains alone, walled up inside its own egoism, confined to an interiority which (partially) inures it to the depersonalizing horrors of the *il y a* but also, and by the very same token, ends up leaving it with precious little room to breathe. Heavy is the burden of solitude carried by the self which tends, whether it wants to or not, to appropriate and therefore to destroy (in Midas-like fashion) almost every alterity it encounters, be it through immediate consumption, through the possession accomplished by labor, through theoretical comprehension, or through any other form of "economic" activity, i.e., activity governed by the law (*nomos*) of the home(*oikos*), the familiar, the proper.

If the ego is to escape its sentence of solitary confinement, then, it needs to find a way to take leave of itself, to depart from the dwelling place, the "*chez-soi*" that becomes a prison cell as soon as it ceases to open onto the Outside. But at the same time, it must continue to protect itself against overexposure to the impersonal *il y a* that threatens the I with complete annihilation. This existentially urgent "problem of the preservation of the ego in transcendence" is Levinas's primary concern in *Time and the Other*, where the question, concisely put, is the following: "How can a being enter into relation with the other without allowing its very self to be crushed by the other" (TO 77)?

Though posed in a philosophical manner in *Time and the Other*, it is a fundamentally "Jewish" question—at least, that is, if Blanchot is right to find at the core of Judaism an affirmation of "exteriority, whose exigency invites us not to be content with what is proper to us (that is, with our power to assimilate everything, to identify everything, to bring everything back to our I)" (IC 127). And in the *autrui*-centered answer to it that Levinas begins to limn in the late 1940's, though in terms of eros and paternity rather than the ethics of the later texts, we find the key, I believe, to understanding the gesture that comes to

define his philosophical career, viz., the positive coding of radical alterity that we found somewhat perplexing a moment ago.

> The relationship with the Other [*Autrui*], the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject. The other 'assumed' is the Other. (TO 78-79)

"[A]n event happens, " Levinas writes, indicating that the monotonous boredom of the self chained to itself in oppressive solitude is shattered by the encounter with *autrui*. And yet, the self lives to tell the tale. That is to say, in the social relation the ego is exposed to the other it desires while still remaining itself, as yet undissolved in the acid bath of the *il y a* to which death (interpreted by Levinas, with Blanchot and against Heidegger, as the "impossibility of possibility"), that other great "event," that other otherness, threatens to return it. In sum, the alterity of *autrui* is resoundingly affirmed as goodness because in it, and only it, something like a "solution," however temporary and fragile, is found to the great problem of existence as understood by the early Levinas.

Blanchot, for his part, is less than convinced. Returning to *The Infinite Conversation*, we can see that he is no doubt given pause by precisely this sort of "linear narrative," as Paul Davies, also reading Levinas through a Blanchotian lens, has called it.[26] The progression proposed, more clearly (or, a critic might say, more crudely) in *Time and the Other* than elsewhere in Levinas, from the anonymous neutrality of the *il y a*, through the solidity of subjective, "hypostasized" existence, to the felicitous escape from the solitude of this self-centered life in the relation to *autrui*, presumably strikes Blanchot as a bit too neat. His dissatisfaction with the Levinasian story comes to the fore, it seems to me, in his insistence that *autrui* does not relieve us from the burden of attending to the neutral, attending, that is, to the unsettling anonymity and strangeness that in Levinas goes by the name of *il y a*. The attempt to separate the experience of alterity into two distinct regions—the "good" alterity of ethics as opposed the "bad" alterity of the *il y a* or the neutral—is bound to fail, he thinks, for the simple reason that "the Other man who is '*autrui*' also risks being always Other than man, close to what cannot be close to me: close to death, close to the night, and certainly as repulsive as anything that comes to me from these regions without horizon" (IC 72).

Blanchot's claim, in short, is that the absolute alterity of *autrui* is a difference so

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[26] In "A Linear Narrative? Blanchot with Heidegger in the Work of Levinas," in *Philosopher's Poets*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1990), 37-69.

radical as to resist every gesture of determination, not excluding the attribution to the Other of the predicates of goodness, desirability, divinity, or holiness. These attributions are utterly essential to Levinasian thought, and by insisting on an even more radical apophasis with respect to the Other, averring, for example, that "[i]f he be higher, *autrui* is also lower than I am" (IC 63), Blanchot would seem to be striking a blow to the very foundation of his friend's philosophical project. Concurring, by the time of *The Infinite Conversation*, with the Levinasian thesis that the experience of alterity is nowhere more profound than in the encounter with the other person, he nevertheless insists, *against* Levinas, on seeing this otherness as neither "good" nor "bad," neither positive nor negative—but, in a word, *neutral*.

> [L]et us keep in mind that *autrui* is a name that is essentially neutral and that, far from relieving us of all responsibility of attending to the neutral, it reminds us that we must, in the presence of the other who comes to us as *Autrui*, respond to the depth of strangeness, or inertia, of irregularity and idleness [*désoeuvrement*] to which we open when we seek to receive the speech of the Outside. [27] (IC 72)

Despite being announced by the relation without relation to the other human being, the *tout autre* for Blanchot is, in the final analysis, faceless. Anonymous, strange, inert, *neutral*, it can answer to no human desire, not even the "metaphysical" Desire beyond desire that inspires the early Levinas's entire philosophical project of finding in sociality a solution to the problem of fragile, solitary human existence exposed to the *il y a* and trapped within itself. For Blanchot, such a solution can never be anything other than an essentially ambiguous "*arrêt de mort*," a reprieve from burdensome solitude, perhaps, but one which involves a risky exposure to an alterity that leaves the self terrifyingly vulnerable, open not only to goodness but to evil, to the violence that can come from the Other just as easily as from the Same.

The sense one gets from reading Blanchot is that frightening as it may be, this is a risk worth taking. Or, at the very least, he believes it to be one that human beings cannot possibly avoid and thinks that the attempt to do so, the attempt, that is, to inure oneself to the ineliminable strangeness of alterity, is what is behind the crime of anti-Semitism, taken as a universal figure for the hatred of the other human being. If Judaism is an affirmation of the exigency of alterity and

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[27] This remark should be read as a direct response to the following claim made by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*: "We have thus the conviction of having broken with the philosophy of the Neuter: with the Heideggerian Being of the existent whose impersonal neutrality the critical work of Blanchot has so much contributed to bring out, with Hegel's impersonal reason, which shows to the personal consciousness only its ruses. The movements of the ideas of the philosophy of the Neuter, so different in their origins and their influences, agree in announcing the end of philosophy. For they exalt the obedience that no face commands" (298).

invitation "not to be content with what is proper to us," than Blanchot can be said to be a "Jewish" thinker of a sort. But his is an even more "desertified" Judaism than Levinas's, one which makes do without any hope that exile will one day come to an end in the Promised Land, without any faith in the equation of radical alterity with goodness.

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