

Luigi Loiodice

Chiasm and contacts Aesthetic experience in Emmanuel Levinas

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the tension between ethics and aesthetics in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas. Although he displays a certain wariness toward any aestheticisation of existence, Levinas does not refrain from invoking artistic and literary figures, often precisely at critical junctures in his work, those moments in which he seeks to articulate what exceeds both ontological discourse and the activity of the transcendental subject. Starting from the concepts of world and exoticism, and moving through the dimension of language, this study seeks to establish a dialogue between poetics and ontology, with the aim of showing how art can give voice to that which resists the subject's totalising movement. From this perspective, the aesthetic gesture does not merely evoke alterity, but safeguards its enigma – its irreducible polysemy, resistant to any reduction to a univocal, and thus ideological, mode of feeling. Ultimately, the ethical significance of art lies in the preservation of the Other; yet here alterity is understood, in the first instance, as a transcendental principle: it arises primarily all as a restless question dwelling within the subject, which – if heeded – may suggest the ethical possibility of feeling otherwise.

Keywords

Levinas, Ethics, Aesthetics

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luigi.loiodice@studio.unibo.it (Università di Bologna)

1. *Exoticism of a shattered world*

In everyday life, we often relate to things in terms of usability and appropriation, such that “their alterity is hardly noticeable” (Levinas 1995: 52). By contrast, “art makes them stand out from the world and thus extracts them from this belongingness to a subject [...]. Even the most realist art gives this character of *alterity* to the objects represented which are nonetheless part of our world” (Levinas 1995: 52-3). In Levinas, the *world* is to be understood as an ontological category: it is the *kosmos* centered around a rejoicing ‘I’ that frames the object not merely as an intentional pole but as something given to be enjoyed. Enjoyment is – at least in the Levinas of *Totality and infinity* – the *principium individuationis* of the subject: an *embodied* intentionality that moves toward the other in order to bring it back to itself, and that defines the identity of the ‘I’ as a continuous process of identification articulated at the expense of the non-I, imposing its law upon the other, thereby drawing an ‘order’ and a ‘disposition’. These are all expressions that point to the necessary existence of a center around which to gather. The world thus takes shape as a closed and circular space, where neither gaps nor failures are admitted: everything must be *comprehended*. Whatever falls outside this *totality* – everything ambiguous and “refractory to form” – is relegated to the night:

Those we encounter are clothed beings. Man is a being that has already taken some elementary pains about his appearance. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw himself. He washed, wiped away the night, and the traces of its instinctual permanence, from his face; he is clean and abstract. Life in society is decent [...]. What does not enter into the forms is banished from the world. That is refractory to forms is banished from the world. Scandal takes cover in the night, in private building, in one’s home – place which enjoy a sort of extraterritoriality in the world. (Levinas 1995: 40)

Well then – to return to our opening remarks – art claims a status of dignity precisely through this extraterritoriality, this ‘exoticism’ of the world (see Levinas 1995: 52). To be clear: *of the* world, not from the world. Exoticism is not to be understood in a mystical sense – or worse, in a ‘touristic-like’ sense of escapism – but rather as that which reveals an ontological caricature, and thus the latent, unexpressed possibilities within the

ontological horizon itself¹. The extraterritoriality that art bears witness to reveals itself as the counterpoint to a world that is there *for me*, suspending the perception that framed it merely as something ‘at hand’: “Instead of arriving at the object, the intention gets lost in sensation itself, and it is this wandering about in sensation, in *aisthesis*, that produces the aesthetic effect. Sensation is not the way that leads to an object but the obstacle that keeps one from it, but it is not of the subjective order either” (Levinas 1995: 53).

The object thus frees itself from reference to an interior; that is, it breaks away from subjectivity, its necessary interface: “[...] In contemporary painting [...] things no longer count as elements of a universal order which the look would give itself, as perspective. On all sides fissures appear in the continuity of the universe. The particular stands out in the nakedness of its being” (Levinas 1995: 56). Indeed, it is only through the ‘gaps’ in representation – only where form begins to fracture – that one can access the depths of experience, the *sensible* understood as that which resists the dialectical labor of the self. Yet the particular that refuses to be subsumed under the universal carries something of the uncanny: it remains where it has always been, but no longer has any rightful place. It *resists* stubbornly as an image of itself, thereby asserting a strange kind of ‘autonomy’²: “We come to understand in this way the quest of modern painting and poetry, which attempt to preserve the exoticism in artistic reality, to banish from it that soul to which the visible forms were subjected, and to remove from represented objects *their servile function as expressions*. Whence the hostility with regard to the subject, which makes painting into literature of painting [...]” (Levinas 1995: 55; italics mine). The image would seem to express a subterranean bond with ‘obscure perceptions’ that have never been silenced, such that, alongside reality, it reveals its tireless shadow:

¹ Here we find a suggestive point of contact with Adorno’s conception of mimesis. For the Frankfurt School thinker, mimesis is not reducible to the notion of copy or simulacrum; rather, it designates the truth content of the work of art – a truth that exposes the fractures of the world, becomes a critique of the existing order, and restores dignity to that which *resists* (see also Di Giacomo 2021: 14).

² In this regard, see Giorgio Franck’s precise observation: “The image [...] does not occupy the place left vacant by the object [...]. On the contrary, the image removes the place – any place. [...] To live aesthetically an occurrence of the world – to live it in image – then means becoming aware that everything is out of place, that everything is, literally, displaced” (Franck 1985: 36, my transl.).

Being is not only itself, it escapes itself. Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness. [...]. There is then a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. (Levinas 1987: 6)

We might observe that there is, within being itself, an untheorisable and elusive residue which, the more it is concealed, the more it reveals – as it were – an ‘ontological awkwardness’³. This materiality is the *sensible*: that dimension in which objects, no longer referring to the *for-itself* and fallen into disuse, present themselves in their sheer heaviness:

In this falling of things down on us objects attest their power as material objects, even reach a paroxysm of their materiality [...]. [The] painting brings about an absolute existence in the very fact there is something which is not in its turn an object or a name, which is unnameable and can only appear in poetry. (Levinas 1995: 57)

But caution is needed: just as Levinas seems to be winking at art, he is equally swift to retract his claim. One cannot overlook our author’s deep-seated suspicion of aesthetics – at least in its canonical sense. Indeed, in the aesthetic category par excellence – the *beautiful* – Levinas discerns the specter of idolatry, the danger heralded by a ‘pillar of salt’: in the totality delineated by the beautiful, the temporality of the aesthetic object betrays transcendence – the reference to the other – and is extinguished in the *hypostasis* of the instant. Thus, for a time that coincides with Being, alterity remains a chimera and “The world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow” (Levinas 1987:12).

³ It would be appropriate here to draw a comparison – one that would, however, require a separate and more extensive treatment – with Heidegger, and in particular with the existential dimension of inauthenticity (in which, however, Levinas does not believe). For if the world is configured as the realm of idle talk, in which existence takes refuge in the impersonal repetition of the ‘one’ (*das Man*), thereby evading anxiety and, with it, the possibility of an authentic self-understanding, exoticism intervenes to problematize this inauthentic dimension. It discloses the thing in its essence, removing it from the familiarity of use and from the transparency of common sense: the thing then appears as foreign, resistant to appropriation, and thus unusable.

However, in the essay *Reality and its shadow*, Levinas identifies in philosophical critique a remedy for the exoticism and depersonalization that art entails – a way to ‘humanize’, as it were, that world which art, when emancipated from critique, had relegated to an ‘impersonal’ realm, as seductive as it is ruinous. It is, therefore, a recovery of the subject, a human no longer anonymous physiognomy, and this is a task that critique carries out even at the historiographical level. Nonetheless, this integration of the work into history cannot occur on the basis of traditional logic:

It is not, in short, a question of worldly-ising the extravagance of the work by diluting its difference from the world, introducing it into history as a subjective appendage of an epoch, or restoring it to the soul as a ‘means of expression’. Rather, a renewed philosophical exegesis of art should foster a ‘broadening of perspective’ capable of introducing the ‘relation to others’ as the decisive hermeneutic key with which to reread the peculiar excess of sense exhibited by the work – not as derisory senselessness but as a ciphered reference to a surplus of sense, as a trace of absolute transcendence. (Ronchi 1985b: 197, my transl.)

In any case, art cannot break but only suspends its bond with ontology, outlining the possibility of a heterological reference from within being itself. Not only the image, but also the word seems to be situated on the threshold between the world and its *au-delà*, pointing to a peculiar *surplus* of meaning. Indeed – and anticipating what follows – we might say that poetic language expresses precisely the effort to recover the sense of that Saying which, before becoming discourse or intentional act, before being translated (and thus ‘betrayed’) into the *Said*⁴, takes shape as excess, as restlessness: a strange demand, a ‘vague fever’ that stirs and *precedes* the artist. The latter, to be sure, consciously and deliberately prepares their work, knows what they are doing –, but then, by a cunning of ‘aesthetic reason’, “everything unfolds as though art itself were producing itself to be reflected in him. [...] His works follow him, but they designate in him what is not him [...]. It is possible that the artist hears a call and does not know where it comes from: *interior intimo meo*” (Dufrenne 1967: 65, my transl.).

⁴ It is the *Said* understood as the word that de-limits, that arrests the anonymous flow of events, thereby outlining a syntax of the world; distinct from a pre-original, an-archic *Saying*, which unfolds in terms of ‘inclination’, of ‘contact’, prior to any form of discourse.

To grasp this point, it is useful to take a brief *detour* in order to trace Levinas's distinctive philosophy of language, with the aim of understanding alterity not so much in empirical or dialectical terms, but rather as an irreducible question: that is, to conceive *Autrui* as a transcendental principle, an inexhaustible grapheme inscribed in the very flesh of the Same; because it inhabits me even before I inhabit the world. An 'Other-in-the-Same' that does not alienate the subject, but – inasmuch as it shares the same syntax of *metaphysical desire* – is what keeps the subject alive, nourishing that secret question which eludes the surveillance of the *Said* and its claim to pacify the vertigo of existence.

2. *The enigma or the secret of being*

Levinas, likely attentive to Saussure's theoretical legacy, emphasizes the relational and differential nature of the sign: it signifies only *in* relation to other signs, insofar as it possesses a fundamentally differential nature. However, for Levinas, signification does not occur primarily through the mediation of the sign, but always because there is the Other (See Levinas 1991a: 204). According to the analyses in *Totality and infinity*, the word performs a form of *kenosis*: an 'emptying' of its own dwelling, a calling into question of the possession in which the subject basks. In other words, signification is possible because the world of the Same *offers itself* to the *Other*, and in this offering, things are released from the *grasp* of the ego, becoming *exterior*. Thus, discourse, on the one hand, is the prerogative of a Promethean-like subject, as it constitutes the condition of possibility for apprehending the world and for its thematization; on the other hand, however, insofar as it is an offering of the world to the Other, it attests to the recognition of transcendence and to an ethical *distance*: "Apology, in which the I at the same time asserts itself and inclines before the transcendent, belongs to the essence of conversation" (Levinas 1991a: 40). And it is perhaps only in this sense – only because one accepts to place the world at risk in this offering – that it acquires meaning and value. But "[...] In what way has [the Other] managed to draw near and stand before us without immediately hardening into a meaning that emerges in context? From where do proximity and directness arise in a universe of mediations?" (Ferretti 2010: 240, my transl.).

These questions find a tentative answer in the notion of the 'enigma': "This way the other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his

incognito [...], this way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself, we call enigma [...]" (Levinas 1987: 66). However, the term does not denote an entity emerging solely in singular or exceptional experiences, in exceptional times and places. On the contrary, the enigma takes shape 'in broad daylight', within certain everyday experiences that, nonetheless, resist the certainty of the *logos*, for in the face of such experiences, language retreats and falters⁵. And since the enigma is not situated 'behind the world', we attempt to apprehend it through the very structure of appearances "which are what they are and, *at the same time*, the infinite of what they exclude". (Levinas 1976: 151, my transl.; italics mine).

In a commentary on Proust's work, Levinas observes how the French writer outlines a "world that is never definitive, where realization sacrifices none of its possibilities. These press against the gates of being and, like Banco, take the place of the king. Like thoughts, loaded with stored thoughts [...] and things of 'stored things' in unimagined perspectives and dimensions" (Levinas 1976: 151, my transl.). It seems that in Proust's pages, Levinas discerns the dimension of the Saying (*Dire*) as the vestige within the 'Said' (*Dit*) that claims to be definitive, without remainder. To recover the meaning of these *remnants* will thus mean rediscovering the polysemy of 'hidden' things and thoughts, the *plurality* of being, and the emotional tonality – transcendental in nature – of language. The artist accomplishes this by *un-saying* the ontological weave and calling us back to error⁶, thereby unmasking the 'temptation' of univocal meaning on the part of a rationality that tends to 'reduce' the complexity of the enigma to the intelligibility of the phenomenon, and the ambiguity of the subject to the conformism of an abstract identity, decided elsewhere. After all, the entire endeavor of *Otherwise than being or beyond the essence* can

⁵ These are those peculiar experiences that suspend the ordinary relation to the world and take refuge in literature. One might think of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*: faced with the experience of beauty, unable to express it in concepts, Prince Myshkin loses language. He thus defects from the human consortium because he undergoes an experience of a private word, a word in the *singular* – which, properly speaking, does not exist, since the *logos* has always been public. A *failed* word that suspends categorical language and, in an eloquent silence, exposes the *poverty* of the concept.

⁶ This is Blanchot's thesis: "The more the world asserts itself as the future and the full light of truth [...] – where everything will be accomplished under man's dominion and for his use – the more essential it is that [art] preserve the movement, the insecurity, and the unhappiness of what eludes every grasp and every end" (Blanchot 1955: 332, my transl.).

be read as an effort to recover an anarchic voice that unsettles the subject and resists yielding to the monotony and exclusivity of the Said. Indeed, it is by exacerbating the latter – by pushing to the extreme the concepts of an entire philosophical tradition – that Levinas seeks to recover their *surplus* of meaning, their ethical connotation (see Ferretti 2010: 218-20). In this way, he rediscovers that dimension in which the subject's word is *already* the word of the other; in which the word 'I' – a masculine, identitarian word that upholds the world – is transcended to the point of signifying *in exposure* to the other: to the point where 'I' means *here I am*.

Therefore, there is a transcendence of language that must be safeguarded: that is, the heterological reference that the Said seeks to suppress must be preserved. For if the reference to the Other were to vanish, the world would be reduced to a horizon of dead, mute, and interchangeable signs, subsumed under the universality of an anonymous *logos*, a no-man's-land. Yet, since we are always already caught within language, it is inevitable that the world is produced as sign, and that reality is always already deferred, erased. However, "Precisely because the world produces itself as a sign, one increasingly feels the pressing urgency of an infinite hermeneutics that, from the trace abandoned by the Other, ascends to its living presence, to its origin" (Ronchi 1985a: 110, my transl.). In any case, if presence is given within the signifying relation – that is, as something that stands in place of something else – then the system of signs (the Said) necessarily betrays the sincerity of the Saying. This eternal deferral of what appears, this impossibility of grasping the immediacy of the concrete being, bars us from access to a reality in itself: "The spectacle of the silent world of facts is bewitched: every phenomenon masks, mystifies ad infinitum, making actuality impossible" (Levinas 1991a: 94-95). And although the word of the other breaks the silence and overcomes the anarchy of the fact – inasmuch as it takes shape as a *face*, that is, as a living word capable of retracting, defending itself, and offering justification – the problem remains: even the other's alterity can become discourse, be absorbed into the meshes of historiography, and betray itself in the Said. "Should we then affirm with Hegel that the immediate, the immediate singularity [...], has no value, is the vainest and the most trivial of banalities – or that, inviolable and inaccessible since time immemorial and forevermore, it constitutes being itself in its secret?" (Blanchot 1969: 53, my transl.).

Blanchot's question is unsettling: it is as if language moved along the surface of being; as if the word-sign offered us only "a world of tools where

what speaks is utility and value” (Blanchot 1955: 40, my transl.): “It happens, in fact, as though human beings were allowed to share only what concerns them least – the anonymous universal guarded by the concept – while the essential, the immediacy of their life, the unrepeatability of their existence, should forever vanish into the silent background or entrust itself to non-verbal forms of communication such as laughter, tears, or the sexual act” (Ronchi 1985a: 128, my transl.). Yet the *tòde ti*, the singular, is never entirely negated. Just like the *il y a*, which returns within the very act of its negation⁷, what is interdicted by the *logos* continues to stir within the subject. A subject who thus presents itself – borrowing Lacan’s terms – as barred, structured within a distance, and who perhaps, precisely for this reason, turns toward the Other in an attempt to bring it back to itself, driven by nostalgia for a lost unity. This peculiar ‘malady of return’ underlies the metaphysical violence that constitutes the amorphous outside, consigning to the background the *il y a*, that is, what might imperil the future and the stability of the present. It is an attempt at oblivion, a necessity to sublimate the dimension of pain, suffering, and death (the Other), in order to delineate the contours of a world articulated in terms of project, narrative, and ontology: “Sufferings, hardships, dangers – when they have not brought death – have ended up arousing the halo of thought [...] thought is a transformed fear, a fear that has equipped itself with a methodical apparatus” (Gargani 2009: 116, my transl.).

3. *The excluded of writing*

In one of his evocative works, Mario Perniola offers a comprehensive analysis of contemporary society, which he defines phenomena that are ‘already felt’ by society: an age characterized by an aesthetics of consensus and anonymity, one that excludes the power and transcendence of the *novum*. In our society, Perniola argues, not only is thought already thought, but meaning itself is socialized – that is, rendered anonymous – just as

⁷ The notion of *il y a* is the *fil rouge* that holds this work together. As is well known, it designates – according to the definition in *Existence and existent* – being as an impersonal, anonymous field, prior to subjects and objects: a Vichian ‘night of names’ that precedes the world and its thematization.

action has been reduced to pre-established behavioral patterns, subsumed under the bureaucratic framework of the ‘already done’⁸. In this impersonal atmosphere – which recalls the Levinasian *il y a* – every form of feeling merely a sense of *déjà-vu*, and both meaning and the subjects themselves are reduced to simulacra, to *living currency*. Perniola, in fact, highlights a peculiar affinity between the “living currency” described by Klossowski⁹ and the aesthetic beautiful: both are united by the “Universality without concept, purposiveness without purpose, and exemplarity without rule” (Perniola 1991: 30, my transl.). Now, in a world that has turned economic truth into a *fact* – that is, something certain and unquestionable – to the point that politics has been reduced to the application of ritual formulas meant to confirm it (under penalty of being deemed ‘irrational’); in a situation where economic feeling rests upon an ideology which, being founded on solid social consensus (always ‘ritualized’ and reaffirmed through advertising), absorbs all *difference* and any attempt at alternative feeling; in such a world, we may ask: what becomes of ethics? Or, in other words “How can fidelity retain meaning in a world in which feeling is estranged?” (Perniola 1991: 37, my transl.).

Mario Perniola traces the roots of this alienation of *feeling* back to Greek metaphysics, in which the soul traditionally takes precedence over the body, just as action has prevailed over passion (see Perniola 1991: 90). Yet the apex of metaphysical thought coincides with its failure: the echo of the ‘already felt’ has, in fact, replaced any possibility of genuine thought (see Perniola 1991: 91). Moreover, Western thought has always been driven by a demand for *totality*, but – as Galileo might put it – it is only through the removal of the animal – broadly construed as *subjectivity*, the *body* (the *other*) – and through the geometrization of life and social relations subsumed under the sign of *utility*, that the contemporary world has imposed its transcendental aesthetics, in which “everything must be experienced by all in the form of the already-heard” (Perniola 1991: 91). Now, upon closer inspection, the pursuit of totality – the *clavis universalis* of the West – translates into that metaphysical violence whereby “Particularity must be suppressed, mediated [...] the body, sensibility, must be

⁸ Kafka had already anticipated this condition, portraying administrative power – bureaucracy – as a quasi-divine dimension. One need only recall the unsettling atmosphere of *The trial*, where action, beyond the ubiquitous courts and their bureaucratized, predictable dimension, becomes a merely physiological, vegetative, almost repugnant fact (see Perniola 1991: 6-10).

⁹ Here, we refer to the work *Living currency*.

removed, as prescribed by the metaphysics of the West [...]: animals are removed and negated, and then the savages, children, and women. The latter represent, for *ratio*, the world of corporeality, disorder, unculture, and the irrational; they are [...] *the ones excluded from writing*" (Sini 1981: 306, my transl.; italics mine).

Even Levinas speaks of writing as a declension of a violent language – one that subsumes the heterogeneous and the particular into the *order* of Discourse. It is a mute language, devoid of subjectivity, insofar as it lacks a 'living word' capable of *un-saying* the said and thereby justifying itself. Nonetheless, it is important to underscore the ambiguous nature of the notion of writing in Levinas's work. In certain passages, in fact, it appears to bear witness to an opening toward the Other and to echo the structure of *metaphysical desire*. Writing thus emerges as a movement without return, as a form of *expenditure* within the economy of communication. It seems, in other words, to embody the very figure of that nomadism which "[...] It is not the approach to a sedentary stage; rather, it is an irreducible relation to the earth: a dwelling without place. Nomadism is a relation of writing, but more profoundly, it is an ethical relation" (Petrosino 2018: 196, my transl.). Moreover, as Sebastiano Galanti Grollo suggests, "Since it bears the trace of the Other [...] writing is an opening to the Other *as much as the face*, for it reveals, *if* appropriately solicited, the word of *Autrui*. [Therefore], poetic writing is not so much the act of a subject as it is passivity and exposure to the Other" (Galanti Grollo 2012: 132, my transl.; italics mine).

We have insisted on this point because we believe that, in a certain sense, Levinasian philosophy – much like aesthetic experience – may be read as an attempt to safeguard that *clandestine word* which insinuates itself into being and gestures toward a pathway within the *totality* delineated by the transcendental Subject. An ambiguous word, a goad of the flesh that "is said only in the breathlessness that pronounces the extraordinary word *beyond*" (Levinas 1991b: 16). The breathless effort of a response always delayed, for it announces a non-coincidence with itself – an alterity that commands me even before I have *chosen* to lend it an ear. This anteriority relative to choice indicates a form of passivity preceding reception: "Exposure as a sensibility is more passive still; it is like an inversion of the *conatus of esse*, a having been offered without any holding back [...]. The past infinitive form underlines the non-present, the non-commencement, the non-initiative of the sensibility. This non-initiative is older than any present, and is not a passivity contemporaneous with and

counterpart of an act. It is the hither side of the free and the non-free, the anarchy of the Good” (Levinas 1991b: 75).

And it is Levinas himself who draws this discourse close to the dimension of the work, precisely to underscore the non-voluntaristic nature of the choice and the *ingratitude* that underlies it. As something unfree and, in certain respects, excluding the author, the work bears witness to a surpassing of the self, ultimately embracing the *risk* of an eschatology without an author, of a world *without me*: “As absolute orientation toward the Other – as meaning – the work is possible only in patience, which, when pushed to the extreme, means for the Agent: to renounce being the contemporary of the result, to act without entering the Promised Land [...]” (Levinas 1972: 42, my transl.). The work thus reveals itself as the non-place of an abdication of the ego:

[...] In Celan’s terms: the poet speaks in the angle of inclination of his existence [...]. A singular de-substantialization of the I! To become entirely sign – perhaps this is what it means. Enough of the glorious grimaces of the creator! [...] A sign made to the other, a handshake, saying without said – important for their inclination, for their calling rather than for their message [...]. The fact of speaking to the other – the poem – precedes all thematization. (Levinas 1976: 62, my transl.)

Indeed, if it is true that sensation is *already grasped* as and within the intellectual dimension (in the form of thematization), it is equally true, however, that the latter is *already* affective reception: “To think is to receive what comes from outside; to think is to host the foreign [...]. To offer oneself so that something might find in us the possibility of being in the world [...]. It is not we, as subjects, who feel something, but rather we offer ourselves to a feeling that is displaced elsewhere” (Perniola 1991: 95-6, my transl.). In this regard, it is important to recall a comment by Levinas on that verse of the Bible which reads “Speak to the children of Israel *leemor*” (Levinas 1982a: 100, my transl.). It is worth noting the two interpretations of the word *leemor* (‘in these terms’) that Levinas offers. The first – revealed to him by his teacher – translates *leemor* as ‘in order not to say’; and our author comments: “There must be some unsaid so that listening may remain a form of thinking: or else the word itself must also contain the unsaid, so that truth [...] does not consume those who listen” (Levinas 1982a: 100). Levinas also translates *leemor* – seemingly in an antithetical manner – as ‘in order to say’: In both cases, one discerns a conception of truth marked by ethical inflection. It is not the *aletheia* of Heideggerian lineage, for there is nothing *to unveil*. Rather, it points to

the impossibility of enclosure within the *self* and to the imperative of self-giving toward the Other. Truth is thus understood as an *unsaid* that breathes within a hiatus, interrupting the monologue of the I and calling it to an infinite responsibility. It is the *kerygma* of a saying that returns beneath every negation and affirmation; a restless questioning that prevents the forgetting of the weight of being. And it is in these terms that one may understand the dimension of *il y a* in the later Levinas: once an absurd dimension in which subjectivity risked losing itself in a sacred dementia, it now becomes an *entanglement* between the I and the Other; a locus, yes, of the disintegration of the transcendental subject, but also, at the same time, a non-place of traumatic awakening to another subjectivity, grounded in passivity, that finds its legitimacy in the accusative: “The *there is* is all the weight that alterity weighs supported by a subjectivity that does not found it” (Levinas 1991b: 164).

4. On ruining the oikos

The *il y a* is a presence that unhinges – a weight so intolerable that it devastates even to the point of psychosis – and yet, by virtue of this very excess, it *signifies*. It constitutes a genuine ethical *Sinngebung* (see Levinas 1998: 154). Manifesting as a restlessness inscribed within the *corporeality* of the subject (as within the Other), it may be salvific insofar as – beyond recognizing the infinite transcendence of *Autrui* – it enables the unveiling of the limits of that *abstract* gaze which presents itself as ubiquitous, panoptic, and thereby paranoid. In other words, this heavy ‘materiality’ – just like the body – “is a permanent contestation of the prerogative attributed to consciousness of ‘giving meaning’ to each thing” (Levinas 1991a: 129). The *il y a* thus presents itself as a missing word, a stammer of the transcendental subject: a non-sense or ‘poetic sense’ that, to the certainty of the *logos*, opposes the discretion of a *perhaps*. This ‘perhaps,’ or ‘if one will,’ reflects the modes of a defective language, of a subject already de-centered (see Levinas 1987: 66-67): the modality of a *barbaric* language – that is, literally, one *foreign* to the Greek. That said, Levinas is not advocating an emancipation from philosophy, nor a descent into mysticism or irrationality. Rather, his aim is to show that the ethical order is, in a certain sense, “more ontological than ontology itself” (Levinas 1982b: 143). In fact, in the later Levinas, one perceives precisely this effort to maintain the *tension* between ethics and ontology, between

Saying and Said, sincerity and justice. For safeguarding the amphibology of being is an ethical and political task – an anti-idolatrous function insofar as it means recognizing that being is *plural*, fragmentary, and inhabited by an alterity that is, moreover, *undesirable*. In other words, the point is not to disavow ontology, but rather to acknowledge that it is ‘no longer fundamental,’ and that – paraphrasing Freud – being is no longer master in its own house.

Indeed, the work bears witness precisely to this discomfort, this *malaise*: it is – says Levinas – “Jewish by nature”, because, like Judaism, it is “[...] Dehiscence of the world, which offers not a dwelling, but, for passing the night, stones against which the wanderer’s staff strikes [...]. Insomnia in the bed of being, impossibility of curling up in order to forget oneself” (Levinas 1976: 64-5, my transl.). Indeed, we may understand the work under a double illumination: on the hand, the diurnal light, insofar as it is a ‘world-work’ – manifesting as an aesthetic object which, like any other, is the fruit of the Spirit’s labor, a cultural expression; on the other hand, the work gestures toward a proximity with that night, with that black light that “inexorably corrodes that world imbued with human meanings which it itself has helped to produce” (Ronchi 1985a: 156, my transl.). However, while on the one hand the work appears to lead the author toward the night of the *il y a* – and thus toward the barbarism of non-sense – on the other, it is precisely this tension that seems to interrupt the monological reason of the subject, outlining a singular ethical perspective¹⁰: “Far from compromising itself with the anonymous violence of all ‘philosophies of the neutral’, literature would then open the gates to the transcendence of ethics. It would redeem its burden of inhuman insignificance by becoming a ‘trace’ of a transcendence that always exceeds the closed order of the Book – an in-finite transcendence” (Ronchi 1985a: 157, my transl.). Aesthetic experience thus lies at the chiasm between what is familiar to us (the *world*) and what is forbidden to us: it is therefore a site of tension, openness, and possibility. Yet great art does not choose one over the other: it is precisely the *interval* between dwelling

¹⁰ The work’s twofold character thereby reflects, symmetrically, the ambivalence of the *il y a* noted above: on the one hand it presents itself as a *locus* in which subjectivity dissipates into the anonymity of Being; on the other, that very traumatic displacement constitutes the condition of possibility for an alternative subjectivity, one that bears ethical significance. We shall return to this point shortly, given its pivotal role in our argument, in order to elucidate more fully its ethical and ontological implications.

and desert, between the world and its *au-delà*. And it is within this interstice – where intentional aim falters, where the project of the I collapses – that the *shadow* of reality or the ambiguity of being-in-the-world allusively reveals itself.

But the world tends toward *totality*, meaning collapses into *utility*, and the subject adopts the posture of a monolithic *whole*. The immanent dialectic of the self – the total labor and fulfillment of metaphysics – preempts all alterity through comprehension, thereby denying the encounter with the Other, so that the subject may remain secure within its dwelling, and the world becomes merely that which lies within reach. Thus, the ethical task of art, in our view, lies first and foremost in the gesture that ruins the house of being, compromising the transcendental architecture that makes the human the *measure* of all things. And this not out of some crude nihilistic rage, but because only through ontological ruptures can what has been eclipsed be rediscovered – that which “Desolate subsoil [that] confers upon our dwelling its essence of exile, and upon the marvels of our architecture their function as huts in the desert” (Levinas 1975: 23, my transl.). Thus, what is at stake is a problematization of the ontological *locus* – the *Da* of *Da-sein*. Yet, to this end, it is first necessary to unsettle our habitual modes of response, our perceptual habits. This is precisely where art comes to our aid:

We grow accustomed to thinking that everything which exists necessarily exists and is unshakable. Cézanne’s painting suspends this habit and reveals the inhuman base of nature upon which man is situated. That is why his figures appear strange, as if seen by a being of another species. [...] It is a world without familiarity, in which one does not feel at ease. [...] The artist, according to Cézanne, is not content with being a cultured animal, but takes culture from its origin and founds it anew – speaks as the first man spoke and paints as if painting had never existed. (Merleau-Ponty 1966: 28-32, my transl.)

Cézanne’s gesture – like that of other contemporary artists – revolves around two cardinal points: the rejection of perspectival space and the safeguarding of a transcendent dimension – more or less explicitly articulated – which, however, cannot be posited “independently of sensible elements” (Di Giacomo 2021: 22; my transl.). Moreover, contemporary art seems to avert what Levinas feared in his writings of the 1940s – namely, the closure of the image upon itself, the idolatry of the Beautiful, and the resulting suspension of responsibility. On the contrary: “[...] The work safeguards the invisible by preserving it in what is other than itself; if, within

tradition, the image attempted to normalize and render bearable the truth of the world – guaranteeing us separation and absolute autonomy from it – today art cannot but assume the ethical task Adorno assigns to it: that is, it must take responsibility for pain, sharing in it without claiming to explain it” (Di Giacomo 2021: 22). In Levinasian terms, the truth of traditional art is the truth of ontology – the cunning of Odysseus, who translates the scandal of the world into a conciliatory form – through the grasp of the *Begriff* (the traditional perspective) – smoothing the roughness of a path that moves toward the Other *only* to bring it back to the self¹¹. The traditional artist shares the same gaze as Odysseus; which is why, for Levinas, contemporary art represents a paradoxical exception – painting that ‘struggles with vision and points toward that dimension prior to language, in which expression does not name but *safeguards* the invisible.

Expression may thus be understood as the counterpoint to the *Begriff*: it is the *moment* in which power veers into non-power. A non-power that does not affirm impotence so much as introduces a swoon – an uncertainty that betrays the plurivocity of signification, much like the ‘*biffures*’ of Michel Leiris – to which Levinas devotes several valuable pages – which allow one to glimpse a certain otherness of signs, a ‘re-thinking’ because, through them, one attempts “To grasp thought at the privileged moment in which it transforms into something other than itself” (Levinas 1981: 58, my transl.)¹²:

It would be interesting to compare the process of the *Biffures* with the work of modern painters [...]. Here, it is not space that contains things, but rather things that, through their *biffures*, outline space. Behind the rigid line, one perceives the line understood as ambiguity. Lines free themselves from their function as skeletons to become the infinity of possible juxtapositions [...]. Thus, incompleteness – and not completeness – would, paradoxically, be the fundamental category of modern art. (Levinas 1981: 59, my transl.)

¹¹ On the figure of Odysseus in Levinas’s thought, see Ronchi 1985a: 92-3.

¹² It is worth noting that in this essay – and especially in those collected in *Proper names* – Levinas articulates a first rehabilitation of art, understood as a liberation – albeit never final – from the idolatrous dimension of the image. In any case, one must bear in mind that it is once again the relation to ontology – even when this is no longer fundamental, to borrow the title of one of the author’s major essays – that provides the ground sustaining Levinas’s *corpus*, whether one reads it in a predominantly negative key – as *horror pleni*, the vertigo of the *il y a* – or conceives it as integrated within an ethical dimension, as in the late Levinas.

But for Levinas there always remains the risk that this incompleteness be reified into a form, into that alluring image that refers back to the dimension of the 'idol'. Yet, while we acknowledge the reasons and the cautions that lead the author to formulate his thesis in such categorical terms, we maintain that a nuanced modulation thereof can yield equally stimulating interpretive insights. We do not, in fact, consider this tautology of the artistic image to be absolute; rather, we contend that one can perceive within it a certain porosity:

It is a matter of understanding how and to what extent the seemingly tautological tendency of art since the late nineteenth century [...] might in fact demonstrate how this very self-referential dimension always expresses a hetero-referential character [...]. Indeed, it is precisely the autonomy of form in this art that constitutes the necessary condition for the work not to exhaust itself in empty gratification, but to assume an ethical and truth-bearing significance. (Di Giacomo 2021: 11, my transl.)

To grasp this ethical dimension, it is, in our view, instructive to adopt Mikel Dufrenne's insight: that is, to conceive the relationship between author and aesthetic object as a subject-(*quasi*)-subject relation (see Dufrenne 1967: 291). In other words, the subject-object paradigm must collapse. To understand the object as a quasi-subject is to affirm that it cannot be reduced to my truth, cannot be grasped by a definitive formula as under the principle of identity. Levinas would speak of a relation without relation – a form of connection that preserves *separation* between terms. Such a relation, we contend, reveals itself in Cézanne's encounter with *Montagne Sainte-Victoire*:

[...] Cézanne painted the mountain many times, as if he could never provide a definitive version of it; the fact is that between the artist and the mountain a dialogue is established between two subjects, thereby displacing the epistemological paradigm of 'subject-object' and replacing it with that of 'subject-subject'. What the subject-painter asks of the subject-mountain is how it comes to be such [...] by what visible means it emerges from the invisible – that invisible which the visible never manages to eliminate and which, in fact, renders the visible itself always new and different. (Di Giacomo 2021: 48, my transl.)

However, it should be clarified that the visible-invisible relation – as with the ethical relation in Levinas – is not dialectical: it is not a simple oppositional logic, but rather a *chiasm* (or, in Levinas's terms, an *intrigue*):

This is meant to indicate that the characteristic of the visible is to be the surface of an inexhaustible depth, and it is this that allows it to remain open to visions beyond our own. And if the invisible is not the opposite of the visible – since the latter itself contains a structuring of invisibility – then likewise the invisible is the other of the visible: it appears only within it, at the very moment in which it withdraws. (Di Giacomo 2021: 49, my transl.)

All this compels us to rethink the very notion of artistic creation. For if the latter continues to be understood merely in terms of an escape, and further configured in the onto-theological sense of a *fiat* – a poietic instant that creates the world *ex nihilo* – then the aesthetic gesture may evoke precisely what Levinas feared and what underpinned his reservations toward aesthetic experience: that shiver, that dangerous illusion “[...] of glimpsing the *il y a* without falling into it, knowing that it is a game that can be interrupted [...] satisfying in hallucinatory fashion the ancient human aspiration to witness creation, in the absurd and idolatrous conviction of being able to seize it. [...]” (Ciglia 1988: 90, my transl.). Conversely, one may conceive of creation differently – ethically – by enacting a de-centering of the ‘I’: by approaching *poiesis* from the premise that there exists a non-assimilable *exteriority*, and that the work unfolds within the *agon* between a necessary *formal mediation* and a transcendence that, likewise necessarily, eludes it. In other words, it involves welcoming that subversive voice which tears through the ontological repose of the Subject, opening a pathway toward the *unpredictable*. This is what Mario Perniola calls cosmic sensing, opposing it to the anonymous cosmology of the ‘already heard.’ The latter, as a legacy of metaphysical thought, configures being as a *static* totality – as the eternity of the identical: “The endpoint of metaphysics is equality, the interchangeability of everything with everything: [...] the realization of economic equivalence. By contrast, the endpoint of cosmic attunement is an ecological experience of intimate ease and familiarity with ever-emergent nature. According to cosmic attunement, the opposite of birth is not death [...] but that which does not come into being [...] while nonetheless being actual” (Perniola 1991: 102, my transl.).

Now, upon closer reflection, this is the lesson of contemporary art; in particular, it is Paul Klee’s teaching: namely, the notion that “creation today cannot yet be said to be concluded” (Di Giacomo 2021: 59, my transl.):

Instead of offering a definitive image, the work retraces the paths of creation [...]. And precisely because at every moment of the journey infinite bifurcations open

up, the penetrating eye discovers that this is not the only possible world [...]. This is why Klee speaks of his painting as a place where ‘the dead and the unborn’ are found – that is, the unrealized possibilities – so that art gives voice to that accumulated and mute suffering which the prevailing order has stifled through the principle of identity. (Di Giacomo 2021: 59-60, my transl.)

We may understand this accumulated suffering as that *Saying* that voice of the *il y a* never silenced, which returns to unravel the weave of the *logos*. The aesthetic gesture thus becomes a herald of that reduction of the Said to the Saying envisioned by Levinas – as a retroactive creation, a step outside the world, thereby delineating a sense beyond the *conatus esse* and breaking with the stupidity of the idol, restoring to it the ambiguous word of the enigma. At this point, it may be legitimate to interpret the ‘enigma’ embodied by art as the aesthetic counterpart of a pursuit that is not mere iconoclastic fury but that “Only if it remains alert and continuously questions its own idolatrous risks can it truly be ethical” (Di Castro 2001: 60-1, my transl.). And perhaps it is in this sense – in the disposition to listen to this voice – that poetry may indicate the last refuge of transcendence in Western humanism (see Levinas 1976: 24).

Ultimately, returning to the discourse on Klee, we might say that that penetrating eye which discovers further worlds and unveils forgotten horizons of meaning; that vision which is primarily a listening to what precedes my actuality; in short, that optics in which creation assumes the physiognomy of a moral gesture – is ethics: “Creation is the fact that intelligibility precedes me [...] ‘The order of the creature’ [...] is the order in which it has already been denied that every exteriority must have initially been interior, that every past must have been present, that every command is autonomy, and every teaching a reminiscence” (Levinas 1989: 27, cited in Di Castro 2001: 145). To view the order of the creature, the autonomy of the self, and the status of reality in this light means to understand that a fundamental heteronomy structures the subject: a wound that cannot be sutured because inflicted in a past that has never been ours, because it is a “desire for a land not of our birth” (Levinas 1991a: 33-4). In recognizing this, we might perhaps refrain from turning the *desire* for the Other into yet another *need* that extinguishes itself in an egoistic happiness (see Levinas 1987: 107).

5. Conclusions

The ethical response is indeed a response that disappoints knowledge – just as art, when it is not mere commodity, appears in the eyes of figures like Odysseus (champion of economic rationality) as a waste, a senseless expenditure. Yet perhaps the moral strength of the aesthetic gesture lies precisely in setting aside, even if only for a moment, the panoply of Ulysses – to wager on a journey without return, without the hope of the native island. It is the destiny of Abraham, the one who abandoned his land and flocks to walk toward the desert of the Other, propelled by a *calling* that precedes him and that is not exhausted by a mere indicative response; that suspends the metaphysics of presence (the *world* and its certainties) insofar as it is the *trace* of a God who becomes present in withdrawal, who sets the appointment and is not there: “disturbance disturbs order without troubling it seriously. It enters in so subtle a way that unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn. It insinuates itself, withdraws before entering. It remains only for him who would like to take it up” (Levinas 1987: 66).

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