

The ‘face’ of the *il y a*: Levinas and Blanchot on impersonal existence

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Abstract This essay argues for a reading of Levinas’ work which prioritizes the significance of the *il y a* over the personal Other. I buttress this reading by using the well-documented intersections between Levinas’ work and that of Maurice Blanchot. Said otherwise, I argue that Levinas’ relationship with Blanchot (a relationship that is very much across the notion of the *il y a*) calls scholars of the Levinasian corpus to place the conception of impersonal existence to the forefront. To do so is to take seriously the complex relationship between Levinas’ explicitly ethical account of the face, and his phenomenological account of impersonal existence. To approach Levinas in this way (by way of his relationship with Blanchot) is to not only recognize that the ethical import of the face lies in its being without determination or nomenclature, but it is to also fully acknowledge the underlying horror of a Levinasian rendition of the ethical encounter.

Keywords Levinas · Blanchot · Transcendence · Face · *Il y a* · Exteriority · Literature

Levinas’ formulation of the *il y a* is pivotal in his conception of transcendence. So, as scholars of his work, we must grapple with the ambiguous and formidable ‘present absence’ of what he refers to as a field of impersonal existence. This is necessary not only to understand how he situates himself with regard to Western philosophy’s obsessions with transcendence, but to also appreciate the singularity of his conception of the Face, alterity and, ultimately, the ethical. Elsewhere, I have argued for a reading of Levinas’ work, which prioritizes the significance of the *il y a*

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over the personal Other.¹ Here, I buttress this reading by using the well-documented intersections between Levinas' work and that of Maurice Blanchot. Said otherwise, I argue that Levinas' relationship with Blanchot (a relationship that is very much across the notion of the *il y a*) calls scholars of his work to place his conception of impersonal existence to the forefront.² To do so is to take seriously the complex relationship between Levinas' explicitly ethical account of the face, and his phenomenological account of impersonal existence. To approach Levinas in this way (by way of his relationship with Blanchot) is to not only recognize that the ethical import of the face lies in its being without determination or nomenclature, but it is to also fully acknowledge the underlying horror of a Levinasian rendition of the ethical encounter.

Simon Critchley's essay in *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing* makes a similar case in its advocating for a 'Blanchot-inspired re-reading of Levinas.'³ In light of identifying "an alternative destiny for the *il y a* in Levinas' work," he argues for a neutralization of Levinas' personal Other (*autri*), or what I refer to here as the face.⁴ In so doing, Critchley opposes what Paul Davies identifies (quite critically) as a linear reading of Levinas that sets up the impersonality of the *il y a* as an exteriority to be surmounted by the ethical alterity of the face.⁵ In place of this Critchley proposes that one understands the *il y a* as the engine of alterity that fuels the entirety of the Levinasian corpus, including what Levinas describes as the ethical proximity of the face of the Other. The *il y a*, he claims, "functions like a standing reserve of non-sense from which Levinas will repeatedly draw the possibility of ethical significance."⁶ This resonates with my present argument for positioning Levinas' conception of the *il y a* at the forefront of his notions of transcendence and alterity, precisely so that the signification of these terms can be maintained. However, from Critchley's 're-tracking' of the *il y a*, he ventures further with two proposals with which I am not in full agreement. In one of them, he understands the role of literature within Levinas' analysis to be indistinguishable from the overtly ethical role of the personal *autri*. The other reads Levinas' move toward the ethical as dismissive of the ambiguity between the 'good' experience of ethical possession and the 'evil' experience of possession by the *il y a*.⁷

I address the first of these proposals shortly. However, it is worthwhile to comment on the second, given its intersections with the position for which I currently argue. I determine Critchley's question of why Levinas deems it necessary to impose an ethical signification on radical alterity to say more about how Critchley

¹ Sealey (2010).

² In this regard, my thesis is very much aligned with Critchley (1996). At the same time, I also identify our claims to be different in important ways, and explain further as this essay unfolds.

³ Critchley (1996, pp. 108–122).

⁴ Critchley (1996, p. 111).

⁵ Davies (2008, pp. 37–69).

⁶ Critchley (1996, p. 112).

⁷ "I can see why there has to be a radical alterity in the relation to the Other and at the heart of the Subject in order to avoid the philosophies of totality, but, to play devil's advocate, I do not see why such alterity them receives the predicate 'goodness.'" Critchley (1996, p. 116).

presumes a dichotomy between ethics (or the ethical) and the ‘non-holy,’ and in so doing, resists the very re-constitution of the meaning of the ethical that Levinas’ program brings forth. He writes that “Blanchot holds to the ambiguity or tension in the relation to *autri* that cannot be reduced either through the affirmation of the positivity of the Good or the negativity of Evil.”⁸ Granted that the theological and ethical references found in Levinas is intentionally bracketed in Blanchot, Levinas’ formulation of the *il y a* is to precisely trouble the distinction between ‘positive goodness’ and ‘negative evil’ to which Critchley refers. To do what both he and I propose, which is to take seriously the site of impersonal existence (and to this through the lens provided by Blanchot) is to recognize, along with Levinas, an inevitable trauma (or horror) in an encounter with alterity. For Levinas, this encounter signals a genuine transcendence, but its genuineness would be for naught without the disaster that unfolds in finding oneself ‘de-subjectivized’ in the anonymity of existence. It would be a transcendence only as the ‘enigma of an obsessive dying’ that can never end in the ‘phenomenon of death,’ as Critchley rightly notes.

All this is a reminder that, in the midst of Levinas’ ethical language is the scene of substitution, a scene that “restores the strangeness and terror of the inter-human relation.”⁹ Hence, while Critchley proposes that we replace, in Levinas, the primacy of the goodness or holiness of ethics with that more primal ‘neutral’ alterity of the *il y a*,¹⁰ I understand this neutrality to be already present and recognized in Levinas’ re-constitution of the meaning of the ethical. My locating the *il y a* at the center of the Levinasian framework is to underscore this novel constitution, and to guard against a reading of ‘holy transcendence’ that mistakes ‘holy’ for anything short of the absolute disaster that it is. Here, John Caputo’s essay, “Hospitality and the Trouble with God” is very helpful. He provides an interpretation of ‘God’ that is contrary to the theological employment of the term, which seems to be what Critchley has in mind. Caputo writes that “[contrary] to the tendency...to think in terms of the divine order...we [should] think of God as trouble, as a source of disruption and interruption.”¹¹ This is precisely my reading of Levinas’ deployment of a theological language. More importantly, I argue that this reading is unavoidable in grounding Levinas’ work squarely in the *il y a*.

Nevertheless, Simon Critchley’s valuable analysis is one of several that acknowledge the relationship between Levinas and Blanchot as unavoidably formative to understanding their work. William Large documents this to be especially the case, in a paper that arranges Levinas, Blanchot and Heidegger around the genealogy of the *il y a*.¹² In that ‘fine risk’ of reading these two thinkers

⁸ Critchley (1996, p. 117).

⁹ Critchley (1996, p. 117).

¹⁰ “I should want to claim, with Blanchot, that what opens up in the relation to [alterity]...is not the transcendence of the Good beyond Being or the trace of God, but the neutral alterity of the *il y a*, the primal scene of emptiness, absence and disaster...” Critchley (1996, p. 118).

¹¹ Caputo (2011, p. 83).

¹² Large (2002, pp. 131–142).

together, Paul Davies identifies the *il y a* as “a phrase that fluctuates bewilderingly between them.”¹³ He leaves un-translated “le désastre,” citing it as what, for Blanchot, “remains, but never as a determinable presence.”¹⁴ Here, the echoes of Levinas’ phenomenology of the *il y a* are unmistakable, particularly in those instances where it is given in terms of what remains present when all falls away.¹⁵ To this end, Davies’ analysis is alongside Critchley’s and many others, which support the claim that the core of Levinas’ conception of impersonal existence resonates with the ‘neuterness,’ at the center of Blanchot’s work on literature.¹⁶ To be sure, this opens the possibility that certain modes of literary language (in the sense articulated by Blanchot) capture the crux of a Levinasian phenomenology of transcendence. Furthermore, both Levinas’ and Blanchot’s positions seem predicated upon a similar account of the nature of subjectivity, when it comes the disastrous approach of exteriority (or rather, insofar as both understand exteriority as, disastrously, always approaching).

Although this paper acknowledges this explicit question of the ethical import of art in Levinas, it does not decisively come to a position on whether or not one can locate a Levinasian moment of substitution in an encounter with particular forms of art.¹⁷ My hesitation is in light of the important differences between Levinas’ and Blanchot’s positions on the ethical import of art in general, and by extension, literature in particular.¹⁸ For Blanchot, the work of art “radically displaces the projects of aesthetics and the traditional interpretations of the thing.”¹⁹ In so doing, art (or ‘the poet’s gaze’) truly inaugurates, introduces something new, or radically exterior. Levinas’ position on the art object seems less clear, especially in light of his descriptions in *Existence without Existents*. In the section titled ‘Exoticism,’ he writes that “[even] the most realistic art gives this character of *alterity* to the objects represented,” and that this alterity, “[this] absolute existence...which is not in turn an object or name...can appear only in *poetry* [emphasis added].”²⁰ In this regard, Levinas appears to be citing the work of art, and in particular the poem, as what opens up onto the exteriority of the ‘there is.’ However, alongside this is his later account of the element of materiality, as it is given through art, in terms of

¹³ Davies (1991, p. 214).

¹⁴ Davies (1991, p. 220).

¹⁵ “What does not enter into the forms is banished from the world. Scandal takes cover in the night.” Levinas (2001, p. 31) In his description of the *il y a*, Paul Davies also captures this connection to Blanchot. “[The *il y a*] is always spoken of as an incessant and indeterminate shuddering [implying] the continuing of signification beyond the domain of ‘sense.’” Davies (2008, p. 42).

¹⁶ In an extensive footnote to his essay on Levinas and Blanchot, Paul Davies qualifies what might appear to be a synonymous relation between Blanchot’s conceptions of ‘outside,’ ‘neutre’ and ‘désastre,’ and the Levinasian formulation of impersonal existence. Much of this comes from Levinas’ own deployment of the *il y a* in relation to his explicitly ethical enterprise. Nevertheless, what I am currently proposing is aligned with Davies’ qualification of this intricate meeting of terms: “Blanchot’s words...also look to protect what is most extraordinary in Levinas’ enterprise.” Davies (1991, p. 226).

¹⁷ As such, I am not in full agreement with Simon Critchley’s equating of the centrality of the *il y a* in Levinas’ work with a similar centrality of literature. Critchley (1996, p. 112).

¹⁸ For a sustained exposition on this relationship, see Jill Robbins (1999, pp. 150–154).

¹⁹ Davies (2008, p. 39).

²⁰ Levinas (2001, pp. 46–51).

enjoyment.²¹ In this sense, “art can function as a distraction from [or protection from] the *interminable* [‘there is’], denying it [as it substitutes an image to take the place of the ‘nowhere’] in order to sustain a certain order and possibility.”²² To the contrary, on the notion of the image, we find Blanchot’s account, “But what is the image? When there is nothing, the image finds in this nothing its necessary conditions...The image needs the neutrality and the fading of the world; it wants everything to return to the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed...”²³

Despite these important ways in which he varies from Levinas on this issue, I read, in Blanchot’s account of the death of the author, an underscoring of Levinas’ account of transcendence as an absolute and radical interruption. This further affirms that, within the Levinasian corpus, literary language might bring about the disruptive undoing of subjectivity, which, on a certain reading of this corpus, is restricted to the work of the face of the Other. To be sure, by ‘face’ Levinas captures the ethical moment in which all power and agency ceases, in a way unaccounted for by negation or (biological) death. In this regard, the work of literature, as it is outlined in Blanchot, would be ‘with face’ in a similar sense. In his reading of Blanchot’s work in *The Infinite Conversation*, Lars Iyer proposes a similar account of this intersection between Levinas and Blanchot, writing that “Blanchot would seem to invite a re-negotiation of *Totality and Infinity*, pointing us toward a thought of the Other that brings it much closer to the neuter than Levinas might prefer.”²⁴ He goes on to cite the ways in which, on Blanchot’s account, the work of literature “opens the paradoxical space where the very capacity to be...is contested.”²⁵

I am in agreement with Iyer’s analysis of how Levinas’ and Blanchot’s work encounter art in general, and literature in particular. Levinas’ account of alterity, as well as his understanding of subjectivity as ‘interrupted by alterity’ unmistakably resounds with what Blanchot describes as the death of the author. However, this is precisely why it is important to heed to Levinas’ reservations (of which Iyer writes) against ascribing a ‘face’ to literature.²⁶ More importantly, it is possible to sustain this caution alongside what I currently pursue, which is a reading of Levinas that centralizes his conception of impersonal existence insofar as it captures the theme of ‘rupture’ or ‘disruption.’ The question of the ethical import of art is indeed generated by the intersection between a Blanchovian account of the neuter and a Levinasian account of the *il y a*. I allow this question to remain as such—currently unsettled and worthy of pursuit. My focus lies in employing the above-mentioned intersection to assist in a reading of Levinas that prioritizes his phenomenology of the *il y a* in a way that does not *undermine* his conception the face, but rather to retain ‘disruption’ as that conception’s ground.

²¹ Levinas (1961, p. 141).

²² Davies (2008, p. 43).

²³ Blanchot (1998, p. 417).

²⁴ Iyer (2001, p.191).

²⁵ Iyer (2001, p. 197).

²⁶ “For Levinas, Blanchot merely *prepared* us for the thought of the Other, for the infinite...for the author of *Totality and Infinity*, who will tell us how that horizon [of totality] is breached by the encounter with the Other.” Iyer (2001, p. 191).

1 Death/loss of subjectivity as ‘interval’

In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas describes being as ‘the bare fact of presence. “[One] is held by being held to be... This presence which arises behind nothingness is neither a *being*, nor consciousness functioning in a void, but the universal fact of the *there is*...”²⁷ In this description, Levinas seems to account for a fundamental difference between the presence of the Heideggerian being, and the unqualified ‘presence’ of that which remains when ‘all else falls away.’ He argues that ‘being’ in the Heideggerian sense provides the backdrop against which possibility and power persists. On the contrary, the fact of the ‘there is’ is encountered at the limit-point of such powers, signaling a ‘not yet’ of possibility. In tracing the genealogy of the ‘there is,’ as it figures into the relation among Levinas, Blanchot and Heidegger, William Large notes that, unlike those instance of ‘profound boredom’ in Heidegger, the moment of encountering impersonal existence does not render the possibility of finding and choosing an authentic self. “[In the moment of boredom,] I can break with my involvement with things and people, choose myself as that which I have always already been. [In the case of the ‘there is’], rather than coming back to myself I lose myself, both in the sense of that self that acts on the stage of the world, and the self that resolutely chooses its own freedom.”²⁸ Large finds Levinas’ (and Blanchot’s) analysis of the *il y a* to be a “step further into the nothingness of existence,” when compared to the nothingness of Dasein’s ‘being in the world.’ In so doing, he underscores the radical exteriority of an existence that belongs to no one and nothing at all.²⁹

For this reason, the bare fact of the *il y a* is ‘oppressive’ in its contestation the individuation that might sustain the kind of authentic self found in a Heideggerian analysis of impersonal existence. But this does not mean that the *il y a* is some power opposed to mine. As Joseph Libertson explains, the *il y a* must be understood as “the incumbence or approach of an exteriority which itself has no power, but against which consciousness has no power.”³⁰ The ‘there is’ is oppressive insofar as I am not yet able to find myself *as* a self with power, since this anonymity resides at the ‘consummation of being,’ or the beginning of a subject-as-possibility.³¹ Hence, in the sense that Levinas might sometimes refer to the ‘there is’ as ‘being in general,’ this ‘being in general’ calls for a notion of human identity that is radically *unlike* the identity of Heidegger’s *dasein*. In an encounter with the *il y a*, there is no horizon against which everyday beings show up in their instrumentality, nor is there

²⁷ Levinas (2001, p. 61).

²⁸ Large (2002, p. 137).

²⁹ Though I agree with much of Large’s analysis, I stand in opposition to what, in the end, he determines as a major difference between Levinas’ and Blanchot’s appropriation of the *il y a*. Describing Blanchot’s position, he writes that, “ethics as the relation to the other is not wholly separable from the experience of the impersonal.” (p. 140) Unlike the reading of Levinas to which I subscribe here, Large intends this to be in contrast to Levinas’ conception of ethics, as a relation to the other. In other words, one could find support for the intertwining of ‘the ethical’ and the experience of an impersonal existence in Levinas as well, particular in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*.

³⁰ Libertson (1982, p. 208).

³¹ Levinas (2001, p. 52).

the hermeneutic circle that sustains and returns the projected possibilities of *dasein*. On Levinas' account, the *il y a* stands as the absence of ground that is, nonetheless, a presence (albeit a presence that no longer facilitates 'dwelling' in the Heideggerian sense³²).

To put this otherwise, an encounter with impersonal existence, "[unlike] the Heideggerian relation to Being, [is] not a pre-comprehension, but [for Levinas] a break-up of comprehension."³³ Likewise, this encounter signals a break-up of the structure of intentionality to which these acts of comprehension allude. Hence, inseparable from the meaning of the 'there is,' is an alternative account of identity that is founded on a perpetual undoing (or interruption) of the subject.³⁴ Levinas tells us, "the ego is swept away by the fatality of being. There is no longer any outside or any inside."³⁵ In contrast, to be 'on the inside of myself' is to possess an encampment that allows for self-affirming sovereignty, or for clear delineations between what is of the self (welcomed, safe and non-threatening) and what is fundamentally foreign. Encountering the *il y a* undermines this very divide between the interiority of the self and exteriority.³⁶ Across this broken and defunct boundary, the ego (the subject, or the Levinasian *moi*), is 'swept away' from itself (the Levinasian *soi*). To be sure, Levinas' claim is not that the subject somehow ceases to be who she is upon encountering impersonal existence.³⁷ This negative conception of transcendence presupposes that there *is* a 'subject' locale, fully formed or 'established,' from which there can then be an escape. Levinas' analysis in *Existence and Existents* recognizes the relationship between the *moi* and the *soi* to be something entirely otherwise. To be swept away in my encounter with the *il y a* is to be radically exposed to and implicated in the most obsessive of exteriorities. Like Blanchot's account of literature, the time of the *il y a* "is indeed the time of a 'between,' the *no longer* and the *not yet*, but it is a 'between' that is somehow 'outside,' the time and space of exile."³⁸ In this regard, the moment of an encounter

³² On the question of the work of art, Levinas reads Blanchot's work alongside Heidegger's as follows, "[For] Heidegger, art...makes the truth of Being shine, yet it has this in common with other forms of existence. For Blanchot, however, the vocation of art is unique...to write does not lead to the truth of Being. One may say that it leads to the error of Being...to the uninhabitable" (Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, p. 19) For a comprehensive trace of Levinas' relation to Blanchot, through the work of Heidegger, see Davies (1990, p. 150).

³³ Wall (1999, p. 333).

³⁴ Lars Iyer likens this to a 'presubjectivated space,' in which "language is not obligated to serve the intentions of a subject [who is no longer, or not yet] who would communicated with another subject." Iyer (2001, p. 199).

³⁵ Levinas (2001, p. 61).

³⁶ "Existence is no longer experienced as a point outside of me...but as my very way of being, which is not anything or anyone else's—individuation as interiorisation...My interiority is turned inside out like a glove. I have the peculiar sensation that the night I have become is watching me, and not I it." Large (2002, p. 138).

³⁷ To resort to negation when it comes to accounting for the 'experience' of the *il y a* is to also be guilty of the escapist notion of transcendence, of which Levinas is explicitly critical. "The movement of transcendence is to distinguished from the negativity by which discontent man refuses the condition in which he is established." Levinas (1961, p. 40).

³⁸ Davies (2008, p. 49).

with the *il y a* is the moment in which one's existing is inhospitable, or when one is 'stranger in one's own skin.' But at the same time, it is also the moment in which I *must* exist, or when existence is already my own existence.

To this end, I inhabit, as an exile, my position in existence, which is to say that, prior to the level at which I exercise the powers of subjectivity, there is that anterior level of passivity that happens in the experience of the *il y a*. But what is the nature of this exile? In a sense, the subject is cast out of herself such that the 'I' becomes depersonalized. Nevertheless, there remains the existent, depersonalized, de-subjectivized, and yet very much a unique self, to encounter the *il y a*. Levinas portrays this in his descriptions of insomnia, and demonstrates the severity with which the ego does not yet possess any kind of power that might allow it agency. Hence, in insomnia, no one watches, or rather, one is never quite sure who watches whom (the insomniac or the night).

Hence, despite its participation in this impersonal field, the ego never melds (in a moment of self-annihilation, for instance) with the *il y a*. In the midst of this 'strange vigilance,' something remains (that is no longer 'I') to be privy to my being 'swept away.' I am aware of myself *as depersonalized* and passive under the gaze of an anonymous night. In this sense, the existent's participation in the *il y a* does not result in an abnegation of its positionality, but rather in *emphasizing* this positionality. As Paul Davies writes, in his essay on the intersections among Levinas, Blanchot and Heidegger, "[the *il y a* testifies] to a passivity that is never yet extinction."³⁹ The *moi* is all the more bound to its *soi* as (paradoxically) it is 'swept away.' In this analysis, Levinas develops a moment in the stream of consciousness in which there is a feeling of being an existent, no longer (or rather, not yet) a locus of possibility, but instead, a vulnerability under the burden of having to exist. Subsumed under the feeling of being held fast by an anonymous night, the existent is depersonalized insofar as she loses the powers of subjectivity, or the very capacity to structure her experience in terms of 'what watches' and 'what is watched.' One might even venture that she loses the power of being '*she*.' Nevertheless, throughout this loss is maintained a rivetedness to 'place' and 'self' that, though swooning, never breaks.

To this end, participation in the 'there is' is a troubled participation, opening up what Levinas identifies as an originary 'not yet' of subjectivity.⁴⁰ To encounter the 'there is' is to encounter the end of my power to bring about the end, and for that reason, the self is called to suffer the proximal approach of that death.⁴¹ This loss of subjectivity is a 'never yet complete,' always approaching death that is an *ebbing* of

³⁹ Davies (2008, p. 42).

⁴⁰ This is a direct contestation of Heidegger's account of death as yet another possibility (of impossibility). Instead, Levinas presents this other signification of death, which rests in the concrete moment of dying, or of feeling one's access to possibility perpetually slipping away. As dying, death then becomes the 'impossibility of possibility.'

⁴¹ Blanchot discusses Levinas' account of the Saying, and identifies this new understanding of 'loss' in the account. Unlike language that modulates in the Said, "Saying is giving, loss...but, and I might add, loss within the impossibility of loss pure and simple." Blanchot (1986, pp. 41–52).

consciousness.⁴² The uniqueness of identity (the very nature of interiority) just *is* this limbo between a fading into neuterness and the poignant intimacy (or ‘mineness’) of acute suffering. Joseph Libertson’s description of this ambiguity is pertinent when he writes that the *il y a* “is a horror without danger, an insecurity which is not an eventuality of destruction [or death], [and] is both urgent and monotonous, both intimate and impersonal...”⁴³

Levinas understands this way of being an existent (of being an ‘I’ without the powers of subjectivity) *as* interruption. In this sense, the subject’s identity is always ‘in between’ completely enclosed interiority and complete negation.⁴⁴ Of Blanchot’s account of the neuter, Paul Davies writes, “The experience of the other as neuter [or, in Levinas’ terms, the experience alterity in terms of the impersonality of an impersonal existence] is this interruption.”⁴⁵ Subjectivity is the disruption of subjectivity, always ‘at risk,’ and as such, *sub*-jected to a fundamental vulnerability. In this regard, identity is ‘without identity,’ subject and self out of phase, dying without annihilation, always occupying the non-space of interval or the ‘in-between’ of being and non-being.

As is the case in Blanchot’s account of what it means to ‘make contact’ with literature, contact with the *il y a* is precisely what signifies as an always-approaching a death/loss of subjectivity. Said otherwise, as a death that performs in a ‘dying,’ or ebbing of possibility, subjectivity is also lived in the literary. Paul Davies writes that, “Blanchot, with the ‘the gaze of the poet,’ says as a non-securing revelation what the ontologist cannot say.”⁴⁶ In other words, the writing that is literature reveals what is at the same time anterior to being *and* disruptive of being. This interruption can never be incorporated in the light (or truth) of being, to perhaps give to the existent what would replace its ‘being in exile’—a secure base for existing. The ‘no longer’ and ‘not yet,’ for which the space of literature serves as an encounter, is precisely the ‘nocturnal dimension’ of Levinas’ insomniatic encounter with the *il y a*.

2 Interruption in *il y a* = interruption in writing

Blanchot employs this notion of ‘interruption’ to account for the non-dialectical function of language. At a certain level, he recognizes, in language, the

⁴² Here, Simon Critchley’s account of the difference between death and dying is quite useful. “To conceive of death as possibility is to project on to a future as the fundamental dimension of freedom...I would claim that such a future is *never future enough for the time of dying*, which is the temporality of infinite delay, patience, senescence or *différence*. Dying thus opens a relation with the future which is always ungraspable...” Critchley (1996, pp. 110–111).

⁴³ Libertson (1982, p. 205).

⁴⁴ Davies describes Levinas’ account of the *il y a* as that which describes the “‘experience’ of the weakening of negation.” Here, Davies highlights the complexity of what it means to participate in the anonymity of existing. Included in this participation is the impossibility of slipping away. Davies (1990, p. 165).

⁴⁵ Davies (1990, p. 160).

⁴⁶ Davies (1990, p. 160).

accomplishment of a unification insofar as words are genuinely *used* to project toward the end of thematization. This is similar to Levinas' analysis of what he refers to as the Said. "By the said, we belong to order, to the world (the cosmos)..."⁴⁷ However, on the hither side of this unity lies what Blanchot names the 'interval.' "The fact that speech needs to pass from one interlocutor to another in order to be confirmed...shows the necessity of the interval."⁴⁸ In other words, in this interval, he identifies the conditions for the possibility of a discourse whose aim is a revelation of a universal truth. But it is precisely this interval that perpetually *interrupts* the movement of the discourse through which the unification and manifestation of being takes place. This rupture or break in language is on the outside of (coherent) discourse, resistant to the very thematization it conditions. In this sense, it is a 'present absence,' present in a way that is very similar to Levinas' conception of 'the Saying.'⁴⁹ From *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes, "[The] signification of saying goes beyond the said...[Saying] is the impossibility of the dispersion of time to assemble itself in the present..."⁵⁰ To 'assemble in the present' would be to bring the meanings of objects (which, as meaningful, would already be appearances) into a synchronous network. It would be to arrange them so that they indicate each other in a common temporal order. To the contrary, the Saying works to interrupt such order, and a similar performance can be identified in Blanchot's notion of 'interval.'

To be sure, Blanchot recognizes that the interval in language *can* work toward this end of assembling and making possible coherent meaning. The pauses that signal the transition from one interlocutor to the next are pauses in the name of understanding (I pause before my response in order to gather your speech into a theme). But, there is also that other sense of the interval, which results from the fact that the Other, to whom I speak, is an alterity with which I have no common ground, despite our sharing a relation in language. In the space of language, we relate to each other in an immediate sense, but this immediacy is precisely founded on her infinite distance from the time out of which I make my address. Blanchot describes this radical alterity in terms of 'the neutral,' meaning that, in the Other, there is a pure resistance to thematization as such.⁵¹ "[It] is to this hiatus—to the strangeness, to the infinity between [two interlocutors]—that the interruption in language itself responds, the interruption that introduces waiting."⁵² This is not to say that language becomes non-productive, and it is not to suggest some end or death of

⁴⁷ Blanchot (1986, p. 46).

⁴⁸ Blanchot (2001, p. 75).

⁴⁹ "The disaster is both what is written and what writes. It is thus more than a term in a relation, more than a possible term in a possible relation. It is the relating or the relation itself. It has a formal similarity, then, to the *Dire* [the Saying], in *Otherwise than Being*." Davies (1991, p. 220).

⁵⁰ Levinas (1998, p. 38).

⁵¹ This relationship between 'the neutral,' in Blanchot, and Levinas' account of the Face lend clarity to the latter. Levinas describes the alterity of the Face as resting on pure abstraction. This is sometimes used to found a critique which attacks Levinas for dismissing the concrete nature of the face. However, juxtaposed near Blanchot's use of neutrality, the abstractness of the Face seems to underscore the sense in which, for Levinas, alterity is radically beyond thematization.

⁵² Blanchot (2001, p. 77).

language. Instead, interruption (the interval) refers to a presence whose modulation is an absence, non-thematized and beyond “being and its monstration.”⁵³ Blanchot is careful not to reduce this absence to an absence of speech, so it is not merely silence that would characterize this kind of hiatus. What Blanchot describes is a signification that troubles both what is said *as well as* the pauses that wait in anticipation of that which is said. Levinas asks, in his analysis of the Saying, “[Is] not diachrony not characterized only negatively? Is [the interruption in language] pure loss?”⁵⁴ Similar to this account of ‘the Saying,’ Blanchot determines that the interruption of language means that something is always ‘left behind,’ as radically immemorial, in the course of a unifying speech. Hence, throughout the unifying performance of language (a performance we can liken to that of the Levinasian Said), there is always that fine risk of the impossibility of coherence, or the possibility of an ‘undoing’ of that which is said.

Blanchot locates the ‘work’ of this interruption in the moment of writing. “[To write],” he says, “is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity.”⁵⁵ However, it seems as though, for Levinas, to write is precisely to operate in the space of the Said. The text (philosophical, literary, or a combination of the two) arranges phenomena under a network of meaning that provides the possibility of naming (or of regarding ‘this as that’). These are clearly Levinas’ sentiments when he says, “As soon as saying, on the hither side of being, becomes dictation, it expires, or abdicates, in fables and in writing.”⁵⁶ On this account, alterity, absolutely resistant to re-presentation, ‘steps away’ from a written language. It is *being* (according to Levinas) that ‘makes its apparition’ in the Said, whereas the Saying (what I am aligning with Blanchot’s sense of rupture) is an ‘interruption of essence’(or an interruption of the modalities of being).⁵⁷ Levinas understands the ‘said’ of language to be the space of the weight of history. It brings about thematization, manifestation, and drags into presence all that dares to remain ‘other.’

Despite this apparent divergence, I argue that both Blanchot and Levinas identify, in certain forms of writing, a ‘good violence’ that opens up onto the alterity of the hither side of being. Levinas asks, “[Is] it necessary and is it possible that the saying...be thematized...into a proposition and a book?”⁵⁸ Similarly, in his exegesis of Levinas’ work, Blanchot asks, “Must not the philosopher be a writer, and thus forego philosophy even while pointing out the philosophy implicit in writing...all the while demeaning himself from time to time by *writing* books?”⁵⁹ Here, both thinkers seem to acknowledge that a work that takes seriously the interruption of radical alterity must, as a consequence, be betrayed by its endeavor (as a ‘work’) *and* betray the alterity it is obliged to encounter. Rupture and infinity, on the hither side of being *must* ‘spread out and assemble’ in the Said (in the

⁵³ Levinas (1998, p. 38).

⁵⁴ Levinas (1998, p. 38).

⁵⁵ Blanchot (2001, p. 77).

⁵⁶ Levinas (1998, p. 43).

⁵⁷ Levinas (1998, p. 43).

⁵⁸ Levinas (1998, p. 43).

⁵⁹ Blanchot (1986, p. 45).

congealment of writing). However, it is precisely in the work's *failure* to fully articulate itself, or rather, to fully account for the meaning it seeks to convey, that alterity is affirmed. Hence, to address Levinas' question (above), a reduction of radical alterity into a theme is, indeed, necessary *and* impossible. But this impossibility signifies positively, since it is the very modulation of alterity.

It is in this sense that Levinas finds, in Blanchot's account of literature, an estimation of the interruption that performs the work of the *il y a*. "Blanchot," he says, "determines writing as a quasi-mad structure in the general economy of being, by which being is no longer an economy...It is literary space, that is, absolute exteriority."⁶⁰ Jill Robbins reads Levinas' appropriation of this Blanchovian account of writing (its 'quasi-mad structure') as an acknowledgement of the "possible convergences and the *limits* [emphasis added] of such a convergence between the alterity of the ethical and the alterity of the literary [work]..."⁶¹ She employs the term 'ultra-ethical' to convey the sense in which Blanchot's *literary* exteriority underscores a more explicitly *ethical* interruption. So even though, as Levinas writes that "the literary space to which Blanchot directs us...abstains from ethical preoccupations, at least in an explicit form",⁶² we might understand that, despite its abstinence, this literary space operates along the same plane as the *il y a*. In light of my claim that the Levinasian conception of the face is animated in his account of the *il y a*, this literary space operates on the plane of the proximity of the face of the Other as well. To this end, the quasi-madness of literature, like the horror of the *il y a*, signals the radical rupture that renders signification to the ethical moment.

Indeed, it may be possible to treat the Blanchovian account of literature as the 'ultra-ethical' grounding that condition an encounter with the face. To state this case more strongly, Blanchot's account of literature could already *be* 'with face' in the Levinasian sense. This could be used to support the claim that the literary work might bring forth the obsessive 'being for the Other' that founds Levinas' account of substitution. In other words, ascribing a 'face' to literature may result in identifying, in the 'experiencing 'of literature, the experiencing of one's infinite responsibility for the Other. However, this experience (of infinite responsibility for the Other, or of being substituted for the Other) is predicated upon a notion of subjectivity as radically disrupted, or structured *as* 'ruptured by exteriority.'⁶³ In this regard, the question I pursue is not so much the ethical import of Blanchot's space of literature (or, more specifically, Levinas' take on its ethical import), but rather the sense in which both moments deliver 'rupture,' show 'rupture' as part of the 'how' of human identity. The claim of this paper is that, because this is the case, the *il y a* stands central in both the formulation of literature in Blanchot as well as the Levinasian conception of the personal Other.

⁶⁰ Levinas (1997, p. 133).

⁶¹ Robbins (1999, p. 152).

⁶² Levinas (1975, *On Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Michael Smith, Fata Morgana, Montpellier, p. 137)

⁶³ To reiterate, this project does not make an explicit case for this reading of Levinas, but rather takes it as its starting premise (a premise for which I argue elsewhere).

To be sure, ‘literature,’ on Blanchot’s account, is no longer ‘the proposition and the book’ with which Levinas aligns the region of the Said (and the manifestation of being). Rather, in this analysis, literature seems to refer to a more primordial task of opening up onto a proximal absence that remains inexpressible, or unnamable, in that opening. In his discussion of Blanchot’s exposition on literature, Thomas Carl Wall affirms that “writing *is* the very happening of an outside that remains in the text, but only as a silence, like the *voux narrative* of which Blanchot speaks.”⁶⁴ As such, literary work would perform as the rupturing of the totality into which it would reside, were its original function, instead, one of naming and illuminating things. On Levinas’ formulation, this latter function would belong to a manifestation of being, or to the realm of ontology out of which ‘things,’ belonging to the world, show up *as* this or that. To the contrary, Wall reads the appearing made possible through art as being without use or purpose, and in this sense, radically exterior. “[Art] returns to materiality itself, its origin, without any proper name or place in the world...Insofar as it has no purpose and serves no purpose, art affirms this namelessness: the very fact of the *il y a*.”⁶⁵ Here, Wall identifies the peculiar ‘appearance’ of exteriority in both the poem (the literary space) and in the *il y a*, and does so upon a reading of Levinas’ account in *Existence without Existents*.⁶⁶

In reading Levinas’ formulation of the ethical as that which bears, most centrally, the theme of rupture or disruption, Wall’s seems to be an account that troubles the distinction found in Jill Robbin’s *Altered Reading*, between the ‘alterity of the ethical’ and the ‘alterity of the literary.’ To put this differently, on Wall’s account, the alterity of the ethical appears to already be present in the exteriority emerging out of the space of literature. In other words, given the evident resonance between this exteriority (in the *il y a*) and Blanchot’s account of the space of literature, it becomes difficult not to find Levinas’ conception of ethical alterity (most specifically, his account of the face of the Other) modified, underscored and packaged anew in Blanchot’s description of literature’s ruinous space. It is at this point that I take heed to Levinas’ own hesitations against this conceptual move, and in following Lars Iyer, read Levinas as understanding the neuterness of the space of literature as ‘preparatory’ for “the relation to the Other beyond being.”⁶⁷ It is clear that Levinas is willing to recognize the *il y a* as a formative bridge between his notion of the ethical and Blanchot’s account of literature. In this regard, we can say that if, by ‘ethical,’ Levinas refers to the radical contestation of all forms of subjective power, and the radical rupture of everything meaningful and phenomenologically present in the world, then the *il y a* is precisely that which gives to the ethical its signification.

⁶⁴ Wall (1999, p. 66).

⁶⁵ Wall (1999, p. 70).

⁶⁶ Most notably, this can be found in that section titled ‘Exoticism.’ Levinas (2001, pp. 45–51).

⁶⁷ Iyer (2001, p. 191).

3 The Face as radically abstract

Given his emphasis on the Face of the Other, it is interesting that Levinas is able to identify the trace of exteriority in certain literary forms. In a space out of which no one in particular addresses *or* is addressed, such forms of language can be regarded as an ‘impersonal speech.’ As such, it could very well fall under his critique of history and the grand narratives to which the singularity of persons are reduced. Such a critique would have it that, by the time language takes on literary form, works become reified, frozen into themes and made part of the totality of historical order.

However, particularly because this is strongly supported in Levinas’ own analysis of the *il y a*, I argue that it is precisely this impersonality (or anonymity) that gestures literature’s rupturing of the order of the Said. Blanchot specifically identifies the privilege of the poem to consist “in [its] being present without being given.”⁶⁸ To be given would be to appear as already a possibility for some power (the power of history, the power of the subject). Given over in this sense, language would be useful or formative to the power who receives this gift. It would be a revelation that is already in the light of Truth, which, for Levinas, “however bold and fresh, leaves [the subject its] sovereignty of self and the horizons of the World.”⁶⁹ To the contrary, a poetic (or literary) language is absent from such a world, and precisely *shows up* as absent. Its way of being is never a ‘giving,’ but rather of that which is impossible to give or take up. As Levinas writes, the message of the poem is “untranslatable into objective language, indefensible by coherent speech.”⁷⁰ And yet, it is a presence, even if only as a trace under threat of being reduced.

Hence, as impersonal, the work of literature undoes the powers of subjectivity, very much like the radical neuterness of the ‘there is.’ To recall, insomnia’s disruption is precisely insofar as *the night* watches. The absence of light makes itself present without ‘identifying’ itself, or rather, by carrying out an inversion of the very subject who would have otherwise exercised those powers of identification. As a disruption of World and order, poetic language signals a similar inversion of the author that is *prior* to any reduction in history. The author is rendered powerless *as* author, in an inspiration that allows for the unnamable trace of the Saying to speak in place of the power of (her) subjectivity.⁷¹ This is not to say that the literary voice hearkens to some spiritual or supernatural origin. It is also not the case that the poem has its origin in some magical unknown. To understand ‘inspiration’ in that sense is to dismiss what both Levinas and Blanchot describe as the dying or ebbing away of subjectivity. The author’s absence refers to an inversion, which is neither the complete annihilation of death, nor some supernatural usurpation. For Blanchot, the

⁶⁸ Levinas (1997, p. 131).

⁶⁹ Levinas (1997, p. 130).

⁷⁰ Levinas (2008, p. 70).

⁷¹ “To read, to write, the way one lives under the surveillance of the disaster: exposed to the passivity that is outside passion. The heightening of forgetfulness. It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be by your forgetfulness.” Blanchot (1995, p. 4).

infinite dimension of language “[arises] out of fatigue, out of pain or affliction,” tropes that articulate the absence of a subject that is very much present because her dying never ends (which is to say that her death never comes).⁷²

In this sense, radical rupture, *because* it is radical rupture, performs as the work of ‘no one.’ On Blanchot’s account of the relation to the Other, Lars Iyer writes, “For Blanchot, the words that greet the Other are not at our disposal...I speak only when I have been, as it were, cast out of myself- when I have no power to begin or to cease speaking...’I’ address the Other only when possibility is, as it were, no longer possible for me. ‘I’ respond as ‘no one.’”⁷³ The *il y a* captures this emptying of the content of subjectivity that ends not with negation, but with the *impossibility* of negation.⁷⁴ ‘I’ is not yet, coming later than the more prior absence that is represented by what Levinas calls ‘*soi*.’ In Levinas’ account of insomnia, there simply *is vigilance*, with no one in particular watching or being watched. To be certain, insomnia is *my* insomnia, and its grip is a consequence of my being conscious of ‘the night that watches.’ But I am conscious of this Blanchot-like disaster in a way that I am unable to be conscious of my own consciousness. In other words, I find myself as ‘no one,’ a *soi* who/that⁷⁵ is not yet a *moi*, or an established and positioned subject. In a similar sense, the language of the poem seems to undo the ‘reader as subject’ very much the way the subjectivity of the author is undone. As such, Levinas confirms Blanchot’s analysis when he writes that “To write [and to encounter Absence in writing] is to die.”⁷⁶

One can locate the performance of Levinas’ conception of the face in the kind of anonymity found in poetic forms. Levinas continues, “To write is to break the bond uniting the word to myself...[The author’s] gaze is seized by the work, the words *look at* the writer.”⁷⁷ Here, Levinas seems to ascribe a ‘face’ in this performance of language, almost as though the neuterness of this space amounts to the work being ‘with face.’ In this regard, there seems to be, on Levinas’ part, an acknowledgement that saves him from Simon Critchley’s critique, which claims that Levinas’ resort to an ethical language domesticates of the radicality of the *il y a*.⁷⁸ According to Critchley’s analysis, the alterity of impersonal existence ceases to remain the neutral scene of emptiness that, for him, assures the kind of exteriority that Levinas’ work

⁷² Blanchot (2001, p. 78). See also Blanchot (1995, p. 4), “It is true that, with respect to the disaster, one dies too late” (p. 4), and Levinas (1997, p. 132).

⁷³ Iyer (2001, p. 199).

⁷⁴ Of the *il y a*, Joseph Libertson writes, “At the ‘bottom’ of the negative persists an uneliminable moment of existence, an impossibility of nothingness, which implies an impossibility of the intervals which consecrate identity and non-contradiction.” Libertson (1982, p. 205).

⁷⁵ Here, I echo the important question raised in Simon Critchley’s work on Levinas and Blanchot. In his exposition of his account of dying as the ‘future of an Other,’ he asks, “Who or what is the Other? Does the ‘Other’ translate the impersonal *autre* or the personal *autri*?” In a similar sense, the insomniac’s encounter with existence enters into the limit point of singularity, in which extreme interiority merges into radical impersonality. Critchley (1996, p. 111).

⁷⁶ Levinas (1997, p. 132).

⁷⁷ Levinas (1997, p. 132).

⁷⁸ Critchley (1996, pp. 108–122).

offers up to philosophy. His suggestion is that, instead of grounding transcendence in a ‘Good beyond being’ (or other such terms that already carry some kind of determination), Levinas’ transcendence should read in terms of an ‘atheist’⁷⁹ transcendence, which is to say, one that is neither good nor evil, ethical nor non-ethical, but rather fully ambiguous and fully neutral.

While Critchley reads the neutrality of the *il y a* as serving a Levinasian conception of alterity better than the face of the Other, I find, already in this latter notion of the face, accommodations for the ambiguity that Critchley rightly cites as essential to alterity. In other words, Critchley argues for the neutrality of the *il y a* to stand in place of the personal *autri*, or the face, and I argue that it is not only permissible but indeed necessary to understand the *il y a* as already ‘with face.’ This is insofar as ‘face’ (the personal Other), for Levinas, is already neutral, abstract and without determination. In what sense could we understand how the words of a piece of literature *look at* the writer, other than to say that, on Levinas’ formulation, the face conveys the ambiguity required to challenge the totalizing thematization that would seek to *represent* it. This explains why Levinas is committed to the idea that the face is ‘radically abstract.’ Criticism has been laid against this aspect of his work, claiming that, without giving us precise formulations of exactly *who* gets to be ‘our neighbor’ (or who the widows and/or orphans are), the Levinasian ethical import necessarily disappoints. However, such a critique misses Levinas’ alignment with Blanchot, or rather, how that alignment demonstrates that his notion of the ethical is significant *only* to the degree that it shares the platform of the *il y a* with Blanchot’s notion of literature. The face is to remain abstract (without determination) if it is to perform the (un)-work of the ethical, which is to terrorize the economy of being in its constant contestation of that economy.

To be sure, this would render difficult any concrete (or perhaps, political) instantiation of the Levinasian notion of ‘face.’ But is this not this notions’ overall and most valuable impetus, which becomes clear once the face (and Levinas’ conception of the ethical in general) is properly grounded in the impersonality of the *il y a*? The face of the Other, in modulating radical exteriority, is set up, from the outset, to resist systematization, whether that is an ontological systematization (which, for Levinas stands for violence and tyranny) or whether (somewhat ironically) it is the systematization of ethics in terms of the Good beyond being, evil, or ‘atheist.’ In other words, the face will call into question, and ultimately resist attempts to ‘put it to work.’

4 Concluding remarks

In this regard, the implications of finding the face in a radically impersonal field like literature are significant for scholars of Levinas. Despite its neuterness, the ‘impersonal speech’ of literature, much like the impersonality of the ‘there is,’ should not be understood as ‘faceless.’ To the contrary, it is precisely as neuter, or

⁷⁹ “[The] neutral alterity of the *il y a*, the primal scene of emptiness...[is] what I am tempted to call, rather awkwardly, atheist transcendence.” Critchley (1996, p. 118).

as void of any and all manifestation, that the impersonal *can be* a face (in the Levinasian sense of the term). For Levinas, the personal *autri* is ‘with face’ in precisely this sense. Hence, without necessarily giving us principles for an ethics, Levinas quite successfully articulates the meaning of ‘the ethical,’ or what must underlie all such ethical principles, when they are given. This intersection between his and Blanchot’s work demonstrates that the ethical performs as an inversion of the powers of subjectivity, found in the ‘never-ending ending’ of those powers. Such moments happen in an encounter with impersonal existence, and such moments happen in encounters with that ‘infinite dimension of language,’ opened up in literature.⁸⁰ Hence, if, by ‘face,’ we mean to articulate that which is most exterior, most ‘outside,’ or most disastrous, its fundamental signification lies in the *il y a*. More importantly, until the face is void of all identifying and discernible traits, it is not the proximal trace that can be ‘present without being given,’ which, since Levinas, is precisely what we should expect of the ethical.

Both Levinas and Blanchot seem to have inscribed, into philosophy, an interruption with which it must grapple. Despite their variations in terminology and conceptual tools, these two thinkers are explicitly committed to articulating a most radical account of otherness that is truly excess, or beyond the totality of the Same. I have demonstrated that, by way of Blanchot’s account of literature (or more importantly, of Levinas’ commentary on this Blanchovian account), there is a richer understanding of the ways in the notions of the *il y a* and the face purview in Levinas’ attempts to articulate this ‘outside.’ Such an understanding is vital to an accurate reading of what Levinas means by ‘transcendence,’ and more importantly, the sense in which his determination of the ethical is inseparable from the horror and ambiguity of the *il y a*.

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⁸⁰ “The public discourse whose perennial purpose has been the description of this involvement [of Same with Other], and which has on this basis the greatest affinity with Levinas’ *ethique*, is literature.” Libertson (1982, p. 339).

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