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## Being for every other: Levinas in the Anthropocene

**Abstract:** The essay traces the apparent influence of Emmanuel Levinas on several thinkers concerned in different ways with Anthropocene ethics. It postulates that an application of Levinas's ideas to the involvement of the human and the non-human challenges and extends the limits of his thought, while considering the occasionally partial and even fundamentally distorting nature of some of these appropriations.

**Keywords:** elemental, ethics, hyperobject, materiality, pandemic, stranger, vegetal

### Literature with and against philosophy

The presence and status of literature in the metaethics of Levinas are an exemplary case of how literature can open up intellectual and affective spaces for more generous and reaching relations. But at the same time, this also suggests how an approach to literature made from an explicitly ethical perspective can itself harbour and even endorse obscurities, relegations and normalisations. For Levinas, it is indisputable that literature is more than just cultural signalling, even if his favourite examples reflect cultural and "cultivated" preferences. His references to Shakespeare or Goethe or Dostoyevsky smack of the household library, but for all that are not merely embellishments or bourgeois *volupté*. In Levinas, literature acts firstly as a fundamental reactant in the challenge to philosophical totality. More culturally, Levinas's literary choices also support the general restitution of a humanist and socially existential worldview that resists the objectification of art by the inchoate urges of pre-cultural belongingness. In this continuing refusal, Levinas's overdetermined choices are also clearly counterpointed with a clear even if sometimes briefly isolated conclusion regarding a congruence between Heidegger's mythopoetics and essential aspects of Nazi ideology (an identification given some renewed force with the publication of the first series of Heidegger's so-called *Black Notebooks* or *Scharze Hefte* almost 20 years after Levinas's death).

From the beginning of Levinas's philosophy, therefore, and especially from the moment we reach a post-war refounding, a literary presence or acknowledgement is fully a part of the articulation or performance of a post-philosophical message. His ethics develops a double voicing that acts as a simultaneous commentary and critique, delivering stereophonic expression of a philosophical tradition in which literature counts as both cultural continuation and as expression of infinitude. However, in speaking of Levinas's literary examples as a form of cultural continuation, I mean also to underscore that while the philosophical canon in places may become challenged radically by Levinas, there is ostensibly less questioning by his work of the literary equivalent, and *pace* his gradual appreciation of poetry as prayer (especially in the case of Celan), much less revision of his literary reading. His bookshelves contain works

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that reflect unquestioned dimensions of assumed origin and cultural identity; and additionally offer a series of consciously high-minded, fundamentally European, aesthetically conservative and – to put it emblematically – “elevated” readings.

For all this, literature is given a prime role in Levinas. It is placed alongside or even before the authority of a Plato or Hegel. It is deemed able to support a supra-totalising critique of a Western thought, that for Levinas, given his formative experience, proceeds from Parmenides and culminates in Heidegger. Yet, in passing, we can note that this is an ethics of literature that is arguably less than fully ethical towards literature *qua* an “other.” Levinas’s selected literary examples, at least in works published during his lifetime, are not chosen for their foregrounding of the equally resistant impulses of negativity, violence, perversity, obsession, sarcasm, subversion, or even humour. It is legitimate to conclude that Levinas’s literary choices are *bien pensant*, dutifully productive, and even banally illustrative. It seems that literature’s expressive intuitions are praiseworthy for Levinas only to the extent that they ensure extension of the vocabulary and imaginative reach of a *philosophy* that seeks its own renewal and radicalization. As a result, his literary confirmations and encapsulations are always somewhat heavy, serious, and – for all their indication of an *au-delà* of ontology – ultimately unimaginative.

There is a key reason for this slightly productivist determination. Levinas’s choices seem to be conditioned almost contrapuntally by his abiding vision of a forceful and iconoclastic thinking in Heidegger wherein mythopoetic performance dramatizes being as destiny, whether in Heidegger’s specific use of Hölderlin, or in his more general poetic evocation of the *Schwarzwald* in which, like a Schiller, the philosopher must feel nature’s bud unfold in sympathy with a general destiny. This extreme view of literature as expressing and even glorifying a pre-verbal and pulsing enrootedness that the merely cosmopolitan intellectual cannot hear or register in the deep heart’s core, seems to condition and contextualize Levinas’s often evidently alternative literary choices.

This means that in Levinas there is additionally a fundamental allegiance between the use (and repudiation) of a certain literature, and the presence (and repudiation) of a certain nature. And this in turn means that a certain notion of *elemental* being is presented from the beginning in Levinas as being associated with violence and potential totalisation. I want to retain this connection between a certain landscape and a certain literature in order now to follow a path through Levinas’s developing ethics, from 1933 on, that continues to be concerned with a foreboding sense of the elemental.

## Escaping the elemental

Levinas’s prescient article “Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism” was published in the progressive Catholic journal *Esprit* in 1934, not long after Hitler’s accession to power. On the occasion of a republication in 1990, Levinas specified a number of things that are here very relevant: that the source of National Socialism was due to “the essential possibility of elemental Evil” against which “Western philosophy had not sufficiently insured itself”; and that this possibility or inherence “is inscribed within the ontology of a being concerned with being – a being, to use the Heideggerian expression, ‘dem es in seinem Sein um dieses Sein selbst geht’.”

This is a direct quotation from Heidegger's *Being and Time* (s. 12). Levinas therefore isolates here a primary (the French term employed can also designate a simplistic or primitive) elementalism as the threat to the spirit of freedom. Elementalism is therefore tied to the essentialisation which in Nazi racial ideology identifies communities as based inside or outside of blood-ties, affirms and confirms belonging, and supports national and nationalist forms of glorification. Levinas thus posits already an essential link between a grounded identification, its cultural reflection, and the subduing of ethical consciousness by communal assertion and struggle. And he associates all this unmistakably with Heidegger. His description of this as a Hitlerian philosophy is therefore significantly dramatized by a quasi-Heideggerian historicizing, temporality, and anticipatory resoluteness:

Chained to his body, man sees himself refusing the power to escape from himself. Truth is no longer for him the contemplation of a foreign spectacle; instead it consists in a drama in which man is himself the actor. It is under the weight of his whole existence, which includes facts on which there is no going back, that man will say his yes or his no.

But to what does this sincerity bind man? Any rational assimilation or mystical communion between spirits that is not based on a community of blood is suspect. And yet the new type of truth cannot renounce the formal nature of truth and cease to be universal. In vain is truth *my* truth in the strongest sense of this possessive pronoun, for it must strive towards the creation of a new world. (Levinas 1990 [1934]: 70)

Levinas's first properly philosophical attempt to both understand this, and fashion a way out of it, is the contemporary *On Escape*. First published in 1935, it is significant in ethical terms as being, in Levinas's own words, his first effort at bearing "witness to an intellectual situation of meaning's end." Already Levinas is putting the key inherited phenomenological concepts reflecting a cosmopolitanism *sous rature*. Primary here is what the word "freedom" now means. The political horror that the Levinasian subject is experiencing now recasts Bergsonian life force or creative evolution in a deathly context devoid of naïve *élan*. But most importantly the "tragic despair" of a Heideggerian dramatization of Being or *Dasein* is here openly characterized as a barbarism. There is a clear connotation again made by Levinas between the overwhelming of civilization, and the blood-ties to a clannish or pre-verbal enrootedness that give force and expansionist desires to collective identity:

And yet the value of European civilization consists incontestably in the aspirations of idealism, if not in its path: in its primary inspiration idealism seeks to surpass being. Every civilization that accepts being – with the tragic despair it contains and the crimes it justifies – merits the name "barbarian."

Consequently, the only path open for us to satisfy idealism's legitimate demands without nevertheless entering into its erring ways is that on which we measure without fear all the weight of being and its universality. It is the path where we recognize the inanity of acts and thoughts incapable of taking the place of an event that breaks up existence in the very accomplishment of its existence. Such deeds and thoughts must not conceal from us, then, the originality of escape. It is a matter of getting out of being by a new path, at the risk of overturning certain notions that to common sense and the wisdom of the nations seemed the most evident. (2003: 73)

Levinas explicitly states that he will henceforth search for a new path that can lead out of this “being.” He already suggests that such a way logically must involve for him the dismantling of his philosophical inheritance and his most recent education. This is therefore going to involve an exile from his own philosophical community and its now exposed language. What this path must lead to is a new existential, and initially minimal, apprehension of being open to an “other” that can be indifferent to internalization or subjectivation.

Literature here re-enters as a mode of reformulation, most especially now in its ability to evoke “horror” in a non-ontological manner. The austere text *Existence and Existents* was published almost immediately after the war, but its stark minimalism and bare rebuilding work betoken a survivalist experience of the war itself, both for a human whose wider family in Lithuania was largely wiped out though his immediate family was successfully sheltered, and for a philosopher whose own recent philosophical training was now to be considered as tainted, and even complicit, with totalitarianism. In working to build from the ground up a non-ontological formulation of being, that can ascend from fatigue to hopeful and projective, but yet not muscular or expansive, terms such as sociality, alterity, hope and fecundity, Levinas explicitly looks to divest himself of that “elemental” “climate” of a being-unto-death that co-opts a hypnotising artistic expression as its ecstatic *liebestod*. Investigating the anxiety about this death, which he precisely here terms horror, Levinas significantly draws on the power of the literary imaginary, and in doing so coins one of his most resonant and ambiguous non-definitions of non-captation and non-totalization, the *there is*:

Horror is [...] a participation in the *there is*, in the *there is* which returns in the heart of every negation, in the *there is* that has no exits. It is, if we may say so, the impossibility of death, the universality of existence even in its annihilation.

To kill, like to die, is to seek an escape from being, to go where freedom and negation operate. Horror is the event of being which returns in the heart of this negation, as though nothing had happened. “And that,” says Macbeth, “is more strange than the crime itself.” In the nothingness which a crime creates a being is condensed to the point of suffocation, and draws consciousness out of its “retreat.” A corpse is horrible; it already bears in itself its own phantom, it presages its return. The haunting spectre, the phantom, constitutes the very element of horror. (1989c: 33)

Not for the last time will Levinas turn to projective vistas in Shakespeare (even if the presentation of supernatural forces and folkish presentiment in *Macbeth* here ought to generate as many problems for Levinasian infinity as they are used to evince) in order to formulate outside of philosophical language what remains beyond comprehension or sublation. There is not a consciousness here that can be employed to provide a comfort, a defence, or a definition of the *there is*, if a non-ontological ethical being-for-the-other is to be authentically found and nurtured. Once again, in Levinas’s evocation, we also observe a residue of an elemental and altogether tribal landscape, albeit rather melodramatically animated, which may correspond affectively to the one experienced by him during the war when, imprisoned in a Stalag deep in Germany, he was sent to work each day as part of a logging party.

If *Existence and Existents* seeks to define a route out of the elemental, it is in the collection of lectures entitled *Time and the Other* that we are given the earliest post-war elaboration of real-life scenarios that frame and enact a developing ethics posited in the renewed space of

public (and competing) philosophies. Moving into more social, intimate and deliberately undramatic interiors, the lectures evoke recognizable features of a mature Levinasian position: the face-to-face of ethical irruption and infinity; the core view of time as relation rather than a dramatic solitude building to a tragic and authentic death; the primary nature of being-for the other rather than the secondary affections of being-with; and in sum the contestation of a virile sense of power and expansion in dramatic settings, by a tenderness, vulnerability and essential interiority linked to the recommencements inherent in fecundity, family and paternity. It is easy in hindsight to point up the conservative domestication, sexual normalization, and even bourgeois morality of these scenarios, which seem almost to celebrate a deradicalized immersion in suburban life. But this would be to downplay the contrapuntal significance of these nurturing scenes, whose significance lies partly in what one has escaped, and what has not been obliterated:

Paternity is the relationship with a stranger who, entirely while being Other, is myself, the relationship of the ego with a myself who is none the less a stranger to me. The son, in effect, is not simply my work, like a poem or an artefact, neither is he my property. Neither the categories of power nor those of having can indicate the relationship with the child. Neither the notion of cause nor the notion of ownership permit one to grasp the fact of fecundity. I do not *have* my child; I *am* in some way my child. (Levinas 1989d: 52)

Key here is the presentation of the stranger as something non-reductive, even in the most seemingly authorial position of the paternal relation. The stranger is a personification that henceforth recurs in increasingly radicalized and non-finite form. Through the 1961 *Totality and Infinity*, and on through the 1974 *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, Levinas hereafter develops an increasingly complex elaboration of the intellectual, socio-political, and even linguistic ramifications for this first stated rebirth of non-ontological being as being-for-the-other.

## **Reality's revisions**

From the chronological unfolding presented above, which limits itself to appreciation of these texts as a set of fundamental definitions and tensions that will progressively develop their own formal interrogations and resolutions, I shall retain a few preliminary conclusions: how the trajectory sketched above would have encouraged Levinas to remain suspicious towards a literature that seemed to endorse a mythopoetic ontology that itself became complicit with totalitarianism; how ethical being for Levinas would logically have become elaborated in relation to a specifically and even pathetically human Other; how the elemental therefore would have remained a site off-limits for Levinas. In reviewing these now, I shall begin to foreground a new question: how uncovered elements of repression in Levinas, that we asserted derived from his rejection of an overdetermined (and thereafter increasingly hypostasized) “Heideggerianism,” can encourage challenging his supposedly distant relationship to thinkers of the Anthropocene, to the point where we can follow the line of a productive if highly problematic link between Levinasian ideas and articulations, and concerns and sensitivities

associated with the Anthropocene by a number of thinkers. The path being followed here is that while these ideas and links might remain underground in Levinas, and even fundamentally and intentionally so to the extent that they were considered by him to be something about which he could speak, they can be brought back nearer to the surface through close reading of writers who in individual but occasionally converging ways locate a recognizably Levinasian lexicon in their concern to articulate Anthropocene ethics. This occurs, fittingly, even as they reconceptualise ethical relations with and among non-human others, in the light of their apprehension of the great acceleration produced by the human that increasingly is recognised as affecting fundamental planetary conditions through a form of deadly totalisation.

My cue for initiating a less chronological, and more anachronistic, reading of Levinas stems itself from a resurfacing in the posthumous Levinas of literary writings, and of the way in which literature appreciably seems to signify here as a return of the repressed within the invited re-evaluation. At the heart of such revision lies a remarkable corpus of unfinished and unpublished literary efforts by Levinas himself. The continuing preoccupations of these writings, to which significantly Levinas returned even during the post-war years – by which time his published philosophy seemed to be advancing a basic ethical repudiation of literary solutions – show how their concerns represent an alternative solution to Levinas that was less superseded than transcended. I have read these writings in some detail elsewhere (Hand 2019). In terms of our present concerns, we can simply emphasize how, in contrast to the post-war published Levinas, their dramatic and unphilosophical expression of existence symptomatizes how Levinas had clearly contemplated relinquishing the construction of a philosophy in favour of the search for an artistic apprehension of being. Taking into account the evidence in these writings of a slowly sublated thematics of abject, realist, erotic and anethical circumstance also helps to link some of the unquiet situationism of philosophical texts clearly produced through and out of the war, notably *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other*, to what otherwise seems like an abruptly contrastive appearance just after the war of the sternly judgemental essay “Reality and its Shadow,” which lambasts the inadequacy and irresponsibility of literature in the context of wartime ethical decisions. In the limited period of post-war *épuration*, the condemnatory judgement here of those who colluded with the occupier on French soil focuses with what seems like a high degree of investment on the production of a certain literature:

The most lucid writer finds himself in the world bewitched by its images. He speaks in enigmas, by allusions, by suggestion, in equivocations, as though he moved in a world of shadows, as though he lacked the force to arouse realities, as though he could not go to them without wavering, as though, bloodless and awkward, he always committed himself further than he had decided to do, as though he spills half the water he is bringing us. The most forewarned, the most lucid writer none the less plays the fool. The interpretation of criticism speaks in full self-possession, frankly, through concepts, which are like the muscles of the mind. (Levinas 1989a: 143)

Criticism is here not just lucid in a way imaginative writing is not; it also criticizes literature as *essential* irresponsibility. Such Olympian disapproval, which personifies ethical alterity and transcendence in an almost muscular manner, is thrown back into enigma and equivocation, however, by our knowledge of Levinas’s own novelistic attempts during the period in question,

which themselves focus obsessively on cosmopolitan desire, survivalist intrigue and moral collapse, in a wartime world of fundamental ambiguity and ethical suspension.

In light of these posthumously revealed notes and sketches, it is therefore tempting to read “Reality and its Shadow” as an overcompensating self-correction, in which Levinas’s creative attempts to fashion a post-philosophical literary exploration of moral and erotic wavering are reined in. I should argue further, and have examined in more detail elsewhere (Hand 2008), how appreciation of literature none the less manages to resurface later in Levinas, above all in relation to the poetry of Paul Celan. This remarkable poetic work clearly manages to signify both ethically and contrapuntally for Levinas, that is, as an ethical saying and receptivity that also contrasts with the affirmation of enrootedness or confirmation of pre-verbal belonging that Levinas connects to Heidegger’s elevation of the poetry of Hölderlin.

Such a psychoanalysis in relation to literature’s significance suggests its own fascinations and phantasms. In other words, the aggressive application of strictures applied to the artwork enjoins us to recognize how the ethical framework excludes as much as it embraces forms of otherness, even in its own written forms. The ethics of literature, then, can insist on certain elements remaining underground or in exile; but from this subterranean position the buried material can continue to exert a powerful force and occasional upheaval. It is this dynamic that I should like to pursue further now.

In parallel to this literature-induced approach, we can also suggest at the same time how the persistence of seemingly surpassed limits in non-ontological meta-ethics arguably shows up in similar moments of overdetermined tension in Levinas’s more directly political post-war work. In a number of incidental essays suddenly redolent of Cold War suspicion, also to be found in journals like *Esprit*, we come across passages of rather impatient categorisation of otherness where ethics remains conditioned by geopolitics. These include an open hostility towards Chinese communism, the “impersonal Reason” of Sovietism, and the supposed singularity of “Asian civilization.” To this list can be added the now overly exploited moment in a radio interview where Levinas hesitates to extend the concept of alterity to Palestinians. Such momentary relapses of the ethical back into the political can be identified as the resurgent frontier or *realpolitik* of being-for-the-other. In terms of this essay’s concern, this hesitation can be mentioned at least alongside the manner in which, for all his espousal of a post-Heideggerian ethics, Levinas does not naturally extend the ethical relation to the non-human animal (a limit if anything confirmed by his story about a “Kantian” dog called Bobby that greeted the returning prisoners of the Stalag to which I earlier made reference, at the end of each day) and much less again, for reasons no doubt of residual suspicion of the elemental, to non-animal existence.

But the anachronistic turn which I have here taken permits me precisely to extend this relation, and so to locate Levinas in the Anthropocene. To employ Levinas’s own most mature ethical language, we can thus say that the substitution that is assumed as a condition of becoming hostage, and of articulating and understanding subjectivity from the beginning in the accusative, as a responsibility towards a calling that cannot be declined, is what at this point of investigation can be considered the stakes and fundamental leap of Anthropocene ethics. In designating thus the human re-positioning of Anthropocene ethics, I am of course recalling to mind the famous, and extreme, description of “substitution” as ethical hostage in Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*:



Subjectivity is being hostage. This notion reverses the position where the presence of the ego to itself appears as the beginning or as the conclusion of philosophy. This coinciding in the same, where I would be an origin, or, through memory, a covering over of the origin, this presence, is, from the start, undone by the other. The subject resting on itself is confounded by wordless accusation. For in discourse it would have already lost its traumatic violence. The accusation is in this sense persecuting; the persecuted one can no longer answer it. More exactly, it is accusation which I cannot answer, but for which I cannot decline responsibility. (1989b: 116)

If I call Levinas out in this way, it is because, notwithstanding some of the limits of his own meta-ethics evoked above, Levinas has clearly inspired and guided several writers and thinkers in this field, to judge from discernible traces of both his vocabulary and his absolute postulations in their essays. Such an alliance is unquestionably surprising, given the seeming distance between their metaphysical visions and primary location of being. For this very reason, such an apparent *mésalliance* can potentially give rise to an inspirational and innovative reconceptualisation deriving precisely from a common questioning of ontological limits and a number of associated assumptions, including distantiation, possession, interiority and agency. In the course of reviewing certain dramatic applications of Levinasian terminology and ethical envisioning, however, we can also come to see with more clarity how such appropriative moves need themselves to be challenged in light of a selectivity and even misrepresentation that is effected on Levinasian ethics through such heightened and often quite missionary repurposing.

## Splicing Levinas into the Anthropocene

A well-known writer in question here is Timothy Morton, who is often associated with the so-called object-oriented ontology school of thought that calls into question the privileging of human existence over the existence of nonhuman objects. Morton's stated tasks in the 2009 *Ecology without Nature* therefore notably include tackling the haunting nature of the word environment (2009: 141), as part of a critical ecomimesis (142) that must take up the environment imagined as an unconscious process (203) or an aestheticization. In this way, Morton also enjoins ecological criticism to politicize the aesthetic (205). As part of this framing, it is therefore highly significant that Morton directly characterizes Levinas's *There is* as an "automated process." That is to say, it is evidence of the fact that "[t]he environment just happens around us, without our intention [or] it is the objectified, perhaps unintended consequence of an intention – intention's echo" (60). As part of such an ongoing invocation, Morton provocatively continues to recruit recognizably Levinasian terms and characterizations at several points in his subsequent work, of which we can here isolate two examples as emblematic, the first (dating from 2010) from *The Ecological Thought*, the second from the opening of the 2013 *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*:

The ecological thought permits no distance. Thinking interdependence involves dissolving the barrier between "over here" and "over there," and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside. [...] The mesh is vast yet intimate: there is

no here or there, so everything is brought within our awareness. The more we analyze, the more ambiguous things become. We can't really know who is at the junctions of the mesh before we meet them. Even when we meet them, they are liable to change before our eyes, and our view of them is also labile. These beings are the *strange stranger*. (2010: 39-40)

Hyperobjects have already ushered in a new human phase of hypocrisy, weakness, and lameness [...] Hypocrisy results from the conditions of the impossibility of a metalanguage [...]; weakness from the gap between phenomenon and thing, which the hyperobject makes disturbingly visible; and lameness from the fact that all entities are fragile (as a condition of possibility for their existence), and hyperobjects make this fragility conspicuous. (2013: 2)

In each case we hear how Levinas is invoked both as support and as the accused, depending on the moment, in a manner that haphazardly challenges the primary texts of Levinas themselves with an ethical delimitation. (There is a similar ambiguity evinced with regard to Heidegger.) In invoking ecological thought as one that ethically goes to the stranger, Morton here insists on the stranger *remaining* strange, rather than becoming eventually domesticated or rehomed via the silent retention of inherited or learned limitations (the unsubstantiated implication being that Levinas can ultimately fail here). The second quotation, where Morton presents hyperobjects, expands the accusative existence of Levinasian vulnerability into new contemporary realities such as climate, nuclear weapons, evolution, or relativity. Such objects are deemed to put unbearable strains on normal ways of reasoning in contexts where an apprehension of ecological catastrophe can equate to the end of the world – like Levinas's end of philosophy – having already occurred. This means that for Morton in ecological terms, as for Levinas in philosophical terms, concepts such as world, nature, and here environment can no longer maintain a meaningful horizon against which human events take place. Morton's response at this point is not to embrace the *realpolitik* of a virile being-unto-death, but conversely to welcome the series of opposite affections that clearly bear a trace of Levinas: vulnerability, weakness, the stranger's exposure, fragility. All of these espousedly non-ontological beginnings before beginning are projected as reflecting and resituating a founding irremissible responsibility of the kind that Levinas elsewhere locates within the light of infinity and the absolute.

An approach to materiality as inhering in a world where the human is located but not prioritised also informs the chief ethical invocations of Jane Bennett. A typical detail of her work *Vibrant Matter* conveys a tellingly live and fundamentally redefining *nature morte*:

Odradek, a gunpowder residue sampler, and some junk on the street can be fascinating to people and can thus seem to come alive. But is this evanescence a property of the stuff or of people? Was the thing-power of the debris I encountered but a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my ideas of these items? Was the real agent of my temporary immobilization on the street that day humanity, that is, the cultural meanings of "rat," "plastic," and "wood" in conjunction with my own idiosyncratic biography? It could be. But what if the swarming activity inside my head was itself an instance of the vital materiality that also constituted the trash? (Bennett 2010: 10)

If I highlight this quotation, it is to pick up on the seemingly discardable signifier Odradek. The term immediately recalls a strange little non-human creature of that name in a short story by Kafka entitled “The Cares of a Family Man.” In Kafka’s story, this creature may be homeless and purposeless; but by the same token cannot die and will outlive me:

I ask myself, to no purpose, what is likely to happen to him? Can he possibly die? Anything that dies has had some kind of aim in life, some kind of activity, which has worn out; but that does not apply to Odradek. Am I to suppose, then, that he will always be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, right before the feet of my children, and my children’s children? He does no harm to anyone that one can see; but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful. (1971: 429)

Its convoluted but convincing link to a subterranean Levinas comes via use of the very same story by Slavoj Žižek to engage in a typically provocative gesture, which involves violently denouncing Levinas’s gentrification of weakness and its “fetishist disavowal,” in order to underscore the supposed virility of encouraging us instead to smash the neighbour’s face. In an almost parodic rendition of redneck individualism, Žižek offers up this pre-analytic noise as supposedly Marxist-Hegelian reaffirmation of the enemy or the alien or the monstrous Thing. Markedly different in both tenor and tenderness, Bennett’s approach to Odradek suggests instead that we embrace the alterity already within us, and of which we are a part, such that the strange stranger is as much us as the Other. Her inclusion of Odradek is a more exact and exacting analogical appeal to Levinas and to us, wherein we are asked to extend unlocalizable and interminable responsibility to undefinable life, and to recognize that the ethical being answering this irremissibility is itself but an instance of a vital materiality. Though Bennett does not cite Levinas directly in *Vibrant Matter*, she creates a close cohabitation throughout with the articulations and concerns that Morton and others associate directly with Levinas. In the opening chapter, she therefore recalls Adorno’s criticism of Heidegger’s “realist” phenomenology, which to the former’s mind had sought to breach interjected layers of subjective position because of its underlying “violent ‘rage’ against non-identity” (Bennett 2010: 18). And in the concluding chapter, this fundamentally critical view of ontology leads to a closing credo which espouses an active and energetic (rather than frugal and sparing) vitalism that views the world as traversed by active heterogeneities, and posits a belief in “encounters” that “highlight the common materiality of all that is” and “expose a wider distribution of agency” (122).

At the animal level of inter-species relations, the work of Donna Haraway similarly employs, and lovingly develops, the view of the stranger within a becoming-with reality of multidirectional and symbiogenetic forms of co-shaped existence. It does so by postulating an epigenesis that is fundamentally “in and between always-in-process.” The following is a telling example of how being-with in Haraway is extended to a generalised ethics that is both inter-species and intra-active:

Margulis and Sagan put it more eloquently when they write that to be an organism is to be the fruit of “the co-opting of strangers” [...] The shape and temporality of life on earth are more like a liquid– crystal consortium folding on itself again and again than a well-branched tree. Ordinary

identities emerge and are rightly cherished, but they remain always a relational web opening to non-Euclidean pasts, presents, and futures. [...] It is turtles all the way down; the partners do not preexist their constitutive intra-action at every folded layer of time and space. (2007: 31-32)

Finally, as an even more challenging extension of responsibility to the non-human, we can here cite the recent work of Michael Marder, where being-with resonates strongly with an equally sensuous registration of plant life and “plant-thinking.” In his *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* Marder expounds in an explicitly Levinasian mode:

The plant embodies, *mutatis mutandis*, [the Levinasian] approach to alterity, in that it tends, with every fiber of its vegetal being, towards an exteriority it does not dominate. Its heteronomy is symbolic of Levinas’s quasi-phenomenological description of the subjectivation of the I in an ethical relation to the other that/who is unreachable and cannot be appropriated by the I. (2013: 71-72)

This espoused “vegetal heteronomy” perhaps elides the precise residual and somewhat Hegelian limitations inherent in Levinasian concepts of space and time, especially perhaps in work up to and including *Totality and Infinity*. But it does initially challenge us with the possibility of conceiving the messianic anachronism and ethical uprootedness in Levinas in terms of a plant alterity, and as such also poses searching questions to Levinasian separation and interiority. Marder hopes, indeed, to encourage this ethico-emotional alliance: “[a]s soon as ethics sheds its humanist camouflage the human subject will join plant life in a self-expropriating journey toward the other” (74). Leaving aside the possibility of a residual humanist ethics and intentionality in the metaphor of journeying, the direction of travel evinced in wind, rot, or growth is clear enough. The different existences posited of humans and plant life in terms of co-existence and co-contemporaneity – whether Hegelian or Nietzschean – that Marder sees as residual in Levinas can thus be repositioned at an “ethical junction” (105) that derives insight and formulation from Levinas’ own radicality. In the book’s final Part, entitled “Vegetal Existentiality,” Marder therefore concludes with a conflated re-employment of Levinas:

Implying neither a conscious choice nor the impassiveness of inanimate objects, the plant’s sheer exposure in space and in time bespeaks what Levinas terms “passivity more passive than all passivity,” the feature of an ethical comportment “in its antecedence to ... freedom, its antecedence to the present and to representation.” Before activity, before a conscious orientation, and before attachment to the present, the time of the other determines the being of the ethical subject as much as that of the plant. Responsibility, in the normative and calculative senses of the word, pales in comparison to its semantic association with responsiveness and exposure to the other as “the very accomplishment of time” in vegetal being. (107)

So Levinasian elevation, as inspiration and ethical dynamic, here joins what might have been otherwise posited contrapuntally by Levinas as chthonic heteronomy. Clearly, there still remain fundamental metaphysical (and in the Levinasian representation religious) ramifications to this opening-up to vegetal being. But for Marder, this is all answered or overwritten by an absolute

demand, one of ten fundamental “offshoots” in the book’s epilogue, where he again cites Levinas in support, that “*Ethics as such is an offshoot of plant-thinking*” (182).

## Uprooting Levinas from the Anthropocene

At one level of reception, these Anthropocene ethics could legitimately be comprehended as little more than an injunction to manifest a caring for “neglected” things, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa puts it. But, more challengingly, they also formulate what Isabelle Stengers presents as a cosmic hesitation or cosmopolitical proposal, one that is therefore arguably seeded always already in Levinasian alterity. That is to say, nonhuman agencies and communities here already entail a primary rather than consequent care (in the sense of *Sorge*), and therefore a care that bears forth a differently complex notion of *hostis* to that evinced by Schmitt whose essentially antagonistic vision maintains the distinctions of separated and separating, host and hostage, guest and enemy.

It is all the same incumbent upon us to note the various ways in which this sowing of Levinas in the Anthropocene field can ignore or decontextualize some unavoidable aspects of Levinas’s own postulations. The epigraph that Morton’s *The Ecological Thought* borrows from Levinas (“Infinity overflows the thought that thinks it”), perhaps unintentionally presages the degree to which Levinas is made party to overtures that his work both withholds and exceeds. The opening-up of the world that Morton wishes ecological thought to be is from the start characterized less than happily as a virus “that infects all other areas of thinking” (2010: 2). This kind of delimitation spreads through precise contextual significances, such that Levinas’s critique of *Jemeinigkeit* in Heidegger becomes an endorsement of “wilderness” (7), which in turn evokes Freud (9), which soon enough draws forth mention of *The X-Files* (10). As “(e)cology permeates all forms” (11), the Levinasian stranger can connote not the separatedness inherent in Levinasian obligation but a mesh, a multitude, an entanglement (15). The transcendence, distance and height core to Levinas’s understanding of subjectivity and alterity become transmuted into “infinite connections and infinitesimal differences” (30). This fundamentally different view of difference “permits no distance”: it precisely “involves dissolving the barrier between ‘over here’ and ‘over there,’ and more fundamentally, the metaphysical illusion of rigid, narrow boundaries between inside and outside” (39). The term that Morton then decides to apply to ecological thought, “coexistentialism” (47), describes what is precisely not occurring in the epiphanic face-to-face revelation of infinity and irremissible answerability in Levinas. Subsequent deployment of key Levinasian topoi to designate or describe the particular landscapes, wherein the elemental is presented as modern junkspace, or the stranger is the environment (51) or an encounter that brings back lost intimacy or care or love (135), somewhat ironically instrumentalises the extremes of substitution in Levinasian as possessive and vaguely polymorphous pathos. In the later *Hyperobjects*, it is significant that the Levinas that is attended to is one that has been filtered through the particular mesh of Alphonso Lingis (Morton 2013: 6).

A less direct misalignment applies in the case of Bennett’s espoused romantic vitalism. While seeking to avoid the temptation to effect “reconciliation” (Bennett 2010: 14) or even

spiritualization of the vital agent that exceeds comprehension (122), Bennett does wish to posit “the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality” (14) that can “chasten my fantasies of human mastery [and] highlight the common materiality of all that is” (122). A key term that Bennett recalls to generate this pursuit of an affective relationship, with its balance of delight and disturbance, is that of enchantment (xi). In the 2001 book bearing this word in its title, she had described this as a weak ontology that encouraged the engendering of a disposition (Bennett 2001: 161) that enhances human generosity through concentration on the overflowing material world (162). But such an affective disposition, however it deals with spiritual affirmation (and Bennett’s examination of Bergson in *Vibrant Matter* recalls Levinas’s very early treatment of this then dominant thinker in his very first publications up to production of his 1930 thesis on *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*), is regarded with fundamental suspicion by Levinas. Proceeding from associations he makes between this and Heideggerian *Dasein*, he specifically insists from the beginning of the post-war period on a vigilance towards the aesthetics and political quietism of enchantment. The judgements of “Reality and its Shadow” derive from this very point; while the essays running from the end of the forties through to the sixties and occasionally beyond, that go to make up *Difficult Freedom*, insist on a sobriety of disengagement, suspicion towards any instance of ecstasy or illusion, and insistence upon non-coincidence, even in the shared and hopeful building of Israel in the modern world. As he asserts in one such typical essay, “Judaism and the Present”: “Here, Judaism filters into the modern world. It does so by disengaging itself, and it disengages itself by affirming the intangibility of an essence, the fidelity to a law, a rigid moral standard. This is not a return to the status of thing, for such fidelity breaks the facile enchantment of cause and effect and allows it to be judged.” (Levinas 1990: 212). His progressive distancing from the ontological event that he comes to associate with the concept of totality does not lead him instead to welcome weak ontology as a merely enchanting experience of infinitude. For Levinas, this retains the fundamental danger of falling into a merely aesthetic relation that foreshadows and suspends the ethical.

Levinas’s attentiveness towards enchantment is complemented by his insistence that ethics comes before politics. It is interesting, then, that an exponent of “weak thought,” Gianni Vattimo, is named as joint author of a foreword to Marder’s *Plant-Thinking* that praises this work as a political emancipation of the ontic category of vegetal life and a releasing of the inherently political space of conviviality (Marder 2013: xv). Taking up this theme, and asserting that plants have “suffered” even greater marginalisation than animals and have thus “populated the margin of the margin, the zone of absolute obscurity” (2), Marder establishes the task of “encountering” plants, while still maintaining their “otherness” (3). As plants are taken to have their own “vegetal modes of dwelling on and in the earth” (8), such that this encounter must take place in an interstitial zone that also establishes philosophical grounds for an event in which both parties experience exposure (10), Marder asserts the existence of vegetal existentiality with its own mode of being-in-the-world, and associated modes of temporality, freedom, and wisdom (11-12). The elaboration of this claim, which clearly conflates norms and causes and evokes a kind of horticultural *Dasein*, employs Levinasian terms to depict this ethical encounter within vegetal democracy that will supposedly culminate in a common non-essentialized mode of living-with wherein the plant radically embodies Levinasian alterity (72), all the more so as it is bereft of interiority (73). This wholesale re-rooting of Levinas

consistently replaces the human location of revelation in Levinas with the botanical: the “hetero-temporality of vegetal existence” is an exemplary instantiation of the face-to-face (107); fecundity becomes the vegetal manifestation of ruptured continuity and personal transcendence (111). Even so, Levinas is elsewhere castigated for complicity towards disavowal of the symbiosis of human and vegetal freedoms (138). In spite of and beyond Levinas, then, Marder commands that we summon what remains of the plant in us in order to reach “otherwise than being” without having recourse to “religion at the dusk of metaphysics” (140). Indicating here a mystical underpinning that it decries, Marder appropriates Levinasian language to depict an ironically rootless transcendentalism that discards the embeddedness of philosophical elaboration. A case in point is when Marder cites the “fertile” essay “Place and Utopia” as evidence that Levinas views displacement and uprooting as an excuse for absolving oneself of responsibility (106). This misunderstands or misrepresents an essay produced in 1950 in *Évidences*, a French-language journal established and bankrolled by the American Jewish Committee from 1949 to 1963, as one of many significant international and especially American interventions in French Jewish politics after the end of the war, with a brief to support cultural renaissance and even matters of restitution and interfaith restoration. Levinas’s essays in this outlet at this time range from terse portrayal of figures like Paul Claudel (not least for effecting blithe appropriation of Jewish culture and writing) to an evocation of the State of Israel as being not merely land but rather the opportunity to implement social law. Collected in *Difficult Freedom* where it initiates a section entitled “Polemics,” “Place and Utopia” stresses, in a precise post-war context, how the individual “attached to the here below” is not *merely* “a tree that grows without regard for everything it suppresses and breaks, grabbing all the nourishment, air and sun, a being that is fully justified in its nature and its being.” (Levinas 1990: 100). Emphasizing instead how the individual, as conscience, is part of justice, Levinas explicitly articulates in the section quoted by Marder how it is from this ethical action that one should not therefore “uproot” oneself. “Utopia” in the context therefore refers to the abnegation of one’s duty to law, in favour of “solitary salvation,” the pursuit of “Desire,” and being merely subject to magic, dazzlement and dreaming. The ethical vigilance of “Reality and its Shadow” here returns in the context of the *work* to be done – in the making of Israel (101). The conclusion to the essay, with its insistence that this work to build an ethical order is not preparation for a Divine transposition but is itself accession to it, exposes the decontextualized deployment of Levinas’s socially situated exemplification of infinitude in the service of the abstract postulation of a non-conscious self-expropriating vegetal intentionality from which ethics exists as an off-shoot. Levinas’s warning about utopian fantasy therefore applies quite sharply in this case of appropriation: “A heavy suspicion weighs over the feeling of divine presence and mystical ecstasy and every aspect of things sacred [...] All the rest is a dream” (102).

Notwithstanding the degree to which the inclusion of Levinas into these Anthropocene-focused ethical concerns can be seen to be highly questionable in terms of strict adherence to the full definitions and implications of Levinas’s own vision, a generously inclined intermediary conclusion all the same is that such incorporations and prioritisations by theoretical meditations on the Anthropocene of Levinas’s ethics, his relation to literature and other forms of limit, and his opening-introduction *nolens volens* to the other of the other, or the strange stranger that is acknowledged, have the merit of enlightening our moral horizon, and certainly of avoiding a deliberate gentrification of Levinasian language and thematics, as in

Žižek or Badiou, which then can be used to reassert an ethics of pseudo-emancipatory force. Indeed, the introduction of Levinas into the area of the Anthropocene can clearly offer a quite radical step both in maintaining and developing the vigilance of metaethical care, and in enacting fully an infinitude of answerability that overarches Levinas's mature positions but can be regarded as circumscribed by his own set of cultural and philosophical assumptions. At the same time, it is clear that such appropriations have elided key constraints that Levinas's ethics retain in terms of recognition of consciousness of responsibility in the non-human, and thereby fail to confront directly as a core question in their own different evocations of moral materiality. If I am guided ultimately by the validity of both such views, however, it is, as Mary Midgley pointed out, because "moral pluralism of this kind is neither confused nor dishonest. It is simply a recognition of the complexity of life" (1996: 53), and because of the powerful exposure that the combination of Levinasian ethics and Anthropocene concerns can bring to bear upon the pathological endpoint of our continuing rationalistic determination of rationality.

## Viral Postscript

As I write this, the coronavirus that can generate a respiratory illness known as Covid-19 continues to cross the planet through human transmission. To date it is estimated that there have been over 42 million cases, with well over one million deaths. More casualties will follow, and several waves of transmission are likely. Unable now just to recommend smashing in the virus's face as an act of ethical violence (Žižek 2005: 185), and sounding at times genuinely frightened, it is instructive how Žižek's published response to the pandemic in 2020 suddenly sounded like a pathos-laced call to collectivism. In *Pandemic!* he also endorses (Žižek 2020: 98), and even characterises as Christian (or, more exactly, Christological), Catherine Malabou's conclusion, in a contemporary consideration entitled "To Quarantine from Quarantine: Rousseau, Robinson Crusoe, and 'I'," that "an *epochè*, a suspension, a bracketing of sociality, is sometimes the only access to alterity, a way to feel close to all the isolated people on Earth. Such is the reason why I am trying to be as solitary as possible in my loneliness." (Malabou 2020) Given that the pandemic clearly exposes latencies, it is very interesting to observe swift shifts into regressive personalisation, especially when they seem at least on the personal level to strive for neither the beautifully formulated resistentialist compact involving both people and nature that concludes Camus' *La Peste*, nor the rather magnificent concluding recognition in Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* (a text attended to by Bennett) that the plague, as that which is alien to us, introduces disorder *and compels change*: "proinde ubi se caelum, quod nobis forte alienum. / [...] corrumpat reddatque sui simile atque alienum." (1992 [1924]: lines 1119-1124). In contrast to Žižek *et al.*, therefore, it seems at least that the Levinas-inspired formulations of Anthropocene ethical being might here also be proposing something more properly challenging to us: namely, that we regard the pandemic as an eruption of the permanently present strange stranger. If we accept the challenge posed, including in Levinasian formulation, then we can come to articulate how the unhostile overwhelming of ineffectual barriers by the virus can among other things also signify as a wordless accusation of arrogance that may necessitate from us a salutary acknowledgement of fragility. The advent of such an



ethical weakness, depending on events and their management yet to occur, might even give rise to a fundamental revision of the illusory control and destructive distanciation that arguably bring about the pandemic consequences. Through this dolorous clarification, we might arrive at an overdue adoption of what can certainly be voiced at least in Levinasian ways, as an ethical substitution that relocates human being-for-the-other biologically and ethically within a vital materiality, and as an answerability towards an alterity whose passage around and through the human might be *pour le malheur et l'enseignement*. In highlighting and questioning the Adamic moment of ethical consciousness that distinguishes human from animal (Lucretius himself describing the plague as serpentine), a moment that Nie Zhenzhao isolates indeed as mythically foundational in so much ethical literary criticism, such a post-survivalist symbiosis also might encourage us to see what the tree of knowledge still bears, but is often recalled only in moments of precarity.

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