Narrow Gates
Strait Ways

The Postmodern Sacred
and the Icon

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Thesis Abstract

This study compares two prevalent notions in postmodern philosophy and critical-cultural theory: the sacred and the icon. On the one hand, the sacred has often been described as the exposure to an abyssal reality that is completely foreign to human perception and control. This deeply subversive event is presented through two of its most influential thinkers, Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot. On the other hand, the icon marks the experience of a sensitivity to the singular selfhood of the other. It comprises a loving receptivity to its unique identity, in particular the identity of the human or divine stranger who is excluded or victimized by human narratives and structures. Intrinsic to the ethical scene, as I show through Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, is an interaction rather than a subjugation of the subject by the other.

This project seeks to present the similarities and differences between the sacred and the icon. In particular, it calls for a certain relationship between them, allowing both to be observed in each other's respective light. Both are thus re-examined through their relation to each other. Moreover, this bond is seen to be ethically significant for either phenomenon and it helps redefine the sacred and the icon in a manner that is closer to actual experience. It also perceives either one in terms of a practical efficacy. To exemplify these views, the Christian mystical experience known as the 'passive dark night of the soul' is explored insofar as it constitutes one of the most radical instances of the icon. Crucial to this relationship is its exposure of the possible shortcomings and misjudgements of previous conceptions of the sacred. A potential new role for the sacred is indicated: a function that is at once more ethical and constructive.

Above all, the underlying concern of this study is the very nature of this interaction of the two extremes. Throughout, it shows this affiliation as dialectical by nature. Between the sacred and the icon, a process of a mutual coinciding and estranging takes place.

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Lastly, I wish to dedicate this work to my late aunt, Doris, whose affection and kindness will never be forgotten.

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Introduction

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Towards
a Dialogic
Phenomenology

The postmodern sacred and the icon are the central thematic of this study. *Narrow Gates, Strait Ways* is a comparative inquiry of these two philosophical domains that have been of considerable significance in twentieth and twenty-first century philosophy and critical theory. Both represent experiences of the limit: moments when subjectivity is faced with what is foreign to its understanding. The postmodern sacred and the icon refer to what is infinitely outside the ego: an unknown reality that ever challenges the sovereignty of the ego and its appropriations.

The Postmodern Sacred

Defining the Postmodern: A Search for Absolute Alterity

The term 'postmodernism' is a notoriously complex, contentious, and vague term. If anything, however, it can be broadly described as a reaction to modernity. It is a defining and radical response to modern thought.[1]

Very often, critical and cultural theory and philosophy see the inaugural act of modernity as taking place in the seventeenth-century with the creation of the Cartesian subject.[2] The philosophical works that follow are seen to carry on a certain method or a certain preference that had been initiated in René Descartes' works. This, generally

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[1] Throughout this study, I have chosen to use the term 'postmodernism' rather than 'postmodernity' because of the specific connotations this suggests. Rather than an aesthetic or literary movement, 'postmodernism' is here used in relation to the philosophy together with critical and cultural theory that take place after modern philosophy and in reaction to this philosophy. In this sense it is a term that defines a *particular* way of thinking that comes after modern thought and criticizes it. 'Postmodernity' usually has a broad and much more encompassing signification. It is usually understood to describe society in general after modernity. The label refers to the condition or state of being of society after modernity. It also signifies the economic and cultural states of such a society. Postmodernism would thus be a subcategory of postmodernity (see for instance 'Post-modernity vs Post-modernism?', http://thehoopoesodyssey.blogspot.fr/2008/07/post-modernity-vs-post-modernism.html; Martin Irvine, '"The Postmodern", "Postmodernism", "Postmodernity": Approaches to Po-Mo', http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/theory/pomo.html; Ihab Hassan, 'From Postmodernism to Postmodernity: the Local/Global Context', http://www.ihabhassan.com/postmodernism_to_postmodernity.htm; Mikhail Epstein, 'The Place of Postmodernism in Postmodernity', http://www.focusing.org/apm_papers/epstein.html).
[2] See Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. xxii.

speaking, is human *reason*. 'Let us suppose […]', remark John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon in their introduction to *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, that modernity revolves around

> an act of exclusion or bracketing; that the modern epoch turns on an *epoche*, a methodological imperative, in which modernity made up its mind to abide by human reason alone. In the *via moderna*, the rule will be that we are to make our way along a way (*meta-odos*) illuminated by the light of reason alone, of what *was called* reason in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.[3]

Modern thought hinges upon an unconditional conviction that reason will deliver mankind. Anything else that does not conform to its understanding of reason is of no concern whatsoever.

In reaction to this, postmodernism can be very generally described as an attempt to capture an 'experience' that is foreign to our pre-established forms of thinking. This experience is impossible in the sense that it does not belong to those possibilities derived from what modern philosophy has called 'reason'. It does not emerge in any way from the conditions of our perceptions; those same conditions through which we understand ourselves and our world. It is completely alien to them. We are subject to an experience that is impossible for all our possibles. Postmodernism, Caputo announces, initiates 'a *new* Enlightenment […] arising from a deep desire for what, given the constraints and conditions imposed by modernity, is precisely not possible, which for that reason is precisely what we most deeply desire'.[4] Mark C. Taylor likewise observes that

> [t]he search for irreducible difference and radical otherness obsesses many of our most imaginative and creative artists, writers, philosophers, psychologists, and theologians. Although it recurs throughout the century, concern with difference and otherness is a distinguishing trait of thinkers who can be described as 'postmodern'.[5]

The term 'alterity' is often used to designate this reality that is extraneous to our perceptions. Richard Kearney refers to postmodernism as a 'fixation with inaccessible

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[3] John D. Caputo, Michael J. Scanlon, 'Introduction: Apology for the Impossible: Religion and Postmodernism', in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo, Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 2.
[4] Caputo, Scanlon, 'Introduction', in *God*, p. 3.
[5] Taylor, *Altarity*, p. xxi.

alterity'.[6] From Latin *alteritatem*, which means, 'being outside', alterity means 'the state of being other or different; diversity, otherness'.[7] As Kearney points out, the alterity that is the focus of many postmodern writings is so absolute that any attempt at trying to make sense of it proves to be futile. In postmodernism, otherness is unrecognizable to us. 'Faced with such putative indetermination, we cannot tell the difference between one kind of other and another […].'[8] Before the postmodern alterity, we have no way of knowing whether what we are experiencing is benevolent or malevolent to us. We do not know whether what we are exposed to is an other in need of our help and care, an other who seeks to hurt us, or something else entirely.

Defining the Sacred: An Alterity of Extreme Paradoxical Natures

The absolute alterity evoked by the various postmodern writers is presented through different types of characteristics. There are different kinds of radical otherness as portrayed by post-Heideggerian philosophical and theoretical thought. Among these, one can mention Jacques Lacan's concepts of the Real and the Other together with Jean-Luc Marion's God without Being. The sacred is described as postmodern in that it constitutes another form or expression of this absolute alterity. It is indeed one of the most frequent subjects in postmodernism. Thinkers such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, Mark C. Taylor, and Kevin Hart all often reveal a preoccupation with this theme in their works.

In the sacred event there occurs a deeply unsettling encounter with a completely foreign reality. This reality is too foreign to be related to any other, good or evil, any divinity, religion, or theology. It eschews all attempts at apprehending it. Moreover, it radically affects the selfhood of him or her who experiences it. Selfhood is subverted and altered. One finds oneself being dispossessed by this unknown force.

Underlying the sacred as presented in this study are certain particular attributes. These features distinguish it from the various other varieties of alterity suggested by postmodern thinkers. Moreover, these constituents can also be traced in writings that

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[6] Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 10.

[7] *Oxford English Dictionary*, ed. Catherine Soannes, Angus Stevenson, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[8] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 10.

describe an otherness through various other designations, sometimes alongside the 'sacred'. Bataille, for instance, also calls this particular phenomenon 'inner experience' and 'sovereignty', while Blanchot calls it 'neuter' and 'outside'. Taylor refers to it as 'altarity', Levinas as 'there is', Lyotard, Kristeva, and Žižek as the 'sublime', while Derrida and Caputo as '*khora*'.

What I call the sacred refers to a more extended range of views of alterity than is usually presupposed when this notion is alluded to. Indeed, 'concepts' such as *khora* and the sublime are very often not found in relation to the subject.[9] Despite its more extensive meaning in this study, however, the term 'sacred' is retained and favoured because of its Latin etymology. The connotations implicit in this word clearly indicate the set of characteristics that capture the type of experience I am here seeking to explore.

'Sacred' is derived from the Latin noun '*sacer*'. *Sacer* means *holy* as well as *soiled*, the morally and spiritually *pure* as well as the *impure* or the *tainted*.[10] The sacred domain is a reality that is outside the realm of being and beings as lived by the subject. Its exteriority is *both* above being and below being. It is a place that is *both* a divine transcendence and a monstrous abyss. Bataille is one of the first thinkers of the sacred who draws attention to this double meaning in such works as *Erotism*, *Visions of Excess*, and *Inner Experience*. The sacred realm, he claims, accedes to both the divine and the profane, the eschatological and the scatological. Deeply spiritual and mystical phenomena tap into the sacred reality just as much as those which are debauched, base, and degrading by nature. Thereby, experiences that deeply transgress social rules, religious and civic, are also included as potential means of exposure to this inscrutable region. Just like the deeply spiritual and mystical experiences of some believers, acts of blasphemy, drunkenness, sexual obscenities, murder, destruction of any sort, and so forth, likewise lead to the *same* reality. In this respect, Blanchot also emphasizes profane experiences that are related to some form of extreme suffering. In addition to some spiritual events, the sacred, he suggests, can be reached through a severe physical or mental affliction, despair, horror, ennui, or an intense monotony of the mundane.

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[9] See for instance Kevin Hart's idea of the sacred, in *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), pp. 3-11.

[10] See Hart, *Gaze*, p. 41.

Taylor's particular appellation for the sacred, 'altarity', is also indicative of the paradoxical significance that marks the sacred domain. Among the network of this word's derivations is the word 'altar'. As Taylor points out,

> [t]he semantic range of 'altar' extends from high to low, sacred to sexual, eschatological to scatological: a toilet, the sex that modestly withdraws, a platform for offerings, or the communion table. So understood, the altar might mark and remark the site where one almost encounters the deity through the release of sacrifice, the sacrifice of a substitute victim [...].[11]

Each of the two polarities that constitute the sacred space is marked by a radical alterity. Both are far outside the limits of understanding. Both are too alien to subjectivity to be confined to representation. The divine place or God is too upwardly transcendent and the abyssal place is too downwardly monstrous to be reached by any form of comprehension or recognition. Either extreme is so absolute in its alterity, so remote from being, that ultimately one becomes *indistinguishable* from the other. The sacred knows no distinction between these two polarities. It opens a region where one reflects the other in its infinite remoteness from being. In the sacred, the eschatological merges with the scatological and vice versa. One cannot be undergone without the other because both are here effectively undifferentiated.[12] In Lyotard's, Kristeva's, and Žižek's accounts of the sublime, for instance, 'horror is just as "ineffable" as the vertical transcendence of God [...]. There is, in short, an apophasis of the monstrous analogous to an apophasis of the divine'.[13] Fusion is brought about through confusion.

In this context, the transcendent God, in his unspeakable foreignness, loses all trace of his love and goodness. God becomes a force that threatens, frightens, inspires awe in his sheer anonymity. As Kearney points out,

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[11] Taylor, *Altarity*, p. xxviii. Other associations of 'altarity' include 'to alter', 'to alternate', and 'alterity'. In the context of the term 'altarity', all these words suggest aspects of the dynamics of a subversive movement of otherness. Moreover, 'altarity' can be seen as a word that is incessantly oscillating between the meanings of all these derivations. '"Altarity"', says Taylor, 'is a slippery word whose meaning can be neither stated clearly nor fixed firmly'. In this disorientation it brings about, it discloses 'the proximity of a difference and an other that call into question every word and all language'. In being each and every one of its associations and yet none of them, it refers to a certain remainder that refuses to be fixed with any meaning. 'Altarity' reveals a 'more' that is paradoxically 'a certain less', an excess that is the excess of a lack of meaning (Taylor, *Altarity*, pp. xxviii-xxix).

[12] See Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 9, 107-8.

[13] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 88. The sublime for these three thinkers focuses on the monstrous character of evil, its association with 'horror, unspeakability, abjection and nothingness'. Evil is here transcendent, transgressing the limits of representation. Its 'strangeness and uncanniness constitute its glorious monstrosity. One shudders before such logic' (p. 88). See pp. 88-9.

> [t]o render these two apophatic extremes interchangeable, as certain postmoderns do, is to revert to a primordial indistinction which, I will argue, negates any ethical notion of the divine as unequivocally good. [God as] an unspeakable divinity is very close to the notion of the 'holy' which Otto and Eliade relate back to the experience of primordial awe – the experience of the divine as *tremendum et fascinans*.[14]

Before this divine, one can have no interpretative assurance or consolation, no hope of any meaningful interaction. It deprives one of any understanding whatsoever. The divine becomes a deprivation of every meaning, a source of disempowering horror.[15] *This* makes it interchangeable with the other polarity of the sacred.

The mergence of the divine and the profane orients itself towards the profane. What this means is that there is here a greater resemblance of the divine to the profane than the other way round. The abyss below being refers precisely to a nothingness or rejection of being. It is a point destitute of everything where being has not yet come to be or is no longer. The divine blurs with the profane in becoming an impersonal alterity that divests existence of all meaning imaginable. It is overall the nature of the scatological domain that defines the sacred reality. The divine, in its extreme alterity, loses itself to the abyssal state.

In fusing with the profane, however, the divine also *divinizes* it. The profane takes up some of the qualities which are occasionally inherent in some experiences (often mystical) of the radical transcendence of God. It inspires an irreducible sense of fascination, dread, sometimes even veneration in the subject. The scatological assumes the momentousness, the awe, and the horror that are prevalent in some transgressive divine experiences.

The word 'sacred' of course also suggests this element of sanctification (hence again, my preference for this name above the others). According to the Oxford English Dictionary definition, the sacred refers to what is 'regarded with great respect and reverence by a particular religion, group or individual'. It pertains to what is 'regarded as too valuable to be interfered with, sacrosanct'.[16] The sacred is the inviolable, what commands awe and veneration for a certain individual or a collective. This means that

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[14] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 88.

[15] As Peter Haidu claims, this notion of divinity is 'pre-Judaic, intractable in moral terms, in which divinity bypasses human understanding [...] as an object of profound repugnance. It is a concept of divinity which culture and civilization as we know them, hold at bay, rendering it also "unspeakable"' (Peter Haidu, 'The Dialectics of Unspeakability', in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 284).

[16] *OED*.

it is marked by a uniqueness and momentousness that is incontestable by any other experience. To be before the sacred is to be before what is somehow a profound, timeless truth, too valuable to be interfered with.

This idea of an incomparable value is very often implicit in the manner this reality is designated by the writer. Time and again, the sacred event is exalted or given some form of ultimate significance. The alterity is precisely seen as *sacred*. Lyotard's sublime, Bataille's inner experience, Blanchot's neuter, Caputo's *khora* (via Derrida), are all experiences that are regarded by their thinkers with a certain fascination and awe.

More importantly, these thinkers all betray a *preference* for such experiences above any other. This is because such phenomena operate outside the bounds of subjectivity. They are phenomena of the limit of one's very capacity to experience phenomena. Their event contests or undermines the truths and certainties of the conditions of experience in general, which, we can say, are also the foundations of being. In doing so, they expose them as intrinsically illusory and fallible. They expose them as convincing artifices that are also indelibly vulnerable. To undergo the sacred is to undergo a nothingness undoing all such structures and their verities. It is to partake of a state where selfhood and its world are not really existent or actualized. This nonrealization of being makes this state pre-originary to it. All this gives such an experience, for its writers, an indisputable truthfulness and authority. Experiences that fall within the purview of selfhood are ultimately regarded as inherently false and misguided in being for the most part solipsistic projections of that self upon the world. In the end, what is outside the I is perceived in its image, through its predispositions. The world is seen through the distorting screen of the ego. The other becomes what the self presupposes. What is sacred, however, is alien to the ego's dominating horizons. It is an experience of what is outside the self but unfettered by its arrogations. The sovereignty of this experience depends on this foreignness to selfhood. It is considered to be somehow more real than any other phenomenon in contesting the self, preventing that self from controlling it.[17]

Most influential among those who write on the sacred are Bataille and Blanchot. Their particular visions of the sacred have been crucial to the various ways postmodern philosophers and critical and cultural theorists understand events of alterity, and not

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[17] See Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 17-8, 203-5

only those that are related to the sacred. The manner in which alterity has been envisaged since the twentieth-century has more often than not been inspired by either one of these two thinkers. There are often strong affiliations with these two specific perceptions of the sacred in the principal characteristics of postmodern formulations of otherness. I would include among the names of those who have been influenced, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, John D. Caputo, Mark C. Taylor, and Jean-Luc Nancy. Bataille and Blanchot can indeed be considered to be the fathers of the postmodern genealogy of the sacred and alterity in general. Throughout this work, the sacred is thereby conveyed mainly through these two thinkers.[18]

The Icon

As well as the sacred, the other central thematic of this work is the icon. In phenomenology and ethics, the icon suggests an event where a fellow human being or a divine being shows itself through its essential singularity. This singularity is the irreducible intimate selfhood of that being. It refers to its unique incomparable identity. Every human being is *other* to the subject, *other* from all other human beings, because of its particular and irreplaceable awareness of itself and its world. What makes an other itself – its self – is invisible and foreign to the subject and its intentionality. A person can only make itself 'known', it can only express itself, through its appearance.

Diacritical Hermeneutics as a *Via Tertia*

In this work, the icon will be perceived through the ethical method Kearney calls 'diacritical hermeneutics', which he distinguishes from both what he calls 'romantic' and 'radical hermeneutics'. Romantic hermeneutics is endorsed by Friedrich Ernst

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[18] For Bataille's and Blanchot's very significant influence on writings of the postmodern sacred, see Hart, *Gaze,* pp. 4-11.

Daniel Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Hans-Georg Gadamer. It sponsors the view that despite the separation of the subject's consciousness and the other's consciousness, a union can be brought about. This fusion between two otherwise estranged entities is called 'appropriation', 'to become one with'. It can be achieved by recovering 'some lost original consciousness'. Union is attained when this past knowledge is made contemporaneous with our present comprehensions. Recovering this consciousness will reveal the analogousness of the subject's and the other's mind or soul. In this model, the other is finally the 'other' of the 'same': another individual who is yet similar to me.[19]

On the other hand, some thinkers such as Caputo and Blanchot promote what can be called a model of radical hermeneutics. For them, the other's singularity is too foreign, too infinitely different to be understood in any way by the subject. There exists an irreducible dissymmetry, an unbridgeable gulf, between subject and other. Exposure entails a violent breaching of subjectivity by the other's alterity.[20] The other's 'invisible infinity comes over me and demands everything of me, the food of my mouth'.[21] Subjectivity finds itself unconditionally opened to the other's alterity. Overcome, it gives itself unreservedly and without any choice to the other.

We are once again venturing upon an experience of radical alterity that is outside all thought and being. The hyperbolic hypothesis suggests an absolute otherness that rejects all the determinations and distinctions of selfhood. In this regard, a radical hermeneutics of the icon can be seen as another form of the postmodern sacred.[22]

To reduce the other to the subject's appropriations, as romantic hermeneutics tells us, is to completely suppress that other's self-identity and its particular needs and responsibilities. It becomes indistinguishable from the subject's totalizing self. Conversely, to perceive it as an absolutely foreign force, as radical hermeneutics suggests, is to convey upon it a mystique and horror that prevent genuine ethical action to take place in relation to it. The icon's utter foreignness paralyzes and confuses any sense of understanding that is necessary in order to act for it. The very idea of an uncontrolled and unconditional openness to the other – possession, it seems, by the other – further invalidates all sense of self-determined, responsible action by the subject. Surely this ordeal is not so far from the traumatic. It can risk becoming, emotionally, a

[19] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 17.
[20] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 17-8.
[21] John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2000), p. 70.
[22] See Hart, *Gaze,* p. 11.

deeply distressing shock that can have upsetting long-lasting psychological effects, perhaps even leading to the loss of one's very sanity. This unknown that the other inaugurates also prevents any ability to indentify what that other is. 'How are we to address otherness at all if it becomes totally *unrecognizable* to us?' How can one tell in any way if that other has good intentions or bad intentions towards us? This, again, can be extremely detrimental for subjectivity. The subject can easily be seriously harmed if it exposes itself to any other indiscriminately, if it cannot in any manner discern what is before it.[23]

As a response to this problematic, Kearney proposes the diacritical method. This hermeneutics obviates 'both the congenial communion of fused horizons and the apocalyptic rupture of non-communion […]'. It tries to find a middle path between the outlook often related to modernity and that related to postmodernity. It 'endeavour[s] to explore possibilities of intercommunion between distinct but not incomparable selves'.[24] The other is neither reduced to a dialectics of the subject's selfhood nor is it an irruption of unknown heterogeneity. It is not an alterity that is so foreign it can be just anything. Rather, it is seen as an alterity that pertains to a person: the subject *identifies* another self. Despite the irremediable difference of this otherness, in belonging to another being, it offers itself to be understood. Its singularity, in being the singularity of a selfhood, expresses itself to the subject's own selfhood in some way or another. Subjectivity in turn opts to welcome this expressiveness. Further, this action allows it enough freedom to interpret what that other gives it to understand. The icon is not so overbearingly other that it prevents one from seeking to understand it, even if in the most minimal sense. The subject's selfhood has to play an active interpretative role if it is to understand what the other needs, if it is to act in relation to such needs. Subject and other thus remain 'distinct but not incomparable selves'.[25] Despite the irreconcilable gap that separates them, a *dialogue* is established. Possibilities of interaction take place through an initiating hospitality to the other's expressivity and its attempts at construing this expressivity.

This form of the icon will be explored especially through Levinas and Kearney. Levinas is, as is well known, *the* philosopher of the icon. There are tendencies in his later works, especially *Otherwise Than Being*, to conceive this ethical event in terms of

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[23] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 10. See pp. 10-1, 70-2.
[24] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 18.
[25] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 18.

a radical hermeneutics. I will demonstrate, however, that he also above all suggests a phenomenology of the icon that allows for some degree of interpretative activity on behalf of the subject. In most of his writings, Levinas discloses the ethical encounter primarily through an icon which expresses itself to a subject and a subject that receives such an expression through its own interpretations. In the end, the ethical scenario is here also based on a dialogue with alterity rather than a subjugation to it.

The Dark Night of the Spirit

To corroborate my designation of the icon, the set of phenomena known as the 'dark night of the spirit' will be used as a continuing example. Through a steady exploration of these episodes, I hope to clarify and substantiate the various traits that constitute the ethical experience and its comparison with the sacred.

The dark night is a term that describes the penultimate phase in a mystic's progressive journey towards full spiritual union with God in actual life. It is an advanced period along a long process that serves to gradually submit the mystic's faculties unconditionally to the divine reality. It can last months, even years, and can be distinguished especially by the mental and spiritual suffering it entails. Above all, writers on the dark night ultimately perceive this period as a necessary phase of trial and purgation for the mystic's selfhood to be completely divested of its self-seeking nature and uphold and sustain itself completely on the radical alterity of God. Significant here is the painful shedding of the mystic's egotistic identity before the singularity of the divine.

Why then choose this extra-ordinary, even strange experience as an instance of the icon when one could have exemplified it through much more common everyday experiences? I believe that the dark night is one of the most extreme experiences of the icon imaginable. It takes this phenomenon to its farthest limits. The alterity it exposes the subject to, the alterity of God, is far more foreign and subversive than most other encounters with the icon that we can experience in a lifetime. Few other experiences of the icon, perhaps none, can rival the disruptive alterity the mystic finds their selfhood undergoing in these excruciating episodes. Because of its extreme difference from the subject, divine otherness here offers very little understanding of itself. In many events

in the dark night, this leads to a disempowering of the self that dominates over any sense of empowerment or capacity to interpret the otherness that one is exposed to.

If the dark night is a radicalization of most other events of the icon, it therefore leads to the consideration of an important factor. One can argue that the more intense a particular kind of experience, the more it accentuates those attributes that make up its kind. In this case, the events that mark the dark night can be seen to disclose the features of the ethical event more prominently than most others. Now one of the attributes exposed, as I demonstrate throughout this work, is the icon's relationship with the sacred. More than most other phenomena, the dark night – and this is the main reason for its expediency for this study – reveals a particular interaction with what we have been calling the sacred. The high element of self-subversion in its phenomena points to the presence of the sacred in what is otherwise a group of events often seen as undergone in a relation with God. Investigating the dark night will thus enable us, perhaps more than any other form of ethical event, to prove and clarify on the curious affiliation that these two extremely diverse polarities share. This relationship is indeed a significant subject of this study.

Mysticism

No spiritual tradition testifies and writes more about the dark night than Christian mysticism. The mystical thematic in this work thereby refers especially to Catholic Christianity. In this respect, the idea of the mystical here only partly fits the contemporary popular definition. As Rowan Williams explains,

> [m]ysticism has come to be opposed to the rational and the institutional aspects of religious life, and it is very frequently regarded as a form of experience common to all religious traditions and representing a level of unity in the religious apprehension of reality deeper than the merely historical and linguistic diversities between faiths. We can identify a phenomenological core to 'mysticism' that has some real coherence […]. ['Mysticism' and 'mystical'] have become words associated with a specific range of states of consciousness, states of consciousness we should be inclined to describe as abnormal or at least exceptional, with some significant analogies to conditions usually identified with mental pathology or dysfunction […]. [W]hat enables all the diverse

phenomenological material in question to be bundled together under the one concept of 'the mystical' is finally, it seems, the judgement that ordinary consciousness is being interrupted in such a way that we are given a *direct* awareness of sacred reality, however that reality is described.[26]

The mystical as a schema of psychic adventure is, however, but a part of the mystics' overall understanding of this notion. For the Catholic Christian tradition and its mystics, the mystical begins when the self is surrendered to God. This surrender is so radical that the self's actions are seen to be inseparable from those of the divine. In this respect, the mystical or the 'supernatural' consists of a significant *coinciding* of what I am doing with what God is doing.[27]

This integration is perceived through the theological Christological framework. Any abnormal psychological experience must be perceived according to a context relating to the Church's doctrine on Jesus Christ's actions, teachings, passion, and resurrection. This essential hermeneutic integrates the ecclesiastical, moral, and sacramental dimensions. The mystical experience, as Williams points out, is the assimilation of one's life to Christ. The Christian mystic asks 'to be judged by the pattern of the Word of God made flesh and crucified'. Here, 'the criteria of authenticity do not lie in the character of the experience itself but in how it is related to a pattern of concrete behaviour, the development of dispositions and decisions.'[28]

To validate a mystical experience is to ask: how does this preternatural moment help conform my personality more to Christ's; how does it help bring my behaviour in actual life closer to Christ's? In this sense, the mystical is not opposed to the intellectual and institutional. The mystic's spiritual journey is placed strictly under the same standards of judgement to which all other Christians are answerable. It is seen as part of a vocation to which all members of the Church belong. 'If the "mystical" ultimately means the reception of a particular *pattern* of divine action […], its test will be the presence or absence of something like that pattern in a human life seen as a whole, not the presence or absence of this or that phenomenon in the consciousness.'[29]

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[26] Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila* (London: Continuum, 1991), pp. 144-5.
[27] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, pp. 143-5.
[28] See Williams, *Teresa of Avila,* pp. 146-7.
[29] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, pp. 145-6.

A Phenomenology of Ethics

This study touches upon theology and religion although its area of focus is its interaction between important writings on the postmodern sacred and the icon. The prevalent characteristics of the sacred, as presented especially by Bataille and Blanchot, and the ethical relation, as presented by Levinas and Kearney, are traced out and compared with each other. To this end, a significant field of thought here is phenomenology.

That the philosophy of the icon pertains mainly to phenomenology has already been established by its thinkers and critics. Moreover, the philosophical and theoretical writings on the sacred can also be seen to belong to this province. What this means in general is that the sacred is very often described in these works from the viewpoint of the subject's structures of consciousness. It is evoked through the manner it is experienced by the subject. Sure enough one can criticize this view by pointing out that the sacred is precisely an event that comes from outside the realm of subjectivity and what it can go through. It is an event that does not give itself to the conditions of experience and their faculties, the sensibility and the intellect. This is true although it does not mean that these conditions and their faculties are thus absent in such writings. It is impossible to dismiss them. I will therefore reformulate my claim. Writings of the sacred often disclose this phenomenon through its *effect* on the experiencing faculties of the subject. Its otherness is described *through* the manner it is suffered by the experiencing I. The writings of Bataille, Blanchot, and Caputo, for instance, often describe the *manner* this subversive event is undergone by the experiential consciousness. The sacred is explored in terms of the contestations and rupturing with which it afflicts the feeling and thinking self. It is designated in terms of the suffering of an increasingly dispossessed consciousness. The perspective is still taken from the domain of consciousness. This situates such writings also in the province of phenomenology.[30]

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[30] Together with the icon, therefore, I frequently refer to the sacred as a phenomenon or an experience. (One can note that I have already described it as such in some instances above.) To the extent that the sacred is – to a minimal degree – experienced by consciousness, to the extent that its writers imply this indirectly through their experiential descriptions of it, it remains situated within the domain of phenomena (see ''Twixt Exposure and Action', pp. 229-34). In effect this means the same as when the sacred for example is referred to as a 'quasi-phenomenon', a '"phenomenon"', an '"experience"', or a 'nonexperience'. These terms simply seek to emphasize also the other side of the coin: the radical level

It is only fitting that the dialogue that this work establishes between the sacred and the icon is in turn also phenomenological in character. The arguments and ideas posited are grounded exclusively in terms of the experiential structures and contents of subjectivity. What this means is that the relationship explored is designated above all through the ways in which it is undergone by the subject. The comparison of the sacred and the icon is delineated through the *experiencing* of their affiliation and nonaffiliation.

To this end, the comparison can be called a *dialogic phenomenology*. A dialogic phenomenology presents a phenomenon from two forms of logic. On the one hand, it describes it separately from any other phenomenon: it describes it on its grounds, as its own point of reference, as its own authority. On the other hand, it describes it also in relation to another different type of phenomenon. An experience is here perceived in the light of another experience, that is, through its correspondences with it and its divergences from it. In the present study, this dual perspective is applied to both the sacred and the icon to disclose their respective inimitable singularity, their irreconcilable differences from each other. It is also employed to admit to the possible connections between these two poles. Neither phenomenon should be seen as reducible to the other though tentative crossings between both are indeed possible as actual experiences such as the dark night have time and again proved.

This dual perspective is the method used all along to establish and express the principal proposition of this study. The particular interaction between the sacred and the icon can in truth be seen as a 'chiasmic play'[31] of overlapping and retreat. Both experiences sometimes lead to each other, while at other times they withdraw from each other as either one is experienced autonomously. Converging and diverging, both poles give at once the evidence of a certain dialogue taking place between them while also indicating their infinite separation.

This interaction, when seen in particular from the perspective of the sacred, will elicit insights into the icon that are often inadequately explored, sometimes even disregarded by its thinkers. When seen from the perspective of the icon, the sacred assumes a new signification that makes it relevant in its nature to this very perspective. These conclusions above all pertain to ethics. They are all concerned in some direct or indirect manner with how the other should be perceived in a way that gives its

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of transgression in the self when the sacred is undergone. I avoid utilizing them in this work because their repetitive usage, in my view, can look awkward.

[31] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 208.

singularity as much justice as is possible. I would therefore broadly demarcate the phenomenological field of this study as a phenomenology of ethics. Moreover, as already pointed out, the ethical event in this phenomenology is construed through Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics. The icon, I suggest, is neither too alien nor too familiar for the subject. Its alterity needs and offers itself to be interpreted at all times without however losing its foreignness from one's horizons of understanding. In addition to its overall phenomenological designation, therefore, a small part of this study would have to explore a form of hermeneutics needed to interpret the icon. This would further elucidate and bring into effect the paradox of same and other at the heart of the ethical encounter. Together with Kearney, in this regard, I will also be drawing from Paul Ricoeur's ideas of a hermeneutics. Ricoeur's hermeneutics is in fact the central source of influence of Kearney's own ethical thought. It is moreover particularly constructive in formulating a method of ethical interpretation. Its significance indeed also extends to our expression of the relationship between the subject and the other in the ethical scene and even the relationship that is revealed between the sacred and the icon.

Appraising the Comparative Perspective

To evaluate this study, one must consider again its exposition of the chiasmic bond between the sacred and the icon. One must also draw attention to the kind of ethical event it illustrates. The icon is seen as disempowering and yet empowering the subject to discern it.

Both of these factors aim at delineating the two central phenomena of this work in what I believe to be a more realistic manner. They aim at capturing them in a way that is more reflective of actual experience than in previous postmodern writings.

Seen in each other's light, either phenomenon can be perceived from a relatively new perspective.[32] The comparative framework helps accentuate the extremeness and violence that mark the alterity of the sacred. Those attributes that give the sacred its

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[32] Many of the ideas behind these innovative outlooks are largely in agreement and sometimes even a continuation of the thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas, Richard Kearney, and Paul Ricoeur.

destructive, excessively dispossessing character are better clarified, seen in all their intensity. Its detrimental and horrifying nature is brought more into emphasis. This exposes what in my view is the fallacy of a trend in certain thinkers such as Bataille, Blanchot, and Caputo, to commend one to such an experience. Implicit in these writings is a qualitative preference for the sacred – an acclamation, sometimes even an exaltation of what is ultimately a deeply harmful event. In this work I criticize this tendency, arguing against an acceptance or resignation to the ordeals of this experience.

The relationship of the sacred with the icon in fact indicates a way how the sacred can be overcome. If 'transcendence' means to move to a qualitatively better state than the previous one, to *surpass* something, then the icon, I propose, does precisely that. Its interaction with the sacred expresses phenomenologically why it transcends it, how it does so, what is necessary for one region to lead to the other one.

This does not mean that the sacred must be dismissed as an insignificant event. Its ineluctable presence in life is unanimous. Everyone at some points of his or her life is a victim of its nihilistic nature: subjected to a deeply distressing event that disrupts the very foundations of the self. A philosophy of the sacred must be acknowledged. The dialogic phenomenology presented here permits this, just as it also calls attention to the importance of seeing that same sacred as operating *on* the icon. The icon cannot be perceived simply as an experience that is autonomous from the sacred. It should not be seen as an experience whose authority and conviction are not liable to be challenged by radical alterity. This phenomenon is not incontestable by other phenomena, its power incapable of being destabilized. If it goes unquestioned, the truth-values and interpretations that are elicited from it can risk becoming dogmatic. This can undeniably entail various harmful consequences, from discrimination and prejudice to fundamentalism if the other is the divine.

To recognize the icon's association with the sacred is to recognize its vulnerability to such undermining forces as doubt, despair, and fear. To be sure, a crucial claim in this study is the intrinsic openness of the ethical event to what transgresses it. Inherent to the constitution of the ethical bond is the submission to its own overcoming. Paradoxically, this proves to be one of its principal strengths. Through the ruin generated by the sacred, the subject can find itself strengthened in its love for that icon; the re-experience of its bond with it can become more authoritative and compelling than before. One's susceptibility to the other, to what it is trying to say, can be augmented through the erosion of that very susceptibility. The disruption

produced by the sacred can make one aware again or more aware of the other's singularity. The experience of the other's irreducible identity is heightened. In this light, suffering the sacred is seen as a possible means for the subject to reassess itself and its interpretations of the other. It can serve to revitalize the event of the icon, to purify it or authenticate it, removing it far from any outlook involving complacency or undue self-assurance. Moreover, it can also be seen as a means of inclination to give oneself to an other for the first time. The sacred itself can inspire the subject to decide to give itself to an icon it had never really known before.

In the context of this relationship then, the sacred becomes a *productive* phenomenon. It is given a more *practically meaningful* angle. While losing none of its terrifying alterity, the sacred is also at once seen as part of an interaction that endows it with an *ethical significance*. It remains insufferable and yet this insufferableness assumes a purgatorial value to it. It assumes a usefulness that is much more than marginal if the subject is to be sure of avoiding making use of the icon for its own egoistic ends and abuses, if it is to avoid taking its understanding of it for granted.

What follows is an overview of the chapters, accounting especially for their respective roles vis-à-vis the exposition of the comparison that underlies this entire study.

'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', the first chapter, presents the sacred via Bataille and Blanchot. Both of these two portrayals are explored from the viewpoint of a phenomenology of severe obsession, in which context they are also often compared with each other. Integral to this comparison is introduced another similar type of event as evoked by Levinas, the tormenting state that he calls the 'there is'. Moreover, a fourth kind is accounted for briefly in the conclusion: Derrida's and Caputo's notion of *khora*.

A full description of the dark night of the spirit is given in the next chapter, 'Intersecting at the No-place'. Another prevalent thematic in postmodernism, the

phenomenology of the gift, is announced. This constitutes another outlook on the sacred that can be closely associated with the phenomenology of radical obsession that had been disclosed in the previous chapter. Through these two perspectives, a similarity is traced between various characteristics intrinsic to some experiences in the dark night and those relating to the sacred. Some phenomena in the dark night are in truth identified as phenomena of the sacred.

The third chapter, 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', introduces the icon often through a juxtaposition with the sacred. A main distinction that is found between these two domains is the kind of alterity each refers to. Whereas the sacred refers to an alterity that is absolutely anonymous and nonhuman, even inhuman, the icon refers to an alterity that pertains to a human being (or sometimes a divine being). The chapter then expounds on the intense differences that result from such a divergence. This extensive comparison leads to two crucial deductions. The first is that an important element of the ethical event consists of its own vulnerability to the onslaughts of the sacred. Any experience of the icon can find itself given to the other's nihilistic suffering. The second is that the ethical event can also empower itself through this decline. It can operate by transmuting, or better, redeeming, the impersonal and senseless alterity it had been exposed to into its own different kind of alterity. A dual relationship is thus in place. The ethical relation can give in to the sacred and it can take over the sacred.

This is elucidated through the recurring example of the dark night. The totality of experiences that make up this period can be defined as one entire phenomenology of an icon. This is because the overall meaning and source of the dark night as a whole is precisely the mystic's relation with the divine as an icon. The attributes of many of its individual phenomena are indeed also identified with the attributes of the ethical event. Within the dark night, therefore, *both* experiences of the sacred and the icon are undergone. This further justifies the two factors that are seen to comprise the interaction of the ethical event with the sacred: a giving in and a taking over.

The chapter then ends by elucidating on the significance of the sacred for the icon. An absence of its interruptions from one's exposure to the other can lead to a misunderstanding of that other. If the ethical bond is not contested by the sacred, the subject can easily cease being receptive to the other's singular selfhood. A complacent perception can lead in turn to the perpetration of various forms of harm.

The fourth chapter, 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', further distinguishes the sacred and the icon in engaging with their different modes of initiation. The subject, for Bataille and Blanchot, finds itself undergoing the sacred through a 'desire' that is involuntary. This desire is a violation and abjection by an absolute otherness. 'Desire' and the closely related 'decision' for Derrida, Levinas, and Kearney mean something quite different. They suggest a willing consent to the call of the other. Only by affirming this call can the ethical event be initiated. This desire moreover integrates a sense of faith, hope, and love for the other. Once again these issues are referred to the mystics' writings.

Closely affiliated with the concepts of desire and decision in this context is the manner one experiences one's selfhood when faced with alterity. The sacred and the icon indicate two significantly different experiences of personality. Whereas the first phenomenon is undergone through a self that suffers a progressive disempowerment, the second is undergone through a self that goes through a progressive empowerment.

'’Twixt Exposure and Action’, the fifth and last chapter, dwells particularly on the issue of redemption. How can one describe the character and the process of the icon's redemption of the sacred? Redemption is seen to be constituted by a specific communication between self and other. If the other expresses itself, if it intimates certain possible meanings, it is then up to the subject to seek to identify these possibles and realize them in actual life. Self-exposure to the other must also coincide with self-projection. This defines the dialectical nature of selfhood in the ethical relation.

Deciphering what the other has to say is usually carried out through narratives that are read and learnt. To this end, a large part of the chapter is dedicated to sketching out a prototypical narrative – what I will call an 'icon narrative' – that can best do justice to the other's singularity through its interpretations. It formulates the basics of a narrative that can most effectively be faithful to the other's individuality. The icon narrative would function also to interpret experiences of the sacred, to endow them with some form of meaning to motivate their victim to prevail over them. The chapter explores this narrative first by illustrating the different forms of understanding or the kinds of redemption it helps effectuate in relation to the two central phenomena. In this, I borrow liberally from Ricoeur's and Kearney's narrative hermeneutics. Among the most crucial forms of redemption are catharsis, phronetic understanding, hope, and pardon.

Whether it is seen in the setting of the actual ethical event or in the icon narrative, redemption is based on a dialectic derivative of Ricoeur's particular view of the metaphor. This dialectic involves two polarities that are at once mutually in conflict and yet in accordance. This dynamic of a pair in discord as well as in concordance is seen to operate in the icon narrative in several forms. Narrative redemption is now described through some of the ways it enacts this same dialectical movement.

'That Uncharted Crossing Between Despair and Hope' brings this work to a conclusion by illustrating and making use of all its principal ideas to give a complete picture of the special relationship between the sacred and the icon. The dialectic emphasized in the previous chapter is now seen as capturing the particular way these two extremes react to each other. It shows the two polarities as engaged in a 'chiasmic play'[33] of retreat and overlapping. At the core of this entire study is the particular interaction of these two seemingly incompatible phenomena that repel as well as traverse each other.

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[33] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 208.

Chapter 1

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Monomaniacs and Neurotics

The Sacred as Obsession in Bataille and Blanchot

I

The Thought

The sacred, as evoked by Bataille and Blanchot, can be captured from a phenomenological perspective of inordinate *obsession*. In my view, looking at this postmodern theme through the suffering of a fixation helps disclose various comparative insights between its two kinds as designated by these thinkers. It provides an effective stance from which the similarities and differences of the characters of these two types of sacred can be better observed. This applies also to the next chapter's comparative study with the events of the dark night. The sacred as an experience of obsession helps illuminate the similarities between its atheistic nature and the theistic dark night.

This phenomenological standpoint also accentuates the existential aspect of the sacred. It allows one to see more clearly the intimate connection with its lived facticity. This includes above all episodes relating to excessive debauchery, intense ennui, physical or mental affliction, even the experience of various art forms and the writing of literature. Significant for a coherent understanding of the sacred is the awareness of its inseparability from those actual instants through which it is undergone. In imparting or enhancing such a recognition, a phenomenology of obsession allows the sacred to be perceived in a more realistic and familiar manner: a manner that is more empathetic. It reveals the character of certain definite experiences in life as intrinsically constitutive of the sacred.

An Impersonal Obsession

For Bataille and Blanchot, the experience of the sacred can be seen as the infliction of a severe obsession. The subject suffers from the persistence of a *thought* without content or form. It is the thought of something completely unknown. In subjectivity, it is an inscrutable presence that is always there. It never leaves me alone, even when I am, as is customary, in control of my consciousness. The thought constantly teases the attention of the subject's consciousness, often in a very indirect, vague, and concealed manner. It 'tempts him, seduces him, cajoles him, torments him, misleads him, but never abandons him'.[1] 'A thought that he does not identify, even knowing it, holds vigil'.[2]

In various ways the thought's presence constantly affects one's thoughts and emotions. However, it partakes of and belongs to neither. Although it affects them, it never reveals itself to their comprehension. Subjectivity through its faculties is incapable of pinning down what this thought is or is not despite this thought's constant perturbations. It is 'ever-present, yet strangely inaccessible […]'. So proximate, it is yet so foreign: an *intimate exteriority*. Indeed, it is because it is too intimate that the subject cannot reveal it to itself. As Steven Shaviro points out, 'the most intensely personal experiences are also the most inaccessible, the most rigorously impersonal'.[3] The thought is closer to the self than that self's very own thoughts and emotions. Intrinsic to this unknown presence is its terrifying immediacy. This immediacy is too immediate to allow its distancing for the interpreting observer, my selfhood. The thought is lodged in one's very self-consciousness. It is more intimate to the subject than its own awareness of itself, than the coinciding of its self with itself. It is the throbbing of a rupture in selfhood constantly sensed whenever it re-collects itself in its

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[1] Steven Shaviro, *Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory* (Tallahassee: Florida University Press, 1990), pp. 128-9,

[2] Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond,* trans. Lycette Nelson (New York: State University of New York, 1992), p. 64. For other references to the sacred as a thought, see for instance Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 7-8, 23; Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (London: University of Nebraska, 1995), pp. 52, 56-7, 121; Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (New York: State University of New York, 1988), pp. 155-6, 204; Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 86-8, 125-8, 131-3.

[3] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 128, 113.

perceptions, reflections, decisions. A breach in selfhood that does not belong to this selfhood, the thought is an anonymous or *impersonal* obsession.[4]

It follows then, that to *directly* suffer the onslaughts of the thought is to be torn away from one's sense of identity. 'The extreme movement of thought must show itself for what it is: foreign to action.'[5] To undergo a true subjugation to the obsession is to be torn away from all intentional acts of one's own selfhood that come from and lead to that same selfhood. It is to be torn away from the security of being one's own centre of perception, thought, and decision; to be torn away from *owning* all acts of consciousness. To a large extent, one's self-awareness is therefore *disowned*. Radical exposure to the thought *depersonalizes* the subject. Divested of my will and freedom, I am subjected to a passive suffering. The thought is a subversion of selfhood rather than a projection of selfhood.

In more concrete terms, what is it like to experience oneself and one's world when afflicted by the thought? Subjectivity here finds itself in abjection to what Emmanuel Levinas calls the '*there is*'.[6] There is an estrangement from the particular identities that constitute one's outside world and one's self-identity. This is brought about through subjugation to an indeterminate manifestation. Everything becomes pervaded by an impersonal, nonsubstantive presence. Subject and object are seized, as it were, by the universal foreignness of a night. Levinas remarks that '[w]hen the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like a presence […].' For Levinas, the presence of this night, the 'there is', is the sheer fact of universal *being*: 'The anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person or thing […]. *There is*, in general, without it mattering what there is, without our being able to fix a substantive to this term. *There is* is an impersonal form like in it rains, or it is warm'.[7]

When one suffers the 'there is' or the thought, objects lose their familiar meanings and distinctions and appear in all their materiality. All objects assume a *pure*

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[4] See also Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 27, 90, 131-3.

[5] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 155.

[6] Levinas's notion of the 'there is', described especially in his early work *Existence and Existents*, has exerted a deep influence on Blanchot's concept of the 'disaster' and Derrida's and Caputo's reading of *khora*. I am here designating the 'there is' only in terms of its similarities with Bataille's and Blanchot's sacred. Further on in this chapter I will disclose and elaborate on its greater resemblance with Blanchot's sacred.

[7] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), pp. 52-3.

physicality, too blatant to make any sense of. Everything degrades into appearance. This physical reality as undergone by the thought-stricken subject is what Bataille refers to as 'base materialism'.[8] The immediate is here so immediate that it 'serves only to accentuate its irreducible strangeness […]'.[9] As Blanchot observes, '[t]he near, through presence, belongs to the distant, and through the distant, belongs to the indefinite play of separation and limit'.[10] This sheer materiality discloses every object as a density that holds no meaning, a presence that is senseless. Everything becomes the presence of an absence of all signification. Everything becomes a reflection of the thought.

Aspects of the Thought's Depersonalization: Physical Sentience, Selfhood, and Temporality

Thus far I have focused primarily on how the subject experiences the world around as it is suffering of the thought. To designate the manner in which it experiences its self, one must draw attention to this event's affinity with the '*affect*'.

Because of the thought's irreducible immediacy to subjectivity, its experiencing affects before all else one's *corporeal feelings*. The affect is the event of 'a literally blinding, violent excess of sensation'. It is 'the constraint that an immediate, more-than-spontaneous sensation exerts on the sensibility'. The thought in this respect is equivalent to this form of phenomenon. Because of its visceral character, it can be undergone through physical intrusions, 'wounds, spasms, cataleptic seizures', even sexual penetrations. Bataille's and Blanchot's fiction is indeed very often descriptive of severe physical illnesses, dying characters, and perverse sexual games. To be inflicted by the thought is to be seized by spasms and vociferations, by 'the involuntary movements of the body'.[11]

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[8] See for instance 'The "Old Mole" and the Prefix *Sur* in the Words *Surhomme* [Superman] and Surrealist' and 'Base Materialism and Gnosticism', in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985), pp. 32-44, 45-52.
[9] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 133.
[10] Blanchot, *Step,* p. 70.
[11] Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 30, 139, 86. The corporeal and visceral qualities of the thought can be seen for example in descriptions of J's dying in Blanchot's *Death Sentence* or Thomas' particular vision of the world through his partial blindness in *Thomas the Obscure*. On the other hand, Bataille's fiction, such as

If the emotions and the intellect respond to this 'impregnation' it is always *after* the instant of its actuality. The instant itself is a sensorial violation too overwhelming to be seized by either emotional or intellectual determination.[12] This dispossessing influx can have the ineffable character of an extreme pleasure, joy, distress, pain, and even horror and despair. The more intense is the exposure to the thought, the more these types of sensations merge into one another, sometimes even to the point of becoming indistinguishable.[13]

For Bataille and Blanchot, a*nguish* is one of the most common sensations undergone in this particular affliction.[14] Like all the other sensations, it is outside the appropriations of selfhood. Its stirrings divest selfhood of its self. Suffering anguish, the subject is depersonalized. It is seized by an anonymous torment. '[A] great unhappiness', writes Blanchot in *Death Sentence*, 'as silent as a real unhappiness can be, beyond all help, unknown, and which nothing could cause to appear'.[15] Levinas sees horror as the sensorial impression proper to the 'there is'. Like anguish, he claims that '[h]orror is somehow a movement which will strip consciousness of its very "subjectivity"'.[16]

The frequent impression of anguish or horror more than any other physical emotion takes place because of a simple reason. Anguish and horror are suffered because the thought's indeterminate presence *will not go away.* The subject suffers anguish because this unknown presence persists. The subject cannot free itself of it in any way. As Levinas observes, anguish is 'the impossibility of escaping from an anonymous and uncorruptible existence […]: the fatality of irremissible being'. It 'carries out the condemnation to perpetual reality, to existence with "no exits"'.[17]

Anguish is thereby the sensorial expression of one's sheer *impotence* before the thought. *On the one hand,* it is the anguish of being unable to assert control over its

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The Story of the Eye and *My Mother*, usually centres on the thematic of extreme debauchery, usually sexual.

[12] This suspension of all forms of control and understanding in the subject earns the phenomenon such appellations as 'nonknowledge', 'night', or 'first night'. See for instance Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 51-2, 115-6, for references to 'nonknowledge' and 'night' respectively, and Blanchot, *Space*, pp. 163-4, for references to the 'first night'.

[13] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 38, 52-3, 72.

[14] Sometimes Blanchot also describes this form of sensation as fear or dread. See for instance Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 58, 62-3, 91, 114-5.

[15] Maurice Blanchot, *Death Sentence*, trans. Lydia Davis (New York: Station Hill, 1978), p. 37.

[16] Levinas, *Existence*, p. 55. See also for instance Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 34-5; Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 11; *Step,* p. 67.

[17] Levinas, *Existence,* pp. 57, 58. See also Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 41, 52; Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 112, 117-9, 126-7; John D. Caputo, *The Prayers* and *Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 78, 85.

presence. In other words, through this presence, one cannot affirm one's sense of selfhood, thereby containing the presence within this affirmation. Anguish does not lend itself to any control by selfhood. Selfhood cannot interpret it, repress it, or distract itself from it. *On the other hand*, anguish is the anguish of the self's inability to give itself to the thought. The subject cannot surrender its whole selfhood to this presence. It cannot forget itself or annihilate itself by merging with it. Paradoxically, anguish comes from a deprivation of selfhood *and* the constraint of this very selfhood. Bataille infers this when he claims in *Inner Experience* that '[a]nguish assumes the desire to communicate – that is, to lose myself – but not complete resolve: anguish is evidence of my fear of communicating, of losing myself'.[18]

The thought is too intimate for me to escape from it. It is also too foreign for me to assimilate it to my self-presence.

Before the inexorability of the thought, incapacity is suffered through these two forms of efforts. Subjectivity is experienced or *endured* as the continuous failure of two contrary movements. I find myself unable 'to escape from my compromised identity, any more that I can retain it and assert it'.[19] I can neither own the thought through my consciousness. Nor can I lose my consciousness to the thought. Before the thought, I can neither take control of my consciousness, nor can I lose it. I seem to be paralyzed to a consciousness that has ceased to be my own. What is most intimately my own has become inept, ineffectual. What is my own has become an oppression, even an imprisonment or suffocation. Selfhood has ceased to be *my* selfhood. It is as if what was me had become someone else's. 'In its skin [the self] is stuck in its skin, not having its skin to itself, a vulnerability.' The thought is 'the against oneself that is in the self'.[20] I subsist in my consciousness as disempowered – a consciousness that Levinas calls '*impersonal*'.[21]

Seen in Bataille's and Blanchot's contexts, an exposure to impersonal consciousness signifies an unremitting loss of one's *personal* consciousness. It is an incessant stripping of one's power to have private existence. Again, anguish here

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[18] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 53. See also pp. 34-5, 39, 52-3; Blanchot, *Step,* pp. 58, 63, 67, 134. On the subject of *malheur* in Blanchot, see Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 137-40.

[19] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 103. See also pp. 118-9.

[20] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1981), p. 51. In its original context, the quotation described above all the corporeal suffering undergone by the subject before the other's alterity in the ethical relationship.

[21] See for instance Levinas, *Existence*, pp. 55, 63.

expresses the inescapability of this impotence. It is a shocking awareness of its endlessness. No reprieve offers itself. To suffer impersonal consciousness is to find oneself incessantly deprived of one's powers; a disempowerment that grows with every instant. The thought is a never-ending subversion of selfhood. It is not difficult here to trace this state to experiences that have to do with intense physical or mental suffering. Severe injury, despair, and insomnia, for instance, in different degrees are experienced precisely as incapacity for respite, as pain with no exits, as pain *because* of no exits. All are phenomena undergone as the very inability to endure, a suffering of the insufferable. This is a torment 'not of the death of the world, which is rest, but of this other death that is death without end, that is the trial of the absence of end'.[22] One is '"dying to die"',[23] dying of not dying.

Depersonalization of consciousness opens also towards a depersonalization of that consciousness's temporal structuring. One's own sense of present or self-presence is ruptured. Self-presence starts suffering from an irreconcilable tension with itself. It is afflicted by an incapability to self-coincide. This alienation is '[a] present in which all things present, and the ego present to them, are suspended […]'.[24] One's intuitiveness of a now, one's self-possession, is fractured by an anonymous and unknown pulse. Unable to be itself, unable to be empowered by itself, selfhood increasingly loses all sense of identification. It progressively leaves behind all forms of understanding about what it is and where it is. The past and the future indissociably linked with its perceptions are thus also dissolved. All personal (or self-meaningful) awareness of past and future is upset because of this rupturing of self-presence. The sense of a now that founds one's identity and its interpretations starts shattering, and with it start shattering the before and the after that inform that now, that are projected from it.

Subjectivity is thus torn away from its own personal memories and its own personal anticipations. They cease belonging to it. In dispossessing my present, the thought dispossesses my past and future and reduces them to anonymity. The absence of one's sense of a present brings about the sense of a past and a futurity that had never been one's own. '[I]n the future', Blanchot claims, 'will return infinitely what could in

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[22] Quoted and translated by Pascal Massie, 'The Secret and the Neuter: On Heidegger and Blanchot', in *Research in Phenomenology*, ed. John Sallis, 37 (2007), from Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), p. 228.

[23] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 120. See also Shaviro, pp. 102-4.

[24] Quoted and translated by Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 29, from Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 65.

no form and never be present, in the same way that in the past that which, in the past, never belonged in any form to the present, has returned'.[25] One's personal past becomes the past of something else, an impersonal and unknown past. Its identity dissolves and leaves it as a mere *no-longer*. Likewise, what is to come assumes the unknown. It is impersonalized to a something that has not yet come. It becomes a mere *not-yet*.

To undergo this self-deprived past and future is to find oneself taken by the paradoxical movements intrinsic to depersonalized consciousness. On the one hand, subjectivity finds itself attracted and steered towards a point infinitely foreign to its nature. In a rupturing instant, it is lured towards a futurity that is immeasurably remote from such an instant. There is an ever-progressing advancement that is an enticement by a not-yet. On the other hand, there is a countermovement of repulsion and failure to reach this point that is striven for. In the same instant, the subject finds itself helplessly incapable of ever partaking of the not-yet. It is distressed by the not-yet having become a no-longer. The futurity it was moving towards is undergone as irreversibly lost, as having become already a remote, unknown past. The no-longer is this irrevocability. In the succeeding instant, the process from the not-yet to the no-longer is then reversed, and the movement of attraction towards a not-yet starts over again. The cycle continues until the phenomenon ends.[26]

This experience can indeed be likened to a stretching out upon a rack, interminably suffering one instant after another as torn between two opposing forces. One is torn between a future that becomes a past and that past becoming a future. Both future and past are here inaccessible tenses or forces instigating contrary pressures upon selfhood.

If the thought is an anonymous obsession, its form of temporality is also constituted by a *return*.[27] Subjectivity is assailed in its sensations by an outside force

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[25] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 22.

[26] See for instance Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality,* trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights, 1986), pp. 56-7; Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 73-4, 137; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 104-7; Blanchot, *Space,* pp. 75, 274-5; Blanchot, *Step,* pp. 11-6, 22, 40, 110, 113-4; Lycette Nelson, 'Introduction', in Blanchot, *Step,* pp. xi-xii. Bataille does not refer directly to the attributes of the no-longer and the not-yet when evoking the temporality of the sacred. However, his particular portrayal of temporality, as we will be seeing later on, is equivalent to the way these terms designate it (see below, pp. 49-51).

[27] Bataille's and Blanchot's idea of the return is derived from Nietzsche's own notion of the eternal return. See for instance Bataille, *Experience*, p. 154; Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 22, 29-30.

that keeps on coming back. This return can be seen on two levels. A single experience of the thought consists of a continuity of returns. The duration of an event comprises an endless succession of reoccurrences. In addition, the event as a whole can also be seen as a return. Every entire episode of the thought is an instance of the return. Every incident is a reappearance of the thought. All designations of the return can be seen simultaneously from this dual perspective of the event and the instants that make up that event.

Each return is a repetition. Each repeats a dispossession of the subject, each re-affects its physical emotions anew. With every arrival, the subject is depersonalized all over again. Time and again, before what comes, 'the best will is immaterial'.[28] The thought is a persistent and relentless throb of such assaults upon the self. As Blanchot remarks, '[t]he Eternal Return of the Same: the same, that is to say, myself, in as much as it sums up the rule of identity, that is, the present self. But the demand of the return, excluding any present mode from time, would never release a now in which the same would come back to the same, to myself'.[29]

The return comes upon the subject as an unanticipated attack, a shock. Its traumatic nature means that it wrenches subjectivity from its own control. It opens it every time to what is completely outside of it and its world. Every time, subjectivity is disempowered by the arrival of an absolute otherness. Divesting selfhood of itself and its forms of understanding makes a return intrinsically incomparable with another. What is undergone in an instant that is undetermined; an instant that is beyond my control and takes me out of myself; an instant, therefore, that cannot be assessed in any way in relation to another one that does so again. With each return, subjectivity is exposed to an otherness it cannot know, an outside that is irreducible to any form of knowledge and distinction. The experience of this otherness cannot be measured in any terms. The return of this alterity cannot be compared and qualified in relation to the alterity of another return because its experience is outside such comprehension, any comprehension whatsoever. Every return is unique: it stands on its own as a moment when subjectivity is given in to the unknown, absolute and incalculable. It repeats what

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[28] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 154.
[29] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 11. See pp. 11-2, 22-3, 29-30; Nelson, 'Introduction', in Blanchot, *Step*, pp. x-xii; Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 153-4; 'Rotten Sun', in Bataille, *Visions*, pp. 57-8; Mark C. Taylor, *Tears*, (New York: University of New York Press, 1989), p. 23.

cannot be repeated. What keeps on coming back is 'what is most singular and irreplaceable'.[30]

The absolute singularity of each return can also be seen in the degree of intensity each inaugurates. Every return does not rupture subjectivity in an equal measure. It ruptures it ever more severely. The alterity that each return introduces is stronger each time. I find myself ever more submitted to otherness with every return. Selfhood is subjected to an ever increasing disempowerment with every instant (or every experience). Beyond all expectation, each new moment is more excruciating than the previous in its torture. Every incoming brings with it a more radicalized dispossession. Each one opens the wound further, exposing it ever more to the unknown. This makes every return more completely distinct than the previous. Each stands more and more on its own as a testimony to an outside reality.[31]

Suffering the thought thus means suffering an interminable escalation of subjugation and disruption by an influx of alterity. The philosophy of 'what does not kill you makes you stronger' certainly does not apply here …

The Thought's Influence on the Ego

The impersonal consciousness undergone in the event of the thought reveals a suffering of two opposing movements. There is a movement oriented at merging or disappearing in the thought. There is also a movement oriented at reasserting the ego. The significance of this paradoxical logic will become clearer when one considers Bataille's and Blanchot's views of the nature of subjectivity or the ego and its particular relationship with the thought.[32]

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[30] 'Rotten Sun', in Bataille, *Visions*, pp. 57-8; Taylor, *Tears*, p. 23; Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 15-6, 22-3, 32-3; Nelson, 'Introduction', in Blanchot, *Step*, p. xiii.

[31] Bataille, 'Rotten Sun' in *Visions*, pp. 57-8; Taylor, *Tears*, p. 23; Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 15-6, 22-3, 32-3; Nelson, 'Introduction', in Blanchot, *Step*, p. xiii. For Shaviro's own view of Bataille's and Blanchot's concept of the return and its simultaneous singularity and repetitiveness, see Shaviro, pp. 102-7, 146-8,

[32] See 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 211-4, 222-5, for a further more detailed elaboration on the way Bataille and Blanchot perceive subjectivity and its connection with the thought.

The ego, for both thinkers, originates as an *insurgence* to the thought. The thought gives way to its own contestation. Through a *compulsive reactivity*, anarchy submits to the contrary nature of order. Already implicit in the inauguration of the ego is its prior failure. It arises only inasmuch as it is resistance to what is outside of it. Every imposition of the ego and its systems is inscribed within what exceeds it, within the presence of its absence. *'[Error] is the condition of thought.'*[33] It is *through* the thought that the ego finds itself posited. The thought can thereby be seen as *constitutive*: 'the rupture which constitutes my nature'.[34] The thought establishes the ego because the ego's very existence presupposes it and is in direct relation to it; the ego is a rejoinder to the thought.

It is also *for* the thought that this same ego is posited. Constituting the ego is the duplicity of a *desire*. Originating through the thought, the nature of subjectivity is rooted in a desire to give itself to the thought, to become one with it. Inherent in the ego is a need for what exceeds it, a need for what is radically dissimilar to its essence. Bataille calls this the ego's '*principle of insufficiency*'.[35] However, as long as the ego remains in control of itself in relation to this desire, as long as it seeks to contain it within its processes, as long as it seeks to direct it, this fundamental need can never be gratified. 'My very concern for the *pensée* betrays it.'[36] I can never partake of the thought through my own endeavours. My nature infinitely diverges from it. Intrinsic to the ego is its self-presence and the appropriation of any otherness to this self-presence. Its deliberations, perceptions, and desires are inextricable from the satisfaction of this self-presence. The exercise of the ego's desires is inevitably constituted through and for this self-reflexivity. The undertaking of any of its desires is inseparable from the *conformation* of that desire to the affirmation of the ego's constancy. Its exposure to anything that is different to it is always undertaken to reduce such a difference to the purview of its self-identity. For Bataille and Blanchot, selfhood cannot exercise a thinking or a desiring that deviates from its own confirmation. Its impulsive homogenization thereby always misses the thought's reality. What the ego desires is never its true desire. When desire is truly undergone, it perpetually undermines that desire which the ego has made its own. '[D]esire returns ', Bataille remarks, 'but it is, at first, of all it is the desire to annul time (to annul desire) […]. [But] if it is at first the

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[33] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 82.
[34] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 71. See Blanchot, *Step,* pp, 24-5; Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 46-8.
[35] 'The Labyrinth', in Bataille, *Visions*, p. 172.
[36] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 135.

desire to annul desire – barely has it arrived at its goals, than it is the desire to rekindle desire'.[37]

The thought is thus *evasive* for the ego. '[T]here can be no desire of the [thought's] disaster […]', says Blanchot in *The Writing of the Disaster*, 'it is without any such desire, but it is the undesirable nocturnal intensity (more, and less than can be desired)'.[38] In a similar vein, Shaviro explains in *Passion and Excess* that the subject's weakness to desire the thought does not stem from 'lack of strength' but from 'excess of strength', from 'the continuation of selfhood'. 'It is not that I am too weak to act', he states, 'but rather that I am forever too weak to give up my claim to action, my vain pretension to sufficiency and mastery'. Further on, he observes again that '[p]ower and possession, whether embodied in larger social structures and technologies or simply in the "I", seek to regulate and control the very forces and movements which have invested them, but which remain for all that irreducibly exterior to them'.[39]

The ego's attempted movement towards the thought is thereby already a movement away from it. The ego is precisely constituted by this continual estrangement from the alterity of the thought. Together with the desire to give itself to what is radically different from its nature, is its other desire to assert itself in whatever activity it undertakes. This desire is always stronger than the other one in any experience that does not threaten its power. Left to itself, the ego is a continual persistence to coincide with itself in every one of its actions. It is the pursuit of seeing itself reflected in all otherness and through all otherness.[40]

Independently, the ego cannot do anything but exercise its desire for mastery. Opened to the thought, however, its other desire for radical abandon assumes an equal intensity to the other. Stripped of all its power, depersonalized, subjectivity is here submitted to both desires that are its source. Brought down to its barest of essentials, it undergoes that very force which has founded it and through which it continues to exist. At the precipice of its extinction, the ego suffers what inaugurates it, what at bottom it has always been, a force torn by contradictory desires. Impersonal consciousness is the suffering of subjectivity at its very limit, a suffering *of* this very limit. Before my

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[37] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 56. See Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 46-8, and pp. 128-9, for the simultaneity of loyalty and betrayal in the subject's response to the thought.

[38] Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 50.

[39] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 130, 130, 136.

[40] Ultimately the ego for Bataille and Blanchot turns out to be a particular manifestation of the thought. The ego is seen as a particular way the thought discloses itself. This is explained in 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', p. 224.

annihilation, I find myself reduced to what underlies me: a point tensed between a pressure away from being and a pressure towards it.

This designates the ego's dispossession, its decline to a drastic impotence at being in power of itself and its surroundings. If anything the thought can only be undergone as such. Subjectivity can only experience it as a deprivation of itself and its capabilities. Subjectivity can only really face the thought as *subversion*. Of the three principal characteristics mentioned so far – constitutive, evasive, and subversive – it is this third one that most successfully captures the nature of this obsession. This is because above all this obsession is a something so radically alien that it subverts the ego of all its mastery and identity. It can only be seen as such – an incessant breaking apart of the ego's hegemony. Nothing further can be known on the approach of this absolute otherness.[41]

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[41] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 46-8.

III

Monomania:
A Thought of Extreme Mastery

Though similar in many ways, the sacred as presented by Bataille and Blanchot respectively is not identical. These two thinkers conceive it in different ways. I will introduce this distinction in the context of radical obsession by way of Gilles Deleuze's essay 'Bartleby; or, the Formula'. Here, two extreme existential conditions are portrayed that are similar to these two variants of the sacred.

In 'Bartleby; or, the Formula', Deleuze describes Herman Melville's characters as being of two main kinds: the monomaniacs and the hypochondriacs. Both are 'beings of Primary Nature' – 'originals' that expose the world and its laws to an inherent nothingness and ineffectuality. This is because

> [e]ach original is a powerful, solitary Figure that exceeds any explicable form: it projects flamboyant traits of expression that mark the stubbornness of a thought without image, a question without response, an extreme and nonrational logic. Figures of life and knowledge, they know something inexpressible, live something unfathomable.

At one pole, Deleuze claims, is the obstinate thought of the monomaniac to assume complete will and mastery over what is too foreign to be mastered. '[T]heirs is a delirium of action'. Theirs is the making of 'a monstrous choice' driven by a will that is always demanding more and more of itself: a will to will. The goal is to master all and everything, and thereby this will is ever falling short of itself. It becomes an ever growing hysteria that never stops. Monomaniacs exceed all limits in response to their will's increasing demands. Ultimately, this will ends up consuming itself and its subject in the exorbitant losses of force that it causes. It is a 'will to nothingness'.

At the other pole stands the hypochondriac or the neurotic. They are afflicted by a severe passivity that withdraws them entirely from the daily activities of human beings. This unconcern invests them with an 'innocence and purity'. '[S]tricken with a constitutive weakness', the neurotic has no qualities, no personality. They exude an anonymity that is disturbing to all those around them. Unlike the monomaniac, they have 'no will at all, a nothingness of the will'.

It is clear that these two deviant states of being are distinct opposites of each other. Deleuze, however, also suggests that these two types 'are perhaps the same creature – primary, original, stubborn, seized from both sides, marked merely with a "plus" or a "minus" sign [...]. [T]he first beyond conscience, the second before conscience: she who chooses and she who does not choose [...]'.[42]

A Desire in the Ego to Become Otherness

Bataille's sacred falls within the province of the monomaniacal condition. There exists in the ego or the *ipse*, for Bataille, a deep-rooted desire to cease being itself in its personal self-autonomy, in its self-reflexivity. Innate in the *ipse* is a '*principle of insufficiency*',[43] a need to be other than itself. It 'is condemned to wishing itself to be other: all and necessary'.[44] The thought signals an increasing desire to give oneself to an absolute otherness intimated to the subject. It opens towards a growing submission to this sensorial desire.[45]

Bataille sees this deeply corporeal longing unleashed in events relating especially to unbridled debauchery, mindless violence, and religious mysticism. To be seized by this obsession is to be seized by the irresistible attractions of an otherness embodied in a single object or idea. A captivating woman, the idea of glamorous

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[42] All quotations in this section are taken from 'Bartleby; or, The Formula', in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp. 79-80, 82-3.

[43] 'The Labyrinth', in Bataille, *Visions*, p. 172.

[44] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 85.

[45] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 53, 85-6, 116-9, 123-4; Boldt, 'Translator's Introduction', in Bataille, *Experience*, pp. xvi-xviii.

escape and forgetfulness through drink, the idea of Christ's divinity and love, the sculpture of some saint, all can be forms of access to a region that exceeds the subject. They can all intimate an alluring unknown that seduces precisely because it is so different from one's egotistic nature. The sexuality or beauty of a woman, chance in gambling, the transcendence of Christ, and so on, are all kinds of otherness that the subject can be drawn towards.[46]

The more intensely the desire is felt, the more unconditionally I find myself giving myself to the otherness the thought is referring to. This is what the monomaniacal state signifies. *Mono*mania is the uncontrollable pursuit to become one with the alterity that a particular object or idea is suggestive of. It is the irrepressible striving for what refuses the ego's appropriation.[47]

This pursuit is described as an 'unproductive' or 'radical' expenditure.[48] Subjectivity is submitted to an increasing squandering of its resources and energies to merge with the otherness it is drawn towards. It becomes an '"exceeding energy" of pure loss [that] cannot be conceptualized, captured or (re)presented', disrupting even as it escapes 'the various modes of social organization and regulation'.[49] This squandering knows no reimbursement, no recompense or gratification. It is an incessant and frenzied spending of one's force that knows no final consummation. We 'squander our resources to no purpose, just as if a wound were bleeding away inside us […]: the uselessness or the ruinousness of our extravagance'.[50] Instances of debauchery for example entail the expenditure of huge amounts of money and energy for no profitable gain. What is spent is not used to produce or preserve anything. Rather, excessive loss takes place in an uncontrollable abandon to reach a reality foreign to the self.

The desire for alterity is at first felt by the ego though it does not belong to that ego. It belongs to no one, it is anonymous. Selfhood is merely the *receiver* of this

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[46] Bataille, *Erotism*, pp. 20-4; Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 53, 116-9, 121-4; Boldt, 'Translator's Introduction', in Bataille, *Experience*, p. xviii.

[47] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 153, 185. If otherness is anything that is completely alien to subjectivity; if otherness is otherness irrespective of the type of object or idea through which it is experienced, then, regardless of what this object or idea is, it is also always already everything that is exterior to subjectivity. To give oneself to an otherness is also to give oneself to everything that is outside one's knowledge. Monomania can therefore also be seen as *mega*lomania: the insane will to become *all* that is not oneself, the 'unknowable immensity' (p. 85) of the universe, even God.

[48] See 'The Notion of Expenditure', in Bataille, *Visions*, pp. 116-29; Allan Stoekl, 'Introduction', in Bataille, *Visions*, pp. xviii-xxiii.

[49] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 46-7.

[50] Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 170.

sensation. When the desire is weak, I can decide to suppress it or ignore it. I can also choose to open myself to it, to give myself to it and let it steer my thoughts and actions. This intensifies the desire. The yearning that stirred in my ego starts increasing in its force.

More frequently, this longing is strong enough to be incapable of any control. This means that it is experienced *by* the *ipse* but that *ipse* cannot choose to weaken it or suppress it in any way. It endures it without being able to do otherwise. Desire is at this point continuously disposing itself to the ego's activity. It is continuously inclining itself to appropriation. Its drive is constantly assumed into the self-assertive and self-projecting processes of the ego. As long as the experience of desire is confined to selfhood, however, the alterity it charms the subject to strive towards becomes impossible to reach. The subject finds itself completely powerless to become one with the otherness it finds itself desiring. This is because the desire to be other than oneself, as appropriated by the ego, is always already transformed into a desire to *incorporate* that otherness into oneself. It is always already becoming a desire to see oneself in that otherness, through that otherness. Intrinsic to the ego's identity is precisely its inability to be other than itself.[51]

The subject's efforts, in thought and deed, are thus constantly met with sheer failure. Time and again, all its forms of expenditure fall short of their goal. The maniacal race to partake of a foreign reality is frustrated over and over again by the awareness of its insufficiency, the surprise that this reality is still infinitely remote. Every collapse entails intense anguish. Distress is brought about by the shock of one's impotence before the desired alterity. Feverish pursuit plummets repeatedly into the disarming pain of a deep-rooted inadequacy and hopelessness.[52]

Otherness and the desire for it are always already *outside* the subject's appropriations of them and the actions based on such appropriations. Desire *exceeds* the ego's will for it. Anguish is the result of a desire that cannot be satiated by the subject's views and actions. No interpretation and its related active response can capture what is precisely foreign in nature to the very source of such a response. Regardless of any reaction whatsoever, desire is ever demanding more, it is ever demanding something *else*. It persistently intimates a goal that is still far away, still beyond one's grasp.

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[51] See also Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 23, 42-3, 90.
[52] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 34-5, 85-6, 115-6; Boldt, 'Translator's Introduction', in Bataille, *Experience*, pp. xvi-xvii.

Therefore, to the subject's eyes, more interpretation is always needed, more squandering is ever required, more energy must be expended. And this leads to inexorable failure.[53]

Desire increases in intensity the more it is answered to. The more the subject gives itself to desire, the more inordinate this desire becomes. This in turn leads to increasing extravagances in the expenditure of energy. In this way, desire as a force outside the ego, gradually grows in strength, progressively undermining that ego and its attempts at mastery. A process of increasing self-subversion takes place. The ego is ever contested in more severe ways. The desire it is ceaselessly trying to contain gradually starts disempowering it, depriving it of itself and its capabilities. It is progressively *overmatched* by a sensorial excess it could previously survive despite. The force of the desire in excess of the self escalates: it overcomes ever more that amount of itself which is interpreted by the self. Selfhood starts losing itself to the growing intensity of the longing it had been experiencing.

With the gradual breaking of the ego comes also its growing disconnection from the subject's actions. Forms of expenditure are progressively undertaken without any intentionality or comprehension. Subjectivity starts losing awareness of its increasingly inordinate actions to partake of alterity. The squandering of its power, in other words, starts *exceeding* its awareness of itself. Its insatiable drive to give starts taking over the very understanding it has of itself. It is in this very blindness that the subject's actions can be said to be *authentically* an expenditure. In not acting out of its ego but out of its increasing dispossession by desire, expenditure becomes more and more inadvertent, involuntary - pointless. It becomes increasingly nonsensical, assuming no significance whatsoever. The ego is increasingly unable to control and determine one's expenditures. No egotistic gain or satisfaction of any form is attained by them. Expenditure becomes a true loss, a true wastefulness. Subjectivity is here truly giving itself, truly abandoning itself to what is completely foreign to it. Inasmuch as expenditure does not issue from the ego, then it does not serve to affirm that ego. It becomes, therefore, a movement of subjectivity towards otherness.[54]

Insofar as a large degree of the desire in question is still experienced through selfhood, the constant failure of the subject's expenditures continues to be suffered. Only when the desire exceeding the self *overrides* that which is appropriated can the

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[53] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 174-6; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 44, 86-7.
[54] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 174-6; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 44, 86-7.

true approach to otherness start taking place. The sensorial impression of desire now drastically weakens any attempt at comprehension as the subject throws itself into ever more radically excessive forms of expenditure without the ego's concession. The level of intoxication by the thought is at this point overwhelming, calling for ever more extravagant actions for alterity to be reached. Subjectivity is here increasingly divested of itself. The self is increasingly prevented from assuming itself and employing its egotistical processes. Its rupture grows as desire intensifies. A progressive depersonalization is under way.

Anguish and Rapture

Against the rupturing of the self undergoing desire is an instinctive reactivity within that very self that is constantly hindering this same rupturing. The closer the self advances towards absolute otherness, the more it starts recoiling from it. Otherness instils within the self the threat of its impending annihilation. It confers upon it the shocking awareness of its oncoming total extinction. Another aspect of anguish is here undergone. Anguish now constitutes the fear of an oncoming death. It relates to an impulsive shrinking away from alterity. It thus coincides with horror and nausea. For Bataille, both of these sensations come through the corporeal consciousness of losing selfhood altogether. Before otherness, he writes, the *ipse* 'strives towards prodigality to the point of anguish, to the point where the anguish becomes unbearable'.[55]

The nearly complete dissolution of the ego by the excess of desire does not only entail an insufferable anguish. It can also at times deliver the subject into rapture. Rapture is undergone when the self is on the *brink* of being dispossessed entirely. It comes about because of the subject's extravagant openness to alterity. Like anguish, it is another effect of such a radical exposure. Its point of reference, however, is precisely contrary to that of anguish. While anguish refers the subject back to its ego, rapture refers it to otherness. For Bataille, '[a]s long as *ipse* perseveres in its will to know and to be *ipse*, anguish lasts, but if *ipse* abandons itself and knowledge with it, if it gives itself up to non-knowledge in this abandon, then rapture begins'.[56] The nature of rapture is the opposite to that of anguish. It constitutes the phenomenon of one's

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[55] Bataille, *Erotism,* pp. 60, 178. See also pp. 233-4; Bataille, *Experience,* p. 53.
[56] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 53.

mergence with absolute alterity. This experience entails the becoming other of selfhood. The extent of the ego's dispossession becomes the extent of one's union with otherness.[57]

A thin line, however, separates rapture from anguish in being both effects of the same precarious state. The experience of rapture instantly turns into anguish. In anguish and through anguish, the ego fervently reasserts itself in a defensive counter-reaction to the threat of self-annihilation that rapture poses. An impulsive act of self-preservation breaks the state of rapture. In entailing a reaffirmation of the ego, anguish brings the subject back to itself, back to self-consciousness.[58]

The repossession of selfhood entails the re-empowerment of the ego. With the onset of anguish, the otherness undergone in rapture is conformed to the egotistic processes. It becomes an idea or a thought of the self. The desire that returns after the break with rapture is also seized and arrogated by this reclamation. Submitted to the *ipse*, the sensorial irreducibility of desire is once again reduced to the *ipse's* qualifications. Its chaotic flux is brought to meaningful order, made sense of. The goal that subjectivity now sees itself striving towards, the alterity it had experienced in rapture, has turned into one more projection of its recovered ego. This reorientation inspires the self with the certainty that it has almost finally attained the object of its yearnings. Able to conform and thus incorporate the alterity it had formerly touched upon within its own identity, the ego is progressively convinced that it is very close to partaking completely of it.[59]

This hope is obviously misplaced. The resuscitation of the ego and its appropriation of desire and its goal are in turn contested by the growing intensity of desire itself. Once more, desire surpasses the desire that the ego had turned into its own image. Again, desire reaches an excess that starts undoing selfhood and its appropriations. The otherness which the subject yearns for re-announces itself as still beyond reach. The instant the ego thinks it has mastered alterity is the instant that alterity calls for an ever more unconditional sacrifice from that ego. It demands that the

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[57] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 52-4; *Erotism*, pp. 241-2.
[58] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 52-4; *Erotism,* pp. 241-2.
[59] Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 52-5.

ego's expenditures reach further abandon, break more limits. Inasmuch as expenditure issues from the ego, it cannot attain union with otherness.[60]

The cycle thereby repeats itself over and over again. The attempt at mastery is undermined by the otherness it is attempting to master. Imposing oneself on this otherness leads once more to one's subversion by this same otherness.[61] The *ipse's* 'sense which is nonsense is lost, becomes nonsense once again (without possible end)'.[62] For Bataille, the event of the thought attests to the endless gyrating of this vicious circle. We have here a stalemate brought about by the reciprocal infinite difference in nature of ego and alterity. Neither one can meet or overlap with the other.

The Infinity and Temporality in Extreme Mastery

This ceaseless and increasingly extreme alternating between self-positing and self-disruption can be seen in the light of Levinas's concept of infinity in *Totality and Infinity*. The thought is the obsession to be one with an otherness. Intrinsic to its event is the ego's perpetual representation to itself of some *idea* of the infinity of what it is striving towards. Selfhood is continuously attempting to conceive the desire that moves it, the otherness it points to, through some idea, pertaining both to sensibility and cognition. Infinity, says Levinas, 'is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*'.[63]

The infinity of the alterity intimated by the thought is not, however, reducible to the ego's nature. Time and again, it is undergone as the incessant *non-adequation* between that ego and its ideas *and* the actual infinity of otherness. Infinity is undergone as an '*infinition*'[64] of self-transgressions, 'the *unlimited* adventure'.[65] It is the

[60] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 52-5.

[61] Bataille suggests this when he states, '[s]ince [knowledge] moved from the unknown to the known, it is necessary that it invert itself at the summit and go back to the unknown' (Bataille, *Experience,* p. 111).

[62] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 52. See also pp. 52-4, 102.

[63] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969), p. 26.

[64] 'Infinition' is a term used by Levinas in the context of the ethical scene to designate the condition of the experience of infinity that is inaugurated through the other. It refers to a state that exceeds being and the ordinary sense of time. It accentuates above all else the endless self-contesting instants this state is marked by. Selfhood is exposed over and over again to an instant that dispossesses it; an instant that

endlessness of an 'exceeding of limits': the excess of otherness ever exceeding and undermining the determinations and distinctions set by the stubborn *ipse* to control it.[66]

To suffer this obsession is to suffer from an inordinate demand for mastery. The ego's expenditures to possess grow ever more abandoned. Expenditure is taken over by an uncontrollable urge to dominate that ceaselessly grows more demanding, more extravagant. Wanting impossibly to be other than itself, the ego's mastery of that otherness never masters it enough. Infinity is the suffering of the incessant insatiable demand for more and more mastery. Mastery is always already a demand that would require it to fall short of itself. Its command is always already insufficient, incomplete, an unfulfillment. Intrinsic to every imposition of mastery is its ineptitude, a further need for more mastery. In mastery there is mastery's demand: the need to give more to advance further towards a point not yet reached. Bataille's thought can be characterized as the demand for extreme mastery or the *mastery of mastery*.[67]

The infinite call for mastery is clearly reflected in the type of temporality that characterizes the suffering of this monomaniacal fixation. The obsession to control extinguishes the former sense of past and future. Time is reduced to an instantaneity always already in the process of annihilating itself and leading to a successive instant. Every instant is an ever more vicious breaking apart of the world, objects, and ideas that are built and rebuilt by the ego. The thought inaugurates the rapid succession of an ever returning destruction, razing all efforts at mastery. It brings about 'an unstoppable temporal flux',[68] a '[p]ure intensive time, a time of incessant metamorphosis'.[69] '[E]verything that exists destroying itself, consuming itself and dying, each instant producing itself only in the annihilation of the preceding one, and itself existing only as

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takes it out of itself and bares it to the foreign futurity opened by the other. Whereas 'infinity' and 'infinition' are used by Levinas in relation to the ethical injunction, I am here applying them to the event of the sacred. This is because of the identicalness in character both experiences seem to share in part in relation to the (phenomenological) meaning of these terms (see also 'When the No-place Becomes a Person, pp. 133-4, for the idea of infinity in the sacred and the icon; see Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 26-7, 281-2, for references to 'infinition').

[65] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 21.

[66] Levinas, *Totality*, p 26. Subjectivity at this point, for Levinas 'can neither contain nor receive solely by virtue of its own identity. Subjectivity realizes these impossible exigencies – the astonishing feat of containing more than it is possible to contain' (p. 27).

[67] Bataille also suggests the movement of infinition when he states in *Inner Experience* that the *ipse* wants to become 'the whole of the constitution from which it has begun, then one day, without limits, the whole of the universe' (p. 85).

[68] Taylor, *Altarity*, p. 140.

[69] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 105.

mortally wounded.'[70] This perpetual ruin delivers objects and thoughts 'to the obscurity of the unknown […]: the unknowable itself which, at the succession of each instant, opens itself within them […]'.[71] The fierce destruction of each instant consigns it to the foreignness of what has destroyed it – a *something* that has not yet been mastered. It opens the instant to the anonymity of a future, a foreign unknown that must yet be reached for.

This instant is therefore constituted by the pursuit of a not-yet brought to ruin by its devastating conversion into a no-longer. It is made up of the attraction of a hope withdrawing itself into the despairing futility of an unreachable past. Futurity assumes the loss of the irretrievable. Most significantly, however, what puts this state of affairs into play is the ego's *striving* towards alterity. The entire phenomenon is brought about by the struggle to reach an ever receding point. Underlying the event is the persistent resolve to master otherness. It is the aspect of futurity or the not-yet, rather than the past, that is here the dominant factor.

Extreme mastery can only end in exhaustion, unconsciousness, and sometimes, as in the novels of Marquis de Sade, even death.[72] Despite myself, I desire to possess what cannot be possessed. Exceeding the ego, my will is a euphoria or a hysteria to master that cannot be fixed into some form of understanding. It eludes all kinds of deliberation and calculation. This monomaniacal will, in surplus of my self-awareness, is an ever-intensifying 'rage'[73] and 'mad pride', an increasing vexation or 'irrational audacity'.[74] At the same time, however, desire is also undergone by my ego. In being experienced at once *through* the self *and outside* the self, the nature of desire combines the significant paradox of a refusal 'alike of being "myself" and of subordinating myself to something allegedly greater than myself'.[75]

In its foreignness to selfhood, desire inaugurates a drunken will that does not belong to the world of being as related to the ego with its distinctions and syntheses of thought. It delivers me rather, to what is foreign to this world. My will is given to the

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[70] 'The Practice of Joy before Death', in Bataille, *Visions,* p. 238.

[71] Bataille, *Experience,* p. 137. This openness towards an unknown futurity can also be seen as the temporality of an '*amor fati*', a love of fate – 'wanting chance, differing from what has been' (Cited and translated by Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 107, from Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes,* 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-1988), vol. 6, p. 140). See also Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 73-4; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 104-7.

[72] See 'The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade', in Bataille, *Visions,* pp. 91-103. See also Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 52, 54.

[73] Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3, p. 381.

[74] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 44, 116.

[75] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 103.

indistinct continuity of frenzied movements of energy. I find myself given to 'a superabundance of being'[76] or an *excess* of being. This obsessive will partakes of a reality in being that is not of the nature of being. The monomaniac is part of a flux of life that is an affront to all intentionalities of the ego. Before this superabundance, the ego's world is revealed in all its ineffectuality and elaborate nothingness.[77]

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[76] Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 49.
[77] Bataille, *Erotism*, pp. 59-60; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 46-7, 86-9.

IV

Neurosis:
A Thought of Extreme Passivity

Desire as Completely Outside of the Ego

While Bataille sees the thought as haunting the extreme experiences of life, usually by way of alcohol or sex, Blanchot sees it as shadowing mundane events of life. Here, the thought is the emptiness suffered in intense ennui. It is that torpor or lethargy felt in daily habits and routines. It is present also in the most tragic of events, especially by those who are dying. Our experiences of art, and especially the appreciation and writing of literature, are also ways how this strange and yet most familiar of phenomena is undergone. Above all, this obsession is the condition of the paralyzing passivity that afflicts the neurotic.[78]

In Blanchot's writings, the subject is also ravished by the thought of a desire. It is possessed by a desire that 'ruins all distinctions and all desires'.[79] Again, this is a yearning to give oneself up to otherness, to no longer be oneself. For Bataille, however, a large part of this experience is undergone *through* the ego. Desire controls the ego, it steers it towards union with otherness, but it does so often by disposing itself to that ego's self-affirming processes. The *ipse* finds itself experiencing or containing a yearning that also exceeds it.

Conversely, desire for Blanchot is experienced inasmuch as it *ruins* the ego. This compulsive urge does not pass through selfhood in any way. Its impression upon it

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[78] See for instance Kevin Hart, '"Experience of Nonexperience"', in *Mystics Presence and Aporia*, ed. Michael Kessler, Christian Sheppard (London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 195-6; Hart, *Gaze*, p. 159; Blanchot, *Step*, p. 95; Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 112.

[79] Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 163.

subverts it rather than partially gives itself to its self-appropriating nature. Therefore it does not become, on account of the ego, a desire to *master* otherness. Desire is here experienced all along *as outside* selfhood, as other to it. It does not enter the ego, allowing itself to be seen by that ego. Desire is undergone inasmuch as it undermines me. It is undergone as it really is: undistorted by my interpretations. I am seized by a longing for a reality completely alien to me. I am taken in by a drive to become part of an anonymous place outside of myself. What moves me deprives me of my self-identity and its functions. The desire is an impulse that is constantly and increasingly divesting me of myself.[80]

Strictly speaking then, this thought cannot be suffered precisely because it prevents its suffering from disposing itself to the power of my selfhood. I am unable to possess the freedom to assert myself over the pain and perceive it in whatever manner I see fit. The thought does not allow my capability to suffer it in any way. It is suffered simply as the increasing loss of myself. I cannot make my own the deprivation of my own self. The thought is suffered as what *cannot* be suffered, what *cannot* be endured. I am incessantly subjected to my own disempowerment, to the death of all my capacities. 'This is an experience', Blanchot claims, 'we do not have to go very far to find, it is offered in the most common suffering, and first of all in physical suffering […]. Suffering is suffering when one can no longer suffer it and when, because of this non-power, one cannot cease suffering it'.[81]

The Infinity and Temporality in Extreme Passivity

The significant difference between Bataille's and Blanchot's respective conceptions of the thought can be explored further. For Bataille, the thought instigates the ego to master otherness. It steers the ego to possess. Subjectivity does not normally have any decision in this. It is moved to squander its energies by forces outside of it.

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[80] Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 46, 65-6, 118; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 163-8.
[81] Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), p. 44. See also Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 163-8.

Its radical expenditure does not come from a freedom of will. To suffer the thought here is thereby to suffer an incontrollable empowerment of the self.

To be taken by Blanchot's thought is also to be stripped of any freedom of will. This form of coercion, however, does not impel the ego to perform in any way. It does not influence the ego by compelling it to act. Instead, it affects it with *inactivity*. What takes over me makes me incapable of acting, of exercising myself, rather than capable in any sense. Intrinsic to this thought is the *inoperativeness* it impresses upon the ego. My nonfreedom does not come in the form of a frenzy of self-assertions. It comes through the gradual paralysis of selfhood. It comes through a gradual impotence to undertake an activity of any kind. This is because there is here a *draining* rather than a *boosting* of the ego's vitality. I am increasingly denied of myself and thus I am increasingly incapable of acting in any form. The thought affects me with a progressive privation of my selfhood. Rather than being an incontrollable empowerment, it here emphasizes an incontrollable disempowerment. I am dying of a death that has no end; a death I am powerless to do anything about. I am losing myself of myself as I am ever more exposed to a reality completely outside of me.[82]

This increasing expiration is endless. I never expire completely. I never become an absolute nothingness or a part of the alterity this expiration is heading towards. Desire for otherness, desire for my death, never reaches attainment. The disempowerment that seizes me is never too absolute to make me other. Desire never makes me desireless of myself, of the world, enough to extinguish me completely, to kill me. It is a desire for desirelessness that is never desireless enough, that never brings about complete nothingness. What I am subjected to is a desire that constantly turns against itself to become ever more desireless. Desire is incessantly wearing itself out to be ever more penurious. It turns against itself to become voider and voider of everything. I am taken over by an emptiness that is always perpetually emptying itself of itself because its emptying is never emptying enough. '[A] passivity', says Blanchot,

> [that] is never passive enough. It is in this respect that one can speak of an infinite passivity: perhaps only because passivity evades all formulations – yet it seems that there is in passivity something like a demand that would require it to

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[82] A death, writes Blanchot, 'of which one does not die, a death without power, without effect,without achievement [...]' (Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill, 1988), p. 49). See Blanchot, *Disaster,* pp. 14-5; Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), pp. 52-4.

fall always short of itself. There is in passivity not passivity, but its demand, a movement of the past towards the insurpassable.[83]

Infinity is to be understood again in the Levinasian sense. To be delivered to 'the infinity of fatigue'[84] is to be delivered to a movement of exhaustion that is ceaselessly outdoing itself in its exhaustion. This is the infinity of a passivity that is always more passive but never passive enough. Passivity is endlessly exceeding itself in an attraction towards a point that is never reached. At any instant, passivity is thus always already a *passivity of passivity*. It is always in submission to a demand for *extreme passivity*, for a more passive passivity. Blanchot's other appellations for the thought, such as the 'neuter', the 'outside', and 'passion', all hinge upon the infinity of this movement of emptiness and resignation.

Extreme passivity entails the infinite deprivation of my selfhood. This endless self-ruin is the manner I unwittingly answer to a demand coming from a place or a reality outside my present and its sense of time. It is the requirement of the response which an otherness forces upon me. It is the condition for what it summons me to do: the condition for *welcoming* it.

Beyond my will, I am called upon to open myself unconditionally to an event that does not come from the past and the future I project from my selfhood. It approaches from a before and an after beyond my horizons of understanding. 'In this "other" time', John D. Caputo remarks,

> the past is always already past, a past that was never present, never lived through, a *tout autre* past that did not pass through conscious life and experience only then to assume its irrevocable place in the flowing off of past nows. By the same token, the future, no less *tout autre*, is not a future present, a not-yet-present toward which consciousness can stretch out, protend, foresee, anticipate living through, as it gradually comes about, but rather a future that will never be present, that is prohibited in principle from ever being actualized at some future point in time.[85]

If what is to come has always already come, it has done so prior to the very constitution of my identity, prior to my self-awareness. The event I am exposed to has already happened in a past from which I had been excluded, from which the I had been

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[83] Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 16. See also pp. 44, 90-2; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 166-8.
[84] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 130.
[85] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 77.

excluded. Likewise, this event that had happened comes from a future which is foreign to my own. I find myself given to a futurity that is outside the active assumption of any of my possibles. What is to come will not happen within the horizons of *my* experience. Affirming this unknown can only take place therefore in the manner of an *impotence* of my potencies and my selfhood. My negation is an affirmation of alterity. It is a '*viens*' or '*venez*', a '*come*' to the absolutely foreign. Passivity is an inauguration of otherness. It is the inevitable manner of my receptivity to an alien futurity. In being outside my possibles, the futurity that beckons me can only beckon me by exhausting me of such possibles. My intimacy with what is completely other to my nature must compel me to incessantly die of myself in order to be open to it.[86]

The selfhood that endures this perpetual disempowerment is engaged in an unrelieved conflict. Disrupted by a deep passivity, this oppressed self cannot help but struggle incessantly to re-empower itself, struggle to master the otherness which this passivity is steering towards. Subjected to dispossession, it ceaselessly attempts to regain self-mastery and mastery of the alterity it is giving in to. This alterity, however, pertains to a futurity that cannot come into my present and its predicted future. It is an alien, impersonal event that is always to come: 'the non-arrival of what comes about'.[87] It is always not yet, in the sense that it is always yet to enter into my presence but never does. What approaches is an event that is absolutely outside my reality and its approach thus repeatedly divests this reality of itself and its source, the ego.

Impotence here therefore signifies the continuous inability to take charge of the incoming alterity, to take charge of myself as this alterity upsets me. It signifies my repeated failure to contain within myself the reality I am being exposed to, my repeated failure to assert myself in this exposure. This is indeed for Blanchot what sets in motion and largely constitutes the experience of the thought. The thought's affliction hinges upon this perpetual helplessness and hopelessness at being myself and acting out through such a self. On the one hand, the thought for Bataille is experienced mainly as the hysterical persistence of the ego's attempts to conquer otherness. On the other hand, for Blanchot, it is experienced mainly as the constant incapability to find power to exercise such attempts, the constant disempowerment inflicting my very ego. What primarily directs one event is the lure, the promise, the *possibility* that a radical alterity

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[86] Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 118-9; Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 77-87; Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 143, 166-8.
[87] Blanchot, *Step,* p. 95.

impresses upon me. The other is directed by the *impossibility* of grasping such a radical alterity, the *impossibility* of being myself.

The temporal format of the experience of the thought for Blanchot thus accentuates above all the *no-longer* that what is not yet, what is to come, continuously falls into. My recurrent inability at making present what is not yet is experienced as a fall of this not-yet into what is no longer. What attracts ceaselessly becomes something that is impossible to attain. It is ceaselessly experienced as absolutely inaccessible, as absolutely outside my touch. Through a temporal framework, the unknown that is to come becomes something that has always already passed. What I was striving towards is experienced as something that belongs to a past that is not mine or anyone's. Its experience as a time that has always already gone signals its loss beyond all hope, its irremediable absence. The no-longer is suffered as the deep resignation and passivity that come with this sheer loss.   The suffering it engenders is the suffering of *irrevocability*. What I am seeking to possess pertains to an irreversible time. It pertains to what cannot be retrieved. I am continuously and increasingly exposed to this fatality. As Blanchot claims,

> [i]rrevocability would be the slip that, by vertigo, in an instant, at the farthest remove from the present, in the absolute of the non-present, makes what 'just happened' fall.
> What has just taken place, would slip and would fall right away (nothing more rapid) through irrevocability, into 'the terrifyingly ancient', there where nothing was ever present.[88]

This event is above all marked by a process of increasing loss and deprivation. Its movement is the movement of my deterioration. It advances as my regression. It progresses not forward but backward through exposure to a time of bereavement. What constitutes this experience is my fading away, my growing passivity.

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[88] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 14. See also pp. 11-4, 113-4; Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 65-6; Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), p. 53; Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 149-55.

Existence seen through Extreme Passivity:
A World of Images

Extreme passivity enforces a certain manner of perceiving the world. What is suffered is a sense of *redundancy* in my selfhood and my surroundings. Everything assumes a visibility of its excessive familiarity. Beings and things collapse into the sheer presence of their shape, density, and weight. To suffer the 'there is' and the thought for Blanchot is to suffer the world through the weight of an undue presence.

What is ominous about this presence is that it reveals nothing: every object or being presents itself as any other object or being. Every object is present and no object is distinguished. Everything exudes an impersonal and nonsubstantive front – an '*exteriority without interiority*'.[89] My environment is deprived of any intellectual and emotional relationship it once had with me. The personal appeal (or nonappeal) of objects is gone. They are divested of their intimacy for me. All is hollowed out of any significance. Everything becomes what Blanchot calls an '*image*' of itself. Here,

> there is no more interiority, for everything that is interior is deployed outwardly, takes the form of an image […]. [T]he essence of the image is to be entirely outside, without intimacy, and yet more inaccessible and more mysterious than the innermost thought, without signification, but summoning the profundity of every possible meaning unrevealed and yet manifest.[90]

This presence of absence is not the same as Bataille's. The presence of a lack in meaning for Bataille pertains to a dynamic, hysterical contestation of sense. It refers to the ecstatic chaos in 'a superabundance of being'.[91] To surrender oneself to this reality is to give in to outbursts of energies, a prodigality of life. I am taken by an intense vigour, a plenitude of vitality that is precisely such and is thus alien to meaning. Blanchot's absence of meaning holds a different vision. It refers to the presence of the terrifying emptiness of everything, of existence. It is the profile of the hollowness of being, the 'bare fact of presence'. What this profile discloses is 'the fact that nothing

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[89] Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), p. 48.
[90] Maurice Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003), p. 14. See also Hart, *Gaze*, pp. 65-7.
[91] Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 49.

approaches, nothing comes, nothing threatens […]'.[92] It discloses this immutable and universal silence and void that will not go away. What is revealed is the starkness of barrenness.

This is a condition found in experiences of the most crushing ennui and insomnia. It submits me to a world 'without secrets and which has taken away all possibilities'.[93] What remains in this exhaustion is the *secret* of 'no secret, or no appearance of any secret'.[94] To experience one's world as frustrated of every secret is to find oneself suffering of that very lack of secrecy. The lack of all possibility, the lack of all promise, becomes in turn a secret in signalling towards an anonymity that is not reducible to my understanding. What the excessively familiar reveals to me is a bareness that is indifferent, that is callous, to me. This is a bareness that is outside the meaningful world of my selfhood. It is a secrecy because of this foreignness. When all identity and hope are taken away, objects assume this unreality. 'The quotidian', Blanchot explains in *L'entretien infini*, is 'that which is most difficult to uncover […]. It does not let itself be grasped. It escapes. It belongs to insignificance, and the insignificant is without truth, without reality, without secrets'.[95]

What is menacing here is the fact that this presence of absence cannot be alleviated; it seems to persist forever. One is, as it were, chained to this heavy atmosphere in an unremitting manner. Forever rings remorselessly in the claustrophobia of this experience. 'There is horror of immortality', Levinas states, 'perpetuity of the drama of existence, necessity of forever taking on its burden.'[96] The endlessness of it all, the inability to escape from the exorbitant presence, brings horror and anguish upon me.

To see my world as this void is to be delivered to a consciousness that is not powered or owned by myself. I suffer an awareness that is not mine, whose perceptions do not belong to me. This consciousness does not know identities and distinctions. It is depersonalized. It is no one's and is directed at nothing. I find myself seized by an '*impersonal vigilance*'. The anonymity of this vigilance belongs and is a part of the

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[92] Levinas, *Existence*, pp. 61, 53. See also Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), pp. 47-8.

[93] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 46.

[94] Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, 37 (2007), p. 48.

[95] Quoted and translated by Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 112, from Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 355-7. See also Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 137.

[96] Levinas, *Existence*, p. 58. See also Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 41, 52; Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 112, 117-9, 126-7; Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 78, 85.

'monotonous presence' before me.[97] The consciousness oppressing me is the same anonymous consciousness of the nothingness that the world around me exudes. When I suffer this malaise, it is not *I* who is awake. It is the nothingness bared by the world that watches. It watches. And I suffer this watching.[98]

The experience of this abject condition is not only limited to such events as insomnia and ennui, but extends also, for Blanchot, to art. In art, 'one must respond to an empty depth in the work where every possibility has been exhausted, where there is nothing to negate, and only pointless repetition occurs.'[99] Art intrinsically discloses a presence empty of any sense which renders futile all the endeavours of the ego to see it otherwise. At bottom, art is ineradicably autonomous of the ego's world; it belongs to an 'essential solitude'.[100] We see this especially in literature. Here, Hart points out, 'language is transformed into matter. Having turned language into no more than the shape and weight of words, literature has not vanquished meaning but repositioned it: meaning is now outside the human mind'.[101] In poetry, words are torn away from their conventional meanings and become bearers of an otherness that belongs to nothing and nowhere. It is the poet who

> sacrifices words and selfhood in order to receive the gift of the poem, those ordinary words now charged as *other* and offered as a response to the 'anterior reality' [...]. The poem is prophetic, Blanchot insists, because it is always ahead of itself, never frozen into an acceptable meaning. It is the fire's part; it burns and does not illuminate.[102]

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[97] Levinas, *Existence*, pp. 55, 55.
[98] Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 48-9, 52; Hart, *Gaze*, pp. 11-4.
[99] Hart, '"Experience of Nonexperience"', in *Mystics,* p. 190.
[100] See the chapter 'The Essential Solitude', in Blanchot, *Space*, pp. 21-34.
[101] Hart, *Gaze*, p. 12.
[102] Hart, *Gaze,* pp. 224-5.

V

A Place Below Existence

For Bataille, more than Blanchot, the sacred is sometimes seen to be the experience of a divine reality far above the realm of being and beings. It can refer to an event that is absolutely transcendent of subjectivity and its reality. This is often related to the mystics' most radical encounters with God, such as ecstasy and rapture.[103] The character of this phenomenon as designated by Bataille, however, is on the whole *indistinct* from the other more common form of the sacred that is designated. The sacred as the experience of a reality *below* being, an abyssal and profane place, is largely undifferentiated from its experience as a divine reality above being. Bataille does not seem to separate the two forms of the sacred in any way. Rather, he sees the transcendent in terms akin to the profane. The sacred as a divine phenomenon takes the semblance of its profane type. This is mostly because of the extreme quality it is marked with. The divine is here so transcendent of being that its experience is the same as what is so below it. What is most high is seen as what is most low in being *completely* foreign to the nature of subjectivity.[104]

The criteria Bataille uses to characterize the abyssal sacred are then given also to the transcendent. Like the abyssal, the transcendent inaugurates an absolute alterity. To be before the divine is also to be subjected to an impersonal, unknown reality that incessantly and increasingly deprives me of my powers. This leads to a suffering of certain violent uncontrollable sensations. To experience transcendent reality is to be exposed to all forms of insufferable physical emotions such as horror, despair, nausea,

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[103] See for instance Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 104-5, 115-9. 174-5.
[104] 'Mysticism and Sensuality', in Bataille, *Erotism,* pp. 221-49. See also pp. 118-23.

anguish, and so on, *because* of its absolute transcendence. The sensation of rapture can also play a role in this susceptibility.[105]

If the divine is here indistinguishable from the profane, we can conclude that the sacred must ultimately be defined as a point below being. This is because an otherness that is truly and uniquely transcendent would be of an essentially variant nature than that undergone in the sacred. It would be experienced differently. The unknown would here constitute a reality that is too meaningful, too present, or too real to be discerned. The indescribable would be a hyper-meaningful, hyper-essential, hyper-real, or sur-real place. It would somehow bring being and meaning to a fullness and completion. Significant here is a sense of *necessary continuity* between one reality and another. What would be above being completes or fulfils being. Without it, being cannot have any existence, any validation. In this sense, the transcendent can be seen as a giver of being. Being would be seen as the direct creation of the transcendent region. It would resemble it much as a crude copy would resemble an original or a shadow its source.[106]

Conversely, the sacred is marked by a sheer *discontinuity* from being. Intrinsic to its experience is a radical estrangement from all that pertains to the world of subjectivity. Divine or profane, the sacred is *outside* meaning and being and thereby is indifferent to them. To undergo the sacred is to undergo this dissociation. It introduces a condition where the subject suffers of the ineffectuality of its reality. Ineffability is here the ineffability not of the fulfilment of being but of its inadequacy. Being degenerates; it finds itself losing all sense as it gives way to an alterity that is utterly foreign to it. If a point above being would not merely exist because it is hyper-meaningful, the sacred does not *quite* exist. If one is more than being, the other is not quite being. The sacred can indeed be seen as pre-originary or anterior to being in pertaining to a place that is an inability to be being, an ineptitude in being. To suffer this excruciating event is to suffer all that is as impotent to be what it is. [107] The sacred is not an excess of meaning but the *excess of its lack*.[108] It is a *superfluity of being*.

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[105] As already indicated in the Introduction, certain corporeal feelings pertaining to transcendent experiences are retained in both the transcendent and the profane versions of the sacred. The sacred elicits some responses that are often attributed to divine phenomena, such as fascination, awe, and veneration. This must not distract one from the fact that on the whole the sacred, both divine and profane, is evoked through connotations that belong more to an abyssal reality below being than one that is above being. See Bataille, *Erotism*, pp. 120-3, 230-4, 246-9.

[106] Another similar description of a reality above being can be seen in Caputo's portrayal of the God of theology in contrast with deconstruction and *khora*. See Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 2-3, 10-2, 34-9.

[107] See Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 2-3, 10-2, 34-9, for a similar description in relation to *khora* and *differance*.

[108] The designation of the sacred as an excess of a lack can also be seen in Taylor, *Altarity*, pp. xxix, 233.

This lack that seizes and takes over selfhood is brought about in two different ways for Bataille and Blanchot. The absence of meaning in Bataille's sacred is that absence that belongs to the nature of chaos, a sense of violent and contingent nonsensicalness. For Blanchot, it is the calmness of an emptiness divesting everything of its identity. In both cases, a regression towards a nether region or a void destitute of all human experience takes place.

Khora (Derrida and Caputo)

The nature of the sacred as an abyssal place is emphasized especially in what Derrida and Caputo call '*khora*'. *Khora* can be seen to have qualities that are similar to Bataille's and Blanchot's conceptions of the sacred. Richard Kearney, in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, introduces this amorphous concept as such:

> In the *Timaeus* 48e-53b, Plato enquires into the primordial origin from which all things come. In what must be one of the most intriguing passages in his entire oeuvre, Plato struggles to identify the fundamental condition of possibility of there being a world. He calls this *khora*, a virtually untranslatable term referring to a kind of placeless place from which everything that is derives. Deploying a number of allusive metaphors – nurse, mother, a perfume base, space, winnowing sieve, receptacle – Plato acknowledges how *khora* challenges our normal categories of rational understanding.[109]

Derrida and Caputo describe *khora* as 'a dark and undifferentiated "background of existence"'.[110] Akin to Bataille's and Blanchot's sacred, it is an aboriginal site outside or without being, 'a void of empty space'.[111] It is neither an entity nor an object but an anonymous no-place. This no-place is anterior to anything conceivable within existence: form and sensibility, being and nonbeing, the divine and the human. '[*Khora*] hasn't yet reached us. It is beneath us, before us, behind us [...].'[112]

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[109] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 193.
[110] 'There is: Existence without Existents', in Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (London: Blackwell, 1989), p. 32.
[111] '*Khora*', in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, trans. D. Wood, John P. Leavey, I. McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 1995, p. 125.
[112] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 198.

Everything seems to happen through *khora*. In a way it is like a receptacle through which everything transpires.[113] It is not, however, the source of anything that takes place through it. One cannot say it is like God for it does not confer anything. *Khora* is not a giver of being and beings. It is indifferent to what traverses it. *Khora*, Derrida tells us, is 'this "thing" that is nothing of that to which this "thing" nonetheless seems to give place – without however, this "thing" ever giving anything'.[114] It gives place 'without the least generosity, either divine or human'.[115] It 'gives nothing in giving place or in giving to think […]'.[116] 'Giving place', Kearney points out, thereby seems to imply 'a letting take place that has nothing to do with producing, creating or existing as such'. *Khora* is both a-theological and a-donational. It is '*[t]out autre par excellence*'.[117]

In his chapter 'God or *Khora*?', Kearney relates *khora* with some particular types of experiences. One can find oneself lost in this no-place in phenomena that disrupt and estrange themselves from the realm of being and beings. These phenomena would often be affiliated with some form of intense distress, a deep agony that can be physical, mental, and/or spiritual. Insomnia, terror, despair, and misery are all ways of falling into *khora*. 'Is *khora*', Kearney stresses, 'not that pre-original abyss each of us encounters in fear and trembling when faced with the bottomless void of our existence?'[118]

As with *khora*, the thought as evoked by Bataille and Blanchot cannot be separated from its concrete experiential aspect. Intrinsic to a full understanding of the postmodern sacred is its affiliation with a certain kind of experiences. The sacred is more often than not indissociable from those phenomena that pertain to extreme abjection, horror, and suffering. It is related to moments when our selfhood is threatened by utter annihilation.

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[113] 'Receptacle' is indeed one of a number of allusive metaphors Plato deploys to try to describe *khora*. He also calls it 'nurse', 'mother', a 'perfume base', 'space', and 'winnowing sieve'. Hence he acknowledges how this concept contests our categories of rational understanding (Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. H. Lee (London: Penguin, 1965), pp. 49-52).

[114] Quoted and translated by Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 200, from Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), p. 568.

[115] Quoted and translated by Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 200, from Jacques Derrida, 'Foi et Savoir: Les deux sources de la "religion" aux limites de la simple raison', in *La Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida, Gianni Vattimo (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1996), p. 86.

[116] Derrida, '*Khora*', in *Name,* p. 196.

[117] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 200, 200.

[118] See Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 204.

Chapter 2

†

Intersecting
at the
No-place

The Malady of the Gift
in Two Strait Ways

Prologue

Having given an account of what defines the postmodern sacred, a way must now be charted for the possibility of a different interpretation of such a thematic than is usually presented by thinkers who write on the subject. The requirement of such a prospect devolves from a tendency, often very inconspicuous, in these various thinkers to conceive their sacred as *the* archi-ultimate experience. As already indicated in the introduction to this work, the sacred is constantly marked by its writers with an evaluative preference over any other form of experience whatsoever. It is endowed with an import or significance that is incomparable. To undergo the suffering of the sacred is to undergo in some irreducible sense the most authentic or 'real' (even in Jean-François Lyotard's sense) experience possible.[1] Any phenomenon that gives itself to interpretation on any level is regarded as inferior. A pre-originary and supreme 'truth', as it were, abides in those events that ruin all forms of understanding. It is as if, as Richard Kearney indicates, to submit oneself to the nonsensicalness, desolation, and impotence that mark the sacred '*without* looking for meaning or healing, is really more steel-nerved and unblinking than seeking to be found'.[2] Events of trauma, horror, ennui, despair, are valued *for themselves*, for the deep disruption they cause in subjectivity. Worth is here judged on the experience's violence to one's self-identity.[3]

This chapter thus starts orienting the direction of this study towards a less perverse and a more productive and ethical significance of the sacred. It does this by tracing out its similarities with those episodes of the mystic that are collectively known as the 'dark night of the soul'. The dark night will be used extensively as an example through which the redefinition of the sacred, and more generally, the comparison of the sacred and the icon, will be explained, clarified, and validated.

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[1] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 205.
[2] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 205.
[3] See 'Introduction', pp. 12-3.

I

Introducing
the Dark Night of the Soul

An Overview of the Mystic Way

For the Christian mystics, selfhood is above all an 'ascetical self'[4] that has been more or less purged of its attachments towards the outside world, to anything that is profane. Yet this ascetical self is still selfish and covetous by nature. It still works by possessively asserting itself independently of anything else. It is still a 'literal *self-indulgence*' in its spirituality.[5] This selfhood utilizes its various engagements with God and its actions for 'that trivial and egotistic quest of personal satisfaction'. It is constituted by a 'spiritual gluttony', seeking in everything it does its own spiritual enjoyment and consolation.[6] Owing to its intrinsic nature, its faculties of emotion, will, and intellect, are constantly instigated by and incline themselves towards – not God, their proper object – but the individualistic self, 'the me-who-possesses'.[7]

Any sustenance and endorsement of a sense of self-individuality or self-autonomy is ultimately adverse to the goals of the mystic. By its very nature, the ego is antithetical to the spiritual demands the mystic must meet. As Evelyn Underhill rightly claims, '[t]he obstacle in [the mystics'] path is not consciousness in general, but *self-*consciousness, the consciousness of the Ego.' This is because '[mysticism] is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain

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[4] The 'ascetical self' is a term used by Denys Turner in *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995). See especially pp. 238-44.

[5] Turner, *Darkness,* p. 234.

[6] Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Development of Humankind's Spiritual Consciousness*, 14th edn. (London: Methuen, 1942), pp. 395, 395.

[7] Turner, *Darkness,* p. 234.

[…] but purely from an instinct of love'. To open oneself to true love for someone is to give without expecting anything in return, to be ready to sacrifice all that one has and is for that someone. Emotion, will, and intellect must cease drawing their impetus from ipseity, the locus of possessiveness and individualism. They must recentre themselves around another form of selfhood if their love is to be as unconditional and truly selfless as they desire it to be. In mysticism, this selfhood can be termed the '*transcendental self*'.[8]

The transcendental self is the 'spiritual spark'[9] in oneself. For the mystics, it is a consciousness that is the ground of the entire self. It is the source of the soul, as they often refer to selfhood, and its faculties. In the transcendental self selfhood is selfhood as steeped in God. There is here an inexpressible immersion in the Absolute as 'consciousness finds itself possessed by the sense of a Being at one and the same time greater than the Self and identical with it: great enough to be God, intimate enough to be me'.[10] This 'most intimate source from which our actions flow, our freedom to love, is in us but not of us, is not "ours" to possess, but ours to be possessed by'.[11] This divine faculty, the mystics tell us, is present as an embryo in every person's soul. The mystic way is the name given to the process of fully *reawakening* this faculty. It constitutes the arduous psychological and spiritual process, often lasting a lifetime, for the complete realization of the transcendental self.[12]

The 'unitive state' or 'unitive life' is the term often attributed to the state of a consciousness that has finally reached the full reawakening of this divine personality.[13] Significant in the development to attain this state is the movement 'through a series of strongly marked oscillations between "states of pleasure" and "states of pain"'.[14] Evelyn Underhill classifies these alternations of the mystic way under five phases.[15] First and foremost comes 'conversion', '[t]he awakening of the Self to consciousness of

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[8] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 172, 71. See for instance pp. 68, 93-4, for references to the transcendental self or the transcendental faculty.

[9] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 93, from Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephone Mackenna, 5 vols. (London: 1917-24).

[10] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 82, from Edouard Recejak, *Essay on the bases of the Mystic Knowledge*, trans. S. C. Upton (London: 1899).

[11] Turner, *Darkness,* p. 251.

[12] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 93-4.

[13] See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 81, 413-43, for a full description of the unitive life.

[14] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 168; quoting from William Blake, *Jerusalem*, ed. E. R. D. Maclagen, A. G. B. Russell (London: 1904).

[15] It must be noted, however, that in many instances in the mystics' texts some of these phases are merged into each other or seem to be completely suppressed. The classification presented here is only for the purposes of a general and comprehensive observation of the mystic way and not for a study of one or two specific mystics (see Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 168).

Divine Reality', an experience that is 'usually abrupt and well-marked […] accompanied by intense feelings of joy and exaltation'. This is followed by 'purgation', initiated by a painful awareness of the mystic's 'finiteness and imperfection'. Through mortification, which is often here self-imposed, a detachment from the 'things of sense' is acquired. Moreover, the mystic becomes more mature in the practice of the three virtues of faith, hope, and charity. What follows is a 'joyful consciousness of the Transcendent Order [that] returns in an enhanced form'. This is the phase of 'illumination', a state which also includes various stages of contemplation together with divine communications such as visions, even sometimes ecstasies. 'Illumination brings a certain apprehension of the Absolute, a sense of the Divine Presence: but not true union with it. It is a state of happiness.' Illumination is then succeeded 'by the most terrible of all the experiences of the Mystic Way', 'the dark night of the spirit', and this in turn is followed by 'union'.[16]

The Ascetical Self and the Dark Night of the Senses

States of happiness in the mystic way are the result of the soul's *awareness* of its proximity to God. This can be experienced not just through various divine communications but also through the awareness of an increased awakening of the transcendental self.[17] In this regard, an important task of the states of pain is to bring about this advancement through an ever more radical self-deprivation of the 'appetite for worldly possessions'. Pain in the mystic way is usually the result of a deeper severance from accustomed attachments to the material world, from the firm adherence to the ego. As John of the Cross pointedly remarks, '[d]arkness, an attachment to creatures, and light, which is God, are contraries and bear no likeness toward each other […]'.[18] What he calls the 'dark night of the senses', Underhill's version of 'purgation', is a state of cleansing pain that serves precisely this purpose. This state is for the most part brought about by the mystics themselves. Through various acts of contrition, sacrifice, and penance, a reformation of the senses takes place. The sensory is made to

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[16] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 169.
[17] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 168-70.
[18] *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, I, in St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Keiran Kavanaugh, Otilio Rodriguez (Washington D.C.: ICS, 1964), pp. 74, 78.

concentrate upon faculties directed towards the divine. That is to say that the sensory nature of the mystic no longer dictates their decisions and actions. Through the mystic's activity, the senses are made to respond only to emotions, will, and intellect that have become spiritual in that they draw their motivation from the divine reality. The sensory appetites now find their inclinations coming from faculties deeply attentive to all that is related to God. The phase of illumination, for John of the Cross, is the soul's

> [going] about the things of God with much more freedom and satisfaction of spirit and with more abundant interior delight […]. The soul readily finds in its spirit, without the work of meditation, a very serene, loving contemplation and spiritual delight […]. Since the sensory part of the soul is now purer, it can, after its own mode, experience the delights of the spirit more easily […].[19]

'Hence the night of the senses we explained', he points out further on, 'should be called a certain reformation and bridling of the appetite […]'.[20]

The emotions, the will, and the intellect are now expressions of what we have called the 'ascetical self'. This self is spiritual in that its faculties are focused on the divine reality. Its decisions and actions are inspired from this concentration. Sometimes, however, the ascetical self fails to direct its force from God. The spiritual joy it experiences when it exercises the faculties can distract it. Inspired by the transcendent reality in the faculties, it can yet become fixated by the happiness it feels coming from this reality. This joy can become a goal in itself while the true object of love, the divine, is marginalized. The mystic's decisions and actions would thus be undertaken for the delight the ascetical self brings about. An excessive focus on the spiritual joy can occur at the expense of its source. This can serve to alienate the mystic from God since the joy that comes from the ascetical self is still a joy that affirms this self only and nothing else besides. The elation that comes from the ascetical self, despite being of a spiritual nature, is still self-reflexive: it still serves to assert exclusively that ascetical self. It is thereby possessive. It can use divine communications and religious-spiritual actions to sustain and assert the self it expresses. For the mystics, this selfhood is not to be trusted in that it is still autonomous of the

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[19] *The Dark Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, pp. 329-30

[20] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, p. 33. See *Ascent*, I, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 101-3; *Night*, I, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 311-3, 320-7.

divine. Its nature, though centred on God, is still separate from him. It is not in unity with him.[21]

The nature of the spiritual joy that results from the dark night of the senses still presupposes a distinction between subject and object, lover and beloved. The reformation of the faculties of emotion, will, and intellect is still imperfect in that the spiritual identity they are now influenced by is still distinct from the source of their love. Ultimately this identity is not part of the divine reality but yet another self in need of controlling or mastering its outside world, even its very experiences of the divine. The dark night of the senses cannot completely uproot the ego because it is a process that is to a large extent brought about by the mystics themselves. Asceticism is here often exercised by the mystic's self. Insofar as it is this self that strives for a detachment from worldly things to be one with God, the attainment of complete detachment is impossible. This is because this self remains entirely in control of its decisions and actions. A self that remains in command of events can never completely eradicate the egotistic nature because its own intrinsic nature is egotistic. Any selfhood that is individualistic must necessarily be egotistic. As Denys Turner claims, 'no merely *active* ascetical practice could achieve a perfect state of detachment. Why? Because an active, self-imposed asceticism, by virtue of its being primarily *our* activity of imposing our will upon desire, is essentially an indirect reaffirmation of the self in the form of its mastery of desire'.[22]

The prerogative for the unitive life entails a severance from this last form of the possessive self. It is a detachment 'not merely from a particular self-of-experience, but of the *need* for a self-of-experience of any kind'.[23] The unitive life is lived as

> a pure desire *for God* as possible only in so far as it is also *of* God, not conceivably of anything we could call a 'self' as distinct from God. For, as Simone Weil puts it, 'God alone is capable of loving God' […]. It is therefore only by means of the neutralisation of our active powers in any independent exercise that God can love God in us.[24]

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[21] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, p. 331; Turner, *Darkness*, pp. 234, 241-3
[22] Turner, *Darkness*, pp. 233-4. See pp. 236-43.
[23] Turner, *Darkness*, p. 244.
[24] Turner, *Darkness*, p. 236; quoting from 'The Love of God and Affliction', in Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Collins, 1951), p. 61.

Pain and Darkness in the Dark Night of the Soul

It is the dark night of the spirit that leads the mystic to true union with God. The ascetical self is here neutralized. Most significantly, the purgative suffering of this phase is not brought about by any form of the mystic's acquisitive selfhood. The mystic does not choose and decide upon what they experience. This dark night is above all undergone as *passive*. If the mystics' texts on the dark night of the spirit often differ in their descriptions of it, the element of passivity remains a constant.[25]

This harrowing phase in the mystic way bears witness to an unprecedented proximity to the divine. The divine at this point is not undergone through the perception of the mystic's faculties. Its closeness is not appropriated by selfhood and experienced as spiritual joy or as some form of knowledge whatsoever. Instead the divine is undergone *as itself*. It is undergone as *foreign* to the mystic's possessive self. There is a gradual direct intimacy with the divine as *other* to what the mystic is. God intimates himself as alterity: an alterity that, in the words of John of the Cross, 'exceeds the capacity of the soul'[26] to comprehend it. The divine as 'excess of light to the soul' is thus for the mystic a darkness, 'the darkness of unknowing'.[27]

If God at this point is beyond the ascetical self's conditions of experience, then he is also beyond one's very power of experiencing him. God as darkness is the *inability* to experience God. It is an *unawareness* of God in his true nature. Clinging desperately to one's ascetical self and its perceptions, one fails to be conscious of the divine. Having withdrawn all its forms of communication from the ascetical self, the divine ceases to exist for this self. It is as if God has died.[28]

God as darkness presupposes a subjectivity that is also in darkness. As John of the Cross points out in *Dark Night*, the soul is in darkness because of its nature; the soul's is a darkness of ignorance. One does not know what is happening to oneself, where and what God is. The dark night is a psychological and spiritual growing into a radical new state of being that is as yet incapable of being known let alone hoped for inasmuch as the possessive self persists. As Jeanne Guyon remarks, 'there is no loss [of the interior delight and support of God] except to our own consciousness, as it still

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[25] See Turner, *Darkness*, pp. 232, 234, 236-7.
[26] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 335.
[27] Turner, *Darkness,* pp. 246, 246
[28] See *Ascent,* I, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 75-9; *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 110-1; *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, pp. 335-6.

exists in the Soul, but imperceptibly and without apparent action. If it were not hidden, the death and loss of Self could not be accomplished'.[29]

The dark night thus presents us with two types of darkness. The mystic's self is darkness to God and his intimations. God is darkness to this same self. This is vividly captured in the following statements by John of the Cross:

> [W]hen the divine light of contemplation strikes a soul not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness, for it not only surpasses the act of natural understanding but it also deprives the soul of this act and darkens it [...]. Since this divine infused contemplation has many extremely good properties, and the still unpurged soul that receives it has many extreme miseries, and because two contraries cannot coexist in one subject, the soul must necessarily undergo affliction and suffering.[30]

God and his activities are darkness to the soul because of the darkness of this soul. This is indeed what earns such a collective of experiences, via John of the Cross, the name, '*dark night* of the soul'.

If the divine is darkness to the mystic, if it is outside the boundaries of their very conditions of experience, is it yet experienced in any way? If so, what is this experience like? How does the mystic's ascetical self experience a divine that is outside that self, that is other to that self?

In the dark night, God is in fact undergone not as 'the work of grace in the soul' but rather as 'the experience of the loss of experience of the self'. Turner calls this an '"experiential feedback" of that which is truly "mystical"'.[31] Incapable for the most part of experiencing anything other than through the ascetical self, the transcendent God and his workings can only be experienced as an *undermining* of this same self. God is undergone only as a dispossession of one's selfhood because at this point one cannot know anything except through this selfhood. Only the painful and destructive aspect of the divine intimations is thus experienced. The ascetical self finds itself, experiences itself breaking apart. Very often this dying is undergone through various forms of excruciating agony. For John of the Cross, the dark night is primarily a helpless misery. This is because 'all the imperfections and disorders of the sensory part are rooted in the

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[29] *The Way to God*, in Jeanne Guyon, *The Unabridged Collected Works of Jeanne Guyon*, ed. Glenn Kahley (n.p.: Kahley House Publishing, 2006), p. 285. See also *Ascent*, I, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 89-91.

[30] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 335-6.

[31] Turner, *Darkness,* p. 245.

spirit and from it receive their strength […]'. In this night, God 'leaves the intellect in darkness, the will in aridity, the memory in emptiness, and the affections in supreme affliction, bitterness, and anguish, by depriving the soul of the feeling and satisfaction it previously obtained from spiritual blessings'.[32]

Against this passive deprivation, the ascetical self struggles to reaffirm itself. It persistently refuses to let go to its own gradual eradication. It fights for its survival against the divine and its actions, stubbornly unwilling to surrender itself to its dissolution. A good deal of the suffering that takes place in the dark night is precisely caused by this obstinacy in the ascetical self. A violent tension or conflict is brought about between selfhood and divine reality that instigates many of the agonizing experiences the dark night is known for. Pain is caused by the self's decision to work against the workings of God. '[T]he soul', as John of the Cross remarks, 'becomes a battlefield in which these two contraries combat one another'.[33]

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[32] *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 333, 333. See pp. 335-45.

[33] *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 336. See pp. 335-7; *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 61; *Spiritual Torrents,* in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 327.

II

The Radical Difference between God and *Khora*: Destination and Destinerrance

What is the relation between the phenomena of the dark night of the soul and those pertaining to the postmodern sacred? Can they be related in some way or are they irreconcilably different from each other? If anything, the first class of phenomena appears to have God as their source whereas the second one lacks any such agent, divine or otherwise. The dark night can be seen as a series of divine intimations causing mental and physical suffering in the unwilling subject while the postmodern sacred entails a mental and physical suffering that has nothing to do with the divine and religion. Indeed, any event of the postmodern sacred points to the absence of any meaning, any foundation. Its suffering is above all nonsensical and refers to nothing.[34]

In his chapter 'God or *Khora*?' Kearney makes a similar point on *khora* or the *differance* of deconstruction and the believer's experiences and descriptions of God.[35] He indicates that deconstructionists such as Derrida and Caputo sometimes admit to an undecidable relation between these two kinds of phenomena. This, however, cannot distract one from their sheer antithetical natures. Caputo seems to confirm this also in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* when he remarks,

> [n]egative theology is always on the track of a 'hyperessentiality', of something hyper-present, hyper-real or sur-real, so really real that we are never satisfied

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[34] In their works, Bataille and Blanchot do not treat the thematic of a relationship between the mystics' experiences of God and the postmodern sacred (or *khora*) with much detail. My discussion will therefore focus predominantly on Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney who present various comparative insights into these two kinds of phenomena.

[35] For the purposes of this argument and context, the notion of *differance* is here seen only as in 'God or *Khora*?' in terms of its equivalence to the notion of *khora* in its relation and nonrelation with God.

simply to say that it is merely real. *Différance*, on the other hand, is less than real, not quite real, never gets as far as being or entity or presence […].[36]

Khora is 'a quasi-transcendental anteriority, not a supereminent, transcendent ulteriority'.[37] As Kearney states, '[i]f God is higher than being, *differance* is lower than it'. Whereas God is seen as an abundance of presence and light, *khora* is 'a dark bottomless "abyss"', a '"void of empty space"'.[38] Moreover, no matter how beyond being, no matter how ineffable, God is designated, he is still ultimately perceived as a 'who', a someone or something with characteristics such as love and hope, a giver of gifts. *Khora*, however, is indeterminate; it has no 'who', no attributes in relation to this 'who'. Its giving place to anything means a letting take place. It is neither an agent to any phenomenon that takes place nor does it refer to its own existence.[39] It is 'a-donational' and 'a-theological'.[40]

One of the ways by which Kearney expresses the estrangement of *khora* from the theological and being is through Derrida's term 'destinerrance'. Destinerrance evokes an event that is absent of any form of destination or goal. To undergo the destinerrance of *khora* is to be subjected to an endless wandering without purpose, gratification, or reassurance. One is lost to the erroneous: an incessant uncertainty and confusion that know no form of respite. This insecurity belongs to instants of the most intense despair. It refers to 'a formless desert abyss, a no-place we experience in fear and trembling moments of uncertainty and loss'. There is a submission to 'a night without end, a place where religious prayer, promise and praise are *not* applicable'. No consolation can appease this deep distress. It is this that for Kearney and Caputo distinguishes *khora* from the experience of God's alterity, no matter how disruptive this latter is, as in the dark night. Both thinkers agree that the dark night is a 'journey through desolation', through fear and trembling. And yet it is a journey that is 'made in the fervent hope that one will find a path to God, that the lost sheep will be gathered and brought home to the Father'.[41] Caputo insists that '[e]ven when apophatic theology seems to gravitate close to saying *khôra*, when it speaks of formlessness', it always

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[36] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 2. See Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 201, 209-10.

[37] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 3.

[38] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 198, 199; quoting from John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 86.

[39] Derrida, *Psyché,* p. 568; Derrida, 'Foi', in *La Religion*, p. 86; 'Khora', in Derrida, *Name*, p. 96; Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 36.

[40] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 200. See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 62-5.

[41] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 202-4.

already interprets such moments as abandonment by God and this gives it the necessary prayer and hope of return to God. '"My God, My God, why have You abandoned me?" is still a prayer to God who, thus far, has not abandoned us.'[42] Desolation in the dark night, desolation for the believer, presupposes the alienation of God from the sufferer in its meaning, which presupposes in turn God's love for the sufferer, and thus the faith and hope that the sufferer and God will be reunited. Here, abandonment by God is never an abandonment of one's faith in God. Desolation for the believer is always already *meaningful*.

This is seen also in Derrida's view of negative theology. In its quest to evoke the divine as foreign to all comprehension, the language of negative theology deconstructs everything that is related to being. Sometimes its language refers to a divine that is 'very little, almost nothing, perhaps something other than something'. Derrida in 'Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)' nonetheless situates these writings within a hermeneutical context that is outside *khora*. This is because they still operate within a revelation, the history of a revelation, a messianism, a destination that points to an entity with its own denominations of goodness, generosity, love, etc., no matter how inexpressible in human language, how foreign to understanding, such denominations can be. The divine can be expressed as almost a nothingness to human comprehension but it still possesses in such texts some form of identity or personality, even if this in itself is beyond comprehension.[43]

In this regard, the dark night of the soul is seen as a suffering that is not an irredeemable defeat or loss – a destinerrance – but a *destination*. It is a suffering that is '*on the way towards* God'. What the mystic undergoes is *significant* for what will follow. It is a *necessary* step towards a goal that is believed in. The dark night is for the mystic a trial without which one cannot really love God, without which one cannot rid oneself of the ego and fully awake the transcendental self. The desert fathers or the anchorite monks, Kearney observes, saw loss and the void as '[a]n unavoidable detour on the way to grace […]: [l]osing life – yes – but in order to gain it. Renouncing their beloved, yes, killing their darlings, yes, sacrificing their Isaacs, yes, but believing all the while they *would get them back again*'.[44]

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[42] Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 39, 39.
[43] 'Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)', in Derrida, *Name*, pp. 50-1, 80-1.
[44] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 202, 206.

Clearly, the dark night is being posited within an economy of price and reward, its pain being a means to an end. I am suffering now but I believe, I hope, I know that I will be rewarded for it. No matter how deep this suffering goes, there is still consolation and reassurance inasmuch as it is seen as a necessary transitional experience towards a better state. It thus allows itself to be interpreted. One's selfhood is affirmed and reaffirmed all throughout the disturbance this suffering causes. The dark night is here ultimately egotistical. Its experiences are meaningful; they are appropriated in accordance with the self and its understandings. They are converted into a means for the self to confirm and sustain itself. Interpretation always leads to the satisfaction of one's self. In the context of the dark night, however, this poses a fundamental problem. If the mystic does perceive their experiences of the dark night in this manner, then the very purpose of this episode, its eradication of the possessive self, is lost. If the mystic interprets the dark night's pain in terms of their selfhood, if this very selfhood is still operating throughout such pain in order to interpret it, then one much concede that the dark night's purpose is self-defeating. How can one undergo a suffering that is supposed to uproot one's sense of selfhood when that same suffering is being interpreted by that very same selfhood, interpreted in order to affirm it?

For Derrida and Caputo, the hermeneutical context of salvation decides the precipitous gulf dividing the divine from deconstructive *khora*. Sometimes, however, they also admit to an instability or indetermination of this very difference. Apart from their absolute difference, *khora* and God *also* reveal an undecidable *relation* with each other. They are not only two opposing tropics but are also in some irreducible manner connected. At times they unexpectedly coincide with each other. For such instances, Caputo asks, '[w]hat is the wholly other […] God or *khôra* […]? How are we to decide? Do we have to choose?'[45] Derrida suggests likewise in the comments on the Christian mystic Angelus Silesius in his 'Post-Scriptum' to *Derrida and Negative Theology*. '"God"', he says, '"is" the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language […]; a name which is, at the same time, interpreted by Silesius as "the divinity of God as gift"'. Further on, Derrida proceeds to relate this God to 'some *khôra* (interval, place, spacing)'.[46]

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[45] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 37.
[46] Jacques Derrida, 'Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices', trans. John P. Leavey, in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward, Toby Foshay (Albany: University of New York Press, 1992), pp.

How is one to understand then this nonrelation and yet relation between experiences of God and *khora*? One can dismiss the ambiguous connection on the grounds that it is simply untenable. One can dismiss it on account of its obfuscation of two radically separate experiences. By having them coincide with each other, Derrida and Caputo are losing track of the essential and very different natures of these two polarities.

I propose here to re-evaluate this separation and affiliation of God and *khora*. This view can indeed be substantiated and clarified through a careful observation of the mystics' writings on the dark night. My suggestion in what follows is that the dark night *does* evade the circle of economy. Many of its tormenting experiences *do* subvert and escape the affirmation of the mystic's selfhood and its appropriations. Not only is the period of the dark night different from the experiences of *khora* and the postmodern sacred but it can also be seen *as* an instance of them. This most trying episode in the mystic way can demonstrate that experiences of the divine are sometimes *indistinct* from those belonging to the postmodern sacred.[47]

The inevitable question is then: how can the dark night be *khora*?

300-1. See also 'Sauf le nom', in Derrida, *Name*, pp. 76-80; Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 59; Caputo, *Deconstruction*, p. 97.

[47] In this work, I will be exploring this relation and nonrelation through Kearney's idea of a chiasmic play between God and *khora*. To be sure, Derrida also presents his own description of the particular relationship between these two poles when he introduces the notion of the 'without'. He describes this relationship through an 'exemplarism' of conjunction-disjunction. See for instance 'Sauf le nom', in Derrida, *Name*, pp. 75-7. This perspective, however, emphasizes the undecidable *relatedness* of the two poles more than their fundamental opposition. In my view, both aspects need to be emphasized equally if one is to authentically capture their natures and how they interact with each other (see also Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 210).

III

The Postmodern Gift
in the Dark Night

The Ontological and the Phenomenological Versions of the Dark Night

To identify experiences of the dark night with experiences of the postmodern sacred, one must perceive them from a *phenomenological* angle. They must not be designated in the context of the dark night as a whole or the mystic way. Each phenomenon must be described in the manner it had been experienced: how it was *while* it was being experienced. The structures and processes of the mystic's consciousness *during* the phenomenon are to be traced out. Every experience must not be interpreted in relation to any preceding or following experiences. It must be seen as standing on its own regardless of what happened before and after. It is the *actual experiencing* of the phenomenon that is significant here and not how it is seen and explained by the mystic in the aftermath or perhaps at an earlier time. Any interpretation that does not take place during the phenomenon would therefore be discounted.

This leads us to attempt a demarcation in the mystics' texts between those descriptions that tell how an event had been when actually undergone and those that tell how it is from a detached explicative standpoint. As Turner demonstrates in *The Darkness of God*, there is more than one mode of analysis at work in the mystics' texts.[48] For the purposes of the subject in question and at the risk of oversimplifying, I would divide such modes of observation into these two types. On the one hand, the

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[48] See for instance Turner, *Darkness,* pp. 26-7, 248-51, and his chapter 'From Mystical Theology to Mysticism', in *Darkness*, pp. 252-73.

mystics see their experiences from an ontological hermeneutic. They interpret them through an ontology based on a Neoplatonic theological epistemology. It is indeed through this perspective that Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney perceive the dark night. But on the other hand, the mystics also occasionally describe events through a mystical epistemology strictly based on categories of subjective experience. Phenomena are here described *as* they had been undergone. This writing would thus be of a psychological and phenomenological nature.

Often in the mystics' texts, these two views are present at the same time in the same description. We can take as example an extract from Teresa of Avila's 'Sixth Mansions' in *Interior Castle*. 'We have no need of reflection', she says, 'to enable us to understand' that the soul was 'clearly aware of its misery and realized how little we can do of ourselves if the Lord should forsake us'. This is because

> the soul's experience of enduring [this misery], and of having found itself completely powerless, has made it realize that it is utterly helpless and that we are but miserable creatures. For, though it cannot be devoid of grace, since despite all this torment it does not offend God, and would not do so for anything upon earth, yet this grace is buried so deeply that the soul seems not to feel the smallest spark of any love for-God, nor has it ever done so.[49]

From a phenomenological lens, this passage describes an overwhelming anguish, the feeling of an intense corruption and forsakenness of God. From an ontological hermeneutical lens, it sees this anguish in relation to the divine workings of grace, situating it within a larger interpretative picture of purgatorial suffering and divine will. Significant here is the high probability that this perspective is entertained *outside* the actuality of the experience of anguish mentioned.[50]

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[49] St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, trans. E. Allison Peers (Surrey: Sheed and Ward, 1974), p. 74.

[50] It is often admittedly difficult to separate the ontological hermeneutical perspective from the phenomenological perspective in the mystics' texts. There is frequently no clear distinction between the ontological and the phenomenological. Therefore a good deal of conjecture would sometimes have to be used in the analysis that follows. Moreover, in relation to this problem, my phenomenological descriptions of the dark night will sometimes have to resort to references that partially describe the dark night ontologically.

The Gift (1):
Derrida and the Mystic Way

Having established the presence of a phenomenological perspective in the writings on the dark night, the next step into considering its affiliation with the sacred is to perceive it through the phenomenology of what postmodernism calls the 'gift'.

Derrida, in the roundtable discussion with Marion called 'On the Gift', points out that '[a]s soon as a gift [...] is identified as a gift, with the meaning of a gift, then it is cancelled as a gift. It is reintroduced into the circle of an exchange and destroyed as a gift'. As soon as a gift is identified as something by giver or givee or both, that is, as soon as the giver knows it is giving or giving something, as soon as the givee knows it is receiving or receiving something, the gift stops being a gift. As soon as the giver knows it is giving, it recompenses itself by thanking itself. As soon as the givee knows it is receiving, it thanks the giver and in this thanks it *gives* its gratitude. As soon as the gift itself is identified then the consciousness of giver as giver or givee as givee or both is introduced and thus thankfulness also introduced. Gratitude of thankfulness on both sides reinscribes the gift in the circle of economy, exchange, knowledge, and ontology where giving and receiving presuppose each other, one is recompensed by the other, and therefore both cease to be themselves.[51]

'[A]s soon as you know [the gift], you destroy it.' A significant condition for the gift to occur is the separation or distance between knowing and doing. 'A gift', says Derrida, 'is something you do without knowing what you do, without knowing who gives the gift, who receives the gift, and so on.'[52] The giver is unaware that it is giving a gift. The givee is unaware that it is receiving a gift. And both, naturally, do not know what this gift consists of.

Now the state of affairs that constitutes the phenomenology of the gift can be traced out in the dark night if one perceives it from the phenomenological viewpoint of the mystic. Prior to this period, God has been frequently experienced as a presence. He has been a constant source of nourishment for the mystic's transcendental self. In

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[51] 'On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, Moderated by Richard Kearney', in *God*, p. 59.
[52] 'On the Gift', in *God,* p. 60.

various degrees, God has very often been felt and enjoyed in all of the mystic's actions and thoughts.

This relation with the divine presence can be seen through a cycle of economy. At this point God is both a giver and a givee. His frequent presence within the mystic gives them spiritual contentment. He is also the giver of supernatural phenomena such as auditions, visions, ecstasies, etc. The joy this giving brings about, however, also serves to affirm the mystic's ego or their ascetical self. Insofar as the mystic's ascetical self still survives, their delight does not only pertain to their transcendental self but passes especially to this spiritual possessive form of selfhood. God here disposes himself to the subject's egotistical self-assertion. The spiritual sustenance he confers upon the transcendental self also leads to the sustenance of the ascetical self. God's proximity nourishes and affirms the ascetical self by way of the transcendental self. He gives: the mystic receives and recognizes or acknowledges to some extent through their egotism.

Acknowledgement is also brought about through the mystic's devout actions for God. God's constant presence and communications greatly encourage such efforts. Grateful for the egotistical nourishment, the mystic undertakes various actions intended to be offered to God. Recognizant to the giver, the mystic seeks to become themselves the giver. God is now the recipient or givee.

Given to God, the mystic's actions are in turn also *acknowledged* by God. The giver's various actions, such as prayer, obedience to one's superiors, helping others, penance, and so on, are often rewarded by the givee through a further spiritual happiness. Sometimes they are rewarded by the experiencing of a supernatural event, a vision or an audition. One's deeds are congratulated by a contentment that affirms the ascetical self. The divine within the mystic is a source of motivation for everything that the mystic intends to do for it. One's actions are here always already defined in terms of their rewarding end. The mystic gives, often unwittingly, so that they will be rewarded. In their actions, they expect on some level a recognition in kind for their trouble. Again, their relationship with God is still locked in an equilibrating circle of loss and profit.

If giving and receiving are a means to affirm the ascetical self, the spiritual ego, then they are both an expression of mastery and possessiveness. I give so that my ego will be reasserted, so that I will receive it through my giving. As a giver and a givee, the mystic perceives God in terms of their egotistic affirmation. God is interpreted

according to the degree of spiritual delight he can give the mystic. The divine is appropriated for the ego's ends.[53]

Now the 'tragedy' of the dark night is that the divine as source of spiritual egotism is felt no more. All trace of divine nourishment has become inaccessible. The mystic stops experiencing the partial wakefulness of their transcendental self. The divine within that they had previously felt grounding all their faculties has gone. By extension, the sustenance their ascetical self was deriving from this groundedness has also gone. As Underhill explains, 'it seems as though that God, having shown Himself, has now deliberately withdrawn His Presence, never perhaps to manifest Himself again'.[54] 'He acts', says Eckhart, 'as if there were a wall erected between Him and us'.[55] 'When this total privation or "mystic death" is fully established', Underhill adds,

> it involves not only the personal 'Absence of God', but the apparent withdrawal or loss of that impersonal support, that transcendent Ground or Spark of the soul, on which the self has long felt its whole real life to be based. Hence, its very means of contact with the spiritual world vanishes; and as regards all that matters, it does indeed seem to be 'dead'.[56]

The dark night of the soul is the horror that God 'has cast [the soul] away into darkness as an abominable thing [...]; the shadow of death and the pains and torments of hell are most acutely felt, and this comes from the sense of being abandoned by God, being chastised and cast out by His wrath and heavy displeasure'.[57]

In the dark night, God ceases being a giver of egotistical gifts. He has also ceased being a givee of the mystic's devout actions. All of the mystic's efforts fail to produce any form of fulfilment, recompense, or encouragement. They go unacknowledged. The God who has been experienced as a fount of spiritual egotism exists no more. God as seen through the mystic's possessive selfhood, God as the mystic's *idea*, has vanished. God, Augustine Baker tells us, 'withdraws all comfortable observable infusions of light and grace', depriving the soul 'of all comfortable reflections upon His love'. The soul 'seeks God, and cannot find the least marks or

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[53] See for instance *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 93.

[54] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 389.

[55] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 389, from Meister Eckhart, *Eckhart's Sermons*, trans. C. de B. Evans (London:1924).

[56] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 390; quoting from Jeanne Guyon, *Autobiography of Mme. Guyon*, trans. T. T. Allen, 2 vols. (London: 1897).

[57] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 389-90, from St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, trans. D. Lewis (London: 1916).

footsteps of His Presence […]. [I]ndeed, she is now in a region of all other most distant from spirit and spiritual operations – I mean, such as are perceptible'.[58]

Anguish as Subversive in the Dark Night

The death of God as an idea of the ego brings about the insufferable anguish that marks the entire period of the dark night. Anguish results from what the mystic regards as the absence of God, from the inability to once again reach out for his egotistically nourishing presence. It is brought about by an infinite distance that is revealed between the mystic and the divine. John of the Cross pointedly remarks that 'what the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected it, and with an abhorrence of it cast it into darkness. The thought that God has abandoned it is a piteous and heavy affliction for the soul'.[59] Guyon also confirms this: '[A]fter God had taken from me one [support] after another, He withdrew also Himself. I remained without any creature; and to complete my distress, I seemed to be left without God, who alone could support me in such a deeply distressing state'. 'My God', she claims, 'seemed to be so estranged and displeased with me, that there remained nothing but the grief of having lost His blessed presence through my fault'.[60]

Intrinsic to this anguish is its severity. While being undergone, it often subverts the mystic's selfhood to a point where it cannot control itself. Subjectivity is literally taken over by this distress, its self-possession violently ruptured. This anguish often disjoints the self from itself and prevents it from coinciding with itself. While suffered, it prevents the will from taking control of itself again and in doing so prevents it from exercising its intentional activities. No support of any kind is afforded to this broken self. No consolatory meaning can be given to the overwhelming distress. What this means is that inasmuch as we are trying to capture this anguish *in the actuality of its suffering*, we must set aside the interpretations from which it *results* or which it *leads to*. If we observe the mystics' texts well, we will see that the common significance given to

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[58] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 387, from Augustine Baker, *Holy Wisdom: or Directions for the Prayer of Contemplation*, ed. Abbot Sweeney (London: 1908).
[59] *Night,* II, in John *Collected Works,* p. 338.
[60] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, pp. 96, 103.

this suffering – the infinite distance between the mystic and the divine – is itself destroyed or is absent when this suffering is being described *as* it has been suffered.[61]

Many of the mystics indeed present this anguish in itself as anonymous, as coming from no one and nowhere and going towards no one and nowhere. It is suffered as nonsensical. While suffered, it is pain as pain and not pain because of …, coming from …, or leading to …. As Guyon in *Spiritual Torrents* professes, 'the torment [the soul] suffers prevents its recognizing the nature of its pain […]. [W]hen the Sun flashed full upon it, then the soul felt itself burning, without believing that it was so much as warmed'.[62] In a similar vein, John of the Cross claims that in such experiences 'we discover the reason it seems to the soul during the dark night that all blessings are past and that it is full of evil. For at this time it is conscious of nothing but its own bitterness […]'.[63]

One must distinguish between the ontological picture and the phenomenological picture of the dark night's anguish. In the former, pain is related to God's absence, his abandonment of the mystic, the difference of a sinful selfhood from a remote and pure divine reality. In the latter, pain is *experienced* and seen simply as a dispossessing otherness intervening between the mystic and God. This pain is an impersonal or indifferent difference disrupting the subject-divine relation. It is strictly a foreign alterity.

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[61] This does not mean that such a harrowing experience destroys *absolutely all* sense of selfhood in the subject. No phenomenon can undermine subjectivity and its will to an extent that these are completely annihilated. No phenomenon can gain absolute control of one's selfhood. If it does so, then this same subjectivity is either rendered unconscious or quite simply dies. In both cases, the phenomenon in question is not really experienced by the subject. It is as if it is nonexistent to it. Any phenomenon, therefore, no matter the degree of self-disruption it presents, presupposes at least a minimal control of one's self, a minimal exercise of its interpretations, throughout its duration. See ''Twixt Exposure and Action', pp. 230-1.

[62] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 325.

[63] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 352.

The Gift (II)

The Mystic as Giver and Givee in the Dark Night: Turning Towards God as a Turning From God

In the dark night, the mystic as giver does not receive anything. Their attempts to *turn towards* the divine become in turn the insufferable experience of a *turning from* the divine. The more they give the divine, the more they suffer from its absence. Their attempts to be closer to God lead to an ever greater awareness of their distance from him. The more the mystic strives to unify themselves with the divine, the more infinite its difference from them is revealed. The greater the effort, the bigger and more painful becomes the failure.

On the ineffectuality of one's actions in the dark night, Guyon remarks, '[God] seems to despise what we do to please Him, and to turn away from it; to have only scorn for what formerly seemed to charm Him; to see Him repay with a terrible coldness and distance what we do for His sake alone, and with terrible flights all our pursuit of Him [...]'.[64]

> [The soul] running hither and thither in search of her Beloved, not only soils herself grievously [...] by falling into faults of surprise and self-esteem, but she wounds herself with the thorns that come in her way. She becomes so wearied at length that she is forced to die in her race for want of help; that is, to expect nothing from herself or her own activity.[65]

There are times in the dark night when the mystic finds themselves once again the recipient of various preternatural episodes. They find themselves the givee of God's communications, brief as these might be at this stage. Very often these consist of ecstasies and raptures. What is different this time is that such divine intimations are not in any way a sustenance to the givee's ego; they do not dispose themselves to it. The ego is incapable of deriving any enjoyment and comprehension from such phenomena but rather finds itself ruptured by their violence, incapable in any way to assume control and appropriate them to itself. Indeed, before the influx of such strongly subversive events, selfhood, finding itself unhinged, can play no role.

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[64] *Torrents,* in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 319.
[65] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 335.

This is seen for instance in the manner such episodes are brought about. It is not the self that initiates them. Rather, they rush upon a consciousness completely unprepared and unsuspecting. Sometimes they even come from a wandering thought. Most significantly, their irruption often intervenes while the mystic is suffering the anguish of God's absence. Torn apart by an excruciating pain of failure, the mystic finds themselves suddenly and violently the givee of a divine intimation. In an impossible instant, their 'turning from' has become a 'turning towards'.

Such supernatural events will last as long as selfhood is kept submissive and dispossessed, powerless to be itself and do anything. They are undergone inasmuch as subjectivity is to a large degree surrendered to them, seized by them. To undergo a rapture or an ecstasy in the dark night is to be almost possessed by it. A radical passivity takes over the givee before the onrush of the divine event. As the event comes to an end, subjectivity finds itself regaining possession of its selfhood and with this the attempt to claim that very phenomenon for itself through its understandings. The moment the preternatural episode starts fading away is the moment subjectivity starts reclaiming power over itself and thus by extension the empowerment to appropriate that episode to itself. The ending moments of the event therefore see the subject striving to turn that event into a source of egotism. Some form of interpretation is at this point brought into being. Very often it involves the awareness that the mystic had been drawn close to the Lord. The mystic starts realizing that they had been drawn close to the divine reality.

The re-assertive attempts undertaken by selfhood once the divine communication starts fading away do not last long. As soon as the self starts taking charge of itself and its experiences, the mystic finds themselves disconcerted once again by the awareness that they have lost God, that there is now a hopeless distance between themselves and God. Extreme distress takes a hold of them once more. No sooner has the self attempted to take authority then it finds itself undermined yet again by the return of the inconsolable anguish.

The untimely abrupt return of the distress together with the radically subversive nature of the preternatural phenomena that often precede it deny the mystic as givee the full capacity of acknowledgement and action in relation to the divine as giver. Receiving from God does not allow their selfhood to be appeased and to respond upon such an appeasement. Their ascetical self is deprived of the satisfaction and gratitude such communications granted it before. Thereby, they do not motivate it or encourage

it to act for God. The moment the ego tries to appropriate to itself what has been experienced through interpretation, it finds itself ravished by a renewed anguish. The mystic cannot give *because* they have been given. Whatever form of giving they initiate is immediately ruined. Any form of a turning towards God ends in failure, ends in a turning from God. Indeed, divine intimations are experienced insofar as this very 'turning towards' is stilled or rendered passive, turned submissive to the influx of alterity.

In *Spiritual Torrents* Guyon describes this dynamic when she writes, '[w]hen [God] sees that [the soul] is becoming disheartened and inclined to give up the race altogether, He looks upon it for a moment, and the poor bride finds herself wounded anew by this look […]. [W]hen she seems to lay hold of Him, He flees from her again'.[66] Teresa of Avila in *Interior Castle* also suggests this when she states that 'often when a person is quite unprepared for such a thing, and is not even thinking of God, he is awakened by His Majesty, as though by a rushing comet or a thunderclap'. This, however, is 'never permanent, and for that reason it never completely enkindles the soul; for, just as the soul is about to become enkindled, the spark dies, and leaves the soul yearning once again to suffer that loving pain of which it is the cause'.[67] Later on, she describes the effects of the divine interventions upon the self as follows:

> Have all these favours which the Spouse has granted the soul been sufficient to satisfy this little dove or butterfly […]? Certainly not; she is in a much worse state than before; for, although she may have been receiving these favours for many years, she is still sighing and weeping, and each of them causes her fresh pain. The reason for this is that, the more she learns about the greatness of her God, while finding herself so far from Him and unable to enjoy Him, the more her desire increases […]. [G]radually, during these years, her desire increases, so that she comes to experience great distress […].[68]

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[66] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 335.
[67] Teresa, *Castle*, pp. 76, 77.
[68] Teresa, *Castle,* pp. 123-4.

God as the Thought of Death:
The Three Attributes of the Sacred
in Relation to the Ego in the Dark Night

God in the dark night is experienced as an absolute otherness to the mystic's identity. His nature is experienced as foreign to the nature of this selfhood, to its perceptions and realizations. The mystic does not know anymore who or what God is, how to pray and act for him, how to approach him once again. The divine becomes the sheer unknown, and in this respect, one can affiliate it with what Bataille and Blanchot call the 'thought of death'.

Like the thought, as long as the mystic at this point concerns themselves with God, they betray him. The 'right' perception or idea of God can never be a part of their horizon of understanding. Insofar as *they* act for God to be nearer to him, insofar as *they* respond to his interventions, they meet with a harrowing failure. Any attempt to appropriate the divine to oneself entails the shocking distress of its ever unbearable distance from oneself. Any effort made by selfhood to be at one with God, to think God as he really is, is always already disastrously ineffectual. Turning towards in any form is a turning from God. Both the thought and God are *evasive*. The subject seeks to attribute God or the thought to its selfhood, only to find it ever escaping such efforts.

God also provokes all the activities of the self. Through the prior phases of the mystic way, subjectivity had learnt to concentrate itself on the divine presence experienced within it. It had slowly managed to focus and motivate its faculties strictly through an awakening transcendental self in contact with the divine. Selfhood had established itself as grounded on this personality. God's absence in the dark night means that the reality which the self had made its own core is now no more. With the withdrawal of what it had grounded itself upon, subjectivity cannot do anything else but *be* one drawn-out yearning for it. Its foundation removed, subjectivity becomes a yearning for it, an intense desire for the God it had been enjoying. If selfhood is here an intense desire for God, then God like the thought *constitutes* it. Its nature consists of a continual complete dependency on another reality that is yet always beyond its reach. Subjectivity in the dark night is the creation of something it cannot partake of. It exists as an impotence to be what it really is, or what it thinks it really is. Absent of its heart,

the self is at this point nothing but a continual craving and search for it. If it endlessly fails in finding its source, it is because that source does not dispose itself anymore to its egotistical nature. What constitutes selfhood is here foreign to its nature.

Subjectivity partakes of what constitutes it when it is *subverted* by it. It experiences the divine not on its own initiative and through its own expectations but through an enforced passivity of its powers. Because he is infinitely other to the self's nature, God can only be approached through a violent dispossession of that self by his otherness. God and the thought, in their otherness to the subject, can only be undergone against that subject's will and through a radical deprivation of its selfhood. The subject is not itself, it cannot be itself, when undergoing the thought or the divine of the dark night. The instant it tries to possess or contain the joy it feels as its encounter with the divine draws to a close, is the instant its 'turning towards' shifts to a 'turning from', and it finds itself undermined again by the anguish of desolation. 'Turning towards' is always already a 'turning from', and by the same token, 'turning from' is always already a 'turning towards'. The three attributes of the thought in relation to the ego – the thought as evasive, constitutive, and subversive – can thus be found also in the mystic's particular 'relationship' with God in the dark night.

IV

The Dark Night as the Sacred (I): Extreme Mastery and Extreme Passivity

In being evasive, constitutive, and subversive, God in the dark night is often seen to be indistinguishable from the thought. In disclosing these three attributes, the divine becomes interchangeable with the otherness of the sacred. He has ceased to be God and is now undergone in the same manner as the thought. He *has* become the thought. As far as the mystic is concerned, God no longer exhibits any relation to such attributes as goodness, love, and hope. In being evasive, he ruins any idea that the mystic can conceive of him. He renders ineffectual all actions that seek to be close to him. In being constitutive, the mystic's selfhood and all its interpretations are established through his reality, but established through their infinite difference from this reality. In being subversive, he undoes most operations of the selfhood and exposes it to his sheer otherness.

The conversion of the divine into the postmodern sacred is phenomenological above anything else. God's identicalness with the thought is *experienced* by the mystic and not interpreted as such. The view that the three attributes of the thought are transferred to the divine is relevant only insofar as we are concerned with the manner the mystic experiences that divine and not in the way that mystic seeks to understand it. The confusion of God and the sacred makes sense only from an experiential point of view. To further disclose the manner this confusion is brought about, we must therefore see how the three attributes of the postmodern sacred in the divine operate in the occurrence of independent experiences. We must observe how such traits are undergone, how they take place in specific events. In this regard, our study must focus more closely on the phenomena themselves. It must ask: how is God evasive,

constitutive, and subversive in the various experiences of the dark night? In this way, we can fully demonstrate the interchangeableness of God and the postmodern sacred in this period of the mystic way.

In doing so, two factors must first be brought to account. Firstly, if we are to observe how the divine is experienced as the thought through particular phenomena, then the phenomena under study would have to be subversive of selfhood by nature. The thought can only be undergone through phenomena that do not allow themselves to be controlled and appropriated by subjectivity. It pertains to events that radically disrupt this very subjectivity, baring it to their complete alterity. God experienced as the postmodern sacred can only be seen through a careful study of such types of events. The sacred, one can say, only 'manifests' itself through such types of events. Secondly, one will find that in the dark night many of these phenomena do not relate directly to the divine. Several of them do not consist of divine communications such as ecstasies and raptures. God as the thought is more than often suffered through his attribute of *evasiveness*.

God's evasiveness, his withdrawal from all of the mystic's endeavours to seek him out, brings about various subversive episodes marked by an extreme anguish, weariness, desire, despair, or apathy, among other types. It is such episodes above all that reveal the experience of God as an experience of the postmodern sacred. Through them, all conceptions of the divine wither away through the arrival of an alterity that can be neither mastered nor understood. The experience of God as the thought will therefore be elucidated both through supernatural experiences and such profane experiences. This is because both kinds of events define the thought or the postmodern sacred. The divine experiences are concerned with a reality that is absolutely foreign to the self in its transcendence. The profane experiences are concerned with a reality that is absolutely foreign to the self in its baseness. Either case describes a self-transgressive absolute alterity that is outside all hermeneutics.

Extreme Mastery in the Dark Night

Many of the events of the dark night can be seen to be intrinsically close in nature to either Bataille's or Blanchot's forms of the sacred. Some reveal a suffering that involves extreme mastery while the suffering underlying others involves extreme passivity.

Bataille's notion of desire is similar to what in the dark night is experienced as a desire for God.[69] The mystic cannot help but yearn to be close to the divine as they had once been. Selfhood occasionally betrays this desire even when it is not disrupted by subversive experiences. Weak or strong, it can be a constant presence dwelling within the mystic for a certain period of time. When felt, it often cannot be controlled or suppressed. Its force gradually overpowers the mystic. It becomes an obsession that completely possesses them. They become blind and deaf to everything but this longing. They are taken over; their reality becomes one agonized yearning.

This sensorial desire, which is frequently experienced also through nonphysical emotions, induces the mystic to undertake all kinds of religious-spiritual activities which they think would bring them closer to the goal of this desire, the divine. Through their efforts they seek to be one with God through their own initiative, through the intentions and knowledge of the possessive selfhood. As in the experiences of desire evoked in Bataille's writings, however, the more the mystic exerts themselves in this regard, the more they find themselves failing. The more they reach out for God, the more insufferable is the anguish of their miscarried actions. Moreover, their desire grows every time they find themselves consumed by this distress. They fall only to find themselves getting up again inspired ever more fervently by a desperate determination to seek out the divine. The mystic is intoxicated by the obsession of turning towards God. This vicious circle of persistently striving only to persistently fail continues very often to the point of utter exhaustion. We see this dynamic in Henry of Suso's dark night which is described in his *Life* as an 'active night'. Here, he is constantly urged by interior voices and visions to act, 'and the more active he was forced to be, the darker

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[69] For a description of Bataille's sacred as an extreme mastery and his view on rapture, refer to 'Monomanaics and Neurotics', pp. 43-9.

and more painful it became […], once he began to meddle with practical life, soon disclosed his native simplicity and lost the reputation for wisdom and piety […]'.[70]

Underhill describes this obsessive longing as follows:

> In persons of a very highly strung and mobile type, who tend to rapid oscillations between pain and pleasure states, rather than to the long, slow movement of an ascending consciousness, attainment of the Unitive Life is sometimes preceded by the abrupt invasion of a wild and unendurable desire to 'see God', apprehend the Transcendent in Its fullness: which can only, they think, be satisfied by death […]. [T]heir movement to union with God is foreshadowed by a passionate and uncontrollable longing for ultimate Reality.[71]

The desire as undergone in the dark night is marked by both pleasure and pain. It is a yearning that is anguishing and yet also pleasurable in its anguish. It is in fact not unlike the suffering of a deep heartache or lovesickness for an absent lover. Teresa of Avila calls it a 'delectable woundedness'. 'Having won such great favours', she remarks in *Interior Castle*, 'the soul is so anxious to have complete fruition of their Giver that its life becomes sheer though delectable torture'.[72]

As John of the Cross suggests in *Dark Night*, all faculties of selfhood here find themselves concentrated on this desire.[73] The self becomes indissolubly bound to it. The desire is experienced as the very core of selfhood. It is a substitute of the transcendental self. Now that this source upholding the self has gone, what remains at the very roots of the self is the painful desire for it. The absence left at the heart of selfhood has turned into a feverish longing for what has been lost. As long as this self remains in control of the subject, however, this longing is impossible to satisfy. This is because of the infinitely different nature of that reality which has constituted the self. Even when it had partaken of the divine in previous stages of the mystic way, this very partaking was to a large extent turned into a projection or an appropriation of itself. It was egotistic. The self had always been a *misguided reaction* to God's otherness. From the very start, the reality it had developed itself through, had not been perceived and experienced in its true nature. Selfhood had fashioned itself *through* a misguided conception and experience of God and a misguided conception and experience of itself in relation to God. Its essential nature is based on such misguidedness. It is founded on

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[70] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 407. See also p. 410.

[71] Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 394.

[72] Teresa, *Castle,* p. 97. See pp. 75-8, for Teresa of Avila's description of the state of delectable woundedness.

[73] See *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 353-4.

an antithetical, because egotistical, reaction to the divine reality. Subjectivity has *(mis)construed* itself through the divine. The dark night thus presents this self as constructed from a reality that it can never be a part of insofar as it is this self which strives to join with it.[74]

Another event in the dark night that seems to have an affinity with Bataille's sacred takes place as a reaction to what is often called 'aridity'. Aridity is a state marked by a deep existential emptiness. The mystic is stricken by an emptiness and apathy towards everything, including things related to God. Sometimes, however, this condition instigates a mania of activity and religious practice. Here, it is not desire that triggers such actions but precisely the lack of it. *Desirelessness* prompts the mystic to throw themselves into a frenzy of religious-spiritual pursuits. Action is taken to escape or distract oneself from aridity. It is also pursued because this condition, and sometimes the unbearable anguish that comes from it, provoke a frantic search for a remedy.

Activity again presumes that one's intentions and actions would cover the distance from the divine. The harder the efforts, the stronger is the belief that God is being loved, the stronger is the belief in one's progress towards finally being at one with him. Inevitably, however, all attempts at turning towards God are hopelessly inadequate to reach him. The more the mystic struggles, the greater grows their aridity and the deeper is the anguish this can cause. As Guyon confesses, 'whatever I tried for a remedy seemed only to increase the malady'.[75] In *Spiritual Torrents* she also states,

> the soul must fall, not into sin, but into a privation of the previous degree and of feeling. It does its best to rise after it falls; it does all in its power to restrain itself, and to cling to some devotional exercises and it makes an effort to recover its former peace; it seeks solitude in the hope of recovering it. But its labor is in vain […]. It is astonished to find that it has lost its love for prayer and devotion. It does violence to itself by continuing in it. It finds only death at every step. That which formerly revived it is now the case of its death. Its peace has gone, and has left a trouble and agitation stronger than ever, caused as much by the passions, as by crosses, which increase outwardly, and which it has no strength to bear […]. Life has become death to her […]. [T]he steeper the rocks, and the greater the obstacles which oppose her course, the more she redoubles her speed.
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> [The soul] seeks to cleanse and to purify herself, but she is no sooner washed than she seems to fall into a slough yet more filthy and polluted than that from

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[74] See for example *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, pp. 138-9; *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 333; *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 61.
[75] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 94.

which she has just escaped. She does not see that it is because she runs that she contracts defilement, and falls so frequently, yet she is so ashamed to run in this condition, that she does not know where to hide herself.[76]

Falling ever deeper into the suffering and despair of ineffectuality with every attempt, the mystic then often turns their activity to worldly matters. They might seek respite in occupations related to sensuous enjoyment: outings in the countryside, eating, and sleeping, for instance. They might also try to look for comfort in other secular activities such as constant conversations with other people. Time and again, however, these fail to provide the self-satisfaction the mystic is so desperate to achieve. As Guyon maintains, 'seeing that [the soul] no longer finds support in God [it then] seeks it in the creature, but it finds none; and its unfaithfulness only increases its apprehension'. '[The soul] can find no rest in the creature, having tasted of the Creator. She dashes on more vehemently […]'.[77]

The escalation in the mystic's anguish often seems to reach a point at which it seems to become too overpowering and crushing to struggle against. The distress brought about by the incessant impotence eventually becomes so excessive that it reaches a toll of the blackest despair. All hope seems to have been lost: all desire and the resolve this inspired are smothered by this peak of insufferable helplessness. This desolation robs the mystic of almost all control over themselves and their actions. It is often here, in the most unexpected of moments, that ecstasy suddenly intervenes. Surrendered to the most abject of miseries, the mystic suddenly finds themselves liberated very temporarily from this anguish and the desire which had been causing it, usually by a very powerful form of this preternatural event.

Unfortunately this does not last long. As suddenly and unpredictably as the ecstasy is undergone, it is just as suddenly and unpredictably lost. The ecstasy leaves and the mystic starts regaining control of their faculties. Recovery of their selfhood in turn coincides with a renewed anguish. This is effected by the return of the desire for God, and inseparable from this desire, the returning consciousness of God's absence. The mystic is yet again subjected to the suffering that comes from the desired one's loss. They are exposed once more to a sense of their sheer impotence before the divine. As Guyon discloses in *Spiritual Torrents*, '[w]hen you see the soul reduced to the last extremity, and out of breath from its constant pursuit, you show yourself for a moment

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[76] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 321-3, 327.
[77] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 322, 323.

that it may recover life, only to be killed a thousand times with ever increasing severity'. '[I]n the terrible confusion into which [the souls] are thrown, [the Lord] gives them a glimpse of Himself. He touches them with His sceptre […] that they may not die; but His tender caresses only serve to increase their confusion at the thought of having displeased Him'. A bit further on, she remarks again that the soul 'does not cease to run after Him, but the faster she goes, the further He seems to leave her behind; and if He stops, it is only for a moment, that she may recover breath'.[78]

The Gift as Aridity

Experiences of extreme passivity in the dark night can be more effectively captured in the context of the gift. Bataille and Blanchot also designate the sacred through this type of phenomenology. As with Derrida, their gift is 'with neither giver nor receiver'. It 'can neither be asked for nor given'. Beyond my will, I find myself answering an unknown, anonymous appeal. Without knowing how, why, or what, I find myself responding to an impossible demand to give. This giving is an *infinite* process. It is never allowed to rest in itself. It never satisfies and realizes what is demanded. The gift is the 'infinite given' in that it is an impulse that never stops demanding more and more to be given. The act of giving is incessantly falling short of itself as a further more radical act of giving is urged for. Giving is ever exceeding itself in giving. The act of giving leads to a giving of that very act of giving. This gift of giving is always becoming a giving of that giving, a '[g]ift of the gift'.[79]

The compulsion that drags me into this inordinate giving is beyond my powers. It is an impulse to give what I cannot give: unconditional giving. I am stricken by the demand for an unrestrained loss of my selfhood. This brings about the suffering of my infinite deprivation. Giving is loss that is ever surpassing itself in loss: loss becoming its own loss, a 'loss of loss'.[80] At this point, to give is 'to abandon and to give oneself:

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[78] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 325, 323, 324.
[79] Blanchot, *Disaster,* pp. 50, 50, 109, 50. For the concept of 'infinity', see 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 49-50, 55-6.
[80] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 68.

to give oneself wholly to limitless abandonment'.[81]   This irrational and exorbitant submission is both outside the giver's knowledge and outside its volition. The infinity of giving or loss is an endless and increasing disempowerment of my selfhood.   It expresses the process of oneself as incessantly unable to be oneself, oneself as incessantly failing to take control. I am continuously stripped of all my power, taken in by a progressive impotence at doing anything, being anything. My giving is therefore a giving of myself as limitless incapacity. What is given is what I do not know I am giving and what I do not want to give. It is strictly what '*cannot be given*'.[82] The gift is that 'there is nothing to give or to give up'.[83] The gift is myself as unable to give. It is in truth my subjugation to an unknown force. My selfhood is afflicted by the suffering of an extreme passivity or paralysis. My exposure is to a '*gift of very passivity, gift of what cannot be given*'.[84]

The dynamics of the gift in the dark night can be expressed through the two types of darkness intrinsic to many of the experiences of this period.[85] God has ceased to be felt, and the soul, because it is still blinded by its ascetical self and its solipsistic conception of God, is unable to intuit the true divine in its otherness. What it sees itself undergoing is God's workings but absent God. In the dark night, this often entails the increasing loss of one's selfhood and its faculties. The subject finds itself divested of its self-identity and its powers. Various phenomena in the dark night expose this deprivation.

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[81] Blanchot, *Community*, p. 15.
[82] Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 47.
[83] Blanchot, *Community*, p. 15.
[84] Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 47. The phenomenon of the gift can be seen to be equivalent to what Derrida calls the 'desert in the desert'. Like *khora*, the desert is a region that unremittingly drains all forms of decision from their conviction and significance, all knowledge from its assurance and truthfulness. Every determination in this most arid of places is emptied of its reality and becomes an indetermination. A deterioration is effected that ceaselessly outdoes itself in the impotence it provokes. The exhaustion of resolve incessantly turns into an exhaustion of that exhaustion. To suffer the desert is to suffer a desertification that endlessly turns against itself in its desertification. The experience of the desert is always undermined by a further desert within that desert. If this event opens towards a perpetual deterioration of all subjective supports, then it precisely destroys all forms and semblances of any goal that is being sought. All objectives are revealed as inherently ineffectual. Every certainty turns endlessly into uncertainty, every movement into stagnation. This event brings about a disempowering impasse to all my decisions. I am stuck in 'the aporia of the no-way out' ('Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of "Reason" Alone', trans. Samuel Weber, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 43). Left purposeless and perplexed, I find myself committed to a drifting, a wandering, a destinerrance. See for instance 'Faith', in Derrida, *Acts*, pp. 55, 57, 60; Derrida, 'Post-Scriptum', in *Negative Theology*, pp. 298-9, 320; 'A Silkworm of One's Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)', in Derrida, *Acts*, pp. 316-7.
[85] See above, pp. 73-4.

A form of self-disempowerment can be seen in various episodes of aridity. These are synonymous with the extreme passivity that characterizes Blanchot's sacred. The mystic is oppressed by an overwhelming sense of nothingness. Subjected to this existential void, the will start deteriorating. This disempowering exhaustion often increasingly deprives one from undertaking any kind of activity. The very faculties of feeling and thought become inoperative. Selfhood is severely enfeebled by an infinite fatigue that exceeds all attempts at being controlled or suppressed. Among the mystics, John of the Cross and Guyon especially give voice to this state of weariness. Such an affliction, John of the Cross remarks,

> makes the soul feel within itself the other extreme – its own intimate poverty and misery […]: an emptiness and poverty in regard to three classes of goods (temporal, natural, and spiritual) […], and is conscious of being in the midst of the contrary evils (the miseries of imperfections, aridities and voids in the apprehensions of the faculties, and an abandonment of the spirit in darkness).[86]

The soul, Guyon claims, 'has lost all good works, such as outward charity, care for the poor, readiness to help others, but she has not lost the divine virtues. Here, however, these too must be lost, so far as their practice is concerned, or rather the habit of exercising them, as acquired by herself, in order to appear fair'.[87]

In the mystics' texts there are also indications that this passivity is increasing all the time. Selfhood finds itself stripped ever more drastically of its faculties and supports. It is ever more giving in to the deep impression of a void that has seized it and will not let go. As Guyon claims in *The Way to God*, '[i]n proportion as you become enfeebled and destitute of every operation and activity of Love, however insignificant, the Will, which was founded in that vigor of Love, becoming weaker day by day, gradually disappears […]'.[88] Guyon conveys the worsening of this process most prominently in *Spiritual Torrents* as she gives an account of the last stages of the dark night which she calls the 'mystic death'.[89] Here, the 'poor soul, after having lost its all, must at last lose its own life by an utter self-despair, or rather it must die worn out by terrible fatigue'.[90] Above all instances in the dark night, the period of the mystic death especially attests to the gradual deprivation of the soul's understanding, memory,

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[86] *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 338.
[87] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 332.
[88] *Way to God,* in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 286.
[89] For references to the 'mystic death', see for instance *Way to God*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 288-90.
[90] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 337.

and will, followed by a withdrawal of the transcendental self from these faculties. Its last moments – what Guyon calls the 'degree of burial' – completes the process of the soul's dispossession of all inclination and activity together with any remaining spiritual and emotional gratification of God.

> [The soul] has no sooner expired, than it loses all vital action, all desire, inclination, tendency, choice, repugnance, and aversion. As it draws near to death, it grows weaker; but its life, though languishing and agonizing, is still life […]. The soul falls into a depth of misery from which there is no escape […]. It must lose not only all prayer, every gift of God, but God Himself to all appearance – that is, so far as He was possessed selfishly by the ego. And not lose Him for one, two, or three years, but for ever. All facility for good, all active virtue, are taken away from it […]. The soul will soon be in an entire oblivion.[91]

Sometimes extreme passivity is seen also in the mystic's very activity and devotional practice. In the torpor of their emotions and intellect, the mystic's world and their conceptions of the divine oppress them with the exhausting familiarity of an 'exteriority without interiority'.[92] This boundless fatigue drains all action of any trace of passion and motivation. Action of any form stops being a source of egotistical nourishment. It turns into the clockwork of a routine. All activity is performed for the sake of being performed. It is undertaken mechanically or with a mindless spontaneity out of sheer habit. All significance – emotional, intellectual, and spiritual – has been drained out of it. As Teresa of Avila writes in *Life*, the soul 'seems to go on by habit' since its '[f]aith is then as dead, and asleep, like all the other virtues […]'.[93] She describes this state as

> a certain foolishness […] when I seem to be doing neither good nor evil, but following in the wake of others, as they say, without pain or pleasure, indifferent to life and death, pleasure and pain. I seem to have no feeling. The soul seems to me like a little ass, which feeds and thrives, because it accepts the food which is given to it, and eats it without reflection.[94]

Perhaps no one captures this passivity, whether suffered in activity or inactivity, more vividly than Guyon. For Guyon, in the dark night,

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[91] See *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 339-40.
[92] Massie, 'Secret', in *Research in Phenomenology*, p. 48.
[93] St. Teresa of Avila, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. David Lewis (New York: Cosimo, 2006), p. 233.
[94] Teresa, *Life*, p. 237.

> the soul is reduced to a state of nothingness, and has become like a person who does not exist, and never will exist; it does nothing, either good or ill. Formerly it thought of itself, now it thinks no longer. All that is of grace is done as if it were of nature, and there is no longer either pain or pleasure. All that there is, is that its ashes remain as ashes, without the hope of ever being anything but ashes. It is utterly dead, and nothing affects it either from without or within – that is, it is no longer troubled by any sensible impressions.[95]

The experience of aridity is the suffering of a death-in-life. It disempowers selfhood and its willpower by an exhaustion that exceeds all attempts at control. The mystic 'gives' without intending or knowing what they give. Their giving is not willed by them. They give what they themselves cannot give. They give themselves not as themselves. Rather, they give themselves as self-impotence. What is given is oneself as an inability to be oneself, as an inability to love others and God. Impotence here entails a withdrawal of what had previously grounded selfhood, the transcendental self. The absence of the transcendental self which subjectivity had made its foundation leads to an incapability in the faculties to draw any further motivation and inspiration from the divine reality.

Aridity is an estrangement from all forms of experience – emotional, intellectual, and spiritual. It is as if the mystic finds themselves becoming more and more anaesthetized in their faculties and thus isolated and detached from those realities they had partaken of before. This isolation, which is not far from despair, is the suffering of a foreign void underlying all experience. Estrangement posits the mystic in a reality that is *outside* all known realities, a reality that is an insufferable nothingness. They find themselves being ever carried away by this outside, towards this outside, from actuality and its instances. Belonging nowhere, partaking of no known experience, this reality, like the region of *khora*, is a *no-place*. Augustine Baker suggests this no-place in such statements as the following: '[The soul] seeks God, and cannot find the least marks or footsteps of His Presence […]. [I]ndeed, she is now in a region of all other most distant from spirit and spiritual operation – I mean, such as are perceptible'.[96] John of Ruysbroeck claims as much:

> [T]he man goes out and finds himself to be poor, miserable, and abandoned. Here all the storm, the fury, the impatience of his love, grow cool: glowing summer turns to autumn, all its riches are transformed into a great poverty. And the man begins to complain because of his wretchedness: for where now are the

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[95] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 342.
[96] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 387, from Baker, *Holy Wisdom*.

ardours of love, the intimacy, the gratitude, the joyful praise; and the interior consolation, the secret joy, the sensible sweetness? How have all these things failed him? And the burning violence of his love, and all the gifts which he felt before. How has all this died in him? And he feels like some ignorant man who has lost all his learning and his works […] and of this misery there is born the fear of being lost, and as it were a sort of half-doubt: and this is the lowest point at which a man can hold his ground without falling into despair.[97]

Various other mystics evoke this liminal place by stressing not only one's estrangement from the spiritual-divine world but also the estrangement from the profane world of the senses and beings. The mystic is seen to be constantly exposed to the misunderstandings, suspicion, and aversion of people to whom they are closest, especially those who are supposed to help them progress in the mystic way, that is, their confessors and spiritual advisors. In her autobiography especially, Teresa of Avila recounts how one of her trials was her inability to bide the company of anyone and how '[servants of God] looked upon [her] as deficient in humility; and when they detected any of [her] faults – they might have detected many – they condemned [her] at once'. They inspired her with neither confidence nor fear, and made her feel she was deceiving herself in recounting to them the visions and ecstasies or the trials she was suffering from. Because of her condition of aridity – her 'profession of the faith […] hardly more than an outward profession of the mouth' – she found herself becoming increasingly vulnerable and tormented by their various abrasive accusations of her.[98]

More so than Teresa of Avila, the principal trial of Henry of Suso's dark night was constituted by the play of two chief forces upon him: 'The absence of God whom he loved, the enmity of man whom he feared […]'.[99] The latter distress was caused mostly by unjust ill-repute, the contempt and unfriendliness of others towards him, and their miscomprehension of his activities. A substantial part of Henry of Suso's *Life* is a long and dismal catalogue of the enemies he had made, the slanders which he endured. Finding refuge in God was likewise impossible. This no-exit tribulation is indeed related to him in a vision by a young man who presents him with a knight's attire:

Thou hast been immersed in the divine sweetness like a fish in the sea. Now I will withdraw all this. It is my will that thou shouldst be deprived of it, and that thou suffer from this privation; that thou shouldst be abandoned of God and of

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[97] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 392, from St. John of Ruysbroeck, *Adornment of the Spiritual Marriage*, trans. P. Wynschenk Dom. (London: 1916).
[98] Teresa, *Life,* pp. 218, 233.
[99] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 410.

man, that thou shouldst be publicly persecuted by the friends of thine enemies. I will tell it thee in a word: all thou shalt undertake, that might bring thee joy and consolation, shall come to nothing, and all that might make thee suffer and be vexatious to thee shall succeed.[100]

As Guyon also vividly remarks, 'after God had taken from me one [support] after another, He withdrew also Himself. I remained without any creature; and to complete my distress, I seemed to be left without God, who alone could support me in such a deeply distressing state'. Neither here nor there, '[the soul] does not know where to hide herself'.[101]

Often the no-place is interpreted as the experience of the infinite difference between the as yet possessive soul and the true nature of the divine. The mystic and God are opposites and the soul must disengage itself from the world of beings if it is to partake of God. The no-place is precisely this state of absolute extrication from any remaining attachments with the reality of beings and its underlying ego. Guyon's mystic death sometimes expresses the no-place from this perspective. Death, as she explains,

> is a separation from Self in order that we may pass into God; a loss, total and entire, of the Will of the creature, which causes the soul to be wanting to itself, that it may exist only in God […]. The Soul is dead as soon as it is separated from Self; but this death or mystic decease is not complete until it has passed into God. Until then, it suffers very greatly, but its suffering is general and indistinct, and proceeds solely from the fact that it is not yet established in its proper place.[102]

In the mystic death, in the no-place, the soul has detached itself from the world of beings but has not as yet passed into the divine.

To suffer this in-between region is thereby to suffer a dying from all experiences. No support or consolation, spiritual or otherwise, can replace or win over this dying of everything, from everything. This region entails all that is experienced and understood as deteriorating. It is an endless nothingness seizing all realities that the mystic had been in contact with. Everything is continuously revealed as nothing. This nowhere space is thereby abyssal in the sense that nothing upholds it. It has no

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[100] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 406, from St. B. Henry Suso, *Life of B. Henry Suso*, trans T. F. Knox (London: 1913).

[101] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 96; *Torrents,* in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 327.

[102] *Way to God*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 290. See also *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 102-4; *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 336-39; *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 126-7.

foundation or grounding in anything but is an irrepressible void ever undermining all known realities.

V

The Dark Night as the Sacred (II): General Attributes of the Sacred Event

Physical Sentience

The sacred for both Bataille and Blanchot is marked by some significant characteristics that are also revealed in several events of the dark night. Once again, we must attempt to capture these phenomena *as* they are happening, *as* they are experienced, if we are to bring to light their affinity with the postmodern sacred.

These events come to pass in extreme close proximity to selfhood. They take place on a level that is more intimate to subjectivity than the consciousness of itself and its faculties. The part of selfhood affected here is subliminal. These instants instigate an *alteration* within the regions of the subconscious. They are often expressions of a certain kind of radical change in a place outside the waking self, a place which upholds and sustains that very self. This preconscious faculty is here the transcendental self. Intense distress often includes moments of a certain withdrawal (or further withdrawal) of the transcendental self from the self's faculties. Intense joy usually involves a certain approach of the transcendental self towards the self. In both cases, the effect this provokes in the subject is chiefly visceral. The alteration in the unconscious is felt through the *sensations*. Corporeal sentience is the closest faculty to the subliminal regions. Any alteration that occurs outside of the conscious faculties is experienced

firstly through the corporeal emotions. Such events can be rightly characterized as *affects*.[103]

The movement of the transcendental self thereby releases a flow of sensation. Despair, desire, joy, aridity, anguish, and so on, are to a large extent different kinds of physical sentience. Such events come upon the mystic unawares. As with any affect, the will plays no part in initiating the phenomenon. What happens is completely unanticipated, catching the mystic by surprise.[104] Teresa of Avila emphasizes this in her portrayals of desire and ecstasy:

> These other impetuosities are very different. It is not we who apply the fuel; the fire is already kindled, and we are thrown into it in a moment to be consumed. It is by no efforts of the soul that it sorrows over the wound which the absence of our Lord has inflicted on it; it is far otherwise; for an arrow is driven into the entrails to the very quick, and into the heart at times, so that the soul knows not what is the matter with it, nor what it wishes for […]. It is impossible to describe or explain the way in which God wounds the soul, nor the very grievous pain inflicted, which deprives it of all self-consciousness; yet this pain is so sweet, that there is no joy in the world which gives greater delight.[105]

In the affect, the sensorial influx always *exceeds* self-awareness and its intentionality. Its force ruptures the self and prevents it from coinciding with itself, thereby preventing it from taking charge by appropriation. The self's efforts are continuously broken by a surplus it is unable to contain, by a surplus it cannot affirm itself over. John of the Cross in *The Dark Night* expresses this sensorial saturation as follows: 'As the waters sometimes overflow in such a way that they inundate everything, this roaring and feeling [of one's wretchedness] so increases that in seeping

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[103] This does not mean that affects in the dark night are not experienced also through other aspects of subjectivity. In addition to the sensorial, we can mention in this regard the eliciting of spiritual emotions, that is, emotions that come directly from the transcendental self, whether it is close or quite distant from the conscious faculties. The presence of such a sensibility is indeed quite strong in the case of ecstasies (see 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 191-3). This section, however, concentrates on the sensorial aspect of all such events in seeking to trace out the similarity between these events and the postmodern sacred. See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 358-63, for a description of ecstasies considered from the physical aspect.

[104] Exceptions to this case are those ecstasies the mystic enters gradually by contemplating or absorbing themselves on an idea they invoke in their mind. This, however, is not so frequent in the dark night inasmuch as ecstasies here are often undergone without warning and any preparation whatsoever. I am also presupposing those ecstasies that are triggered by a sudden idea in the mystic's thoughts, the hearing of some word, or the looking at some symbol. In all these cases, the mystic is alerted by something that is intimately meaningful to them. The ecstasy this leads to, however, is still completely unanticipated and beyond control. Like most others in the dark night, its experience subverts all forms of appropriation in forcing exposure to a sensorial inflow. The cause of such an event is completely inadequate at explaining why that event has come about, what that event entails and signifies. See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 359, 364-5, for ecstasies, and pp. 375-6, for raptures.

[105] Teresa, *Life,* p. 224.

through and flooding everything, it fills all one's deep affections and energies with indescribable spiritual anguish and suffering'.[106]

One of the strongest forms of affects in the dark night is the ecstasy. This supernatural phenomenon is more intense and powerful in this stage of the mystic way than in all the previous stages.[107] The surge of subliminal intuitions is here so violent that it disempowers the self almost completely. The self is a hair's breadth away from totally losing itself to the sensorial onslaught. Ecstasy, as Underhill explains, 'merely indicates the presence of certain abnormal psycho-physical conditions: an alteration of the normal equilibrium, a shifting of consciousness […]'. '[I]nstead of developing naturally from a state of intense absorption in the Divine Vision, [ecstasy] may seize the subject abruptly and irresistibly, when in his normal state of consciousness. This is strictly what ascetic writers mean by Rapture.' Rapture inaugurates a 'violent uprush of subliminal intuitions' which 'disorganizes the normal consciousness, overpowers the will and the senses, and entails more or less complete entrancement'.[108]

A remarkable instance of this sensorial possession is what Teresa of Avila calls the 'dark rapture'. This phenomenon, she tells us, happened right after she experienced either ecstasy or a deep desire to be close to God. What followed was a deep sense of loss, an acute distress that came from the awareness of the immeasurable distance between herself and the divine. This anguish was so intense that it rose to the heights of a 'negative rapture, an ecstasy of deprivation'.[109] The agonizing sentience took over her selfhood and became an ecstasy, or a negative ecstasy. She found herself so consumed

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[106] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 349.

[107] See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 381-6. I am here dismissing from study those forms of supernatural phenomena that are related to the intellect or the imagination in being intrinsically different in nature from the affect. Intellectual and imaginary visions are visions that very often arise in the act of contemplation: they are evoked, that is, through an endeavour of the intellect. To a great extent their experiencing touches upon the mind's faculties. Moreover, they are usually provoked or prepared for by the mystics themselves. Even if they come upon them unanticipated, their very experiencing depends upon a mind that is in the appropriate concentrated and recollected state to receive them (see Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 279-85). This is very often not the case with ecstasies in the dark night. In this regard, one should consider also the very frequent perception of these ecstasies as moments of very close proximity, even union, with God. Here, ecstasy, like several of the other experiences of anguish, desire, aridity, and so on, inaugurates an event that to a large extent prevents the consciousness from functioning. What this means is that, like most other self-subversive experiences in the dark night, it is interpreted in any form only *after* it has been undergone. Only in the aftermath of such events, that is, only when consciousness regains its freedom and empowerment, is it capable of explaining in any way what it has just gone through. Ecstasy is seen as the experiencing of an intimacy with God only after its passing.

[108] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 360, 375, 376. See also Teresa, *Life,* p. 225; *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 61. The force of several ecstasies even extinguishes the last spark of consciousness that was experiencing their joyful sentience. In such cases, the event ends with unconsciousness. Indeed, Underhill remarks that ecstasy includes 'a longer period of complete unconsciousness, which may pass into a death-like catalepsy, lasting for hours […]' (Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 360).

[109] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 394.

by sorrow that it dispossessed her. 'During the time that it lasts', she says, 'we cannot think of anything that has to do with our own existence: it instantaneously enchains the faculties in such a way that they have no freedom to do anything, except what will increase this pain'.[110]

Temporality (I)

The sensorial invasion of the affect exposes one to *depersonalized* time. This sense of temporality is undergone as a series of *returns*.[111] In the dark night, this is suggested especially in those episodes related to negative sensations such as anguish, aridity, and despair. As Guyon attests, '[w]hen you see the soul reduced to the last extremity, and out of breath from its constant pursuit, you show yourself for a moment that it may recover life, only to be killed a thousand times with ever increasing severity'.[112] This is because after the soul is 'deprived of all things, both inward and outward, which are not essential, the work begins upon those which are [...]'.[113] John of the Cross suggests the return when he states that in the dark night, 'when a person feels safest, and least expects it, the purgation returns to engulf him in another degree more severe, dark, and piteous than the former and which lasts for another period of time, perhaps longer than the first. He thereby believes that his blessings are gone forever'.[114]

Depersonalized time also presupposes the loss of one's own sense of past and future. The bygone and the to-come are divested of their intimacy and assume *anonymity*. In the dark night, the mystic sees their personal past at large as a state of proximity to God. At present, they no longer experience any form of spiritual comfort and support. The mystic therefore regards the past, from the perspective of the now, as a state they have lost. Their recollection is constituted by an awareness of being no longer close to God. Their memories are defined by a spiritual state which they no

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[110] Teresa, *Castle*, p. 124.
[111] For a more detailed explanation of the temporality of the sacred as a return, refer to 'Monomanaics and Neurotics', pp. 36-8.
[112] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 325.
[113] *Way to God*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 285.
[114] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 342-3.

longer partake of. Exposure to an affect, however, dispossesses them of their self-identity and its particular past. They are torn out of their own sense of time and into a depersonalized space. Their past loses all traces of having belonged to them. It is as if this personal past of divine love ceases to be theirs anymore. It estranges itself from them; it becomes a time that was never lived by them. What happened before turns into the vagueness of an unreality. Its remoteness from experience distorts it into what seems to be a fiction. This obscured past gives way to a past that is not the mystic's and belongs to no one. The mystic has no recollection whatsoever of what happened in the past they now find themselves undergoing. What happened in this new past and is no more is now unknown and had never been experienced. Something had happened that is now not happening, but what that something is, is foreign to understanding. And this is because it was never a part of the self of experience. If the mystic's personal past was a *no-longer with God*, *this* past is a mere *no-longer*.

When subjected to this anonymous time, Teresa of Avila claims that 'knowledge of God becomes [to the soul] as that of something which it hears of far away […]. [I]t recollects nothing of its own former experience'.[115] She also suggests this form of temporality when she claims,

> I forgot all the mercies our Lord had shown me, and remembered them only as a dream, to my great distress; for my understanding was so dull, that I had a thousand doubts and suspicions whether I had ever understood matters aright, thinking that perhaps all was fancy, and that it was enough for me to have deceived myself […].[116]

If the soul, she says, 'has done anything good, or His Majesty has granted it any favour, the whole thing seems to it like a dream or a fancy […]'.[117] John of the Cross also evokes this suffering of an anonymous temporality in this passage from *The Dark Night*:

> [A] person can neither pray vocally nor be attentive to spiritual matters, nor still less attend to temporal affairs and business. Furthermore, he frequently experiences such absorption and profound forgetfulness in the memory that long periods pass without his knowing what he did or thought about, and he knows not what he is doing or about to do, nor can he concentrate on the task at hand, even though he desires to.[118]

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[115] Teresa, *Life*, p. 233.
[116] Teresa, *Life,* p. 231.
[117] Teresa, *Castle*, p. 74.
[118] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 344.

Selfhood

Depersonalized temporality is undergone by a depersonalized form of consciousness. This is a consciousness marked by its inexorability. The mystic can neither control it nor escape from it. On the one hand, the impersonal self is the awareness of one's incapacity of affirming oneself and appropriating what is happening to that self-affirmation. It is the consciousness of an unrelenting dislocation in one's consciousness. I am suffering from the persistent alertness that I am not myself, that I cannot possess myself. On the other hand, this consciousness is the awareness of one's incapacity of forgetting it. I am suffering from the consciousness of being unable to relieve myself from this consciousness. I am conscious that I cannot be or do anything else but remain bound to it.

The impersonal self is constituted of these two forces acting in contrary directions. It is a consciousness brought about *by* the paralysis of one's selfhood. It is a consciousness *of* such a paralysis. I am afflicted by a paralytic consciousness that is a consciousness of my paralysis. In the dark night, the impotence intrinsic to this awareness is sometimes experienced as bliss in ecstasies and raptures. More often than not, it brings about anguish, despair, and aridity. Depersonalized consciousness is the experience of a self that cannot be endured: an unremitting presence that offers no respite. The impersonal self offers no escape. The neither-nor that constitutes it – the inability to be oneself and the inability to be anything else – usually makes of its experience a suffering not unlike an unendurable claustrophobia or an endless strangulation.[119]

John of the Cross alludes to this form of selfhood when he points out that

> [e]verything becomes narrow for this soul: there is no room for it within itself, neither is there any room for it in heaven or on earth; and it is filled with sorrows unto darkness […]. This affliction the soul undergoes here is a suffering unaccompanied by the comfort of certain hope for some spiritual light and good.[120]

The impersonal self like the no-place is the state of finding oneself, as Guyon remarks, 'banished from all beings without finding a support of refuge in anything. I could not

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[119] See also 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 34-5, for a further explanation of the impersonal self.
[120] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 354.

more practice any virtue with facility'. She continues to describe this condition when she states that '[l]aden with miseries, weighed down with oppressions, and crushed under continual crosses, I thought of nothing but ending my days thus. There remained in me not the least hope of ever emerging'.[121] Teresa of Avila also suggests the impersonal self especially in relation to the pain that frequently follows divine intimations:

> All is wearisome; [the soul] cannot run away – it sees itself chained and imprisoned; it feels then most keenly the captivity into which the body has brought us, and the wretchedness of this life […]. [H]ere it often cries with so much violence, that it is as if it would go out of the body in search of its freedom, now that they do not take it away. It is as a slave sold into a strange land […].[122]

Temporality (II)

If the personal past of the mystic is defined by a loss of divine love, their sense of a future is the aspiration to partake again of this love. In their thoughts and deeds, the mystic strives for the hope of a future when they would be reunited with God as they had been prior to the dark night. Their sense of what is to come is above all a *not-yet with God*.

Taken out of themselves by the various subversive episodes of the dark night, the mystic's futurity, like their past, is divested from its intimate relationship to them. What is to come becomes anonymous. The not-yet with God dissolves into a *not-yet*. Beyond their powers, the mystic is drawn towards a prospect that is unknown and alien to them. They are taken in by a force that pulls towards a time to come that does not belong to them, in which they do not have any role, in which their self does not exist. This force that moves them is an irresistible desire. The mystic is drawn by the allure of a prospect completely foreign to their nature. Attraction is here for the hope of an otherness to come. This is an intrinsic component of depersonalized consciousness. To

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[121] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 93-4, 111.
[122] Teresa, *Life*, pp. 152-3.

suffer this selfhood is to suffer the powerlessness to flee from it. Intrinsic to its experience then, is the endless desire to find relief from its insistent presence. This is an uncontrollable yearning *to be* an otherness that is not yet and thereby escape the unbearable condition one is in. The sense of futurity that opens before the dispossessed subjectivity is defined as such.[123]

What pulls the mystic is an overpowering desire to be what is absolutely foreign to their nature. The longing is to cease being themselves, to get away completely from their self as an interminable paralysis. They are carried by a desire to become absolute alterity and therefore to annihilate themselves once and for all. This force that pulls towards this alterity to come is therefore a desperate desire for death. John of the Cross points out that '[b]oth the sense and the spirit as though under an immense and dark load, undergo such agony and pain that the soul would consider death a relief'.[124] Guyon suggests the repose that the not-yet promises when she claims that '[the soul] feels now that she must die; for she no longer finds life in anything; all has become death to her; prayer, reading, conversation – all is dead. She loses the joy of service, or rather, she dies to it, performing it with so much pain and weariness, that it is as death to her'.[125] Elsewhere she also writes, 'I could not see any hope of salvation, yet was not unwilling to die. I bore a strong impression that the longer I lived the more I would sin'.[126] Teresa of Avila likewise points out,

> [i]t sometimes happens that, when a person is in this state that you have been considering, and has such yearnings to die, because the pain is more than she can bear, that her soul seems to be on the very point of leaving the body, she is really afraid and would like her distress to be alleviated lest she should in fact die.[127]

The otherness that the to-come promises, however, never comes. As Teresa of Avila makes clear, 'the soul goes about in quest of relief and God suffers it to find none'.[128] What is to come incessantly evades the desire that reaches out for it so anxiously. Intrinsic to the movement of attraction is the constant frustration of its fulfilment. If the yearning for self-destruction is indissociable from the experience of

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[123] See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 35-6, for a complete description of the temporality of the sacred as a depersonalization of the past and the future.
[124] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 337.
[125] *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 324.
[126] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 104.
[127] Teresa, *Castle*, p. 127.
[128] Teresa, *Life*, p. 233.

the impersonal self, the perpetual failure of this yearning constitutes another aspect of such an experience. Time and again, this consciousness finds itself cheated of its drive to escape from itself. It finds itself plummeting into the distress of being itself. The drive towards the not-yet is continuously dismayed by the inaccessibility of this not-yet. Over and over again, the not-yet reveals the impossibility of being ever approached. Over and over again, it is experienced as loss, as something that has gone, forever beyond reach. The not-yet continuously turns into a *no-longer*.

This shock is constant throughout the dark night. The mystic is exposed relentlessly to the painful realization of the hopelessness of every hope. Indispensable to a phenomenological study of the events that haunt this period is a close understanding of all these sufferings that the postmodern sacred inaugurates.

Chapter 3

†

When the No-place becomes a Person

The Icon and its Conversions

Prologue

The Question of
Religious-Spiritual Phenomena
in the Dark Night

We have seen that a phenomenology of the dark night is constituted by phenomena that are synonymous with the sacred. Throughout its duration, however, the mystic also experiences phenomena conceived within a religious framework. These can include imaginary and intellectual visions or even certain experiences of agonizing desire. Intrinsic to the actual experiencing of such events is their identification as pertaining to the mystic's religion, its teachings and narratives. One must trace the reason for the presence of these instances to what causes the dark night in the first place. The dark night takes place within the mystic way and the mystic way is an ongoing process of a maturing love in the divine. The dark night takes place *because* of this process. It is thereby situated within a context that is ultimately religious-spiritual. We see this again in the fact that the dark night is the only means to the unitive life, the final union of the mystic with the divine.

The dark night's religious-spiritual phenomena are thereby to be explained by this episode's overall significance as the mystic's growing openness to God. If this is so, however, how is one to explain the inclusion of the sacred within this series of events? How is one to reconcile the nonsensicalness, the nothingness, the despair the sacred inflicts, within this general and meaningful outlook of the dark night? Can one see the dark night as a phenomenology based on a love for the divine while also taking into account and justifying the presence of such atheistic experiences? The answer is yes *if* one is to perceive it through a phenomenology of the *icon*.

The idea of the icon points towards a phenomenology that has the potential to express experiences related to religion and theology. It is 'at the threshold of a

phenomenology of religion'.[1] Moreover, it is a phenomenology that allows itself to be disrupted by the chaos of the sacred. Intrinsic to its composition are experiences belonging to the sacred. Indeed, this feature proves to be one of its most defining strengths.

What follows is a comparative observation of the sacred and the icon. The dark night will be presented from the perspective of the ethical scene, and this new orientation will serve to further elucidate on the curious relationship that these two contrasting experiences share.

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[1] Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2001), p. 19.

I

Interpreting the Dark Night as a Phenomenology of the Icon

A phenomenology of the icon consists of phenomena having to do with the unique and irreducible identity of the other person. They describe my recognition and exposure to this identity; an identity that is infinitely different from my own sense of selfhood. Despite myself, I give myself to this identity. I open myself to it so that it would impress itself upon me, so that it would transform my own identity.

Each phase of the mystic way can be characterized respectively as a phenomenology of the icon. The dark night would here constitute the most transgressive of all these phenomenologies. The mystic way as a whole can also be seen as one such entire phenomenology. It is after all a development of loving openness to the alterity of God. In this respect, subjective and supernatural activities reflect and depend on the level of openness to God that underlies the particular phase they take place in. The violent and intense ecstasies and raptures undergone in the dark night for instance are rarely ever found in the illumination phase, which usually abounds in supernatural auditions, visions, and experiences of automatic writing. Indeed, illumination consists of '[a]ll pleasurable and exalted states of mystic consciousness in which the sense of I-hood persists, in which there is a loving and joyous relation between the Absolute as object and the self as subject […]'. The mystic's particular state of consciousness in every phase of the mystic way also designates their degree of exposure to the divine other. Every phase testifies to 'a movement of consciousness towards higher levels, or [a] remaking of consciousness' in 'its innate capacity for apprehending the Absolute'.[2]

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[2] Underhill, *Mysticism*, pp. 234, 298. See also pp. 240-1 on the types of experience in the phase of illumination.

To consider the dark night as a phenomenology of the icon is to perceive its nature again through the antipodes the mystics use to describe it. The dark night is an unprecedented exposure to the alterity of the divine. All of its phenomena are outcomes of this exposure to God as sheer otherness. If a phenomenology of the icon is a phenomenology of experiencing the other in its absolute singularity and thus difference from oneself, one can rightly say that from all the phases of the mystic way, the dark night of the spirit reveals this phenomenology at its purest and at its most transgressive. This is because God's alterity in the other phases is seldom undergone in the anguish of its difference from the self, but rather as some form of reflection of the mystic's own selfhood.[3] The dark night, however, entails a suffering that has its source in the mystic's incongruous nature to the divine, the suffering of a self being dispossessed of itself through God's incommensurable, unknown alterity. As Underhill explains, '[t]he self is in the dark because it is blinded by a Light greater than it can bear – that "Divine Wisdom which is not only night and darkness to the soul, but pain and torment too"'.[4]

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[3] The unitive life can also be perceived as a phenomenology of the icon although its character does not really correspond to the particular ethical phenomenon which Levinas describes and on which I would be focusing mostly in this chapter. Levinas designates this event as a woundedness of the subject before the infinite difference of the other, and this is close to the mystics' own descriptions of the dark night. In the unitive life, however, the mystic is in absolute *loving communion* with God. Consciousness here partakes of 'a vaster consciousness' that does not belong to it: it is itself as in God (Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 172). The ego's self-consciousness has been overcome. The self has reached an epitome of giving as it is neither God (God is always transcendent of it) but nor is it the ego and its self-gratifications. The transgressive suffering Levinas describes in his phenomenology is no more. (If there is suffering here there is always also the fortifying sense of God's presence.) Here, the self is a for-ness. If anything, the unitive life still bespeaks a phenomenology of the icon, although one that is taken on a different level of subjective consciousness than the commonplace (egotistic) consciousness Levinas presupposes in his phenomenology (see Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 172-4, 413-3).

[4] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 399; quoting from John, *Night,* trans. D. Lewis.

Christ as Icon

Christ as Figure of Identification: Being *With* Christ

For many mystics, the icon in the dark night and the mystic way is Jesus Christ.[5] Christ is *the* icon for Roman Catholics in that he is believed to be the bridge-point between humanity and divine otherness: Christ is God become man. If for the mystic there exists an infinite distance between the human and God the Father, the Son is needed as mediator between the two. Exposure to the divine is made available through Christ because his humanity allows *identification*. For the mystics, Christ's life-story, his Passion, and his teachings, are sources which they can comprehend, find comfort from, live by, and emulate. John of the Cross expressly states this: 'A man makes progress only through imitation of Christ Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one goes to the Father but through Him […]'[6]. Teresa of Avila in *Life* points out that

> our thoughts must have something to rest on […]. [W]hen we have many things to do, when we are persecuted and in trouble, when we cannot have much rest, and when we have our seasons of dryness, Christ is our best Friend; for we regard Him as Man, and behold Him faint and in trouble, and He is our Companion […].[7]

Likewise, Rowan Williams attests that '[w]e could not begin to do God's will without the faithful presence of Christ before the mind's eye, Christ praying with us to the Father, Christ sharing our human experience […]'.[8]

Identification with Christ is extended also to the soul's progress throughout the mystic way. The states of the soul as it climbs up the ladder of 'secret wisdom'[9] are believed to be modelled on the essential constituents of Christ's life-story. 'The Incarnation, which is for traditional Christianity synonymous with the historical birth

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[5] As Underhill notes, this is mostly the case with mystics whose consciousness of God takes the more personal form of a divine companionship. Christ is experienced as a companion or bridegroom to the soul to whom it must increasingly surrender for divine union to be achieved (see Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 128, 118). References to Christ in John of the Cross's texts are rarer compared with the other mystics we have discussed, and he tends to be more aware of the divine as a place and not a companion and lover. There are however some instances where he does view it as such. See *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 123-5; *Ascent,* III, pp. 277-9.

[6] *Ascent,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 124

[7] Teresa, *Life*, p. 162.

[8] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, p. 95.

[9] *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 371.

and earthly life of Christ', describes and explains for various mystics 'the nature of the inward and personal mystic experience'.[10] The suffering of the dark night in this regard is often seen in the context of Christ's Passion, especially his final agony on the cross. The mystics interpret their suffering as shared with Christ's suffering. Their suffering becomes a suffering for the expiation of sins, necessary for them and the world to be closer to the divine. While being a means of consolation, the Christ figure also inspires the mystics' resolve and acts as a guideline or an ideal which the mystics can look up to throughout their spiritual progress, especially in adverse circumstances. As Teresa of Avila claims,

> His Majesty can do nothing greater for us than grant us a life which is an imitation of that lived by His Beloved Son. I feel certain, therefore, that these favours are given us to strengthen our weakness […] so that we may be able to imitate Him in His great sufferings.
> We always find that those who walked closest to Christ Our Lord were those who had to bear the greatest trials.[11]

Evelyn Underhill also points this out in the following passage:

> [T]hese mystics see in the historic life of Christ an epitome – or if you will, an exhibition – of the essentials of all spiritual life. There they see dramatized […] the inward experience of every soul on her way to union with that Absolute 'to which the whole Creation moves'. This is why the expressions which they use to describe the evolution of the mystical consciousness from the birth of the divine in the spark of the soul to its final unification with the Absolute Life are so constantly chosen from the Drama of Faith. In this drama they see described under veils the necessary adventures of the spirit […]. Moreover, the degree of closeness with which the individual experience adheres to this Pattern is always taken by them as a standard of the healthiness, ardour, and success of its transcendental activities.[12]

Identification can be seen as an interpreting of one's joy or suffering. Joy or suffering becomes joy and suffering *with* Christ. In the mystic way, however, the subject also undergoes phenomena that undermine its sense of selfhood, as in certain imaginary and intellectual visions, ecstasies, and events of aridity and despair. The intense subversion intrinsic to these episodes prevents that selfhood from identifying them in any way. Their force leaves very little freedom in subjectivity to carry out its

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[10] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 118.
[11] Teresa, Castle, p. 145.
[12] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 121; quoting from Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love, recorded by Julian, Anchoress at Norwich, A.D. 1373*, ed. Grace Warrack (London: 1923).

interpretations. Yet, in several such cases, the mystics exercise the *belief* that the alterity they are undergoing *belongs* to Christ. In other words, they assert the faith that the unknown disrupting their selfhood is actually Christ's divine consciousness. The unknown is Christ's divine otherness, his singular personality. We see here the other significant aspect of the mystics' experience of Christ as an icon. Instead of empathizing with the Christ figure, the mystics now believe they are *facing* him as an other person. They are now not *with* Christ but *before* him. They believe they are submitting themselves to the irreducible singularity of the Son. To be before Christ is for the mystics inseparable from being with Christ.[13]

Christ as Figure of Alterity: Being *Before* Christ

Christ's alterity is often seen as an alterity that suffers for the world's sins, an alterity constituted by the agony of an infinite love. To undergo the Son's singularity is to undergo his boundless passion, sorrow, and pain for man. This is alluded to in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* where John of the Cross claims that 'Christ is to a great extent unknown by those who consider themselves His friends. Because of their extreme self-love they go about seeking in Him their own consolations and satisfactions. But they do not seek, out of great love for Him, His bitter trials and deaths'.[14] They do not acknowledge his otherness.

When the mystics believe they are before Christ they are not interpreting the alterity of the experience they are undergoing. Yet they are giving it a meaningfulness nonetheless, a meaningfulness that is irreducible. The alterity undermining the mystics remains but is at the same time renewed in the affirmation that it is Christ's ineffable identity that they are experiencing. The mystics recognize that the intense suffering (and sometimes joy) they are undergoing is Christ's and this explains these phenomena's disruption of their selfhood and its assurances. To be before Christ is to allow phenomena to be at once transgressive and yet meaningful: meaningfully

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[13] To affirm this belief, a certain degree of self-assertion is nonetheless needed. The phenomenon in question, despite its subversive alterity, must *allow* sufficient freedom in the selfhood to make this choice. Not all of the subversive phenomena in the mystic way are disposed in such a manner. As already seen in the previous chapter, some phenomena are too transgressive to elicit any form of resolve on the mystic's part.

[14] *Ascent,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 125.

transgressive. It is to transform their anonymous alterity into the alterity of another person. An anonymous alterity becomes a *personalized* alterity.[15]

Various phenomena in the mystic way can therefore be described through the mystics' belief in being for Christ, that is, their belief of experiencing Christ as icon. This in turn presupposes two components: being with Christ and being before Christ. On the one hand, for the mystic, Christ as icon reveals himself through the hermeneutical, through what is capable of being interpreted. He expresses himself to the mystic. He takes the form of the finite, of what is comprehensible for us. In such a way, the mystic is able to emulate him. On the other hand, he reveals himself through the ineffable difference of his singular identity, through his divine otherness. Christ is the Incarnation, the infinite in the finite, the divine embodied in the mortal. These two sides to Christ cannot be separated. Both are crucial to the manner the mystics perceive their experiences in the mystic way.[16]

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[15] In the mystic way, faith in being before Christ can also be seen working on another level. Intrinsic to certain intellectual and imaginary visions prior to the unitive life is the intuitiveness of a *contact* with a divine otherness. The mystic sometimes sees this as being Christ's otherness. They believe they are at one with Christ's singularity rather than experiencing it as insufferably different from their selfhood, as in conflict with this selfhood. Underhill describes this form of communion as the recognition of 'the personal and intimate Lover of the soul, of whose elusive presence [the mystic] is so sharply aware, with the person of Christ […]': 'a personal and immanental meeting in the "ground of the soul" […]' (Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 344, 344; quoting from Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Das flieszende Licht der Gottheit von Mechthild von Magdeburg, Ins Neudeutsche übertragen und erläutert von Mela Escherich* (Berlin: 1909)).

[16] See Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 109; Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 41, 47-8. The twofold perspective of Christ often provides for the Christian faith a substratum through which the human relation is perceived. Friendship with another human being is a recognition of its otherness as coinciding with its interpretive embodiment before us through its appearance. The other is both manifestation (visibility for subjectivity) and alterity. The other is seen to be a part of Jesus Christ. It is a part of the eternal Incarnation, the bringing about of the infinite in the finite through and in Jesus Christ, in whom lies the perfection and fulfilment of such an ineffable duality. To love the other is to love it as an other; it is to recognize its duality not just as modelled on Christ's and his life-story but as literally partaking of Christ's and vice versa. It is to recognize the indefinable individuality that is suggested by its appearance as immersed in Christ's divine otherness. For the mystics – in truth, for the entire Christian tradition – Christ is the icon of icons. See Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 42-3; Williams, *Teresa of Avila,* pp. 52-3, 83-4, 89-92, 103-4, 158-63.

II

The Alterity of the Sacred
Versus
the Alterity of the Other

The sacred and the icon are phenomena that can be ultimately differentiated by *what kind* of alterity each respectively refers to. The alterity of the sacred pertains to an asubjective and nonhuman exteriority, 'the *approach* of a space that exiles us from ourselves and condemns us to an endless wandering'.[17] Moments of ennui, debauchery, and physical and mental afflictions are an exposure to *something else*. They open to a menacing anonymity, a neutral region intuited insofar as it is dispossessing that subjectivity. The alterity of the icon on the other hand is *someone else.* It can never be as radically anonymous and neutral because it belongs to a person before the subject.

This contrast is especially made prominent through Blanchot's later attempts since *Friendship* at rethinking ethics through the sacred. He calls the politics or society constructed upon such an ethics a 'communism beyond communism' or the 'community of disaster'. In his vision of the ethical relation, the suffering of the sacred, the thought, or the outside is undergone because of the other. The other reveals to me its dispossession by the thought especially when it is 'threatened by hunger, loneliness, and disease'. Its encounter reveals its selfhood as broken and in abjection to the approaching otherness of death. The other appears through the anguish and horror of its finiteness. Exposure to the other's suffering in turn exposes me to my own vulnerability to death. '[T]he death of the other person calls me into question, contests any claim I might have to be a sovereign self.'[18] This is 'the most terrible look which a living being

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[17] Hart, *Gaze*, p. 20.
[18] Hart, *Gaze,* pp. 214, 214, 218, 218.

can receive',[19] 'that of an endless dying, and it is this thought that solicits our unbounded solicitude'. That suffering which the other reveals to me is in turn suffered by me. The 'relation without relation' envisaged in this community of disaster is thus one where the members are bound together solely by this thought of death.[20] *The Unavowable Community* captures this quite strikingly through its observations on Marguerite Duras's récit, *The Malady of Death*:

> A prison community, organized by the one, consented to by the other, where what is at stake is indeed the attempt to love – but for Nothing, an attempt that has in the end no other object than that nothing which animates them unbeknownst to themselves and exposes them to nothing else than to touching each other in vain […]. [There is here] the sovereignty of death at large, which may be evoked but not shared, that death of which one does not die, a death without power, without effect, without achievement, a death which, in the derision it offers, keeps the attraction of 'inexpressible life, the only one you accept in the end to be united with' (René Char).[21]

What seems to be central in this ethics is still the thought of death; a thought that belongs neither to the other nor to the subject. Rather, the thought is what 'holds the self and the other person at a distance from one another […]'. There is here 'an exposure to the Outside by way of the other person'. Through the other, the subject suffers the thought. The other in its difference from the subject seems to be a *means* or a *vessel* for the sacred. And the sacred in turn is not the other but is what takes both other and subject to 'a stultifying space', 'a neutral space'.[22] The thought is a no-place that torments the other and this torment as it were then infects the subject also. Neither one nor the other, impersonal, nonhuman, and often inhuman, the sacred is a difference between subject and other that joins them by disjunction.

'Lévinas and Blanchot appear to differ on just one point', remarks Kevin Hart. 'The one regards being-for-the-other, ethics, as marking an exit from the *il y a* [or the 'there is'], while the other maintains that ethics can begin only if there is an Outside'.[23] For Blanchot, the other's alterity is inseparable from the suffering of the thought: it *is* the thought. Can one however say that a person's alterity simply amounts to the

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[19] Blanchot, *Sentence*, p. 20.
[20] Hart, *Gaze,* pp. 218, 220.
[21] Blanchot, *Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill, 1988), pp. 49-50.
[22] Hart, *Gaze,* pp. 17, 11, 9, 9.
[23] Hart, *Gaze,* p. 209. See Levinas, *Existence,* pp. 93-4; Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), pp. 51-7; Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), pp. 51-2.

thought? Can one extend the absolute and nonhuman alterity of the sacred to one's encounter with a human being? Is a person's otherness equivalent to that otherness one experiences in ennui, debauchery, despair, etc.? Hardly. My exposure to the alterity of a person is somehow different from my exposure to an alterity characterized by sheer meaninglessness and unqualified disruption of my selfhood. To open myself to the alterity of the other person is not to give myself to a region of disempowering nihilism. One must 'distinguish adequately between different *kinds* of otherness'.[24]

Persona: The Other's Singular Self

In contrast to the sheer anonymity of the sacred, the alterity originating from the other belongs to its irreducible singularity. It is what makes that person that person and not any other. It belongs to its own unique selfhood autonomous of any of my appropriations. While Levinas often calls this alterity 'the trace of the other',[25] Richard Kearney in *The God Who May Be* prefers the term 'persona'. To welcome the other as a persona is to recognize not just its '*flesh-and-blood otherness*', its presence or visibility, but also what 'exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding [the other's] inimitable and unique singularity'.[26] The persona is what withholds itself from the present and my interpreting gaze. It is an unknown that comes from what belongs most intimately to the other and thus can never be taken over or controlled by me.

'[H]owever non-present it is, *persona* is not to be understood as some impersonal anonymous presence […]; nor indeed as some archaic and formless receptacle (Plato's and Derrida's *khora*) […]'.[27] Despite its foreignness to my understanding, the other's alterity is a human alterity or an alterity related to what is human. It is an unknown that gives meaning, an unknown that is thereby meaningful in turn though inscrutable in its meaningfulness. It refers to an irreducible force of consciousness and expression that enters my very being. This entry is not nonsensical but in some ineffable way meaningful because what enters me imparts meaning. I am

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[24] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 108.
[25] See for instance Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 76, 91, 93-4.
[26] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 11, 10.
[27] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 13.

exposed to the foreignness of a different selfhood and therefore exposed to a foreignness that is recognized though in an indefinable manner. My recognition is inexpressible because what is 'identified' is incapable of being possessed by my selfhood. In being human or related to what is human, this other self and its offerings of meaning can be called a *personalized alterity*. This is an alterity that I can also relate to, that I can also interact with.

The Sacred In the Ethical Event

Notwithstanding the significant difference being proposed between the sacred and the icon, Levinas's descriptions of the ethical scene frequently seem to betray a similarity with the sacred (or in his case, the 'there is'). Attributes such as infinity, affectivity, anonymous temporality, and lassitude among others, seem to also express attributes related to the sacred. Conversely, other characteristics such as goodness, illeity, fecundity, and responsibility clearly differentiate the ethical event from the sacred. They are qualities that are not found in experiences of the sacred. It looks as if the ethical relation for Levinas sometimes partakes of phenomena that have to do with the sacred while sometimes they refer to the other's persona. It appears that the phenomenology of the icon is here seen to be exposed to both kinds of alterity within its configuration. It allows the subject not just to undergo the alterity of the other but also to undergo the alterity of the no-place. The dark night likewise discloses the presence of both phenomena. It includes phenomena that pertain to the icon of Christ and phenomena that pertain to the sacred.

One should, I propose, perceive the dark night from this phenomenological stance to account for its contradictory experiences. Taken as a *whole,* however – that is, as a set of events – it can only be defined as a phenomenology of the icon. Seen in its entirety, and therefore from a stance that is ontological and hermeneutical, the dark night can only signify a loving exposure to the otherness of an icon, God, or God

through Christ. From this perspective, the dark night, like any other phase in the mystic way, is the result of this developing exposure.

III

From the Sacred to the Icon: Redeeming the Attributes of the Sacred

Personalizing the Impersonal

For Levinas, one of the ways in which I can truly recognize and undergo the icon is through my awareness of the imminence of death. Consciousness of death's proximity is brought about through experiences that rupture my egotistic will. This can be seen in such instances as physical suffering and severe obsession. They bare me to the proximity of a death that is yet incapable of being reached, a death that I cannot make my own or appropriate to myself. The thought of death is the awareness of an annihilation that is ever approaching, ever looming but never reaching my controlling grasp. Impending, it is yet evasive of my attempts at appropriating it to my will or abandoning my will to it. This will thus finds itself incessantly contested before the thought. The thought reveals my will to its unending impotence.[28]

For Levinas, the thought of death's proximity does not only entail insufferable anguish. It can also *dispose* me to personalize it. My exposure to the anonymity of death can be a preliminary to my relation with an other. The threat of death violating my will can somehow motivate me to personalize it into the threat of a foreign *will* violating my will. The suffering of death's proximity can incline me to personalize it into a suffering brought about by an other's force. Death's anonymous alterity can

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[28] See for instance 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 33-5, 55-8, for a description of the suffering brought about by the sacred. The phenomenon of the sacred is similar to the way Levinas describes the consciousness of death.

become the alterity of a persecutor or of a murderer to which my selfhood is held hostage. Here, 'I am a passivity threatened not only by nothingness in my being, but by a will in my will'.[29] In this manner, I abandon my egotistic will and the suffering of its disempowerment and reach for a will that is for the other. My personalizing effort makes me give up my egotism for an openness to the alterity of an other entity. As Levinas claims,

> death cannot drain all meaning from life […]. The enemy or the God over whom I can have no power and who does not form a *part* of my world remains yet in relation with me and permits me to will, but with a will that is not egoist, a will that flows into the essence of desire [….] that is for the Other […]. The will […], exposed to death but not *immediately*, has time to be for the Other, and thus to recover meaning despite death.[30]

To personalize the threat of death is to transform it into the presence of an other 'who remains in a consciousness of hostility'. This, however, 'renders possible an appeal to the Other, to his friendship and his medication […]. Death approaches in the fear of someone, and hopes in someone'.[31] This is interestingly similar to some of the phenomena occurring in the dark night. There is a tendency in the mystics to interpret some of their most painful and nonsensical experiences in terms of God. What is at first felt as meaningless suffering is here then seen as coming from the will of God. The mystic's state is seen *in terms of* God: an angry or cold God. My present horrid condition, the mystic would say, *is the result of* God's abandonment.[32] Suffering here is thus undergone as anonymous and then personalized. Again, the phenomena met in the dark night pertain to both the sacred and the icon.

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[29] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 236.
[30] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 236.
[31] Levinas, *Totality,* p. 234.
[32] See for instance *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 338; *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, pp. 103-4; *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 328-9.

Infinity as Impersonalized and Personalized

The personalization of the alterity pertaining to the sacred brings about a therapeutic transformation. The traits of the phenomenon of the sacred are re-experienced in a new reality. Traits such as infinity, desire, anonymous consciousness, the never-ending return, anonymous temporality, and so on, are undergone through the reality of the other's alterity. This inscribes them in a meaningfulness that is foreign to the ego's forms of comprehension. What had been previously drained of any meaning or consolation is now transformed by a meaningfulness that can only come from the other. The traits of the sacred are transfigured from an active disempowerment to an active empowerment of my selfhood through this new reality. A *redeeming* process is effectuated. What follows is a marking out of this simultaneous affinity and difference intrinsic to the attributes constituting the phenomena of the sacred and the icon.

Affectivity, Impersonal Consciousness, and Infinity

When exposed to either the sacred or the icon, I am affected first and foremost in my sensibility, in 'the very sensing of sensations', a 'sensuous contact and closeness'. Akin to my experience of the sacred, my encounter with the other entails an impression 'in the deepest recesses of the flesh' – an *affect* experience.[33]

In the ethical relation, I also find myself in a condition that is similar to what has been described as 'impersonal consciousness'. On the one hand, my ego finds itself unable to control or possess the other. On the other hand, it is unable to lose itself to that other, to forget itself by unifying with it. My ego suffers from its own nature, the futility of its power. It suffers from the radical difference of the other from its nature. Like the sacred, the ethical injunction also instigates that disempowerment that has been described as the 'against oneself that is in the self'. The ego is undergone as intrinsically dysfunctional. It is taken over by extreme passivity.[34]

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[33] Richard A. Cohen, 'Foreword', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xiv; Alphonso Lingis, 'Translator's Introduction', in Levinas *Otherwise,* pp. xxii, xiv.

[34] See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 34-5, 55-8, for the full explanations of 'impersonal consciousness', the 'against oneself that is in the self', and 'extreme passivity'.

The incapacity that is here undergone is incessantly exacerbated. Its endless increase can be expressed through the notion of *infinity* as described in 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics'.[35] If suffering signifies a rupturing of my ego, infinity, through both the sacred and the ethical relation, entails a suffering of suffering. Before the icon, my ego is constantly attempting to possess its suffering, to have the power to suffer; to suffer *through* itself rather than to suffer itself. It is endeavouring to restore suffering within the provinces of its will. These attempts, however, are continually violated by a new suffering that exceeds all the power it musters. The moment the ego subordinates suffering to its will, another suffering is brought about that exceeds that will. My ego is once again helplessly subverted. And once again, it tries to dominate what is subverting it. The process knows no end. Intrinsic to its characterization, is the double condition of passive suffering.

Infinite Suffering as Personalized

In contrast to the sacred, the infinition of this infinity is initiated and undergone *for the other*. I suffer my ego in the name of the other. Levinas, however, also suggests that this infinity for the other can also often turn into an infinity *for nothing*. This suffering can sometimes become so dispossessing that it ceases to signify anything. My ego's disempowerment goes so deep, it becomes so unbearable, that my very awareness of the other, my love for that other, is itself also undermined. The other stops being that other and becomes an impersonal otherness, a senseless anonymity. What little consolation and assurance I had in the other is now gone. My suffering stops being ethical in any sense and literally becomes the suffering of the 'there is' or the sacred. As Levinas remarks, '[t]o not be reabsorbed into meaning, the patience of passivity must be always at the limit, exceeded by a demented suffering, "for nothing", a suffering of pure misery'.[36] We find here again a reference to the sacred as taking place within the ethical event:

> My suffering [for the other] is the cynosure of all the sufferings – and of all the faults, even of the faults of my persecutors, which amounts to suffering the ultimate persecution, suffering absolutely […]. This element of a 'pure born',

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[35] See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 49-50, 55-6.
[36] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 153.

> for nothing, in suffering, is the passivity of suffering […] in which the for-the-other of sensibility, that is, its very sense, would be annulled. This moment of the 'for nothing' in suffering is the surplus of non-sense over sense by which the sense of suffering is possible […]. [I]n the anarchic character of suffering, and prior to all reflection, we have to catch sight of a suffering of suffering […].[37]

Before the icon, however, infinity is also and above all undergone as personalized. Because of this important factor, its significance also diverges from the experience of a suffering of suffering.

If in the ethical relation every instant brings about a subversion of my ego it is *because* every such instant exposes me to new possible meanings that do not belong to the nature of that ego. Every moment is an exposure to the other's foreign will; a will that seeks to express itself to me. Only by committing the ego to its disempowerment, can I truly try to receive the other's messages. The more passive the ego is, the more authentic is my welcome to the other's act of communication. Infinity here refers to my continual attempt at understanding the possible meanings the other is offering me. My endeavour is endlessly sabotaged by the reception of other new possible meanings. I seek to interpret the other's expressivity through my own limited powers only to always find my efforts subverted by a new expressivity. Again, my labours are incessantly undermined by a force that is always in excess of my selfhood.

Personalized infinity is thereby 'an *incessant* recapture of instants that flow by by a presence that comes to their assistance, that answers for them. This *incessance* produces the present, is the presentation, the life, of the present'.[38] I undergo infinity because the passing of every instant is not determined by the ego. Every instant is empowered or given by the other; it is entirely on its terms.

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[37] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 196.
[38] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 69.

IV

The Other's Expression as the May-Be

Every instant given by the other is an instant that inaugurates *new possibilities.* The other's persona opens up every instant to the possibility of new states of being, perceptions, and meanings that I can experience. These possibles do not originate in my selfhood. Their nature is other to its self-identifying horizons. Only the other can inaugurate them. Its persona offers me a meaningfulness that my selfhood is incapable of experiencing on its own. Personalized alterity is made up of this crucial dynamic. Its meaningfulness is in the mode of the possible, the potential: it is as yet unrealized. Kearney thereby calls it the '*may-be*'.[39]

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[39] Kearney's 'may-be' is often used in relation to God as experienced in the ethical scene through the other, what he calls the 'God-who-may-be'. This designation of the divine is derived and yet significantly differentiated from Nicholas of Cusa's term for God as '*possest*', from '*posse esse*', the 'possibility-to-be'. For Cusanus, possibility and actuality coexist miraculously in God as distinct from actuality. 'Everything that exists already exists, Cusanus insists, from the Beginning *enfolded* in God [...]. And the whole process of creation in time and history must be seen consequently as a universe *unfolded* into the created world [...]. Unlike us creatures, therefore, the divine Creator is everything he is able to be [...]. [W]hat-was-created always existed in the possibility-to-be, in whose absence nothing was created. Clearly, Actualized-Possibility (*possest*) is all things and includes all things [...].' Kearney, on the other hand, insists on taking away the necessity of actualization intrinsic to the possibilities that define God. History cannot be reduced 'to a slow-release "unfolding" of some pre-established plan'. Divinity must be 'reconceived as that *posse* or *possest* which calls and invites us to actualize its proffered possibles by our poetical and ethical actions, contributing to the transfiguration of the world to the extent that we respond to this invitation [...]' (see Kearney, *May Be,* pp. 103-5; Nicholas of Cusa, '*Trialogus de Possest (On Actualized-Possibility)*', in Jasper Hopkins, *Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 71, 81).

Death of My Possibles for the Other's Possibles (Kearney)

In the ethical scenario, Kearney designates the other as revealing 'possibles which are beyond both my impossibles and my possibles (as horizontal projections of my existence [...])'.[40] To experience these new possibles, I must first suffer the ineffectuality of my egotistic self. I must first suffer, that is, my sheer incapacity to appropriate the other and its demands by my ego. I find all my ego's possibles futile before the other's singularity and its call. Only when I undergo this painful ineptitude, a reaching of the limits of all the ego's powers, do I then find myself endowed with unforeseeable new possibles that are not my own.

My receptivity to these possibles comes about through the arousal of my own singular self or persona.[41] Coinciding with the suspension of my ego through the icon, is the emergence of my most intimate self. It is the exhaustion of all of my possibles that awakens in me my own persona. My persona is a susceptibility to the incoming possibles of the other or the im-possible in myself. Possibility is opened up and made possible only 'when my power of possibility undergoes its own death as "my" possibility – acknowledging in mourning, passion, suffering, and anxiety that it is this very impossibility which allows a new possible, another possible, another's possible, an im-possible possible, to come, or to come back.'[42] The harrowing experience of my ego's impossibility is a precondition for the event of a new possibility, the may-be. In

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[40] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 82. The may-be is a concept that is largely influenced by what Derrida calls the 'impossible-possible' or the 'perhaps'. Derrida sees the experience of the 'perhaps' as at once constituted by what is possible *and* impossible. A true event can only happen if my present is disturbed by the incoming of what is not possible for me and for my world. It must interrupt all pre-existing possibles in the economy of the same and open them to the irruption of what is unforeseen, incalculable. The 'perhaps' intimates a possible that is impossible in the sense that it is a potential that does not come from myself and my potentials. This inauguration comes from a foreign reality that is undergone as a futurity that is outside a future which I anticipate. It announces the promise of a radically innovative understanding or thinking that comes from what is outside my horizons of knowledge. See 'As If It Were Possible: "Within Such Limits" ...', in Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001,* ed. Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (California: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 343-70; 'Loving in Friendship: Perhaps – the Noun and the Adverb', in Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 26-48; Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 93-9; Josh Toth, 'A Certain Perhaps: Touching on the Decisiveness of Derrida's Indecision', in *Mosaic,* ed. Dawne McCance, 40/2 (2007), pp. 245-60.

[41] I will be calling the subject's own kind of selfhood when given to the other, the 'singular self', after Levinas, and the 'persona', after Kearney's term for the other's self. Kearney, however, does not really give any particular name to this ethical selfhood although he does describe one. See Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 79-81; 'In Indecision By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 218-9.

[42] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 97.

the ethical relation, every instant is given by the other's persona and it is given as a may-be. It is the other's foreign will that now *gives* presence, that presentifies.

Possibilizing as Signifyingness (Levinas)

For Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, the other's will is the very act of the *giving* of meaning. Receptivity to this giving is more originary than any of my understandings and self-understandings. My exposure to the other's giving of meaning is anterior to any aspect of my self-identity. It precedes even the very intelligibility and actualization of meanings. Communication is here at its most visceral. It is constituted by the raw process of meaningfulness *as* meaningfulness. The other's will does not only suggest innovative possible significations, it does not only signify. At bottom it is the very process of *signifyingness*.[43]

Signifyingness is the possibilizing of signification. It is the other's unconditional teaching to my selfhood and its possibles. What the other teaches is not simply new potential ideas for my appropriation. Signifyingness is above all the *act* of teaching such possibilities, the *event* of teaching itself. We can define it as the teaching of teaching. It is therefore the very condition of any possible meaning: the flux and matrix from which all potential meanings emerge. All my perceptions and knowledge are actualized by this foundational form of communication. The ways I see and understand myself have always already been inspired by this creative flow.[44]

In being the very irreducible process by which meaning is born, signifyingness *exceeds* its disclosure of any possibility of meaning. The possibilities it alludes to are also and at the same time *undermined* in their truthfulness. The incessant giving of signifyingness presents me with possible new understandings just as it invalidates them. What is revealed is also questioned because of the very inordinateness that constitutes this pure process of meaningfulness. 'Ideas instruct me coming from the master who

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[43] For references to 'signifying' and 'signifyingness', see for instance Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 66, 259-61, 261-3. See also pp. 92, 206-7, 218-9, 297.
[44] Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 51, 66, 69-70, 95-100, 206-9, 218-9.

presents them to me: who puts them in question; the objectification and theme upon which objective knowledge opens already rest on teaching'.[45]

The Person: Incarnation of the Possible

For Kearney, my exposure to the other entails my consent to let the other's will disclose the world and myself through new possibles. I let these possibles empower me to transform the world and myself according to their nature. I allow myself to be affected by these possibles so that I can actualize them into my personal and social life.[46]

If the other's persona conceives new possibles, then, these possibles manifest themselves in the *person*. The other's person is the other insofar as it is appearance. It is the actuality of its face and body which are inseparable from their expression. The persona continuously communicates itself through the person: it is its invisible unending author. 'It is the non-presence that allows presence to happen in the here and now *as* a human person appearing to me in flesh and blood.'[47] In the person is disclosed the possibles that are continuously being given by the persona.[48]

If the persona is the source whence possibles emerge, then it does not reveal itself in the person. In directing the outflow of signification, the persona is thereby always outside of it. The possibles it offers are but various forms of its expression which are all already separate from it. This is because the persona partakes of a different reality than its expressions. Its transcendence cannot ever coincide with what can enter the subject's horizons of interpretation. An infinite distance is always present between the possibles and their author.

The continuous expressivity disclosed in the other's person also marks the continuous withdrawal of the persona from my appropriative gaze. Every possible that comes my way through the other's appearance bares its irrecoverable difference from its acting source. The may-be that is being revealed refers to its impossible distance from

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[45] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 69. See also pp. 51, 95-8, 182, 204, 207-9.
[46] See Kearney, *May Be*, p. 110.
[47] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 13.
[48] See also Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 119-20.

its creator. In the other's person – in its face, for Levinas – is the presence of the persona absenting. The face reveals the *trace* of the persona's retraction. It reveals the other's singular self as a surplus, 'the trace of the excession, the excessive, of what could not be contained' in that person.[49] The finite is marked by what that finite cannot hold, what exceeds it, the infinite. The infinite is in excess of the finite and yet it can only express itself and mark its excess *in* the finite. The invisible can only communicate and 'reveal' itself *in* the visible. In the finite, the persona is yet infinite: it is *in-finite*.

There is evidently here a parallel with Christ as an icon in the dark night and the mystic way. Inasmuch as Christ embodies the finite – what is humanly comprehensive and emulative for the mystic, and this includes his teachings, his historical personage, and his humanity – he can be regarded as the person. His persona, on the other hand, can be said to define his singularity, which is also divine. Kearney draws out this 'Christic crossing of *persona* and person' in the chapter 'Transfiguring God' in *The God Who May Be*. '[I]n the testimony of Mount Thabor […]', he points out, 'the person of Jesus is metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples into the *persona* of Christ […]. Jesus comes into his own by being "othered" as Christ. His person transforms into the *persona* latent in his self, the very divine otherness of his finite being, his in-finity'. The experience of being *with* Christ signifies the recognition of his person, while the experience of being *before* Christ signifies the recognition of his persona. '*To the father through the features of man's face* […].'[50]

Like the icon the sacred subverts my ego. Contrary to the icon, however, it does not in turn give me the alternative of receiving foreign possible meanings. The sacred is not a giving of meaning or signifyingness but an unceasing rejection of meaning. To the icon's generosity we must juxtapose this relentless rejection or indifference of the sacred. To personalize the alterity of the sacred would thus mean above all to redeem the radically adonational to the radically donational. Subversive non-giving is

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[49] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 91. 'In [the face] the emptiness of an abandonment […], obsessive as in agoraphobia, the trace of a passage or trace of what could not enter […]. Is it the trace of the excession, the excessive, of what could not be contained, of the non-content, disproportionate to all measure and all capacity, the trace of the infinite signifying diachronically exactly through these ambiguities? The empty space of what could not be collected there is the trace of a passage which never became present, and which is possibly nothingness. But the surplus over pure nothingness, an infinitesimal difference, is in my non-indifference to the neighbour […]' (p. 91). See pp. 89-91.
[50] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 41, 39-40, 40.

redeemed into a subversive giving. An infinite impossibilization is transfigured into an infinite possibilization.

V

The Subject as a Giving to the Other

Before the icon's expressivity is received as a signifyingness (with the possibles this presents), it comes to me as a demand, an order. It comes as a *call* to be responsible for that other. This call seems to come 'from a dimension of height' that 'dominates me' and judges me. It is also at the same time the *plea* of the other's destitution, its helplessness and fragility.[51]

The other's summons is a summons to an absolute exposure, to a giving of 'one's very substance'[52] to it. I am summoned to give myself unconditionally to the other. This radical giving would be an unreserved openness to what the other has to say to me. In the ethical scene I welcome the infinity of the other's signifyingness in myself. The dynamics of personalization can indeed be further elucidated if this event is illustrated from the perspective of the subject and its surrender to the icon.

The Subject's Giving as Metaphysical Desire (Levinas)

Levinas calls the unreserved exposure to the other's signifyingness, 'metaphysical desire'. Metaphysical desire or desire of the other does not partake of any form of possessiveness but is rather a boundless munificent love for the other's singular self. It is a continual submission to that self. Without any deliberations and

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[51] See Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 214-5.
[52] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xix.

limits, desire does not let any self-gratification or any threat stand in its way. Kearney describes Levinas's notion of desire as follows:

> The desired is like the good precisely because it cannot be possessed, because it is invisible, separate, distant, different, transcendent. This is not to say that desire is without relation; only that it is related to a desired that is never *given*, to an otherness that is absolute precisely because it absolves itself from the intentionality of adequation and appropriation. In other words, desire is a relation that is unequal to itself, asymmetrical.[53]

Desire does not seek to take over and control but is rather a *developing* openness to the other. An unending *progression* of self-surrender and self-giving to the other's self takes place. It is unending because no matter how much this desire gives to the other, it never gives enough and is thus always striving to give more. Desire finds that it is always much more than what it gives. Desire finds that it never desires enough. This movement is characterized by the continuous attempt to exceed itself in generosity and renunciation. The desire of the other is so strong that any amount of giving to it is always already insufficient. Desire always already falls short of itself. It 'desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it'.[54]

Desire's endless exceeding of itself captures its infinition. Desire for the other is also a desire for infinity. It is 'not a Desire that the possession of the Desirable slakes, but the Desire for the Infinite which the desirable arouses rather than satisfies'. Levinas conceives 'transcendence' as this very experiential process of longing. 'The other that Desire desires is again Desire; transcendence transcends toward him who transcends […].' Again, this asymmetrical relation sees the other from a 'dimension of height'. The movement of desire is thus vertical. Desire infinitely reaches out to what is always beyond it. It is always transcending itself towards what is always transcending it.[55]

In many respects, the infinity of desire is similar to the infinity undergone in the suffering of the sacred. Both are characterized by a self-subversive movement that exceeds itself without end. Infinity in both cases is an increasing loss of my ego to an alterity. Intrinsic to ethical infinity, however, is its verticality, its *directionality*. It

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[53] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 64.
[54] Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 34.
[55] Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 50, 269, 214. See pp. 34-5, 41, 50-1, 267-9; Kearney, *May Be*, p. 64.

reveals a sense of purpose: a moving *towards* through love. Ethical infinity is going somewhere. It is the attempt to ever give oneself more fully to the other.

Conversely, the infinity of the sacred is marked by purposelessness. Here, I am simply subjected to an ever increasing abandon of my selfhood. Whether I undergo extreme mastery or passivity, I am progressively taken over by an outside force, dispossessed ever more by something unknown. Because I do not know what is taking over me, because I have no control over this something, infinity in the sacred phenomenon is the infinition of a lack of directionality, the infinition of a dissemination of subjectivity. It is strictly an endless deterioration of my selfhood. I am falling apart with every instant, and that is about it. Whereas the icon inspires an infinity of transcendence, the sacred brings about an infinity of defeat, an aimless wandering, a destinerrance.[56]

The Subject's Giving as 'Saying' (Levinas)

In *Otherwise Than Being* the condition of desire is also described as 'saying'. This condition must again be distinguished from any experience related to the realm of being and beings and its connection with the activities of consciousness. Being operates through the appropriations of consciousness. It is inseparable from their activity. Levinas calls 'essence' any movement of being that announces itself for the first time in consciousness. Essence refers to that very instant of the entering of an exteriority into the horizons of subjectivity. This entry of the outside into the scope of my awareness allows me to articulate it and fix it through the classifications and distinctions of intellectual knowledge. Being gives itself to consciousness. It is a constant availability to my appropriative gaze. Its influx into my consciousness is in turn worked upon by that consciousness: it is transformed into the strict logic of thought. It is altered to what Levinas designates as the 'said'.[57]

In contrast to the rigid fixity of the 'said', 'saying' comprises the infinite movement of unreserved exposure to the other. It refers to one's openness to the other

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[56] See 'Intersecting at the No-place', p. 77, for a description of 'destinerrance'.
[57] See Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 39-40.

in such a way 'that the *for-the-other* […] is kept from being *for-oneself*'. In 'saying', I am outside the region of being and beings; I am outside the movement of its entry and availability for the appropriations of my consciousness. 'Saying' is the infinity of the 'holding open its openness, without excuses, evasions or alibis, delivering itself without saying anything said. Saying saying saying itself, without thematizing it, but exposing it again'.[58] Like desire, 'saying' is an ever increasing openness for the other that is never satisfied or complacent because it is never open enough. It is a violent incessant giving that does not let itself rest in any form of reasoning or interpretation I might give to myself and the other. It does let itself be fixed in the said. This is because the other towards which I strive always already transcends any interpretation I assert and the comfort this entails. 'Saying' is a process of an ever more unrestrained exposure. In it, I am an unconditional pointer to the other. I am an unqualified receptivity and susceptibility to the process of signifyingness and its endless possible significations. I am not just a sign that points to other signs. In endlessly subverting the denominations of the said, I am the incarnate process of openness to meaning, to meaning*fulness* even, which is the precondition of every sign. In me, the process of *conveyance* that marks every meaningful sign takes place.

> Saying is thus to make signs of this very signifyingness of the exposure; it is to expose the exposure instead of remaining in it as an act of exposing. It is to exhaust oneself in exposing oneself, to make signs by making oneself a sign, without resting in one's every figure as a sign. In the passivity of the obsidional extradition this very extradition is delivered over to the other, before it could be established.[59]

As with signifyingness, for Levinas, 'saying' and desire pertain to a reality that is foundational in nature. The openness that 'saying' brings about precedes any form of phenomenon related to consciousness and being. As Alphonso Lingis explains, 'saying' is 'the original form of openness. It even founds and sustains the openness to things or to the elements. Not only perceptions but even sensation is seen to be wholly sustained by ethical responsibility. The sense of alterity itself maintains open every kind of openness […]'.[60] For Levinas,

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[58] Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 50, 143.
[59] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 143.
[60] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. xxii.

[i]t is in the signification of the-one-for-the-other that systems, consciousness, thematization and statement of the true and of being are comprised. To the point that the-one-for-the-other can be expressed as though it were a moment of being. The-one-for-the-other, saying, is on the point of changing into an intentional consciousness, a formulation of truths, a message emitted and received.[61]

To be for the other is to partake of a phenomenon that is irreducibly different in nature from all other phenomena because transcendent of them, a transcendence that is also their origin. The transcendence of 'saying' is the process from which all other phenomena are brought into existence. 'Saying' is the precondition to my existence as a subject in the world of being and beings.[62]

'Saying' and Desire in the Dark Night

The infinity of desire and 'saying' can be traced in the dark night to those phenomena where the subject is above all *before* Christ, or in some cases, before God, rather than *with* Christ. In other words, these are phenomena entailing an otherness that to a large degree subverts the self and its interpretative consolations without end. And yet, despite the undermining force of this alterity, it allows the mystics enough self-freedom to believe it belongs to Christ or God. They accept this alterity by believing that in undergoing it they are giving themselves ever more unreservedly to the divine.

This faith in one's radical openness to God can come about very often in experiences of intense suffering, such as physical afflictions, aridity, distress, despair, and so on. The incessant disruption these experiences cause in the selfhood, the sense of the unknown that they bring with them, is converted by the mystics into a part of divine alterity. This willed transmutation then enables their consent to suffer for and because of this alterity out of love. A self-rupturing is thus converted into a for-the-other. Nonsensical suffering is converted into a suffering-*for,* a giving, an offering. Insofar as the duration of a subversive phenomenon is marked at some point by the mystic's belief that they are undergoing a radical exposure to the divine otherness, one

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[61] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 80.
[62] See Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. xix, 19.

can relate such an event with the notions of 'saying' and desire as Levinas designates them. John of the Cross captures the personalization or redemption that distinguishes such violent episodes as follows:

> [A]lthough the soul in its progress has not the support of any particular, interior light of the intellect or of any exterior guide that may give it satisfaction on this lofty path – since these dense darknesses have deprived it of all satisfaction – love alone, which at this period burns by soliciting the heart for the Beloved, is what guides and moves it and makes it soar to God in an unknown way along the road of solitude.[63]

To be a ceaseless giving to God as an icon is to find no relief and assurance in oneself. It is to make of oneself a perpetual sacrifice to the foreignness that is God. John of the Cross compares this excruciatingly selfless state with that of souls in purgatory:

> [T]he souls in purgatory suffer great doubts about whether they will ever leave and whether their afflictions will end. Although they habitually possess the three theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity), the actual feeling of the privation of God and of the afflictions does not permit them to enjoy the actual blessing and comfort of these virtues. Although they are aware that they love God, this gives them no consolation […]. Thus, although a person suffering this purgation knows that he loves God and that he would give a thousand lives for Him […], he finds no relief. This knowledge rather causes him deeper affliction.[64]

The radical giving implicit in such experiences cannot be associated with preternatural episodes such as visions and ecstasies, even those related to an insufferable desire for God. Here, in darkness, the mystics give themselves in darkness, to God, who is darkness.

The phenomenon of 'saying' or desire can also designate the dark night when perceived as a whole, that is, when it is seen as a phenomenology of an icon. The road leading to God, John of the Cross says, demands 'true self-denial, exterior and interior, through surrender of self both to suffering for Christ and to annihilation in all things. In the exercise of this self-denial everything else, and even, more is discovered and accomplished'. This vulnerability to the divine unknown is 'the root and sum total of all the virtues […]'.[65] Seen from this perspective, all phenomena in the dark night are

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[63] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, p. 389.
[64] *Night,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 343.
[65] *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, p. 124.

moments of an ever developing exposure to the divine. This includes also those phenomena we have related to the sacred. Seen by themselves, these episodes are characterized by a rupturing that prevents any understanding from taking place, and this includes also a belief in Christ or God as an icon. Seen as part of the ethical configuration, however, these same experiences assume its signification. They become *essential* moments in the process of the mystic's perpetual giving to the other. The nonsensicalness they exhibit when perceived autonomously achieves direction from this perspective as they are seen as important steppingstones on the road to a true receptiveness of God.

Levinas describes the inclusion of a suffering for nothing in the phenomenology of the icon as follows:

> Of itself saying is the sense of patience and pain. In saying suffering signifies in the form of *giving*, even if the price of signification is that the subject run the risk of suffering without reason […]. Signification, as the one-for-the-other in passivity […], presupposes the possibility of pure non-sense invading and threatening signification […]. The for-the-other (or sense) turns into by-the-other, into suffering by a thorn burning the flesh, but *for nothing*. It is only in this way that the *for-the-other* […] is kept from being *for-oneself*.[66]

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[66] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 50. In brief, phenomena that are for the other can often become for nothing. Inasmuch as this change remains an integral part of the larger context of the dark night, that is, as part of a process defined as a phenomenology of the icon, as the subject's exposure to God as other, these phenomena can still be characterized as a 'saying' or as desire.

VI

Personalized Suffering
as Responsibility for the Other

Suffering the Other's Singular Self (Levinas)

At its deepest level, the ethical relation is not just a susceptibility to the other's possibles or the process of signifyingness whence these possibles come from. It is also a susceptibility to what gives and withdraws from this communication: the other's persona. To give myself to the other is ultimately to give myself to that other's singular self. This means that I expose myself to what is beyond the other's expressivity, what is its most intimate selfhood.

This selfhood is the most intimate suffering of the other. For Levinas, this is the dispossessing suffering of one's proximity to death. The other's singular self is the suffering of its finitude before the threat of death that 'hunger, loneliness, and disease' can bring about.[67] It is the suffering of its vulnerability before annihilation, its anguish before the approach of what it cannot control. This is a distress that incessantly disempowers the other's ordinary selfhood by the helplessness of 'a death to come'.[68] To undergo one's singular self here is to undergo the endless inability of selfhood to coincide with itself, to assert itself before the imminence of its eradication. One's approach towards the point of one's extinction elicits in the self an endless impotence to contain itself, to contain within itself the point it is heading towards. The singular self is what exceeds one's appropriating and self-affirming self. The ethical scene is above

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[67] The full quotation goes as follows: 'At its deepest level, *Dire* [or 'saying'] is an exposure to the certainty of the other person's death, an acknowledgement that he or she is finite, threatened by hunger, loneliness, and disease' (Hart, *Gaze,* p. 218).
[68] Hart, *Gaze,* p. 218.

all an acknowledgement of this suffering enslaving the other. I open myself to the true wretchedness and abjection that mark the other's state.[69]

This receptivity then in turn exposes me to my own suffering. The other's abject condition calls my own subjectivity into question, '[contesting] any claim I might have to be a sovereign self'.[70] Giving myself to the other's suffering I find *my* egotistic self undergoing this suffering. Exposure to the other's singular self exposes me to my own.[71]

Suffering of the Sacred and Suffering for the Other

On first appearances, the state of affairs just described seems to be similar to Blanchot's ethics. What is crucially different, however, is the nature of the suffering in question. For Blanchot, and also for Bataille, suffering in the sacred or ethical event accentuates more often than not the gradual dissolution of my selfhood (and the other's selfhood) by the approach of a no-place.   My suffering is the suffering of a dispossession of all that is mine, a deprivation of all that constitutes my distinctiveness. It is there inasmuch as it questions and undoes the experience of anything that pertains to my selfhood. Whether this is the egotistic or the singular self makes no difference. If the anguish of the experience of the sacred happens to arouse my singular self it is again only to expose its powerlessness, its ineffectualness. This suffering is precisely an indifference to the experience of my most intimate self, the suffering of such indifference. A '"dying that does not concern me" puts me in play in all dying, by way of a relation that does not arrive through me, in bringing me to answer – without responsibility – in the most passive passion, for this relation (relation with the non-concerning) that I neither suffer nor assume'.[72] The sacred is above all a force that ruins, that undermines. Lycette Nelson illustrates this in relation to Blanchot's

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[69] See Levinas, *Totality,* p. 179; Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 88, 95; Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 14-5.
[70] Hart, *Gaze,* p. 218.
[71] See Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 52, 88, 195.
[72] Blanchot, *Step,* trans. Lycette Nelson (New York: State University of New York, 1992), p. 123.

conception of the sacred as *le pas au-delà* or the step/not beyond (*pas* means both 'step' and 'not'):

> Dying is the step/not beyond that is never accomplished, that one seeks to accomplish in the other, dying in the other's death. The *pas au-delà* transforms the *pas* of negation into the *pas* of patience, passion, and passivity, taking its power of negation away through the powerlessness of the unaccomplished. The *pas* of the completely passive is transgressive without accomplishing anything […]. We seek passivity in the other, by dying in the place of the other. Dying in the other sets us free from ourselves, but does not change our relation to dying, which is anonymous, intransitive, disappropriating, and therefore without relation to any I, be it mine or the other's.[73]

Suffering here is a suffering of an anonymous region outside both subject and other, 'a nonworld of nihilism'.[74] A region indifferent to all our forms of selfhood, including our singular self, is approached or approaches inasmuch as the self faces its dissolution. What counts in the phenomena of the sacred is such a (non)approach.[75]

For Levinas, my suffering before the other *belongs* to my singular self: it *constitutes* this particular consciousness. It is 'a falling back upon oneself or a being thrown back upon oneself, a recurrence to oneself […]'.[76] Inasmuch as it involves a gradual disempowerment of my egotistic selfhood, it is also a destructive force. But this same anguish is also constructive because it inaugurates one's most intimate self. A new sense of selfhood is experienced through its subversion, as an intrinsic part of its process. '[W]e have moved from the ego to me who am me and no one else.'[77] In the event of the sacred, my suffering is a suffering of the impersonal, an impersonal suffering. Before the icon, my suffering is also a suffering of what is most personal in me, my absolute singularity.

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[73] Blanchot, *Step,* pp. xxviii-xix.

[74] Hart, *Gaze,* p. 17.

[75] Consider also the following: '[W]e must also remember that the "negative" is sometimes operative (speaking with language and related thus to "being"), and sometimes inoperative: the nonoperation of sheer inertia – endurance without duration (which is to say: patience), a pre-inscription which ever effaces itself as a production of meaning without thereby becoming meaningless, and which is suffered "in us" only as the death of others. Not as death itself, but as a death that is always other […] for which we bear the unbearable responsibility' (Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 118). Again, all others here seem to be a means for the subject to expose itself to 'a death that is always other'. Not the otherness of that other but that other as a 'doorway' to the sacred.

[76] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xxxvi.

[77] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 14. This contrast will be taken to further detail and exemplified thoroughly in the next chapter (see 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 214-7, 219-22. Its brief preliminary here should suffice for the purposes of this chapter's argument.

The Infinity of Responsibility

The personalization of suffering in the ethical scenario can be further characterized as a radical responsibility. This ethical term further distinguishes personalized suffering from the idea of impersonal suffering as portrayed by Bataille and Blanchot.

Before the other, I find myself accountable and blamed for its sufferings. I find myself suffering because I find myself being in some indefinable way the author of the other's suffering. My suffering is a suffering *for* someone, in the stead of someone, because I am accountable for its misfortunes. The other suffers from itself while I suffer from myself because I suffer for the other, because I am accountable for that other. Responsibility describes my exposure to the alterity of the other's singularity which afflicts me with the suffering that is my own singularity.

Responsibility 'is not something that happens by caprice'. It is a suffering that is justified, rendered meaningful, in being for someone else. It 'is what first enables one to catch sight of and conceive of value'. In Lingis' words, it 'is a form of recognition – acknowledgement of a claim, an order, which is even constitutive of subjectivity – a summons to arise to be and to present oneself. It involves a recognition not of the form but of the force – vocative and imperative […] – of the other, of alterity itself'.[78]

The suffering brought about by responsibility is not in any way related to what I did or did not do. The experience of responsibility is outside the deliberations and actions of my will. My suffering in the ethical relation is a suffering of my involvement with the other's state in a way that is unrelated to the commonplace experiencing of my self-identity and its intentions. Responsibility reveals my timeless irrevocable bond with the other. It discloses my intimate relationship with it before we were even existent. I am 'held accountable for what I did not do, accountable for the others before the others'. I recognize my complicity in a course of things in which I have never been

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[78] Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 197, 123; Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. xix.

involved, which I have never steered or willed. I 'have to answer for a situation that was in place before I came on the scene'.[79]

Apart from the neighbour's miseries, what I find myself responsible for is ultimately that intimate suffering in the neighbour that constitutes its singular self. I find myself accused of who the other is. The ethical experience of my responsibility goes even further than this. To acknowledge the other's intimate misery is to also acknowledge the intimate misery of all other others. It is to be painfully aware that all the other others are in the same situation as that other that stands before me. My blame for the other's selfhood ultimately opens to my blame for all the other others' selfhoods. To be responsible for the other's distress is ultimately to recognize myself as responsible for the distresses of everyone else. Implicit in the other's suffering is the universalization of this suffering. Implicit in the other's misery is the misery of all the other others. It indicts me of the world as agony, as unjust. I find myself 'under the weight of the universe, responsible for everything. The unity of the universe is […] what is incumbent on me from all sides, regards me in the two senses of the term, accuses me, is my affair.'[80]

The idea of infinity can once again express this aspect of the ethical injunction. Responsibility for the other leading to a responsibility for existence itself is an experience that is always in excess of itself. I am subjected to what is always beyond my control. No matter how much I take charge of my responsibility for the other, no matter how much I interpret it and act upon such an understanding, there is always a more that needs to be attended to, a more that concerns me painfully. I am always already overpowered by the enormity of what remains to be answered for. My blame for the state of things is never fulfilled.[81]

Despite its differences, personalized alterity, as already indicated, is also related to impersonal alterity. The experience of responsibility also bears a resemblance to the two aspects of infinity that can constitute the sacred: a mastery of mastery and a passivity of passivity. Responsibility is similar to extreme mastery in the subject's endless attempt to take over and set to rights the responsibility it undergoes on behalf of the other. The more I fulfil the responsibility towards the other the more insufficient this responsibility appears to be. My responsibility is never responsible enough. The

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[79] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. xxix, xx.
[80] See Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 116, 148.
[81] Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp.12, 54-5, 93, 148.

more my selfhood takes charge of this demand, the more it finds itself in turn undermined by the exigency of a greater demand. Similarity with extreme passivity is seen in the endless way my selfhood is transgressed by this call for a more radical giving. My selfhood is undermined continuously in its every effort to meet the demands of an exorbitant culpability. 'The more I answer the more I am responsible; the more I approach the neighbor with which I am encharged the further away I am. This debit which increases is infinity as an infinition of the infinite, as glory.'[82]

Responsibility in the Dark Night

God and Christ as Accusatory

The distress of responsibility also characterizes various phenomena in the dark night, especially those in which the mystic believes they are *before* Christ more than *with* Christ. In other words, the experience of responsibility is often intrinsic to certain self-subversive episodes. Sometimes, their transgressive force is so strong that the mystic believes it is mainly God's most-high divine alterity which is before them. The Father's infinite transcendence is encountered compromising most efforts of understanding. The Father is undergone to a large extent only in his persona. Proximity to the divine thus here elicits a very minimal degree of expressivity.

In such instances, God's, or sometimes Christ's, alterity is experienced as *accusatory*. Christ or God accuses the mystic of their selfhood. They are blamed and held responsible for the very nature of their self. Their very being, they feel, is an aberration that they themselves have created. The very roots of their self are evil and worthless. 'The vision of the Good', Underhill claims, 'brings to the self an abrupt sense of her own hopeless and helpless imperfection: a black "conviction of sin"'.[83] John of the Cross presents this torment as one of the primary trials of the dark night: '[W]hat the sorrowing soul feels most is the conviction that God has rejected it, and with an abhorrence of it cast it into darkness [...]. [It suffers] the feeling of God's

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[82] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 93. See also pp.12, 54-5, 93, 148.
[83] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 390.

absence, being chastised and rejected by Him, and of being unworthy of Him, as well as the object of His anger'.[84]

As in Levinas, this sense of responsibility is outside one's intentions and actions. The mystic finds themselves condemned for what they did not do. This is because it is the very essential nature of their selfhood that they are accused of. They are blamed for what intrinsically constitutes their selfhood, its possessive character. Before this judgement, they are powerless. Responsibility once again exceeds all efforts that seek to meet it. How can the mystic liberate themselves of their own selfhood? How can they atone and purify themselves of the elementary nature of who they are? This is impossible in that the very endeavour of expiation requires taking control over or taking power over one's self. Ironically, this action defines that same self. This is precisely how the self operates all the time. Intrinsic to its nature is its objectification of everything that it seeks to understand and change, even if this is itself. Any effort of the subject to expiate itself from its possessive selfhood cannot escape the basic constitution of this same selfhood: its self-affirmation and appropriation. Expiation can only be in the manner of one more adequation performed by the ego, *for* that ego. Perhaps the only way how the mystic can reconcile themselves with this radical responsibility is to literally abolish themselves.[85]

This blame can sometimes come about through an awareness of the immeasurable difference between oneself and the absolute love and suffering of God. The incapability of reciprocating this perfect love can be suffered as an indictment against oneself. It can also be caused by the occasional ineffectualness of the mystic's faculties. Aridity, physical afflictions, despair in the dark night often prevent one's faculties from concentrating and acting upon what is spiritual. The mystic finds themselves indisposed to do anything, their resolve terribly weakened. When this condition is at its worst, the mystic often believes that they are the one responsible for it. I felt, Guyon confesses, '[l]aden with a weight of past sins, and a multitude of new ones, I could not think God would ever pardon me, but looked on myself as a victim designed for Hell'.[86] The mystic's sufferings are met with a harrowing self-blame, a reaction often related with the sense of God's accusatory presence.

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[84] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 338. See also *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 318-9, 328-9.

[85] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 338; *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 319, 328-30.

[86] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* p. 94. See also *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, pp. 323-4, 331-4

Suffering the Self as Suffering Christ

We have shown that the phenomenon of being before Christ is often related with an inconsolable responsibility. As suggested earlier on, however, this same phenomenon also signifies an exposure to the persona of Christ. These two perspectives are inextricable from each other.

Before Christ, the mystic believes they are suffering from the sinfulness and frailty of their selfhood. Before Christ, they also believe that this very suffering is also Christ's suffering. For the mystic, Christ's persona is inseparable from his sufferings, from the trials and tribulations of his Passion, particularly his crucifixion. To partake of the Son's singular self is to cease finding any consolation in one's sense of selfhood and worldly things. It is to suffer unbearably because of them. To be a part of Christ's unique identity is to undergo a painful estrangement from all that belongs to oneself, one's egotistic self and its selfish perceptions of the Father.[87]

In *Teresa of Avila*, Williams points out that the process of the mystic way is in fact, for a mystic like Teresa of Avila, the process of God himself. In their trials and joys, the mystic is undergoing what God went through and is still going through in the self-giving love of the Incarnation, what Christ suffered and is still suffering for others.

In Teresa of Avila, the shifting of the centre of meaning

> is conceived as God's own characteristic movement: God *is* a reality moving away from a centre of self-possession towards being-in-another. And so the moving of the centre of meaning that is involved in turning from external ambiguity to inner clarity is saved from being simply a move into the private sphere by its association with God's journey into creation. The rejection of the world's standards is also a claim on behalf of God's will and ability to penetrate the world and to remake it in self-abandoning love.[88]

Indeed, both *The Way of Perfection* and *The Foundations* 'were written with the assumption that part of the indication of the life of Carmel is its character as *manifestation*, a making concrete of the possibilities of Christlikeness, showing what it means to live within the movement of God's love towards the world'. Referring to the

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[87] John of the Cross suggests this when he describes Christ's sufferings on the cross: 'He was most annihilated in all things: in His reputation before men, since in beholding Him die they mocked Him instead of esteeming Him; in His human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from His Father, for He was forsaken by His Father at that time so as to pay the debt fully and bring man to union with God' (*Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 124-5).
[88] Williams, *Teresa of Avila,* p.163.

mystics in general, Williams then points out that the mystical begins with 'the state in which what we are doing coincides – more or less – with what God is doing; or, in theological terms, it is the formation of our created selfhood in the likeness of Christ'. The mystics are defined by 'the assimilation of their life to Christ's'.[89]

The mystic's suffering of the fallibility of their selfhood is also Christ's suffering, his persona. There is more to this than Levinas's ethical relation, where the subject undergoes the other's intimate sufferings, its singular self, through *its own* intimate sufferings, its own singular self. The mystic literally believes that their agony is *a part* of Christ's agony. Christ's selfhood is actually being suffered through the deep sufferings of one's own selfhood. A union in misery is effectuated.

In believing they are partaking of Christ's agony, the mystic is also acknowledging responsibility for such an agony. They believe they are a part of that agony because they deserve it, because they are the ones who have brought it about. I am carrying Christ's Cross, the mystic thinks, because I have recognized my infinite culpability for that Cross. I am now a part of it because I am its cause and thus I must suffer it too. I must account for it if I am to reconcile myself with God. I am in Christ's pain because I am obliged to alleviate it. The mystic suffers Christ because they realize that Christ suffers because of them. Their participation in the Son's Passion is the beginning of an absolution of their responsibility for the sinfulness of the world, their responsibility for that very Passion and its objective to cleanse that world of its sinfulness. The mystic's trials are here rooted in their inexorable guilt for Christ's agonies.[90]

Suffering as Guilt in Responsibility

In the sacred, the self's perpetual disempowerment can be described through Blanchot as a passivity of passivity. I am incessantly deprived of taking control, of being myself. In the context of responsibility, this infinite passivity is personalized as

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[89] Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, pp. 158, 144, 146.
[90] See Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 103, 108-9, 111, 138, 152, 155-6, 207; Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, pp. 95-6, 144-7.

an infinite *debt*. Debt signifies obligation, something that is owed. It is a personalized experience because it presupposes another person in its signification. In the ethical relation, debt is the increasing ineptitude I find myself suffering from in my attempts at taking upon myself the responsibility the other accuses me of. The other's demand is so inordinate that only '[m]y death will mark the limit of my force without limiting my responsibility'. Before the other, '[p]ain is a pure deficit, an increase of debt in a subject that does not have a hold on itself, does not "join up the two ends"'.[91]

This pain is similar but also intrinsically different from the nature of that pain undergone in the event of the sacred. Before God or Christ, I likewise suffer from my inability to be other than myself, that is, my inability to be more or less than myself. My selfhood prevents me from escaping from the divine presence just as it prevents me from reaching it and unifying with it. Equivalently but from a different perspective, I can neither take control of my selfhood and appropriate what is before me, nor can I leave this selfhood. I thus suffer my selfhood as an insufferable limitation. Bataille and Blanchot call this pain an anguish or unhappiness. The pain of my impotence as experienced in responsibility, however, is personalized as *shame* or *guilt*. In the ethical event, guilt denotes the increasing pain of my endless failure to take upon myself or to answer adequately for the obligations I have towards the other. Guilt is my despairing ineffectuality and futility to set to rights my responsibility. Before the other's face 'I am wanting and faulty. It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving'.[92] Derrida describes this notion of guilt in *The Gift of Death* as follows:

> This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined, I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible […]. Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough. One is never responsible enough because one is finite […].[93]

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[91] See Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xx; Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 55. See also p. 12.
[92] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 91.
[93] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), p. 51. See Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 83-4, 251-3.

Guilt in the Dark Night

In the dark night, the mystic's suffering of their limitations before the Son or the Father often signifies a deep sense of guilt before his perfect love. In the context of Christ, this means the mystic's incessant inability to meet the exorbitance of Christ's agonies, their inability to suffer enough as Christ suffered, to fully vindicate or justify Christ's agony with their own. The mystic's pain is here the pain of being unable to repay what is due to Christ's love. It is the suffering of never suffering enough to deserve him.

Sometimes, a painful experience in the dark night can produce this unbearable guilt. Sometimes, guilt itself can bring this experience about. At other times, it can be a component of the experience itself. Guilt often comes directly after a vision or an ecstasy. Teresa of Avila claims that the more those 'souls to whom the Lord communicates Himself in so special a way […] receive from our God, the greater grows their sorrow for sin'. '[T]his sorrow can be more oppressive at one time than at another and [it is also] of different kinds; for the soul does not now think of the pain which it is bound to suffer on account of its sins, but only of how ungrateful it has been to Him Whom it owes so much […].' The only fear of such souls 'is that God may let [them] out of His hand and that they may then offend Him […]'. '[T]he thought of so much goodness and of favours granted to one who has merited only hell makes the distress greater'.[94]

Guyon describes this severe guilt as follows:

> The pain of displeasing God, and the strong propensity I felt in myself to all sorts of faults, caused me most lively and sensible pain […]. [T]he farther I went, the more everything appeared to me a sin; even crosses appeared to me no more crosses but real faults. I thought I drew them all on myself by my imprudent words and actions.

I found myself unable to 'perform any exterior acts or penances for my evil'.[95] Again, guilt comes from the radical disproportion or dissymmetry between the fallible and finite mystic and the infallible and infinite goodness of God. It is the agonizing

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[94] Teresa, *Castle*, pp. 102-4.
[95] *Autobiography*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 105-6. See pp. 102-4; *Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works,* pp. 326-7, 331-4.

consciousness that, as Derrida says, 'I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness [...]'.[96] Time and again, the mystic feels that their culpability or sinfulness is too inordinate for them to set it to rights. The guilt they suffer for the state of things is too excessive for their self to do anything about it. Above all, their selfhood cannot answer for their guilt in that it is ultimately the very nature of this selfhood that is guilty. The infinite distance between the mystic and the divine is here the cause of much torment.

Responsibility in Blanchot's Ethics

The theme of responsibility is not only present in Levinas's phenomenology. Blanchot's conception of the ethical relation also makes use of this term to designate the human relation. In such works as *The Writing of the Disaster*, he often seems to claim that responsibility is my suffering of the other's vulnerability to death through my own vulnerability to death. My suffering is thus a responsibility for another's suffering.[97]

Again, what here seems to be in agreement with Levinas's ethics, turns out to be quite different on a more careful observation. For Blanchot, the suffering that the subject and the other undergo is at bottom a suffering of the *sacred* rather than a suffering of their singular selves. Their anguish does not inaugurate their most intimate selves. Instead, it disempowers all that they are as human beings and opens them to the anonymous and inhuman place of the sacred. Pain is here an exposure to the outside, the 'there is', the no-place, etc., rather than a form of intimacy with one's absolute singularity.

In truth, for Blanchot, there does not seem to be any difference between the suffering of my responsibility before the other and, for instance, the suffering of my responsibility in the experience of writing poetry and literature. This is because the phenomenon of writing, for Blanchot, is yet another event when my subjectivity is exposed and dispossessed by the sacred. Just like the instant when we face the other, here 'we have to die supplementarily [...], which involves us in becoming responsible

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[96] Derrida, *Gift*, p. 51.
[97] See especially, Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 13, 18, 25-7.

for the movement of dying – transgression that transgresses nothing'.[98] At this point, the ethical scene risks becoming indistinguishable from other experiences which likewise testify to the disempowering approach of the no-place.

What seems to be understood by 'responsibility' is therefore once again the subversion of selfhood by the sacred. In this sense, the experience of responsibility is more than anything a destructive force. In extending the sacred to a region that is suffered through the other, one has the impression that responsibility for Blanchot seems to be not a suffering *for* the other but a suffering *of* the otherness of the sacred. Responsibility is the contestation of '"*sharp questioning, that is, in an unhappy incapability of life for yourself*".[99]

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[98] Blanchot, *Step,* p. 104.

[99] Blanchot, *Step,* p. 131. Blanchot's idea of responsibility is also suggested in the following passage: '*Neither of them was given to using tricks: he, being a part of his plans that supposed a life that was still intact, the everyday life promised to all, and he, hearing nothing but the speech that was already failing, incapable of speaking except by default. Between them, the responsibility of fear*' (p. 59). See also Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 118.

VII

Temporality and the Divine in the Ethical Event

Temporality in the Sacred and the Ethical Event

A Temporality that Disempowers the Ego

The similarity and difference of the sacred and the ethical event can be revealed also through a description of their respective modes of temporality. Both phenomena refer to an instant in which my sense of the present is unhinged. This in turn strips the past and the future of any personal connection with my self-identity. The disjointedness of my present suspends my recollections and my anticipations as the instant is opened to a past and a future that are foreign and unknown. Whatever is happening to me in that moment I cannot recognize or appropriate because my self-presence has been ruptured, its references to what came before and what will come after dislodged. The force working upon me is outside my appropriating intentions, beyond my control.

The temporality I experience in the sacred pertains to an impersonal region: it is a depersonalized temporality. That experienced before the icon is personalized in belonging to the other. It pertains to its persona. Kearney calls this sense of personalized temporality, the 'eschaton' of the other's persona. The eschaton signals the expiration within me of my own identifying temporality, my exposure to an alien time that comes from somewhere else, or rather, from someone else. 'I understand eschaton here precisely in the sense of an end without end – an end that escapes and

surprises us, like a thief in the night – rather than some immanent teleological closure.'[100]

The eschaton's past is always already precedent to my own, its future always already after my own in 'pre-existing and post-existing the seizure of myself as presence (qua sum of totalizable properties)'.[101] Its past is outside my own and can therefore only be experienced as strictly an unidentifiable *no-longer*. Equivalently, its future is foreign to my own and can therefore only be captured as an unidentifiable *not-yet*. My recollections and anticipations are disjointed by this extraneous temporality. We can see here the similarity with the anonymous time that the sacred inaugurates. As in the sacred, the other's eschaton tears me out of my own sense of time and exposes me to a foreign point, a not-yet that I find myself attracted to and moving towards. I am also, however, always failing to reach this unknown destination. I am constantly undergoing its shift from a not-yet to a no-longer. Striving towards it, I never strive enough. I am always losing it in an irretrievable manner. It is always already beyond my reach in a no-longer. But I still keep on reaching out for it.[102]

What do I try to move towards in a personalized temporality? If in the sacred, this futural point is a region of absolute otherness such as death, in the ethical bond, this is the otherness of the persona. I cannot reach this source because it is autonomous of my selfhood. It has a freedom and a will of its own which I can never take over. As Kearney claims, '[t]he eschaton, as *persona*, is precisely the other's future possibilities which are impossible for me (to realize, possess, grasp) […]. Eschatologically considered, the *persona* of the person brings home to us that we have no power over her/him.'[103]

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[100] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 12.

[101] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 12.

[102] See also Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. xxv-xxvi; Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 37-8.

[103] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 12. Levinas describes another form of personalized temporality in *Totality and Infinity* which he calls '*fecundity*' and relates it in part with phenomena of love and the erotic. The 'there is' constitutes the return of a distress of an irrevocable and unknown past that weighs upon and determines actions the subject undertakes. Subjectivity is a constraint of and is constrained by this irreversible past. Through the ethical relation, however, the return of the 'there is' becomes the return of an instant that unbinds or *pardons* subjectivity from the fatal weight of the irrecuperable past. Pardon also delivers the subject from the futility of an anachronous future. Its futurity is an openness to a liberating unknown, a freedom that disowns and exceeds egotism and its perceptions. It is the return of a *rejuvenation* that dismisses egotistic subjectivity, a transgression by a meaningfulness that is transcendent. For-the-other enacts a futurity that does not belong to the subject, that is not subjective, and yet one which it finds itself partaking of. The for-the-other relieves the fatedness of destinerrance, turning it into the directionality of transcendence (see Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 276-9, 283-4). The no-longer and the not-yet of the sacred temporality are personalized, revealing a movement of desire towards the other that fills them with a meaningfulness beyond subjectivity.

A Temporality that Empowers the Subject

The temporality of the icon is undergone in all its extraneousness, that is, as a no-longer and a not-yet, only from the perspective of my possessive self. It is felt to be a disempowering force only in relation to the ego. Inasmuch as my ego and its appropriative inclinations persist to some degree or another, I will experience the other through this particular foreign and subversive sense of time.

Inasmuch as we are perceiving the temporality of the ethical relation from the viewpoint of the subject's *singular self*, its self as a for-another, we can say that together with its undermining no-longer and not-yet sense of time, another temporality is experienced. This temporality depends on my willingness to receive the possibles that the other's persona is offering me. Every instant in the sacred is a further disempowerment of my selfhood in an approach to a no-place. Every instant before the icon is a disempowerment of my egotistic selfhood but *also* an *empowerment of* my singular self, *my empowerment through* my singular self in an approach to the other's singular self. The no-place is adonational: it does not give anything but is always withdrawing. The persona withdraws itself just as it also gives me new possible ways of being and acting. In one phenomenon, every instant marks a further impairment of my selfhood. In the other phenomenon, every instant also marks a new beginning, an *advent* that does not come from my selfhood. In one phenomenon, the instant is a hollowing out of subjectivity. In the other, the instant is a *hallowing* outside of subjectivity. On the one hand, I am increasingly subject to impotence. On the other hand, my ego is rendered impotent while my singular self is inspired by the freedom of a creativity that is not my own. This tempo, Kearney tells us,

> surprises us with possibilities which would have been impossible to us without such grace [...]. [It is the promise] of a new natality in a new time: rebirth into advent so infinite it is never final [...]. From out of the future into every moment, from beyond time, against time, into time – the Word becoming flesh forever, *sans fin*, without end'.[104]

The approach of the no-place fills me with dread and anguish. The approach of the persona also fills me with *hope* and *promise*. It inspires promise because it is a

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[104] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 82 (my emphasis). See pp. 14-6, 81-2.

region that is ever making possible new and more ethical ways of seeing and doing things. The incessant deprivation I suffer from the no-longer and the not-yet is thus *redeemed* on behalf of the singular self. The no-longer and the not-yet cease disempowering me but paradoxically become a no-longer and a not-yet that empower me. They are refigured as a fecundity. They become a source of incessant generosity, an endless giving of possibles. Through the ego, I experience them as an end that never ends. Through the singular self, I experience them as an end that inaugurates a beginning, a new freedom. I find myself before a beginning that begins and yet always remains to begin.[105]

The Divine in the Ethical Event as another Personalized Alterity: The God-Who-May-Be and Illeity (Kearney and Levinas)

My openness to the other's persona is also my openness to the divine. The other's singular self is also part of God's alterity. Temporality, its no-longer and not-yet, is personalized not just by the other's persona but also by the reality of the divine and the good. The possibles it inspires in me are also possibles that come from the divine. This is because they are possibles that are inspired through my unconditional love for the other.

The God who gives me new possibles through the other is what Kearney calls the 'God who may be'. It is the 'transfiguring [of] our very incapacity into a new kind of capacity'.[106] I am endowed with potentialities that are nonexistent through my ego. Like the other's persona, my experience of the divine through this persona, is an experience of an alterity that subverts my egotistic selfhood and is yet meaningful in this very subversion. This is not the approach of something, anything, an absolute heterogeneity. Rather, it is the approach of a *particular kind* of alterity outside being:

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[105] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 14-6, 81-2.
[106] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 81.

an otherness intuited as an otherness of a particular nature. I recognize its alterity as being of a certain kind, an alterity that belongs to the divine. It is not an existential angst, the 'there is', or a bit of indigestion.[107] I *sense* it is God. Again, this is what personalized alterity signifies. I am before an otherness whose unknown is yet in some very minimal and irreducible way identifiable for me. Its ineffability is yet constituted by a meaningfulness, a meaningful ineffability or an ineffable meaningfulness.

What is thereby approached in the ethical relation is not God as *deitas*, as a divine entity. To have an experience of God as a *being* would mean experiencing him in terms of my perceptions. God would here be for the most part reduced to the interpretative intentionality of my selfhood, a part of the identifiable world of being and beings. Through the other, rather, God is experienced as what Levinas calls '*illeity*', an unknown *il* or He.[108] Illeity is outside the region of being and yet it is not undergone as an absolute anonymity. It is not an influx of otherness inside me that possesses me, that leaves me in helpless abjection to its force. This is what would happen if such a force would be completely alien to anything that is human. Illeity, however, is a personalized alterity because in some irreducible way it *communicates* with me. It touches upon a certain degree of my freedom to recognize it, to answer it. On some deep level, I find myself interacting with it. It is not my ego that illeity interacts with, however, but my singular self.[109]

On the one hand, the sacred comes upon me as an *irresistible demand*. Beyond my control, this demand takes over me and I am completely at its mercy. At this point I find myself undergoing a mastery of mastery or a passivity of passivity. The nature of this force bespeaks the entry of something absolutely foreign to me in me, the entry of a strictly alien urge or impulse within me that can be anything. On the other hand, illeity *calls* me, *pleads* with me, *judges* me, *accuses* me. Although it is indecipherable, even subversive for the ego, a form of message between illeity and me is evoked. This message to take up responsibility for the other impresses itself in my most intimate selfhood, my singular self. Illeity is recognized (by my singular self) through such a message. The sacred with its nonhuman and absolute otherness is neutral to me, to my

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[107] Caputo, *Prayers,* p. 12.
[108] See Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 147-8, 162.
[109] Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 122-3.

absolutely singular identity. Illeity or the other's alterity affects my most intimate self. It appeals to it. It is intimate to me.[110]

The hold illeity has over my singular self, indicative of its personalized alterity, can be seen also in its relation to the realm of being and beings. Akin to the experience of 'saying', Levinas designates my exposure to illeity as an exposure to a reality that is beyond being and therefore different in nature from it.[111] At the same time, this same reality is the condition of being. It is pre-originary to being in the sense that it is completely outside it and yet is its foundational ground. My subjectivity originates from this divine matrix. As Levinas points out, '[i]n the indirect ways of illeity, in the anarchical provocation which ordains me to the other, is imposed the way which leads to thematization, and to an act of consciousness'. It is 'the birth of meaning in the obtuseness of being […]'. This factor makes of illeity a momentous experience *for me*. It *concerns me* to the very depths because it is the basis of all that is me, of all that is human, the foundation of being and beings. This means that before my self-identity and being are even in existence, a pre-originary bond exists between illeity and me. Before I am a self-presence, before I am a self that interprets itself and the environment around it, I am related to illeity. This is a bond that touches upon my singular self. 'The problem of transcendence and of God and the problem of subjectivity irreducible to essence, irreducible to essential immanence, [that is, the singular self,] go together.'[112] One must not, of course, see this relationship that illeity has with me in a context of the ego, where anything that is significant means that it can be utilized for one's own self-affirmation. For Levinas and Kearney, what truly concerns me in a profound manner does not pertain to egotistic ends but rather to my singular self or my persona whose ends have to do with unconditional love. It is such a love that reveals my pre-originary bond with all the others and the world in which I live in.

We can conclusively say then that the icon opens me to a personalized alterity. If anything, the suffering that the event of the sacred entails comes from an alterity that

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[110] In relation to the God-who-may-be, Kearney remarks that in being 'less as a power of immanent potency driving toward fulfilment than as a power of the powerless which bids us remain open to the possible divinity […]', it 'unfolds not just as can-be […] but as should-be […]' (Kearney, *May Be*, p. 100). See also Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. xl-xli; Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 122-3.

[111] As Levinas points out, '[t]he detachment of the Infinite from the thought that seeks to thematize it and the language that tries to hold it in the said is what we have called *illeity* […]. The subject is inspired by the Infinite, which, as *illeity,* does not appear, is not present […]. It is glorified in the glory that manifests a subject, is gloried already in the glorification of its glory by the subject, thus undoing all the structures of correlation' (Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 147-8). See Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. xxxix-xli.

[112] Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 16, 128, 17.

is indifferent to anything affiliated to me and to being. The sacred, as Steven Shaviro claims, 'is my "experience" of [the] inhuman, my impossible relation to […] "the non-concerning. Not merely that which does not concern (regard) me, but that which does not concern (regard) itself"'.[113] Conversely, my suffering before the icon is a suffering brought about by my deep concern for its alterity: a suffering of concern. I suffer because this alterity continuously deprives me of my egotistic self and arouses my singular self. I suffer because I am affected by a non-indifference to the other's difference.[114] Depersonalized suffering marks one experience while personalized suffering marks the other.

Addendum:
The Absence of the Sacred from the Ethical Relation

We have seen that despite the difference of its nature from the sacred, the ethical bond yet submits itself to its interference. The event of the icon can entail the alternating experience of a personalized alterity and its disruption by the impersonal alterity of the sacred. In my view, this paradox is yet not necessary to the ethical injunction. Sometimes the subject simply does not find its love for an other undermined by any equally powerful nihilistic event. The subject's bond with a personalized alterity remains unchallenged and unquestioned.

The sacred is not indispensable to the ethical phenomenon. Nonetheless, when it is present it serves a significant function. The subversion of the ego as caused by the sacred can help in turn to sustain the subject's will to expose itself to the other. It can even ameliorate this exposure. The sacred exposes the ego to its limits and this can motivate the subject to uphold its ethical relation, a relation that depends on how much of the ego has been sacrificed. Moreover, it can motivate the subject to give up its ego

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[113] Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 183; quoting from Maurice Blanchot, *L'entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. xxiii, (Shaviro's translation).
[114] See Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 162.

more completely for the other. The experience of the ego's ineffectuality can inspire the subject to give itself more unconditionally to the alterity of the icon. It can help it better acknowledge what in that other is foreign to the ego and its arrogations, that is, its singularity.[115]

The disempowerment of the ego as caused by the sacred helps instil in the subject the sense of otherness constituting the other's persona. Its possible absence from the ethical encounter would mean an absence of its radical, insufferable rupturing. Without this, one's openness and love for the other's persona would not be contested. And there is here the likelier chance of a weakening in one's will to give oneself to that persona. Without the intense disruption that the sacred enacts, there is a high possibility that the subject would start taking the other for granted, a complacency starting to grow in its ethical response towards it. The subject can start increasingly perceiving the icon through its presupposed forms of identification, becoming by degrees unreceptive to the subversion of this very perception by that icon's singularity. At this point, I 'see' the other not through the unknown of its persona but through the familiarity of its *person*. I understand it like any other extraneous nonliving object: according to its *literal appearance*. Just like my day-to-day interpretative perceptions of the outside world, the other recedes to a façade, an object, which makes it easily compliant to my perceptual intuitions. This withdrawal or objectification detaches it from its relationship to my singular self, prevents it from affecting that self with its expressivity. Rather, it makes it yield like any other object to my presupposed ideas. Here, I see what I want to see in the other. The other becomes a reflection of my presuppositions.[116]

These preconceived meanings with which I identify the other could have been presented to me by that same other. In the ethical relation, the other offers me possibles with which I can understand it and act for it. When I reject the persona, however, or when I confuse the other's person with its persona, I can start interpreting that other *exclusively* through one or more of the possibles it had alluded to, while being unreceptive to the *other* possibles it offers, and above all, unreceptive to the subversion of these same possibles by the force of its persona. The other is seen solely through a number of possibles while the transcendence that marks its singularity is dismissed. This means that such possibles are taken to *literally* signify *who* that other is. They

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[115] This is explained in more detail in 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 183-7. See also 'Conclusion', pp. 263-8; Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 211.

[116] 'Far easier', says Kearney, 'to take the other as given, to take him/her for granted, as no more than what we can grasp – following the logic: what you see is what you get' (see Kearney, *May Be,* pp. 10-1).

cease being potential ways of knowing and understanding that other and become *the* only way of knowing and understanding it. In other words, they stop being possibles and become facts. The order of the possible is conflated with the order of the actual, the fictional with the empirical.[117]

To perceive the other through an interpretation inspired or not inspired by that other means that I am subsuming its identity in some fixed idea that I consider to be an indisputable truth. The persona can here easily be betrayed in the name of an ideology or some form of totality. This betrayal takes place because of one's unacknowledgement of the *fictitiousness* of this ideology. 'Indeed, as critics of ideology, from Marx to Ricoeur, have observed', Kearney points out, 'ideology is a "false consciousness" which, like the camera obscura, works by inversion, in the dark, to give us what seems like a perfectly believable illusion'.[118] Not to affirm the artificiality or inventiveness of any system of ideas is to blindly identify the other as a particular manifestation of this system. The consequences here can be various. Whether the other is human or divine, its identification with absolute values can lead for instance to a disregard to certain forms of ethical action, passivity, arrogance, a marginalization of certain others, and even violence. Dogmatism, authoritarianism, and finally also fundamentalism can also be possible results.[119]

The intervention of the sacred is significant in that it disrupts the 'infallibility' of an ideology. It destroys our illusions of totality and exposes them to their limitations. It helps me question their assumptions, sustaining my awareness of their nature as belonging to the order of the possible or the fictional. Consciousness of an idea or an ideology's artificiality can in turn lead to the awareness that the other's identity is therefore outside of it. I realize that my comprehension of the persona has been but a believable fabrication while that very persona is an ineffable actuality always in excess of my fictitious interpretative horizons. I realize that my ideology is a possible while the other's persona is *what* can *give* such a possible. Though not disconnected, these two elements belong to two different sorts of reality. The sacred in this situation can therefore lead to an affirmation or a reaffirmation of the will to open myself to the other's singularity. This in turn means that it can play a significant role in the

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[117] See Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 10-1.

[118] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 11. See Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[119] See Richard Kearney, *Poétique du possible: Phénoménologie herméneutique de la figuration* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984); *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, ed. Richard Kearney, Joseph S. O'Leary (Paris: Grasset, 1981).

motivation to receive new possibles expressed by the other, that is, possible ways through which I can better understand it.

Chapter 4

✝

In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide

The Leap into Two Great Abysses

Prologue

A significant difference between the sacred and the icon concerns the mode of traversal between the experiential plane of the subject and the experiential plane of alterity. The phenomenon of the sacred and the phenomenon of the icon reveal distinct ways how the crossing between the realm of being and beings *and* otherness occurs. The manner of shifting from one reality to another is different because of the different kind of alterity either phenomenon refers to. In both cases, the term 'decision' is often used to capture this transitional process.

Decision denotes a 'qualitative leap'[1]: an inexplicable and sudden crossing to a state of a radically divergent nature from the previous. It is 'the leap into something *tout autre* […]; the leap into the impossible, the transformation, the motion of the event, of a new time […]'.[2] The infinite gulf between two diverse realities radically disjointed from each other is astonishingly bridged.

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[1] This phrasing is Søren Kierkegaard's: see especially, 'The Follower at Second Hand', in Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments or a Fragment of Philosophy*, ed. Edna H. Hong, Howard V. Hong; trans. Edna H. Hong, Howard V. Hong, 2nd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1962), pp. 89-110.

[2] Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 50-1.

I

The Ethical Relation:
The Decision as Mine and the Other's

The Decision as a 'Yes, Yes' (Derrida)

Decision indicates an 'inaugural movement toward an other-than-self'.[3] In the ethical scenario, this movement is characterized by a stripping of the subject's solipsistic horizons in an unreserved exposure to the other's alterity. The other calls, judges, and accuses the subject for its suffering: it decides for the subject; it decides the subject. The subject gives itself to the other's decision; it finds itself in an unconditional submission to the other's decision.

This does not mean, however, that the subject undergoes the alterity of the icon involuntarily. The ethical bond requires a certain decision on behalf of the subject itself for its initiation. The subject must decide to be for the other's decision. What, then, is the nature of this decision? What does it consist of? For Derrida and deconstruction, it is first and foremost the practice of 'vigilance, patience, and humility'.[4] One must never lose sight of the fact that decision in the ethical phenomenon is *both* the other's decision and the subject's decision in an irreducible unison.

For Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *my own* decision in the ethical scene must be in the form of the unreserved welcome of 'come' (*viens*) and 'yes, yes'.[5] To

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[3] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 63.
[4] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 99.
[5] Derrida's ideas of the 'yes, yes' and the 'come' are derived from Blanchot, namely, *The Step Not Beyond* and *The Writing of the Disaster.* For Blanchot, my exposure to alterity, and this includes also my experience of the other, elicits in me the consent to unconditionally give myself to it. Alterity demands of me that my response towards it would be one of an unreserved affirmation: that the nature of my response

decide to be for the other is to say 'yes' to its absolute singularity. My yes is a decision to affirm unconditionally the other's alterity. It is a resolve to be completely receptive to its call. A dilemma, however, is here in play. The other's singularity is precisely foreign to the horizons of my knowledge. It is outside all my memories and expectations. To say 'yes' is to decide to affirm what is an absolute stranger to my selfhood and its perceptions. I choose to give myself to what is not myself.

Is this undertaking possible? Can I really choose to suspend all my preunderstandings and open myself unconditionally to an other's singularity? Intrinsic to my yes is its *uncertainty*. We say yes but 'we do not know as yet if we have said yes'. In my decision to welcome the other, I am not sure if I have really welcomed it. I do not know if my decision is a decision to really affirm and receive its alterity, or rather, if it affirms my pregiven perceptions in some manner. I do not know if my yes will allow the other to enter, to come into my experience, or whether my yes is merely a projection of my ego and thereby closed to what is outside of it. Is my choice a susceptibility or some form of imperviousness? 'When we inaugurate something', Caputo points out, 'we do not know if we have inaugurated anything yet; inaugural days come after the fact, years later, *a posteriori*. We are just beginning and we are not sure if this beginning is a beginning or if it will fail, if we will fail to remain faithful to it'.[6]

Lodged in my yes is the indeterminacy whether this yes is selfless enough to inaugurate the other. This yes thereby defers itself to the unknown future. It gives itself to a prospect that is completely foreign to its understandings: the prospect of the other's advent. It refers itself to that unanticipated time when the other will break into the order of presence. When I say 'yes' I am only hoping that this yes will be truly effectuated in

would be in the manner of a complete receptivity, a 'come' and a 'yes, yes' to it. Intrinsic to this openness, however, is its insufficiency. I can never surrender myself enough to partake of what approaches me. My yes is never affirmative enough. It always already calls for a second yes that exceeds the first yes in its openness. This infinite assent takes place because of the contrary natures of my selfhood and what transgresses it. I can never give myself completely to what is incoming because the very nature of my selfhood is a resistance to it. This notion of the 'yes, yes' also differs significantly from that described by Derrida and Caputo. This is because it is evoked in the context of the sacred. Even in an ethical scenario, this affirmation is not related in any way to the other's absolute singularity. It pertains rather to an impersonal and unknown reality, very often associated with my death. This alterity is not the other's but an alterity that the other brings about as it makes me susceptible to the event of my death. My yes is a yes to my death or what Blanchot calls the 'outside' rather than a yes to any alterity pertaining to that other as other. My affirmation is here my subjection to the desire to die that the thought inflicts in me. It is a yes instilled in the subject through extreme passivity. It is thus above all *imposed* on me rather than chosen by me in any way. There is no active assumption in any form of this yes but rather a gradual *giving in* to it. Yes is here the yes of a progressive submission to radical otherness. See 'Monomanaics and Neurotics', pp. 55-8; 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', pp. 125-7, 149-51, 159-60; below, pp. 212-4.

[6] Caputo, *Prayers,* pp. 65, 65.

what is to come. My yes points towards the *promise* of its realization when it can truly be a yes to the incoming alterity. My affirmation hopes to affirm itself when unexpectedly I will find myself exposed to the radical transgression that marks the other's approach. Internal to my yes is therefore the promise of a second yes. To say 'yes' is to look forward towards saying that yes as the other is incoming. It 'is to bind oneself to the future, to a further confirmation in a second yes, which promises to keep the memory of the first yes and confirm it, to repeat it'.[7]

The second yes is the promise made in the first yes. It is the promise to stay loyal to the affirmation made previously. It is the promise to keep the memory of the first yes. This second affirmation is invoked by 'a promise to remember, a memory of a promise [...]'.[8] It must therefore act in accordance with this memory. Before the other, I must fulfil the yes I had given formerly. In staying *faithful* to this memory, however, this second yes must also forget it. The second yes can only realize the first yes if I *once again* decide to give myself unreservedly to the other's alterity now that it is being inaugurated. The other's breach into the order of the same must be coincided with the effort of a *re*-affirmation of its absolute singularity. To say 'yes' for a second time is to *repeat* the first yes in one's decision to give all for what is now inbound. This is 'the very condition of fidelity',[9] where my commitment to a memory of exposure to the other must be confirmed by a renewed exposure. It must be confirmed by a new openness that seeks to be freed from all possible presumptions – and this includes even and especially the memory of this action in the first yes. In acting itself out, the second yes must suspend the first yes because as a memory it has become but another presupposition of the other, a part of one's pre-established knowledge.

A necessary paradox thus marks this affirmation. If it is to truly open itself to the other, it must act through the memory of the first affirmation just as it must cut itself from it. It exists because of the first yes just as it must disregard it if it is to be itself. By this logic, the second yes is second as it is also first.[10]

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[7] Caputo, *Prayers,* p. 65.

[8] Caputo, *Prayers,* p. 65.

[9] Quoted by Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 66, from Derrida, *Psyché,* p. 649.

[10] See Derrida, *Psyché*, pp. 649-50; Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 65-6. Indeed, for Derrida and Caputo, the promise of a second yes in the first and the memory of a first yes in the second threaten the very integrity of the yes as it is being undertaken. The promise or memory of the yes jeopardizes the acting out of the yes with the possibility of its inauthenticity. To keep the promise or the memory in view while one is affirming the other's singularity, to not forget them also at the same time, does not make of one's yes an *unconditional* surrender to the other, a genuine attempt to forgo all of one's presuppositions and interpretations. To say 'yes' while relying completely on *another* yes can entail the acting out of a yes that is impassive. It brings about a decision that is made in the shadow of another and can thus instil in

My decision to be for the other, however, can never be effectuated by myself alone. In the end, I can never really embrace the other's singularity solely through *my own* decision. No matter how selfless and just this decision seeks to be, it will always be trapped to a certain degree 'within a pregiven horizon of perception'.[11] My ethical attempts can never completely escape the interpretations of my selfhood. Self-identity is precisely rooted in my understandings of myself, my world, and other beings. I can never free myself entirely from my own perceptions solely through my own efforts. My decision to expose myself to what is other to me must therefore affirm what it cannot affirm on its own. It must exceed itself and the will that fuels it.

My decision is thus always conjoined with the other's decision. I give myself to the other's singularity not only through my efforts but also and especially through the force of the other's consent. To my yes, the other must also say 'yes'. It is the other's will that must, as it were, lead me, guide me to its own alterity. I can only expose myself to the other through that other. The ineptitude of my ethical actions here means that they can only be in the form of a will *to receive*. My decision must be in the nature of a *passivity* for the other's actions to work upon it. My yes can only be a yes of unbounded welcome. To decide is here *to be ready* for the other's irruption into my world. It is *to expect* what cannot be expected. To embrace the other, my yes must aim to be as susceptible and vulnerable as is possible. It should seek to be as much as is possible within its powers, an expression of unconditional openness to the other. In this manner, my decision would be a decision to be for the other's decision.[12]

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me a sense of inferiority, insipidity, even tedium, in the decision I am undergoing. This can effect an undertaking that is to some degree apathetic or unmotivated, an action done out of routine. Promise or memory expose the yes 'to the possibility of becoming something mechanical and rote, a semblance of itself, a simulacrum, a fable, fictitious, which no longer believes in itself, which would be a "bad" repetition, unloyal and untrue. What is so dear, so close to our heart, that we learn it by heart is menaced by the automaton, the automatic repetition' (Caputo, *Prayers,* p.65; see '*Che cos'è la poesia*', in Jacques Derrida, *Points ... Interviews, 1974-94*, ed. Elisabeth Weber, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 294-5).

[11] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 22.

[12] In his chapter 'Possibilizing God', in *The God Who May Be*, Kearney points this out also: 'In the event of decision, [Derrida writes], "only the im-possible takes place; and the unfolding of a potentiality of possibility already there would never constitute an event or invention". Why? Because, explains Derrida, "a decision that I *can* take, the decision *in my power* and which merely manifests the acting out […] or unfolding of what is *already possible* for me, the actualization of my possibility, decision which only derives from me, would it still be a decision?" The answer is no, for genuine decision is not just about *my* possibles but is also about *others'* possibles intervening which may well represent the impossibility of my own possible. Whence Derrida's preference for a paradoxically *receptive* decision, [...] which allows for the irruption of the other in the self. He notes: "the responsible decision must be this im-possible possibility of a 'passive' decision, a decision of the other in me which removes none of my liberty or responsibility"' (*May Be*, p. 94-5; quoting from Jacques Derrida, 'Comme si c'était possible, "Within

My resolve can thus only lead to the other's advent if it is sufficiently ready to receive such an advent. 'In order to be overtaken by something we were not ready for […]', Caputo insists, 'we have to be ready'. And further on he points out again that if the event of the *tout autre* 'is to take place, then the horizons to be shocked […] along with a readiness to be surprised – all of that must be in place, must antedate, must anticipate and prepare for the incoming arrival'.[13] I must say 'yes' before I inaugurate what transgresses me, the yes of the other. And only if my yes is exercised with a fair degree of selflessness, of anticipation in such selflessness, can I expect the other to come to me. The divesting of my identity, the taking over of my self by the other and its demands, *depends* on my (always imperfect) preparation for such an event. The incoming of the other thus hinges not only on my decision but also on my *kind* of decision.

For Derrida, however, my decision is never what initiates the ethical scene. It is not, so to speak, the first cause of my exchange with the other. It is rather, always already, a decision that *responds* to an anterior openness to the other. The first choice is not only a first. To choose at the 'origin' is always to choose in view of an exposure that is more originary. Taking action is here a reaction to a more originary ethical bond. It is a choice derived from a consent that precedes knowledge and selfhood. My choices, my self-identity always come after this primordial assent. Derrida is pointing towards an affirmation, a 'come!' that predates language and the order of presence. A yes already made and traced in the yes I am now intending. My yes is always a yes to an anterior yes outside time and intentionality. My first yes, therefore, is also a second yes to a yes that is always already more ancient. My no, even if I decide to turn my back on the other, is a no in relation to this ever aboriginal yes. To decide is always to decide for an affirmation that had already been made, outside my will, outside my selfhood.[14]

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such Limits" ...', in *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 3/205 (1998), pp. 515, 498, 498 (translated by Kearney)).

[13] Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 22, 24.

[14] '"Dialanguages"', in Derrida, *Points ...: Interviews,* p. 150; Jacques Derrida, '"Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Who Comes After the Subject?,* ed. E. Cadava, P. Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 109; Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials', in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Stanford Budick, Wolfgang Iser (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 14-5; Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 143, 395.

The responsible freedom of my yes answers to a yes, a responsibility already undertaken. Underlying this ever prior affirmation is the other's urgent request that brought this affirmation about. The originary yes to which I answer is always a yes said to the other's call. This call is also what arouses my decision here and now. My yes (or no) to an anterior yes is also a *direct* yes (or no) to that other's demand, to its plea. It is an *immediate* response to the other's beckoning. As Caputo insists, '[t]he archi-yes by which we are promised and engaged, is already, as soon as it starts, a *response* to what calls upon and engages us; the first yes comes second, in response to a demand that precedes it'.[15]

My decision is therefore also a reply to a preceding appeal. Its ethical nature would not make much sense if it were not also this direct response to a cry of need. Its compassion necessitates its summons by those who are destitute. The ethical legitimacy of my decision depends on its *inspiration by* the other. The other *moves* me to decide. Prior to all choices and their deliberations, the other stirs me to say 'yes' to it. My resolve seeks to give itself to what is to come *because* what is to come has always already touched it. My yes is thus receptive in this sense also. It strives to affirm the force that has already sought to enter it. Inspiration leads to a decision to give in to that inspiration. The yes tries to affirm what it is already drawn towards. It is a submission to what the other has already requested. My yes is brought about by the other's anterior yes, a yes for that yes. In this manner, my decision is also the other's decision. It is my own just as it also comes from the other. As Derrida claims,

> [m]y own decision, my own responsible decision, must in myself be the other's […]. When I say that a decision must be the other's in myself, I do not mean that I am irresponsible, that I am simply passive or simply obeying the other. I must deal with this paradox. That is, my decision is the other's […]. [T]he freest decision in myself is a decision of the other in myself. The other is in me, the other is my freedom, so to speak.[16]

Caputo also refers to the coinciding of these two polarities in the following passage that relates the 'yes, yes' with the 'come' or *viens*:

> [I]f the *viens* is a kind of first, an *Ur*-affirmation, *oui*, it is a second first, *oui, oui*, coming first in response to the call of what is other. *Viens* calls for the other, for the *à-venir*, but it calls in response to the solicitation of the other, it calls *for* the other because it is called *by* the other […]. *Viens* both comes *from*

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[15] Caputo, *Prayers,* p. 65.
[16] 'Discussion', in Richard Kearney, 'Desire of God', in *God,* p. 134.

beyond-being, that is, it is a response solicited and called by the other who is coming, and it calls *for* and solicits the other, the movement beyond being, the possible, the same.[17]

If my decision is the other's decision, if it is a receptivity to the other's decision, then, it is completely at cross-purposes with the decisions that my selfhood usually takes. My resolve is a suspension as far as is possible of all my modes of comprehension to attest unconditionally to what the other asks of me. I must discard, in other words, all my familiar ways of reasoning to give myself without reserve to a foreign demand. It is inevitable that this complete surrender cannot announce itself without undergoing *indecision*.

Indecision is my hesitation as to whether I should renounce all and give myself to the other's call *or* refuse this to decide in accordance with my own forms of understanding and society's forms of understanding. At heart is the irreconcilable tension between giving all for the other's unique demand and staying within the sphere of consensual knowledge. An inexorable conflict is always at play between these two kinds of decisions. Deciding against my forms of understanding means deciding for an unknown entity that is also immeasurably singular. It means deciding for I do not know who or what. My decision would entail a renunciation of my world in order to give myself to what does not enter this world, to what is not realized or recognized in this world. To submit myself to the other's unqualified distinctiveness is to submit myself unreservedly to what radically contests all my expectations and intuitions. The other does not come into my present but rather disturbs this present by its foreign reality. Giving in to it means trusting in, believing in complete darkness: committing myself to an unidentified someone or something. The other can thus be insane; it can be benevolent or malevolent. It can be anything. This is precisely what an informed choice avoids. This choice calculates, it measures, it steers clear from what does not partake of its unanimous determinations. *Prudence* is here advocated.[18]

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[17] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 98.

[18] See Derrida, *Gift*, pp. 65-7 and Caputo, *Prayers*, pp. 57-9, 207-8 on the decision as caught up in indecision and its relation to the story of Abraham and his son. The arriving of the absolute other into the order of presence is what Derrida calls the *arrivant*. The *arrivant* is completely foreign to my world: it points towards a new reality. What arrives can be anyone or anything: 'the emigrant, the immigrant, the guest, or the stranger'. Its arrival means 'the neutrality of *that which* arrives'. 'The absolute *arrivant*', Derrida maintains, 'does not yet have a name or an identity [...]. This is why I call it simply the *arrivant*, and not someone or something that arrives [...]'. Moreover, this inbound alterity is also the 'singularity of

Agreed-upon codes of ethics, laws, or any social or personal form of knowledge also demand a justice that is *equitable*. If I choose to submit myself to an other's demands, they instil in me the painful consciousness that I am doing so at the expense of all the other others. Knowledge of my decision makes me aware that it is pursued by the exclusion, and thus to the detriment of, all those others who need help to an equal or larger measure. My boundless charity is revealed as being also a species of cruelty. In *The Gift of Death,* Derrida portrays this paradox in the following way:

> I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*], every one else is completely or wholly other. The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concept of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned *a priori* to paradox, scandal, and aporia [...]. As soon as I enter into a relation with the other, with the gaze, look, command, or call of the other, I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others.[19]

The torment of indecision is crucial in that it gives me *responsibility* for my decision. Uncertainty presupposes an interval where I am faced with a choice between one option and another. It is the suffering of the freedom of being able to choose the right decision for the other. My decision can only relinquish all responsibility if it is imposed upon me. Responsibility, Josh Toth claims, 'must remain tied to a certain ordeal of indecision, an ordeal that sees us having to gamble on a decision that we can only *hope* will be correct (finally and at last)'.[20]

A true decision, then, can only be attained at the price of betraying the singularities of other others. By extension, it also entails betraying all forms of comprehension, my own and society's. My unqualified commitment leaves no space

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who arrives, he or she who comes' (Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 33-4). It refers to the irreducible distinctiveness of the other's selfhood   At once unique and unknown, it is undergone as a futurity that is outside a future which I anticipate. It is the irruption in me of a future as future, that is, an irruption of what is completely beyond my perceptions and expectations. What calls upon me is the other's alterity experienced outside my own. I am touched by what *will arrive*, what does *not yet* belong to the order of presence and its projections. The *arrivant* that inspires me is always to come – *à-venir*. Its selfhood can never really situate itself in my present. It can never give itself completely to my knowledge. See Derrida, *Aporias,* pp. 33-4; 'Loving in Friendship', in Derrida, *Friendship*, pp. 29-30, 42-4; Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 65, 168; Caputo, *Prayers,* pp. 129, 135.

[19] Derrida, *Gift,* p. 68**.**

[20] Toth, 'Perhaps', in *Mosaic,* p. 247.

for anything else. I must discriminate for unconditional indiscrimination. I must betray for unconditional fidelity.

In 'Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)', Derrida describes this paradox in the mystic's context as an instant of '(sur)passing'. To decide is to (sur)pass the aporia of indecision that the other instigates. It is, on the one hand, to find myself vacillating as I turn my back to familiar and secure paths of consensual reason to stand before ways that are averse to them, ways that are completely unknown, where anything can happen, ways which can be deeply ethical as well as unethical, even detrimental to me. Uncertain as to which road I should take, I am thrown in an aporetic state where there is '[n]o marked out or assured passage, no route in any case, at the very most trails that are not reliable ways, the paths are not yet cleared […]'. On the other hand, to decide is also *at the same time* to surpass this despairing indecisiveness. A way is opened as I resolve to give myself entirely without hesitation to the other's alterity, the demands this announces. I am determined to cut myself from any predetermined form of understanding and go wherever the other will lead me. Intrinsic to the decision for Derrida is this *simultaneity* of indecisiveness and decisiveness. Uncertainty and certainty here presuppose each other if the decision is truly mine. The certainty of giving all to the other is inseparable from the uncertainty involved in leaving all that *I* consider as certainty. Otherwise, the decision would not be one that I have made out of my free will.[21]

This is precisely the madness of my decision. I decide in my freedom to go against all that I stand for to be completely for the other. *Despite* my reason, *despite* my very self, I choose the other that transgresses them. As Derrida claims, quoting Kierkegaard, '"[t]he instant of decision is madness"'.[22]

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[21] 'Sauf le Nom', in Derrida, *Name*, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995), pp. 53-4.

[22] Derrida, *Gift*, p. 65.

The Decision as Metaphysical Desire
(Levinas and Kearney)

Derrida's notion of the decision to be for the other is what Levinas calls 'metaphysical desire'. In his commentary on Kearney's paper 'Desire of God' in a conference entitled 'Religion and Postmodernism', Derrida remarks,

> [y]ou can transfer what I'm saying about decision to desire. The desire of my desire is not mine. That's where desire stops. If my desire for the other, for the *tout autre*, were simply *my* desire, I would be enclosed in my desire. If my desire is so powerful in myself, it is because it is not mine […]. [This] means that I experience my own desire as the other's desire.[23]

For Levinas, desire of the other is inseparable from desire of the good, God, illeity. Moreover, it is a desire that is always already prior to my own desire. It is not initiated by myself. Desire, Levinas claims, 'is an aspiration that the Desirable animates; it originates from its "object"; it is revelation […].'[24] Here, 'I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my consciousness like a thief […]'. '[The Good] has chosen me before I have chosen it.'[25] 'God, it seems', Kearney points out in *The God Who May Be*, 'is the other who seeks me out *before* I seek him, a desire beyond my desire […]'. 'While God's lovers will always continue to seek and desire him whom their soul loves, they have always already been found, because already sought and desired, by him whom their soul loves.'[26] And to respond justly to such an injunction, one's decision must thus be a resolve to expose oneself unconditionally to this divine desire: to give oneself absolutely so as *to be* this desire. This is well captured in the advice given to Nathanaël in Gide's *Nourritures terrestres*: 'Let your desire be less expectation than a readiness to receive'.[27] By the same token therefore I can also choose not to heed the other's call and stifle its desire for me. The ego can decide to suppress the ethical-divine injunction. The presence of the other 'dominates him *who welcomes it*'. '[S]ubordination [before the other] is not an absence: it is brought about in all the personal work of my moral initiative (without

[23] 'Discussion', in Kearney, 'Desire of God', in *God,* pp. 134-5.
[24] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 62.
[25] Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 13, 11.
[26] Kearney, *May Be,* pp. 54, 79.
[27] Cited by Kearney, *May Be*, p. 79.

which the truth of judgment cannot be produced), in the attention to the Other as unicity and face […].'[28]

Desire is 'an affirmative "yes" to the summons of a super-abundant, impassioned God – "Here I am. Come. Yes, I will Yes, I will Yes"'. If this yes is mine, it also already exceeds itself because it lets itself be the other's yes. It 'is the independence of the separated being' and simultaneously 'its transcendence'. Through the other, I find myself partaking of divine love. In my desire for the other as other, I find myself desiring the divine which is also the divine's desire for myself. In true desire, 'our desire for God' is also 'God's desire for us'.[29]

The Freedom of Metaphysical Desire
and its Relationship with the 'There Is'

Levinas describes the decision to be for the other as the experience of a '*freedom*' that is intrinsically different from the freedom and nonfreedom experienced by the ego. Freedom within the reality of being and beings refers to the subject's ability to adequate exteriority to its processes. Exteriority is contained and conformed to the same to affirm the same. By contrast, nonfreedom refers to the inability to adequate the exteriority which the 'there is' inaugurates. One's existence assumes an otherness that refuses appropriation.[30]

In belonging to the ethical relation, the freedom of desire pertains to a different reality than the ego. It dismisses the freedom and nonfreedom constituting the quotidian perception. These cease to have any significance in the ethical reality. This dismissal is not a suppression, an escapist distraction, or a fearful retreat from the nonfreedom inflicted by the 'there is'. Levinas describes the self in desire as a

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[28] Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 66 (my emphasis), 300. See also Levinas, *Totality*, pp. 49-50.
[29] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 54, 68, 79.
[30] Levinas, *Otherwise*, pp. 116,138; 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 31, 59-60; 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', pp. 131-2, 141, 157.

'forgetting', an 'indifference', or a 'disinterestedness'.[31] The self is in a state that is no longer concerned or immersed in the realm of being and beings and the 'there is' which occasionally undermines it. The 'there is' is suffered *inasmuch* as the subject refuses to give up the needs of its ego, inasmuch as it clings to its self-asserting and possessive personality. In desire, the self is '*otherwise* than being'; it is a '*despite*-oneself'.[32] Its condition is of an irreducibly different substance and value than that assigned to being. The reality of the ego and being exist on a different phenomenal-existential level than that of desire. The 'despite' in the despite-oneself suggests that in desire one's ego remains but it is suspended or marginalized before the pre-originary truth of the ethical bond.

> Can one not understand the subjectivity of the subject beyond essence, as on the basis of a leaving the concept, a forgetting of being and non-being? Not of an 'unregulated' forgetting, which still lies within the bipolarity of essence, between being and nothingness. But a forgetting that would be an ignorance in the sense that nobility ignores what is not noble, and in the sense that certain monotheists do not recognize, while knowing, what is not the highest. Such ignorance is beyond consciousness; it is an open-eyed ignorance […]. This [is] ignorance and openness, an indifference to essence.[33]

Because this disinterestedness is not an avoidance of the 'there is' (and being), it can be seen as an awareness of the 'there is' but through a whole different state of being. It can be seen as an acknowledgement of the 'there is' but *through* the will of the other. The subject undergoes the 'there is' not as a suffering for nothing but as 'absolved'[34] through personalization. The subject's possibles are here exhausted or abandoned – as in its sufferings of the 'there is' when still in the realm of being – *but* they are so in the name of the other, the goodness of its alterity. In desire, this exhaustion is the *sine qua non* for embracing the other's possibles. Disempowerment here inaugurates a new different empowerment through the other. In the ethical relation, what had been my nonfreedom, 'the irremissible weight of being', now 'promotes my freedom, by arousing my goodness […]. It is thus the irremissible weight of being that gives rise to my freedom. The ineluctable has no longer the inhumanity of

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[31] For references to these terms, see Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 177, 178, 14, 15, 43-4, 49-50.
[32] Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 48-51.
[33] Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 177-8.
[34] The term 'absolution' is used by Levinas for instance in *Otherwise*, pp. 50, 92.

the fateful, but the severe seriousness of goodness'.[35] 'In this trauma [of one's exposure to the other] the Good reabsorbs, or redeems, the violence of non-freedom.'[36] If in the freedom of desire a degree of nonfreedom is *still* suffered it is because the subject still clings on some level to its ego. Ethical freedom can be seen as nonfreedom only from the perspective of the ego. Intrinsic to its nature is its resistance to the ethical exposure. In desire, one is transcendent of any abjection of subjectivity inasmuch as this subjectivity is not in any way still directed by the ego and its acts of identification.

Levinas, however, also seems to sometimes suggest a certain *dependence* of metaphysical desire on the nonfreedom caused by the 'there is'. On occasion, he alludes to the possibility of a relationship between these two divergent realities. In *Totality and Infinity*, for instance, he points out that the insecurity or disquietude of the 'there is' 'comes neither from the revelation of the Other nor from any heterogeneous content, but somehow from nothingness […]. [T]hus in interiority, a dimension opens *through which* it will be able to await and welcome the revelation of transcendence'.[37] In *Otherwise Than Being* he implies this again:

> [The *there is*] is the surplus of nonsense over sense, through which for the self expiation is possible, an expiation which the oneself indeed signifies […]. In this overflowing of sense by nonsense, the sensibility, the self, is first brought out, in its bottomless passivity, as pure sensible point […]. Behind the anonymous rustling of the *there is* subjectivity reaches passivity without any assumption […]. To support without compensation [the other's alterity], the excessive or disheartening hubbub and encumberment of the *there is* is needed.[38]

How can one explain this suggested relationship between the 'there is' and the ethical turn? I will attempt to do so at present. To suffer the 'there is' is to suffer the disempowerment of the ego: to suffer what is outside its possibles, what cannot be appropriated by them, what subverts them. Insofar as the 'there is' exposes the ego to an alterity, it is *preparing* it for other kind of phenomena that are also constituted by some form of alterity. Since the ethical experience is also an exposure to what is outside the horizons of the ego, the 'there is' can serve to make the subject ready for such an experience.

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[35] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 200. 'To be without a choice can seem to be violence only to an inaccurate reflection, for it precedes the freedom non-freedom couple. It is the setting up of a being that is not for itself, but is for all, is both being and disinterestedness' (Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 116).

[36] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 123.

[37] Levinas, *Totality*, p. 150 (my emphasis).

[38] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 164. 'Oneself' here refers to the subject's persona or singular self. This subject will be discussed in detail later on in this chapter. See below, pp. 214-7.

The 'there is' reveals an indifference in being to the subject's ego, and thus reveals its power as intrinsically fallible. Through the 'there is', the ego is made aware of its finitude, aware that it is not an omniscient and invincible entity. It becomes conscious of an exteriority autonomous of its nature, an exteriority that rejects it and contests it. This awareness can stimulate a better susceptibility to the other's call. The subject is forced to be cognizant of its ego's boundless vulnerability, of realities that are relentlessly foreign to it, and so it is in a better position to receive and accept the other. Its attentiveness, its sensitivity to what is always other has been enhanced. Exposure to this impotence, a suffering of this impotence, can also be responsible for a subsequent willingness in the subject to abandon its egotistic identity, to reject it because of its intrinsic insufficiency and the suffering this causes. Against the limitations revealed and the anguish caused by the 'there is', an inclination can be aroused for experiences that are outside the horizons of the ego. Disappointed or disillusioned by its solipsistic selfhood and its self-indulgences, the subject is motivated to open itself to what transcends them.

In both cases, one must not see the 'there is' as an experience that leads by its own accord towards a receptivity to the icon. This receptivity is inaugurated rather through a form of selfhood that is not touched upon by the 'there is'. The ethical relationship is brought about through the subject's persona and the other's persona.[39] By itself, the 'there is' can only question the subject's faith in the ego and its processes, and initiate perhaps a need to dispense with it. It is an experience that only affects the subject's ego. It does not stimulate any other form of selfhood. The subject therefore cannot open itself to the other just because of the 'there is'. What this suffering can do is to *predispose* the subject to the ethical relationship. An attraction towards the other can be inspired through the undermining of the ego. Exposure to the icon requires a decision that must be brought about by the subject and this decision is taken by a different form of selfhood than the ego.

I would thereby argue against taking Levinas's indications of a relation between the 'there is' and the ethical turn as signifying a relation of cause and effect. The 'there is' does *not* effectuate the decision to be for the other. Its destructive nature can only be a source of susceptibility and motivation for such a decision.

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[39] This is fully explained below on pp. 214-5, 218-9.

The 'there is' and the ethical relation are irreconcilably different from each other. The ethical disposition the 'there is' inspires in the subject, however, implies also a certain degree of concordance between the two phenomena. As has already been seen in the previous chapter, it reveals that both phenomena share similar traits such as infinity, a disempowering mode of temporality, and sensorial affectivity. The main reason for this is the basic fact that either phenomenon refers to an alterity that subverts the ego and its possibles. Another reason can be that the ethical bond, while being autonomous of the 'there is', can also be seen as a personalization (or absolution) of its traits. This is only of course one way of seeing it. It does not mean that the ethical injunction depends on the 'there is' for its effectuation. This experience can be viewed in all cases as completely separate: an experience whose alterity is of an ineffably different kind. However, when it takes place after the 'there is' and to an extent because of the influence of the 'there is', it can be seen as partly happening in relation to it. The occurrence of the ethical event after the sacred and partially through the sacred discloses its particular relationship with it. And this affiliation can be described through the idea of personalization. Personalization suggests that the ethical event has similar and yet infinitely different features from the sacred. This way of perceiving the icon suggests that the leap from one phenomenon to the other, desire or the decision, can be described as an irreducible instant of *transference* from the 'there is' to its personalization. In a moment of madness, the traits of the 'there is' are transferred into a completely different phenomenal-existential state, transposed into another medium or substance. Desire is the 'there is' transposed into the reality of ethical freedom. This transference is the sudden unreserved acceptance of the 'there is', the taking upon oneself the nonsensical infinity of its suffering, through and because of the other's will. It is a leap of responsibility.[40] The decision is also a decision *to personalize*.

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[40] See 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', for a full description of personalization and itself as a reason why the sacred and the ethical event can be seen to share similar traits. See also 'Conclusion', pp. 265-6.

The Decision in Conversion
as the Mystic's and God's

If it is possible to perceive the mystic way as one entire phenomenology of the icon, it is also possible to perceive the phenomenon of its initiation as analogous to the phenomenon of desire or the decision. The decisive event, which entails the awakening of the transcendental self, is usually affected in many mystics in an abrupt and sometimes even violent manner. As Evelyn Underhill claims,

> [t]his awakening, from the psychological point of view, appears to be an intense form of the phenomenon of 'conversion' […]. It is a disturbance of the equilibrium of the self, which results in the shifting of the field of consciousness from lower to higher levels, with a consequent removal of the centre of interest from the subject to an object now brought into view: the necessary beginning of any process of transcendence.[41]

Intrinsic to this awakening is the sudden emergence of 'that passion for the Absolute' as 'clearly imposed from without rather than developed from within'.[42] The mystic is 'called' by something that is foreign to their conscious and unconscious intentionality. They are called unexpectedly by a reality outside themselves.

The call often takes place as a 'sudden and apparently "irrational" impulse to some decisive act [that] reaches the surface-consciousness from the seething deeps'. There is a *decision* at this point to follow this impulse. Again, the call of the other requires a decision to be receptive to it on behalf of the subject. Once affirmed, 'the swift emergence of the transcendental sense results'. And '[t]his "unwonted visitation" effects an abrupt and involuntary alteration in the subject's consciousness: whereby he literally "finds himself another man"'.[43] We see this in the story of Francis of Assisi according to Thomas of Celano's *Second Life* where Francis chooses to follow a sudden urge to enter the little church of St. Damiano and pray therein, whereupon he receives '*unwonted visitations*'.[44] Likewise, Catherine of Genoa's emancipation results from a choice to make her confession to the confessor of the St. Benedict nunnery, despite

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[41] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 176.
[42] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 177, 178.
[43] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 180, 180-1, 181; quoting from Thomas of Celano, *Second Life*.
[44] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 180, from Celano, *Second Life*.

feeling indisposed to do so.[45] In both cases, it seems, the decision is confirmed through a physical action. Once the decision is made – and it is a decision that does not come from the rational self and its 'deep-seated instincts of self-preservation and self-enlargement' – transcendental reality 'breaks in suddenly' upon the mystic.[46]

One must not, in this respect, neglect cases where conversion is affected without the undertaking of any particular action as in St. Paul and Henry of Suso.[47] Even here, I would suggest that some form of affirmation by the mystic's deeper self takes place when transcendental reality is about to emerge in their consciousness. The decision to open oneself to '"the larger world-consciousness […] pressing in on the individual consciousness"'[48] need not be accompanied by a physical action. In truth, this decisive consent seems to have already been prepared for throughout the mystic's preconverted period. Prior to conversion, various mystics confess having undergone 'a long period of restlessness, uncertainty, and mental stress. The deeper mind stirs uneasily in its prison, and its emergence is but the last of many efforts to escape'.[49] For instance, during Francis' preconverted state described as 'the attempt to flee God's hand',[50] there is a frequent dissatisfaction with earthly pleasures. Time and again, he finds himself suffering from a sense of nonbelonging to the world, from a temperament that is incongruous with anything related to material joys. Here, the mystic's decision in conversion is but the culmination of a long struggle between their ego and their transcendental self. At some point during this struggle the mystic would have already started deciding to dispose themselves to the transcendental urges. Although such efforts would have been weak at first, they would have probably grown more resolved and sincere.

Let me then reiterate the significance of such mystical instances for our portrayal of the ethical decision. Indispensable to one's exposure to the other is one's choice to initiate such an exposure. Whether such a choice is expressed through a physical action or not makes no difference. The true action takes place in the mystic's most intimate consciousness.[51]

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[45] See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 181-2.

[46] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 176, 177.

[47] See Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 178-9, 186-7.

[48] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 177, from Edwin Diller Starbuck, *The Psychology of Religion*, 2nd edn. (London: 1901).

[49] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 179.

[50] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 180, from Celano, *Second Life*.

[51] These terms should here be understoond in accordance with their more familiar usage rather than as having any relation to psychological or psychoanalytical concepts such as Sigmund Freud's.

II

The Decision
as Charity, Faith, and Hope

Charity in Mysticism

The notion of the decision corresponds to what in a mystical-theological language or a discourse on religious faith is known as 'charity'. Like the decision, charity here signifies an unconditional openness to the other. It is unconditional in the sense that it is not governed or inhibited by anything that pertains to egotistic determinations. It breaks out of all forms of knowledge.

As Underhill explains, charity for the mystics is a 'deep-seated desire and tendency' towards the divine. 'It is a condition of humble access' to this alterity. For the mystics, charity can indicate any experience, mundane or not, that relates to a deep desire for God. Underhill describes it as 'essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love'.[52]

The desire intrinsic to charity is deeper than the emotions and their form of apprehension. It is a passion whose source is the transcendental self. Through this passion, because of this passion, the mystic decides to surrender themselves to the divine. This passion is not only regarded as the subject's passion for God but also as God's passion for that subject. 'Divine love', says Dionysius the Aeropagite, 'draws those whom it seizes beyond themselves: and this so greatly that they belong no longer

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[52] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 85, 85, 71.

to themselves but wholly to the Object loved'.[53] Charity is sometimes the occasion of a violent disruption in the self's faculties – its emotions, will, and intellect – insofar as these faculties are to a certain extent still concentrated around the ego. This description of charity does not only relate to the phenomenon of conversion but to many of the transgressive phenomena we have already observed such as ecstasies and visions. Insomuch as such phenomena inaugurate a personalized alterity rather than an anonymous one, they can be perceived as instances of charity. Indeed, this characteristic is shared by several ecstasies and raptures. In this regard, experiences of charity are frequently seen as causing and helping the subject's faculties to concentrate themselves around the transcendental self. Charity is an 'act of perfect concentration, the passionate focussing of the self upon one point […]: to real and transcendental things […]'.[54] Visions and ecstasies affect this deep change in the mystic while they last. They are also moments of support and motivation in the gradual process of liberating the transcendental self in the mystic way.

Any experience of charity originates from 'the inmost sanctuary of personal being, the deep root of its love and will, the very source of its energy and life': the transcendental self. To undergo charity, for the mystics, is to yield and partake of this self. 'This "sense"', Underhill points out, 'has attachments at each point to emotion, to intellect, and to will. It can express itself under each of the aspects which these terms connote. Yet it differs from and transcends the emotional, intellectual, and volitional life of ordinary men'.[55] Charity liberates a self latent in the subject, which, once awoken, is found to be the origin of all the faculties, a source of their perfect integration, now capable of affecting them all and drawing them back towards itself. Just as the transcendental self is the condition of the faculties, it is also their transcendence. It is seen to be a *pre-originary* source to egotistic subjectivity inasmuch as it is a direct receptivity to what is outside this identity, to what can never be conformed to it, to what always already predates it. This selfhood is an accessibility to divine alterity.

Exposure to personalized otherness affects the subject before anything else in its sensibility. Charity is this inspiring of sensibility in the subject because of the divine other. For the mystics, as for Levinas, sensibility is the most rudimentary and vital of

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[53] Cited by Underhill, p. 197, from Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: 1920).
[54] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 48-9.
[55] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 71-2, 49.

all the subject's regular faculties.[56] Absolute vulnerability before a subversive otherness elicits first and foremost an emotional response. Divine passion 'rouses to activity not merely the mind, but the whole vitality of man'.[57] Only sensibility can stimulate the will, and charity, for the mystics, is therefore not just an emotional susceptibility but also a steering of the will by the stirred emotions. 'This driving and drawing', says Jan Van Ruysbroeck, 'we feel in the heart and in the unity of all our bodily powers, and especially in the desirous powers'.[58] 'By love [God] may be gotten and holden', claims the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, 'but by thought of understanding, never'.[59]

A distinction must nonetheless be drawn from what Levinas understands by sensibility. On the one hand, for Levinas, especially in *Otherwise Than Being*, sensitivity in desire entails primarily corporeal emotions. Being affected by otherness, for him, is a 'sensuous contact and closeness'.[60] Otherness is answered in subjectivity by an inflow of sensations especially those prevalent in physical woundedness. For the mystics, on the other hand, sensitivity in the desire for God comprises emotions that are primarily spiritual. Sensibility is here affected and directed by the transcendental self. John of the Cross suggests this in *Dark Night*:

> With this livery of charity, a livery of love which increases love for the Beloved, the soul receives protection and concealment from the flesh, its third enemy. For where there is true love of God, love of self and of one's things finds no entry […]. Charity […] empties and annihilates the affections and appetites of the will of whatever is not God and centers them on Him alone.[61]

As has already been disclosed in relation to various cases of ecstasies and raptures, phenomena of charity do often instigate impressions that partake of corporeal sentience.[62] They also, however, elicit passions that lead to and come from a mystical personality innate to the subject. Levinas's portrayal of the desire for the other excludes any references to either this mystical selfhood or the particular desire that it inspires. A

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[56] I have referred to this priority and significance of sensibility as a response to personalized otherness in 'Intersecting at the No-place', pp. 107-10, in relation to the mystics, and in 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', p. 132, in relation to Levinas.

[57] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 48.

[58] Cited by Underhill, p. 48, from Van Ruysbroeck, *Spiritual Marriage*.

[59] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 48, from *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. B. M. Harl (London: 1912).

[60] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xxii.

[61] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, pp. 380-1.

[62] Mystical phenomena such as raptures and ecstasies are studied from the perspective of a sensory responsiveness in 'Intersecting at the No-place', pp. 107-10.

difference in nature must thus be assumed between the ethical desire designated by Levinas and that designated by the mystics.

Faith and Hope for the Divine Other (Mysticism)

For the mystics, the decision to give oneself to divine alterity necessitates, together with charity, the exercise of hope and faith. If charity affects the emotions and the will, they see hope and faith as affecting the memory and the intellect respectively. The three virtues are perceived as working distinctly through these faculties.

Memory is always a memory of objects, of things recognized, possessed, or partaken of in various ways. To have true hope in God is to stop dwelling on such comprehensions disclosed by memory and direct oneself to the unpossessed and unknown object that is God. Hope must always be hope for what does not belong to one's memory because of its infinite difference from the possessive nature of such memory. It is a hope for the intervention of a divine unknown. Likewise, faith is a belief in what cannot be accorded intellectual understanding because of its disparity from this power. It is a virtue exercised by an intellect that has dismissed all its rational intentions and truths as motives for thought and action. All its deliberations are now concentrated, they all rest, on an ineffable object that has become the source of all its actions. Faith is an intelligence whose rationality or intentionality depend on an unreserved acquiescence to the divine unknown.

It is not the ego but the transcendental self that now stimulates memory, intelligence, will, and emotions to undergo hope, faith, and charity. Here, the three faculties do not function any longer to indulge and secure one's sense of a sovereign self. They are now directed to function for a spiritual reality they have no apprehension of and yet around which they seek to centre themselves. As John of the Cross attests,

> [f]aith darkens and empties the intellect of all its natural understanding and thereby prepares it for union with the divine wisdom.
> Hope empties and withdraws the memory from all creature possessions, for as St. Paul says, hope is for that which is not possessed (Rom. 8:24). It withdraws

the memory from what can be possessed and fixes it on that for which it hopes. Hence, only hope in God prepares the memory perfectly for union with Him.[63]

The mystics' accounts on hope and faith also presuppose the important presence of the subject's role in its decision to open itself to the other.[64] Above all, they define the manner by which the mystic, by their own accord, must alter their faculties if they are to truly give themselves to the divine. They are descriptions of the particular disposition they are to assume if they are to welcome the other in their life. The other can only come if the mystic freely assents to this transformation of their faculties.

Faith and Hope for an Absolute Other (Derrida and Caputo)

Philosophers such as Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney also suggest the practice of faith and hope as intrinsic to the ethical phenomenon. For Derrida, a decision for the other 'cannot be deduced from a form of knowledge of which it would simply be the effect, conclusion, or explicitation. It structurally breaches knowledge' in that I am no longer acting for myself, through my own criteria of interpretation.[65] As Caputo insists, '[t]he only way to keep *viens* safe is for it to proceed by way of the *sans, sans savoir, sans avoir, sans voir*, without seeing, knowing, or having in advance an idea of what is coming or of what coming means.'[66]

For deconstruction, the decision is an affirmation of faith. Not a faith in some determinate narrative or entity, divine or otherwise, but faith that is a *willing openness* to the unforeseeable and the unknown. Faith is a belief that suspends all pregiven conceptions of subjectivity. There is an insistence 'on a general openness to an alterity without name, without identity'.[67] This is because 'every other, without and before any determination, any specification, man or woman, man or God, man or animal, any other

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[63] *Night*, II, in John, *Collected Works*, p. 381.
[64] Indeed, the mystics rarely portray faith and hope in relation to God's divine qualities, that is, God as having faith and hope in the mystic, and by extension, humanity.
[65] Derrida, *Gift*, p. 77.
[66] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 99. See Jacques Derrida, *Parages* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), p. 25.
[67] Caputo, 'Introduction', in *God,* p. 13.

whatever is infinitely other, is absolutely other': '*tout autre est tout autre*'.[68] I believe in the other. I let it come. I do not know who or what this other is. Its irreducibly unique identity prevents me from knowing. Still, I let it come.

For Derrida, God or the suffering stranger is not a personalized alterity. Its absolute singularity makes of it an anonymous alterity. It is too foreign to the subject to present itself even as *any kind* of alterity whatsoever. It is complete otherness. My belief in the other therefore is an affirmation and a welcome devoid of any form of preconceived knowledge. Faith is a faith in the sheer unknown and thus it is also a faith in what I cannot have faith in because I do not know what I have faith in. It is a faith in what is too remote from my being and my expectations to be credible, to make any sense. To believe is to believe in the unbelievable. A faith *without faith* is a faith that incessantly subverts itself. It gives itself to what eludes intentionality and its determinations, thus endlessly subverting them in a willing openness to the absolute unknown. Caputo likewise observes that a

> faith without faith is a decision inscribed in undecidability where undecidability is structurally ingredient in faith, not the opposite of faith but the element of faith. The undecidability is first, last, and constant, the element, the space in which faith makes its leap, the horizon in terms of which faith understands its limits, understands that it is faith […]. Faith is a path that must pass through the aporia of the *sans* […]. Faith without faith is precisely such *an* impossible, a translation of the impossible and impassable […].[69]

In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Caputo situates Derrida's view of the ethical bond in relation to God as the other. God, like any human or nonhuman other, is 'the name of what is *never given* […], the excess of what is always promised, hoped for, prayed and wept over. It is the name of the future, of what keeps the future open, of what "keeps hope alive" […]'.[70] God as other inaugurates a futurity that is outside my subjective world. He disrupts that world with an absolutely unknown futurity. God never comes, is never present, but is *always coming*.[71] Thereby, he keeps my faith, my hope, and my love for him disengaged as much as possible from my

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[68] 'Discussion', in Kearney, 'Desire of God', in *God,* p. 135.

[69] Caputo, *Prayers*, p. 63.

[70] Caputo, 'Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion', in *God,* p. 199.

[71] '[T]he presence of God', Caputo points out, 'means God's *coming* (*venue*), and the faith and hope and love of the future that this coming elicits […]. For Derrida the presence of God is the coming of God, and the gift of God is a gift without givenness, *le don sans la donation*, not a gift of givenness but a faith in the gift to come' (Caputo, 'Apostles', in *God,* pp. 199, 200).

subjective intentionality. Before him, I am constantly deprived of the satisfactions and masteries of my ego. His futurity is continuously demanding my hope, my faith, and my love to be ever more abundant, to ever exceed themselves in their openness to his otherness.

If God ever comes, my hope, faith, and love would be placated. God as presence, as manifestation, would cease to pose any contestation to my subjectivity and would thus dispose himself to be appropriated by it. The divine would become another object of my egotistic selfhood. This can very easily lead to complacency, stagnation, despair, even perhaps an oppression of others. Faith, hope, and love would cease to be because intrinsic to their nature is an openness to what is irreducibly other to oneself. 'Once you know what the hint of redemption is', Derrida insists, 'you lose the hope. The hope for redemption must go through renunciation'.[72] Faith, hope, and love are actions that must constantly destabilize my selfhood and submit it to an unknown reality utterly foreign to it. For Derrida and Caputo, absolute and impersonal otherness is crucial for the exercise of true hope, faith, and love.

Faith and Hope for the Eschatological Kingdom and its Possible God (Kearney)

True faith and hope for Kearney are actions that are inseparable from the realization of the eschatological kingdom, the kingdom of God. To be for the other is to have hope for the promise of a new time, 'a new heaven and a new earth'.[73] Hope is the consent to give oneself to this promise.

The promise of God's kingdom announces a temporality that happens in the immediate present. It ruptures the now of presence with its past and future projections, its recollections and anticipations. In doing so, it opens them to the unknown of a yet to

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[72] 'Response by Jacques Derrida', in David Tracy, 'Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times', in *God,* p. 182. See 'Discussion', in Kearney, 'Desire of God', in *God,* pp. 131-3 on the necessity to be open to the unforeseeable and the unknown especially in the context of what Derrida calls 'justice to-come' and 'hospitality', and their significant role in manmade existing structures such as governments, laws, and social institutions.

[73] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 111.

come. The present is transgressed by what it cannot imagine or foresee in belonging to a future that does not belong to it, a future outside its conceptions. Hope is the decision to open oneself to this futurity that subverts subjective temporality and introduces what is in excess to it. This tempo of a foreign not-yet is the tempo of the messiah. It is the temporality proper to the one who endeavours to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

To decide to be for this kingdom, for its messiah, is also to *answer* to that messiah's soliciting. My decision is a response to the divine who has always already called me before any initiative of my own. At the same time, however, this divine has not come yet. It still belongs to an unreachable and unrealized alien future. It has always already come for me and it is still yet to come. My decision is for a messiah who is always already here and is not yet here. To hope is to yearn 'for an Other who beckons but has not yet fully arrived, who is present in absentia (Philippians 2:12), a *deus adventurus* who seeks me yet still promises to come, unpredictably and unexpectedly […]'. I must give myself to what surpasses and renounces my preconceptions because hope is 'a desire for something that eye has never seen nor ear heard'.[74]

To submit myself to this anachronous hope is to submit myself to the other's persona. The eschatological kingdom is a kingdom of eschatological filiality where I see the other as eschaton, as a person intimating a reality foreign to my subjectivity. In this kingdom, I welcome the singularity of each and every person. I see all persons as 'neighbors in the Word'. I see the singularity of each and every one as part of the reality of the messiah: Christ, the icon of icons. Everyone is seen to inaugurate the futurity of the messiah's arrival. This futurity, this messiah or God, possibilize experiences and meanings that are foreign to my ego, impossible for that ego. God is here the God of the may-be. In the eschatological kingdom, everyone is seen as 'adopted children of the *deus adventurus* – the God of the Possible'. Faith in this kingdom and its God is faith in their may-be, faith in the other outside my power, faith in the possibles this other offers.[75]

To give myself to the kingdom is to decide for a reality where I allow myself to be recreated through the other and that other in turn allows itself to be recreated by me. The kingdom entails a community united by mutual unreserved faith, hope, and love. It

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[74] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 61, 62.
[75] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 81.

is an existence founded by the new possibilities that these virtues open for me. I allow the other to empower me with its possibles. I allow it to change the very nature of my selfhood. And this, in turn, empowers me to change others. The kingdom is a *pro-creating* of one another. I am transfigured through my unconditional openness to the other which also enables me to transfigure others in turn if they so desire. This is a *co-creation* or a *co*-reality established through a reciprocal receptivity of possibles. It is 'not something we invent out of ourselves, a possible projected by our subjective dreams and imaginings alone; no, it is a creation *for* the other, *on behalf* of the other'.[76]

If the kingdom is characterized by the may-be, then, central to its actualization is my own continual role. The possibilities inspired by the other *can* be welcomed, *can* be realized. 'The other empowers me by saying: "Even though you are powerless, I believe you can do this".'[77] It does not say, 'you must' but 'you can'. I am not subjected by force to its alterity. Again, my faith, hope, and charity entail the manner I must determine my decision in order to be susceptible to this persona. It is ultimately up to me to affirm the kingdom's possibles and bring them into effect.

> If the play of eschatological possibility may indeed 'save us', it is only to the extent that we choose to respond to it by acting to bring the coming Kingdom closer, making it more possible, as it were, by each of our actions, while acknowledging that its ultimate realization is impossible to us alone. That's what we mean when we say 'God may be'. The Kingdom is possible but we may decide not to accept the invitation.[78]

As Kearney insists, '[t]o God's "I may be" each one of us is invited to reply "I can".'[79]

'I can' does not only mean my affirmation to expose myself to the other. It also entails the resolve to interpret the other's possibles and actualize them in the world of being and beings. Empowerment by the other's possibles must lead to the fulfilment of those possibles in practical life. Essential to decision, to its faith, hope, and charity, is an exigency to act for the other in actuality and thus bring the kingdom ever closer to it. The other does not just inspire me with new potentialities but also stimulates my very will to understand and act upon such potentialities. It invites me to carry out its demands in the present world.

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[76] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 110.
[77] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 12.
[78] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 110.
[79] Kearney, *May Be*, p. 108.

It is clear that for Kearney, faith, hope, and charity do not refer themselves to an absolutely heterogeneous force, to something that can be anything and anyone because it is completely unknown. Alterity here is not a *neutral* and *indifferent* outside. It involves *me*, my self, my freedom in its very dynamics. *I* am called to affirm it, *I* am called to understand it, *I* am called to act for it. It concerns me above all because this me that it calls and inspires is my most intimate selfhood. An *interaction* is thus enacted between this selfhood and this alterity, an interaction that avows and accords an unreserved priority to the alterity. This dialogue can only be brought about if the alterity in question is personalized, if it can be on some level meaningful for me, if it elicits my understanding. Otherwise, my involvement and my concern for this otherness would make no sense. Together with the mystics, faith, hope, and charity would here be my disposition to hear what that alterity has to say, to comprehend it as best as I can so that I can meet its needs in actuality. Contrary to the sacred and its possession of my helpless selfhood, personalized alterity is inseparable from my free decision. It needs my own voice for its intervention.

III

The Decision in the Mystic Way

The Mystic's Role in the Decision/s of Conversion

The Personalizing Decision

The period of conversion in the mystic way often inaugurates the first awareness of mystical reality. Some mystics experience this revelation as 'a sudden and acute realization of a splendour and adorable reality in the world […]'. Mystics such as Brother Lawrence, Starbuck, and Richard Jeffries all testify to having experienced 'the great light and the Beatific Vision'.[80] They find themselves immersed in an anonymous ineffable reality that is transcendent and cosmic. 'I was not more than eighteen', Jefferies writes in his autobiography, 'when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe'. 'I now became lost', he confesses, 'and absorbed into the being or existence of the universe […] and losing thus my separateness of being, came to seem like a part of the whole'. Further on, he continues describing the phenomenon as follows: 'I feel on the margin of a life unknown, very near, almost touching it – on the verge of powers which, if I could grasp, would give men an immense breadth of existence'.[81]

If the process of the mystic way is to be truly initiated, however, that is, if a true openness to the divine other is to be established and developed, then the experience of this revelation is not enough. This emergent sense of a mystical reality does not really determine one's new relationship with God. As Underhill makes clear, the mystic 'must

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[80] Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 178, 196.
[81] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism*, p. 192, from Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1891).

pass beyond the stage of metaphysical rapture or fluid splendour […]'.[82] Their conversion does not hinge specifically on this supernatural experience. This is because such a vision on its own, though a source of bliss, is usually too impersonal and anonymous, too lacking in meaningfulness, to inspire and guide the mystic to act through it, to instigate the life of the mystic way. By itself, it is too obscure and foreign to concern and involve the mystic in a life predicated unconditionally on the love of God and Christ. The decision acceding to the irruption of this experience is thus barely what one would describe as ethical. The alterity that calls the mystic to grant it entry into their consciousness is to a large extent indistinguishable. This elicits an affirmation that is for the most part devoid of the operation of faith, hope, and love. My decision for such an event would merely be in the manner of a concession to open myself to the summons of an unknown spiritual reality.

If the mystic way is to be initiated, a decision for a *personalized alterity* must be executed. The mystic way, in being a progressive exposure to an icon, can only be embarked on if a decision to give oneself to *this* icon, that is, a decision to give oneself to the personalized alterity of Christ and/or God, is inaugurated. My affirmation must be for an alterity that is in some minimal and irreducible way *recognized.* Essential to this 'leap' is a relation to an alterity that is outside appropriation and yet can be intuited as a *certain kind* of alterity. The three virtues can only be carried out through this form of action. It would not make much sense if I were to have faith, hope, and love for something so radically extraneous that it can be anything and anyone. If I am to believe, hope, and love something, that something must be discerned and distinguished, even if in a very general and vague manner.

Subsequent to the anonymous vision, how then does the mystic's decision to be for a personalized alterity come about in conversion? I would suggest that integral to the experiencing of the first preternatural episode is this episode's potentiality to be personalized. Latent in this impersonal phenomenon is the possibility of its personalization. It lends itself to such a re-formation. It motivates the mystic to transform it. Ultimately, however, it is up to that mystic to actualize this potentiality. If he or she does so, his or her decision would be a decision that gives a particular recognition and meaningfulness to that same revelation. Underhill seems to suggest this interaction constituting the decision when she claims that the process of conversion 'is

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[82] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 195.

not one-sided […] [but a] never to be ended give-and-take is set up between the individual and the Absolute'.[83]

Above all, the decision here is a decision to personalize. It can be a choice taken in continuity with the first choice that had allowed the impersonal vision to take place, or it can be taken autonomously in a later episode. The personalizing action that constitutes this decision does not mean that the mystic can refashion the vision to whatever understanding they see fit. In my view, if this revelation encourages them to personalize it, it also encourages them to personalize it in a *particular way*. It inclines itself towards a particular understanding and meaningfulness. It *calls for* a specific personalization that *can be* realized by the mystic. Their decision would be an assent to this call. This particular relationship between the subject and the revelation then in turn brings about the emergence of another revelation that is personalized in nature. There is no saying when this second revelation occurs. What is significant in any case is that its effectuation is the product of the decision.

The particular personalization the revelation tends towards is a revelation of a God of charity. Through their hope, faith, and love, the mystic consents to this inclination inherent in the impersonal phenomenon. The three virtues are here a determined receptivity to discern a God of charity in what is otherwise an indefinite, anonymous alterity. The decision to open oneself to this spiritual yet anonymous alterity now crystallizes into 'a willed response to the Reality perceived; a definite and personal relation must be set up between the self and the Absolute Life'.[84]

Not all of those who experience this supernatural phenomenon respond to it through a personalizing decision. Those who do not, emphasize for us above all the centrality of the subject's role and its freedom in the decision to undertake the mystic way. In Jefferies, for instance, as Underhill indicates, we find the instance of a decision that lets oneself be transported by the anonymous reality of a revelation, but the absence

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[83] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197.

[84] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 195. I would not suppose that the first supernatural event implicit in conversion is as subversive by nature as the experiences of the sacred that are undergone in the dark night. If it is a transgressive experience that yet allows a decision to initiate it, if it also allows for its personalization, then the influx of its alterity would probably be of a less violent and disruptive nature. Moreover, if intrinsic to its constitution is the potential for its personalization, then it can also be the case that such a vision or ecstasy can be *already* to a certain minimal degree personalized. Indeed, some mystics, in their encounter with this cosmic and transcendent reality, still claim that it is God - though God as transcendent rather than immanent - that is, a God of love. And this by itself can also inspire the exercise of the mystic way though certainly not as passionately as the impression that the third more personalized divine experience provokes (see the next passage; see also Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 196).

of that decision that allows this same revelation to affect the exercise of one's hope, faith, and love.

> Jefferies stood, as so many mystically minded men have done, upon the verge of such a transcendental life. The 'heavenly door', as Rolle calls it, was ajar but not pushed wide. He peeped through it to the greater world beyond […]. In Jefferies's case this crystallization, this heroic effort towards participation did not take place, and he never therefore laid hold of 'the glory that has been revealed'. In Suso's it did, 'exciting in him a most lively desire for God'.[85]

Those who accede to the personalization of the transcendental vision find it transfigured into the God of charity. They find themselves undergoing the divine that is 'the love and sorrow at the heart of things, the discord between Perfect Love and an imperfect world […]'.[86] Guyon describes the emotions she feels in this experience as 'a *profound wound*, which was full of delight and of love – a wound so sweet that I desired that it might never heal'.[87] For Catherine of Genoa, this inward revelation discloses the finitude of the self before 'the wound of the unmeasured Love of God'. Beside herself, she cries inwardly 'with ardent love, "No more world! no more sin!"'[88] Richard Rolle calls this 'passionate and all-dominant' love 'a great heat: the heat which is to light the Fire of Love'.[89] 'As it were if the finger were put in fire, it should be clad with feeling of burning: so the soul with love […] set afire, truly feels most very heat'.[90] We see here the experiential results of a decision for a God of charity.

In various other conversions, the impersonal revelation, that 'shining vision of the transcendent spiritual world, is wholly absent'.[91] The first awakening occurs instantly through a more intimate revelation, 'to that which is within, rather than to that which is without […]'.[92] The first call of alterity is the call of the personalized alterity of a God of love. In such episodes, the opening decision would thus necessarily involve the operation of the three virtues. To God's call of surrender to him, the mystic would

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[85] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 193, 195-6; quoting from Richard Rolle, *The Fire of Love*: *and The Mending of Life*, ed. F. Comper, trans. R. Misyn, (London: 1914).
[86] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 196.
[87] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 184, from Guyon, *Autobiography*, trans. T. T. Allen.
[88] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 181-2, 182, from St. Catherine of Genoa, *Vita Mirabile e dottrina celeste di Santa Caterina da Genova insieme col Trattato del Purgatorio e col Dialogo della Santa* (1743).
[89] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197.
[90] Quoted by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197, from Rolle, *Fire of Love.*
[91] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 196.
[92] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 196.

reply through a resolve that acknowledges an otherness that is on some irreducible level known.

The kind of revelation undergone in conversion very often depends on the mystic's particular temperament. Whether the first encounter with the supernatural comes about through an impersonal or personalized alterity very much depends on the individual personality of the mystic. Emotional mystics such as Rolle and Guyon, for example, are straightaway introduced to the divine through an experience that is intimate to them. Both find themselves overwhelmed by the preternatural instant of an all-encompassing and infinite love.[93]

The Interpreting Decision

Following the decision or part of the decision to personalize is the decision to *further understand* the reality of divine love the mystic finds themselves submitted to. Having become personalized, the alterity experienced now holds an intimate connection with the mystic. It concerns and involves the very core of their selfhood, inspiring a bond that profoundly affects it. This reality urges and stimulates the mystic to assist it, to give themselves ever more to it, to act unconditionally for it. The subject must therefore interpret this personalized alterity as best as it can so that it can know how to act for it and through it. Through its intellect above anything, it must interpret and actualize to the best of its powers the possible meanings this alterity is inspiring it with. A narrowing down and identification of possibles thus brings about the next supernatural phenomenon.[94]

This discernment is usually enacted by the mystic's religious-spiritual background, in this case the Christian faith. The mystic seeks to further comprehend and clarify the meaningful nature of their revelation through the principles and narratives of their religion. Part of this process is a *further specification* of the personalized alterity. What follows the vision of divine love is a phenomenon that

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[93] For more on the subject of the relation of the mystic's temperament with the kind of alterity they undergo in conversion, see Underhill, *Mysticism,* pp. 95-124.

[94] Hermeneutical discernment in the ethical encounter will be one of the primary concerns of the next chapter, ''Twixt Exposure and Action'.

discloses a more identifiable form of personalized alterity. Sometimes, this specification entails an objective believed to be ordered by God to the mystic.

In all these instants, the decision for a further personalization is not quite implemented by the interaction of the mystic and the alterity experienced. It is executed to a large extent by the mystic alone. 'In the deep and strong temperaments of the great mystics', Underhill explains,

> this love passes quickly – sometimes instantly – from the emotional to the volitional stage. [The mystic's] response to the voice of the Absolute is not merely an effusion of sentiment, but an act of will: an act often of so deep and comprehensive a kind as to involve the complete change of the outward no less than of the inward life.[95]

Although there are instances where the revelation of an anonymous reality leads directly to these very personalized revelations, it is more often the case that they develop from the already personalized revelation of a divine love. It is this episode that inspires the most active response in the mystic to understand the alterity experienced and act upon such an understanding in actual life. For Francis of Assisi, this phenomenon took place through 'the painted image of Christ Crucified [that] spoke to him from out its pictured lips. And, calling him by his name, "Francis," it said, "go, repair My house, the which as thou seest is falling into decay"'.[96] For Catherine of Genoa, and Rulman Merswin, a disciple of the great mystic theologian Johannes Tauler, it was a mental or 'interior vision of Christ bearing the Cross'.[97] Transported by this sight, Merswin 'was abruptly filled with a violent hatred of the world and of his own free-will. "Lifting his eyes to heaven he solemnly swore that he would utterly surrender his own will, person, and goods to the service of God."[98] Through these visions, the divine other is experienced on a more familiar and coherent level. This further stimulates the mystic's resolve to act for God in actuality. As Underhill explains,

> [i]t is to this personal touch, to the individual appeal of an immediate Presence […] that the awakened self makes its most ardent, most heroic response. Not because he was rapt from himself, but because the figure on the Cross called him

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[95] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197.

[96] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 181, from Celano, *Second Life*.

[97] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 182, from Catherine, *Vita Mirabile*.

[98] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 185. Quoting from Auguste Jundt, *Rulman Merswin et l'Ami de Dieu de l'Oberlan* (Paris: 1890).

> by name, saying, 'Repair My Church' did St. Francis […] accept the message in a literal sense and set himself instantly to the work demanded […].[99]

It is the particularity and intimate attraction intrinsic to these preternatural episodes that ultimately prompt the realization of life-changing choices and deeds that bring about and constitute the life of the mystic way. They instigate '[t]he awakening of the self […] to a new and more active plane of being, new and more personal relations with Reality; hence to a new and more real work which it must do'.[100]

> Merswin's oath of self-surrender: St. Catherine of Genoa's passionate and decisive 'No more world! no more sins!': St. Francis's naïve and instant devotion to church-restoration in its most literal sense: these things are earnests of the reality of the change. They represent - symbolize as well they can upon the sensual plane – the spontaneous response of the living organism to a fresh external stimulus: its first effort of adjustment to the new conditions which that stimulus represents.[101]

Only personalized alterity can truly transfigure the subject. It reveals an intimate bond that urges that subject to give itself to it. Receptivity entails the experience of new possibles that further inspire an unconditional giving. The subject is empowered to see itself and the world, to act, by the new perceptions and meanings it elicits from such possibles. In the mystic's context, this revelation of a bond and the self-transformation this can lead to take place through the awakening of the transcendental self. The possibles inaugurated through the personalized visions help this spiritual personality to emerge.[102]

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[99] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 196.

[100] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197.

[101] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 197.

[102] In this section, I have traced out three gradations or levels of decision in conversion. These can also be seen as three separate but progressing kinds of decisions. Indeed for some mystics, intervals of days, weeks, and even months can pass between one stage of decision and another. The scale of development that I have presented here is meant to elucidate all the possible variations and details of this decision or decisions as presented by the mystics' texts. As already suggested, this explanation is not meant to portray the period of conversion as necessarily comprising all three developing levels of decisions or all three levels in a single decision. Occasionally, one or two decisions or levels of decision can be described as simultaneous or merged into each other. One or two levels can also be left out.

The Last Decision in the Dark Night

There is a significant difference between the decision that takes place in conversion and that which terminates the dark night of the spirit. The latter discloses an extremeness in its nature that is unmatched by any other resolve undertaken throughout the mystic way. This decision displays an intense strength because it is carried out without any interpretation or actualization of the other's possibles. The determination that ends the dark night at once personalizes the nonsensicalness of this insufferable period through faith, hope, and charity for God, *and yet* is unable to understand this personalized alterity in any way because it is infinitely foreign to any form of comprehension at hand. We are looking at what is probably one of the most radical and powerful form of decisions that can be experienced in actual life.

The dark night's suffering is personalized through the fervent belief that it is part of the divine's intentions for the mystic. It assumes the role of an enunciator of God's will. This gives it a meaningfulness it did not have previously. Impersonal alterity is personalized. And yet, the meaningfulness this personalization entails is *still* too estranging for the mystic to understand it. The possibles inherent to it are as yet still closed off from any form of recognition. This is because the severity of the dark night's suffering prevents any trace of understanding to take place. Its torment remains too excessive to inspire any kind of knowledge *despite* having now become for the mystic a form of God's expressivity. The dark night's senselessness, its desolation, its impossibility to any form of explanation, is now 'seen' through a meaningfulness, a may-be, that is inseparable from its extraneousness to the mystic's horizons of understanding. Paradoxically, personalized alterity here *denies* any enlightenment by its possibles: it is strictly a non-giving.

The decision that ends the dark night is one of the most insurgent and daring of decisions imaginable. By situating the trials of this period as a part of an other's alterity, it affirms that other, God, in complete blindness, in the unknown. It affirms the other barely knowing anything about it. The God the mystic is opening themselves to is no longer the one they used to know. With the onset of the dark night they have indeed been increasingly deprived of any experience relating to this familiar God of love and mercy. This God, they feel, has long since abandoned them. Their faith, hope, and love now barely know what they are giving themselves to. Contesting their action is their

own deep uncertainty of the identity of who they are directing themselves towards. This uncertainty comes especially from the entire logic of their resolve. For how can two clearly contradictory elements be united with each other? How can the dark night's torture reconcile itself with the divine nature, whatever this nature entails? How can this utterly profane and atheistic torment become a part of God's designs? How can God's absence be a part of God? The mystic believes unconditionally and yet does not have the slightest idea of what this belief means, or how the dark night can be subsumed into God. This divine other they are saying yes to is infinitely remote from them.

Henry of Suso refers to this decision in his *Life* when he writes: 'And after thus suffering half a day, his brain was exhausted, and at last he became calmer, and sitting down he came to himself: and turning to God, and abandoning himself to His Will, he said, "If it cannot be otherwise, *fiat voluntas tua*"'.[103] Underhill evokes this decision as follows:

> Thus with Suso, as with St. Catherine of Siena and other mystics whom we have considered, the travail of the Dark Night is all directed towards the essential mystic act of utter self-surrender; that *fiat voluntas tua* which marks the death of selfhood in the interests of a new and deeper life. [Suso] has learned the lesson of 'the school of true resignation': has moved to a new stage of reality: a complete self-naughting, an utter acquiescence in the large and hidden purposes of the Divine Will.[104]

This decision is an act of self-surrender taken in utter despair and aridity. It is the will to be for the other undertaken to a large extent in that other's absence. It is an act that depends mostly on the subject. In experiential nothingness, in the absence of worldly joys, in the absence of faith, hope, and love, the subject decides to have faith, hope, and love for a personalized otherness. Nothingness is redeemed to nothingness included in the divine will. Absence of the divine is accepted through the divine. The passion or intensity of pain is *transferred* to the passion or intensity of faith.

Significant to the enactment of this decision is the minimal involvement of that other which the subject is giving itself to. The decision is barely called upon by the divine other before it is executed. The summons to decide is very weak; its incentive thus almost negligible. The subject affirms the other practically without the other

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[103] Cited by Underhill, pp. 411-2, from Suso, *Life*.
[104] Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 412; quoting from Suso, *Life*.

having called it first.[105] John of the Cross frequently refers to this radical resolve in his insistence to approach the divine through a complete denudation of the self's faculties. 'To attain union with God', he claims, 'a person should advance neither by understanding, nor by the support of his own experience, nor by feeling or imagination, but by belief in God's being'.[106] Anything through which the ego receives the least sustenance or comprehension, *including* phenomena sent by the divine (visions, ecstasies, auditions, etc.), must be dismissed. Ultimately, a decision of true love for the divine must not even be inspired by its call in whatever determinate form this takes place.

A person, writes John of the Cross,

> must […] darken and blind himself in that part of his nature which bears relation to God and spiritual things. This […] is the rational and higher portion of his nature […]. Insofar as he is capable, a person must void himself of all, so that, however many supernatural communications he receives, he will continually live as though denuded of them and in darkness.[107]

For John of the Cross, if one is to truly approach the divine, one must do so 'in complete blindness',[108] distrusting all forms of understanding – emotional, intellectual, and spiritual – as these can only reassure the self of its own nature, detaining it from giving itself completely to the absolute otherness of God. In other words, one must progress unreservedly in the darkness or nonknowledge through which the three virtues operate. And it is probably only in the particular circumstances of the dark night – that is, through its various experiences of nothingness and aridity – that the mystic can approach this unconditional self-giving to the divine will. Alienated and unsupported by everyone and everything, even themselves, the mystic yet gives themselves to the divine become a complete stranger. They give themselves to a divine that is also by and large absent from the event itself. This is the most selfless act undertaken in the mystic way and thereby the most crucial in its advancement.[109]

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[105] I do not mean therefore that this decision is *absolutely* autonomous of the other's call. The degree of the other's involvement, however, is very little in comparison with the subject's involvement which is here almost complete.

[106] *Ascent*, II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 113.

[107] *Ascent,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* pp. 112-3. See also: '[I]f the soul in traveling this road leans upon any element of its own knowledge or experience of God, it will easily go astray or be detained for not having desired to abide in complete blindness, in faith which is its guide' (p. 113).

[108] *Ascent,* II, in John, *Collected Works,* p. 113.

[109] As Guyon stresses, '[t]he soul, reduced to nothingness, must remain in it, without wishing to change its state; and it is then that the torrent loses itself in the sea', that is, in the divine (*Torrents*, in Guyon, *Collected Works*, p. 342.

It is important not to perceive this act as simply a total self-resignation to suffering. This is not the choice of self-abandon that can often result from chronic despair. This is the kind of helpless acquiescence that will be seen to characterize that decision that brings about the experience of the sacred. The decision that marks the dark night's closure, however, entails an *active* resolve through faith, hope, and charity, to give oneself to an absent personalized alterity. That which marks the sacred entails a *passive* affirmation to an experience taking over oneself. It is enacted through the demise of any role or will of subjectivity, a yes to this incontrollable demise. On the one hand, the subject can only affirm a despair that is seizing it. On the other hand, it chooses to affirm that despair through the other. Despair is redeemed: *'la sua voluntate è nostra pace'*.[110]

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[110] Cited by Underhill, *Mysticism,* p. 412, from Suso, *Life*.

IV

The Selfhood related to the Decision

The Absence of My Decision in the Sacred:
The Subject reduced to an Ego

'Decision' in Bataille's and Blanchot's writings is often referred to as a 'desire of the sacred'.[111]   Blanchot also describes it as 'passion'.   Like the decision designated by Levinas, Derrida, and Kearney, desire of the sacred is seen also from two aspects or two viewpoints.   Desire is at once desire *by* the sacred and desire *for* the sacred.   The former alludes to the impression of alterity on the subject while the latter alludes to the subject's own decision to be for that alterity.

If 'desire by the sacred' refers to the action of alterity on the subject then it is made up of three significant elements.   In 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics' we discussed three different ways of behaviour that the sacred discloses in relation to subjectivity. The sacred subverts subjectivity; the sacred constitutes subjectivity; the sacred evades subjectivity.   The sacred throws subjectivity into a dispossessing state of extreme mastery or extreme passivity.   It also draws it out of this abject condition, allowing its possessive nature to once again take hold.   Just as the sacred breaks the subject, it also establishes it.

'Desire for the sacred' has also been discussed in 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics'. To describe the subject's behaviour in relation to the sacred, we must once again call attention to Bataille's and Blanchot's views on the structure of subjectivity. Subjectivity is made up of two primary movements in opposition to each other.   It is constituted by the desire to leave itself to partake of the alterity that the phenomenon of

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[111] For references to 'desire', see for instance Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 47, 85-6, 124, and Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 10, 11, 30, 32-3.

the sacred introduces and the desire to secure itself in whatever activity it pursues. On the one hand, it exhibits a desire to go against its own nature to become one with the otherness that the phenomenon lures it towards. On the other hand, it exhibits the desire to assert itself in anything which it experiences, to appropriate everything to itself. Inasmuch as these contrary desires are exercised *by* subjectivity, that subjectivity is incapable of truly giving itself to the alterity in question. It remains held to its solipsistic nature. Its desire for alterity is always already confined to its self-centredness and its processes. The desire to be other is found to be another form of its desire for mastery, another activity of its drive for omniscience.[112] Subjectivity is here an existence marked by an *irreversible constraint* to its nature. If it is anything, it is an inability to decide the leap from its cognitive-egotistic realm to any realm that is foreign to such qualities. It is a chasing of its own tail. 'Passion', Steven Shaviro writes,

> demands infinite self-abandonment, and I loyally abandon everything that is mine to it; but as long as I am strong enough to abandon everything to it, as long as 'I' remain the one who does the abandoning, I remain too weak to abandon myself [...]. [P]assion is only realized in the world, as it must be realized, by virtue of such betrayals.[113]

Subjectivity is irrevocably confined to a self-positing and possessive nature because for Bataille and Blanchot it is seen *exclusively* as an *ego*. The subject is here an ego and nothing else besides, and therefore, it cannot exercise any other powers save the identification of everything in accordance to its self-affirmation. Ultimately, the subject can only function to indulge or satisfy its self-awareness. Its functioning is aimed to recognize its self in everything and everyone. What does this say about the subject's desire for the sacred?[114]

In the ethical relation, the desire to be for the other entails the necessity of my preparation to welcome the incoming alterity through the carrying out of faith, hope, and love, which in turn lead to the transgression of my selfhood by that alterity. Always already called by alterity, I must nonetheless decide to welcome it through a decision that entails utmost humility, patience, and vigilance. Desire for the sacred (as subversion), however, presupposes a subjectivity that has been reduced to a

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[112] See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 38-41.

[113] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 130-1.

[114] This equivalence of subjectivity with an ego-cogito can be seen for instance in Blanchot, *Step*, pp. 5, 71-2, 113-4, 123; Blanchot, *Disaster*, pp. 12, 61, 129-30, 139-40; 'Losing the Power to Say "I"', in Hart, *Gaze*, pp. 105-132; Bataille, *Experience*, pp. 52-4, 115-6.

domineering ego. Such a subjectivity is therefore incapable of opening itself to the sacred. It is indeed incapable of opening itself to any alterity whatsoever. By the same token, the sacred itself is perceived as too foreign and inhuman to allow the subject the least potential for any preparation or anticipation, misguided as these might be. The sacred is too alien to be decided for, to be desired. It comes upon me unsuspectingly. It violates my selfhood right through and literally possesses me. 'It comes and goes, errant disarray, and yet with the imperceptible but intense suddenness of the outside, as an irresistible or unforeseen resolve which would come to us from beyond the confines of decision.'[115] Before the sacred, the subject is a subjection, an impotence of itself. 'I am shaken and altered by a repetition which carries me along, of which I am the effect and not the subject.' Extreme mastery or passivity, I find myself either way increasingly deprived of all that is me, fast approaching my complete extinction. And unlike the experience of the icon, I have absolutely no choice in the matter. Shaviro points out that 'no matter what I do, I cannot escape the terror of this call. The darkness envelopes me in any case, and as I lose myself within it, I am no longer the one who might have chosen either to deny or to accept it'. 'The decision is generated, not by the subject, but from within the darkness which attracts the subject. A strange reversal of normal narrative causality seems to be at work: the decision has already been effected, prior to my making the decision or becoming cognizant of it.'[116]

Bataille and Blanchot also on occasion describe the subject as responding to its helpless dispossession through a disturbing sense of resignation that is also sometimes a jubilation. Given in to a malignant force, subjectivity assumes a perverse consent to its breaking apart. It accepts or finds pleasure in its mounting ruin. Referring to the narrator in *Death Sentence*, Shaviro remarks that 'his "decision" consists only in a kind of patience tinged with fear, his willingness to *become* the darkness that will swallow him in any case, or the fortitude with which he affirms, after it has already engaged him […]'.[117] This consent does not seem to have any determining effect on the phenomenon taking place. It often seems to be more in the nature of a masochistic joy in having one's self gradually shattered, and thus above all an assent, a revel even, to one's self-abandon. 'Not to want to be everything is to want time, to want chance', Bataille

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[115] Blanchot, *Disaster*, p. 4.
[116] Shaviro, *Passion*, pp. 123, 124, 125. Consider also the following quotation: '[The subject] "responds" only to the extent that it is irrevocably altered by the multiplicities it encounters' (Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 31).
[117] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 124-5.

claims, referring to this submissive affirmation. 'To want chance is *amor fati*. *Amor fati* means wanting chance, differing from what has been. Winning the unknown, playing it'.[118] As he states in *Inner Experience*, '[w]e are perhaps the wound, the sickness of nature. It would be necessary for us in this case – and moreover possible, "easy" – to turn the wound into a celebration, a strength of the sickness'.[119]

The subject cannot choose to ignore the 'call' of the sacred. If one must speak of the 'decision' to open oneself to the sacred, then one must speak of a decision that is more in the nature of an inherent compulsion. Innate to subjectivity is an incontrollable impulse to give in to what ruptures that same subjectivity. The decision is here not really a decision at all. Desire for the sacred is ultimately nothing other than a desire *by* the sacred.[120]

Selfhood in the Ethical Event

The Singular Self (Levinas)

My decision to be for the other is not a decision that is taken by my ego. The other exposes me to a more intimate selfhood than the ego. I am exposed to a particular experience of myself that can only occur within the ethical relation. The icon opens me to what is most singularly me. It is *through* this revealed self that I then decide to be for the other, that I endorse its alterity. To undertake the decision, to say 'yes', is to give myself to this nascent consciousness. To say 'no' would mean suppressing the emergence of this self through a reassertion of the ego and its rationalizations. I affirm the alterity of the other through a new sense of identity. I refuse it by clinging stubbornly to my ego.

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[118] Cited and translated by Shaviro, *Passion*, p. 107, from Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres complètes*, 12 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970-1988), vol. 6, p. 140.
[119] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 169.
[120] This will be further demonstrated below on pp. 222-5. Here the nature of the ego for Bataille and Blanchot is seen to be a form of the sacred.

The subject's singular self is a consciousness inaugurated through a responsibility for the other.[121]   Responsibility in the ethical situation is constituted by an infinite suffering. The impossible demands put on the subject by the other are undergone by a self in scission. Selfhood is *on the one hand* an incessant incapability to take control. It is an endless impotence to interpret the other in order to help it, an impotence to take over it, an impotence to meet its demands. The other's singularity infinitely subverts the very locus of one's self-identity and the interpretative actions it brings about. An intensely disruptive process takes place that ruptures self-consciousness, preventing it from taking charge of the other and what it is calling for. *On the other hand*, however, selfhood is also the very effort to interpret itself and the other. It is the endless endeavour to uphold one's sense of self-identity even as this is breaking apart. Faced with the other's call, the subject strives relentlessly to answer that call through its own powers, to understand it so that it can realize it in actuality.[122]

The subject's singular self is constituted by a continual subversion of one's sense of self-possession and its continual attempts at taking control over itself so that it can meet the other's needs. Central to this particular selfhood is the duplicity of two movements.   There is the paradoxical simultaneity of a movement towards empowerment and its undercutting by a movement of disempowerment. Towards and away from self-identity, the singular self is 'the dead time or the *meanwhile* which separates inspiration and expiration'.[123]   It inaugurates at once the possibility and impossibility of taking charge of oneself for the other.

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[121] In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida calls the subject's persona the 'secret' because it involves a self that breaks away from any form of knowledge and universality: 'I have nothing to say about it. What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable […]; as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment' (Derrida, *Gift*, pp. 70-1). See also p. 60.

[122] See also Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xxxvii.

[123] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 109. See also Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. xxxvii. Is the singular self another term for the transcendental self? Insofar as it is described as pre-originary, as the condition and transcendence of the ego, it is similar. And yet its nature omits anything that has to do with some form of union with divine reality. The transcendental self is defined by the subject's singularity as inseparable from divine singularity: the subject is in an irreducible unison with God's reality.
Experiences of the singular self belong strictly speaking to the corporeal existence while those that pertain to the transcendental self, though often verging or including such corporeal experiences, belong for the most part to the emergence of a spiritual reality. Ultimately, the two terms describe different, though perhaps not unrelated, aspects of an indefinably intimate selfhood.

The Singular Self as tending towards Self-Identity

Another form of selfhood is experienced through the sacred. We have called this 'impersonal consciousness' in the first chapter.[124] Contrary to the singular self, this impersonal selfhood does not come about through any form of volition at all. Here, the subject does not decide to be for alterity by allowing itself to affirm an emerging new sense of selfhood. Subjectivity suffers this selfhood anyhow. It is imposed upon it as is its exposure to alterity. Nonetheless, like the singular self, impersonal consciousness is seen to comprise a double movement. Before alterity, a selfhood is experienced that is constituted at once by an incessant subversion of self-identity and an incessant striving of that identity to assert itself. Again, a conflicting dynamic is at play. A force is seen to orient itself towards the subject's source of self-mastery just as another orients itself towards its dissolution. The nature of this conflict, however, is significantly different from that associated with the singular self. The difference is above all a difference of *directionality* and *reference*.

'Directionality' is the where the paradoxical movement of the selfhood in question is *tending towards*, the course it is taking. 'Reference' is the why to this where: what does that type of directionality refer one to, and therefore why is it of that directionality? Reference is the reference of this directionality to a kind of alterity which is seen to be the impetus behind that type of directionality. This alterity either belongs to the no-place of the sacred or to the other's persona. Directionality and reference are of course inseparable: one cannot have one without the other.

Now for Levinas, the unceasing conflict constitutive of the singular self is a process that inclines itself towards the actualization of the subject's locus of self-identity.[125] The contestation between its movements towards self-identity and away from it gradually tends ever more towards the former movement. The struggle remains but the orientation towards self-knowledge grows ever stronger. A progressive steering towards the possibility of self-possession rather than its impossibility takes place in the sustained tension.[126]

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[124] See 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 34-5.

[125] The phenomenon of the singular self indeed precedes both sensibility and intellectuality, both essence and the said.

[126] In *Otherwise Than Being,* Levinas also occasionally conceives the other as too radical in its foreignness to enable the subject to interpret it in any way. In this version of the ethical scene, one is divested of all of one's powers before an other that is absolute in its alterity. This event seems to take

The singular self can be seen as a phenomenon that is transcendent of the subject's self-awareness and is thereby autonomous of it. This transcendence, however, is also in the form of a tending towards or a *possibilizing* of such a consciousness. Beyond or outside self-identity, the singular self is also what leads to it. It is a reality through which self-understanding originates. It is at once outside the subject's sense of identity and yet also its condition. We can designate it as the process of this identity's possibilization prior to its actualization. The singular self 'precedes and motivates acts of self-identification and efforts to escape oneself'[127]: a selfhood which animates one's consciousness of anything. It has thereby an intimate connection with self-identity and yet is also infinitely different from its nature. Although it makes this force possible, it is, however, foreign to its actualization. Actualization belongs to another reality, the reality of the said, its being and beings. The singular self, however, is the

> hither side of the present in which every identity identified in the said is constituted. It is already constituted when the act of constitution first originates […]. The disclosure of being to itself lurks there […]. The breakup of 'eternal rest' by time, in which being becomes consciousness and self-consciousness by equalling itself after the breakup, presuppose the oneself [or the singular self].[128]

As Alphonso Lingis explains,

> Levinas actually sets out to see in the exposedness to alterity in the face of another the original form of openness. It even founds and sustains the openness to things or to the elements. Not only perceptions but even sensation is seen to be wholly sustained by ethical responsibility. The sense of alterity itself maintains open every kind of openness, even that to distant terms or immediately oncoming elements.[129]

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place against the subject's own will and nature. It becomes a fierce violation or subjugation of the subject: an overwhelming and overpowering dispossession. Despite this move towards what verges upon an experience of the sacred, Levinas, time and again, also however alludes to a manner of perceiving the other from the more balanced standpoint that is designated in this work. In this context, the other does not only disrupt selfhood but above all offers it the possibility of understanding it. This can be seen especially through the idea of the subject's singular self that is also explored in *Otherwise Than Being*. See Kearney's criticism of Levinas in *Strangers*, pp. 71-2, 80-1.

[127] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xxxvi.

[128] Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 105. Note that 'oneself' is another term for the singular self.

[129] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. xxii. See Levinas, *Otherwise,* pp. 52-3, 70.

The Subject's Persona (Kearney)

Kearney's notion of the subject's persona in the ethical relation bears a similarity with Levinas's singular self. The persona is oneself as another. Through the other, the ownership of my selfhood is disrupted; I am partly opened to what is foreign in me. The icon's alterity impresses itself upon me as an otherness in myself. I become 'a stranger in myself'. This disturbing self-alienation serves the significant function of moral 'conscience'. '[T]he other is inscribed within me as an uncontainable call from *beyond*.' I am an openness to the call to be for the other: '[I]t is the other within who is calling us to act on behalf of the other without'.[130]

Receptivity to the other's call is a receptivity to new possibles expressed by that other. For Kearney, the persona is the miraculous site where the im-possible is brought about, where the impossible is made possible. Through the other, possibles that had pertained to the ego are abandoned to be replaced by others that would not have existed had the subject dismissed that other. Possibles impossible to the ego are now inspired through the openness that constitutes the persona.[131]

Inspiration, however, is never sufficient. To truly welcome the other's possibles and above all *act upon them*, the subject needs to interpret them according to its powers. In other words, the persona needs at the same time to orient itself towards the interpreted and the interpretative self. It must allow self-identity to exercise itself. Ethical inspiration must be productive for the subject for otherwise it would be of no use at all. The exposure to alterity therefore must coincide with the operation of the subject's self-identity. The persona must integrate these two contrary processes within itself. More specifically, the subject must identify itself and its world *through* and *for* the other's possibles. And it can do so through its own interpretative capabilities. The new possibles are stimulating guides which the subject must fulfil in its world through its own endeavours. Just as they disempower the ego, they *empower* the hermeneutical self to function according to their understandings.

An undermining movement away from a solipsistic and egocentric self-identity through an openness to the other's possibles, is counterpoised by a movement towards self-identity in an attempt to interpret such possibles. Again, there is here a continuous tendency towards self-identity and its hermeneutics. If the dominant orientation is the

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[130] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 80-1.
[131] Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 81-2.

disempowering of one's sense of selfhood, the subject's bafflement and inaction towards the other will most likely take over any sense of motivation and effort to help that other. Without a tending towards a self of interpretation in one's persona, the ethical scene can easily become paralyzing, horrifying, even traumatic.[132]

Selfhood in the Sacred

The Impersonal Self as tending away from Self-Identity

If some form of selfhood is undergone in the sacred, this selfhood seems to accentuate a directionality in its movements that is contrary to that constituting the singular self. The selfhood that the sacred brings out tends towards the anonymous, the dissolution of self-identification.[133] Significantly, Bataille and Blanchot do not usually designate this consciousness through such terms as 'absolute singularity', 'singular self', 'oneself', 'persona', etc. These appellations indeed emphasize an orientation towards one's source of self-identity. Instead, the subject's singularity is here expressed through terms that focus on a tending away from self-identity. If Levinas calls this selfhood an 'impersonal consciousness', Blanchot often calls it '*someone*'.[134] 'This Someone', Shaviro claims, 'is not myself, is not anybody in particular'.[135] It is anterior to any sense of self-individuality. A source of the ego, it is also a self that is in submission to anonymous affective drives. It comprises the *increasing* inability of the ego to coincide with itself or be in control of itself and its environment. Once again, the process of infinity captures this self's increasing impotence, its exacerbating breakdown towards utter dissolution. 'Someone', remarks Blanchot, 'is what is still present when

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[132] See Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 77-82; *May Be*, pp. 10-9, 81-2. See also ''Twixt Exposure and Action', pp. 231-3, for a further description of the persona.

[133] Note that this selfhood suffered in the sacred does not reach complete anonymity but tends towards it progressively.

[134] Levinas does make use of this name for the subject's singular self in *Otherwise Than Being* though very rarely (see for instance p. 53). To avoid confusion, however, and show a clear distinction between the two forms of selfhood, I will be using the terms 'someone' and 'impersonal self' exclusively in relation to the context of the sacred.

[135] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 114.

there is no one […]. I am not there, no one is there, but the impersonal is […]'.[136] Shaviro presents a vivid and distinct picture of this form of consciousness:

> What happens to me happens to no one, because what happens is my exclusion from what is happening. The approach of the impersonal, the loss of myself, is also the loss of my ability to change, the loss of my power to transcend or to project myself […]. I cannot escape from myself, in the sense that I cannot escape from – I am not released or liberated by – the loss of myself. I am bound irrevocably to the loss of myself, by my very inability to take part in it […]. I must repeatedly suffer my own radical inability to achieve an identity or to initiate an action […]. I am no longer myself, but I subsist as an anonymous 'someone' consumed by passion. I am condemned to the indefinite continuation of an existence that is no longer my own.[137]

To speak of this impersonal self is to speak of the fatality of a decline in my self-constancy and its mastery, which, if taken to its logical conclusion will end in my death. For Bataille, I am an impersonal self inasmuch as I am incessantly losing myself to the anonymity of instinctual life. This consciousness is constituted by the process of a breaking apart of my self-possession to 'a superabundance of being'. For Blanchot, the impersonal self can be seen as my ego in the grip of 'an irrational, repetitive movement' that thwarts all sense from thoughts, all intensity from emotions.[138] At the mercy of such convulsions, I am increasingly divested of myself, submitting all that I am to the empty repetitiveness such convulsions introduce into me. In the phenomenon Blanchot calls 'tyrannical prehension', for instance, the subject becomes like an automaton, controlled by unknown forces outside of it. This event is related to the context of writing and literature: it describes that moment when the writing hand has been taken over by the thought. 'This hand experiences, at certain moments, a very great need to seize: it grasps the pencil, it has to. It receives an order, an imperious command.'[139] As Shaviro stresses,

> I do not have the power to *decide* to obey (or disobey) such an order […]. I find myself already obeying it, prior to all reflection. Compulsion anticipates all other aspects of experience; it is included in advance in everything I think, say, or do. The 'sick' hand seems to have a life of its own, or rather a life which, terrifyingly, is not its own.[140]

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[136] Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: Nebraska University, 1982), p. 31.
[137] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 118.
[138] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 49, 127.
[139] Blanchot, *Space*, pp. 25, 25.
[140] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 127. See pp. 126-7.

Rather than a pre-originary possibilizing or empowering of self-identity and its interpretative powers, the impersonal self thereby is characterized as an endless impossibilizing or disempowering of self-identity. The impersonal self is a consciousness that is a pathological case or a consciousness that is the product of a pathological state anterior to the volitional workings of the comprehending self. And by 'pathological' I mean a condition that has taken over an individual and bespeaks an unknown disease. For Bataille and Blanchot, the sacred exposes in the subject a symptomatic personality that is an increasing abandon to exterior drives. This is often emphasized when, for instance, Bataille calls such a selfhood an '*improbability*', another term which accentuates its disempowering aspect. The movement towards self-identification is here posited *inasmuch* as it finds itself endlessly breached by anonymous forces. It is a drive that is present but is present *as* improbable.

> If the consciousness which I have of my *self* escapes from the world, if, trembling, I abandon all hope for a logical harmony and dedicate myself to *improbability* – at first to my own and, in the end, to that of all things [*this is to play the drunk, staggering man who, in a movement of logic, takes himself for a candle, blows it out, and crying out with fear, in the end, takes himself for night*] – I can grasp the *self* in tears, in anguish […], but it is only when death approaches that I will know without fail what it is about.[141]

In the impersonal self, subjectivity remains inasmuch as it experiences its radical disempowering. It remains inasmuch as it is incessantly undermined.

While the icon inaugurates a selfhood based on a motivation for meaning and action, the sacred inaugurates a selfhood based on an incessant rejection of such motivation. This is owing to the type of alterity the selfhood in each case is a reference to. On the one hand, the drive towards utter dissolution refers to a seizure by an inhuman anonymous alterity. To be susceptible to an other's alterity, on the other hand, is to welcome in oneself the drive towards the actualization of meaning because the other inspires and demands ethical action. The singular self's inclination towards giving meaning through possibles given by the other is an inclination towards ethical action. It is an inclination to act for the other in the only realm possible for the subject, the sensible-cognitive realm; and hence the necessity of the interpretative workings of

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[141] Bataille, *Experience,* pp. 70-1. See also: 'He and I, having emerged without name from … without name, are for this … without name, just as two grains of sand are for the desert, or rather two waves losing themselves in two adjacent waves are for the sea […]. O death infinitely blessed […]. Joy of the dying man, wave among waves. Inert joy of the dying, of the desert, fall into the impossible, cry without resonance, silence of a fatal accident' (pp. 50-1).

self-identity. As Levinas especially points out in *Otherwise Than Being*, the drive towards self-identity is undergone in the name of the other.

The intentionality of one's interpretative self is an expression of the world as said.[142] Above all, it is introduced through the other, for the other. For Levinas, appropriations of being are first and foremost renderings of the ethical exigency, realizations of a giving to the other. '[T]he constituted and fixed, maintained logos itself is sustained by the saying that is a relationship with alterity.' Self-identification instigates 'the thematization of the same on the basis of the relationship with the other [...]'.[143] Its discernments are fixed representations of the ethical relation for practical action to take place for the other. Thematizing, Levinas insists,

> is an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity [to the other] [...]. There is weighing, thought, objectification, and thus a decree in which my anarchic relationship with illeity is betrayed, but in which it is conveyed before us. There is betrayal of my anarchic relation with illeity, but also a new relationship with it [...].[144]

The Nature of the Ego for Bataille and Blanchot

For Bataille and Blanchot, the impersonal self is a self forced upon the subject. It is a self that is endured when the sacred violates the subject. Above all, its nature emphasizes an influx of the unknown and the anonymous. I find myself taken over by an absolute heterogeneity, seized by an alien selfhood. This violence of possession precludes any freedom of welcome or rejection on my behalf. I cannot decide to affirm the invasion of this impersonal selfhood or suppress it. There is no element of will capable of choosing to accept this self and thus allow my exposure to it. Subjectivity here has absolutely no say in its openness to alterity. It cannot decide through its own powers to undertake the leap into a reality that is foreign to its identity. It is completely

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[142] For an explanation of Levinas's concepts of the 'said' and 'saying', see 'When the No-place Becomes a Person', pp. 143-5.

[143] Lingis, 'Introduction', in Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. xxxv; Levinas, *Otherwise,* p. 158.

[144] Lingis, *Otherwise,* p. 158.

constrained by its own nature. This makes it very similar to a machine that cannot help being what it is in its predetermined nature to be.

The double movement of desire that for Bataille and Blanchot constitutes subjectivity reveals this very fact. Subjectivity is wholly bound to the ego, and an ego cannot help but seek to appropriate everything and everyone to itself. Its desire for the sacred as subversion therefore always already fails to achieve its goal.[145] The ego is the failure of being anything but itself.

Moreover, the double desire intrinsic to the ego is also indicative of its absolute dependence and conditioning by the sacred. This attests further to the ego's powerlessness to decide to open itself to such an alterity. The fact that one of its two basic constituents is its constant striving to give itself to the sacred can attest to such a total dependence. But then, this desire always falls within the other one when the ego is at work. Bataille and Blanchot, however, see this very self-conforming nature of the ego as intrinsically reliant on the sacred. As pointed out in the first chapter, the sacred *constitutes* subjectivity. More specifically, subjectivity is seen to be a *symptom* of the sacred. It is a *compulsive reaction* by the sacred to its own anonymous discord. Subjectivity inaugurated by the sacred, is an impulsive self-preservation to that sacred: its subsistence is a defensive reaction to the threat of utter dissolution that that sacred posits. Bataille suggests this in *Inner Experience* when he says, 'I am and you are, in the vast flow of things, a stopping point favoring a resurgence'.[146] My power, claims Shaviro, 'arises out of resistance, and not the reverse; just as the demand for possession arises out of passion, and not the reverse. Power and possessions [are born by seeking] to regulate and control the very forces and movements which have invested them [...]'.[147]

Initiated by the sacred, subjectivity is a resistance to that sacred. Its identity is inaugurated by the sacred and is inseparable in its nature from that sacred. Subjectivity originates through that which also ceaselessly disrupts it. It is an inevitable incident sprung out of its own impotence and constantly exposed to that impotence. If subjectivity is marked by a sense of freedom for its sustainability, if it relies on a belief in self-volition for its processes to take place, it is ultimately seen to be not free at all. If the sacred constitutes its nature, then it depends on it for its very processes – for itself –

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[145] See above, pp. 211-2; 'Monomaniacs and Neurotics', pp. 38-41.
[146] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 95.
[147] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 136.

to take place. And these very processes are in turn fated to be undone by that same sacred. The pawn of anarchic forces, it yet continuously depends on its freedom delusion for its perpetuation. 'Stability and internal cohesion are secondary functions of the very processes which disrupt them, and which they are unable to take into account […]. Even subjectivity is generated only by the "contagion" of outside elements […].'[148]

Not only is subjectivity a compulsion to the sacred, it is also a compulsion *of* the sacred. In other words, the ego *is* a form of the sacred, a part of its dynamics. Subjectivity is a perverse process that the sacred plays against itself. It is the reaction of the sacred against itself, the sacred miscarrying itself. Shaviro frequently elucidates on this in *Passion and Excess*. 'My existential isolation', he explains, 'which is to say my self-consciousness, is only a temporary effect, a relative viscosity or partial coagulation, of the very movement which renders it impossible'. Further on he points out that '[b]oth loyalty [to the sacred] and betrayal [of the sacred] are dimensions of, or responses to, the impersonal fascination which alone initiates thinking'. In truth, '[t]he imposition of order, the generation of form, is not an escape from the constriction and darkness of obsession, but its most total and horrifying expression'.[149] Alluding to the phenomenon of 'tyrannical prehension' in *Space of Literature*, Shaviro presents the following scene:

> I seek to change compulsion into freedom, to turn a futile, illusory gesture into a real and efficacious action. But my exercise of mastery is secretly conditioned, and therefore strangely compromised, by the very force it seeks to subdue. The imposition of order is itself the most compulsive, the most unfree and inauthentic, of actions […]. In seeking to establish order, I bind myself to a movement whose senselessness and lack of direction undermines all notions of order. The first hand's grasping movement is a simulacrum of action, a mocking, ruinous parody of the second hand's act of mastery. But this is a case where the 'parody' precedes the 'original.' When the 'healthy' hand seizes the 'sick' one, by that very movement it mimics and perpetuates the latter's passive agitation. Voluntary action ironically echoes the involuntary. I conquer repetition only by giving way to it, again and again. My will is subject to a fatality of which it can know nothing […]. [E]verything we accomplish […] is secretly marked by 'the abnormal nature and the terrible source' of such irrational compulsion.[150]

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[148] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 46.
[149] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 88, 128, 134.
[150] Shaviro, *Passion,* pp. 127-8; quoting from Blanchot, *Space,* p. 25. Blanchot, *Sentence*, p. 64. 'Behind every action, beneath every initiative, lurks the *pressentiment* that "some secret treason was going to take place, one of those harrowing acts which no one knows anything about, which begin in darkness and end in silence, and against which an unknown misery has no weapon"' (Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 128; quoting from Blanchot, *Sentence*, p. 46).

Just as subjectivity needs the sacred so does the sacred need subjectivity. *Through* subjectivity's self-affirming movements, *through* the illusion of freedom and volition such movements impress it with, the sacred *as subversion* is in turn allowed to reveal its 'reality' and its exorbitance by precisely breaking down what subjectivity had built. The sacred as subversion can only happen, can only 'manifest' itself, by shattering the spell of the self-sovereignty of the ego. Freedom and volition are here posited in order for them to be profaned, to be revealed as intrinsically a delusion, through the disclosure of a nothingness present before they had ever existed. As Bataille claims, '[t]he fragile walls of your isolation, which comprised the multiple stopping-points, the obstacles of consciousness, will have served only to reflect for an instant the flash of those universes in the heart of which you never ceased to be lost'.[151] Blanchot also suggests this in *The Step Not Beyond*:

> The more strong and justified the name, the more it gives hold to the perversion of the anonymous; the more that greatness, creative force, indubitable truth present themselves in a name, the more it is ready to denounce itself as the error or the injustice which has thrived at the expense of the nameless. But, in return, everything happens as if the anonymous, shadow of which light would be unaware that it shines only to project it, arranged the whole comedy of glories, of powers, of sanctities, in order to bring itself near to us, signalling to us across signification and precisely there where every sign would be lacking.[152]

'[D]omination', Shaviro makes clear, 'presupposes, and nourishes in spite of itself, the anarchic proliferation of forces that oppose domination'.[153] Although the sacred as subversion still remains *the* pre-originary phenomenon, it is still reliant for its event on its constitutive aspect. Intrinsic to the sacred are its aspect of subversion and its aspect of constitution which mutually establish each other. The decisive leap from subjectivity to the sacred or, for that matter, from the sacred to subjectivity, must here not be perceived in part as pertaining to the will of that same subjectivity. Rather, it must be seen as pertaining *entirely* to the all-encompassing domain of the sacred. Subjectivity is an *inexorable postponement* of the sacred (as subversion), an inevitable distraction from it. It is the inevitable part of an ever-turning vicious circle called the sacred.

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[151] Bataille, *Experience*, p. 95.
[152] Blanchot, *Step*, p. 37.
[153] Shaviro, *Passion,* p. 135. 'Men assure their own subsistence, or avoid suffering, not because these functions themselves lead to a sufficient result, but in order to accede to the insubordinate function of free expenditure' ('The Notion of Expenditure', in Bataille, *Visions*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 129).

Chapter 5

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'Twixt Exposure and Action

Icon Narratives and their Redeeming

Prologue

This last chapter deviates from the others in terms of its focus. Before we move towards its thematic, it will therefore be useful to give a preliminary explanation of its significance for the rest of this work.

The previous chapter concludes the comparison of the sacred and the icon. Their principal similarities and differences have now been accounted for. However, several other related issues need further explanation if this comparison is to be cogently illustrated. Central to these issues is the as yet very briefly explained concept of redemption. If one of the most significant functions of the icon is its potential to transcend or to redeem the sacred, one must investigate how this process actually takes place. Redemption, I suggest here, discloses a dynamic *interaction* between the other's expressivity and the subject's interpretation of that expressivity. One cannot do without the other. What the self understands is as important as what is given it to understand by the other. The idea of selfhood in the ethical scene must thereby be also further investigated. This I attempt to do in the following section entitled 'The Correlation of Alterity, Interpretation, and Action in the Ethical Event'.

In view of the subject of redemption and the essentially related thematic of selfhood in the ethical encounter, the focus of this work needs to be widened. If the self must interpret the other to complete the process of redemption, *how* can it do so in a way that can best do justice to that other, to what that other is trying to say? Interpreting others is usually carried out through various forms of narratives read and learned by the subject. What kind of narrative, therefore, is most suited to comprehend the other as much as possible on its own grounds, in its singularity? This chapter attempts to answer this demand by formulating the basics of such a narrative. A model narrative is sketched out that can best effect the process of redemption. This narrative's hermeneutics is seen to extend also to experiences of the sacred. It can operate by giving such nonsensical events some form of meaning that can motivate the subject to prevail over them in actual life.

I will be calling this special form of narrative an 'icon narrative'. The chapter illustrates the particular ways this narrative attempts to redeem the sacred and the icon. If these types of redemption are learned by the subject, a practical and productive interaction between the subject and the icon, between the subject and the event of the sacred, can be brought about. Some degree of reconciliation, one hopes, can be achieved.

A study of the forms of redemption in the icon narrative also puts into emphasis a *dialectical logic* that is at the heart of their functioning. An important source of this dialectic is Paul Ricoeur's study of the metaphor. This crucial dialectic can also be seen taking place between the self and the other in the actual ethical phenomenon. Intrinsic to the process of redemption, whether it is taken in the context of a narrative, an icon narrative, or in the actual encounter with the other, is the operating of this dialectic. Redemption, I propose, can best be expressed through this particular dynamic between two polarities. In demonstration, some of the icon narrative's forms of redemption are here reviewed directly from this perspective.

This prolonged study of the metaphor dialectic finally also serves to introduce the very nature of the relationship that occurs between the sacred and the icon. As the Conclusion will disclose, this dynamic can also express the particular interaction that the experience of the sacred and the experience of the icon sometimes entertain.

I

The Correlation of Alterity, Interpretation, and Action in the Ethical Event

Intrinsic to a phenomenology of the icon is not just the other's alterity but two equally significant components: the subject's interpretation of that alterity and its ethical action. To speak of the other's alterity is to always presuppose these other two components. All three elements are interrelated to one another, a dynamic that does not feature in phenomena relating to the sacred. The otherness undergone in these experiences is a ceaseless contestation of any form of understanding whatsoever. Before focusing on the as yet unexplored territory of interpreting the icon, I would like to draw attention to this issue of the connectedness of the three elements constituting any ethical event. How and why are the three elements of this triad interrelated? How and why does the other's alterity lead to interpretation and ethical action? Finally, how does this add to our understanding of redemption in this phenomenon?

Suspending all interpretation in the ethical relation would mean opening oneself unconditionally and indiscriminately to the other, to any other. In doing so, how is one to differentiate between different kinds of personalized alterities, between benevolent and malevolent alterities? How is one to distinguish even between personalized alterity and impersonal alterity such as the sacred? 'A fine lesson in tolerance, to be sure', Richard Kearney remarks, 'but not necessarily in moral judgement […]. For if we need a logic of undecidability to keep us tolerant – preventing us from setting ourselves up as Chief High Executioners – we need an ethics of judgement to commit us, as much as possible, to right action'. Not to do so can be detrimental to us. Without any form of interpretation, our actions can be abused of by the other, if that other has malignant ends in mind. Moreover, to consign the other to absolute heterogeneity is 'to condemn

oneself to the paralysis of total incomprehension and, worse, inaction'.[1] In the ethical relation, one should in some respect transform that other into a relative other, an other for another self. The other must be recognized as in part a self that can see the subject as another self worthy of respect and esteem.[2] Some form of interpretation is called for if this is to be achieved – if, that is, an equal priority is to be given not just to ethics but also to *moral judgement* and *prudence*. In truth, the very nature of the other's alterity, personalized alterity, *invites* interpretation. As already discussed in previous chapters, personalized alterity, far from negating meaning, makes possible new meanings, offering them to the subject for interpretation and realization.

Moreover, ethical action before the icon is unthinkable without some form of prior interpretation. On a general level, to say that a subject acts is to presuppose a decision that refers to a meaning or reason behind such an action. Every action is decided through its object – which is always a form of interpretation. Action always commences with the subject's interpretative decision, however 'passive' or preconscious this might be. Take this understanding away and action ceases to belong to the subject's sense of selfhood. Any initiative or will for action on the subject's part would be removed. This would consequently mean that the subject would not have any degree of control on its actions. The process of acting out of responsibility for the other would stop making any sense. Ethical action must *come from* an interpretation of the other.

The necessity of interpretative activity in the ethical event presupposes in turn the experience of self-awareness. Any interpretative process entails some sense of self-constancy that subsists throughout this process. No phenomenon that is experienced can indeed be disengaged from a certain degree of self-awareness. Even phenomena as subversive as the sacred cannot preclude completely any presence of selfhood and its appropriations while being undergone. Without this presence, however minimal, how can one even acknowledge the existence, even if hypothetical, of a phenomenon? How can one 'know' that one is undergoing or has undergone a phenomenon of some sort, even if that phenomenon is irreducible to language and thought? Only the totality of death, and not dying, eradicates all sense of self-awareness.

In the previous chapter, I have described the sense of selfhood experienced in events of the sacred through the notion of the 'someone'. The 'someone' is constituted

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[1] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 72, 102.
[2] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 79-80.

by the tension of contrary movements away and towards self-identification. There is here a *tendency away* from self-identity, a tendency towards its dissolution, its increasing fragmentation. The movement towards this same self-identity however, though increasingly weakening, *remains* throughout the entire phenomenon. Otherwise, how can the sacred *be suffered* by subjectivity? How can it 'exist' if there is no more selfhood to undo, if it is precisely defined as the very undoing of that selfhood? To undergo the sacred is thereby to undergo the increasing conflict of one's sense of self-identity with its own loss, or in other words, to endure an increasing impotence in one's selfhood. The sacred brings about an increasing dispossession by heterogeneous forces. Selfhood is helpless to an extreme mastery or extreme passivity. Its hysteria or lassitude and their actions are not its decisions; they are not its own. Moreover, any actions that come after this event are not and cannot be based on, or inspired by, the subjected selfhood that had endured throughout that event. The self-willed action that returns after the passing of the phenomenon is precisely a defensive compulsion against, or an escape from, that phenomenon.

This is contrary to the ethical relation where action subsequent to the event must be inspired by what that selfhood subsisting throughout that event had actually experienced. This experiencing selfhood must influence the course of subsequent action for otherwise this action would not truly be action oriented towards the other's singularity. A *continuation* in the form of cause and effect in the subject's selfhood, from this selfhood as experienced in the instant of exposure to the icon to its actions in the actual world, must be assumed. This is necessary if one is to say that the subject acts through its responsibility and love for the other. No matter how subversive the experience of being before the other is, subjectivity must be allowed a degree of selfhood all throughout that would enable it to understand that other enough for the defining of the subsequent action to take place. *Therefore*, to describe the encounter with the other, to describe the redeeming process that takes place, one must presuppose a relatively stronger and more assertive sense of selfhood in the subject than that selfhood undergone in the sacred. I have sought to disclose this in the previous chapter through Levinas's and Kearney's views of the subject's singular self or persona, its *tendency towards* self-identity. As Kearney remarks,

> [a] minimal quotient of self-esteem is […] indispensable to ethics. For without
> it I could not be a moral agent capable of keeping my promises to others. If I
> did not possess some sense of self-identity and self-constancy, I would be unable

to recollect myself from my past memories or project myself into a future such that my pledges to the other (made in the past) might be realized (in the future).[3]

Only if the subject's persona sustains some degree of self-awareness can it guarantee its fidelity to the other in the aftermath. 'How is one to be faithful to the other, after all, if there is no *self* to be faithful?'[4]

According to Kearney, however, the process of understanding in the ethical phenomenon does not only come from the persona's tendency towards self-identity in the subject. It is the icon's alterity that before anything else offers the possibility of new meanings. The other's alterity gives new possible understandings to the subject which the subject in turn elucidates and circumscribes in accordance with its horizons of thematization. Understanding or redemption in the ethical realm is in fact the product of an interaction or communication between the other and the subject, an interaction that revolves exclusively around what the other has to say. Redemption by the icon is first and foremost openness to its possibles, which the subject must *also* define to itself according to the intentional horizons of its sense of selfhood. It must do so if those possibles are to be comprehended so that they will eventually be transposed or actualized into the world of action. The possibles of the other's may-be must not only be received. The other's may-be must be apprehended to be converted into a *can-be* by the subject. If one is to speak of the icon's ability to redeem suffering, one must take into consideration a process in which both the icon and the subject are *active*. The idea of redemption would not make much sense otherwise. This is why Levinas's and Kearney's notion of the subject's singular self is constituted both by a movement of openness and limitation to what is exterior to subjectivity.[5]

Kearney, taking his cue from Paul Ricoeur's idea of the narrative self, describes the subject's persona, its movements towards and away from the icon, as a *new* mode of self. At once an empathizing and interpretive self, it has moved away from the ego's horizons, the solipsistic projections of the ego, to previously unexperienced horizons of

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[3] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 79.

[4] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 79. The element of interpretation I am here referring to is that which occurs in the actual phenomenon itself. This of course does not mean that interpretation does not also take place *after* the phenomenon. Indeed, there is a better possibility that this second form of interpretation would be more thought out and more prudent than the first one. What is still necessary, however, is that, again, a strong continuation must be pursued from the first to the second interpretation. The second interpretation must always be in reference to the first interpretation and the alterity that brought it about, a *revised* interpretation. Otherwise, one risks detaching oneself completely from the happenings and intuitions of the actual event itself.

[5] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 67, 72, 79-81, 189, 250; Kearney, *May Be*, pp. 12, 16, 108, 110.

understanding. Through the ethical injunction, subjectivity as ego is transfigured by possibles that have previously been impossible or improbable for it, ethical possibles foreign to a self-centred scope of understanding.[6]

In the process of redemption – in welcoming the other's possibles while interpreting them – the persona is constituted by *a dialectic* of self-constancy and otherness. It is made up of a discordance between its exposure to the other's possibles and the capabilities of its self-identity. *At the same time*, however, this same persona is a concordance of these two infinitely different poles. Somehow it reconciles their discord. On the one hand, it comprises a conflict between the appropriations of the subject's self-identity and the demands of the other. On the other hand, *despite* this conflict, it is *also* a synthesis of these two polarities. The persona discloses the tension between self-expectations and the other's expectations, and yet *in spite of* this tension it also discloses their resolution.[7] It is at once a conflict and its ineffable reconciliation. In this fusion, the polarity of self-identity understands itself and the world around it, rectifies itself and affirms itself – *through* the other's possibles, *for* the other's possibles. If the subject interprets, it interprets always in reference of the other, inspired by the other. Self-constancy in the persona cannot be confused with the sovereignty of the ego-cogito.[8] As we will be seeing later on, the general features of the dialectical dynamic just described are behind all the procedures of redemption that can take place in the encounter with the other.

If redemption presupposes the subject's interpretation of the icon, then this interpretation, like any other, must be informed especially by various kinds of narratives. These include narratives that belong to the social consciousness,[9] narratives belonging to social institutions such as politics and religion, and the narratives of cultural works such as novels, films, poetry, and drama. The subject's understanding of

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[6] Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 67, 72, 79-81, 189, 250; Kearney, *May Be,* pp. 12, 16, 108, 110.

[7] The notion of the 'in spite of' (or the 'despite') has been utilized by Ricoeur especially in relation to the structure of hope. See 'Hope and the Structure of Philosophical Systems', in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 204-7, 215-6,). See also 'Conclusion', pp. 268-70.

[8] This interpretation of the narrative self as a dialectic is to a large extent drawn from both Ricoeur and Kearney. For Ricoeur's own designation of the narrative self see 'Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator', trans. J.N. Kraay, A.J. Scholten, in Paul Ricoeur, *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdés (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), pp. 435-7; 'The Creativity of Language', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, p. 477; Richard Kearney, 'Narrative imagination: between ethics and poetics', in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 181-4. See also Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 151-2.

[9] Narratives of social consciousness are narratives which a society uses to interpret its identity and the identity of other societies.

itself and the world is the product of the various narratives it has been taught and that it has chosen to read, *and* its interpretation of them. '[W]hat I call myself, the self of myself', suggests Ricoeur, 'is in fact the pupil of all the works of art, works of literature, works of culture which I read, which I loved, which I understood. And therefore, it's a kind of deposit, a treasure of all these experiences'.[10] This affects the way I understand the other and its possibles. The narratives of cultural works, above all, are significantly influential and essential for the ethical relation.

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[10] 'Poetry and Possibility: An Interview with Paul Ricoeur', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, p. 454. See also 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 435-7; Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* pp. 181-2; Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 153-4; Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 230-1.

II

Forms of Redemption in Narratives

What is an Icon Narrative?

Not all narratives of cultural works are of course equally capable of assisting the subject in understanding the other. A narrative would need certain specific requirements if it is to express otherness in the most ethical, just, and sensible manner possible. I will be calling these hermeneutics an 'icon narrative'. The role of an icon narrative would be primarily to augment one's ethical understanding of an otherness, and through this, motivate ethical action towards this otherness in actuality. It designates an otherness through a hermeneutics that is above all innovative and ethically insightful.

My idea of an icon narrative and its attributes should be taken above all as a possible prototype for present and subsequent ethical narratives. The description of its characteristics is meant principally to present the ideal way a narrative should be constituted if it is to have the optimal effect on the subject's interpretation and ethical action in relation to a particular otherness. These characteristics can also be traced in various narratives, ranging from textual narratives to visual narratives such as film and drama. An icon narrative can indeed be found and can take the form of fiction, nonfiction, or even religious and spiritual narratives. It can even manifest itself in poetry. A large extent of the particular features of an icon narrative, however, is different from the purely theoretical and conceptual discourses that usually constitute science and very often, philosophy, sociology, and theology. In my presentation of such distinctive characteristics, I will often be drawing liberally from Ricoeur's and Kearney's approaches to narratives and hermeneutics.

The Narrative's Possible World (Ricoeur)

An icon narrative offers the subject the possibility of an optimal ethical understanding of alterity. Its hermeneutics should always be seen in inseparable relation to the ethical encounter. The alterity that an icon narrative seeks to express can also, however, pertain to the event of the sacred. In giving that experience an ethically meaningful picture, it thereby personalizes it. On the other hand, it further personalizes the personalized alterity of the icon in presenting it as more meaningfully specific than its actuality. In either case, the goal of an icon narrative is to motivate an ethical, constructive, and practical active response to whichever otherness it designates.

What follows is a portrayal of some of the ways through which narratives, especially icon narratives, interpret, or better, redeem otherness.[11] All such types of redemption are constituents of that mode of meaningfulness we have called the 'may-be'. All describe diverse facets of this extra-ordinary experience. To start giving an account of the may-be as it manifests itself in icon narratives, we must first turn to Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the narrative and its idea of possible or fictional worlds.

Ordinary spoken discourse and any theoretical-conceptual discourse such as the scientific discourse belong to the *descriptive*. They are all describers of a world that is already there outside of them. They presuppose and refer to this pre-established world, a world common to both interlocutor and listener, text and reader. In ordinary and scientific discourses especially, the validity of their description depends on whether its object can be 'pointed at', on whether it already exists in the preconceived world. It depends on whether this object can be empirically verified or falsified. Description here bears an uncritical ratification of a certain notion of truth, a logical and pragmatic truth based on measurements. Indeed, the type of description that these discourses exhibit is of the same nature as that belonging to the particular perception of their presupposed world. Since this world belongs exclusively to the ego's projection, describing in these discourses signifies or is predetermined by the manner in which the ego perceives

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[11] The question might arise at this point why I have chosen to describe the icon narrative in general rather than focusing on the more specific description of an icon narrative of faith. After all, the previous chapters have all been related on some level to mystical themes, especially the dark night of the soul. The principal reason for such a present divergence is that this work aims principally to compare the sacred with the icon in general rather than the dark night and the spiritual-mystical subjects in connection to it. In the other chapters, the dark night is discussed to the extent that it provides an important example of the icon (and a singular example at that, owing to the particular radicalness of its phenomena).

reality. Describing means objectifying reality, appropriating everything in terms of the ego's thought processes, subsuming everything within the ego's solipsistic self-identification. Truth is truth, for such discourses, if it conforms to the ego's appropriations of reality. Intrinsic to their functioning, therefore, descriptive discourses presume a certain world *or*, in different words, they presume a certain perception of the world.[12]

To speak of the referentiality of narratives, including icon narratives, is to acknowledge the operating of another form of referentiality that is not of a descriptive nature. This referentiality comprises 'modalities of our relation to the world that are not exhausted in the description of objects'. It 'refers to our many ways of belonging to the world before we oppose ourselves to things understood as "objects" that stand before a "subject"'.[13] It discloses ways of belonging to things and beings as much as ways in which we behave in relation to them. *Nondescriptive referentiality* inaugurates the possibility of a world *other* than that projected by the ego and its distinctions. It *reveals* the possibility of a being-in-the-world that does not espouse the appropriating intellect. The being-in-the-world or possible world disclosed by the narrative is experienced as an idea in the imagination. This idea is of a preconceptual nature in the sense that it is above all the revelation of a particular sensorial state. The possible world is experienced by the imagination as an idea of a state of being with a particular sensorial makeup, that is, an idea made up of particular sensations, sense-impressions, and even emotionality. It is the inspiring of a state of being that is imaginatively felt by the physical feelings and the emotions and imaginatively intuited by the senses. Its effect is thereby *quasi*-sensorial. An intellectual understanding is always incapable of exhausting this sentient meaningfulness. No cognitive interpretation does full justice to the sensorial character of a possible world. This mode of meaningfulness pertaining to sensibility always insinuates the possibility of other meanings, other ways of explaining it. It exceeds its intellectual comprehension and opens it to the suggestion of other interpretations.

This possible world pertains to that mode of meaningfulness we have described as the may-be. The may-be can indeed be experienced in all poetry, fiction, and

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[12] See 'Pastoral Praxeology, Hermeneutics, and Identity', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 220-3; 'Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics', trans. David Pellauer, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 313-4; 'Poetry', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, p. 452.
[13] 'Naming God', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* p. 222.

nonfiction narratives.[14]   For the icon narrative, more than any other narrative, the possible world that constitutes the may-be is the expression of some form of otherness in actuality. This otherness can be an individual or a collective, the divine, or an event related to the sacred.   The unknown and the alienating in this otherness, often threatening and disorienting for the subject, is redeemed by the narrative's possible world. An estranging otherness is redeemed to an empathic otherness. A way is offered to see the world through an other's consciousness, through the particular aura of a past incident.

The disclosure of the possible world means the same as when 'we speak of the Greek world, [when] we speak of the Roman world, that is to say, a horizon of possibilities which constitute an environment for people … where we could dwell'.[15] Through this prospect, the subject finds itself capable of understanding the actual world around it, even understanding itself, from a different state of being, a different perspective. It finds itself empowered to project its ownmost possibilities through an environment that is not a projection of its ego. Through this empathic move the subject can then directly realize such possibilities in the outside world. The partaking of understandings that are not one's own can motivate the subject to apply them to its actual world, to integrate the whole possible world into its customary perception of reality. Empathizing with the possible world presupposes the capacity to transfigure one's habitual ego-centred world. This is crucial if the narrative is to have any true ethical significance for the subject.[16]

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[14] 'Naming God', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 220-3; 'Metaphor', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 313-4; 'Poetry', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 452. Later on in this chapter I will further describe the may-be, especially that disclosed by an icon narrative, as constituted not only of one possible world but as also hinting at other alternative possible worlds. I will suggest that an icon narrative's may-be should be ideally made up of one principal possible world and several other possible worlds that are less distinct. I will discuss this in detail below on pp. 256-9. For the time being, I will sideline this characteristic in order to focus more on what defines a possible world.

[15] 'Poetry', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 453.

[16] 'Metaphor', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 314; 'Poetry', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 452-3; 'Naming God', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 222-3. Ricoeur takes his idea of the possible world from Aristotle's idea of *mimesis* in art as *poeisis* or productive activity, a re-creation. For Aristotle, 'far from producing a weakened image of pre-existing things, *mimesis* brings about an augmentation of meaning in the field of action […]. [I]t produces what it imitates […], a creative imitation' ('Mimesis and Representation', trans. David Pellauer, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, p. 138). What makes such an imitation a *poiesis*, moreover, 'is the activity of arranging incidents into a plot: the activity of emplotment that Aristotle calls *mythos* […]. The poet imitates or represents to the extent that he is a maker, a composer of plots. The three terms *poiesis*, *sustasis* (which can be substituted for *mythos*), and *mimesis* thus form a chain that has to do with *praxis*, where each term must be understood in terms of its relations to the others' ('Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 138-9).

Catharsis

A significant aspect of the sensorial empathy the possible world inspires in the subject is the redemption known as *catharsis*. This relates especially to narratives whose possible world seeks to capture experiences that might cause a very intense emotional response in the subject if undergone in actual life. Catharsis has to do with a narrative's expression of a phenomenon that can be traumatic or excessively disturbing to one's emotionality. This phenomenon can consist for instance of a suffering other, an other's death, or the otherness that pertains to the sacred.

Undergoing such subversive events in actuality can leave the subject incapable of *effectively* interpreting them, that is, understand them in a just, prudent, and moral manner, understand them in a manner that will further its self-development. They can therefore disempower the subject of subsequent *productive* action correlating with the right understanding of that otherness. As Kearney indicates in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* the shock or horror such events can arouse in the subject can leave it incapable of reconciling itself with them, incapable of acting effectively in relation to them, and move on with its life. Unable to truly extricate itself from the severe shock of the event, repressing its distress, the subject can henceforth find itself unable to extricate itself from certain obsessional repetitions of that event. It can find itself reliving consciously and unconsciously in thought and action that past moment. This often incites a sense of fatalism in one's perceptions and actions which can easily lead to despair.[17] The narrative can be therapeutic in this regard through the invocation of the possible world and its empathic function.

The narrative's possible world would here be a *recapturing* of the traumatic events of actual life. Through the narrative's artistic recreation, the subject is able to re-experience (or experience) otherness and yet remain at a safe distance from its otherwise violent and harmful effects. The narrative's empathic function enables the subject to emotionally experience the phenomenon of otherness but through a position

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[17] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 103-4.

of spectatorship, in a manner that does not destabilize that subject's sense of self. In *On Stories*, Kearney indicates that

> dramatised stories could offer us the freedom to behold all kinds of unpalatable and unliveable events, which by being narrated have some of the harm removed […]. [T]he very contrivance and artifice of *mimesis* detaches us from the action unfolding before us, affording us sufficient distance to grasp the meaning of it all.[18]

This is what happens when we empathize with King Lear's misery and hardships, with Macbeth's ambitious yet distressed mind, or with the heroes' extreme sufferings in Greek tragic plays   Catharsis is the redemption of a dispossessing emotional response into a relatively more temperate emotional response. Very often, such redeeming emotions have to do with awe and fear as well as pity.

> [Catharsis] provokes a certain 'awe' (*phobos*) before the workings of fate. It is what we experience in *Oedipus Rex* when we learn the true meaning of the riddle of the Sphinx, or in *Hamlet* when we register the Prince's discovery that there is a 'divinity that shapes our ends' […]. Cathartic awe stops us in our tracks, throws us off kilter, deworlds us. The Greeks identified this with the detachment of Olympian deities, enabling us to see through things, however troubling or terrible, to their inner or ultimate meaning […]. As well as being distanced, we need to be sufficiently *involved* in the action to feel that it matters. Catharsis, as noted, purges us by *pity* as well as fear […]. By pity (*eleos*) the Greeks understood the ability to suffer with others (*sym-pathein*) […]. If we read *Oedipus Rex*, we experience what it is like to be a Greek who murders his father and marries his mother. If we read *Anna Karenina*, we experience the tragic fate of a passionate woman in nineteenth-century Russia.[19]

Through awe, fear, and pity, narrative empathy with otherness enables that discharge of emotions necessary for the disempowering element of actual otherness to turn into an empowering of subjectivity. Catharsis redeems through emotions that allow for both involvement and detachment. It is a 'work of mourning' that emotionally allows and acknowledges the suffering of otherness – the other's death or sickness, one's despair or ennui – but *in doing so* it also re-endows a certain degree of esteem and faith in the self.[20]

The response catharsis brings about predisposes the self to sever its possible recalcitrant emotional and intellectual attachments to an experience of otherness, its

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[18] Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 137-8.
[19] Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 138-9.
[20] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 103-4.

enslavement to a paralyzing obsession. It enables enough distance or freedom for the subject to then criticize otherness through a practical understanding and perhaps even a theoretical-conceptual understanding. In provoking this intelligibility, catharsis 'turns *passive lament* into possibilities of *active complaint* […], paralysis into protest'.[21] The suffering of the sacred is thus made resistible, the other and its condition reconcilable. A present lived through the obsessive repetition of the past is turned into the openness of a future of new possibilities. 'What the catharsis of mourning narrative allows is the realization that new actions are still possible *in spite of evil suffered*.'[22]

Phronetic Understanding

Catharsis leads to an understanding of otherness that is practical or *phronetic*.[23] This belongs to the verbal and thought-related level of the narrative's presentation of the possible world. Cathartic redemption orients otherness to an empathic emotionality that empowers the self. Phronetic redemption orients otherness to an intelligibility geared towards just, prudent, and moral action. The detachment intrinsic to catharsis's mode of emotional impression allows enough freedom or room for phronetic deliberation to operate. On the other hand, the emotional involvement intrinsic to catharsis gives such deliberation an exigency and import that would not be felt if the narrative were devoid of the cathartic form of redemption. Phronetic understanding thus depends upon the narrative's emotional impression for its effectuation. It is because of this basic impression that the phronetic perception can effectively function. This form of knowledge can also be seen as an intellectual manifestation of the sensorial state of being the narrative is evoking. It is entirely a reference to the sensorial possible in the sense that it is a definition of it through the medium of practical intelligibility.

Phronetic understanding advocates an ethical stance in relation to the otherness the narrative is referring to. Kearney points out that a story, '[f]ar from being ethically

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[21] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 104. See Paul Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting', in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. Richard Kearney, Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 5-12.

[22] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 104.

[23] Phronetic understanding is a significant component in Ricoeur's and Kearney's narrative hermeneutics. The idea is taken mainly from Aristotle's notion of 'practical wisdom' or *phronesis*. In *Strangers, Gods and Monsters,* Kearney mentions other sources, namely, biblical 'wisdom' and Kant's 'reflective judgement'. See 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 144; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 427-9; Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 143-4; Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 100-1.

neutral […], seeks to persuade us one way or another about the evaluative character of its actors and their actions'.[24] The ethical lessons of practical understanding are often the most compelling and effectual for the subject through a knowledge revealed through the narrative's plotline.   Phronetic understanding about a possible world is here disclosed through the very development of the events and actions of the plot.[25] Binding the diverse events of a narrative is a certain logic that instructs the subject how to perceive otherness in a meaningfully practical way. This understanding helps us see

> connections between the ethical aspects of human conduct and fortune/misfortune. Literary and artistic expressions can dramatically illustrate how reversals of fortune result from a specific kind of behaviour, as this is re-enacted by a plot. It is thanks to our familiarity with the particular types of emplotment, inherited from our culture or civilization, that we may come to better relate virtues, or forms of excellence, with happiness or misfortune. These 'lessons' of poetry, as Ricoeur calls them, constitute the 'universals' of which Aristotle spoke, and which we might call approximate or quasi universals since they operate at a lower degree than the abstract universals of purely theoretical thought and logic.[26]

Phronetic understanding redeems through the eliciting of a practical intelligibility that does not pretend to an absolute comprehension of otherness; it does not seek to reduce it to certain incontestable universals. It is a reasoning that is not an exact or adequate judgement, but one grasped by the *sensus communis*. Driven by moral justice, it engages with a particular alterity and yet does not admit being that alterity's conclusive interpretation. Its truths are thereby quasi-universals. This form of redemption respects the singularity of otherness because its knowledge, rather than being theoretical or conceptual, is practical. It perceives otherness as a source of motivation for an understanding focused on 'a future-oriented praxis'.[27] Phronetic redemption does not focus on comprehending otherness but rather focuses on what can be done in the face of that otherness. It proposes possible tasks for the subject to undertake. Before otherness, it reveals various 'lessons' from which moral-political action must proceed.[28]

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[24] Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 155-6.
[25] See 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 144-5; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 427-9.
[26] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 101-2. See Paul Ricoeur, 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*, ed. David Wood (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 23.
[27] Kearney, *Strangers*, p. 101.
[28] See Kearney, *Strangers,* pp. 101-2.

If the otherness in question pertains to an icon, phronetic understanding perceives it as an irreducible otherness one must act *through* and *for* so that an ethical praxis can take place. If this otherness pertains to an experience of the sacred, phronetic understanding perceives it as an irreducible otherness one must act *against* for an ethical praxis to take place. Rather than disclosing a knowledge that *resolves* the aporia of the sacred, phronetic redemption discloses a knowledge that is a *response* to it, an active contestation of it. The sacred remains inscrutable and yet it becomes a productive source. Its inscrutability becomes a soliciting for a certain practical-ethical judgement that can motivate the corresponding action.

Hope and Pardon

The joint effect of catharsis and phronetic understanding stimulates in turn such forms of redemption as *hope*. The emotional working-through, together with the suggestions of a practical understanding, open up hope for a better world where the otherness described by the narrative has been reconciled with the subject. Hope, a form of redemption found in many narratives, is an experience that incorporates both the emotional and intellectual capacities of the subject. Like the other forms of redemption, hope can be seen as another designation of the narrative's possible world. In resulting from and including within it the two other types of redemption, however, the experience of hope presupposes a more holistic vision of the possible world. Hope operates through and entails a very comprehensive perspective of the possible world the narrative is intimating.

Narrative hope includes within it other types of redemption because it is always a hope for a world both felt and (to a certain extent) phronetically understood. This world is the eschatological kingdom.[29] The experience of hope in various narratives, and above all, the icon narratives, is ultimately always a version of a hope for the eschatological kingdom. What is aspired to, in other words, is always a world of reciprocated love, hope, and faith in the other, a 'universal culture of singularities'.[30]

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[29] See 'In Indecision, By Indecision I Will Decide', pp. 196-9, for a detailed phenomenological description of the eschatological kingdom.
[30] Quoted and translated by Kearney, *May Be,* p. 110, from Derrida, 'Foi', in *La Religion*, p. 28.

The kingdom is always 'a creation *for* the other, *on behalf* of the other'.[31] A yearning is revealed in the narrative to realize this kingdom in actual life through its possible world. In truth, a possible world, its various forms of presentation, can be seen as the narrative's *particular* envisaging of the kingdom. All possible worlds are different facets of the same kingdom. They are perspectives proposed to the subject for application in actual life. Every possible world suggested is the narrative's attempt at bringing us one step closer in application to the fulfilment of the kingdom.

The principal function of hope in narratives is to liberate the subject from set ways of perceiving itself and its world. Hope loosens one's fixed interpretive ties to the past. Fictional worlds, in setting up states of being that are different from the subject's, instigate a questioning and perhaps a modification or correction to such understandings and values that had previously been thought indisputable or absolute by that subject. These include the subject's self-interpretation and its interpretation of the other. In historical or historical fiction narratives, it can also include the self-interpretation of a community and its other. Narratives have the potential to inaugurate new ways with regard to how these two opposing domains can perceive themselves.

This kind of re-evaluation can often be found in narratives that reinterpret historical events where people of a certain identity inflict suffering on others: the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, 9/11. Intrinsic to these narratives should be a reassessment of the identities that each conflicting party perceives in itself and in its other. 'Historical communities', Kearney points out, 'are constituted by the stories they recount to themselves and to others. Hence the importance of the rectifications that contemporary historians bring to the historical accounts of their predecessors'.[32] This is significant because blind belief in certain past truth-values can lead to prejudice, ostracism, and violence.

Narratives that reappraise the identities of historical communities that have been persecutors or that have been victims of persecution can inspire a redemption of *pardon* as well as of hope. Pardon, like hope, integrates cathartic and phronetic redemption within its dynamics. Both pardon and hope work through an awareness of the narrative construction behind a subject's or a community's self-understanding, the understanding

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[31] Kearney, *May Be,* p. 110. The eschatological kingdom is not affiliated to any religious dogma and its invocation in the narrative need not include the divine.

[32] Kearney, 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', in *Ethics*, p. 26.

of its other, its understanding of the past.[33] They do so because they admit to the constant need for reinterpretation for the achievement of a true ethical interaction. As Kearney insists,

> [o]nce one recognises that one's identity is fundamentally narrative in character, one discovers an ineradicable openness and indeterminacy at the root of one's collective memory. Each nation, state or *societas* discovers that it is at heart an 'imagined community' (in Benedict Anderson's phrase), that is, a narrative construction to be reinvented and reconstructed again and again. After such discovery of one's narrative identity, it is more difficult to make the mistake of taking oneself *literally*, of assuming that one's collective identity *goes without saying*. This is why, at least in principle, the tendency of a nation towards xenophobic or insular nationalism can be resisted by its own narrative resources to imagine itself otherwise – either through its own eyes or those of others.[34]

Narratives arouse forgiveness and hope also in relation to the foreignness that an other presents for the subject or community. Some others can be more estranging, more different and difficult to understand than others. Their ways of thinking, their culture, their actions, can seem strange, affronting, even threatening to the subject. This is also true for an other that happens to be a perpetrator of suffering in the past or in the present. Persecutor and persecuted, the other can sometimes seem too incomprehensible, too much of a stranger for the subject to find any incentive at some form of communication. We see this in the case of certain indigenous tribes and communities, for instance in Australia, or various Muslim peoples in whose regard the West sometimes still behaves intolerantly. Through the possibilities of meaning suggested by narratives, the extent of the other's inscrutability becomes a source of empathy for the subject. This helps the subject forgive that other for any past transgressions that other might have committed against it. It helps one hope for a relationship of a better understanding between the two parties. Hope can operate also in narratives that seek to designate the alterity of events related to the sacred.

Pardon and hope redeem a sense of past irrevocability that pertains to either an interpretation or a noninterpretation of otherness. They open this irrevocability to an

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[33] Pardon is found more often in historical or historical fiction narratives. Hope, on the other hand, is also found in fiction narratives. One must also not forget the self-constancy in the subject's selfhood as mentioned above on pp. 230-4. If the subject's self is constituted of interpretative narratives, a part of it must also be a '*writer*' and '*reader*' of such narratives, and this constitutes the irreducible aspect of self-constancy. The self-constancy and the narrativity of the self, though in inseparable interaction with each other, can be seen as two different though related aspects of the same self. A sense of sameness is intrinsic to any selfhood, whose role is to interpret its self, the world, and the other through narratives, to see itself through such narratives. See Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* pp. 181-2.

[34] Kearney, 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', in *Ethics,* p. 26.

unprecedented possible world with its possible meanings (practical and sometimes even theoretical) that speaks in the name of a more compassionate future.[35] This possible world is part of and opens upon the horizon of the eschatological kingdom whose infinite possibles go beyond the experience of this possible world. It partakes of and alludes to a transcendent, ethical meaningfulness, the may-be of the kingdom.

The redemption of pardon and hope is an inauguration of the possible *in spite of* all evidence to the contrary in the actual world. Cathartic and phronetic redemption also share this crucial dynamic. The lucidity, the seriousness, the determination of pardon and hope is derived from the contrary nature of otherness – as interpreted or as noninterpreted – the intense adversity it presents.[36] Hope cannot exist without uncertainty, without hopelessness. Pardon cannot exist without egotist ways of seeing the other, the infliction of suffering this often leads to. The sense of the irreversible, the Never, that the sacred and sometimes the icon emit, is transfigured through the narrative's pardon and hope, to the 'marvel of a once again'.[37] What seems to be an 'abundance of senselessness, of failure, and of destruction' in actual life is opened to a '"superabundance" of meaning', the world of the may-be.[38]

Hope opens the Never to 'the mark of the future – of the "not yet" and of the "much more" […]'. '[H]ope', Ricoeur remarks, 'makes of freedom the passion for the possible against the sad meditation on the irrevocable'.[39] Likewise, '[t]o forgive is basically to be liberated from the burden of the past, to be untied or unbound […]'.[40] Through hope and pardon, memory is given a transcendent future, the future of the kingdom.

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[35] On the theme of forgiveness, see Ricoeur, 'Reflections on a new ethos for Europe', in *Hermeneutics*, pp. 9-11.

[36] 'Hope', in Ricoeur, *Sacred*, pp. 205-7.

[37] William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic: Speculation, Cult and Comedy* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 238-9.

[38] 'Hope', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* p. 206.

[39] 'Hope', in Ricoeur, *Sacred*, p. 206.

[40] Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting', in *Ethics,* p. 10.

III

Dialectics of Redemption
in the Icon Narrative

The Metaphor Dialectic

The forms of redemption intrinsic to the narrative (and icon narrative) together with the process of redemption seen as a phenomenological interaction between self and other, can be described through a particular dynamic which we must now focus on. This dynamic is expressed through Ricoeur's notion of the *metaphor dialectic*. The metaphor functions through a dialectic that can be seen to operate in the narrative in its transformation of one's perceptions of actuality through its possible world.[41]

The metaphor is created through a clash of semantic fields or a deviancy in the use of predicates. Ricoeur illustrates this through examples such as 'man is a wolf' or 'time is a beggar'. A semantic tension is provoked by the unusual allocation of predicates. Man and time are not usually considered to be a wolf and a beggar or to be in any way related to them.[42] The tension created, however, stimulates in turn the

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[41] This particular dialectical view of the metaphor has also been indicated by writers such as I. A. Richards, Max Black, Colin M. Turbayne, Monroe Beardsley, Douglas Berggren, and others. Their observations on the metaphor depart from the tradition of rhetoric which presents the metaphor as a figure of speech carrying no information; appearing as a stylistic ornament whose only role is to please. Many of these thinkers also suggest that the narrative as a whole functions in the same manner as the metaphor dialectic. In his works, Ricoeur often acknowledges their significance and influence on his own thought on the metaphor and the narrative.

[42] For thinkers such as Richards, Black, and Beardsley, the metaphorical meaning of a word is brought about in specific contexts where it is opposed to the literal meanings of other words. Richards and Black present the metaphor as the site of a semantic tension between a tenor and a vehicle, between a focus and a frame, between a word and the sentence in which it is posited. Beardsley likewise perceives the metaphor as constituted by a procedure of self-contradiction, what he calls the 'metaphorical twist' (see I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964); Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962); Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1958)). By the

subject's imagination to reconcile this very tension. The metaphor inspires an *imaginary schema* that resolves the semantic incongruity. Similar to the possible world's most basic type of impression upon the subject, this schema or harmonizing mental impression is before anything else quasi-sensorial. The metaphor's eccentric verbal construction stimulates the imagination with a unifying idea disclosing a particular sensorial state. Next to the possible world's impression, however, this idea is usually relatively much more distinct or well-defined to the imaginary senses, sensations, and emotions. It is more concrete to the imagination though its concreteness is irreducible to conceptual thought in being of a quasi-sensorial nature. This quasi-sensorial distinctiveness makes of it *an image*.[43]

If the image aroused by the metaphor is a reconciliation of what one perceives to be as invariably dissimilar – man is a wolf, time is a beggar – then it is making possible a novel way of seeing and understanding the world and oneself. A metaphor can be perceived as a miniature process of the narrative in its quasi-sensorial invocation of a possible world. Significantly, this invocation takes place through a dialectical process. For Ricoeur, the metaphor operates through the dialectic of two different levels of perception. *On the one hand* is the verbal level, the level of literal predication or customary significance, where the meanings of certain semantic fields are in conflict. *On the other hand* is the nonverbal and sensorial intuition of likeness affected by the imagination. The metaphor functions through an *interaction* between these two levels of effectuation. The semantic level carries an irreconcilable discordance. *At the same time*, however, this is reconciled on another level, the imaginary level. Discordance and concordance remain dissimilar in nature in belonging to two divergent levels of meaning. And yet, through the phenomenon of the metaphor, they are *assimilated*. Discordance on one plane and concordance on another are integrated.[44]

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same token, Turbayne rightly compares the dynamic of the metaphor with what Gilbert Ryle calls a 'category mistake', which is a mislocation of names and of predicates (see Colin M. Turbayne, *Myth of Metaphor* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989)).

[43] 'Word, Polysemy, Metaphor: Creativity in Language', trans. David Pellauer, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 76-8, 82; 'The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality', trans. David Peallauer, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 123-5; Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, John B. Thompson (London: Athleen Press, 1991), pp. 172-4.

[44] 'Word', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 78-3; 'Fiction', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 125-6, 134. Implicit in Ricoeur's view of the imagination here is Emmanuel Kant's theory of schematism and the productive imagination. For Kant, the imagination is a site of emergent new categories and meanings (see 'Word', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 82; 'Fiction', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 126; Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), p. 182). Like Ricoeur, Berggren for instance maintains that the metaphor operates on a dialectical level of conflict and reconciliation. For him, 'the indispensable principle for integrating diverse phenomena without sacrificing diversity' can be

Ricoeur describes the simultaneity of the semantic level and the imaginative level in the metaphor dialectic as a '*seeing as ...*' The metaphor makes possible ways of seeing things in another manner than through the manner we see them in ordinary discourse. It proposes an alternative to what ordinary discourse refers to.[45] The use of ordinary discourse refers to our quotidian, pre-established way of seeing things, which is very often ego-centric and thematizing. It presupposes also phenomena that cannot be reduced to its logic when experienced. In other words, it presupposes the forms of otherness that persistently disrupt its attitude. In referring to our commonplace view of things, ordinary discourse also refers to what does not make sense for this view, the otherness that disorients it. All this, however, is swept aside from the perspective of the meaning aroused on the metaphor's imaginary level. In this regard, the metaphor has the role of the *analogue*.

An analogue proposes an altogether new sense to something. It proposes a way of seeing some element in the familiar world *as* something else. Man is seen as a wolf. Time is seen as a beggar. Metaphorical language is analogous because it is a language that *stands for* the quotidian perception and its undermining alterities. It stands for this attitude through that mode of signification called the may-be. In doing so, it transfigures our preconceived ideas of actuality. It transfigures, that is, and yet lets the quotidian perception remain in effect. Intrinsic to the metaphor dialectic is the integration of two levels of perception: the actual, or what we consider to be the actual, and the possible.[46] Likewise but on a larger scale, the narrative itself as a whole can be seen as the metaphor or the analogue of some component of actuality. Through the

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found in the metaphor (cited by 'Word', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 81). Moreover, Goodman describes the metaphor as operating through 'the reassignment of a label' (cited by 'Word', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 80). This reassignment is brought about through an interaction between a predicate which has a past and an object that paradoxically yields while protesting (see Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976)).

[45] 'Imagination in Discourse and in Action', in Ricoeur, *Text to Action,* pp. 172-3; 'Word', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 83-5; 'Fiction', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 127-31.

[46] Black, together with Beardsley, also perceives the metaphor as evoking an emergent meaning through its dialectical dynamic. It entails a process that involves the 'system of associated commonplaces' or the 'potential range of connotations' attached to the predicate words ('Metaphor', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 309). These are applied in a new way to the main subject of the sentence, thus attributing an innovative significance to it. The metaphor's role as an analogue can be further seen in Black's *Models and Metaphors*. Here, it is described as taking the role of a model. A model functions by perceiving an unknown or a lesser-known object in the light of a more familiar one through a similarity of structure. This is similar to Aristotle's claims in *The Art of Poetry*. For Aristotle, 'to be good at metaphor is to be intuitively aware of hidden resemblances' (Aristotle, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. Philip Wheelwright (New York: Odyssey Press, 1951), p. 137). The *similarity* postulated in a metaphor is the awareness of an identity in things which are different from each other. The subject is thereby revealed through a new meaning.

sensory ambience of its possible world, the narrative stands for reality and in turn transfigures that reality.[47]

The Metaphor as a Model for Narrative Dialectics

I will recapitulate what has just been discussed. The metaphor dialectic is constituted by the interaction of two polarities. On the one hand, it is constituted by the subject's preconceived way of perceiving the world, which also suggests those phenomena that subvert such a perception. On the other hand, it is constituted by a novel sensorial form of perception. The metaphor is an interplay between customary understandings of actuality or the otherness that disrupts them, *and* their substitution by an imaginative identification. This particular dialectic does not operate only on a tropological level in a narrative (if this is textual). It can be seen to operate in all the strategies of redemption in a narrative. Any form of narrative redemption presupposes the dialectical process of these two polarities constituting the metaphor phenomenon.[48]

On a more general level, the metaphor dialectic can be seen as two opposing elements in discordance with each other *and yet* in concordance with each other. Every strategy of redemption discloses the ineffable *coincidence* of separation and unification. The infinite difference of two elements is here also their inexplicable reconciliation.

As already indicated, one can also perceive the phenomenological dynamics of self and other through this dialectic. Again, in the ethical event, the subject's persona is a matrix for two incompatible domains that are also at the same time assimilated. On

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[47] See for instance 'Narrated Time', trans. Robert Sweeney, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 347-50; Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* p. 177.

[48] As already pointed out above on p. 241, even phronetic redemption depends upon and refers to the sensorial redemption for its functioning. It presupposes the sensorial possible before it can effectively operate. In any narrative, the sensorial redemption is more basic and essential than any form of redemption. The idea of an artistic work operating in the same way as a metaphor can be seen for instance in thinkers such as Aristotle, Beardsley, and Bachelard (see Gaston Bachelard, *Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969)). Metaphor, Beardsley claims, is 'a poem in miniature' (cited by 'Metaphor', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 316). In Aristotle's *Poetics,* Ricoeur points out, the metaphor is related to the *mimesis* of the literary work as a whole because both function in the same manner. *Mimesis* entails the work's 'productive reference' ('Fiction', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 121), its disclosure of a possible world. Metaphor derives its effect from *mimesis*. A mutual connection and affinity exists between the project of the work as a whole to inaugurate a possible world and the process of metaphor as an emerging meaning ('Metaphor', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 316-8).

the one hand, it is the site of a conflict between selfhood, its interpretations, *and* otherness, its possibles. On the other hand, it is also the site of their assimilation.

I will now be designating the narrative's redemption techniques from the perspective of the metaphor dialectic. Whereas earlier I described some significant ways as to how the narrative and icon narrative redeem otherness, in what follows I will disclose a few of the forms of redemption particular to an icon narrative in more detail and from the viewpoint of the metaphor phenomenon. In doing so, I believe that further elucidation and insight can be drawn from these redeeming strategies. This will help illustrate the manner by which the redeeming process in general works in the ethical experience.

The descriptions that follow are again borrowed in part from Ricoeur's versions in relation to the standard narrative. The reason for this loose connection is owing to the fact that an icon narrative should more or less exhibit the same redeeming strategies as any other narrative, though with a difference. These strategies are here *radicalized* and their effect is thus more augmented. If the icon narrative is to be an effective metaphor for otherness, it must operate through the accentuation or intensification of certain traits found in any common narrative. Thereby, their effect would be more convincing and inspiring to the imagination and thought. This, of course, does not mean that such accentuated traits are not to be found in various other narratives. As has already been suggested, many narratives share a number of such features with the icon narrative.

An icon narrative should be constituted by all the strategies of redemption that are discussed below. Any narrative that has all such qualities can be considered an icon narrative.

The Expected Emplotment and Innovative Emplotment Dialectic

An important component of the icon narrative's overall transfiguring effect on actuality is the expected emplotment and innovative emplotment dialectic. 'Emplotment', a term often used by Ricoeur and Kearney, refers to 'the activity of arranging incidents into a plot'.[49] The expected emplotment in a plot utilizes the

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[49] 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* p. 138.

subject's *a priori* knowledge of various other plotlines learned from a practical wisdom of everyday life. An understanding of the narrative relies on stories based on the subject's pre-established phronetic intelligence, stories that give voice to such an intelligence. As well as being learnt from the community's shared sense of practical wisdom and its ideas of the commonsensical, such plot formulas can also be learnt for instance from a knowledge of traditional stories such as folktales, fairytales, and religious stories, and through everyday experience and events. They produce and enhance practical wisdom as well as articulating it. A very general and popular pattern of such plotlines would be the following up of ethical conduct by rewarding consequences and the following up of unethical conduct by misfortune.[50]

What an icon narrative's emplotment does is to suggest these presupposed conventional plots in order to present alternate ways of looking at them and the practical wisdom they illuminate. It refers to them so that it can bring about an innovation in its own emplotment. Various typical plot structures and the phronetic wisdom they disclose are inferred so that an innovation in the narrative's emplotment can be brought about. Emplotment in an icon narrative is ultimately an experimentation of other already established plotlines. This can be enacted through the creative or original formulation of these same plot structures. A conventional plot in this regard would be narrated in a novel way. In other words, a certain amount of the narrative techniques utilized for a conventional plot are broken. The storyline remains the same though the manner of its expression is changed. What is innovative in emplotment can also function through a breaking away from the prefigured storyline itself. Literally, a new form of emplotment is instituted that differentiates itself by various degrees from the conventional ones it is based on.[51]

The altered delivery of an already existent emplotment and the transgression of an existent emplotment have two principal effects on the subject. The first technique especially functions to re-accentuate and intensify the practical wisdom that had been signified by that plot which the icon narrative is innovatively expressing. Bringing that plotline's message closer to the subject's attention can make it more convincing and meaningful for that subject. This can also be the purpose of a new form of emplotment.

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[50] See also 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 140-3; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 432-5; Kearney, *Stories*, pp. 129-31.

[51] See also 'Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 239-41; 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 146-9; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 429-30; 'Language', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 470-1.

The effect here is often more radical. By transgressing a standard plotline, different ideas and ideals or a different practical wisdom are promoted. A more effective and authentic way of interpreting the world and its events is disclosed. Perhaps the knowledge gained is more relevant to the subject's times and culture, and thus more personal and significant for it. This practical wisdom inaugurated is often on some level at odds with that endorsed in a conventional plotline. In truth, such a type of innovation can be seen as its rectification. This function can also sometimes be found in the original delivery of a plot.[52]

Intrinsic to the functioning of the expected emplotment and the innovative emplotment dialectic is the sense of differentiation brought about between the polarities. An icon narrative should produce this feeling of divergence between the presupposed and the novel. *At the same time*, however, a sense of *continuity* is also produced between the two polarities. The innovative plotline is based on pre-established ones. It is made up of pre-established patterns that have been transformed. It cannot be innovative if there are no presupposed patterns from which it can distinguish itself. By the same token, the reference or reminding of typical plotlines is undertaken so that their innovation can take place. The expected is suggested in order to bring about its innovation. There is thus a coinciding of the expected emplotment and the innovative emplotment.[53]

Engaging with an icon narrative, therefore, should entail the experience of a dissociation of the innovative plot from a pre-established plot (or plots) *and* their necessary concurrence. It effectuates this assimilation of difference and synthesis. In this way, a practical understanding of an otherness is emphasized, rendered more effective and persuasive, or questioned before a different practical understanding.

The Illumination and Illustration Dialectic

Another significant redeeming strategy is the illumination and illustration dialectic. Illumination is that aspect of the narrative that expresses otherness

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[52] See 'Narrative Theology', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 239-41; 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 146-9; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 429-30; 'Language', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 470-1.

[53] See 'Narrative Theology', in Ricoeur, *Sacred,* pp. 239-41; 'Mimesis', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 146-9; 'Life', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 429-30; 'Language', in Ricoeur, *Reader,* pp. 470-1; 'Poetry', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 458-9.

intellectually. It designates otherness through an objective explanation that includes concepts, distinctions, information, and facts.[54] Illumination ranges from any detached and neutral fictional report of an event or a person to the more scientific empirical report found in the historical narrative with its facts and figures. It aims at rethinking rather than reliving that otherness through language. This involves the customary use of language as *descriptive,* that is, as ratifying the ego's perception of the world through objectification and thematization.[55]

Illustration concerns the *nondescriptive* use of language. While illumination explains, illustration *evokes*. Illustrative language functions as an aesthetic of representation, a means to invoke a sensorial state of being which can be a past or fictional event or person. It is an imaginative way of using language to inspire the subject's imaginative sensorial empathy with an otherness. Empathy is achieved through the deployment of fictional strategies in order to make otherness visible and felt *as if* it was present, *as if* we were experiencing it or living it. Illustrative language thus borders on the poetical through the frequent use of tropes. In transporting the subject into an alien psychic life or event, illustrative language gives the subject impetus to act in actual life in relation to that otherness which it is conveying.[56] Phronetic understanding, in this regard, constitutes a transition-point between illumination and illustration. Its mode of understanding is of an intellectual kind but yet its effectuation relies upon and seeks to refer itself to the sensorial possible world. One can say, therefore, that the expected emplotment and innovative emplotment dialectic of phronetic understanding belongs partially to the illumination polarity and partially to the illustration polarity.

The illumination and illustration dialectic entails a dichotomy between explanation, which 'seeks to connect things together and see disparate events as part of a larger cohesive pattern', and evocation, which 'is more responsive to the incomparable nature of events; it endeavors to isolate their singularity from sanitizing homogenization

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[54] The expression of otherness through information and facts pertains especially to historical or historical fiction icon narratives where the aspect of illumination is the most salient.

[55] Kearney, 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', in *Ethics,* p. 30.

[56] Kearney, 'Narrative and the Ethics of Remembrance', in *Ethics,* p. 30; Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* pp. 177-81. Kearney remarks that the illustration element in historical narratives should move towards 'a *felt* reliving of past suffering, injustice, or horror *as if* we were there'. In such cases, 'the refigurative powers of narrative imagination prevent abstract historiography from neutralizing injustice or explaining things away' (Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics*, p. 179).

[…]'.[57] Alterity is, on the one hand, homogenized through the ego logic of descriptive language, and on the other hand, it is singularized through the particular sensorial and emotional qualities it is given by nondescriptive language. Despite the divergence of these two elements, an icon narrative cannot prioritize or exclude one from another. Referring to historical narratives, Ricoeur insists that the conflict of these two modes of language must not lead to a 'ruinous dichotomy between a history that would dissolve the event in explanation and a purely emotional retort that would dispense us from thinking the unthinkable'.[58]

Explanation and evocation must be used to abet each other. Sensorial empathy must give rise to thought in the attempt to intellectually understand the empathized otherness. A critical distance must be carried out allowing one to better discern and distinguish the nature of the otherness in question. Otherwise the narrative would fail to instruct on possible ways how an otherness can be realized in the world of action. It would fail to instruct on how to act in a just and prudent manner in relation to the otherness it is illustrating. Without practical, informative, and theoretical explanations, the icon narrative can end up evoking an abstract world of emotions, even a dreamworld, which the subject can easily use to distract itself or escape from everyday reality. Conversely, thought in an icon narrative must give rise to sensorial empathy.[59] Otherwise the narrative may 'risk becoming an idle game of curious exotica or, worse, a value-neutral positivism of dead facts. Such outcomes are not ethically permissible'.[60] Again, a narrative's concentration on the element of illumination can easily result in a failure to motivate any ethical action in actuality.

An icon narrative can consist of sections whose function is to explain only or to evoke only. However, the larger part of an icon narrative should affect the subject with a *simultaneity* of these two functions. It should above all be constituted by a language that both explains and evokes. *Despite* the divergent natures of illumination and illustration, a significant part of an icon narrative should disclose their simultaneous effect. Through an icon narrative, the subject should experience their synthesis *in spite*

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[57] Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics*, p. 180.
[58] Cited by Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics*, p. 180, from Richard Wolin, *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 188.
[59] See Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* pp. 178-81.
[60] Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* pp. 180-1.

of their difference. In other words, it should experience a synthesis that *coincides with* difference. 'In spite of' presupposes difference as well as synthesis.[61]

This dialectic can be achieved efficiently through a language whose mode belongs *principally*, and therefore not exclusively, to either the illumination or the illustration polarity. In any part of an icon narrative, the language can largely pertain to one mode, the explanatory or the illustrative, and yet through this same mode the effect of the other would also be intimated. This effect can usually be subsidiary and discreet in comparison with that conveyed by the language's predominant mode. What is significant, regardless of their degrees of effect, is that the icon narrative's explanatory language stimulate also evocation while its evocative language stimulate also explanation. Moreover, equal importance and space should be allotted to both explanation and evocation respectively as principal modes of the narrative's language. The narrative's language should approximately be principally characterized by both modes in equal measure.

The Closure and Opening Dialectic

The disclosure of only one possible world in an icon narrative can easily entail the subject's gradual confidence, even overconfidence, of that narrative's interpretation, especially on a second and third experiencing. The subject can start taking for granted its understanding of the narrative and can become in this respect almost passive and complacent in relation to its message. What is unfamiliar becomes familiar and the narrative would then cease to have any subversive effect on the subject's prefigured way of perceiving actuality. Taken for granted, the narrative's particular refiguring through a possible world can easily turn to a prefiguring; the unexpected can turn into the expected.

This can lead the subject to *confuse* otherness with the possible world that is representative of it. It can lead to a forgetting of the fact that the possible world is also meant to be a *fictional* substitute or *one possible* substitute for what is ultimately always outside the subject's interpretative horizons. It can also predispose one to ignore the fact that this same possible world is the product of the narrative's particular point of

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[61] See Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics*, pp. 178-81.

view together with its style and genre. To settle unquestioningly for one understanding of an otherness, to be unaware of the limitations of such an understanding and of the need to always leave it open to further rectification, is to be blind to the irreducible singularity of that otherness, that otherness as also always foreign to subjectivity. It is precisely the nature of such a self-assured belief that eventually produces the other as 'the one who is not being heard, who is silenced, victimized by the existing structures'.[62] Prejudice, arrogance, complacency, and the marginalization of other others are such possible consequences of an individual or a structure whose decisions it conceives as indisputably righteous or infallible.

If it is to inspire the optimal ethical outcome on its subjects, an icon narrative must promote a belief in the illusion of its possible world *while also* drawing attention to its limitations or insufficiency. It must uphold and convince one of a possible world while at once undermining such an endorsement. A possible world must be promoted at the same time as its shortcomings must be indicated. These shortcomings can include this possible world's blindness to other aspects of the otherness it is representing or the intimation of aspects of this possible world that are ethically dubious. Through the coincidence of advocating and criticizing, the subject is reminded of the unending struggle to ever do justice to the singularity of the otherness the narrative is referring to. The narrative's perceptions of otherness must thus be at once irresistible and untenable. It should 'combine strategies of presence *and* distance, belief *and* disbelief, engagement *and* estrangement, to produce a proper balance of "controlled illusion"'.[63]

The narrative can undermine the esteem and persuasion it endows its possible world with in various ways. The phronetic understanding and perhaps the intellectual understanding defining this possible world can sometimes be expressly criticized by the narrative itself through, for instance, the remarks of the narrator or author, or through other characters. At other times, the narrative can intentionally disclose the ethically suspect side to its designations of a possible from an uncritical perspective. It can deliberately indicate, even emphasize its flawed ethical thinking without commenting about it. (The fictional strategy of the fallible narrator, for instance, is sometimes used to bring this about.) Through this strategy, a character's actions and ways of thinking

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[62] 'Discussion', in Kearney, 'Desire of God', in *God,* p. 131.

[63] Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics*, p. 179; quoting from Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey, David Pellauer, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 186. See also 'Between the Text and Its Readers', trans. K. McLaughlin, David Pellauer, in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 402-4.

expressing its possible world reveal themselves, as if on their own, as being inherently defective and finally, perhaps, on some level, harmful to such a character and to those around it. The phronetic and theoretical limitations can be exposed through those developments and outcomes in the plot that are contingent on the possible world in question. Through the plot's development, the where and the how of the possible world's limitations can be scrutinized.

This disclosure is inseparable from the importance of suggesting *alternative possible worlds* through which the represented otherness can be also understood.[64] In an icon narrative, the exposure of the possible world's fallibility and the reference to other possible worlds presuppose each other. To designate the may-be by which this narrative redeems otherness, it is significant to consider both its predominant and distinct possible world together with all its suggestions of alternative possible worlds. These substitutes can be evoked through the presentation of other characters' psychic lives or by the narrative itself suggesting such worldviews. The narrative can also refer to the possible worlds of other icon narratives and narratives that seek to designate the same otherness it is designating. The main function of these other possibles would be to sketch out, sometimes even very vaguely, other potential paths through which an otherness can be perceived. Other worlds are suggested whose different ways of perceiving otherness may not be taken into account by the main possible world. Substitute worldviews should be intimated which might do justice to the otherness in ways that the narrative's predominant worldview does not. These alternative ways of understanding alterity can thus function as possible rectifications to the principal possible world, picking up where it fails. On the whole, they should perhaps not be as distinct and comprehensive as the principal world invoked; otherwise, the narrative might risk becoming more confusing than motivational for the subject to realize its particular understanding in the actual world. It might affect more uncertainty than impetus in the refiguring of one's perceptions.[65]

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[64] I am here perhaps diverging slightly from Ricoeur's view of the possible in narratives. On the whole, his hermeneutics considers the idea of only one possible world in a narrative. This does not have to mean that he dismisses any likelihood of there being more than one possible world. I would suggest rather that his hermeneutics is not concerned with this issue but is focused on disclosing the more principal attributes of a narrative. Our study of how the self must interpret alterity needs, however, take this factor of plurality into consideration.

[65] One must note that this is not an unconditional rule of the icon narrative. It does not mean that an icon narrative cannot without question have more than one principal possible world. This quality is, however, by no means indispensable for its basic constitution.

The interaction affected between the principal possible world and the other less distinct possible worlds can be seen as a dialectic of *closure* and *opening*. One worldview must be promoted at the same time as its validity is questioned and referred to other dissenting worldviews. Belief is at once also suspended by disbelief and the intimation of other possible forms of belief. Again, as with the previous dialectics, we have two conflicting polarities: the possible world's sense of conviction or finality *and* its uncertainty leading to its openness and reference to other worlds. Moreover, despite their opposition, these polarities also coincide with each other during the icon narrative's experience. Again, the simultaneity of two elements in discordance and yet in concordance with each other is here effectuated.[66]

In conclusion, the dialectic of closure and opening ensures the possibility of refiguring one's perception and world through a particular worldview. *At the same time* it prevents the horizon of this worldview from closing in upon itself. It stimulates an awareness of the constant need to rectify this worldview through other possible worldviews, those suggested in the narrative and even perhaps others that are not suggested in the narrative. This way the icon narrative accentuates its nature as a *fictional analogue* or as a figural 'as if' to otherness. It protects the subject from the mistake of believing it is seeing the otherness through its narration, the mistake of *seeing* rather than *seeing-as*.[67]

This self-reference works as a reminder that the narrative ultimately cannot emulate or re-enact the alterity it is designating. It can alert one to the necessity of actual exposure to the otherness that is being expressed if this expression is to have a genuinely improving effect. The ethical success of realizing the fictional possibles in actuality must be put into question if one has never really experienced the otherness those possibles refer to. All of the narrative's forms of redemption can only do their work if the subject has actually experienced the alterity presented and if that same subject has decided to act ethically for or in the name of that alterity, if this is an icon, or against it, if this is the sacred. The icon narrative seeks only to be an effective mediator or translator between the subject and its alterities.

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[66] See 'Text and Its Readers', in Ricoeur, *Reader*, pp. 401-2.
[67] Kearney, 'Narrative imagination', in *Hermeneutics,* p. 179.

Conclusion

✝

A Chiasmic Play
of Two Extremes

The Sacred and the Icon
Interacting
through the Metaphor Dialectic

Central to a dialogic phenomenology of the sacred and the icon is the particular relationship both polarities can display between each other. Our descriptions so far of either polarity, whether relating to their autonomy or their connection, ultimately all shed light on some aspect of this special interaction. Underlying all the various themes that have hitherto been treated is a continuing disclosure as to how these two phenomena can be affiliated or unaffiliated with each other. The distinct reaction between these two poles has indeed been all throughout, often implicitly, the principal preoccupation of this study.

All the arguments and ideas that have been explored can be seen to attain their full bearing when applied to a direct designation of what can transpire between the sacred and the icon. These thoughts reach their full import when considered especially in relation to what happens *between* the two phenomena as they intersect. They arrive at their full depth of understanding when perceived as indicative of the event that marks the transition from one region to the other. In revealing the relationship of the sacred and the icon, this epilogue thus makes use of all the ideas that have been explored until now. The curious logic of the chemistry between the two experiences is here effectively captured through the entire background of all that has been said so far.

The deviancy in the nature of the interaction between the sacred and the icon comes about from the fact that these two phenomena seem to be distinct and adverse to each other, *and yet*, they also seem to lead or coincide with each other. Mutually hostile, they are also mutually cooperative. As Kearney indicates in 'God or *Khora*?', faith and *khora* reveal a reciprocal opposition and a reciprocal supplementation.[1]

Taking the cue from Kearney, my suggestion is that the joint reaction of these two radical events can be expressed through the logic of the same metaphor dialectic that has also been seen to operate between the subject and the other in the ethical encounter and on various levels in the narrative and the icon narrative. That dialectic that articulates how redemption takes place in the ethical scene and in the narrative and icon narrative, also articulates *how* the sacred and the icon act towards each other. It attests that the site of discordance between two elements is also a site of their concordance. The sacred or the icon can be undergone as separate from each other but

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[1] To elucidiate further on the strange interaction between the sacred and the icon, I will be referring occasionally to its account by Kearney in the chapter, 'God or *Khora*?', in *Strangers,* pp. 193-211. Here, God and faith, on the one hand, and *khora*, on the other hand, can be seen as respective substitutes of the icon and the sacred. Faith and *khora* feature after all among the range of experiences presupposed by these two polarities.

also as inseparable from each other, as leading to each other. Inasmuch as they are in conflict they also sometimes coincide. These two seeming incompatibles occasionally traverse each other. They are two poles bearing witness to a '*chiasmic play*' of overlapping and retreat.[2]

A Mutual Opposition

One side to the dialectical relationship between the sacred and the icon is an experiencing of the infinite difference between them. The sacred is undergone in complete separation from the icon. Or the icon is undergone in complete separation from the sacred.[3]

In this context, the experience of either event discloses its irreducible singularity. It instates that event as, in some ineffable way, the most 'real' or the most 'truthful' moment one has ever passed through. The sovereignty of one event is experienced to the extent that the other is invalidated. The empowering of one phenomenon is in correlation with the other's disempowering. No other experience can compare with the one that is being undergone. While the phenomenon in question is taking place, every other phenomenon is rejected, disclosed as infinitely inferior, as feeble and unreal.

This disempowering takes place in two ways depending on whether it is the sacred or the icon that is in effect. The sacred disempowers through *subversion*. It operates by intruding upon other phenomena and taking them apart, ruining them.

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[2] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 208 (my emphasis). See pp. 206-8.

[3] This mutual opposition can be mostly justified with the particular understanding that has been given to the sacred and the icon. In the Introduction, the defining grounds are laid. The sacred is defined as an experience that ultimately pertains to an absolute alterity that is abyssal rather than transcendental, profane rather than divine by nature. It also, however, betrays certain qualities usually attributed to divine experiences, namely the eliciting of a sense of awe, fascination, and veneration. The ethical relationship as announced in this study corresponds to Kearney's model for a diacritical hermeneutics. It refers to the advent of an other that offers possibilities of meaning and allows the receiver to interpret them. Only if we presuppose these separate identities of the sacred and the ethical encounter can we clearly recognize the possibility of a distinct experiencing of either one of them.

Whether they pertain to the ego, or not, such as the ethical relation, all phenomena are encroached upon, contested, and deeply undermined with the approach of the sacred. All that made sense is now defiled by an inexorable lack of sense.

Rather than assuming an act of intrusion and transgression, the authority of the icon is inaugurated through an act of forgetfulness. The sovereignty the sacred had previously exerted, its nonsensicalness, is forgotten. All that had been suffered through the sacred is here dispelled through a state of obliviousness. This is not an obliviousness caused by some form of psychological defence. It is not a suppression of what can otherwise cause intense grief. It is rather the forgetfulness of *indifference* or *disinterestedness*. The ethical injunction sustains this forgetfulness because in its experiential domain, the sacred as it had been suffered ceases to have any validation, any omniscient 'truth', any threat whatsoever. In the reality of the may-be, there is no place for the nothingness and the horrors that the sacred brings in its wake. Through this reality, its nonsensicalness is made sense of. The icon *harmonizes* it with itself, with the horizon of possibility that it opens. Nonsensicalness is configured or *reconciled* with the icon's form of meaningfulness. Therefore, on the one hand, the sacred disempowers through a process of disruption and destruction, a process of erosion and *discord.* On the other hand, the icon disempowers through a process of *concordance*.[4]

A Mutual Attraction

The Motive of a Basic Identicalness

The other side to the dialectical relationship of the sacred and the icon is their occasional overlapping. One region can intersect or lead to the other. 'God and *khora*', Kearney remarks, 'may, on occasion supplement rather than exclude one another'. At this point, 'God and *khora* are not so much diametrically opposed alternatives as supplementary partners in dialogue […]'. He points out that 'Caputo [also] does

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[4] See 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 183-5, for the ethical event's relation of disinterestedness to the 'there is' as seen by Levinas.

sometimes seem to concede that *khora* may be an ally as much as an adversary of God. On one occasion, for instance, he even sees *khora* as a precondition of genuine theistic faith'.[5]

Despite their conspicuous adversity, the two phenomena reveal an affiliation. Though they 'beat with different hearts', though 'they think different thoughts and signal different options, they 'are as inextricably linked as Siamese twins […]'.[6] Are there then possible reasons for such an extraordinary connectedness? Why do these divergent experiences sometimes associate with each other?

A possible cause can be the fundamentally related natures both experiences share. Both are events that expose the ego to what is outside its possibles. Both attest to an alterity that cannot be contained and conformed to the ego; an alterity that subverts that ego. To this end, their impression on the subject is before anything else sensorial. For thinkers such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Emmanuel Levinas, this is because what is exterior to us affects us first physically before affecting us in our nonphysical emotional and intellectual faculties, wherein that exteriority disposes itself to be appropriated. What is other to the subject impresses it first corporeally.

This basic similarity can also explain the transition from the sacred to the icon in terms of the subject's increased sensitivity. The sacred subjugates the ego with a suffering of its limitations, a suffering that comes from an exposure to what is indelibly alien to its nature. This impresses upon the subject a shocking *awareness* of its ego's intrinsic fallibleness. A consciousness of finiteness starts developing: a growing consciousness of the severe blindness inherent within one's sense of omniscience. An increasing sense of humility starts being learnt. Moreover, and in close relation to this, is the awareness (or the enhancing of an awareness) of realities that are other to the ego. Subjectivity is rendered conscious of a truthfulness or veracity that is not confined to its self-appropriations. A susceptibility to experiences that are outside the egotistic horizons is aroused. This augments one's sensitivity to the call of the other. When the stranger approaches, the subject is in a more prepared condition to receive them through their singularity and listen to what they really have to say. The painful alertness to one's finitude, to what is alien to one's understandings, can facilitate the inclination to meet the other on its own grounds rather than one's own (always appropriating)

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[5] Kearney, *Strangers*, pp. 211, 208.
[6] Kearney, *Strangers,* p. 211.

grounds. After suffering the sacred, the subject can find it easier to open itself to what is outside its ego, and this includes its encounter with the other.[7]

The same rudimentary identicalness that binds the two poles, however, does not only explain their affiliation. It can also account for their contestation. This is because both phenomena open the ego to a reality that is outside its powers. Both submit the subject to a region that the ego cannot master, a region that excludes it. This elicits in either experience an irreducibly overpowering and intense quality that stands on its own for its authentication and dims the other in its importance. In being foreign to the ego, the alterity undergone is absolutely singular and this indeed also makes it incomparable or incapable of being measured to any other reality that is likewise an alterity. Either alterity of the sacred or the icon, when experienced, can thus easily neutralize the other in validity because, like that other, it refers to what is completely unique. Both thus equally affect the subject with the conviction of their authority, their inscrutable sovereignty. In this respect, they oppose each other because of their basic kinship. Paradoxically, they pose a mutual formidable challenge founded on a sense of their identicalness.

The Motive of Personalization

The idea of personalization is another reason behind the connectedness of the sacred and the icon. The experience of the icon can be seen as having the characteristics of the sacred as personalized. Before the other, such traits as infinity, sensorial affectivity, and depersonalized temporality, are introduced as transfigured. They are presented in a new ethical reality: experienced through and because of the other's will.

What this means is that these two events are affiliated by having related characteristics. The process of personalization also reveals a certain relation between the pair in expressing the ethical scene as an alleviation of the suffering inflicted by the sacred. The icon is disclosed as an event that can succeed the sacred and transform it to a whole new level. Personalization is yet also indicative of the infinite dissimilarity

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[7] See also 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 185-6.

between the two phenomena. By transfiguring the sacred, the icon augments its characteristics through its particular mode of meaningfulness. It divulges attributes that are at once related to the sacred but are also infinitely separate from them in having now become personalized. Once again, what seems to be a source of convergence between the two experiences also reveals itself to be a source of divergence. Personalization expresses the icon's traits as similar and yet also as intensely different from the sacred.

The Motive of Opposing Difference

The paradoxes and ambiguity involved in an attempt to explain the reasons behind the relationship of the sacred and the icon do not end here. I would also make a case for their divergent natures. Another possible motive for their overlapping is their radical difference from each other. I will here recapitulate briefly a few of their main points of contrast. While one is a discordance of all phenomena, the other is a concordance of the sacred. While one stifles the ego with nonfreedom, the other liberates a futural freedom beyond the ego. One instigates catastrophe and incapacity, the other instigates an advent. While one exceeds the ego's domain through despair and senselessness, the other exceeds it through charity, hope, and faith, opening towards a superabundance of possible meaning.

Needless to say, such differences are on first appearances *the* reason behind the opposition and assertion each phenomenon demonstrates over the other. Because they are so different, each phenomenon seeks to completely estrange itself from the other and affirm only itself as sovereign. On a closer look at actual experience, however, I would argue that such a dissimilarity can also be a strong force behind their connectedness. Their very adversity can also be the cause of a mutual attraction. Their reciprocal antagonism seems to also reciprocally reconcile them.

This can be seen on the subject's behalf in relation to the crossover from the sacred to the icon. Before the sacred, the ego is tortured by its incapacity to coincide with itself, which comes from its incapacity to appropriate and assert itself through the otherness it is exposed to. Anguish is here an inability to have power over one's selfhood. The ego incessantly suffers of itself: it suffers from its own ineradicable

insufficiency. One suffers from what is 'against oneself that is in the self'.[8] Now a telling outcome can come about through this particular distress. It can instigate in the subject a certain disappointment and sceptical detachment towards its ego. Moreover, this can also stimulate a need and a readiness to dispense with such a self because of the misery it causes, because of the intrinsic inadequacy of its nature in various experiences. In this way, one can find oneself being drawn towards the ethical relation. This is because, in contradistinction to the sacred, the icon inaugurates a reality free of the ego's voracities; a reality that empowers me with possibles foreign to the capabilities of this entity. The attraction this phenomenon offers at this point is precisely owing to its opposing difference to the sacred. In other words, the nature of the sacred brings about an inclination towards the opposition that the ethical event offers.[9]

A more general and significant perspective can be deduced from this context of an interaction as a result of conflicting differences. I would suggest that the particular force constituting one phenomenon is proportionate to the likelihood of its succession by the other one. The more powerfully real an experience is, the more probable the chances are that that experience will lead to the other one. The degree of intensity constituting a phenomenon is equivalent to the degree of possibility that that phenomenon will eventually submit itself to its opposition. Probability of change is here paradoxically dependent on how convincing or how authoritative an event proves to be. That same amount of resistance an event displays to its other is reversed to its vulnerability to that other. Disempowering the other phenomenon entails the possible deferring of its empowering or re-empowering in proportion to the strength of that disempowering.

This reversal can also be perceived in terms of the *force* the ensuing phenomenon displays. I would argue that if one event leads to the other one, it is very likely that the degree of force exhibited in the first event would also constitute the following one. What takes place is a correspondence in the intensity of one experience with the intensity of the other that succeeds it (if it succeeds it). The more incontestable or the more sovereign is the experience of one polarity, the more probable it is that the experience of the other polarity will entail an equal amount of sovereignty. The powerfulness of one phenomenon is mirrored in the other. A reciprocal neutralization is here in play. The ascendancy of one experience is likely to be *completely* offset by the

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[8] Levinas, *Otherwise*, p. 51.
[9] See also 'In Indecision, By Indecision, I Will Decide', pp. 185-6.

other's. Again, the higher an event seems to rise in its truthfulness and omniscience, the harder it seems to fall if it eventually coincides with the opposing event.

This changeover is by no means certain. To designate it, one must always make use of such adverbs as 'likely' and 'probably'. Undergoing the sacred *need not* lead to the icon, and vice versa. The particular force intrinsic to the event of the icon *need not* be supplanted by the equal force of the sacred. There is no law of necessity, or any form of predictability for that matter, in this curious drama. It can only be defined by a sense of likelihood, by *possibility*.

'Despite' or 'In Spite Of' as an Expression of the Dialectical Relationship

This brings us to the question of finding a formulation that can best capture the overlapping of the two events. In this regard, we can opt for such terms as '*despite*' or '*in spite of*', as already mentioned in the previous chapter to describe how redemption operates, especially in relation to icon narratives. These terms have been used to express the mode of assimilation exhibited by the conflicting elements in the metaphor dialectic when functioning in the icon narrative's forms of redemption. One can equally perceive the possible traversal happening between the sacred and the icon as transpiring also through the signification of the 'in spite of' or the 'despite'.

Essential to the meaning of such notions is a sense of *inexplicability*. As already indicated, there is no law of necessity, no real explanation why one region leads to the other one. Quoting Kierkegaard, Ricoeur in fact calls this an 'absurd logic'.[10] The two reasons with which I have sought to explain this traversal are in truth mutually contradictory. The sacred and the icon, I have said, intersect because of an intrinsic similarity in both domains but also because of a reciprocal opposition owing also to their intrinsic difference. Paradoxically, they coincide because like attracts like and like attracts unlike. Intersecting occurs both because of similarity and dissimilarity – and the latter, I would venture, is more prevalent a force in this dynamic than the former.

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[10] 'Hope', in Ricoeur, *Sacred*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), p. 204.

The idea of the 'despite' is therefore suitable to capture the process of crossover from one phenomenon (A) to another phenomenon of a very different kind (B). This transition can take place gradually or suddenly. It reveals the illogical logic of a decline in what is experienced as inviolable, as an intense truth. *In spite of* phenomenon A, phenomenon B is inaugurated. Despite the omniscient authority phenomenon A conveys, phenomenon B is introduced. An event that seems to be invincible in its veracity, more real than anything else, gives way to what is completely different in nature from it, to what opposes it. The adverb 'yet' also expresses this irreducible change quite effectively. Against all likelihood, in the face of all certainty, *yet* something else comes to pass. In a completely unanticipated moment, the sovereignty of A is yet questioned by the advance of B. What seems invulnerable yet becomes vulnerable.

We are here facing an irrational rationale that is a logic of contraries. 'Despite' or 'in spite of' presupposes an orienting of an element towards an opposing and diverging element. A remains the same but it also directs itself towards B. An impulse of *contestation* can be said to take root in A directing it against its uncompromised nature towards B. This is a demand that is an inexplicable defiance of the very element in which it is inaugurated.

A differentiation in crossover must also be accounted for. The character of the traversal between one event and the other is not the same from both sides. The crossing from the ethical relation to the sacred occurs beyond the subject's control. An inhuman and anonymous alterity gradually or suddenly invades the other's alterity. There is a stripping away of my powers, a forced dispossession or unwilling abjection to this irruption.

Conversely, the traversal from the sacred to the icon very much depends on my decision. No incontrollable switchover takes place. The sacred as undergone during the event of intersection only *inclines* me towards an exposure to the other. I find myself predisposed or *inspired* to give myself to the other's call. I am disturbed or touched by the other's ever preceding demand. The call of the other is heard. A decision, however, must nonetheless be undertaken by me: an action of which I am responsible. This choice given freely is necessary if the sacred is to submit to the ethical encounter. The other's call can just as easily be heard and ignored or suppressed. Icon narratives, in this respect, can further motivate this ethical resolve through their sensorial, phronetic,

and theoretical understanding of the sacred or the icon. Ultimately, however, a determination to acknowledge the other's persona, a decision to personalize through hope, faith, and love for that persona, must be carried out independently of all its influences. The decision that ends the dark night indicates precisely this vital role of a choice taken to transcend desolation and be unconditionally for the other.

If the events of the sacred and the icon are interrelated, then a third way can be charted and extensively explored. This way co-opts the modern and the postmodern philosophical trends of thought. It assimilates them without being taken in by either one's excessive and exclusionary predilections: the modern unqualified belief in subjectivity and the postmodern unqualified belief in an absolutely foreign alterity. It thus attempts to avoid both of their possible pitfalls. In doing so, this middle path envisages a viewpoint that is based on the idea of *interaction*. It claims that people and experiences that on first appearance seem to be estranged from one another on the grounds of what seems to be their radically divergent natures, *can* interrelate, *can* communicate with one another. A dialogue can be conceived between the subject and the complete stranger, between atheistic suffering or despair and faith. In this manner, I hope to present a more realistic, practical, and ethical picture of the sacred and the icon. A way is charted, I hope, that can act as a better guide for the reader towards an actual perception and action that are more ethically productive and fulfilling.

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