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Levinas's Reception of the Mythic

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ABSTRACT: The article examines the primacy of the ethical relationship in the works of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas claims that ethics begins with the movement away from the elemental, which is associated with participatory modes of being, including myth. In this sense, Levinas is promoting a "from . . . to" thesis, where myth is seen as prerational and horrific. Nonetheless, myth yet plays a powerful, if fugitive, role within Levinas's text, mediating the ethical relationship with the Other, a relationship that is portrayed by Levinas mythically.

KEYWORDS: Levinas, myth, ethics, rationality, otherness

Levinas's project throughout *Totality and Infinity* and in his earlier works *Existence and Existents* and *Time and the Other* is to situate the primacy of the ethical as foundational first philosophy. For Levinas, myth is intimately connected to being, the being before reflection and thought. The entering into reflection and thought Levinas terms transcendence, the *epoché*, or first ethical gesture. In order to situate his ethics, Levinas turns to the Cartesian notion of infinity: the idea of infinity as an overflowing presence, the container capable of containing more than it can draw from itself, from its own being.[1] This idea of infinity is grounded in an experience of the Other as primal.[2] The presence of a face (human kinship) introduces the ethical relation. Ethics begins with the Other before me, who demands a

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response, my responsibility, putting the "I" in question. Levinas equates myth and the mythic with paganism and the elemental *il y a*, as states that precede those of the ethical and the infinite relation.[3] Here Levinas advocates the thesis of "from myth, to reason": the idea that the development of humankind as a whole has tended to follow a strict teleological trajectory leading from *muthos* to *logos*.[4] The progression from a traditional narrative account to a purely rational account begins "from a starting point [always already] measured as defective by unalterable criteria towards a necessary goal identified with the knowledge of an absolute and unchanging reality which must inevitably, one day be attained."[5] On this view, the authority and empirical veracity of the *logos* subordinates and excludes *muthos*, which stands other to it, either by excluding the myths or by appropriating *muthos* into *logos* as a rhetorical device. This equation is found throughout many of Levinas's writings, for, on one hand, Levinas associates myth with the destructive identification around an image or concept such as nationalist identity politics. On the other hand, Levinas's writing is itself a language of myth and the Bible. This article analyzes the inscription of the mythic within Levinas's ethics, demonstrating how, by its very appearance in texts such as *Totality and Infinity*, the mythical performs a function refractory to the one Levinas develops.[6] What is inscribed in the text is simultaneously the rejection of the pagan (the exposure of the pagan nothingness[7]) alongside myths of paganism. Levinas's incorporation of these Hellenic and Hebraic myths into his text gives the myths a new life, rescripts their meaning, giving them a face not simply that of the *apeiron*. For Levinas, incorporation involves an implicit contradiction: he simultaneously expunges the notion of the mythic while incorporating specific myths illustrative of his philosophy. My reading of Levinas seeks to demonstrate the inescapable role of myth within the text.

An Impossible Rustling

In order to demonstrate the movement from *muthos* to *ethos* as elaborated in Levinas's early works it is necessary to begin with a meditation on the il y a, the "there is" of *Existence and Existents*, which is later renamed the "elemental" in *Totality and Infinity*. The mythical does not lead to the ethical, claims Levinas. In fact, it is a cipher or placeholder of an elemental horror, the horror of being, of being exposed in front of the elements, "before all

Revelation, before the light comes."[8] Myth is identified in Levinas with the numinous elemental: a preconscious, anonymous, impersonal mode of participation (that is, the pagan) in stark contrast to the ethical relation—that of transcendence, revelation, responsibility, the idea of infinity, and the holy wholly Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, the first ethical gesture is described as the epoché, establishing the separated being summoned to a responsibility and indicating the break with participation and the mode of the mythical.

The elemental scene of existence is a state of irremissible being, where one is condemned to perpetual reality, in a state similar to insomnia: where it is impossible to sleep, where privacy and subjectivity are not yet, where one is exposed "before the elements."[9] This is the background of existence. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas describes the elemental simply as approaching existence without an existent, where "it is impossible to take shelter in oneself. . . . One is exposed. The whole is open upon us. Instead of serving as our means of access to being, [the il y a] delivers us over to being."[10] As does myth.

The field of anonymous being where anything can count for anything else reminds Levinas of the impersonal sacred of the pagan, where no god will appear, only an absence (the pagan prior to the monotheistic, the preconscious *sans-soi* anterior to consciousness). Myth is the impersonality of the sacred for Levinas. It represents a formless exposure to a multiplicity of faceless gods, undifferentiated each from the other: "There is, in general, without it mattering what there is."[11] Consciousness, a result of the epoché, thus results as a birth of subjectivity that ruptures the elemental, putting the existent in touch with its existing. But myth, according to Levinas, totalizes, separates us from the infinite; it "does not deliver itself."[12] Again and again Levinas will associate vision and light with revelation and discourse, consciousness and subjectivity, while myth and the gods associate with darkness, nothingness, the apeiron.[13] Myth is the being-in-the-element, the enjoyment of the element as sensibility, "without respite, a total contact without fissure nor gap from which the reflected movement of a thought could arise."[14]

The apeiron does not equate with the infinite, precisely because of its indeterminate quality. Throughout *Totality and Infinity* Levinas will draw the distinction between the nothingness of the apeiron and the identity of the face, the conflict between "the reign of mythical gods" and the "true transcendence."[15] Myth does not lead to ethics, to the face of the Other, but, rather, its "coming forth from nothing, constitutes its fragility, the disintegration of becoming, that time prior to representation—which is

menace and destruction."[16] Ethics as first philosophy is the epiphany of the face-to-face, revelation, an interiority that is consciousness, the relationship with the Other, the idea of infinity—that is, metaphysics. The pagan risk is that of succumbing to, returning to, the faceless impersonal gods to whom one does not speak: the mythical format of the elemental. Described as "the impersonal par excellence," "existence without existent," "insecurity lived concretely," "this way of existing without revealing itself, outside of being and the world, must be called mythical."[17]

Yet, if this way of existing, faceless and prior to discourse, must be mythical, what is one to make of the repetitive appearance of the myths, both pagan and Hebraic, throughout Levinas's texts? Do Ulysses and Deucalion, Gyges and Eros, offer the reader up to the dark night of the elemental, or is there another possibility announced by their appearance, concerning the ethical?

Participation Mystique

To further substantiate his notion of the il y a, Levinas turns to the ethnographic studies of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, specifically his notion of "participation."[18] In analyzing participation as "an affective experience," Levinas leads us back to the elemental (what Lévy-Bruhl terms "profound reality") in order to accentuate the break between the elemental and the epoché, participation and transcendence, the ontological and the ethical.[19] In an early essay entitled "Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy," Levinas turns to key notions of Lévy-Bruhl's such as participation, the prelogical, and a discussion of profound reality: all necessary for the fundamental distinction between reason and the emotive as modes of being. The following reveals Levinas's thesis, announced toward the conclusion of the essay: Lévy-Bruhl shows "that representation is not the original gesture of the human soul, but a choice."[20] By incorporating the binary opposition of the "prelogical" in contrast to a logical representative function, Levinas demonstrates his privileging of the separated being (ethical) over the participating being (ontological) where an identity subject is not yet formed.

"Primitive mentality is incomparably inferior—that is, can serve only as an object and topic—to the mentality that has broken free of it."[21] The mode of participation belongs to such a "primitive mentality."[22] To participate is to be separate yet engaged, captive to both "this world and

the other," confusing orders of "the visible and the invisible,"[23] exposed and present to the undifferentiated background of being described in *Existence and Existents*. As Lévy-Bruhl, quoted by Levinas, says, "To be is to participate."[24] Participation is that state wherein subject and object inexplicably fuse, merge, become one: "consubstantiality," "interpenetration," "duality-unity."[25] Identity is lost and preserved simultaneously, comparable to a mystical trance, a spell of the sensuous, a fluidity of internal and external where the mind is dependent on and intricately involved in what takes place exterior to it. This is the emotive state, primordial if you will, before the advent of representation, "in which one *is* his future instead of representing it to himself."[26] This is the state of Lévy-Bruhl's profound reality, coincident with the il y a, which Levinas seeks to replace with the ethical. In the thinking of Lévy-Bruhl, Levinas finds a trace of his own theory, namely, that fundamentally there is a distinction between emotive and representative experience, between participatory existence and the ethical subject. Levinas ends his essay on Lévy-Bruhl with a question: "Is monotheistic civilization incapable of responding to this crisis by an orientation liberated from the horrors of myths, the confusion of thought they produce, and the acts of cruelty they perpetuate in social customs?"[27] As convincing as the question sounds, Levinas's orientation toward the myths—when citing them as symbols and points of reference throughout his text—actually moves away from the notion of myth as prerational and horrific, instead introducing a point of view thoroughly sustained by the mythic.

"Violence and the Sacred"

In *Totality and Infinity*, in a section entitled "The Metaphysical and the Human," Levinas will contrast the mode of participation as described by Lévy-Bruhl with his own notion of transcendence as the mode of the atheistic/metaphysical relation.[28] Levinas insists here that we neither wish a participatory relationship with the divine nor are interested in an objectifying relationship. What is needed is a separated being, the atheist "purified of the violence of the sacred."[29] Levinas wishes to separate violence and the sacred, seeking instead an absolute that is, in his words, "purified." Violence is inherent to the participatory mode, where the "bonds" of participation "immerse" believers in a myth of which they themselves are unaware. We are here confronted with a binary operation in which participation and

objectification (two modes of totality) equate with violence as that in which the "I . . . is annihilated on contact . . . [or] transported outside of itself" or involving "a comprehension that thematizes and encompasses its object."[30] Conversely, for Levinas, purity involves sanctification: immunity, refuge, shelter from the violence of this world. The metaphysical relation, a mode of transcendence, is a relation "purified" and separated from the participatory bond. According to Levinas, it is "the dawn of a humanity without myths . . . metaphysical atheism."[31] As such, Levinas introduces the ethical relation of the face-to-face, uncontaminated by the dangers of participation and communion.

Ethics, for Levinas, can only concern the separated being: it is a movement away from the participatory mode inherent in the mythical format of the element (involving human and god, human and earth, human and the supernatural) into justice and social relations (the face-to-face). Only on the interhuman level can the metaphysical relation be enacted; only here is ethics possible, purged of violence and impurity. The social relation, ethics, is precisely the relationship of human to human, face-to-face, and it is conditioned upon the other in need. In order to affect a movement away from totality, signified by notions of the elemental, participation, violence, and communion, to the idea of infinity, signified by the atheistic, separated, nonthematized, and ethical, Levinas introduces the example of the widow-orphan-poor, a concept that is in its very nature mythical. In the encounter with the widow-orphan-poor, one is exposed to that which cannot be assimilated to understanding, to that which cannot be named. Yet the encounter itself situates more than a Levinasian example: it is the very figuration of the mythical nature of the Infinite relation. An alternative reading of Levinas is possible: the presence of myth, Levinas's mythic language, offers a repeated interruption (rupturing) of the text and dislocates Levinas's intended meaning. Instead the myth shines through, speaking not of a pagan nothingness shorn from the ethical but, instead, of the power (primacy) of the imagination, which is in itself ethical.

A Mythic Example

Who are the widow, the orphan, and the poor? When Levinas incorporates them as paradigmatic of a social relation with the transcendent freed of the bonds of communion and participation, he also is positing the widow,

the orphan, and the poor as exemplars of an ethical relation that precludes anything mythic. Yet, historically, they are mythic figures. A footnote found in *Time and the Other* lists the numerous references to the orphan and the widow found in the Hebrew Bible.[32] The major traditions Levinas looks to tell us that responsibility involves care for the poor, and it is likely his intent to posit the widow, the orphan, and the poor as the crucial figures upon which to illustrate an ethics of responsibility for the other.

I am not suggesting that the phrase "widow, orphan, poor" functions in the text simply as an example through which Levinas clarifies his own exposition but, rather, that the repetition of this phrase, the reworking of these mythic figures, indicates a reinscription of myth in a text that elsewhere speaks of the need to expunge myth. The appearance of myth in Levinas's text signals more than the uncomplicated positing of an example and instead highlights a significant instance wherein myth is found inscribed within a philosophical dialectic. As the widow, the orphan, and the poor function as figures that interrupt immanence, similarly I wish to claim that in taking up the archetypes, the instance is fashioned wherein myth interrupts philosophy. As the paradigm "widow, orphan, poor" mediates the relationship of thought to the other, so the writing of the paradigm mediates the relationship between myth and reason—myth being traditionally conceived as the other or outside of reason.

Jacques Rancière suggests that the essential function of "the poor" for philosophy has been "to play the ersatz of philosophy":[33] "An ersatz that philosophy cannot do without, since in order to preserve its role in the legislation of legitimate thoughts, it is itself obliged to produce a discourse on non-philosophy, on illegitimate modes of thinking."[34] The widow, the orphan, and the poor indicate "the exclusions that constitute philosophy";[35] they appear within the text as other, as "what I myself am not": the other in need.[36] In Levinas's choice of this mythic example to illustrate the relationship with alterity ("a relationship without relation"[37]), and furthermore to envision a new form of justice, the phrase itself and the figures contained therein are reworked, rewritten, and mythologized. By this I mean that they take on a new meaning: for Levinas, as alterity content.

The first instance wherein Levinas situates the example of the widow, the orphan, and the poor in order to illustrate the nature of the Other, and thus the central problematic of the Other as residing in an unbridgeable alterity, that is, a radical exteriority, occurs in *Time and the Other*. Levinas introduces the Other as what is, "for example, the weak, the poor,

'the widow and the orphan,' whereas I am the rich or the powerful."[38] He is here speaking of a relationship (between the finite and the infinite, the sacred and the profane, the above and the below) that is nonsymmetrical: a relationship that is not resolved spatially or conceptually but is, rather, a relationship not structured like knowing, intentionality, presence, or presentation—"the relationship of 'thought' to the other and to the Wholely other."[39] The widow, the orphan, and the poor are present in the text as the "diverse figures of a sociality facing the face of the other person,"[40] as one's relationship to the "wholly other"— in other words, as the reminder of that to which I am responsible. Furthermore, they simultaneously present the emergence of myth (they are mythic) and as such expose the frailty of any possible relation with the Infinite. The widow, the orphan, and the poor function in Levinas as figures that bridge alterity. Thus myth functions in his philosophy as an intermediate, bridging the metaphysical and the human, the sacred and the profane, terror and beauty. Despite his repudiation of myth, Levinas's argument nevertheless inscribes the mythic by relying upon as well as reinterpreting classical pagan and Hebraic myths.

Levinas offers a way of thinking about the other that does not exclude the mythic, even when seeming to. His thought opens in a direction that ponders infinity and the infinite relation, the encounter of the face-to-face, and otherness. These notions are imbued with a trace of the mythical, and it is mythic language, rather than reason and logic, through which Levinas speaks. Myth interrupts the Levinasian text, where its presence is overt and inescapable. A sense of myth's fugitiveness lends itself in such a reading, suggestive and unexpected, yet welcomed. To conclude, in Levinas's writing, myth serves as a bridge, opening a space for the language and thinking of the other, whereby myth sustains and is enriched within the text.

NOTES

1. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 197.

2. The idea of infinity is itself mythical similar to Plato's notions of the soul, the good, and the beyond being: as concepts that are logically nonverifiable.

3. "The future of the element as insecurity is lived concretely as the mythical divinity of the element. Faceless gods, impersonal gods to whom one does not speak, mark the nothingness that bounds. . . . The separated being must run the risk of the paganism which evinces its separation and in which this separation is

accomplished, until the moment that the death of these gods will lead it back to atheism and to the true transcendence" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142).

4. Richard Buxton outlines the historical impact of the "from . . . to" thesis in the introduction to *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–21.

5. Glenn Most, "From Logos to Mythos," in *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.

6. For example, throughout *Totality and Infinity* and earlier, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2001); Emmanuel Levinas, "Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy," in *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 39–51; and Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987). In these texts, the mythic may be read as prerational, as the anonymity of existence, an impersonal state prior to representation and separation.

7. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 160.

8. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 56.

9. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 197.

10. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 54.

11. Ibid., 53.

12. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 193. For Levinas, totality is opposed to infinity, wherein totality is the same that converts everything to itself; it is closed unto itself and needs to be broken open. Interiority, signified in the myth of Gyges (as Levinas recounts it) is totality. Infinity is marked by nonadequation: an idea always in excess of itself, the Idea of Infinity, the Other.

13. See, for instance, *Totality and Infinity*, where "vision in the light is precisely the possibility of forgetting the horror of this interminable return [the return of mythical gods], this *aperion*, maintaining oneself before this semblance of nothingness" (ibid., 190–91). Compare with a similar discussion on the apeiron, where the facelessness of the elemental, its "nothingness" and "opaque density," equates to a description of the apeiron: this nameless matter, the non-I, the abyss of being to which myth belongs (158–59).

14. Ibid., 135.

15. Ibid., 142.

16. Ibid., 141.

17. Ibid., 142.

18. See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mentality*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York: Macmillan, 1923).

19. Levinas, "Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy."

20. Ibid., 49.

21. Ibid., 39.
22. Ibid., 40. *Primitive mentality* is a term introduced and often used by Lévy-Bruhl (including as the title of one of his anthropological works) and is adopted by Levinas when writing on Lévy-Bruhl. This adoption subjects Levinas to a form of exoticization, further exposed by Levinas's perpetuation, within his own work, of a belief in "evolutionism" as the idea of the linear progress from myth to reason, where the participatory, "primitive" mode of existence is dismissed as inferior to the detached, conceptualizing, "civilized," and hence superior mode of existence accessed through the epoché. On Lévy-Bruhl's use of the term, see Robert Bernasconi, "Lévy-Bruhl Among the Phenomenologists: Exoticisation and the Logic of 'the Primitive,'" *Social Identities* 11, no. 3 (2005): 229–45.
23. Levinas, "Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy," 46.
24. Ibid., 45.
25. Ibid., 46.
26. Ibid., 48.
27. Ibid., 51.
28. This section references René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Girard's focus contrasts Levinas's, having less to do with the rarified aspects of the divine and instead concentrating on taboos, sacrifice, substitution, and violence—in a word, on impurity.
29. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.
30. Ibid., 77–78.
31. Ibid., 77.
32. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 83.
33. Andrew Parker, "Editor's Introduction," in Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, ed. Andrew Parker, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), xiv.
34. Rancière, *Philosopher and His Poor*, 131.
35. Parker, "Editor's Introduction," xiv.
36. Levinas, *Time and the Other*, 83.
37. Ibid., 35.
38. Ibid., 83.
39. Ibid., 30–31.
40. Ibid.