

Myth and *il y a*

A Convergent Reading of René Girard and Emmanuel Levinas

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ABSTRACT In order to disclose possible affinities between the œuvres of Emmanuel Levinas and René Girard that run deeper than both the apparently opposite quarters in which they deploy their thought—difference and sameness—and their patently shared view—an ethical concern for victims— their analogue account of the mythical dynamics of undifferentiation should be explored. Due to their very similar endeavor—to pinpoint the circumstances in which mythical violence arises—Levinas’s notion of the *il y a* as a neutral and saturated field of forces and Girard’s description of the final paroxysm of the mimetic crisis can be equated with very instructive results. Furthermore, because both instances are linked to the primeval situation in which the subject as such emerges, these authors’ descriptions reinforce each other and provide us with a critical account of a realm that should be transcended—the domain of the violent sacred in which force becomes the ultimate criteria—lest we run the risk of a total social involution.

KEYWORDS Bible; creation; ethics; mimetic theory; mythology; phenomenology; victims; violence

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Even if René Girard and Emmanuel Levinas are frequently thought of as standing in different quarters of contemporary philosophy, one exploring sameness and the other difference, it is quite clear that both share an anti-mythical standpoint regarding the emergence of human subjectivity. Here, the term “mythical” stands not only for what counts as mythological—the beliefs of ancient peoples—but also for the archaic echoes and tendencies that constantly structure our world-view even today. So in order to show how these two thinkers complement each other, we will try to uncover the affinities between mimetic theory’s account of a false theophany as the end result of an undifferentiating crisis and the Levinasian description of the *il y a*, roughly translated as the “there is.” Though hailing from different theoretical realms—fundamental anthropology and phenomenology, respectively—both descriptive instances shed light on the possibility, precious to both authors, of distinguishing between the sacred and the holy.

Though inscribed in the anti-pagan struggle that has characterized a great part of Jewish thought from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards, and greatly influenced by it, Levinas preferred to present his arguments more in a phenomenological fashion than in a historical discussion of the advent of myth and its further development of the sort to be found in neo-Kantian authors such as Hermann Cohen and Ernst Cassirer, concerned with the symbolic foundations of rational thought, or in Marxist theorists like Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, focused on the ideological and aesthetical repercussions of myth as already constituted and transmitted. Myth, within the mystic undercurrents of Jewish thought, was Gershom Scholem’s main subject of study, but Levinas’s background—he hailed from Lithuanian Misnagdim—meant that he stopped short of dwelling too much on mysticism.¹ That is why Levinas’s affinities with Girard’s fundamental anthropology can be presented in a more straightforward manner, as both authors dealt directly with an immediately menacing situation not only faced by primeval humanity, but also capable of reappearing in our highly particular and concrete circumstances even today.

Now, while the aim of explaining the workings of the archaic sacred permeates René Girard’s thought, Levinas’s critique of paganism—though essential for his philosophy—never receives an independent thematic elucidation. His reflections on this subject are scattered right throughout his

1. Though not opposed to the wisdom contained in the Kabbalah, the Misnagdim criticized what they believed to be the mystical excesses of the Hasidim. Their approach to the Talmud was highly intellectual, and relied on natural human efforts rather than any ecstatic disclosures.

ouvre, making it all the more difficult to see at first sight how close he is to the Girardian perspective. Hence, to avoid a wearisome chronological account of Levinas's proceedings on this particular issue, we would like to gather them under the heading of both the *elemental* and the *il y a*. However, some preliminary remarks are first in order. The Levinasian notion of the *il y a* appeared for the first time in his *Existence and Existents*² a text written in captivity during World War II which was recognized by him as his *pièce de résistance*—that is, as presenting an idea that would outlive many of his first attempts at criticizing Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Glimpses of this enigmatic *il y a* can also be found in *On Escape*,³ a very early text from 1935 that deals with some of the passive aspects of existence that *Being and Time* neglects, such as lassitude, nausea, eroticism, etc. The *Il y a*, as the "brutal fact of being" as he calls it in this precocious booklet, is experienced, according to the later descriptions of *Existence and Existents*, firstly as the loss of all definite objects at night time, and eventually as a continuum of existence that engulfs the subject in, for example, insomnia. The *elemental*, on the other hand, is described in his opus magnum *Totality and Infinity*⁴ as the fruitfulness of existence, as a realm in which the subject is joyfully immersed as he or she awakens to the life of the senses. But even if, in the context of his first introducing of the *il y a*, Levinas is careful enough to disengage his new negative notion from the Heideggerian *es gibt* which carries a connotation of abundance, his renewed attempt at keeping this ontological abundance free of negative associations when he deals with the *elemental* is fraught with risks.

Maria Zambrano, a renowned Spanish philosopher, can give us some hints as to why Levinas, in spite of all of his efforts to the contrary, is unable to avoid linking the elemental with the faceless gods of paganism and ultimately with his notion of the *il y a*. Though contemporaries, Zambrano and Levinas never met. But the former's phenomenology of the sacred contained in her book *Man and the Divine*⁵ provides us with a description of the primeval situation of humanity very similar to the one explored by Levinas in the chapters of *Totality and Infinity* that deal with the sensorial realm

2. Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant* (Paris: Éditions de la Revue Fontaine, 1947). In English: Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 2001).

3. Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'évasion* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1982). In English: Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969).

5. María Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1986).

of the elemental, the primeval atmosphere of the subject's first awakening to self. To help us understand our current difficulties when dealing with myths, Zambrano begins her essay "On the Birth of Gods" with a description that converges with Herman Usener's famous dictum recalled by Ernst Cassirer: "The chasm between specific perception and general concepts is far greater than our academic notions, and a language that does our thinking for us, lead us to suppose."⁶ Without concepts, then, the overabundance of the real can only be dealt with through images. As she puts it:

Man could not have taken the long way to discover things, to build city and law without the mediation of these gods, pure ways in which nature has become transparent, has finally agreed to show itself in the only way in which the man needs it in that first step: in the form of an image.⁷

Moreover, María Zambrano argues that the appearance of a god—as a first quality that comes from nothing and escapes to nowhere—is only possible after a long period of desperate waiting in the dark, a period characterized by a terrible persecutory delusion. In the beginning, she says, men feel besieged. With no fixed objects in sight, primeval humanity dramatically experienced what much later would be called *apeiron*—philosophy's first take on the sacred, according to Zambrano. The Levinasian descriptions of the *elemental* as the first seed of space fit perfectly here. In *Totality and Infinity*, he asserts that in spite of its essential link with the self-satisfaction provided by the earth and its nutrients, there is an inherent insecurity in the field of enjoyment that lurks in the form of mythical deities. As it happens, even in the fullness of its selfish existence, the subject would not be entirely alone. Here we cannot help but recall what Usener called *momentary deities*, those first objectifications whose fixation in images, however fleeting they might be, would provide the first coordinates of the elemental in its precarious plenitude:

If the void that light makes in the space, whose darkness it expels, does not amount to anything, even in the absence of any particular object there is this void itself ... The silence of infinite spaces is frightening. The invasion of the *il y a* does not correspond to any representation. In another place we already

6. Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Suzanne K. Langer (New York: Dover Publications, 1946), 90.

7. Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino*, 59.

described this vertigo. And the elemental essence of the element, with the mythical facelessness from which it comes, participates in the same vertigo.⁸

It is clear that neither Zambrano nor Levinas resort to Anaximander's notion to refer to space as conceived by modernity.⁹ They both think of a dark background that is never fully revealed—except in limit experiences such as insomnia—but in whose bosom everything has to be sustained. But while the Spanish author confines herself to recognizing its sacred quality, Levinas derives from the ambivalence proper to the sacred the paradoxes that plague his description of the elemental. He speaks of it as an embryo of space, a sort of *χώρα* that, because it is not the infinite, can become its opposite, “an opaque thickness without origin.”¹⁰ Mary Jane Rubenstein lists the contradictory pairs that appear in Levinas's descriptions as follows:

The elemental is sensibility/the elemental disturbs sensibility; the elemental nourishes/the elemental “menaces”; the elemental constitutes/the elemental “overflows” me; the elemental saves me from ... totality/the elemental is a wave that engulfs, submerges and drowns.¹¹

According to Franz Rosenzweig—one of the foremost influences on Levinas—the pagan is in a better position to receive Revelation than the Jewish-Christian fanatic who intends to fix once and for all what is always a new event open to the future.¹² Yet for Levinas, even though this paganism of the elemental—an unavoidable risk if the subject is to have a foothold in the

8. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 190.

9. “It is the *apeiron* distinct from the infinite, and which, by contrast with things, presents itself as a quality refractory to identification.” *Ibid.*, 140. Now, even though in *Time and the Other*—a series of lectures delivered after the war—Levinas tries to differentiate between the *il y a* and the *apeiron*, in *Totality and Infinity* he uses Anaximander's notion several times to refer to it; see pages 140, 159, 163, 167, nd 191 of the English edition.

10. *Ibid.*, 159.

11. Mary Jane Rubenstein, *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 80.

12. “The ground prematurely cultivated by the fanatic yields no fruit. It does only when its time has come. And its time too, will come. But all the work of cultivation will have to be undertaken afresh.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 370. Cf.: “Both the pagan and the fanatic make a fetish of themselves but, Rosenzweig argues, the pagan remains open to revelation, to becoming a witness, while the fanatic does not. Even though the pagan is self-absorbed, the pagan recognizes her finitude. For Rosenzweig, fanatics—and the adherents of religion—deny their fundamental finitude.” Leora Batnitsky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 48.

whole—brings with it a kind of faceless luminosity, it is ultimately incapable of banishing the murmur of the *il y a*, that is, of anonymous existence—as if the plenum of the real were not all a grace. As Miguel García-Baró puts it in his critical approach to the *il y a*: “Behold, the night seems to start again even in the interior of the world.”¹³ What is, then, this enclosure, this delirium that cannot be defeated, that can only be provisionally limited? For Zambrano, our first dealings with the reality of the whole—which cannot be anything but overwhelming, because no “form” has yet emerged—can only occur in terms of persecution and can only be resolved in images. As Hans Blumenberg points out in his *Work on Myth*, “forms” and “names” would have had an apotropaic function that helped out primeval humans when dealing with the “undefined unfriendliness that originally adhered to the world.”¹⁴ There is no *Lebensraum* for primal humanity, who are hermetically surrounded by unidentifiable forces. Blumenberg speaks of an “opaque powerfulness which stood over man and opposite him.”¹⁵ And precisely this field of forces is what the subject tries to retreat from in insomnia, according to the young Levinas’s descriptions of the *il y a*. So even though later in his *oeuvre* he regales us with an inspiring description of the innocent realm of enjoyment populated by qualities that do not coalesce into substances, Levinas constantly fears behind these quasi-objects something that is not an object, that is not in any way a *thing*, and that, therefore, threatens. Hence his reference to the *apeiron*: a possible bad infinity. So, in *Totality and Infinity*, he insists that:

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 egoism of enjoyment in the midst of its familiarity with the elemental.¹⁶

“Persecutory delusion,” “sleeplessness,” “horror,” “untamed land”: all these terms and negative evocations reappear constantly, even though Levinas struggles to speak of the elemental in terms that contradict the Heideggerian notion of *Geworfenheit*—a dereliction that our author opposes to the

13. Miguel García Baró, “De l’emotion. La phénoménologie contre l’ontologie” (Visage et infini, Rome, 2006).

14. Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 14–5. Nevertheless, in that same passage Blumenberg warns us that the fine arts, relying on form, have “achieved only meager results in relation to the original terrors.”

15. *Ibid.*, 14.

16. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 142.

original enjoyment in which the ego crystallizes. And though, according to Levinas, the abandonment of which Heidegger speaks is not the first situation of the *Dasein*, there is something else that looms and stalks. In *Existence and Existents*, Levinas vividly conveys how fatigue, effort and laziness contain glimpses into the way in which the subject takes on the heavy task of being—that is, of assuming as his or her own a previously anonymous existence. He tries to demonstrate as well that something analogous to the depersonalization of insomnia—the continuum of the expanse experienced at night—is at work when we recognize the anonymity of events that lack a precise subject, registered in expressions such as “it’s raining” or “it’s hot.” In the context of these uncanny experiences, it is as if we were glimpsing an existence without any subjects or objects. And is it so? According to Miguel García-Baró, Levinas’s early notion of the *il y a* is the result of a phenomenological reversal in which a product of the imagination is inadvertently boosted by the feeling of horror that the projection of an indefinite time arouses in us. But, for our part, following the inklings provided by Zambrano’s description of the primeval space of the sacred and seeking, in due course, to benefit from this by linking it to Girard’s mimetic crisis, we would like to understand the *il y a* in fundamentally spatial terms, in order to provide it with a definite anthropological meaning.

Nevertheless, before continuing, we cannot help but notice that we are unable to avoid a sort of anachronism here. (Indeed, this is something that Levinas’s thought actually thrives on.) For Levinas, paganism precedes atheism, the latter being a *sine qua non* stage-setting for the irruption of true transcendence—the authentic aim of an ethical subjectivity.¹⁷ But in *Totality and Infinity*, there is a kind of gap, because we lack a more complete treatment of the previous situation: the emergence of the pagan gods. If they were only the fixation of Usener’s momentary deities, whose appearance coincides, from our point of view, with what Levinas describes as the joyful coming into being of the quality of that which “we live from,” we would simply be left in the selfish circularity of enjoyment. But, as we have already noted, a sort of permanent misgiving leaves ominous references scattered throughout almost all of his descriptions of the subject’s original situation. The suffocating closure that Levinas fears is first concretized in the *elemental*, which is equated *tout de suite* with the *mythical* without further pursuing its implications. This all happens as if the contentment of the self that is described in the pages on sensibility in *Totality and Infinity* were, in its fullest sense, only ascribable to a prelapsarian humanity, and the

17. *Ibid.*, 52–61.

mythical borders that threatens enjoyment were cosmogonic remainders similar to what has been analyzed by Paul Ricoeur in his account of the Adamic myth.¹⁸ Thus we find in synchronicity two situations that should be sequenced. However, as Paul Ricoeur states in the analysis just mentioned, innocence is something that can only be acknowledged as lost. So, in the situation described by Levinas, we would only get a glimpse of the salutary aspect of the elemental before succumbing to its mythical facet.

In his book *A Covenant of Creatures*—in the chapter devoted to myth after the end of metaphysics—Michael Flagenbat makes the case for a Platonic understanding of Levinas's *il y a* as a philosophical *mythos* that resorts to the image to get as close as possible to an otherwise inaccessible reality.¹⁹ That is the kind of eidetic necessity—in the Husserlian and morphological sense—that Zambrano ascribes to our first commerce with the real. But even if we do agree with his reading of the *il y a* as an attempt at a phenomenological transcription of the first chapters of Genesis, in which an *ex nihilo* creation does not appear, we still have to ask about the statute of the mythical in Levinas. Is the *Il y a* a myth, or does it actually describe a way of being that is the mythical being? Is it a myth because it is not true, or is it mythical because it constitutes the occlusion of truth?

Here we should recall that Levinas insists that, when used in an argument, Biblical verses must be phenomenologically justified. Now, it is quite clear that for Levinas what we call “the world” is such only because the voice of *Autrui*, of others, has already resonated in it. Only in the ordering (commandment) of the *neighbor* do phenomena receive their first emplacement. The world—its intelligibility—is, therefore, a moral achievement that exceeds a mere intentional performance: every *Sinngebung*, as “sense-attainment,” has an ethical background. That is why Levinas does not fail to warn us about the revocable nature of the world. In *Reality and its Shadow* he points to the uncanny experience of modern art, in which pure sensation is detached from all cosmic objects relieving us from the duty of constituting the real world.²⁰ In *Time and the Other*, some years

18. Paul Ricoeur, “El mito adámico y la visión escatológica de la historia,” in *Finitud y culpabilidad* (Madrid: Trotta, 2004), 377–419. In that chapter Ricoeur insists that in the Adamic tale what is at stake is the articulation between ontology and history. That is why what appears as a series of events is, from an ontological standpoint, an existential node. Furthermore, evil recognized as a reality that precedes humanity's fallenness is represented in the snake as a cosmogonic remnant, a mythological monster bursting into the Biblical narrative.

19. Michael Fagenbat, *A Covenant of Creatures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

20. In *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology* [trans. André Orianne (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1995)] Levinas makes the case for “morphological essences” that are akin to images in the sense that they are not “exact” as mathematical ideas would be.

earlier, he speaks of a situation in which extreme deprivation turns all the richness of the elemental into mere fuel to survive. Keeping in mind that there is no physics in metaphysics, Levinas provides us with a moral and phenomenological account of the fragility of the *Urfaktum* that is the world: “To say that the *world is created* is not the same as offering a theory of natural origins, it is equivalent to affirming that the pure, brutal fact of being has gone through a moral genesis that transforms chaos into order.”²¹

If Levinas fears the return of the primal *tohu wa’bohu* of *Genesis*, it is because he understands that this existence without singularities, without perspective—that is, without values—corresponds to the neutralization of the goodness of Creation. If, instead of a troublesome dualism (that some ascribe to Levinas), we affirm the moral character of the worldly genesis that leaves behind the *il ya*, we must ask ourselves to what concrete human experience this possible catastrophe dreaded by Levinas could be related. If the recourse to the *il ya* were simply a reasonable counter-myth, as Flagenbat believes, and not a description of the mythical, Levinas would be unable to tear the veil that, according to Girard, every myth places over reality. If Creation’s goodness is vulnerable to what Levinas designates as the *realm of the mythical gods*, we should understand the Biblical passages in which this primordial chaos is spoken of, and in which Levinas is perhaps inspired, as referring to a reality akin to that of the *Il ya*. That way, the anti-mythical thrust of the Bible would be preserved too. If we believe that a fragment like Isaiah 51:9-10 refers to a dualistic battle in which God faces the primordial forces of yesteryear (*tannin*, *Yämm*, *tehôm* etc ...), we return to what Paul Ricoeur designates as a theology of the Holy War that only perpetuates violence.²² But if we think of it as a warning against the destructive powers of the mythical, we move on to another order of thought where Girard can serve as a guide because, as Flagenbat points out, “Creation is not a given but a fragile accomplishment that can revert into chaos.”²³

It is not merely incidental that in the same passage, an octogenarian Levinas refers to both the *tohu wa’bohu* and the *χώρα* to talk about the

21. Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures*, 38.

22. “Can the verification of myth in life be taken further? The myth’s coherence seems to anticipate what can be denominated as a theology of the Holy War: if the King is the figure of the chaos-conquering god, the Enemy will be the image, in our history, of the forces of evil and its insolence will represent the resurfacing of the ancient chaos.” Paul Ricoeur, *Finitud y culpabilidad*, trans. Díaz and Meloni Peretti (Madrid: Trotta, 2004), 357. (The English translation is mine.)

23. Fagenblat, *A Covenant of Creatures*, 36.

Holocaust. He was not being metaphorical when he affirmed: “we returned to the desert ... we returned to a space receptacle.”²⁴ If the world as inter-subjective space or *Lebenswelt* results from a convergence attained only by a community, then when this interhuman bond disappears, what remains but a wasteland? When the world founders, what falls away are the differences and the nuances, the contours that separate beings and things. All singularities succumb, as well as each subject’s irreplaceable perspective. The only thing that remains is a threatening continuum, pregnant with violence. Is the *il y a* a phenomenological translation of Girard’s mimetic crisis, the generating matrix of all myths?

If as Levinas would have it, “the miracle of creation consists in creating a moral being,”²⁵ our starting point changes. So if, as philosophers and not theologians, we start by recognizing a constant Creation being actualized *ex-hylus* every time an authentic community is formed, instead of referring to an absolute beginning as the doctrine of the *ex-nihilo* creation of the world does, we must recognize, as Levinas does, the threatening possibility of Creation’s involution. As Flagenbat, following Hilary Putnam, declares: “The *il y a* suggests that a world without values ‘is’ a world without facts, or is not a world at all but a sheer chaos of indeterminate existing.”²⁶

The mere identity of things, then, its acknowledged causality, does not prevent this return to the dark side of the elemental, of *tehom*. When witnessing an enduring injustice, the doctors of the Talmud are said to have asked: “Why is not the world already all water?” This is precisely what we think René Girard deals with in his mimetic theory: what Flagenbat formulates as the “mythic neutralization of the ethical structure of the world.”²⁷ But although we agree with Flagenbat’s conclusions as to what is at stake in the positing of the *il y a*, we, by contrast, believe the *Il y a* to be not just an extreme hypothesis as to what the disappearance of ethics would entail. We hold that it conveys a very real and concrete annihilation of differences. While, for Lévy-Strauss’s structuralism, the undifferentiated is only a backdrop for the primitive mind, a means of contrast for the deployment of differences, for Girard it is a real anthropological situation whose ontological equivalent is to be found in the *Il y a* posited by Levinas.²⁸

24. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 121.

25. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 89.

26. Flagenbat, *A Covenant of Creatures*, 34.

27. *Ibid.*, 50.

28. “In the linguistic perspective of Lévi-Strauss, the ‘undifferentiated’ or the ‘continuum’ is nothing but a ‘patching over’ of distinctions that have already been made in language ...

The crisis described by Girard is not a mere multiplication of disparate elements that can no longer be assimilated by the community. If we were to employ Levinas's vocabulary, we should say that the crisis represents, on the contrary, the absolute empire of the Same, of uniformity by reciprocity. Here is Girard's description:

When a society breaks down, time sequences shorten. Not only is there an acceleration of the tempo of positive exchanges that continue only when absolutely indispensable, as in barter, for example, but also the hostile or "negative" exchanges tend to increase. The reciprocity of the negative rather than positive exchanges becomes foreshortened as it becomes more visible, as witnessed in the reciprocity of insults, blows, revenge and neurotic symptoms. That is why traditional societies shun a too immediate reciprocity ... Negative reciprocity, although it brings people into opposition with each other, tends to make their conduct uniform and is responsible for the predominance of the *same*. Thus, paradoxically, it is both conflictual and solipsistic. This lack of differentiation corresponds to the reality of human relations, yet it remains mythical.²⁹

"Why mythical?"—we might well ask. Because it is interpreted, thought of and later reported in mythical terms. According to Girard's theory, mythology is born when both the insidious cause of the crisis—conflictual mimesis—and its mechanisms of perpetuation are hidden. When the reproduction of mimetic desire crosses a certain threshold—when we all want the same—the once limited rivalries that plagued the community at a tolerable level become an all-against-all struggle. The cyclical empire of what Levinas calls the *same* then remains a tributary of the mythical assessment of the reciprocal stance of mutual egoisms. As he puts it:

Being's interest takes a dramatic form in egoisms struggling with one another, each against all in the multiplicity of allergic egoisms which are at war with one another and are thus together. War is the deed or the drama of the essence's interest. No entity can await its hour. They all clash despite the

A representation of difference as such, of the discontinuous as such, can only be made against the background of the continuum, the undifferentiated." René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bahh and Michael Metteer (Stanford: University Press, 1987), 109

29. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 13.

difference of the regions to which the terms in conflict may belong. Essence thus is the extreme synchronism of war.³⁰

Placed back to back, these lengthy quotes from Girard and Levinas betray a striking resemblance. We wish to assert that they are basically speaking of the same human situation. Both authors dread the dangers of an unhinged reciprocity. It is widely known that Paul Ricoeur, in spite of the great admiration and respect he felt for Levinas' thought—ascertained through a continuous dialogue with the latter's philosophy—somehow reproached Levinas for his unwillingness to acknowledge reciprocity as a condition both for all dialogic encounter—his *face to face*—and for the formation of human institutions, particularly in *Oneself as Another*.³¹ But if Levinas insists on the basic asymmetry of our ethical relation to the Other it is because he knows what strict reciprocity can become when brought into play by politics: "In political life, taken unrebuked, humanity is understood from its works—a humanity of interchangeable men, of reciprocal relations. The substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself."³²

For Levinas, politics makes life bearable when the multiplicity of egoisms that constitute a community are left unquestioned in their pursuit of ontological plenitude. Girard would agree. But political life, as a lesser evil, never delves into the authentic causes of this perpetual conflict that does not have any real identifiable object at its core. As Girard explains, once mimetic reciprocity progresses beyond a certain point, the original object of the dispute remains out of sight, while only the perpetual antagonism of the rivals prevails. The object vanishes because, as Levinas puts it, what is desired is the being of the Other. For both thinkers, the escalation of violent reciprocity has its origin in the denial of the allocentric character of all desire. What for Levinas is an ethical as well as a metaphysical debt to the Other, for Girard is the cause of an ontological disease—a malaise fueled by the belief that only the other subject enjoys a self-sufficiency

30. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, 1st ed. (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 4.

31. "The question is then whether, to be heard and received, the injunction [of the Other] must not call for a response that compensates for the dissymmetry of the face-to-face encounter. Taken literally a dissymmetry left uncompensated would break off the exchange of giving and receiving and would exclude any instruction by the face within the field of solitude." Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 189.

32. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 298.

that by all rights should be mine. Inevitably, the neighbor becomes first a rival and then an obstacle. Hence, the constant synchronicity of war described by Levinas, that always threatens us with the menacing presence of the *il y a* as the rivals fall into an undifferentiated melee. That is why, for both thinkers, the Western ideal of autonomy can only be suspect. As Levinas puts it, criticizing the bourgeois spirit of self-sufficiency as always unknowingly gravitating towards the “other”: “The individual is called upon to loosen the grasp of the foreign reality that chokes him, but this is in order to ensure the full flowering of his own reality. Only the struggle with the *obstacle* is only open to the heroism of the individual; it is turned towards the foreign.”³³

So, besides this recognition of the other-centeredness of desire—a fact which in itself is the foundation for both responsibility and mimesis—are there any more bridges between Levinas and Girard’s critical description of the situation of primeval humanity and its archaic echoes as found in our own midst? We think there are plenty. For Zambrano and Girard—as well as for Levinas, albeit in a more guarded way—a sort of mythical hierophany is the desperately sought after resolution to the dreaded paroxysm of violent reciprocity. But while Zambrano speaks of a hope wrapped in terror, that will eventually be answered by less mythical deities—for her the Greek gods are a prefiguration of the first categories of thought—for Levinas and Girard the gods hail from a not-so-wholesome source. For the latter, the sacred, in all its ambivalence, only appears after a human community projects outwards—for the sake of survival—its own violence. The hypostasis of this redemptive vengeance inflicted upon the arbitrary victim of the community will constitute the archaic sacred: the first gods responsible for both the crisis and its resolution. In Levinas, meanwhile, the ominous undertones of the elemental as described in his phenomenology have already been established, but we would like to go a step further and consolidate his diagnosis of the emergence of the sacred and its mythical veil in terms of how it relates to that of Girard. In an often neglected passage of *Existence and Existents*, Levinas equates the atmosphere of the *il y a* with Lévy-Bruhl’s notion of participation. We should quote at length:

What is new in the idea of participation which Lévy-Bruhl introduced to describe an existence where horror is the dominant emotion, is in the destruction of categories which had hitherto been used to describe the feelings evoked by “the sacred.” ... Mystical participation is completely different from the

33. Levinas, *On Escape*, 50–1.

Platonic participation in a genus; in it the identity of the terms is lost. They are divested of what constituted their very substantivity. The participation of one term in another does not consist in sharing an attribute; one term *is the other*. The *private* existence of each term, mastered by a subject that is, loses this private character and returns to an undifferentiated background; the existence of one submerges the other, and is thus no longer an existence of the one. We recognize here the *there is (il y a)*.³⁴

Here, as in another text on Lévy-Bruhl,³⁵ Levinas explicitly links the *il y a* with the emergence of the archaic sacred, but does not, as Zambrano or Durkheim would, concede that it prepares the way for a more authentic revelation. For him, nothing in this horrific situation in which any kind of substance or substratum is destroyed points to God. Lévy-Bruhl, says Levinas, has the merit of acknowledging emotion's intentionality, a quality that allows it to prolong itself into the other's psyche instead of staying confined to the subject.³⁶ Participation as conceived by this anthropologist—neglected by Girard, if the truth be told—works as a kind of contagion in which all those involved lose any sense of singularity and immerse themselves in the collective and rhythmic workings of trance, an extreme form of mimetic outbreak. Subjects, now quasi-objects, are left at the mercy of an imitative spiral because existence, for a primitive mentality, is only verified in and through participation. There is no way out. We can thus understand Levinas's suspicion towards the enchantment of dance—a purified form of conflictive reenactment, according to Girard—and his somewhat pitiless critique of art, perceived by him as a child of the *il y a*'s horror:³⁷ "The particular automatic character of a walk or dance to music is a mode of being where nothing is unconscious, but where consciousness, paralyzed in its freedom, plays totally absorbed in this playing."³⁸

It seems to us that Levinas and Girard's efforts converge in their description of the mythical aspect's recurrent situation, in which threatening impersonal forces—both human and inhuman—erupt producing a confusion between subjects and objects. When the elemental loses its character of quality and looms as a threat, when each individual loses its place in the

34. Levinas, *Existence and existents*, 61.

35. Emmanuel Levinas, "Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy," in *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 39–53.

36. *Ibid.*, 43.

37. Baró, "Short De l'emotion. La phénoménologie contre l'ontologie," 9.

38. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 133.

structure and sinks into an undifferentiated chaos, natural causality ends up assimilated to both human and divine agency: hence the faceless elemental gods of Levinas, and hence also the equivocal attribution of responsibility in Girard's mimetic crisis. When this situation unravels, earthquakes and storms get confused with hosts and crowds, the rivers go out of their way to fight hand to hand with warriors, and dancers can suddenly become a runaway crowd infused by a god. The armed "contingent," the enraged mob, become aggregates whose summation turns them into another type of entity, into an anonymous and mechanical force that is no longer part of the human world and that presses irresistibly. In this vein Levinas speaks in his Preface to *Totality and Infinity* of a "mobilization of absolutes [due to which] the trial by force is the test of the real."³⁹ As Simone Weil aptly puts it:

Force, in the hands of another, exercises over the soul the same tyranny that extreme hunger does; for it possesses and in *perpetuo*, the power of life and death. Its rule, moreover, is as cold and hard as the rule of inert matter ... Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is, nobody really possesses it. The human race is not divided up, in the *Iliad*, into conquered persons, slaves, suppliants on the one hand, and conquerors and chiefs on the other. In this poem there is not a single man who does not at one time or another have to bow his neck to force.⁴⁰

The exponential involution of the social fabric when force takes the lead—as shown in Simone Weil's analysis—can perhaps be illustrated in Wai Chi Dimock's take on the Homeric description of the sinister silence that reigns among the Achaeans as their troops descend against the enemy like raging waves (4: 498–502): "The extinction of sound is not incidental but elementary. A silent world is a damaged world, a world in which human beings live only a kind of half-life, existing only as a specimen but not as audible words."⁴¹

That is why Levinas suspects, in all myths, the murmur of the anonymous (the threat of a neutral, voiceless violence), and in every aesthetic or

39. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 21.

40. Simone Weil, "The Iliad or the Poem of Force," in *Simone Weil, An Anthology* (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 170–71.

41. Wai Chi Dimock, "After Troy: Homer, Euripides and Total War," in *Rethinking Tragedy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 75.

mystical notion of “participation,” the conversion of the living word into a legitimizing spectacle that tends inevitably to repeat itself, as does the ritual enactment of the mimetic crisis. And it cannot be otherwise since, as Girard has shown, the concealment of the dynamism that gives rise to it is inherent to myth. For this reason, the supposedly sudden character of the undifferentiating chaos is preceded by presages and cataclysms in which human agency, in its excess, is confused with the power of nature. Fascinated by the potency behind the anonymous guise of force, we give into it time and again, generating with myth a false exit from totality. We thus make war the concrete manifestation of an ontological *polemos* accepted without further ado because strength carries with it its own proof, as Levinas warns us. As H.H. Frankël puts it, referring to the *Iliad*: “There is no summer or winter, no bad weather or cold. The Trojan camp is only the arena for the Trojan War, not a landscape.”⁴²

This is the foundering “world” a young Levinas gloomily intuited in a passage of Husserl’s infamous § 49 of *Ideen*—a passage that deals with the possibility of intentionality’s failure to launch a full-fledged cosmos.⁴³ Thus, in a mythological and immanent universe in which, in the exasperation of both mimicry and solipsistic interests, no one can wait for his or her turn, the exit out of the *tohu wa’bohu* is neither guaranteed nor absolutely doomed, as both authors we’ve tried to link so far constantly remind us. If only we could turn away from an overwhelming sacredness that perpetuates rivalry, and remember the holiness of our neighbor, so that the primordial *persecution* at first lived as the menacing element, but truly hailing from the other as a call to responsibility, could become the *substitution* of self-sacrifice and not the mere propagating and placating of force.⁴⁴ After all, we surely risk too much if we do not:

42. Hermann Fränkel, *Poesía y filosofía de la Grecia Arcaica*, trans. Sánchez Ortiz de Urbina (Madrid: La Barca de la Medusa, 2004), 50.

43. Emmanuel Levinas, “Simulacres,” in *Positivité et Transcendance* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), 40–2.

44. “The non-indifference of responsibility to the point of substitution for the neighbor is the source of all compassion. It is responsibility for the outrage that the other, who *qua* other excludes me, inflicts on me, for the persecution with which, without any intention, he persecutes me.” Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, 166. Levinas here describes a “pre-original” situation in which the proximity of the other obsesses me and interrupts the recurrence that constitutes me as an ego: “a trauma... without possible apology or logos” (ibid., 197). From a Girardian standpoint we could risk saying that precisely this obsessive proximity gives rise to both the positive and negative aspects of mimesis. “Substitution” in Levinas can be equated—not without some minor nuances—with self-sacrifice as understood by Girard: “being held accountable for what I did not do” (ibid., XXIX). In a conversation with Rebecca Adams, referring to the positive connotation he was at first not willing to concede to the

If we believe we live in a world in which it is only worth looking for that which is denied and nothing that is offered, we actively collaborate in the construction of this world... It would seem that vast regions of the planet are transformed into deserts because of the use that men make of them because of their desire. The more the desert expands, inside or outside, the more it reinforces the temptation to incriminate the real, God himself, or even worse, our neighbor.⁴⁵

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notion of "self-sacrifice." He accepts her definition as valid: "self-sacrifice as excessive desire on behalf of the Other." Rebecca Adams, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion & Literature* 25, no. 2 (1993): 30. Nevertheless, a comprehensive survey of these convergences is beyond the scope of the present analysis, as it would also have to include a thorough survey of the authentic transcendence posited by Levinas as "Ilieté" and by Girard as absolute external mediation. Hence our merely schematic mention of further affinities between this two authors.

45. René Girard, *La antigua ruta de los hombres perversos*, trans. Díez del Corral (Madrid: Anagrama, 1985), 83–84. (The English translation is mine).

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