

The Allegory of Being

Image

Levinas begins his 1948 essay on art, “La réalité et son ombre,” simply enough. As everyone knows, the artist substitutes an image for a concept. Uninterested in the intelligibility of the object, the artist does not maintain a real relationship with the object by knowing it, grasping it, and putting it to work. By substituting an image for the concept, all real relations with the object are neutralized. Artistic “disinterest” is just this blindness to concepts, Levinas says. The artistic gaze neutralizes vision and perception. It is not an act. It is a nonconcerning, nonknowing gaze. It does not cross a distance in order to grasp an object as does the hand that labors or the consciousness that seizes the thing in an act of recognition. The simple, elementary substitution of the image for the concept inverts all directionality, all conscious “aiming-at.” The image that the artist substitutes for the concept is not another object and does not behave like an object. In everyday life, in everyday commerce with things, the seized object tends to disappear

into its usefulness, its function, its familiarity. Art arrests this movement of recognition and industry. In art, that which vanishes into utility and knowledge reappears outside its usefulness, outside all real relations, in a space strictly uncrossable, infinitely fragile, only proximally *there* at all, as if its existence had been paralyzed, or as if the object led a phantom existence parallel to its truth.

The image is fundamentally or essentially passive. It eludes all attempts to seize it because it occupies empty space. An image, quite simply, is nothing. Our relation with the image “marks a hold over us rather than our initiative [marque une emprise sur nous, plutôt que notre initiative],”¹ Levinas says. The image contrasts with concepts or, more precisely, it is the very event of contrasting with concepts. Precisely to the extent that I do not act on, know, or think the thing in its concept, there is an inversion of my everyday relationship with the object, and subjectivity is pushed to an extreme pole of passivity. Unable to seize an image, I participate in its imaginary dimension. This passivity can be observed, Levinas points out, in music, dance, and magic.² To this list we may add trance, hysterical possession, and hypnotic suggestion. In short, the image inspires and it is just the image that inspires, not the object it represents. *Precisely when there is nothing and just insofar as there is nothing, the image exercises its impotent power.* Rhythm and participation are the “exceptional structure of aesthetic existence [la structure exceptionnelle de l’existence esthétique]” and are also the way “the poetic order affects us [l’ordre poétique nous affecte].”³ This involvement, importantly, is not “beyond” representation. It is, to the contrary, the profound involvement of the subject *in* its own representations. Profound because their “entry into us is one with our entry into them [entrent en nous ou nous entrons en eux, peu importe],” and therefore “in this rhythm there is no longer

a oneself but a sort of passage from oneself to anonymity [dans le rythme il n'y a plus de *soi*, mais comme un passage de *soi* à l'anonymat]."⁴

The participation itself is an unrepresentable movement. In aesthetic existence there is an indistinction between who is possessed or affected and that which possesses or affects. Levinas notes in passing that this simultaneity of possession and dispossession has a role in ecstatic rites. Aesthetic existence involves us in an indistinction of "same" and "other." It is thus a truly unrepresentable moment (but not a "beyond") wherein the density of being in its "here" is invaded by a "nowhere," a "nothing." Rhythm cannot be objectified; it can only be dramatized, enacted, suffered. It is experienced as indistinction, as myself-as-other. Unable to hang on to its freedom, the subject experiences an exteriority in which it cannot but mistake itself for another. That is, the subject ceases to experience itself *as* itself. Totally absorbed in the scene, consciousness, having nothing to aim at, becomes supererogatory, as does the body, for, at once actor and spectator, the body is transformed into sensations belonging to no one, or belonging to an anonymous Someone whose organs of perception have defected. Hence the fear of the artistic milieu that is attested to in the nervous anxiety so many people feel in the crowded concert hall or the august museum.

An image, Levinas says, is essentially musical insofar as it detaches itself from the object as does sound from that which makes the sound.⁵ In the aesthetic experience, this detachment is an essential atmosphere. In fact, however, this atmosphere is everywhere because images are everywhere. Indeed, the whole world wears on its face its own image and we are thus permitted to think a dimension of aesthetic participation that is general and not restricted to the movie theater or concert hall. This general dimension of profound participation would,

then, subtend consciousness and industry at every moment. Industrial language necessarily fails to tell of this involvement, for this profound participation defects from “every moment” of subjectivity (i.e., of initiative and power). The deconceptualization of reality that art realizes restrictedly is, in fact, a generalized impersonality that lies “below” all knowing. If you like, an ecstatic rite shadows all cognition. Where being-in-the-world involves existence in concepts and truth, ecstatic sensations depart from each moment of being-in-the-world and involve us in a disincarnation of the real simply because of the image (the nonobject, or the music) that is on the face of all that is in the world. Beneath or beside one’s conceptual commerce with the world there remains a rhythmic participation whose immediacy drives out all thought. Aesthetic existence, in short, is perpetually suggestive, affirmative, influential, impersonal, and immemorial. It is as if in the real itself a band of Sirens had always called to us, as in Blanchot’s retelling of the fabulous episode from Homer.⁶

Art realizes the paradox of immediacy—the paradox of an immediacy that drives out all mediation and, essentially empty, drives out itself and is thus outside memory. Disincarnate and impersonal, aesthetic existence cannot enter into any present (or it “dies” when forced to, as do the Sirens in Blanchot’s essay). It is thus intolerable to thought. Not the minutest sliver of reflection or temporal lag makes room for subjective initiative or action. The music lover no doubt feels great passion as she listens to a beloved piece, but it is not certain that she feels *herself* in the passion. Paradoxically, immediacy unhinges me from myself. The proximity of art to magic and trance indicates a trajectory wherein the subject experiences a fainting away of self altogether, and an exposure to exteriority. The body has a membrane, a skin, but the self does not. The “magical” conversion of the object into an

image, a nonobject, a nothing, triggers the immediacy of passionate involvement. While retaining the form, colors, sound, and other qualities of the object, the image, in effect, “drives the object out of the world [chasser les objets du monde]” and thus “breaks up representation [briser la représentation]”⁷ because the image subtracts the object to be represented from the representation. The image disincarnates the real, but this is so only because the real is always already approached by its image: “The whole of our world, with its elementary and intellectually elaborated givens, can touch us musically, can become an image [L’ensemble de notre monde, avec ses données et élémentaires et intellectuellement élaborées, peut nous toucher musicalement, devenir image].”⁸ Art in general realizes this latency and perpetually effaces the difference between the real and the imaginary, nature and mimesis. “La réalité et son ombre” is thus an introduction to the important recent work done by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe on radical, or non-Platonic (i.e., nonrestricted, that is to say, *general*) mimesis.⁹

Duality

A sign directly refers to its object, but an image resembles it.¹⁰ An image resembles an object, but resemblance is not the result of a comparison between two realms: the real and the imaginary. This is a key point for Levinas in this essay. Audiences who respond to a film by immediately comparing it to some reality often respond energetically and aggressively as if they were being cheated of reality and only the proper comparison could restore the real to itself and keep the two realms separate. In jeopardy is the proper difference between them. But resemblance is not the end result of a comparison. It is that which engenders the image in the first place. Resemblance begins in the real itself:

Here is a person who is what he is; but he does not make us forget, does not absorb, cover over entirely the objects he holds and the way he holds them, his gestures, limbs, gaze, thought, skin, which escape from under the identity of his substance, which like a torn sack is unable to contain them. [. . .] There is then a duality in this person, this thing, a duality in its being. It is what it is and it is a stranger to itself, and there is a relationship between these two moments. We will say the thing is itself and is its image. And that this relationship between the thing and its image is resemblance.

[Voici une personne qui est ce qu'elle est; mais elle ne fait pas oublier, n'absorbe pas, ne recouvre pas entièrement les objets qu'elle tient et la manière dont elle les tient, ses gestes, ses membres, son regard, sa pensée, sa peau, qui s'échappent de sous l'identité de sa substance, incapable, comme un sac troué, de les contenir. [. . .] Il y a donc cette personne, dans cette chose une dualité, une dualité dans son être. Elle est ce qu'elle est et elle est étrangère à elle-même et il y a un rapport entre ces deux moments. Nous dirons que la chose est elle-même et son image. Et que ce rapport entre la chose et son image est la ressemblance.]¹¹

A person or a thing resembles itself and the resemblance is already its "other" destiny: toward the image. This movement of resemblance is obscure. One cannot imagine a thing resembling itself. One simply imagines the thing, of course. This attests to the simultaneity of its being and its appearing. That which appears, however, is detachable from the thing and can end outside the thing on a videotape or in a museum. That a thing is imaginable, that it is sensible, gives it another destiny

apart from its truth (from its identity). It is as if that which is imaginable were always already left behind by the thing. Insofar as a thing resembles itself, it departs from itself and can be quoted, or placed in parenthesis, in an image. An image captures and immobilizes this (invisible, unimaginable) movement of a thing-resembling-itself. Art captures that which truth sheds, leaves abandoned, leaks. Art, Levinas tells us summarily, “lets go of the prey for the shadow [l’art lâche donc la proie pour l’ombre].”¹² We are nonetheless entitled to ask: What was the prey? What was lost?

The answer to this question is ambiguous. There is, Levinas says, a duality in being, a nontruth or a defection from truth that is simultaneous with truth. Simultaneous with *being* itself, a thing resembles itself, or flees itself. Giorgio Agamben understands this to mean that a thing is simultaneously itself *and* its qualities without being the same thing as its qualities.¹³ A thing, Agamben says, is not its qualities, is not identical to its qualities, but at the same time it is nothing other than its qualities. We shall return to this delicate point in our chapter on Agamben. (Let us note for now, however, that Blanchot reads the same ambiguity through the uncanniness of the cadaver.¹⁴ He points out that the dear departed is nothing other than the cadaver that lies in state. Yet the departed is certainly not the same thing as the corpse, is not identical with the cadaver. The dear departed one is gone, precisely. Yet, in the corpse, the departed comes to resemble herself, or even, *returns* to herself *as* her resemblance, while at the same time absenting herself. There is a sort of erosion at work here that is strictly speaking unthinkable. It is not a case of qualities clinging to some substance, sub-base, or fundament. It is rather the case that resemblance moves to replace the real, that identity seems to be “constituted” by resemblance or qualities without *being* those qualities or that resemblance.)

Levinas finds, therefore, that that which is strange, obscure (but in no way ineffable), and lends itself to art and to myth is this: Being-such-as-it-is, the real in its truth, is already offered to, or is *in*, the imaginary. The being-in-the-imaginary of the real is a kind of originary exoticism. It is the structure of the sensible as such. The sensible character of the thing, its qualities (red, hard, sonorous, aromatic), make it imaginable, and the truth of the thing is nothing other than its being imaginable as such. The real, being, truth, is the place where the imaginary takes place. That which is “lost,” the “prey” that art “lets go of” is, quite simply, the very event of the imaginary—an event that cannot be imagined, an event the real is already involved in. (By the way, this is the torment of the Blanchotian writer: he loses the most desired moment, the event of poetic language itself. He is tormented by the presence/absence *in* the image of that which is unimaginable. In short, the real as-it-is is always already becoming an image, an untruth.)

Being is dual. It is simultaneous with itself. Irreducibly ambiguous, it is withdrawn from itself in its very sensibility. Nontruth is the sensible character of the thing. Insofar as a being resembles itself it is sensible, but its sensibility is an obscure essence or fugitivity that “disincarnates” being. I see a thing *as* its image, not *through* it. (Thus, Levinas says that the image is the allegory of being, a point to which we shall return shortly.) The disincarnation of being is the very intensity and essential strangeness of art. But art has its own aggressivity as well. In art, the sensible does not merely depart from the real. It “insists” on the absence of the object. Splashes of color, sound, and bits of foreign matter “occupy [the object’s] place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection [occupent entièrement sa place pour marquer son éloignement, comme si l’objet représenté mourait, se dégradait, se désincar-

nait dans son propre reflet].”¹⁵ The massive presence of a corpse wrings so many tears from us because it occupies fully and with excessive completeness the place of the departed loved one. The real is itself *and* it escapes itself. Art does not merely reflect this evasion; it brings it out and completes it. It intensifies it by completing it, by quoting it, by substituting for the truth of the thing its image—as if it was indifferent to the reality of the thing, or as if the reality of the thing counted for nothing. Art places in parenthesis the fugitivity of the real, its ambiguity, and circumscribes a “dimension of evasion [une dimension d’évasion].”¹⁶ Insofar as it does this, it introduces into the world the atmosphere of that temporal interval Levinas calls *l’entretemps*.

To sum up: Insofar as a being resembles itself (apart from *being* itself, that is, apart from the truth proper to its being, i.e., its presence) it is sensible and this sensibility is its nontruth, its shadow. The image does not precede the resembling. The neutralization of space in the image *is* the resemblance that “engenders the image [engendre l’image].”¹⁷ A thing can participate in its truth or in its being, but parallel to this a thing departs from itself in an emission that is phantasmic and is not identical with truth. The quasi existence of this phantasm is a “semblance of existing [semblant d’exister]” or a nontruth without being.¹⁸ (In the chapter on Giorgio Agamben, we shall show that the Italian philosopher makes of this phantasm a pure return to being, but to being purely profaned, that is, stripped of all ineffability and identity.)

The Obscure Temporality of the Artwork

We have seen that an image is musical, that it is rhythmic, but in the last analysis, it is plastic, a statue, a “stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself [un arrêt du temps

ou plutôt son retard sur lui-même].”¹⁹ The time that seems to be introduced into the art of novels, plays, and cinema can in no way “shatter the fixity of the image [n’ébranle pas la fixité de l’image].”²⁰ Just as Mona Lisa’s smile will never broaden, so will Hamlet eternally agree to meet with the ghost that says it is his father’s, and so eternally will Kane suffer the loss of his family, his political ambitions, his empire, and his marriages. The work of art will forever be arrested in the task of accomplishing the work of being. It will forever defect from the time proper to being. Celluloid and paper will of course decay, but *as an image* the artwork will be forever fixed *en l’entretemps*, and this fatality is the central concern of Levinas’s essay on art.

Art is an instant that “endures without a future [dure sans avenir]”²¹ and even without a duration. For art is an image and an image is, if we may say this, *rigorously* uncertain. It does not even occupy space. An image is an “impersonal and anonymous *instant* [*instant* impersonnel et anonyme].”²² There is thus something deadly in the puppetry that is art. Unable to force itself into the present and assume a future, art is the intrusion of death into the familiar world. The temporality art realizes, Levinas says, is the temporality of nightmare. Like the *il y a*, the instant of fixity that is the event of art strips freedom of its power to assume the present moment. Art is not the replica of a time that has been suspended halfway through its continuation and abandoned as half-completed like a bridge that stops in midspan. As Levinas has been showing us, art is that which, in the general economy of being, defects from the present. It is that part of being that incessantly moves to its *en deçà*, its “interstice,” as if each moment of (chronological) time were simultaneously a moment of fate. This should remind us of a point that is important to Levinas’s work as a whole. He conceives of time as a series of instants sutured

together but infinitely fragile, always shadowed by the possibility of congealing into an image and thus of withdrawing from our powers.²³

Being is dual. It doubles up and resembles itself, and the temporality of art is carved out of this repetition. It is in this way that the real itself solicits the artist, since it is always already involved in its own shadow and thus is already vulnerable to the temporal modification that is the image, the narrative, the history. An artist is a person who is fascinated by the plasticity of the real. He or she is one who, as Blanchot says, “lives the event as an image [vivre un événement en image],”²⁴ that is, who experiences the event insofar as it is *already* an image (or already resembles itself and is detached from the real). Levinas puts it this way: “Life solicits the novelist when it seems to him as if it were already something out of a book [La vie sollicite le romancier quand elle lui apparaît comme si elle sortait déjà d’un livre].”²⁵ This means that there is already something artificial about the real, something aesthetic, uncanny, plastic—if you like, something fake. Life is always very nearly a novel, an image, a corpse. Put differently, the real is always vulnerable to the stoppage of time—to the image of finitude—that it wears on its face. Insofar as this person resembles herself, she is infinitely vulnerable, infinitely fragile, as an image is fragile. A strange weakness pervades her that we cannot grasp, a bleeding we cannot stanch. She is not the same thing as her resemblance to herself, but she is nothing other than it. Human reality is nothing other than this infinite vulnerability, inequality-in-itself, or difference-in-itself. It is as if the face of things were another body, a body “made up of” fragility and that takes the place of personal presence. We may wish to say that this is an infinite vulnerability to death. However, the ontological signification is doubled by the fugitivity of the image: a derelict time unable

to become present and that insists on the absence of being, but as if absence itself had been immobilized in its approach and could not even achieve the absence the image so dramatically insists on.

Levinas goes on to say in this essay that art is “the uncertainty of [time’s] continuation [l’incertitude de sa continuation],”²⁶ the possibility that time can stop. This anxiety attests to a dimension of time that peels itself away from chronology as though “a whole set of facts was already immobilized and formed a series [comme si toute une suite de faits s’immobilisaient et formaient série].”²⁷ The real, at its surfaces, on its face, offers itself to art as if it was already plastic. The artist participates solely in the shadow dimension. The very intimacy and intensity of art are its attentiveness to what appears, to what is at the surface, to that which incessantly comes to the surface—resemblance. It is at her surfaces that a person is nearly petrified, nearly captured (but it is here that she is also essentially fugitive, for the image flees the present). This incessant coming to the surface is the obscurity of the time of dying, as Levinas proceeds to make clear. The time of dying is not the cross section of a continuum. Instead, “The time of *dying* itself cannot give itself the other shore. What is unique and poignant in this instant is due to the fact that it cannot pass. In *dying*, the horizon of the future is given, but the future as promise of a new present is refused; one is in the interval, forever an interval [Le temps-même du *mourir* ne peut pas se donner l’autre rive. Ce que cet instant a d’unique et de poignant tient au fait de ne pas pouvoir passer. Dans le *mourir*, l’horizon de l’avenir est donnée, mais, l’avenir en tant que promesse du présent nouveau est refusé—on est dans l’intervalle, à jamais intervalle].”²⁸ This *dying*, Levinas says, “is the great obsession of the artist’s world [la grande obsession du monde artiste].”²⁹ An instant of time may not have another

shore. It may be sutured into time's *l'entretemps*, outside any continuum, and stop just short of the present. It is as if living time were simultaneously sutured into a plastic series, a ceaseless interval departing from any continuity. Or it is as if being-as-it-is, in its truth, were also irreparably consigned to nontruth, to immobilization in the image—buried alive, as in Poe. Art realizes the possibility that living being can always be experienced as an image, as unliving, as always already petrified—as if qualities clung to nothing at all.

The Space of Art

Art is then something horrible, “something inhuman and monstrous [quelque chose d’inhumain et de monstrueux]”³⁰ because it is powerless, because it cannot go beyond, because it cannot even end. Art is radical passivity. It “shows” this passivity in the stoppage of time *en deçà du temps*. Its value to civilization is ambiguous since it is utterly foreign to the world of initiative. It shows the world the obscurity of fate not as an elsewhere that comes from beyond to intervene in the present, but as the very face the world wears. Art accomplishes this feat by way of irresponsibility. Outside all labor, art beckons to us as if all life could end up in myth, in plasticity, in the “rhythm of a reality which solicits only its admission into a book or a painting [le rythme d’une réalité qui ne sollicite que son admission dans un livre ou dans un tableau].”³¹ It is as if art could replace the building up of a habitat, a world, the establishment of justice, governments, the city itself. Ultimately “horrible,” art nonetheless beckons to us in the same way that a rhythm is irresistibly engaging.

Levinas concludes, therefore, that art, aesthetic existence, rhythm, simultaneous possession and dispossession, and irresponsibility are a part of life and have a place, “but only a

place, in human happiness [mais une place seulement—dans le bonheur de l’homme].”³² Criticism, insofar as it approaches the artistic event as such, reintroduces the inhumanity of art back into the world. As we have seen, this will not involve a comparison of the artwork to some reality. It involves treating the artwork as a myth: “[T]his immobile statue has to be put in movement and made to speak [cette statue immobile, il faut la mettre en mouvement et la faire parler].”³³ It involves, in short, interrupting myth and integrating that which is excessively closed to language back into the language from which it defected.³⁴ Myth is the source of philosophical truth, for it is, as the moment of resemblance, the distance the real takes from itself—its ambiguity and duality. Art is an inversion of creation.³⁵ It presents to the world the vulnerability of congealing into an image that all creation is prey to, and philosophy and criticism can ally themselves with creation only by “skipping over the intervals of the meanwhile [en sautant les intervalles de l’entretemps].”³⁶ In effect, this means that philosophy and criticism can only begin by “forgetting” art.

For, like an idol, Levinas says, an artwork is “stupid.”³⁷ We must add that every artist since Pygmalion has known this. Art is a caricature of life, not another, better, life. The artwork cannot assume or take on life. It overflows life on all sides, like water without a container. Unable to attain the present moment, the artwork spills all the aspirations the artist built into it. Art can only empty itself of all the artist’s efforts.

The elementary procedure of art is to substitute an image for a concept. But the artist cannot be said to aim at the image per se as a goal. Art (except in advertising) does not wish to limit itself to an image, however perfect or beautiful. Neither does the artist aim at an elusive essence nor ineffability, as do philosophy and criticism. Art aims to remain in contact with that which is “*unmade in its own image [défait selon son im-*

age],” as Blanchot puts it.³⁸ Art remains in contact with that which is infinitely vulnerable to disincarnation—that which is neither itself in its truth nor in its image (its double, or its other fate). The substitution of the image for the concept is only the first step, for when the image has succeeded in driving the object out of existence, what remains? What is the image when it is no longer an image of . . . ? Neither the thing nor its double, the artwork is at once the trace of no origin. If art “lets go of the prey for the shadow,” and if the “insecurity of a being that has a presentiment of its fate is the great obsession of the artist’s world,” this is because art maintains contact with the imaginary space left empty of all substance and inhabited by no one—the space that being spills out into, beside itself. In this space (Blanchot’s *l’espace littéraire*), the real is already imaginary and detached from its truth, its identity. In this space, the plasticity of matter no longer refers to the substance to which qualities cling but to the arrested death that is the rigorous immobility of the statue. It is ambiguous space and it is the most subtle of bodies, for it is neither substance nor image but rather the liquidation of the elemental distance that separates the two. This space belongs neither to art nor to philosophy, neither to the image nor to the concept. In contrast to the philosopher, the artist is allied with the very weakness of space itself: communication or sheer communicativity—the pure “there is” (*il y a*). (Blanchot, in our opinion, has gone further than any other writer in our times toward making this space “speak.”)

“Inert matter,” Levinas says, “already refers to a substance to which its qualities cling. In a statue, matter knows the death of idols [La matière inert se réfère déjà une substance à laquelle s’accrochent ses qualités. Dans la statue, la matière connaît la mort de l’idole].”³⁹ This means that in art matter will encounter the inversion of creation that is *l’entretemps*. In the inversion,

apart from the inertia of matter and already withdrawn from the thing-for-us, there is the for-no-one that characterizes the Neuter. Neutral with respect to *what* is, art, which substitutes the image for the concept, “presents” the sheer *that there is*, or anteriority as such. This is the atmosphere of art and this neutralization is unmediated and immediate, and thus eludes all cognition and all memory. The artwork is a thing-for-no-one, and it thus induces from us involvements that do not originate in our initiative. This allows Blanchot to say that “the image is intimate because it makes of our intimacy an exterior power that we submit to passively [intime est l’image parce qu’elle fait de notre intimité une puissance extérieure que nous subissons passivement].”⁴⁰ The sheer *that there is*, or the *il y a*, is ungraspable. It eludes every present yet it is that without which there will never have been any possibility as such. Art does not merely present, as Levinas stresses, the possibility that time can stop. It also, more affirmatively, presents *possibility itself* as that which eludes everything—possibility as (the) nothing, as immediate. Which amounts to saying that nothing, or *the* nothing, is the form of any possible relation.

Presented as arrested, the atmosphere of art presents the return of that which can never be excluded but which, at the same time, excludes everything. In the space of literature qualities cling to nothing, to no being. Something eludes cognition, but makes itself felt (if obscurely) as that which is never “itself,” that which is only “suggested.” Something comes but remains arrested in its “meanwhile.” For Blanchot this will be the time of writing. It is uncommon, unclassifiable, and anonymous, like an infinite murmur, as Foucault puts it.⁴¹ It is writing that cannot end itself and is continually outside itself like a thing among things. An enormity without proportion, it is the very scratching sound we hear, from somewhere, when we write these things.

The Profane

For both Levinas and Blanchot, the artist neither creates nor reveals. That which the philosopher fixes in the eternity of the concept, art arrests in the interval of the image. Whereas philosophy offers us the thing to know and use, art realizes a withdrawal from power and even, more strongly, a withdrawal from the present. Aesthetic existence is a lapse in our ability to mobilize time. The intimate possibility that time can stop is the possibility of being delivered to a time without us, without a present—impersonal and neutral. This is simulated time, a simulation of existing or an existence outside initiative. It is not the promise of a new beginning and it does not carry us to a *beyond* of being (ethical or otherwise). It only subtracts us from ourselves.

In *La comunità che viene*, Giorgio Agamben will say that the whole of our world has been transformed into an image, a spectacle. This is the starting point for his politics. He will say that the world has come to resemble itself completely, totally, and thus has separated human agency from its traditional initiative. That is to say, the whole of our world can now be experienced as an image and we are no longer able to experience ourselves *in* the world, for its space is now imaginary. Hence, Agamben's interest in the expropriation of experience and his attempts to rescue from this malaise a radical possibility he calls pure being-in-language. His politics is an attempt to appropriate this expropriation (or this impotence outside any initiative) not as another power, but as an unpower that is an ambiguous capacity for irreparability. He will ask that we cease to seek in the imaginary for that which the imaginary suspends—identity—and instead that we rejoin our “oldest” experience: the sheer profanity *that there is*. The sheer *il y a* is without clamor and without pathos. It would be experienced

when there is nothing to experience—as in aesthetic existence, precisely. In his analyses of art, Levinas brings out art’s “ability” to conserve this experience, and in Blanchot we catch a glimpse into a life outside initiative.

For all three writers, the sheer *that there is* that every image harbors is our separation from any particular experience, but it does not promise a concrete future to which we may relate ourselves. Nevertheless, art remains our manifest orientation towards it. Refusing all grasp, art “says” that time outside the synchrony of the present cannot *but* be lost, that it is nonconsecutive, discontinuous, arresting. If you like, art—the pure form of any possible relation, or anteriority as such—is also the pure form of separation (from the personal and the subjective). That is to say, art is not only the presentiment of fate, it is also *another* death from which we cannot separate ourselves and which we cannot finish, not even in death. It is a loss we cannot let go of, but that does not hold us in it.

For the Levinas of “La réalité et son ombre,” the situation of art in the general economy of being is limited because it lacks the perspective of the Other (*Autrui*) that breaks up the spell of art and awakens us to responsibility. But we will want to show, in our next chapter, that the relation with *Autrui* is ambiguous and, if we may say so, imaginary.