

Tania Checchi G.*

Violent Plasticity: a Phenomenological and Mimetic Approach to Art and Myth

Taking into account the scope of mimetic theory and its impressive accomplishments, the very attempt of a new critique of myth as such and not of a particular case may prove either redundant or utterly presumptuous. I hope the following may attain a middle ground with the help of Emmanuel Levinas, whose thought can be read as thoroughly akin to that of René Girard in many respects, the least explored of which is his critical approach to mythical and artistic time and their intimate link¹. Even though Girard's stance in *Violence and the Sacred* is strictly anthropological, we firmly believe a phenomenological analysis can be attempted regarding how myth, in its legitimation of transcendent violence – as posed by the French thinker – operates at the level of sensibility as a sort of induced and timeless “stasis”². If myth, as Girard affirms, keeps communities engaged in the same type of sacrificial practices that originated them, we would like to suggest the possibility that it does so, and very efficaciously, in a way analogous to art – be it eminently religious, as in its beginnings, or not – and the way the artistic image imposes itself on the subject's sensibility. To do so, we would like to answer the following question: what kind of new threshold is transposed when as a result of the sacrificial crisis, described in *Violence and the Sacred* as the generative process of all culture, a new entity – the image as symbol – makes its entrance into our phenomenological field of perception? Along many other authors which have attempted to trace the origin of all symbolic activity in an originally religious and mythopoetic framework, we have in mind

* *Ph.d., Professor of Phenomenology and Ethics at Colegio de Saberes, Graduate School, Mexico City.*

¹ We would like to thank Professor Sandor Goodhart for his close reading and editing of a first version of this text.

² Because brevity is of the essence in this volume, a full account of Levinas truly original interpretation of Edmund Husserl's Urimpression, that is, the original point source of time as the encounter with the Other cannot, alas, be offered, but its more salient points can be delineated by contrast with the main issue at hand, what I would like to call *mythical stasis*.

here Schelling's idea – prolonged in Levinas's thought – of art's construction of the world through the optic of mythology as expressing, *avant la lettre*, genuinely mimetic insights in the vein of those exposed by Girard in *Violence and the Sacred*³.

Art, particularly Greek classical art, constitutes a privileged object of analysis in terms of temporal effects for both authors, but while Girard's exegesis of tragedy is well known to those acquainted with his thought, Levinas approach to art has been neglected just until lately with few exceptions. Nevertheless it is precisely on this point that a convergent reading can clarify the existential stakes involved in the acritical acceptance of myth as a pervasive structure of experience, a fact that is a given for both authors. It would be suitable here to paraphrase George Steiner's comment concerning the perennial presence in our midst of the Greek world that precedes philosophy: "each time we even attempt to think, a host of specters from Hellas rises to walk by our side"⁴. This image is as beautiful as it is ominous, for how can we even dream of escaping from myth's grasp if the fundamental milestones and perplexities of life are crystalized through myth in language itself? One thinks of Antigone's final ordeal accompanied by the shadows of all her ancestors, ever present in her understanding of the very words she utters against Creon⁵. This is the dead weight of lineage, the sorrow of a story that, in its perfection, forecloses any other possibility: the armature without crevices of myth. In this regard, Girard and Levinas pose the same questions in what Ann Astell describes as "complementary critical axiologies" that run in the first case in a horizontal axis and in a

³ In his *Philosophy of Art*, a text from 1804 but published posthumously by his son, Schelling states the following at the very beginning of his exposition: "In the philosophy of art I accordingly intend to construe first of all not art as art, as this particular, but rather the universe in the form of art, thus the philosophy of art is the science of the All in the form or potency of art" (p. 16). Then, when broaching the subject of the *mode* of construction he will attempt to show in his § 38 that mythology is the necessary condition and content of all art. (p. 45). See F.W.J. Schelling, *The Philosophy of Art*, Stott, D.W., University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1989.

⁴ See G. Steiner, *Antigones*, Yale University Press, New Jersey 1996: "But I want to put myth and grammar into a seminal relation. Many of the ways in which the Greek language and our inheritance of this language inform, abstract, make symbolic, analogize or metaphorize the components of our mental experience and of our presence in the natural and the social worlds seems to me inseparable from certain key myths. It is in intimate conjunction with these myths that the semantic encoding, the expressive means of our grammar of thought can be most vividly construed", p. 135.

⁵ Jean Pierre Vernant stresses the lack of communication between the tragic characters trapped in their own semantic universe, unwilling and incapable of understanding the other's meaning until it is too late. Inherited symmetrical oppositions will be underscored by Girard's approach to myth and tragedy. See J.P. Vernant, P. Vidal Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Zone Books, New York 1996, pp. 29-48.

vertical one in the latter⁶. Both, anthropologically and phenomenologically tackle this issues: to what kind of temporality do we give ourselves into when a succession of fascinating but, as we shall see, ultimately motionless images, as the ones that appear in myth first and then in art, overtakes us? How does the anonymous murmur and rage of undifferentiated violence transmutes itself into art?

In his brief but unsparing analysis of art published in 1948, *Reality and its shadow*, Levinas links the Greek notion of *μορφή* to that of narrativity in a way that reminds us immediately of the sobering texts in which Girard explores the inversions operated by myth and explored by tragedy. Against the frequent assumption of art's innocuous existence and given its links to myth Levinas asks his readers to consider if art is really at such a safe distance from every kind of quasi-religious usurpation. Because Levinas answers this question in the negative, he also puts into question the conviction of his contemporaries about the political engagement of art. His critique tries to settle what could be understood as the ontological status of art, that is, the basic condition that underlies any further sociological or economical denunciation of particular works. According to his phenomenological analysis, as we shall see, the artistic endeavor ends up producing a sort of polished and independent reality upon which any idea of a closed totality, that is, a system of mythical and unchallenged differences can be built⁷. To put it in Girardian terms, images, both artistic and ritual – inasmuch as they ultimately share the same origin – would be warrantors of the differential order that emerges after sacrifice has put an end to the vertiginous proliferation of sameness that the mimetic crisis induced.

But how can this feat be accomplished? To begin with, Levinas tells us that the artistic image, being a double of the real object, is exempt from giving continuity to the phenomenologically endless perception of the world. Of course, he avoids here the cliché of art being a world of its own, but he insists on its emanation of an essence, a form, that for all its apparent luminosity, depends on a darkening of being, as if in the image, the object left only its raiment behind. For Levinas, that's the price of the radical isolation of an object through its appearance. Contrasting with the holistic approach of ordinary perception, the objects offered by art are made up by what he calls adjectival sensations. This crude course

⁶ See A. Astell, *Girard and Levinas as readers of King Lear*, in M. Gold, S. Goodhart (eds), *Of Levinas and Shakespeare "To see another thus"*, Purdue University Press, Indiana 2018, p. 87.

⁷ The French term we would have liked to employ here, not very frequently used, is *hypostatization*, but it lacks an equivalent in English. It connotes the projection of a substantial reality into something that doesn't really entails it.

of impressions without referent closes itself up in a persistent materiality that according to Levinas no longer plays dialectically with any conceivable notion of spirit. Art's commerce with reality would then only refer to its shadow, for the sensorial qualities that constitute the image, be they verbal, aural or visual, do not pertain anymore to any substrate or substance⁸. Syllabic wreaths, visual textures, tactile gleams: the only thing that would give consistency and coherence to this aggregate of synesthetic sensations is rhythm for, in their isolation, they have abandoned any referential endeavor. It's just as if the artistic image was constituted by a discrete pulse – rhythm – that goes from the dispersion of its components to its regrouping in a totality announced even in the slightest of verses or melodic phrases. It would thus seem for the Lithuanian thinker that empiricism's concern with impressions and sensations was correct but only in regard to the aesthetic experience. While for a phenomenologist like Merleau-Ponty, art reconstructs step by step the labor of perception, for Levinas art does precisely the opposite. It invites us, as we shall see, to witness the "end of the world", that is, the possibility of its not being phenomenologically constituted as such⁹. That is why, though trying to obtain a transhistorical category, Levinas finds in modernism, the formal and material elements whose atomicity and strangeness is underscored not only by abstractionism but by atonality and the formless background of some narratives:

From a space without horizons, things break away and are cast toward us like chunks that have weight in themselves, blocks, cubes, planes, triangles, without transitions between them. They are naked elements, simple and absolute, swellings or abscesses of being¹⁰.

⁸ Very generously, Professor Sandor Goodhart made available to us his notes for a study on Levinas, Blanchot and art. There, quite rightly, he points out Sartre's acknowledgement of the independent status of things such as "notes, colors and forms". This should be taken into account to avoid an easy dismissal of Sartre's position which aspires to be as phenomenologically precise as the one proposed by Levinas. Nevertheless, there is still a significant difference inasmuch as Sartre still considers such instances as "things" in a substantive sense. By contrast, for Levinas they can be conceived, in a Husserlian manner, as non-intentional sensations. That's precisely why it is not unthinkable that they may fail to phenomenologically constitute or yield the "world" as Husserl hypothesized.

⁹ Moreover, in a text entitled "Simulacres", published originally as an interview in the Italian magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* in 1984, after alluding to the terrible events of the last sixty years, Levinas went to the length of comparing Husserl's ominous eidetic experiment in *Ideen* § 49 with the cosmic catastrophe alluded in the Psalm 82,5 — "all the foundations of the earth are out of course" — and ultimately, citing Husserl again — *that swarming of absolutely irreducible conflicts* — with the nuclear menace of complete extinction. Both images that correspond almost exactly to Girard's mimetic crisis and the ultimate possibility of uncontained violence in our world.

¹⁰ E. Levinas, *Existence and existents*, Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1978, p. 56.

For Levinas, contemporary art shows us the refractory character of those elements that in traditional art are integrated with greater ease into a totality. So, in an inverse operation to that of classical art, modernism would let us glimpse into “the crevices that rupture the continuity of the universe”¹¹. Therefore, the avant-garde is not interpreted by Levinas as the consummated accomplishment of the original and autonomous subjectivity of romanticism – a myth also denounced by Girard — that is, of a subjectivity capable of playing with formal and material elements at will and without restriction, but as a sort of regression into an acosmic sameness.

So, intuiting a complete disarray of experience that prefigures the one described by Girard apropos the undifferentiation of the sacrificial crisis, Levinas dares to asks: isn't the image as such a sort of falling away of being into cadences, a swooning – *cadere* in Latin – that far from inviting us into a dialogue, only asks of us our blind consent, our capitulation before its seductive sequences? Instead of the Kantian disinterestedness of aesthetic experience that we moderns might expect, we would find here a kind of submission to the rhythmic resonance of the image, rhythm being recognized now as a general aesthetic category that functions as the only integrating principle of the inter-sensorial and otherwise centrifugal elements of any kind of image. Now, far from being a mere historical convention, the Form, with capital letters, expressed by rhythm and challenged by contemporary art, has its roots, according to Levinas in a fundamental and very ancient experience. As Mikel Dufrenne, puts it, there is something imperious in rhythm that forces us to tune in with its flux, awakening in us an schematic and pre-reflexive activity that situates us within the object and outside ourselves.¹² Levinas calls this imperious quality “the exteriority of intimacy”. In his view, each musical compass insinuates itself into our body depleting our initiative, turning us into quasi-objects that will take part in the spectacle itself. Appealing to a familiar experience for all of us, he evokes this overtaking of our body vividly: “to listen to music is in a sense to refrain from dancing”¹³. Henri Bergson, a very important influence in Levinas's critique of art tells us apropos this experience:

The regularity of the rhythm...and the periodic returns of the measure are like so many invisible threads by means of which we set in motion this imaginary puppet. Indeed, if it stops for an instant, our hand in its impatience

¹¹ Ivi, p. 55.

¹² See M. Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973, p. 263.

¹³ E. Levinas, *Reality and its shadow*, Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p. 133.

cannot refrain from making a movement, as though to push it, as though to replace it in the midst of this movement, the rhythm of which has taken complete possession of our thought and will.¹⁴

For Levinas the musical dialectic that sustains every work of art as a sort of vortex in which sensibility strays from the constitution of worldly objects and puts it under the service of an anonymous order finds its archaic concretion in what the French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl describes as *participation*¹⁵. For this author – not taken very much into account by Girard, whose main interlocutor in *Violence and the Sacred* is Levi-Strauss – in primitive societies, the criteria of reality for any given object is a collective experience that plunges the group into an anonymous and all-surrounding emotional atmosphere. So, instead of sending us beyond the world into the domain of intelligible archetypes – as Plotinus would have it – art would be a regression into a realm that strains the frontier between the subjective and the objective and that is marked by the horror of undifferentiation. Though he considers it a fundamental experience for the constitution of any objective reality, Lévy-Bruhl also speaks of the menacing aspects of this trans-personal participation.

For anyone familiarized with René Girard's thought the analogies here cannot be postponed for much longer. In *Violence and the sacred*, describing the Dionysian festivities and their orgiastic atmosphere, he cites Euripides *Bacchae* in a very similar vein: "The Lydian chorus declares: he who leads the dance becomes a Bromios"¹⁶. In the mimetic trance of the Dionysian thiasus, this god, described by Maria Zambrano as the god of transfusion, permeates everything and everyone¹⁷. This "becoming" is for Levinas a capitulation of the self in which the aesthetic experience is lived a sort of narcosis, a surrendering into the neutral waves of matter and rhythm in a way completely analogous if not identical to the ritualized remembrance of the founding crisis described by Girard. Thus the consummation that gives birth to myth, ritual and art has as its price the annihilation of free initiative, be it in the case of the spectator and the author or in the case of the original communities, who become all servants of what Levinas himself calls an obscure deity: the one forged in the communal violence, Girard would add. So, art and myth as described here by Levinas, would pertain to that liminal realm

¹⁴ H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, Dover Paperback Editions, Mineola, New York 2001, p. 12.

¹⁵ See E. Levinas, *Levy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine*, in Id., *Entre nous, Essais sur le penser à-l-autre*, Grasset, Paris 1991, pp. 53-67.

¹⁶ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977, p. 128.

¹⁷ M. Zambrano, *El hombre y lo divino*, FCE, México 1955, p. 57.

in which the emerging order of the symbolic, with its asymmetries and differences, takes place: from a rhythmic and anonymous vortex and into Form¹⁸. We could say that art, when thoroughly deconstructed as Levinas does here, lets us take a peek into the imponderable “before” of the differential structure that for someone like Levi-Strauss is forever out of reach¹⁹. Even Merleau-Ponty, a defender of *l’art engagé*, that is, of an art of capable of political activism, admired what he called Levinas impressive description of the “pre-human medium of art this side of time and life”²⁰.

“This side of time and life”, this is precisely what is at stake here. If the image constitutes an indifferent opacity that nonetheless sweeps us into an ecstatic turmoil lacking in interiority, then its characteristic inertia is anything but time, for Levinas defines interiority not as a private and autonomous domain, but as the warrant of an order in which everything is pending, an order that can still make possible those things which historically are no longer so²¹. Therefore, if interiority is out of the equation, and collective initiative is plunged in an anonymous mimesis, time as a new beginning is blocked. Levinas introduces here the “*pièce de resistance*” of *Reality and its Shadow*: “*l’entretemps*”, a notion that can be roughly translated as the *meanwhile* or the in-between of time.

To say that an image is an idol is to affirm that every image is in the last analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue – a stoppage of time...a semblance of the existing of being.²²

If the present is such only because of its evanescence, because of its continuous solicitation by the future, then the image, affirms Levinas, imposes an interval that is impotent to force the advent of real time. Temporality abandons these doubled beings and lets them simply and stati-

¹⁸ In another text we explored the affinities between Levinas’s notion of the “il y a” or “there is’ with Girard’s mimetic crisis as both entail undifferentiation and violent anonymity. Cfr. T. Checchi, *Myth and Il y a: a convergent reading of René Girard and Emmanuel Levinas*, in “Forum Philosophicum, International Journal for Philosophy”, Vol. 24, N. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 127-144.

¹⁹ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 253. See R. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. S. Bann, M. Metteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1987, pp. 312-313. The undifferentiated state of mimesis experienced by the psychotic is compared by J.M. Oughourlian with the pre-sacrificial chaos akin to what Levinas finds when deconstructing the adjective sensations induced by art.

²⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Parcours 1935-1951*, Verdier, Paris 1997, pp. 122-124. And he said so in the midst of the obligatory Sartrean objections he included as a foreword to Levinas’s text first appearance in *Temps Moderns*.

²¹ See E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania 1969. p. 55.

²² E. Levinas, *Reality and its shadow*, cit., pp. 137-138.

cally endure²³. Consequently, art doesn't merely reproduce the "arrest of time", it accomplishes its fall, its conversion into destiny. Levinas invokes the cruelty of Zeno's paradoxes that incarnate themselves in the sortilege operated by art. The future in its midst is forever announced but either it never truly arrives or it is accomplished beforehand: the arrow that never reaches its goal is the same as the arrow that's been there forever. It is particularly significant that in the same pages in which Levinas lets us feel the sinister shadow of the Eleatic arrest of time, he also speaks of the *amor fati* of the Stoics. Nothing can be added to the rhythmic and paradoxically immobile progression of art because the latter is consummated in advance. Diegetic or fictional time and life's temporality are equated, just as in myth the spontaneous process of the crisis and its resolution is portrayed as having a cosmic inevitability. As Bianca Nogara Notarini points out:

This is, of course, an infallible model that is applied to every story, and that where necessary, lends its tutelage to any kind of event – so much so that it could even be described as a-historical: in the sense that it goes beyond history, or rather it indicates how history is to be interpreted, and it admits the existence of a single, sole coherent, meaningful history (this structure and functioning are what makes a universal story possible). Through this word, [order] this discourse, each event determines and represents the totality of the drama, suggests it by referring to it: and thus, obviously, makes it true.²⁴

Quoting Levy-Bruhl, Levinas reminds us that: "in the presage the sign is the cause and prediction is production"²⁵. According to Goodhart, Sophocles himself warns us of this danger when he subtly highlights Oedipus rushed appropriation of the myth, even when the evidence for his damnation is still incomplete²⁶. For both Levinas and Girard, in myth to

²³ Although Levinas uses the formula "durée quasi-éternelle", he describes the "instant of art" not as an infinitesimal part of duration in the sense that Bergson gives to this key concept in his philosophy—as lived time and dynamic temporal reality—but as its complete opposite: a spatialization of time that annihilates its transcendence.

²⁴ See B. Nogara Notarianni. *In the name of the Father, Job's name. The role of interpellation in practices of subjection*, in B. Nogara Notarianni, M. Stucchi (a cura di), *The ancient trail of the wicked. René Girard and the Book of Job*, in *Dialegesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofia*, vol. 22, 2021, <https://mondomani.org/dialegesthai>.

²⁵ See E. Levinas, *Entre Nous, Essais sur le penser à-l-autre*, Grasset, Figures, Paris 1991, p. 63.

²⁶ See S. Goodhart, S., 'Leskas Ephastes', *Oedipus and Laius's many murderers*, in *Sacrificing Commentary, Reading the End of Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996, pp.13-42. For Professor Goodhart, Sophocles is perfectly aware of the sacrificial pull the characters surrounding Oedipus will experience because the Greek author underscores a critical unraveling of the myth that during his lifetime produced both sacrificial and antisacrificial responses such as his own. See S. Goodhart, *Reading after Auschwitz*, in *Sacrificing Commentary*, cit., p. 257.

have a premonitory knowledge it suffices to look back: past and future are perfectly symmetrical and the present is only their collision. The image becomes, thus, the residence of destiny, of a fatality that in the authentic time of life can only be read in retrospect, because, as Girard puts it, only hindsight puts things into place and justifies the violent occurrence. Levinas thus soberly states: “*Beings enter their destiny because they are represented*”²⁷. The detention of time performed by myth and art embodies thus the condition signaled as inherent to tragedy by XIX century idealist philosophy: freedom and necessity become simultaneous. And this antinomy far from being merely intellectual translates the feeling of futility of every action. Just as in Giraudoux’s play every hope is crushed because the Trojan War will indeed take place²⁸. But, contrary to what is thought, art doesn’t simply represent destiny. According to Levinas, it plunges beings into the circuit of fate as soon as it abducts them from the world of time and precarity, producing a sort of what we would like to call a *mythical stasis*. In storytelling, contingency is integrated into an effect of necessity and all it takes is a gesture of configuration, of submitting beings and events to a *morphé*, a Form, produced by rhythm. That would be the labor of myth-makers, for whom everything is fixed once and for all: events, characters, beings, whose story, Levinas would add, still endures like in a tunnel without moving forward. For instance, in an interview for a documentary on *Richard III*’s worldwide tour under Sam Mendes’ direction some years ago, Gemma Jones, the actress playing Queen Margaret, broke into tears when speaking of how for months and months she has had to see the Duke of Clarence, her son, die time and again without being able to do anything about it²⁹. Hence Levinas’s main point in this respect: “The events related form a situation – akin to a plastic ideal. That is what myth is: the plasticity of a story”³⁰.

This fact underlies the structuralist attempt at finding a logical matrix whose work consists, in the heroic tale, in reestablishing, no matter what the disturbed order, a goal in relation to which any deviation is nothing but a diachronic leftover³¹. That is why Girard criticizes structuralism’s incapacity for dealing with both, pre-sacrificial undifferentiation and authentic diachronicity³². For Levinas, the ending of a story polarizes its development in such a way that we can read time backwards, the beginning

²⁷ E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit., p. 139.

²⁸ See J. Giraudoux, *La guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu*, Libro Théâtre, Paris 2015. Levinas mentions how this aspect of Giraudoux’s oeuvre has not been rightly understood as soon as he introduces the notion of the “entre-temps” in E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit.

²⁹ See *Now: in the Wings on a World Stage*, directed by Jeremy Whelehan, 2014.

³⁰ E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit., p. 139.

³¹ See P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995, pp. 143-144.

³² See note 20.

in its ending, assimilating any hindrance into an impersonal and rhythmical inertia. As if the structuralist research just mentioned was made possible by the introduction of what he calls the *death* of each instant, of this lapse that abandons time³³ in favor of an artificial synchronicity. For instance – and we find this example very illuminating for both our authors' complementary stances – even from the first lines of Sophocles' *Trachiniai*, Deianeira knows that, in spite of the common wisdom that prevents us from declaring a life as good or bad until death, hers will be hard and unfortunate; she knows that the cycles that have determined her vital trajectory will rhythmically repeat themselves up until the end. In pursuing Iole, Heracles, Deianeira's unfaithful husband, repeats his former story with his wife, but this time there's no one to save the maid from the monster he's become. As Charles Seagal puts it³⁴: "The circularity of the myth turns on perpetual reversals"³⁵. The violence of Eros simply forbids the moving forward in time of either of them. Apropos this circularity, to which the tragic hero remains blind, a circularity that transforms Heracles into the monsters he once fought, Girard explains:

The shortest path from the non-guilty to the guilty is a straight line, and so our champion of justice marches straight ahead. He does not notice when the path begins to curve – yet it proves to be a circular path in the end.³⁶

Thus Maurice Blanchot, Levinas best friend, spoke of the *petit enfer* of literary eternity just as Girard did when speaking of Racine's *Phaedra*, trapped in the hybris of her forebears.³⁷ This is why Levinas suspects in every myth the murmur of the anonymous, the menace of a faceless violence and in every aesthetic or mystic notion of *participation* the conversion of the living word into a legitimizing spectacle that tends inexorably to repeat itself³⁸. And it couldn't be any other way, as René Girard teaches

³³ E. Levinas, *Reality and its Shadow*, cit., p. 141.

³⁴ See Charles Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, Harvard University Press 1995, p. 37.

³⁵ R. Girard, *Oedipus Analyzed in Oedipus Unbound*, ed. Mark Anspach, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2004, p. 31.

³⁶ Id., *Novelistic Experience to Oedipal Myth*, in M. Anspach (ed.), *Oedipus Unbound*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2004, p. 13.

³⁷ As a matter of fact, it is Merleau-Ponty in his preface to *Reality and its shadow* the one who mentions Blanchot's *petit enfer* of the literary, evoked by Levinas' piece. In Racine, *Poet of Glory*, Girard contrasts Racine's and Corneille's heroes and heroines underscoring the individualistic character of the latter's protagonists, meanwhile Racine is capable of recognizing the dire consequences of modern individualism in a rivalry blind to itself and to the unbearable weight of ancestry. See R. Girard, *Mimesis and Theory*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2008, p. 109.

³⁸ "Horror is nowise an anxiety about death. According to Levy- Bruhl, primitive peoples show only indifference to death, which they take as a natural fact. In horror a subject is

us, because it is inherent to myth to hide the impersonal and collective dynamism that gives it birth. Thus, plasticity, form, beauty, are the vehicles of myth's timeless and closed off endurance, that is, in Levinas' words, of a *meanwhile* that can't bring the future about, at least, not on its own³⁹. Levinas calls this the idolatry of the beautiful, "whose essence is indifference, cold splendor and silence"⁴⁰. In a footnote in *Otherwise than Being* that might be overlooked he states:

By an irresistible subreption, the incomparable, the diachronic, the non-contemporaneous, through the effect of a deceitful and marvelous schematism is "imitated" by art, which is iconography.⁴¹

Catherine Chalièr, following Levinas, speaks of the ontological solitude that results from the impossibility of the Greeks to escape their plastic and magnificent cosmos⁴². For the Lithuanian thinker that is exactly the condition of the mythic hero, of Phaedra's asphyxiating situation, her "unbreakable commitment"⁴³. Lineage is her burden and destiny: there is no place on earth where she can hide from her ancestors, states Levinas, and their cult is also the cult of her solar ego, adds Girard. Thus, Levinas coincides almost point by point with Girard in his interpretation of Racine's revelatory text when in *Existence and Existents* he tells us:

In his work, the veil of myth is torn. The hero is defeated by himself. Therein lies what is tragic in him: a subject is in the basis of himself and is already with or against himself. While being a freedom and a beginning, he is the bearer of a destiny which already dominates this very freedom.⁴⁴

stripped of his subjectivity, of his power to have private existence. The subject is depersonalized. Nausea, as a feeling for existence, is not yet a depersonalization; but horror turns the subjectivity of the subject, his particularity qua *entity*, inside out. It is a participation in the "there is", in the "there is" which returns in the heart of every negation, in the "there is" that has no exits", E. Levinas., *Existence and Existents*, cit., p. 61.

³⁹ Levinas states in the Preface of *Totality and Infinity* that he will not quote Franz Rosenzweig because his influence in his thought is so vast it would be pointless. Nevertheless, let us use this citation as an example of the issue at hand: "Still today, all art remains under the law of the mythical world. The work of art necessarily has that closure in itself, that indifference to everything that may be found outside of it, that independence of higher laws, that freedom from baser duties; these are the traits we recognized as belonging to the world of myth. It is a basic requirement of the work of art that its shapes reflect a tremor of the mythical... The spirit of myth founds the realm of the beautiful", F. Rosenzweig, *The star of Redemption*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 2005, p. 46.

⁴⁰ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 193.

⁴¹ Id., *Otherwise than being*, Duquesne, Pittsburgh 1998, p. 199.

⁴² C. Chalièr, *Breve estime du Beau*, in *Levinas face au Beau*, Éditions de l'Éclat, Paris 2004, p. 13.

⁴³ E. Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, cit., p. 62.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 88.

Consequentially, in mythical time, temporality *contracts* destiny as if it were a disease, a contagion. If fecundity is, as Levinas puts it, the possibility of an authentic future that breaks the iterative hegemony of the self, then myth works in the opposite direction, making synchronic what should be diachronic and confusing in the identical what should be serial, as Martha Reinecke points out⁴⁵. In myth, Girard explains, “[t]he conflict between generations gives way to a conflict between contemporaries... Between the mythical partners, the difference in age is abolished”⁴⁶. The son, the brother, is feared because the self puts himself forward in terms of power. But this power reveals itself sterile, fatally chained to itself, bound to a cycle as Levinas affirms.

In power, the indetermination of the possible does not exclude reiteration of the I which, in venturing toward this indeterminate future, falls back on its feet, and riveted to itself, acknowledges its transcendence to be merely illusory and its freedom to delineate but a fate.⁴⁷

Maybe, this is the lure of the mythical sagas: the conviction that after all the transformations of Proteus, there is a closure, a seal for the story even if ultimately it concerns only the repetition of the self and its avatars. That is the “last word of violence” – as Girard puts it in his chapter on Dionysus in *Violence and the Sacred* – so dignified and worthy of remembering:

*Also, violence itself offers a sort of respite, the fresh beginning of a cycle of ritual after a cycle of violence. Violence will come to an end only after it has had the last word and that word has been accepted as divine. The meaning of this word must remain hidden, the mechanism of unanimity remain concealed.*⁴⁸

It is if the legitimate desire of escape from being with which the young Levinas struggled in his earliest texts could not find legitimate exits: only the perpetual telling of being as “polemos”, in the iteration of the same

⁴⁵ See M. Reinecke, *Intimate Domain*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2014. In this beautiful book, Professor Reinecke poses the possibility of escaping the conflicts of what she calls the “lateral axis” (sibling rivalry) by adopting a sort of “Antigone’s complex”, in which “the child articulates lines of seriality and sameness in ways that enables the child to love rather than loathe its sibling, replacing traumatizing threat with openness to the other”, p. 85.

⁴⁶ See R. Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, cit., p. 34.

⁴⁷ E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, cit., p. 268.

⁴⁸ R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, cit., p. 136. For Girard archaic thought is wholly dependent on this supposed closure: “And religious thought returns again and again to that supreme wonder, that last word of violence which is all the more precious for being pronounced so late in the day”, p. 125.

acts, the same final and violent gestures – that requisite for catharsis and its post-sacrificial aura.⁴⁹ That’s why both, Levinas and Girard look for lessons in Shakespeare and Racine, anti-cathartic authors. Myth for Levinas is then the crossing out of an unforeseeable future, before which we recoil in fear preferring destiny. Better to remain in the lapse without time of art, that descendant of horror⁵⁰, as Levinas seems to imply, with its premature capitulation, destiny. In *Totality and infinity* he asserts: “The beautiful of art...substitutes an image for the troubling depth of the future”⁵¹. Thus, even the beauty of the Greek aspiration towards the perfect and luminous “morphé” can’t hide that the suspended future of sculpture is the everlasting instant of nightmares⁵². In the second volume of his *Foundations* books Michel Serres finally asks what all his previous writing on that matter had been building up to: “What is a statue? A living body covered in stones”⁵³.

But what if, like Levinas points out, the closure of these terrible and magnificent stories is put into question, what if, somehow, interpretation and dialogue can open up the sealed lips of oracular wisdom and make a statue talk? After all, as Girard points out in his analysis of Oedipus and novelistic experience, the oracle is a failed revelation that nonetheless gives us a glimpse of a future truth⁵⁴. For Levinas and we dare to think Girard wouldn’t disagree, monotheism’s proscription of images is mainly concerned with this possibility of overcoming destiny and idolatry to open up real, ordinary time. Thus, in his text on Levy-Bruhl in which he presents the latter’s thought as a lucid reminder of

⁴⁹ See E. Levinas, *On escape: de l’évasion*, Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif 2003.

⁵⁰ M. García-Baró, *De l’émotion. La phénoménologie contre l’ontologie*, conference pronounced in Rome during the Convegno Internazionale *Visage e infini* in March of 2006, p. 7. It can be read on line in: <http://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/mgb01.htm>.

⁵¹ E. Levinas, *Totality and infinity*, cit., p. 263.

⁵² Levinas uses the famous sculptures of Niobe and Laocoon to illustrate this point in *Reality and its Shadow*. Let us remember that in both cases the suffering is inflicted by gods, Apollo and Artemis firstly, then Athena to favor the Greeks against the Trojans.

⁵³ M. Serres, *Statues, The Second Book of Foundations*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2015, p. 181. Even though this question is posed in his second book of *Foundations*, in the first one, a critical analysis of Livy’s history of Rome, Serres prefigures this preoccupation with the rhythmic beating —of which Levinas is so wary— of the multiple in relation to the one: “A tragic beating in fundamental time, in which pieces depart from a body and return there, transubstantiated into stones before being transubstantiated into signs in the middle of the clamors and voices”, *Rome, First Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015, p. 109. In the preface of *Rome*, Michel Serres expresses his gratitude towards his friend René Girard and soberly states that any mistakes in his *Foundations* texts are his but if anything in them is true this is due exclusively to Girard’s thought bearing on his.

⁵⁴ R. Girard, *Oedipus Unbound*, cit., p. 25.

what kind of regression a philosophy modelled after the experience of de-subjectivation entails, he asks:

But is the civilization born of monotheism capable of dealing with this crisis with a different orientation, one free of the horror of myths, of the conflicts they provoke in our souls and of the cruelties they perpetuate in our behavior?⁵⁵

That is why confronted with the circularity and temporal stasis that perpetuate myth and give the last word to the poetical image forged from the undifferentiated horror of participation, Levinas appeals to a diachronic time that can only spring from that which resists all plasticity, all reduction to form: the face of the Other. So, what to do with all the Others abandoned in the tragic sclerosis of images and tales that make up myth and the sacrificial reading of history? If, as he puts it, only I can be designated as a victim without cruelty, coinciding with Girard's reassessed conception of self-sacrifice, then my responsibility does not consist of giving rules to art in order to make it behave itself decently, to avoid its being a "feast in the midst of a plague"⁵⁶. My responsibility would be about searching for, as does Girard, in every myth, every story, every image, those crevices through which the voice of the Other, of the victim, can be heard pleading for consolation. None other is the meaning of Girard's recalling the moving words pronounced by King Leontes near the end of Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* when the supposedly petrified image of his wrongly accused wife beckons to him silently: "Doth not the statue rebuke me for being more stone than it?"⁵⁷.

⁵⁵ E. Levinas, *Lévy-Bruhl et la philosophie contemporaine*, cit., p. 67.

⁵⁶ In its most disparaging moment, Levinas' critique of art condemns in these terms art's evasive enjoyment.

⁵⁷ R. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, St. Augustine Press, Indiana 2004, pp. 334-342. In the preceding chapters of his book on Shakespeare, Girard already had drawn the progressive arch of our western fascination with images pointing out first the obsession that in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Silvia's portrait arouses, then the momentary but disquieting indifference shown by Bassanio toward the original when confronted with Portia's painterly reproduction in *The Merchant of Venice* and finally the denounced snobbery of the contemporary production of lifelike sculptures in *A Winter's Tale*. In a final note, I would like to call attention to Christopher Wheeldon's ballet based on this play. Just after all the actors leave the stage reconciled and happy after Leontes's conversion and Hermione's return, the limelight focuses on their son's statue in the background in a melancholy manner that reminds us that, even after all, there are losses that stay that way as wounded lingering absences.

Bibliography

- Astell A., *Girard and Levinas as readers of King Lear*, in *Of Levinas and Shakespeare "To see another thus"*, Gold M., and Goodhart S., (a cura di) Purdue University Press, Indiana 2018.
- Bergson H., *Time and Free Will*, tr. ing. di Pogson, F.L., Dover Paperback Editions, Mineola, New York 2001.
- Chalier C., *Breve estime du Beau*, in *Levinas face au Beau*, Gritz, D., Éditions de l'Éclat, Paris 2004.
- Checchi T., *Myth and Il y a: a convergent reading of René Girard and Emmanuel Levinas*, in "Forum Philosophicum, International Journal for Philosophy", Vol. 24, N. 1, Spring 2019, pp. 127-144.
- Dufrenne M., *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, tr. ing. di Casey S. E., Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1973.
- García-Baró M., *De l'émotion. La phénoménologie contre l'ontologie*, conference pronounced in Rome during the Convegno Internazionale *Visage e infini* in March of 2006. On line it can be found here: <https://mondodamani.org/dialegesthai/mgb01.htm>
- Giraudoux J., *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Librio Théâtre, Paris 2015
- Girard R., *Mimesis and Theory*, in Doran, R., (a cura di) Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2008.
- Id., *Oedipus Unbound*, Anspach, M.,(a cura di) Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 2004.
- Id., *A Theater of Envy*, St. Augustine Press, Indiana 2004.
- Id., *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, tr. ing. di S. Bann, M. Metteer, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California 1987.
- Id., *Violence and the Sacred*, tr. ing. di Gregory, P., The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1977.
- Goodhart S., *Sacrificing Commentary, Reading the End of Literature*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1996.
- Levinas E., *Entre nous: Essais sur le penser à-l'autre*, Grasset, Paris 1991.
- Id., *Existence and existents*, tr. ing. di Lingis A., Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague 1978.
- Id., *On escape: de l'évasion*, tr. ing. di Bergo B., Cultural Memory in the Present, Stanford University Press 2003.
- Id., *Reality and its shadow* in *The Levinas Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford 1989, p. 133.
- Id., *Totality and infinity, An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. ing. di Lingis, A., Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, Pennsylvania 1969.
- Nogara Notarianni B., *In the name of the Father, Job's name. The role of interpellation in practices of subjection*, in B. Nogara Notarianni, M. Stucchi (a cura di), *The ancient trail of the wicked. René Girard and the Book of Job, Dialegesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofia*, vol. 22, 2021, <https://mondodamani.org/dialegesthai>.
- Serres M., *Rome, First Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015.
- Id., *Statues, The Second Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015.
- Merleau-Ponty M., *Parcours 1935-1951*, Verdier Philosophie 1997.

- Reinecke M., *Intimate Domain*, Michigan State University Press, Michigan 2014.
- Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1995.
- Rosenzweig F., *The star of Redemption*, tr. ing. di. Galli, B., The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin 2005.
- Schelling F.W.J., *The Philosophy of Art*, tr. ing. di. Stott, D.W., University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota 1989.
- Segal C., *Sophocles' Tragic World: Divinity, Nature, Society*, Harvard University Press 1995.
- Serres M., *Rome, First Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di. Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015.
- Id., *Statues, The Second Book of Foundations*, tr. ing. di. Burks, R., Bloomsbury Academic 2015.
- Steiner G., *Antigones*, Yale University Press, New Jersey 1996.
- Vernant J-P., Vidal Naquet P., *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, tr. ing. di. Lloyd J., Zone Books, New York 1996.
- Zambrano M., *El hombre y lo divino*, FCE, México 1955.