

“Beautifully written, *Through the Dark Field* draws the reader in and calls to conversion. Susie Paulik Babka effortlessly weaves together diverse sources—phenomenology, expressionist art, and Christian theology—in a way that disrupts privileged certainty with compassionate vulnerability. Echoing the artists she engages, her constructive retrieval of the doctrine of the incarnation refuses easy answers to life’s difficult questions, challenging the comfortable to do more than look at suffering. This is truly a stunning example of interdisciplinary Christian theological scholarship! Don’t miss it!”

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Associate Professor of Theology
Director of Undergraduate Studies in Theology
Duquesne University

“*Through the Dark Field* is a grace-filled indictment of any easy answer to catastrophic suffering. Susie Paulik Babka’s call for each one of us to open to an absurd sort of excess, an overflowing of not knowing, of disorienting vulnerability, the abyss between me and you, is poetic and haunting. In the end, Babka creates a theology of the incarnation that witnesses to the suffering other. Even in our failures, and there are many, we are called to witness to the incarnation by witnessing to all others’ suffering, ultimately emptied for the other. This witness is made urgent by Babka’s passion for the promise of the visual arts and her sophisticated command of continental theory.”

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Professor and Chair of the Religious Studies Department
Manhattan College

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—Gerard Mannion
Amaturo Chair in Catholic Studies
Georgetown University

“The doctrine about incarnation is not the real thing. How, then, do we approach the presence of a God so self-emptied as to appear absent? The way must involve encounter, engage the muscle of the mind that makes images, and transcend the images. Susie Paulik Babka leads us on this way, accompanied by Masaccio’s bringing God into our space, by Chagall’s association of Jesus with ravaged Jews throughout history, by Rothko’s mystical negation of representation itself. This meditative, analytical, affective, personal, penetrating, philosophically learned, aesthetically astute, dialectical, and elegantly written approach to God through the visual arts breaks new ground and should inspire the whole field of constructive theology in our present age.”

—Roger Haight, SJ
Union Theological Seminary

Through the Dark Field

*The Incarnation through an Aesthetics
of Vulnerability*

Susie Paulik Babka



A Michael Glazier Book

LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

A Michael Glazier Book published by Liturgical Press

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Carl Phillips, “Steeple,” in *Reconnaissance: Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015).

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Babka, Susie Paulik, author.

Title: Through the dark field : the incarnation through an aesthetics of vulnerability / Susan Paulik Babka.

Description: Collegeville, Minnesota : Liturgical Press, 2016. | “A Michael Glazier book.”

Identifiers: LCCN 2016007175 (print) | LCCN 2016024256 (ebook) | ISBN 9780814680735 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780814680988 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity and art. | Art—Philosophy. | Aesthetics. | Incarnation. | Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BR115.A8 B33 2016 (print) | LCC BR115.A8 (ebook) | DDC 261.5/7—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016007175>

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For my father, Lawrence John Paulik (May 16, 1942–June 7, 2016)
In gratitude for your passion for justice and holiness

Every fragile beauty, every perfect forgotten sentence,
you grieve their going away,
but that is not how it is.

Where they come from never goes dry. It is an always flowing spring.
—Rumi

In remembrance of the four other cyclists who were also killed
on June 7, 2016:

Tony Nelson, Debra Bradley, Melissa Fevig Hughes,
and Suzanne Sippel

To the man whose actions took their lives: your life is forever tied
to the lives and memories of those who remain. Through our grief,
we labor toward compassion. We seek to widen our hearts.

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field.

I will meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.

—Rumi

Lightning

The oaks shone
gaunt gold
on the lip
of the storm before
the wind rose,
the shapeless mouth
opened and began
its five-hour howl;
the lights
went out fast, branches
sidled over
the pitch of the roof, bounced
into the yard
that grew black
within minutes, except
for the lightning—the landscape
bulging forth like a quick
lesson in creation, then
thudding away. Inside,
as always,
it was hard to tell
fear from excitement:
how sensual
the lightning's
poured stroke! and still,
what a fire and what a risk!
As always the body
wants to hide,
wants to flow toward it—strives
to balance while
fear shouts,
excitement shouts, back
and forth—each
bolt a burning river
tearing like escape through the dark
field of the other.

—Mary Oliver¹

1. Mary Oliver, "Lightning," from *American Primitive* (1983), in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 146–47.

INTRODUCTION

The Landscape of the New

When I say that it is possible to encounter God in your age as in mine, I mean God really and truly, the God of incomprehensibility, the God past all grasp, the mystery beyond speech, the darkness that is light only to those who let themselves be swallowed by it unconditionally, the God who is now beyond all names. But equally it was just this God, no other, that I experienced as the God who descends to us, who comes near to us, in whose incomprehensible fire we do not in fact burn up, but rather come to be for the first time, and of eternal value. The ineffable God promises himself to us; and in this promise of his ineffability we become, we live, we are loved and we are of eternal value; through God, if we allow ourselves to be taken up by God, we are not destroyed but given to ourselves truly for the first time. The vain and idle creature becomes infinitely important, inexpressibly great and beautiful, because God endows the creature with Godself.

—Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit”¹

1. Karl Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” in *Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Rosaleen Ockenden (London: Collins, 1979), 17. I borrowed the “God-past-all-grasp” from the translation by Philip Endean in *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), who adds the footnote, “*Unbegreiflich* and its cognates are generally translated in this selection with expressions centered on ‘past all grasp.’ Rahner is drawing on the vocabulary here of the German mystics; it seems appropriate for an English translator to use a phrase of Hopkins: ‘past all/Grasp God’—(“The Wreck of the *Deutschland*,” stanza 32).” See p. 37n2.

I'm eighteen and in my first theology class at the University of Notre Dame. We're on the second floor of the Cushing Hall of Engineering, the classroom a dismal, stone gray, the northern Indiana sky stone gray as well, through a wall of grid windows, another in a string of cloudless, blueless, sunless gray days common to the Midwest; we're reading the work of Karl Rahner (1904–1984), and I am absolutely enthralled with the words above. Meeting God in a place without the constraints and formalism of theology, without the constraints and formalism of religion, without the pain of belonging to a church that denies women ordination: this was the “darkness” I sought, in a hunger for what Rahner understood as “grace.” Gazing out the window, I longed to be “swallowed” by this darkness, to be lost in the “incomprehensible fire,” his words sparking like embers against the gray.

Although I was not fully aware of it at the time, Rahner was a kindred spirit—one who all his life considered himself a pilgrim, who longed for God, for Mystery, for Beauty, without satisfaction. Today, decades later, I still find him to be a true visionary, one who offers a rare awareness that humility is necessary in any theological assertion, and while the multidimensionality and complexity of earthly reality is often terrifying, it is still the arena of what he called God's grace, of God's “self-gift.” For Rahner, God's openness to us creatures—essential to the identification of God as personal—only makes sense when it is met with our openness to God in God's incomprehensibility. Rahner changed the perspective with which I had viewed God. “God” is symbolic for the beginning of humanity constituted in its dynamism toward an infinite horizon of inquiry: here “God” may be *both* personal *and* impersonal, emptiness *and* being, possible *and* impossible, without restriction or categorization. Here the void, the nothing, the absent, melts the conceptual. For all his dense and formal “serious” theological writing, Rahner was at heart a poet and lifelong lover of poetry, someone willingly familiar with the darkness, the abyss, the void, that which is usually an illegitimate source of knowing. For Rahner,

[T]his monstrous, silent void, which we experience as death, is in truth filled with the originating mystery we call God, with God's light and with God's love that received all things and gives

all things; and when then out of this pathless mystery the face of Jesus, the blessed one, appears to us and this specific reality is the divine surpassing of all that we truly assume regarding the past-all-graspness of the pathless God.²

The void is a meeting place where life emerges from emptiness. It is a place of incarnation, where conventional boundaries are eliminated, a dark field where things grow. Such darkness is the locus of detachment, the place in which there is no direct path to the God beyond our hold, the God who will eternally remain as elusive to grasp as a beam of light.

Why was I so enthralled with these words that, decades later, the memory of discovering them is still so vivid? I wouldn't call the classroom encounter with Rahner's thought, that day or any other, a "religious experience" as described by Rudolf Otto: there was neither the "burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions," nor the "intoxicated frenzy," nor the "hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature."³ Otto's attempt to bring Kantian philosophy into conversation with nonverbal religious experience doesn't describe what Rahner meant to me that day, or what his thought still means. Rather, the attraction to Rahner's thought was more emotionally subdued, confirming instincts about my faith that I had not yet articulated. Or, more accurately, it was an intellectual lightning bolt, as Mary Oliver's poem describes above, in which there is fire and risk when radically new ideas appear on the landscape.

The landscape in which the "new" appears is dark, resolutely unfamiliar. A field on a moonless night, a pathless field, an expanse of shadow. Stepping onto this dark field is a risk: such is its exhilaration, as the naturalist John Muir found when he climbed trees to witness lightning storms. Willing to risk the drastically, even dangerously new is the way the discipline of academic theology—the critical

2. Karl Rahner, quoted by Ronald Rolheiser in "Reflections on Death," November 6, 2005, <http://ronrolheiser.com/reflections-on-death/#.Vd4mrPIViko>.

3. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12–13.

evaluation of belief—will not only survive but also thrive in the present age, an age in which deconstruction, demythologization, and the tearing down of presumptions, assumptions, and centuries-old power structures, seems to negate everything “sacred.”

The fear that drives this age, in which we see more insidious growth in racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and sexism and increasing retreat into rigid ideologies and religious fundamentalism, is a self-protective fear investing in certainty. The “certainty” that perpetuates self-protection is defined through a finality and security that the changing world will never afford us. Yet we still pursue the illusion that we can be certain about anything, which often means rejecting the risk of the strange and the stranger, the new, the Other. The self-protective cloak of certainty mitigates fear of the strange; but it will not prevent fear from manifesting in violent self-protection. The Enlightenment notion of reason as an instrument of power led to the identification of truth and certainty; claims to certainty became the way to justify acts that perpetuate the apparatus of power. Violence often masks the fear of the unknown, and so also the openness to truth, taking refuge in the futile attempt to be invulnerable. Indeed, violence is defined in the refusal to be vulnerable, the refusal of any form of weakness or poverty which often justifies itself as “self-defense.” Violence against the stranger, the “Other,” rears from the misguided attempt to protect the self at all costs, to maintain the security of the individual. Violence results from the desire for certainty outmaneuvering the openness required by the initial stages of intellectual or personal encounter.

Encounter requires a self-emptying of the concepts which led to it, otherwise there is no encounter. Concepts, and the words that house them, are merely placeholders as we grope through this field, markers on the pilgrimage, the scrawled graffiti of those who have been here before. Wanderers who placed symbols in chalk on the fence posts. We need to learn how to inquire and not expect definite answers in return, not to expect anything but another placeholder, another marker for the way. A temporary sign that can be abandoned for another. We need to learn to accept our essential vulnerability before the incomprehensible Other, to sleep in the open air, without shelter, to take the risk that a predator will come, to live with a bor-

derless field or space (*lieu*) in which a belief, affirmation, or question can appear as “other than itself to itself,” as Jacques Derrida described, where difference is unearthed in a glimpse and disappears again.

The metaphors and phrases Rahner uses—“darkness,” “fire,” “swallowed up”—are more common to biblical language than the language of academic theology; these images constituted a welcome moment in the gray dullness of that day. Perhaps these phrases touched a poetic nerve in me, at a vulnerable time in life, so that the thrill of discovering them became itself religious. Rahner’s genius navigates both the passionate language of faith (of *kerygma*, proclamation) and the formal language of academic theology; such demonstrates his belief that all theological language begins and ends in the Holy Mystery of God, the *reductio in mysterium*, the return to the mystery. Indeed, the chance and privilege of studying theology was (and still is) an opportunity that of its nature awaits the unexpected. Hopes for it. Having recently finished Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* in that theology class, I wanted an interruption in the monotony of stale ideas about the incarnation as a substitutionary debt to God for human sin. Perhaps the assertion “Jesus died so our sins could be forgiven” should finally be emptied into a repository for desiccated doctrines. It is a tired theodicy—a justification of catastrophe as associated with the goodness of God—that belongs to a time when God was thought to control the events of history, when God was viewed as the One to Be Appeased. The “God who descends to us, who comes near to us” would not will, expect, require, or need Jesus’ death to forgive human sin. Perhaps Anselm’s God of serfdom, the heavenly Lord of legal recompense, is the God who died when Nietzsche’s madman announces his glorious obituary in the town square, and over a century later we are still “not ready.” The pluses and minuses that pull and push in language that approaches the bearing and being of God gives theology life, emerging from a fissure in the argument.

This book investigates the doctrine of the incarnation as an expressive poetics or symbolic language that indicates the emptiness by which God is “God”—by which God may be glimpsed but never grasped—a divine kenosis or self-emptying that is continually poured out for the fulfillment of the Other in the sphere of time and space.

God's emptiness is an openness to the material world, a devotion to the world's vulnerability that makes the created world the embodiment or enfleshment, the incarnation, of the divine life. This emptiness and embodiment is glimpsed in the person of Jesus and is enlivened in Jesus' appeal that we see the divine in all who suffer. Sensibility to the vulnerability of the suffering Other is therefore the gateway to the meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation. Kenosis is then necessary on both "sides" of the divine equation: the creator creates by withdrawing, in the thought of Rabbi Isaac Luria,⁴ and the divine becomes incarnate and enters fragility, suffering, and mortality by self-emptying. Our human subjectivity is constituted by our openness—understood as exposure or vulnerability—toward the suffering Other, according to Emmanuel Levinas. The withdrawal or contraction of "self" is also an indispensable prelude to both the making of and the experience of art, requiring that we contract in order to communicate and withdraw in order to witness.

Chapter 1 relies on the thought of Maurice Blanchot and Levinas to propose an aesthetics of vulnerability. Because I consider "aesthetics" as both a category of experience and as necessarily tied to the arts, I explore Blanchot's relationship between art and the void, between art and emptiness, in terms of the power of art to summon the sacred, as well as the failure of art—which is somehow also its accomplishment *as* art—to contain the sacred. Levinas was close friends with Blanchot but did not explicitly share Blanchot's devotion to art; Levinas's thought is instead devoted to critiquing the program of philosophy which did not prevent the horror of the Shoah. Levinas cautions against anything that distracts from the primordial sensibility that directs us for the Other. Since vulnerability is the locus of the relation to the Other, denial of this vulnerability in a vain attempt to overcome it breeds violence. Taken together, Blanchot and Levinas offer a wider scope of the sensibility to the outside, to the void, to the alterity of the Other and the consequent responsibility to the Other. In the exposure of vulnerability we may articulate the self-emptying that assists what it means to say "God becomes incarnate"

4. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 13.

or “the Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Chapter 2 considers Christology through an aesthetics of vulnerability, in an effort to reimagine the metaphysical categories in which the doctrine of the incarnation initially developed. The ability of theology to respond to catastrophe in the present age means undermining “onto-theology,” the classical metaphysical logic on which traditional theology relies, specifically the substance ontologies that have so identified Western thought that it was difficult for even Einstein to accept the implications of his own theories of relativity. Onto-theology is the naming of God as the “highest Being” abstracted from the material world, the God of the “omnis”—the omnipotent God of theodicy, for example, for whom catastrophic suffering is justified, or the immutable God who is remote to the suffering of the poor. Because I see visual culture and the arts as sources of the interruptions necessary to heighten sensibility to the vulnerable, chapter 3 studies issues in theological aesthetics, including the commodification of art and religion, in an effort to argue for the integrity of art and its value irrespective of the marketplace; chapter 4 traces the meaning of art, beauty, and the imagination as resources for theology.

We will then apply two distinct motifs in visual art as a resource for considering divine incarnation: the first motif, described in chapter 5, is the *Gnadenstuhl*. The term *Gnadenstuhl*, translated as “Throne of Grace” or “Mercy Seat,” is thought to have originated from Martin Luther’s 1534 translation of both Exodus 25:21-22 and Hebrews 4:16 in reference to the lid on the Ark of the Covenant. The original Hebrew term is *kapporeth*, meaning “to cover,” not only as a noun, as in “lid,” but also, based on the Hebrew root from which it was derived, as a verb, meaning “to pardon,” or “to atone for,” as in “to cover a debt.” Thus, although it can be translated as simply “cover,” *kapporeth* is used exclusively in the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to the “Mercy Seat” which resides over the ark, the throne of God’s dwelling. The term *Gnadenstuhl* was then used to describe the medieval motif in visual art that depicts God the Father enthroned, supporting the crucified Son in his lap or on the cross. The Spirit, appearing in the form of a dove, either joins the Father and Son or is among them, elsewhere in the composition. The *Gnadenstuhl* motif is characterized by an insistence that the three divine persons each participate in the

crucifixion event, although not in the same way. Only the second person of the trinity dies, but the tangible sorrow often found on the Father's face expresses the anguish of the loss of a child, and the placement of the Spirit often echoes either the bond between the Father and the Son or their separation at the moment of the Son's death. Also present in compositions of the *Gnadenstuhl* motif is symbolism referring to the shared grief of heaven and earth; much of this is derived from Jewish throne-chariot or *Merkabah* mysticism found in the visions of Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, and the author of Revelation. The earliest known appearance of the motif is in a missal illumination from Cambrai in the twelfth century; the *Gnadenstuhl* soon becomes part of the Gothic renovation of Saint-Denis in Paris, travels through the Netherlands and Germany, and becomes a popular feature of the Florentine Renaissance, as in the phenomenal Masaccio *Trinity* at Santa Maria Novella, ca. 1427.

Chapter 6 will consider the doctrine of the incarnation through the dynamic interplay between the presence and absence of the sacred, reflected in art created during a time in which figuration was assumed to have been exhausted in its relevance—the Abstract Expressionism of the mid-twentieth century. Associated with artists such as Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman in the beginning and Ad Reinhart, Robert Motherwell, and Helen Frankenthaler soon after, this movement took place principally in the United States from the mid-1940s into the early 1970s. The movement away from representation reveals a way to envision and express the radically new in the wake of the failures of modernity: the tragedies of technology and industry, the wars and environmental degradation. Abstract art abandons previously held expectations of what art is for, reconceiving color, shape, form, and perspective in startling ways, which is what theology must also risk. Theology may regard abstract art as participating in new forms of inquiry, which in turn shapes new appreciations of the meaning of incarnation in a world marked by catastrophe and the absence of God.

Standing before a work from another century, or a recent work more obviously abstract—any work born of the particular perception of the artist, the lens through which the artist sees the world and which by definition I do not share—provides immediate alterity in

the space of the unfamiliar: the “dark field” in which I must rethink what I think I know and be willing to discard what I think I believe. This is what Richard Kearney calls “an aesthetic openness to the gracious and strange,” and what André Gide called a “disposition to receive (*une disposition à l'accueil*),” since religions are “imaginary works” that depend on the symbol, story, and image to witness the transcendent.⁵ The power of the experience of art, whether creating or appreciating it, offers the occasion for the doing of theology, the articulation of the experience of the divine, toward a “space” in which “God is the sphere of which the center is everywhere and the circumference is nowhere.”⁶

5. Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 14.

6. Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliot Coleman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), xi; see also Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2.

CHAPTER ONE

Theology, Vulnerability, and Art as the Consciousness of Grief

We live with a deep secret that sometimes we know, and then not.

—Rumi

Theology is constantly striving for an appropriate grammar in which to express the inexpressible. Language is then both the tool and the torture of theologians; we are aware of the need for deconstruction and revision of creedal and doctrinal formulae and also retrieval of the forgotten corners of the tradition, as much as we are aware of the eventual ineffectiveness of any statements we make. Such absurdity in pursuit of saying something regarding the being/life/identity/possibility of God does not deter us. Theologians tend to be a loquacious bunch. My friend and colleague Mary Doak tells the story of bringing her young daughter Sarah to one of her classes and then afterward asking Sarah what she thought. Sarah replied with her usual directness: “All you do is talk! Blah-blah-blah, *God*, blah-blah-blah.” That’s actually about right, for any of us who make a living talking about God. There are times in class when I lecture and am suddenly hit with the realization, as Thomas Aquinas is supposed to have realized, that this talk is all so much straw. But I keep talking; my blah-blah-blahs also punctuated occasionally with “God.” So I am grateful for Derrida’s insight that writing is anguish, “the restricted passageway of speech against which all possible

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meanings push together, preventing each other's emergence"¹—I am grateful that I will never be responsible for the last word, and that this small effort will be unsaid by better thinkers.

What gives theology (and most theologians) pause to silence, however, is catastrophe;² when faced with the horrors of the Shoah, the despair of Syrian refugees and thousands drowned when boats capsize with the weight of the hopeful, the devastation of AIDS and the resurgence of Ebola in West Africa: theology is appropriately rendered mute until lamentation can be channeled into expression. But “the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact,”³ wrote Maurice Blanchot. Etymologically, Blanchot reminds us, “disaster” refers to the separation from the star, from the compass of security. Negotiating the geography of expression and silence when faced with devastation is beyond mere theology or any “God-talk,” and so beyond the limits of language. It seems we need more ways to enter these realities and more ways to impart what we witness. How might we do theology in such a way that the disaster, the catastrophe, leaves nothing intact, detaching our security from the star?

Through the artistic drive, we may explore what it means to consider God in detachment from the secure categories of the past, in the wake of disaster. Blanchot notes that it isn't just “knowledge of the disaster, but knowledge as disaster” that “disorients the absolute,” displacing what masquerades as knowledge.⁴ Art's detachment from certainty or objectivity may be why Theodor Adorno cautiously recommended “the idea that art may be the only remaining medium

1. Jacques Derrida, “Writing and Difference: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 9.

2. J. Matthew Ashley writes that it is the *Leidensfrage*, the “question of catastrophic, massive and systemic suffering” that provides the context for Metz's later work. Based on the usage by Ashley and Metz, I have adopted the term “catastrophic suffering.” Ashley, in *Interruptions: Mysticism, Politics, and Theology in the Work of Johann Baptist Metz* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), vii.

3. Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

of truth in an age of incomprehensible terror and suffering.”⁵ The motivation to navigate meaning, to create and express experience through the arts can be argued as concurrent with the religious impulse in human beings: both art and religion require an abstract or transcendent dimension of mental activity willing to examine what is known or believed in new forms, willing to turn what is experienced into metaphor and myth, symbol and story. The process of creating a work of art, and the process of envisioning the invisible, involves submission to the imagination, the muscle in the mind responsible for creating the images by which we shape the world.

The viewer of art, on the other hand, is a witness to this newly disclosed reality. Art assumes a sacred character when the artist releases a new way of seeing or hearing something that touches us in terms of the weight of existence, even if in the perception of art we cannot articulate it as such. We may feel moved before a work of art but be unsure as to why. That’s all right, of course; art is also about enjoyment, appealing to our aesthetic intelligence, to what “pleases the senses”; etymologically, this is the original definition of “aesthetics,” perceived sentiment. Aesthetics is also a critical, philosophical stance that addresses the appeal to the senses, attempting to articulate the often indescribable experience of something beautiful, or moving, or even something ugly and repellent. Joseph Parry and Mark Wrathall write that art functions as “A way of directing us to important phenomena and helping us to understand them in their own terms.”⁶ Since sight is often the most immediate sense experience we have, visual art and culture will be our primary source of experience in this book, but we will rely on poetry as well. “Visual art, especially painting,” note Parry and Wrathall, “has a particular power to bring us into contact with the world that we study and in which we study because it can convey what the world itself gives us to perceive ‘in full innocence,’ as Merleau-Ponty famously declared.”⁷

5. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, 1984), 27.

6. Joseph D. Parry and Mark Wrathall, introduction to *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph D. Parry (London: Routledge, 2011), 1.

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

This “innocence,” or way that the world gives, is also a matter of its vulnerability, which is symbolized in the naked exposure of one to another. If we consider the sensibility required to appreciate what is outside the self, the bodily sensibility by which we “take in” the outside world, then the aesthetic is the faculty of appreciation and recognition through sensibility, and here particularly through the sensitivity by which we may appreciate the vulnerability and alterity of the Other. The Other, and the art object, must be considered in their alterity, in their integrity, independent of the interpretation I may want to impose, otherwise I disregard this vulnerability, and perhaps even the Other or the art object itself. Although the phenomena of a painting’s color, texture, and line work together to present a face, “a painting doesn’t merely represent reality”—even if the technique used is photographic realism, as in the portraits of faces by Chuck Close—rather, paintings “re-stage the meanings that make up and structure our most basic experience as human perceivers in the world,”⁸ such that within this re-staging is a creative and responsive disturbance of the ego-based tendency to gaze only at my own reflection of the world. As Levinas argues, the Other—and I would add, the artwork—are interruptions, ruptures of the narcissistic response toward which we usually yield. Our aesthetic sensibility is our openness to appreciating the vulnerable Other, as well as our openness to the creative discourse that occurs through the arts.

***A Double Mouthful of Silence:
Toward an Aesthetics of Vulnerability***

Great art discloses *more* than pleasure, and *more* than sentiment; it is, however, notoriously difficult to name or say what the “more” is. This is because great art has always been connected to the sacred or ineffable dimension of the weight of human existence. The French critical essayist and experimental novelist Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003) comes close to describing this “more,” this intensity of the experience of existence, in *The Space of Literature*:

8. Ibid., 3. See also Martin Heidegger, *On the Essence of Truth*, in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D. F. Krell (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993).

[T]he brilliance, the explosive decision—this presence or “lightning moment”—let us acknowledge that such a dazzling affirmation arises neither from the assurance of stable truths nor from the clarity of the day which we have conquered and where living and being are accomplished in actions whose limits are familiar to us. The work brings neither certitude nor clarity. It assures us of nothing, nor does it shed any light upon itself. . . . Just as every strong work abducts us from ourselves, from our accustomed strength, makes us weak and as if annihilated, so the work is not strong with respect to what it is. It has no power, it is impotent: not because it is simply the obverse of possibility’s various forms, but rather because it designates a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation.⁹

Blanchot was raised in a devout Catholic family but identified as an atheist, primarily, it seems, because of exasperation with institutional religion’s totalizing and absolutist tendencies.¹⁰ But the vestiges of Catholicism’s sacramental imagination may have remained a tacit background to his musings on sacred realities in the wake of the modern experience of the absence of God, even if he himself did not explicitly make the connection. He was fascinated by “the inhuman, the nonpresent, the divine that is present and activating . . . and yet is also hidden and as if unrecognized.”¹¹ As you may guess from the above passage, he is famous for making positive and negative statements about the same thing at the same time: here the technique comes close to illuminating the experience of great art as disclosing

9. Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 221–22.

10. Blanchot understood that atheism of the postwar era was devoid of the means to overcome the fascist tendencies in religion. Despite his rejection of Catholicism, and religion in general, Blanchot appreciated Judaism as a religion that disdains idolatry and tries to overcome superstition. He sees in Judaism “the recognition of an ethical order manifesting itself in respect for the Law”; Blanchot writes that the reason Hitler wished to eliminate the Jews was because the Jews consider myth as subordinate to the ethical. See Blanchot, “Intellectuals Under Scrutiny: An Outline for Thought,” in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 221.

11. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 229.

a sacred reality—a reality “set apart and forbidden,” according to Emile Durkheim—that is both an affirmation and a negation at once, strong and weak, possible and impossible, each interpenetrating the other. Hence, it seems Blanchot realized that the experience of the sacred, and specifically the experience of the sacred through art, gives way to an appreciation of the non-dual (neither one nor many but not-two¹²) or mutually interdependent poles of paradox found in Buddhist thought. Blanchot reminds us that we are assured of nothing, whether in the possible communication of the written text or the plastic arts. But through these, we have the designation of the affirmation of the void, the impossible emptiness of existence that permeates, limits, and also liberates the human condition. Only by attending to the void, to the unknowing and unsaying necessary to any discussion of the sacred, can we possibly approach the parallel realities of art and religion. Shouldering the void contains the possibility of self-annihilation when we are confronted with alterity, with otherness, with the “blessed unforeseen.”

Art, Blanchot muses above, brings nothing that is certain, reassuring, permanent, or stable to the intellect or the emotions: its greatness, its endurance, and its allure are in its ability to shift the ground beneath us, to hint at a transcendence of limits within the limits of matter (canvas, pigment, bronze, marble) and time. This transcendence that is also the void, “a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation,” refers to “infinity” for Blanchot and his close friend, the Jewish Lithuanian philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995). “God” represents this infinity, this “Holy Mystery” for Rahner because “God” is transcendent and not the object of my interpretation or the imposition of my perception; the same is true for Levinas. The God beyond the narrow confines of my desire is transcendent Other; but I also desire that which is beyond the confines of my desire. I desire to be swallowed by that which I cannot name. I yearn for what is Other than these bound-

12. I am relying on Paul Knitter’s use of Raimon Panikkar’s way of expressing non-dualism: “God and creation are not two, but neither are they one,” Knitter, *Without Buddha, I Could Not Be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 22.

aries, lost in the dark field, a void in which to be passive before the unknown.

Such is also the case for the artist Mark Rothko. Rothko writes that what distinguishes “art” from an “illustration” pertains to matters “heroic”: art “must provide the implications of infinity to any situation.”¹³ Rothko’s color field paintings thrive in the boundary-less boundaries of ethereal rectangles and the limits of the canvases. They are fields of color both brilliant and brooding, both stable and wandering. Rothko applies “heroic” to art frequently in his writings; for this he relies on Friedrich Nietzsche, one of the first modern thinkers who had the courage to be untethered from the modern illusions of both permanence and progress. Nietzsche credits the Greeks with translating tragedy into an art form; without art to make sense of tragedy, Rothko observes, life would have been unendurable for the Greeks, as it would be for us. Nietzsche, writes Rothko, understood that “the entire function of art is to produce an intelligible basis for the endurability of man’s insecurity.”¹⁴ Indeed, the only values Nietzsche could tolerate in a world he saw as uninhibited by objective meaning are artistic and aesthetic values, which celebrate life when we are confronted with the banality of death.

According to Kevin Hart, Blanchot draws out Nietzsche’s aphorism, “We possess art lest we perish of the truth” toward understanding art as that which “takes us to the abyss where truth can find no traction.”¹⁵ “Truth,” in Nietzsche’s aphorism, refers to what he understands to be a characteristically Christian emphasis on a spiritual realm *opposed* to a material realm. Christians have made the mistake of staking a claim on the spiritual as though it is not only *contained* in the revelation of Jesus Christ but also prioritized above and against the material world. For Nietzsche, art is to be valued because it maintains the human commitment to the sensuous, dangerous, unpredictable world. Hart reminds us that here, art reveals

13. Mark Rothko, *The Artist’s Reality: Philosophies of Art*, ed. Christopher Rothko (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 95.

14. *Ibid.*, 36.

15. Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 65.

the space of impossibility for Blanchot.¹⁶ The “impossible” refers “to what is ‘outside’ the world, and it expresses the profundity of this outside bereft of intimacy and of repose. . . . [A]rt has its origin, not in another world but *in the other of all worlds*.”¹⁷ Hence, what Blanchot referred to as the *dehors*, the “outside,” the “impossible,” the “other” of all worlds, is the one we do not imagine or expect, but one which we are urged to have the courage to risk. The “outside” is a risk because it challenges the boundaries of what is safe, or easy, such when we cling to dualistic thinking in an effort to escape complexity and nuance. Blanchot, however, asserts, “Art is not religion . . . but in the time of distress which is ours, the time when the gods are missing, the time of absence and exile, art is justified, for it is the intimacy of this distress: the effort to make manifest, through this image, the error of the imaginary, and eventually the ungraspable, forgotten truth which hides behind this error.”¹⁸ Art, then, is a means to make tragedy *endurable* as Rothko and Nietzsche attempted to do, because art emerges in a time when the gods are missing in the midst of tragedy, when the star has become separated. Making tragedy “endurable,” however, must never be to justify it: tragedy is neither defensible as a means to redemption nor as a necessary conduit to great art, whether in the mental torture Van Gogh experienced, or in the depression that plagued Rothko for most of his life and finally claimed him at the end. Ultimately, Rothko could not make his own tragedy *endurable*, but his art leaves us with this hope.

The space in which we may be open to the impossible, open to the void as permeating existence, refers to the condition and intention of art, even if it means imagining a world in which we live in proximity to the sacred rather than close to the distraction, willing

16. “What he calls ‘the space of literature’ is the place, or better, nonplace where discontinuity reigns and everything we encounter is strange, and it is in questioning literature and approaching this space that we are led to figure being human by way of the impossible as well as the possible.” Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 8.

17. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 74. Emphasis mine.

18. *Ibid.*, 83.

to risk what Blanchot called the “consciousness of unhappiness,” faithful to the “demands of grief.”¹⁹ For Levinas,

Opening is the stripping of the skin exposed to wound and outrage. Opening is the vulnerability of a skin offered in wound and outrage beyond all that can show itself, beyond all that of essence of being can expose itself to understanding and celebration. In sensibility “is uncovered,” is exposed a nude more naked than the naked of skin that, form and beauty, inspires the plastic arts; nakedness of a skin offered to contact, to the caress that always . . . is suffering from the suffering of the other.²⁰

For Levinas, subjectivity emerges through openness to vulnerability, a willingness to be exposed to what is outside my ego. Living in proximity to the sacred, to the alterity that is a trace of the transcendence of God, means living in proximity to the grief that comes when we shun distraction and escape, when we enter the pain that vibrates from every headline and “Butcher’s Bill” of catastrophe. Entering the pain of another, a willingness to live with a consciousness of the grief of another, is a willingness to make oneself vulnerable and fragile for the sake of another, a voluntary poverty. Such a voluntary vulnerability, awareness of the openness to the Other, reverses the violence of triumphalism, imperialism, absolutism, and control. Living in proximity to the sacred is living in proximity to the work that must be done to meet this pain and commit to being agents of, and so responsible for, its transformation. Art is the consciousness of grief because grief is the activity of witness to suffering, the activity of loss, the despair of the disrepair of the world; “[art] describes the situation of one who has lost himself, who can no longer say ‘me,’ who in the same movement has lost the world, the truth of the world, and belongs to exile, to the time of distress when, as Hölderlin says, the gods are no longer and are not yet,”²¹ writes Blanchot. Theology must adopt the weight of the consciousness of

19. *Ibid.*, 74.

20. Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Urbana, IL, and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 63.

21. Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 74.

grief if it is to retain its integrity and critical function. The weight of this world, the heft of its suffering, must especially accompany those privileged to benefit from this world.

Derrida writes that mortality binds us all “to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this non-power, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish.”²² Vulnerability is the first experience of being alive, and it is the last experience of being alive: it is the essential component of compassion, because no one born into mortality will escape suffering: “From the moment of sensibility, the subject is for the other. . . nothing is more passive than this challenge prior to my freedom, this pre-original challenge, this sincerity.”²³

Because great art often accompanies great suffering, it becomes necessary in witness to great art that we be vulnerable witnesses to catastrophic suffering. In other words, none of us will ever feel deeply the art or pain of another unless we are willing to deny the imposition of the ego upon it. Art brings us closer to the reality of the suffering Other insofar as we are each willing to be open to the alterity of the Other, to refrain from dismissing what is offered, to allow it to affect us. Such a kenosis or emptying of self happens when one is vulnerable before the Other, laid bare, refraining from the tyranny of the imposition of ego—the “in my opinion”—that tends to be the first impulse in the presence of the new. From the standpoint of *witness*, great art encourages the faculty of awareness and the cultivation of perceptual acuity when one withdraws the self; similarly, from the standpoint of *creativity*, great art occurs when an artist avoids the

22. Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, in *Signature Derrida*, ed. Jay Williams (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 410. Derrida writes this essay to displace the anthropocentrism that occupies Western discourse; I use him here in a similar vein, since a recovery of vulnerability is essential to displacing all oppressive power structures. For an excellent investigation of this essay regarding non-human animal rights, see Aaron S. Gross, “Sacrificing Animals and Being a Mensch,” chap. 5 in *The Question of the Animal and Religion: Theoretical Stakes, Practical Implications* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

23. Levinas, *Humanism of the Other*, 64.

sentimental and solipsistic connection to the self. The reciprocal aspects of art, between witness and artist, between receiver and communicator, may be appreciated through the biblical God who both creates and communicates as artist as well as becomes incarnate and receives divine communication as witness.

Art bears witness to this world through what might be called an aesthetics of vulnerability, in which we are all called to visually witness to each other what Levinas called the infinite alterity of the Other. Theology should also adopt this function of art, exposing the infinitely Other reality which is past-all-grasp. If the aesthetic is a manner of perceiving the outside—reality in its phenomena—it is also a mode or method of formulating the outside, the phenomena of reality. An aesthetics of vulnerability affirms that self-sufficiency is an illusion, and autonomy is impracticable; “We human beings are vulnerable to many kinds of affliction and most of us are at some time afflicted by serious ills. How we cope is only in small part up to us. It is most often to others that we owe our survival, let alone our flourishing,”²⁴ notes Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that the history of philosophy in the West is characterized by the attempt to overcome both dependence and vulnerability, rather than ways to sharpen the awareness indicated by vulnerability or strengthen our interdependence in response to it. MacIntyre reminds us that vulnerability and dependence are central to the human condition and so must be the basis for moral philosophy.

Vulnerability is the ethical stance of subjectivity for Levinas: the making oneself vulnerable to the vulnerability of the Other. This vulnerability is therefore existential in its frame of human existence. Rather than a “deficiency” or a “frailty” that refers to an *inferiority*, vulnerability is the manner in which alterity (and so the potential for relationship, which is also the potential for existence) is manifested. Levinas writes,

In this frailty as in the dawn rises the Loved, who is the Beloved. . . . [T]he epiphany of the Beloved is but one with her

24. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1999), 1.

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regime of tenderness. The way of the tender consists in an extreme fragility, a vulnerability. It manifests itself at the limit of being and non-being, as a soft warmth where being dissipates into radiance . . . dis-individualizing and relieving itself of its own weight of being, already evanescence and swoon, flight into self in the very midst of manifestation.²⁵

When are we at our most vulnerable? When we are exposed, naked, without shelter or protection. This is the opposite of power as it is typically understood; it is a passivity that is not inert but rather is a fundamental openness, “like an inversion of the *conatus* of *esse*, a having been offered without holding back . . . not the generosity of offering oneself, which would be an act,” but rather an openness that makes existence possible, that “already presupposes the unlimited undergoing of sensibility.”²⁶ This is where alterity makes being possible, since the sensibility—the aesthetic impulse to feel, to be wounded—is the womb of risk, “pre-original not resting on oneself . . . a writhing in the tight dimensions of pain, the unexpected dimensions of the hither side.”²⁷

This vulnerability, this sensibility, can be experienced through the aesthetic because it involves more than I can understand or act on—it is always more than my ego, more than my “power,” more than my “self.” Vulnerability indicates that there is a surplus, an excess of what is possible, and so it refers to the infinite, to something beyond my capabilities. Such vulnerability is the womb of both the ethical and the aesthetic, the emptiness that radiates the potential of darkness for light, the “limit of being and the non-being.” Our sensibility—and here I note our aesthetic and imaginative capacities—is as an organ of vulnerability, a fundamental openness to the infinite, to the Other who will always exceed the “me.” Indeed, Levinas explains, “The subjectivity of a subject is vulnerability, exposure to

25. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2008), 256.

26. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 75.

27. *Ibid.*

affection, sensibility, a passivity more passive still than any passivity, an irrecoverable time, an unassemblable diachrony of patience, an exposedness always to be exposed the more, an exposure to expressing, and thus to saying, thus to giving.”²⁸

It is this vulnerability that I read into Blanchot’s “demands of grief.” As aesthetic markers, the expressive potential of the arts provides a way to articulate the consciousness of vulnerability. Thus vulnerability gives rise to the signification, which Levinas names as prior to being, the “hither side of or beyond essence.”²⁹ The hither side—the “outside”—is the other of all worlds, beyond the tidy claims I have staked in my attempts at individuality. For Levinas, vulnerability is “a defecting or defeat of the ego’s identity. And this, pushed to the limit, is sensibility, sensibility as the subjectivity of the subject. It is a substitution for another, one in place of another, expiation.”³⁰ Such an excess of sensibility is where the aesthetic may play, where vulnerability makes the expression in language and image possible. Hence, the exposure of one to another is the necessary precondition of the “signifyingness of signs”: “The plot of proximity and communication is not a modality of cognition. . . . It is in the risky uncovering of oneself, in sincerity, the breaking up of inwardness and the abandon of all shelter, exposure to traumas, vulnerability.”³¹ When one can dismantle the shelter of the ego, art and language are possible; disclosing this vulnerability is always conscious of, and so “faithful to,” the demands of grief.

In turn, I am concerned to emphasize that the viewing of great art prepares one to dismantle the shelter of the ego by altering one’s perception and offering a glimpse of alterity “embodied,” so to speak. I am far from the first to consider art’s ability to alter perception, but just as Levinas argues that language and communication are possible when the self is emptied, emerging from the primordial vulnerability that is openness to the Other, we should remember the potential of art to empty the self of what it thinks it knows or understands when

28. *Ibid.*, 50.

29. *Ibid.*, 14.

30. *Ibid.*, 15.

31. *Ibid.*, 48.

art offers a new dimension of reality. Art negotiates between the vulnerability that is primordial openness and the transformation of the subject that takes place when one is laid bare before the experience. There is therefore a profusion of meaning on either side of art's equation—both audience/witness and artist—a profusion that may be described as “emptiness” through the lens of what Buddhism indicates as *sunyata*, a term which describes the interrelatedness of all things. “Emptiness” points to interdependency out of which all things are manifest. That the divine could be glimpsed through the complex paradox between emptiness and plenitude indicated by *sunyata* is a refrain that reverberates in the paradox of what Blanchot describes in *Thomas the Obscure* as “this void which contemplates.”

While it was not Blanchot's intention to “do theology” and, as Kevin Hart cautions, it would be “dishonest in the extreme” to read Blanchot as having an implicit theological intention or “an oblique rapprochement with the Christian or Jewish God,”³² it seems to me that such “demands of grief” ask whether in the dismissal of the positive naming of God or the positive (and exclusivist) claims of religion, we may retain concepts such as “transcendence,” “mystery,” even the “divine” with the discipline of negation and paradox in the unworking (*désœuvrement*) or unsaying of language. “Transcendence” is how the temporal and finite “names” the “beyond”: the impossible beyond of another's pain, the impossible beyond of a God I can never comprehend, but both of which are still as near to me as my own breathing. The beyond of an Other and the beyond of the infinite represent parallel displacements of my perspective. But the human relationship—the interhuman encounter—is where the displacement of perspective refers to an infinity that has the divine as its term of transcendence. This relationship in the here and now is the space of the sacred: although I am engaged in the life of another person, I must never make the mistake of assuming that even that which occurs in the temporal, material, and finite could ever be comprehensible or exhaustible. The relationship, the encounter, is past-my-grasp while I grope for it; such makes it sacred. This relationship displaces the ego I have carefully protected until our encounter.

32. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 230.

For Blanchot and Derrida, the encounter that displaces occurs through art and in language; for Levinas such was less the case, as he privileges the actual encounter and physical relationship. Between language and art, Levinas privileges language. But I hope to show that visual culture, whether photography, visual media, or visual art—all aspects of visual witness—serve to widen the scope of impact by the Other whom I will never physically meet. The image as essential to visual culture invites us to witness, invites us to move beyond the familiar, and heightens sensibility, which heightens perception.

When I look into the eyes of Finda Fallah,³³ a woman who lost three of her six children, and her husband, mother and sister to the Ebola virus—all of whom died in her arms—and picture her sleeping with her children on the streets of West Point, the most densely populated neighborhood in Monrovia, Liberia, in the cold mud, because the clinic had no room for them, the weight of the demands of grief are more than I can tolerate. Art serves to negotiate this burden; the visual culture involved in witnessing her testimony preserves it. I must carry her with me, as powerless as I am. I must never forget her. This “must never” is an indictment of my infinite responsibility to those who suffer, where a glimpse of the divine infinite is possible, but only if it is an interruption and not an assimilation, what Blanchot calls “an interruption escaping all measure.”³⁴ Although I may never meet Ms. Fallah in person, “here is the strangeness of this strangeness—such an interruption (one that neither includes nor excludes) would be nevertheless a relation; at least if I take it upon myself not to reduce it, not to reconcile it, even by comprehending it, that is, not to seek to consider it as the ‘faltering’ mode of the unitary relation.”³⁵ Her face interrupts my life; how can I maintain this interruption without reducing it, without reconciling it, without *comprehending* it? For Blanchot, God is not

33. From “Outbreak,” PBS *Frontline*, episode produced by Dan Edge and Sasha Joelle Achilli, directed by Dan Edge, aired May 5, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/outbreak/>.

34. Maurice Blanchot, “The Relation of the Third Kind (Man without Horizon),” chap. 7 in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 68.

35. *Ibid.*

an explicit aspect of this relation; Levinas, however, sees a trace of the divine within this infinite difference that is “nevertheless a relation.” The relation is established where my power ceases, where self-protection descends; Blanchot explains, “I have in this relation a relation with what is radically out of my reach; and this relation measures the very extent of the Outside.”³⁶

The demands of grief recognize that the “truth is nomadic”³⁷—truth wanders and evolves, and hides again, behind affirmations that open into emptiness, when every question is shadowed by another: “[T]hat which is concealed without anything being hidden, which asserts itself and remains unexpressed, which is there and forgotten: That what was there should have been always and every time a presence, was the surprise within which thought fulfilled itself, unsuspected.”³⁸ “Presence” for Blanchot and Levinas is always at the same time an absence, a proximity that carries the weight of an infinite distance. Asserting the weight of distance intends to obstruct any violence I might perpetrate by assuming that I can ever know the Other or understand the suffering of an Other, or can make any claim to “my” God. The interplay of light and shadow, the hazy shapes of persons in the field of vision of one nearly blind: such is the truth of the sacred that persists through interhuman encounter. That which inspires religious thought begins in the context of relationship.

According to Blanchot and Levinas, “otherness” refers to that which draws us outside ourselves, into this *lieu*, this space. Levinas writes, “[I]t appears as a movement going forth from a world that is familiar to us, whatever be the yet unknown lands that bound it or that it hides from view, from an ‘at home’ (*chez soi*) which we inhabit, toward an alien outside-of-oneself (*hors-de-soi*), toward a yonder.”³⁹ Such occurs, notes Blanchot, in the “frankness of a gaze,

36. *Ibid.*, 69.

37. Maurice Blanchot, “The Conquest of Space,” in Holland, *The Blanchot Reader*, 271.

38. Maurice Blanchot, “Waiting,” in Holland, *The Blanchot Reader*, 278.

39. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

in the nakedness of an approach that nothing prevents.”⁴⁰ Weaving verse from the poet Paul Celan, Blanchot observes,

[T]he I is not alone, it turns into *we*, and this falling of the one with the other joins together what is falling, even into the present tense. . . . [W]e are foreigners, having to bear in common this distraction of distance which holds us absolutely apart. We are foreigners. Just as, if there is silence, two silences fill our mouths: Let us remember this, if we can: a double mouthful of silence.⁴¹

The quality of witness, of interhuman encounter in which there may be a trace of the divine, is that we are both ultimately silent in mutual reflection. We are each incomprehensible to the other, which means that the encounter will never be exhausted, an intimate distance. Our mutual vulnerability renders us silent. This space of the “outside” for Blanchot is neither interior nor exterior; it is borderless, indeterminable by geography. But neither is the *dehors*, the “outside,” solitary; and although we are foreign one to the other, in the depths of other perspectives, other experiences, other worlds, we fall into this distance together, in the proximity of silence. Through the other, “Other” “in an eminent sense,”⁴² we open ourselves to the “impossible,” the *dehors*, through the suffering of the Other, and through art and the ethical commitment of responsibility for the Other, we meet this suffering, witness to it, enter into it, and are passive before its alterity so as not to reduce it to the familiar, to my “self,” my ego, and my suffering.

We must therefore empty ourselves of ego or “self” (*kenosis*, “self-emptying”) in order to refer to this space, this “outside.” There is no primacy of subject here; for Blanchot and Levinas, the subject is always under construction, in a state of becoming, forged through

40. Blanchot, “Knowledge of the Unknown,” chap. 5 in *The Infinite Conversation*, 54.

41. Maurice Blanchot, *Une voix venue d'ailleurs* (Gallimard, 2002), p. 87, quoted in Leslie Hill, “‘Distrust of Poetry’: Levinas, Blanchot, Celan,” *Modern Language Notes* 120, no. 5 (December 2005): 995.

42. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 33.

ekstasis (Greek for displacement), standing beyond or beside the self and the body's boundaries, toward the Other. That the self may be lost in the Other determines the "me" that I am: the Other is the sculptor, chipping away at the marble, and I recognize my subjectivity through seeing how the encounter with otherness releases the "me." I do not come to the Other complete, a finished statue, so to speak. Self-emptying, then, is not merely negation, otherwise a *something* would have to be negated; rather, the activity of self-emptying, of detachment from self as origin, releases a space where the subject becomes possible. The "I" occurs in the negative space that "makes" the something, the statue (to continue the metaphor). Such kenosis, such exposure, might have emptiness as its analogue, emptiness as its source, emptiness as a nonexistence or potency in the *sunyata* of Mahayana Buddhism. Kenosis as an emptying of the self refers to this potency as an openness without foundation, a pure openness, a passivity; Rahner alluded to this in his notion of "obediential potency."⁴³ In such we find the kenosis of Jesus Christ, as an action of radical heteronomy, a passivity directed toward the Other. To paraphrase Richard Kearney, the recognition of powerlessness, vulnerability, fragility, brokenness, is where we "find ourselves empowered to respond to God's own primordial powerlessness and to make the potential Word flesh."⁴⁴

Because no language and no art can capture the depth of the suffering Other, and no language and no art can capture "God," we are left with desire. Desire for Levinas is simply the tending toward the outside, "toward something else entirely": this is not "desire" based

43. Karl Rahner, following Thomas Aquinas, argued that the human being is constituted in terms of an obediential potency for God: human beings have to be able to receive something of the divine self-communication, or else there is no point in God communicating anything: this is a condition present in the existential structure of the human being, prior to awareness or self-reflection. Rahner discusses this more fully as the "supernatural existential." The hypostatic union of divine and human in Christ is the logical outcome of this: the incarnation is the actualization of the essence of humanity, the "obediential potency" for union with God.

44. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 2.

on need, as though I desire food when I am hungry or companionship when I am lonely. This is rather a “metaphysical” desire, to use Levinas’s terminology, a desire that “cannot be satisfied” because it indicates a “just-beyondness” (my term, based on Rahner) of anything that could seemingly complete it.⁴⁵ Because it is a desire that can never be complete or fulfilled, it is always in reference to what is further beyond. Desire as that which refers us outside, to the always just-beyond, is an indication of the infinite. We desire the Other; we desire the sacred, which is at the root of what it means to be human. We desire in the manner of Rahner’s “incomprehensible fire in which we do not in fact burn up, but rather come to be for the first time.”⁴⁶ Through this desire, we see that we are both passive before the Other and the “impossible” brought by the difference or alterity of the Other and what it means to be responsible/responsive before the Other.

We are inclined to name or say this experience, to articulate it, express it in images, while also incapable of finally saying anything about it at all. The Other, as well as “God,” are not objects of thought, to be seized upon and dissected. Rather, the experience of the space of the ineffable, this dark field in which I clumsily grope, has an infinite horizon: Rahner saw “God” as the term of this horizon; Blanchot saw this horizon in the “sacred”; Levinas saw a “trace of God,” so careful was he to avoid naming the divine Other. The “trace” is “the mark of the absence of a presence”⁴⁷ for Jacques Derrida, heavily influenced by Levinas, a way for language to fade into erasure while in use. The “trace” may be said to be a presence of an absence as well, as in Rahner’s “past-all-graspness”; to use a geographical metaphor, like two lovers separated over thousands of miles but who can only think about each other, the desire between them in the space between them. Even when these lovers reunite, the space remains. A space of no form, no substance, but in which we are swallowed up.

45. See Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 34.

46. Rahner, “Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit,” 17.

47. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, translator’s preface to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xvii.

At the Limit of Being and Non-Being

How do we engage this outside, this impossible, this trace⁴⁸ of the infinite? Entering a space for the abstraction of reality reminds us that the ultimate reality, what Paul Tillich called “the ground of being,” cannot be expressed in words, concepts, or images. The emergence of abstract art occurs alongside modernism’s crisis of representation, when the instability of concepts and the identification of linguistic theory’s analysis of the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Modernism began to see that all language and all visual art participate in a type of abstraction; even if a painting attempts a realistic portrayal of something, its removal of the subject matter outside of its time and space constitutes an abstrac-

48. The notion of “trace” will appear throughout this book, especially in reference to Levinas’s thought. Levinas relies heavily on “trace” as a signifier for the infinite. Immanuel Kant considered the “trace” a way to discuss the barest sense impression of an a priori concept. Jane Kneller writes, “If we are somehow able to sense or feel that nature had a place for moral beings—that beings with purpose belonged there, and that nature itself had a purpose—then we would have something of the feeling of hope that we need to make following its strict law possible and even natural.” She cites Kant’s third Critique, section 42: “[R]eason also has an interest in the objective reality of the ideas (for which, in moral feeling, it brings about a direct interest), i.e., an interest that nature should at least show a trace or give a hint that it contains some basis or other for us to assume in its products a lawful harmony with that liking of ours which is independent of all interest (a liking we recognize ‘a priori’ as a law for everyone, thus we cannot base this law on proofs). Hence, reason must take an interest in any manifestation in nature of a harmony that resembles the mentioned harmony, and hence the mind cannot mediate the beauty of nature without at the same time finding its interest aroused.” Translation by Kneller. *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 61. Using the term “trace” is a way to evade direct signification or representation. This is true in Derrida’s use of the term as well: the meaning of a sign or signifier is related to its difference from other signs, and so any signifier contains a “trace” of what it does not mean, indicating what is never fully present or absent. The “trace” for Derrida is related to the *khôra*, a “place” in “the history of philosophy where the *différance* by which all things are inhabited wears through, where the abyss in things opens up and we catch a glimpse of the groundlessness of our beliefs and practices.” Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 98.

tion. Artists began to experiment with forms of abstraction in order to set in crisis ways of naming reality which had been unreflexively accepted. Because of its interest to light fires under what is conventional and established, abstract visual art may be a way for theology to train its “mind” toward the vision of the radically new. Although Levinas’s own work seldom focuses on art, he understands the potential of abstract art to help us think beyond the nameable: “modern painting re-immerses things in a non-figurative reality. In a profusion of monstrous forms, it seeks the compossibility of the impossible. No longer does anything impose choice, and imagination discovers its independence from perception, whose categories it shatters.”⁴⁹

Because modern art moves beyond the explicitly religious imagery from the Middle Ages through the Baroque, during which time it was believed that the invisible could be made manifest through the visible,⁵⁰ modern art asks that we abandon visual expectations, opening a space for spiritual perception and preparation for what is radically Other. Yet the movement between the invisible and manifestation, between kenosis (self-emptying) and incarnation, between potency and expression, is still evident in abstract art, because it is still color, or darkness, or line, or form—the tangible—that enables this space to open. Surrealism was one of the initial movements in modernist art that explicitly saw itself as a bulwark against the narrow confines of rationalism, “heralding a way of thought which is no longer a reducing agent but has become infinitely inductive and extensible,”⁵¹ according to André Breton, one of the framers of Surrealist ideology.

49. Emmanuel Levinas, “Lévy-Bruhl and Contemporary Philosophy,” in *Entre-Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 45.

50. Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141) wrote, “All things visible, when they obviously speak to us symbolically, that is when they are interpreted figuratively, are referable to invisible significations and statements. . . . For since their beauty consists in the visible form of things . . . visible beauty is an image of invisible beauty.” In *Hierarchiam Coelestem 2*; PL175, col. 949. See also Richard Viladesau, *Theological Aesthetics: God in Imagination, Beauty, and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 109.

51. André Breton, “The Crisis of the Object,” in *Surrealism and Painting*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), 277.

While not self-identified as within the movement as articulated by Breton, Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986) provides a vision that transforms the everyday object or scene until it leads to another world. She was fascinated with the spaces created by holes in material objects; her genius depicts these objects from angles that remove their identity. Her *Pelvis Series*, for example, emphasizes the space through which the sky or a landscape that isn’t a landscape can be seen; her magnified flowers contain doorways to a dark promise of infinity. Although her paintings abound in saturated color and light, O’Keeffe paints the space between things until the objects themselves no longer seem relevant. The object—the door to Alfred Stieglitz’s Lake George, New York home (*Farmhouse Window and Door*, 1929), for example—is identifiable as a door, but the off-kilter position alters its dimensionality, giving it a quality beyond its identity. The object then becomes a gateway to the dimension of emptiness from which the object is born. The object separates—and joins—two worlds, the known and the unknown. The unknown then becomes the catalyst by which the “known” may be not known. We have seen that a simple door, reduced to its rectangular and angular simplicity, when shown through the artist’s expression, is always more than a door, and this is more than a residence. As Breton commented in “The Crisis of the Object,” objects take on infinite dimensions with the risk of new perspective in Surrealist works: “With this new focus, the same object, however complete it may seem, reverts to an infinite series of latent possibilities which entail its transformation.”⁵² In this sense, Surrealism is indicative of the fragmentation that often characterizes modernity and so is a portent of the deconstruction and de-centering found in postmodern thought.⁵³

For Blanchot, language, poetry, and the arts are not only what we must trust because we have no alternative but also what we must mistrust because we have no alternative.⁵⁴ We are caught in the

52. *Ibid.*, 280.

53. For this point, I rely on Celia Rabinovitch, *Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), 8–9.

54. See Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 110–11; see also Hill, “Distrust of Poetry,” 1008.

whirlwind. This is especially the case in theology, David Tracy asserts, saying,

[R]eflection upon limit-questions and limit-situations does disclose the reality of a dimension to our lives other than the more usual dimensions, . . . a dimension which, in my own brief and hazy glimpses, discloses a reality, however named and in whatever manner experienced, which functions as a final, now gracious, now frightening, now trustworthy, now absurd, always uncontrollable limit-of the very meaning of existence itself.⁵⁵

Tracy here reminds us of the “limit-experience” Georges Bataille understood as sacred and Blanchot describes in the experience of writing and art. Kevin Hart explains that this is “experience in its radical sense: the peril of passing from a moment in time to the space of images. It is . . . an experience of experience . . . from that which yields positive knowledge to that which, in not offering itself to the senses, cannot enter the order of knowledge. This is what Bataille urges us to see when he speaks of the new theology as having ‘only the unknown as its object.’”⁵⁶ The experience of limits, like the heightening of sensibility for witness, or the empowering of a powerlessness that lays bare the “self” for the Other, is activity that mirrors the divine, when God chooses powerlessness in the incarnation. Observes Richard Kearney, “God thus empowers our human powerlessness by giving away [divine] power, by possibilizing us and our good actions—so that we may supplement and co-accomplish creation.”⁵⁷

The “brief and hazy glimpses” of a reality that bursts the seams of knowing occurred to me the day I discovered Rahner’s imagination; theology can play in the field of the gracious, frightening, trustworthy, absurd, and uncontrollable dimension of a reality none of us can name. Theology at its best reveals a garden of earthly delights,

55. David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 108.

56. Hart, *The Dark Gaze*, 27.

57. Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, 108.

knees aching in the dirt, digging holes into the unknown. Theology is reflection on limit-questions—death, meaning, existence, God—and in the discovery of discourse about God that interrupts, in which Rahner’s human being is affirmed in the incomprehensibility of God, there was that day in the tedious colorless sky stretched out like time, the heady thrall of being introduced to a fresh spot in this field, where Sr. Corita Kent sees “the garden our life is—a place where questions are scattered like seeds.”⁵⁸

Who Is the “Other”?

Who is the “Other” and what is meant by the term? According to Emmanuel Levinas, the “Other” is not a “phenomenon”—not merely something that appears in my experience—but is rather a *disturbance* of my perceptions of the world. To call the Other a “phenomenon” would be to name the Other according to my perceptions, which for Levinas is violent, an activity of domination and mastery. Rather, the “Other” is the one who interrupts and alters my tidy and secure experience of what surrounds me in such a way that I am not human, and certainly not a subject or a self, until I engage the Other as disturbing my perceptions, and not merely as an extension of them. The “Other” reverses the natural order of things; where I should be primarily preoccupied with my own survival (as in evolutionary biology) and my own existence (as in much of existentialist philosophy), the Other’s alterity presents an opportunity for holiness, “the certitude that one must yield to the other the first place in everything, from the *après vous* before an open door . . . to die for the other.”⁵⁹ Levinas calls “alterity” the distinctiveness of another

58. From a serigraph artwork by Corita Kent, *The Garden Our Life Is* (1979): “[A] place where questions are scattered like seeds—an atmosphere where answers for a season grow and blossom—then another year of seasons—it is the school the garden our life is,” www.corita.org/.

59. Emmanuel Levinas, interview with François Poirié, trans. Jill Robbins and Marcus Coelen, with Thomas Loebel, in *Is It Righteous to Be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*, ed. Jill Robbins (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 47.

person, the dimension of the Other that is hidden from me, such that even in a one-to-one encounter, there is far more unknown about the other person than is understood and far more which will forever remain beyond my grasp. “The face is present in its refusal to be contained,”⁶⁰ Levinas writes. Paradoxically, the hidden dimension of the person refers to the transcendent dimension, that which is indicative of the infinity that indicates “God.”

We may feel threatened by the dimension of unfamiliarity and hiddenness revealed by the Other, fear this unknown, distrust it, and even, according to Levinas, try to kill the one in whom alterity resides. More often than not, we fear the Other in such a way that we attempt to preserve an illusion of security, surrounding ourselves with the familiar. This is ultimately futile, since we forget that those closest to us, even those we love the most, are still separate, possessing worlds of perceptions and experience we cannot know, and so are always Other, forever eluding my comprehension. This is what Blanchot and Levinas call the *rappor sans rapport*, the relationless relation; Derrida explains, “Dissociation, separation, is the condition of my relation with the other. I can address the Other only to the extent that there is a separation, a dissociation, so that I cannot replace the Other and vice versa.”⁶¹ Levinas forbids us complacency even regarding those with whom we have the longest relationships: to prevent the violence of “totality” or “sameness”—in which I assume the other person is comprehensible and comprehended—the “Other” marks the difference between my ego-driven world and the world beyond the boundaries of my experience.

This is because “to comprehend” entails knowledge as a closed system: I know who you are, I know what you are, I know what you have done and what you will do. But for Levinas, such claims to comprehension of persons are totalizing, conquering, prone to violence. An example of the beyond-comprehension, the beyond-being, is in the Jewish tradition that refers to “God” as *Ha-Shem*, “the Name.” Using *Ha-Shem* as a divine reference acknowledges that one can never know the Name of God; the divine identity is unnamable

60. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 194.

61. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 14.

and so incomprehensible, so a signifier is used. In Exodus, Moses inquires after God's name before the burning bush,

If . . . they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, "I am who I am." He said further, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': this is my name forever, and this is my title for all generations." (Exod 3:13-15)⁶²

By altering God's answer three times, God explains that the divine Name—which for the early Hebrews signified comprehension of God—is always just beyond our grasp, just further afield. The Hebrew tetragrammaton YHWH, translated as "I am who I am" above or as "I am who I shall be" elsewhere, is unpronounceable in Jewish tradition. But this "just beyond" is a field where the people of this God have gathered, where they remember their heritage, where they tell their stories. That there is such a "beyond" or such a transcendent dimension to alterity is a "shock": the "shock of the divine, the rupture of the immanent order, of the order that I can embrace, of the order which I can hold in my thought, of the order which can become

62. John Courtney Murray argues in his famous lecture on the Name of God in Exodus, "Over against the inconstancy and infidelity of the people, who continually absent themselves from God, the Name Yahweh affirms the constancy of God, his unchangeable fidelity to his promise of presence." God's nearness to the world, however, does not exhaust God's mystery; as Murray explains, "The text, thus understood, contains a threefold revelation—of God's immanence in history, of his transcendence to history, and of his transience through history. God first asserts the fact of his presence in the history of his people: 'I shall be there.' Second, he asserts the mystery of his own being: 'I shall be there as who I am.' His mystery is a mode of absence. Third, he asserts that, despite his absence in mystery, he will make himself known to his people: 'As who I am shall I be there.' The mode of his transience is through his action, through the saving events of the sacred history of Israel. However, what thus becomes known is only his saving will. He himself, in his being and nature, remains forever unknown to men, hidden from them." John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 10–11.

mine, that is the face of the other.”⁶³ Levinas contrasts openness to this “beyond,”—this “alterity” or just-beyondness of the Other, this infinity—with “atheism,” the self’s maintaining “itself in existence all by itself, without participating in the Being from which it is separated . . . One lives outside of God, at home with oneself; one is an I, an egoism. . . . By atheism we thus understand a position prior to both the negation and affirmation of the divine”⁶⁴ in which the “I” is comfortably acceptable as the arbiter of all reality, the “totality.”

Levinas arrives at this position based on what he understands as the order of priorities that has structured philosophy in the West, which he argues refers to the “primacy of ontology” within Martin Heidegger’s philosophical investigation of Being. For Heidegger, the human being is characterized by inquiry into Being: *Dasein*—German for “being-there”—describes the contextual place of the human person in the world, irrevocably tied to time and place and so conditioned by concrete existence when asking the question of Being. Only human persons inquire into Being, and in doing so they orient themselves beyond their circumstances, beyond their context, toward the horizon of Being. *Dasein* does not have an essence which determines it, but is its possibility: it fashions its own existence. *Dasein* is central to Heidegger’s project because *Dasein* is the only being capable of interpreting the world, the beings within it, and the horizon of Being; such interpretive skill gives *Dasein* existence and makes the things of the world ontologically defined by *Dasein*.

For Heidegger, Western metaphysics is in error when it names Being, that of which *Dasein* inquires, “God.” Heidegger coined the term “onto-theology” in agreement with Kant against the notion that a Platonic hierarchy of beings necessarily leads to the “Highest Being,” or “God.” Merold Westphal sums it up well: onto-theology, the designation of “Being” as “God,” is “bad philosophy” because it converts the question of Being into the question of *a* being, even if the “Highest Being.”⁶⁵ From Heidegger’s perspective, questions

63. Levinas, interview with François Poirié, in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 48.

64. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 58.

65. Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Ontotheology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 259.

about “God” belong in theology, not in philosophy,⁶⁶ and to justify the existence of God philosophically rather than religiously is to gut religion of its wonder. Heidegger writes that whereas naming “God” the first cause uncaused (*causa sui*) might work for a philosophical system’s desire for order in the chain of causation, “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”⁶⁷ Heidegger argues here that “God” understood as “*causa sui*” is “the right name for the god of philosophy” because the statement is a logical outcome when positing a chain of causation, a fixed point which can be easily identified.⁶⁸ Abandoning the “god of philosophy is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.”⁶⁹

Levinas agreed with Heidegger that onto-theological tendencies must be overcome. I believe that Levinas also agreed that one can only approach discourse on God through religious thinking; he furthermore follows Heidegger in separating his explicitly religious writings, such as his lectures on the Talmud, from his philosophical project. Levinas, however, argues that two components of Heidegger’s thought are misguided: Dasein’s fundamental orientation in the particular “mineness,” *Jemeinigkeit*,⁷⁰ of Being and Heidegger’s assertion that Being must be intelligible. His arguments against Heidegger on these points reveal Levinas’s own priorities. Levinas argues that ontology—which he defines in terms of Being as a *totality* encompassing all truth—is what distracts us from the metaphysical exposure to the alterity of the Other, which opens to infinity and so to transcendence and so makes it possible for us to exist, to be subjects. The structure of Levinas’s understanding of subjectivity (for Heidegger, the “I” that determines existence) pertains to a primordial exposure

66. See Martin Heidegger, “Kant’s Thesis about Being,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 340.

67. Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72. See also Westphal, *Overcoming Ontotheology*, 261.

68. Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, 71.

69. *Ibid.*, 72.

70. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 2008), par. 9, H. 42, p. 68.

to the Other; the inescapable and infinite alterity of the Other and the response I make to the Other fashions my existence.

Heidegger's philosophical emphasis, however, is first on Dasein's own solitary obligation to decide what and how to be. While Dasein does depend on others in the world, Dasein is not affected by others in the particularity of Dasein's own possession of—or Dasein's activity as a "clearing" (the noun meaning "open space") for—Being, and so Heidegger does not prioritize the ethical obligation to the Other as primordial to Dasein. Acting authentically for Heidegger means acting with full awareness of responsibility to the self, until death, the loneliest, but most "mine" experience one can have. In this sense, allowing others to determine one's existence is "inauthentic." While Heidegger argues that being-in-the-world entails being-with-others, the structure of Dasein's being is not fundamentally for the Other: "[I]n the first instance' this entity is unrelated to Others, and that of course it can still be 'with' Others afterwards."⁷¹ Dasein is first being which is concerned with its own being.

Neither does Heidegger want to equate or otherwise refer to "God" when discussing Being (such he names as the mistake of the onto-theological trajectory of Western metaphysics since Plato and Aristotle): as we see above, Heidegger preferred to bracket or suspend faith in God from philosophical inquiry. Heidegger wished to consider the primacy of Being without "God" getting in the way, and so Heidegger is against "metaphysics" as built on the traditional Western trajectory. Hence, Heidegger wants to change the way *ontology* is done. But where Heidegger misses the mark for Levinas is in making Being and my possession of Being the fundamental matrix of existence, which (although not Heidegger's concern) can lead to the danger of reducing "God" to Being or subsuming "God" under Being. Furthermore, for Levinas, Heidegger makes the Greek metaphysical mistake of assuming that Being is intelligible.

The presumption that one can possess or know Being at all is described by Levinas as "one sole thesis" in Heidegger's *Being and Time*:

71. *Ibid.*, par. 117, H. 121, p. 156.

Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being is already an appeal to subjectivity. . . . [T]o affirm the priority of Being over existents is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with someone, who is an existent (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relation of knowing).⁷²

Although Levinas readily acknowledges not only Heidegger's influence on his work but also that Heidegger is "one of the greatest philosophers in history,"⁷³ Heidegger's anti-Semitic practices⁷⁴ were for Levinas evidence that his description of Dasein is deficient. Levinas located Heidegger's Nazism—he joined the party in 1933—in the components of his philosophical trajectory independent of the needs of the Other, toward "autonomy" or the freedom of the self in the *Jemeinigkeit* of Being. This freedom "maintains oneself against the other, despite every relation with the other, to ensure the autarchy of an I," thus suppressing alterity. Levinas, perhaps in the memory of the deaths of his parents and brothers shot by Nazi soldiers, fashions an arrow straight to the heart of Heidegger's philosophy: "Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. . . . Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relation with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience

72. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 45. See also Westphal, *Overcoming Ontotheology*, 261.

73. Levinas, interview with François Poirié, in *Is It Righteous to Be?*, 32.

74. Heidegger was also deeply anti-Semitic, according to his own philosophical diaries, the "black notebooks." He writes in the summer of 1941: "World Judaism is ungraspable everywhere and doesn't need to get involved in military action while continuing to unfurl its influence, whereas we are left to sacrifice the best blood of the best of our people." He seems to have believed the Jewish people were a key factor in the modern age's "abandonment of Being." See Peter E. Gordon, "Heidegger in Black," *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2014, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2014/oct/09/heidegger-in-black/>. These notebooks begin in 1931 and end in the early 1970s, filling thirty-four volumes. The volumes written during the Nazi regime are currently only available in German in their entirety. See *Überlegungen 2–15*, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2014).

to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.”⁷⁵

This tendency in the modern West to steamroll everything different or Other into a mere extension of the self is totalizing: reductionistic, ego driven, and perhaps even the basis for imperialistic tendencies in Western thought. Levinas calls this tendency toward autonomy, the “law of the self,” “an odyssey wherein all adventures are only accidents of a return to self.”⁷⁶ The tendency of the self to take what is disturbing about the Other and the newness represented by the Other and integrate this into what is familiar, what is “at home,” what is “the Same,” is problematic because it makes the self the measure of all things. This begins in Platonic philosophy: as Michael Morgan points out, in the *Sophist* and the *Timaeus*, “the same” refers to the self, to the mind or reason; “the other” refers to that which is beyond or outside the self.⁷⁷ What is “other” is contrasted with “the same”; what is Other is Other relative to the self. But in the modern age, when the “self” became the locus of “truth” rather than the receiver of it, the “self” and the lust for autonomy took the sublimation of the Other into the self as the melting pot of difference. In this way, the “self” of modernity lost its sense of the infinite when it reveled in its totalizing autonomy.

The only way out of this totalizing odyssey of the Same is to radicalize openness to the Other, to replace autonomy/freedom with heteronomy, by which the “law of the other” becomes the *source* of “being me”: “The putting into question of the self is precisely a welcome to the absolutely other. . . . [T]he epiphany of the Absolutely Other is a face by which the Other challenges and commands me through his nakedness, through his destitution . . . from his humility and his height. . . . [T]o be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility.”⁷⁸ “Responsibility” is the ethical response to

75. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46–47.

76. Emmanuel Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 14.

77. Michael L. Morgan, *The Cambridge Companion to Emmanuel Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 89.

78. *Ibid.*, 17.

the command the Other makes in disturbing my bubble of autonomy. “Freedom” for the autonomous self isn’t really free because it doesn’t lead to existence, which should increase and develop beyond the confines of the totality of Being. What does free the subject seems paradoxical: freedom of the subject consists in the infinite obligation to the Other, even to be “held hostage” by the needs of the Other in an asymmetrical relationship.⁷⁹ Only through radical openness to the otherness, the difference of the Other, can the subject exist, and so go *beyond* Being.

This to Levinas is central to the phenomenological project: consciousness is an intentionality always in contact with objects outside itself, with that which is Other than itself.⁸⁰ In phenomenology, human consciousness is never merely pure cognition with no object of intentionality—it rather moves toward something outside itself and then reflects on it as meaningful. Such is the “lived experience” which Levinas thought Heidegger neglected: the value of interrelationship between human persons that is an irrevocable and primordial aspect of being-in-the-world. The historical and contextual conditions that frame the particularity of being-in-the-world are unintelligible without attention to our relationships and social interaction. According to Levinas, Heidegger’s mistake is to neglect the fundamental importance of these relationships; in this way, Heidegger is aligned with the very Western concepts he sought to overcome. To overcome the Western reliance on autonomy, we must adopt the ethical or biblical perspective that transcends the Greek philosophical emphasis on the intelligibility of Being. Levinas asserts,

[T]he theme of justice and concern for the other as other, as a theme of love and desire which carries us beyond the finite Being of the world’s presence. The interhuman is thus an interface: a double axis where what is “of the world” qua phenomenological intelligibility is juxtaposed with what is “not of the world” as ethical responsibility. It is in this ethical perspective that God

79. See Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 112.

80. See Richard Kearney’s interview with Emmanuel Levinas, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1986), 50.

must be thought and not in the ontological perspective of our being-there or of some Supreme Being and Creator. . . . God, as the God of alterity and transcendence, can only be understood in terms of that interhuman dimension which emerges in the phenomenological-ontological perspective of the intelligible world, but which cuts through and perforates the totality of presence and points toward the absolutely Other.⁸¹

The ethical relation to the Other is prior to the relation with the self or even to the things of the world and our historical contextuality. Levinas here argues that a both/and approach is necessary to flesh out the conundrum of personhood: the phenomenological description of comprehension as moving outside the self is meaningless without the ethical matrix of interhuman obligation that makes justice/heteronomy more important than freedom/autonomy.

How can being bound to the Other be liberating? How can being “held hostage” to the vulnerability of the Other open to the infinite? For Levinas, within this command or summons of the nakedness of the Other is the possibility of life, of existence, since the self is constructed in response to the acknowledgment of the Other’s difference and in meeting her needs. This disturbance places what I think I know into question, and so it is precisely this disturbance that contains the possibility that I may be open to the alterity of the Other, which is an invitation to live in this openness, and therefore, exist. Fr. Zosima, whose character in *The Brothers Karamazov* is based on a monk who helped Fyodor Dostoyevsky heal after the death of his three-year-old son, teaches this as well:

When he realizes that he is not only worse than others, but that he is responsible to all people for all and everything, for all human sins, national and individual, only then the aim of our seclusion is attained. For know, dear ones, that every one of us is undoubtedly responsible for all people, and everything on earth, not merely through the general sinfulness of creation, but each one personally for all humanity and every individual. . . . Only through that knowledge, our heart grows soft with infinite, universal, inexhaustible love. Then every one of you will have

81. *Ibid.*, 56–57.

the power to win over the whole world by love and to wash away
the sins of the world with your tears.⁸²

Here, the language is effulgent, like water luxuriously spilling out of the tiers of a fountain. The secret to love is more than what is required or expected or necessary; far, far more. I am responsible even for the sins of others. Every yapping tendency to shut down this excess, to shut off the water supply, with claims that “I can’t—it is beyond me” circle back to “the I,” which isn’t “mine” (if *Jemeinigkeit* can ever be said) until it is shrugged off, the self that is no-self. The assertion that one cannot be infinitely responsible for the Other is a failure of the imagination, a failure of the aesthetic and sensitive acknowledgment of the Other’s vulnerability, and a failure to recognize the human potential for the incarnation. Dostoyevsky’s poetic prose resonates with anyone familiar with biblical language: it is “all and everything.” The horizon of infinity, of the infinite in the finite. Dostoyevsky repeats the theme of interpersonal responsibility throughout the novel; Levinas is fond of quoting “I more than the others am responsible for all”⁸³ throughout his own corpus.⁸⁴

The vulnerability of the Other and consequent “summons to respond” is the foundation of subjectivity, the locus of “self.” Levinas further describes this responsibility as “infinite” because the need of the Other as other will never cease. Recognition of the Other’s alterity will never end; otherwise, I would have subsumed the Other into my self-identity, and the potential for infinity is diminished. The unsettling constant disturbance, the helplessness to ever fulfill the task the alterity of the Other presents, is a “surplus of being” and “existential exaggeration that is called *being me*.”⁸⁵ The human potential for infinity is the “being me” that is exercised through the responsibility to the Other that will never end.

82. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004), pt. 2, bk. 4, chap. 1, pp. 155–56.

83. *Ibid.*, pt. 2, bk. 6, chap. 2, p. 274.

84. See, for example, Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 146.

85. Levinas, “Transcendence and Height,” 17. Emphasis his.

Because of the infinite character of this alterity, God, Levinas asserts, is encountered through the disturbance in our worldview offered by the Other. The very disturbance we often try to ignore, deny, or assimilate is where the divine may be glimpsed. Human beings seek order, and order is referential to the self's imposition of what is familiar. The very forces of an imperialist Christianity that replaced imperialist Rome, which enervated and undermined what was a shocking Gospel of divine attentiveness to the destitute, vulnerable, and naked Other, continue to be active in the ecclesial power structures of today, clothing Jesus in robes of wealth, privilege, whiteness, and patriarchy.

For Levinas, the willingness to be challenged by the Other, to be displaced and altered by the Other, especially the suffering of the Other, is essential to the meaning of being human and to the making of the subject. Levinas provides a revolutionary and challenging philosophical system in which compassion is constitutive of the subject. I believe his thought sheds important insights on the meaning of the incarnation as characteristic of divine activity: the value of the doctrine of the incarnation in a world of catastrophic suffering is that the Judeo-Christian-Muslim "God" does not merely "comprehend" or remain tangential to the suffering of the Other—whether of human beings or indeed the entirety of the suffering world—but enters fully into it, assuming the needs of the Other, becoming the God *who* suffers in solidarity out of love, as well as the God who provides the summons to mitigate and eliminate such suffering.

The instinct of the early Christians to believe that Jesus embodied the divine, that Jesus represented God's intimate dwelling with a suffering people, involves the understanding that divine activity in relationship to the suffering Other assumes—shoulders, carries—that suffering as much as possible precisely because one is responsible for the Other. Similarly, God's infinity is located in God's responsibility to us and to creation as a whole; it is useless to speculate about divine infinity apart from the human beings who cry out to God from the places where God's absence is most acutely felt. The doctrine of the incarnation must be an affirmation that the cry of those beset by catastrophe has been heard, based on the life of Jesus, whose message and work centered on the care of the destitute,

forgotten, and outcast. It is precisely in the heteronomy of his being that he manifests what was appreciated by his followers as revelatory of the divine. Jesus' life and work manifest the inescapable intertwining of human and divine, such that it is impossible to think of one without the other, or at least of one who does not yearn for the Other.

Hence, this project proceeds with the idea that it is in the disturbance of being, in the "lightning strike" that interrupts complacency, that we may "meet the God past-all-grasp." The significance of the incarnation, in which those who met Jesus in history believed that his disturbance, through action and word, was dangerous to the established order, is considered here in terms of the disturbance made through the arts and the visual, and the way we may be brought to our existence through attentiveness to the Other. That there is alterity that exceeds human consciousness, pointing toward a responsibility for each other that exceeds our finite limitations; such may provide new ways to approach the doctrine of incarnation, in which God becomes the vulnerable, suffering Other, and through which God must experience the perpetual command of the Other as a human being. The arts provide ways to transcend the limits of language and, especially, the limits of propositional language. The idea and possibly the doctrine of "incarnation" may be approached more as the outpouring of the divine, through the sensitivity of the visual, which gives us our existence by first disturbing our complacency. Art in all its forms, but specifically here considered in terms of the visual, is the human self-expression with the potential to manifest the divine self-expression, the glimpse of the divine through openness to the radically Other, and as such is a medium for conceiving and encountering new ways to comprehend the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.

By examining "incarnation" as the belief that the divine breaks into the lonely monotony of human life and energizes it for something more incomprehensible than our reason can capture—whether we refer to the life and work of Jesus in the first century or the Spirit's empowerment of those who seek justice, we see openness to the Other, to the radically new, to peeling away the layers of the familiar. The provoking of discomfort and disquiet, is beyond any linguistic formula. As James Cone puts it, "[T]o be Yahweh's servant

not only means that God will strengthen and help you and ‘will uphold you with my victorious right hand’ (Isa. 41:10); it also means that Israel suffers with Yahweh in the divine establishment of justice in the land. There is no divine election without the call to suffer for justice.”⁸⁶ For Levinas, subjectivity is unachievable without the summons to justice.

But perhaps the idea of “incarnation” should not be confined to the Christian worldview, or even to the explicitly religious worldview: perhaps “incarnation” is a linguistic signifier that would benefit from a dispersal into the visual imagination that illuminates the work of the creative, wild Infinite, work that manifests the surprise and shock and excess of the divine. Perhaps “incarnation” should be approached not in the Christian confidence that the divine *has been* represented, in a once-for-all historical finality, but as a signifier that the divine *cannot* be represented, cannot be contained, that there is no defining enfleshment. In this sense, to say that Jesus is God “incarnate” may refer to Jesus’ own emptiness of self, his turn to the Other as the locus of existence, an Other that is beyond representation. Since it is Jesus who is described by his earliest followers as “kenotic,” the dialectic between emptiness and form, between historical moment and the illusion of time, is energized in non-duality. The Buddhist Heart Sutra, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form,” helps Christians to appreciate this dialectic. As soon as “incarnation” becomes a fixed truth that stops with itself, we have failed to approach the holy ground of the infinite, the holy ground where the bush burns but is not consumed—where the flesh of Jesus suffers and dies but death is not the end. In other words, if what Christians mean by “incarnation” is that the divine *can* be represented, and *is* represented only and uniquely in Jesus Christ, then Christians are not speaking of the “divine” after all. The divine is unrepresentable, unrepresentable; Jesus is the “way” to God because, as Jean-Luc Marion writes, Jesus gives himself over to “the excessiveness of the invisible that enters into visibility through infinite depth,” who “speaks this infinite depth,

86. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 159.

where the visible and the invisible become acquainted.”⁸⁷ “Incarnation” has the potential to be appreciated in excessive, effulgent ways through creative and artistic endeavor, as the process that uncovers the radically new through openness to the Other.

87. Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 22.