

Theology and the Imagination

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Always he faces.

Levinas

1. THE CONTEMPORARY SCENE

I SETTLE DOWN to an hour's mindless watching. The TV program is of little account—usually news already heard or a film with high-placed frauds or camouflaged thugs, and episodes of gratuitous violence. The guns get bigger and bigger, the corpses require more and more ketchup. After many misunderstandings and near disasters the good guys prevail, and there is a happy ending, sort of.

Of course, each program is interrupted at strategic points by ads. This one is for the Lexus. An incredibly sleek, shiny phantom, the embodiment of silent power, glides over the screen toward infinity. “Lexus,” I read, “The relentless Pursuit of Perfection.”

So mysticism and mechanics converge. But the Lexus ad was soon modified. For two seconds “Perfection” is replaced by “Exhilaration.” The obvious reason for this was the introduction of a new type of Lexus. The less obvious one was the manufacturer’s awareness that driving a Lexus had become sedative rather than exhilarating. What still remained watchful in me shifted suddenly into another gear, call it parabolic. “The Pursuit of Perfection,” I thought, “can be either a calming intellectual topic, an escape from life’s turmoil into the history of ideas, or a strenuous thought-experiment, an effort to understand a drive that persists despite our clearly imperfect human condition.”

Do not take it ill that I practice exegetical skills on an advertisement. Our dream life, or the escapist part of it, is spent increasingly in the bosom of videos, and consumer magazines interrupted by ads. Montage and morphing multiply fetishistic images, commodify sensationalism, and exacerbate an appetitive, frustrated relation between eye and mind. We

cannot grasp (*begreifen/ergreifen*) the sensory and speeded-up spectacular load. How can we negotiate the passage from glossy TV ads, or the ingenious evil empires of the tough movie, to an essay opening with “Does it make sense to think of the Messiah after the *Shoah*?”¹

The extreme instance points to a more habitual, painful puzzlement: in an imperfect world, originally that way, or else spoiled by us, how does the idea of absolute perfection survive, so often linked to the existence of God and a kingdom of God? The belief in a Messiah seems to emerge necessarily; the greater the need, the more we rationalize his absence or deferred advent. Paradise Regained, in the depictions of both literature and religion, is a spiritual and political restoration brought about by a figure like the *Adam kadmon* (Hebrew: *Adam rishon*), the divine anthropos of mysticism, the awakening giant Albion in Blake, Buddha radically sensitized by his first encounter with human poverty, pain, and distress, Jesus as an incarnation of the Hebrew prophets’ suffering servant.² Thirty-six inconspicuous Righteous Persons, Lamed Vavniks, are precursors or outriders. In the meantime, however, a mean time indeed, we have the meager consolations of . . . theology.

2. THEOLOGY

Indeed, reading Duns Scotus or Franz Rosenzweig or Karl Barth is hardly an opiate. Scripture is easy compared to them, for the Hebrew Bible is *the* Book of Imperfection—readable stories, in the main, about individual or communal human struggles, even with God himself. It does not contain lucubrations concerning the *ens perfectissimum* or whether “Nothing”—death and its abyss for thought, rather than the All—should be the starting point of theological speculation.

I think of theology with great ambivalence, admiring its determination to attain a knowledge of God, and specifically of a perfection that must guide human behavior and morality. Theology characterizes divine or sacred via concepts derived from reason or revelation, also via communal rituals, rites of purification, ancient prayer-speech, and meditative techniques (*kavanah*). But I regret the dogmatic and bellicose uses to which theology has often put those explorations, and how it refuses to recognize its own imaginative content.³

1. Catherine Chalié, “The Messianic Utopia,” translated in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal: Levinas’s Contribution to Contemporary Philosophy* (New School for Social Research), 20.2–21.1 (1998): 281.

2. For the varieties of Jewish mysticism, see Moshe Idel, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven, Conn., 1998), and *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn., 1988).

3. For a more careful and circumspect understanding of theology, see two books I admire: Paul Tillich’s *Theology of Culture* (New York, 1959) and Arthur

Across history, moreover, we find great variations in what is deemed to be sacred. Some cultures treasure as sacred what others consider indifferent or negligible. The objects of worship of one religion are trashed as idols by a competing faith. An additional challenge is that Judaism demands that an entire people be holy. Is this not an impossible task? For the Hebrew Bible makes one thing above all quite clear: how much more difficult it is for God to form a holy people than to have created the heavens and the earth.

If holiness, on that collective scale, seems out of reach, some indulgence, some doctrine of accommodation or mediation—of religion's adjustment to human imperfection—is a necessity. Otherwise the distinction between sacred and profane, or sacred and secular, becomes uncompromising. We need to be reminded that our very capacity for extending religious feelings imaginatively through poetry and the arts can be a mode of serious play and so a source of strength rather than weakness. Theology should move closer to becoming one of the liberal arts. Someone, somewhere, is always constructing God by means of a fine geometry, to paraphrase Borges's poem on Spinoza.⁴

Christopher Smart's "Let the Levites of the Lord take the Beavers of the Brook alive into the Ark of the Testimony," a verse typical of his *Jubilate Agno*, hints by that pleonastic "alive" how deadly contact with the sacred can be. Recall what happened in Second Samuel to Uzzah, who accompanied the return of the Ark to Jerusalem. When the oxen drawing the cart stumbled and Uzzah put his hand on the Ark to prevent it falling off, he was zapped, struck dead. Smart rejects this extreme dichotomy of sacred and profane: he recalls God's Noachite covenant with humanity and extends it to include, even at the Last Judgment, not only mankind but the animal creation, indeed all flora and fauna, or, as the final psalm in the Psalter says, "everything in which is the breath of life."

Much depends, then, on the part played by our envisioning the *tremendum* character of the holy, qualified by the divine attributes, especially justice, mercy, love. In that envisioning, as it builds a theology and entices with the picture of a more perfect, peaceful, or at least tolerable world, it is often difficult to tell what is contributed by reason and what by imagi-

A. Cohen's *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew: An Historical and Theological Introduction* (New York, 1962).

4. Certain pages in Levinas engage in what must be called a phenomenological construction (rather than reduction) of that "intuitive geometry" as Levinas calls it, and which he carries by a "passage to the limit" beyond that limit with his infinitizing logic. See, for example, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh, 1969), 189–91.

nation. Even the driest theology may have a strong kernel of imagination, however seemingly unaware of it.

3. IMAGING CREATION AND THE DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

Consider, in a very foreshortened way, Duns Scotus's problematic ambition in *A Treatise on God as the First Principle*.⁵ He sets out to prove the necessary attributes of a perfect God. Yet how can that characterization rouse a human response *without* suggesting impure corporeal or anthropomorphic images of the deity? Maimonides too engaged this issue in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. He insists that even the locution "God lives" is theologically incorrect, an anthropomorphic figure of speech.⁶

Poets are not welcome here any more than in Plato's *Republic* (which nevertheless retails many myths). Thank God for the Hebrew Bible (I mutter), which is a challenge for these chaste thinkers and provokes them to ever greater mental gymnastics to derive the being of a perfect Being—who does not live like a living being—from the most lively revelation we have. For if we stay with the Bible's own imaginative strength, its guidance of our efforts to uncover the divine attributes, then the unified, dual, at once sacred and secular status of the Creation cannot be overlooked.

The Creation depicted in *Ma'aseh Bereshit* is a foundational theologic event, a revelatory act or *Wesensschau* disclosing its Creator.⁷ Simultaneously, it is an event not just in but creative of secular, measurable time, and blesses in advance a fruitful reality. This dual structure sets up a mixed theology seeking to determine what is sacred and what secular in human affairs.

I will not torment you with Scotus's recondite theorizing about the Triple Primacy of the First Principle, except to mention an aspect that bears on the theme of the Creation. Scotus, the theologian-philosopher, must establish that the Creation was not necessitated by any imperfec-

5. John Duns Scotus, *A Treatise on God as First Principle*, trans. and ed. A. B. Wolter (Chicago, 1966).

6. Maimonides holds that statements like "God lives" should be interpreted as if a form of negative (apophatic) knowledge: "God is not dead."

7. Paul of Tarsus declares, in Romans 1.20, that simply by beholding the created world—that is, even without benefit of a special revelation like the Hebrew Bible or the Gospels—nonbelievers have no excuse for their nonbelief because they could have deduced the following *invisibilia* from the *visibilia* (i.e., from Nature): there is a God, and he is all-powerful and good. The "good" or "wise" is not directly in Romans 1.20 though the Vulgate has *virtus et divinitas*. In theology Paul's statement became an important proof-text for what comes to be called "Natural Religion" in distinction from but not necessarily opposition to revealed religion.

tion, lack, or need for fulfillment in the Creator. He argues that the universe was created by God's free and preeminently efficient act, manifesting his "all possible actuality" including his power and goodness.⁸

Reading this, my head spins a bit, since, in the human realm, goodness and power (by power I mean the performative efficiency of the fiat's "Let there be . . . And there was")—do not generally go together. The opposite has been expressed by such axioms as "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely," and "The best is the enemy of the good." The unlikely combination of goodness and omnipotence is strengthened, however, by a human reaction, distinct from God's own, to the miracle of existence.

For what first gives rise to religious feelings is often described as simply an astonishment: that there is something rather than nothing, and, potentially, everything rather than some things. Such wonderment, or natural mysticism, does not remain (if it ever was) unmediated but is linked by theology to thoughts about the inherent generosity of a Creator who could have remained self-enclosed.⁹

This relation, between godliness, goodness, and the Creation, is pithily affirmed by a saying of the Pseudo-Dionysius: *omne bonum diffusio sui* (the good goes out and diffuses itself). As Lovejoy demonstrates, a major paradox found throughout intellectual history is that "the concept of [God's] Self-Sufficing Perfection was—without losing any of its original implications—converted into the concept of a Self-Transcending Fecundity."¹⁰

One is not surprised, then, to learn from Scotus that "nothing perfectly gives of itself [*communicat*] unless it does so out of liberality." And this, he continues, "is surely a characteristic of the supreme good, since it expects nothing in return from its giving."¹¹ Here Scotus formulates an

8. Scotus, *A Treatise on God*, 66. Spinoza's metaphysics will argue that God as *natura naturata*, or the actual universe, cannot be distinguished from God as *natura naturans*: the possible cannot be wider than the actual. "The power of God [to produce] is the same as his essence." See Stuart Hampshire, in his *Spinoza* (Harmondsworth, 1951), 54.

9. See Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). Lovejoy, in "The Genesis of an Idea," the first chapter of his book, shows the development of this concept, starting with the metaphysical theology of Plato and Aristotle and reaching into modern conceptions of the fullness and continuity of the various orders of nature.

10. Ibid. I select an epigrammatic poem by Angelus Silesius: "Gott gleicht sich einem Brunn / Er fleust gantz mildiglich // Herauß in sin Geschöpff / und bleibet doch in sich." (God is likened to a fountain / Who streams quite mildly // Out of Himself into His creation / yet remains in Himself.)

11. Scotus, *A Treatise on God*, 66–68.

essential attribute, which differentiates God from Man. He evokes an implicit form of the doctrine of grace by describing a liberality, a giving without strings, without expectation of a return. No *do ut des*, no *quid pro quo*, or contractual relation, or even the natural hope that personal example would encourage reciprocity.

4. EMMANUEL LEVINAS

We understand better, in this light, a recent Jewish perspective. Levinas goes very far in his counsel of *human* perfection when he asks each person for the equivalent of God's liberality: a compassionate, asymmetrical relation between I and other in favor of the other. He asks for this, even though the *imitatio dei* principle is far less prevalent in a Judaism guided by its strict emphasis on divine transcendence, fortified by the second commandment¹² and a historic refusal to believe the Messiah had come into this world as the son of God. Christian *imitatio* focuses, and centrally, on that humanization, on a kenotic, self-sacrificial suffering necessary for the redemption of mankind.

Levinas takes passion and compassion into account, but in a different way. He revalues theology's generative moment as being closer to trauma than wonder: closer to the disruptive eruption of a sense of infinity that overflows prematurely stabilized objects of knowledge and concepts of otherness; and he guides us in this way both toward what is an unavoidable subjectivity and its transcendence. In ethical terms this means we must suffer being shocked out of a dispassionate relation to the other, out of a neutralizing state of mind that resembles the *apatheia* of a supposedly sublimated ego. Listen to the following uneasy—and scathing—passage from Levinas that launches a radical critique of ego psychology:

The hunger suffered by the other awakens men from their sated drowsing and sobers them up from their self-sufficiency. The new transcendence is the refusal to believe in a peace in the other thanks to some harmony within the totality . . . Under the banal term "compassion," we are not astonished enough by the force of transference that goes

12. Levinas's critique of what he often calls "the panoramic" is clear throughout. He goes so far as to write that though ethics as an optics proceeds from the first "'vision' of eschatology," insofar as that can and should be distinguished "from the revealed opinions of positive religions," its breach of a panoramic totality through "the possibility of a *signification without a [finite] context*" leads to a "vision without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues." *Totality and Infinity*, 23.

from the memory of my own hunger to the suffering and responsibility for the hunger of the neighbor.¹³

It would be facile and wrong to charge Levinas with simply appropriating a theological concept, one transferred, moreover, from Christianity. His effort is to place ethics as “First Philosophy” ahead of any theological issue. He invokes a morality that aims beyond the mean (or *juste milieu*, as Aristotle develops the concept in his *Ethics*). Morality should not evade the goal of perfection by being based only on prudential or blissful (eudaemonic, beatific) considerations. Motivated by a primal astonishment as close to terror (in an era marked by the death camps) as to sheer metaphysical awe or wonder at existence, it exacts an ideal of self-transcendence through a full recognition of subjectivity: an ideal that would recall, if Levinas had not practiced a radical phenomenological suspension of positive theology, the mystery of Creation itself and God’s forbearance toward mankind.¹⁴

I confess I still struggle with Levinas’s special philosophic diction. It is dauntingly definitional and apodictic, yet phenomenological in its descriptive acuity. It always turns on alterity, facing, strangeness, infinity (his coinage), the otherness of the other, and how we can avoid the reduction of the other to the same, which is the basic flaw of (theo)ontology. Richly, expansively repetitive, it cultivates “a non-allergic relation with alterity,” so that “power, by essence murderous of the other, becomes, faced with the other, . . . the impossibility of murder, [becomes] the consideration of the other, or justice.”¹⁵

Since Levinas’s concept of alterity always has in mind a “relationship with a being infinitely distant, that is, overflowing its idea,” I am tempted to say that he transmutes mystery into morality by linking Creation to a generous all-powerful Other, with justice, mercy, love as recognizable moral attributes in the secular sphere. Haunted by the memory of the greatest systematic mass murder the world has known, yet inspired (at least implicitly) by the effusive concept of Creation as an overflow and

13. “Secularization and Hunger” (1976), translated in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 20.2–21.1 (1998): 11.

14. Levinas does have para-theological remarks linking creation to “exteriority” in *Totality and Infinity*, 292–94. One comes upon such challenging and suggestive sentences as “The concept of a Good beyond being [a phrase from Plato he often cites] and the beatitude of the One announces a rigorous concept of creation, which would be neither a negation nor a limitation nor an emanation of the One. Exteriority is not a negation, but a marvel.” *Totality and Infinity*, 292.

15. *Ibid.*, 47.

externalization of the divine, Levinas strives to gain a new and universal basis for morality by envisaging the exemplary refusal of a potentially murderous solipsism by those in power. As God, according to the Bible, comes *face to face* with humanity (a facing that reveals the courageous residue of a metaphysics of presence in Levinas), he *covenants* rather than destroys.¹⁶

Yet a doubt does not quite leave me. Could it be, that the entire oeuvre of this master philosopher, who introduces and sustains a new and challenging concept of morality, free of authoritarian theological backing, remains at base, when we recall the Holocaust, a theodicy?

What access, moreover, is there to the life in and around God that would allow us to talk about it (as I have done more explicitly than Levinas) in order to salvage an imaginative, foundational morality?¹⁷

5. BACK TO THE BIBLE

Concerning the life in God, which is the proper subject of mysticism, the Hebrew Bible says almost nothing. Indeed, it immediately throws up a barrier, a first-line defense against inquiry. The apodictic “In the Beginning God created the heavens and the earth” really asks us not to venture

16. One often also senses, as here, a transformation of Hegel’s famous section in the *Phenomenology* dealing with the face-off between liege-lord and serf, or generally master and servant.

17. With this question I also try to indicate how far Levinas goes in his version of a “phenomenological concreteness” that suspends or brackets positive theologies. He remarks in prefatory material to the second edition of *De Dieu qui vient à l’idée* (Paris, 1986), 5–6, and 13: “This imperative to love [i.e., the unconditional love of the other, involving ‘Responsibility without an expectation of reciprocity, response to the other without worrying about the other’s responsibility for me’] . . . is described without evoking creation, omnipotence, rewards, promises.” Levinas then continues: “It has been objected that I neglect theology. I do not contest the need for some kind of recuperation or at least to decide what opportunity for it may exist. Yet I think this comes after glimpsing a sanctity which is primary. All the more so since we belong to a generation and century for which the pitiless trial was reserved of [finding] an ethics without support or promises, and that it is impossible for us, the survivors, to testify against that sanctity by seeking out conditions for it” (my translation). In the same book (8–10) of the “Avant Propos,” Levinas defends his refusal to define more closely the word “Dieu” that “comes to mind”; while in various “talmudic lessons” he praises the rationality of midrashic multivocal argument, and so (to my mind) the deep rationality of imagination itself. By continuously nominating ethics rather than theology as “first philosophy” and developing an independent and affecting mode of language countering a “first violence,” Levinas moves “vers l’au delà d’un autre Dieu.” Cf. Stéphane Moses, “Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as Primary Meaning,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 20.2–21.1 (1998): esp. 22–23.

into what happened prior to that Beginning, even if nonauthoritative midrash, midrash aggadah, often crosses the line with daring intimacy in a playful or moralizing spirit.¹⁸ The Kabbalah also crosses it, in a Judaic version of an adventurous, potentially transgressive *itinerarium mentis ad Deum*.

Yet such mystical excursions are curbed by the Creation's "numeracy," by the emergence of measurable, secular time. The temporal sequencing of the six-day work, together with the statement that God rested on the seventh, establishes a paradigmatic time-line that law-giving in the Bible and then rabbinic halakhah extend into a vast array of human-sized, time-bound duties (*mitsvot*). These sustain not only life on earth but also—explicitly in Hasidism—the Divine itself.

The Kabbalah, moreover, in encouraging a hydraulics of divine outflow and inflow, may heighten our sense for the contingency of God's maintenance of the created world.¹⁹ Yet by emphasizing the potential impact of relatively "small time" ("microchronic" or "mesochronic") rituals or duties—many linked originally to an agricultural and astronomic cycle—kabbalistic thought hints at their vast cosmic ("macrochronic") resonance and does not leave us adrift in the mathematical sublime.²⁰

18. There is a similar discretion in Judaism about the afterlife. The nearest explicit entry-points for mysticism offered by the Hebrew Bible are Jacob's vision of the ladder at Beth El on which the angels ascend and descend, and Ezekiel's *ma'aseh merkava* with its detailed picture of a celestial chariot and throne.

19. The argument that heavens and earth were created by an overflow of the divine that transformed the void does not obviate a sense of the world's contingent or precarious status. Nor does the obverse doctrine of *tsimtsum*, that God contracted himself to make room for created things. In each case creation *ex deo* and *ex nihilo* are too close for comfort. One does not have to be a nihilist to see this. Cf. Gershom Scholem "Schöpfung aus Nichts und Selbstverschränkung Gottes," in *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums* (Frankfurt a/M, 1970), 59. Isaac Luria does say that a perfect world could not be created, since that would duplicate God himself—hence creation by withdrawal. But this will not explain why there is a Creation at all.

20. I do not take up the relation of numeracy to the claim so often heard that Judaism innovated the historical consciousness as a nonspatial (Levinas would say nonpanoramic) modality of time. On this modality, see the interesting remarks of Paul Tillich in his *Theology of Culture* (esp. 35–43). Most suggestive, however, on categories of time is Moshe Idel's essay "The Jubilee in Jewish Mysticism" (see *Millenarismi nella cultura contemporanea* [Angeli, 2000], 209–32), from which I borrow the time-categories cited. For a remarkable thesis on the expressive religious drama of seasonal rites linked to effects that revive "the entire [topocosmic] complex of any given locality conceived as a living organism," see Theodor Gaster's *Thespis* (1950).

Another (interesting) complication bearing on mystical speculation about the life in and around God is that in Judaism—if we stick strictly to the biblical text and disregard a wealth of legends generated by the very sparseness of Bible allusions to an angelic host competitive with that late species, mankind—the human race as motif or motivation plays no revealed role in what events may have led to the Creation. Yet mankind, once created, *is* appointed by the Creator as the apex of created things; and the Bible depicts forebears and prophets who have near-theurgic contacts with him. This suggests the possibility of humanity's *essential* participation in God's own being.

Creation, then, as a dual event, marks not only the beginning of earthly life but also a turning-point in God's own life. *Prior to all other revelations it reveals God to himself, as it were.* (How else to understand "And he saw it was good"?) At the same time, the Creation is a cosmic event open to empirical inquiry. Thus Nature, as we call that cosmic event, is often considered in early modernism and the Enlightenment as the other Book of God and as such justifies scientific as well as meditative study by way of a *lumen naturale* (innate to man) that supports Nature's readability and so Natural Religion.

6. INTERPRETIVE MODERNITY

It is rare today that theologians avoid metaphor and figures of speech as much as scientific thinkers do. Their God-talk has to countenance the Bible as a literary source-text baffling any such aim. And mystical interpretation, which shows no such figural restraint, has its own Bible problem. It may wish to transcend the *pesbat*, the relatively open meaning of scriptural narratives, yet it can only gain authority by linking *anagogical* to *analogical* insight²¹ and to what continues to look like biblical words, however atomized or recombined. The remarkable play in midrash with the letters and words of the Bible text is authorized by the claim that precisely because Scripture is a unity, it can be excerpted and recombined by a *pars pro toto* (synecdochal) method. For Levinas that unity is a non-totalizable, overflowing multiplicity, akin to the numeracy I have already mentioned, and through which reason recognizes itself.

21. See, e.g., the famous passage in the Zohar quoted in Gershom Scholem, *Zohar The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York, 1963), 121–22, on "narratives and everyday matters" in the Torah. They are compared to garments that allow its "supernal truths and sublime secrets" to exist in a world that "could not endure the Torah if she had not garbed herself in garments of this world." This is a remarkable instance of "saving the text" by virtue of its very secularity.

Each sacred word or phrase can then be assumed to have a gravity infinitely more dense than that of the same units in ordinary language. But this assumption, I suspect, could not hold, could not maintain itself for modern readers, unless we had exemplary instances other than from Scripture. Therefore those who wish to understand the verbal depth of the Bible as an inexhaustible reservoir of meaning can also go outside the biblical text to such different compositions (often deeply influenced by the Bible) as Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, Yehuda Halevi's poems (as well as his *Kuwarî*), Donne's sermons, Hölderlin's hymnic odes, Victor Hugo's *La Fin de Satan*, and Dante's, Milton's, Shelley's, and Blake's epic theofictions. "Theology, in the form of concrete poetic speculation," it has been said, "is the domain and duty of imagination."²² An early manifesto by Blake launches an even more daring proposition: "The Religions of all Nations are derived from each Nation's different Reception of the Poetic Genius, which is everywhere called the Spirit of Prophecy."²³

7. CODA

"The law of the LORD *is* perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD *is* sure, making wise the simple." (Psalm 19)

It always amazes me that the light from Scripture continues to reach us. I imagine the "distant deeps or skies" which that starlight of meaning has to traverse. I even doubt at times whether we can have construed with certainty the meaning of those ancient vocables.

Nachmanides seems to be intuitively right when he thinks of them as originally the continuous name or names of God, now divided up and accommodated to fashion articulate Hebrew sentences. I see a parallel in this to Rosenzweig's view of Creation as the emergence of God from the "All" by a manifestation that breaks the shell of mystery.

An obstinate question remains, however. Can religious discourse—poetry, prayer, theology—become an actual dialogue, or must it remain, coming from God, a terrifying voice, an unanswerable questioning as in Job, or overwhelming commission (an offer that cannot be refused) as in Jeremiah and Jonah? And, from the side of mankind, are we doomed to repetitious, pleading, hopeful invocations? To mournful, phatic, or desperately joyous chants launched into the silence—the "eternal silence" of heaven's infinite spaces that terrified Pascal, or produced, as in Jean

22. Frederick A. Pottle, "The Role of Asia in the Dramatic Action of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*," in *Shelley: A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. G. M. Ridenour (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), 142.

23. Principle 5, in *All Religions Are One* (1788).

Paul's famous apocalyptic scenario, a posthumous Christ responding "There is none" to the plaintive "Where is God?" of masses of the resurrecting dead?

Blake presents in *Songs of Innocence* the lyric vignette of a child catechizing a lamb ("Little Lamb who made thee, / Dost thou know who made thee?"), a child going from church or school directly to the open fields, turning its newly acquired knowledge excitedly into delight by that communicative overflow, preaching to the mute creation as if it could answer. This does put us in mind of another kind of voice or invocation: a still, small voice. So much depends, in any case, on the language relation, of being-in-relation through language. Yet in Blake's "prophetic books," despite glorious moments that simulate a conversation between all creatures and a restored *Adam Ribson*, monologues crying in the void predominate.²⁴ Poets open up existence this way too, by sheer invocation and incantation, when the epoch of open vision, and even perhaps of the *Bat Kol* (Daughter of [God's] Voice), is gone.²⁵

Poets, secular or sacred, often try to keep a hold on heaven and earth this way, by invocation or incantation. The most striking instance I know is fortified by some of the last words of Moses, namely the great admonitory psalm of Deuteronomy 32 that begins: "Give ear, ye heavens, and I will speak; and let the earth hear the words of my mouth." Moses summons, for his case, which is also that of God (Deut 30.19) two witnesses—two eternal witnesses—and proclaims a doctrine as life-sustaining as the rain and the dew, and not requiring a further revelation.

24. Harold Fisch talks of Blake's "swerve from dialogue to monologue" in the last chapter of his *The Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton, and Blake: A Comparative Study* (Oxford, 1999). I dedicate this essay to the memory of Harold Fisch, a generous intellectual companion since I first met him in 1970.

25. Levinas, while acknowledging this void, counters cryptically, specifying as the terrifying element in it the persistent, "mythical facelessness of a "there is" (*il y a*) that "does not correspond to any representation" (*Totality and Infinity*, 190), and maintaining in this negative way his concept of a relationship with an Other, a being whose "authority as an existent is already *invoked* in every question we could raise." Perhaps revising the ontological argument for God's existence (cf. Tillich: "God is the presupposition to the question of God"), Levinas asserts: "One does not question oneself concerning him, one questions him. Always he faces" (*Totality and Infinity*, 47). See also for an earlier formulation that contains a succinct critique of ontology and a strong valuing of "invocation" versus "naming" ("Is Ontology Fundamental" [1951]): "In relation to beings in the opening of being, comprehension finds a signification for them on the basis of being. It does not invoke those beings but only names them, thus accomplishing [furthering?] a violence and a negation." *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, ed. A. T. Peperzak et al. (Bloomington, Ind., 1996), 9–10.

For “the word is very nigh to you in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut 30.14).

However sublime the Creation is, including the creation of words, the Bible stays close to a speech that even when it transmits sacred and secret, keeps Judaism from becoming a mystery religion. As the Psalmist says, it “makes wise [even] the simple.”