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Abstract: Is there still time for history? What does it mean to curate the past when the future is in doubt? Staring down the cataclysmic effects of climate change, it can seem “out of time” to reckon with the past, especially given the possibility that there will soon be no one left to read what we write. In the present essay, I begin with Emmanuel Levinas’s 1934 essay on “the philosophy of Hitlerism” in an effort to explore what it means to engage in history (or philosophy) when the end seems imminent. As with the Shoah, I argue, the work of the historian consists wholly of paying a debt to the fallen, whatever the future might hold. Turning to the fifteenth-century discovery and colonization of Madeira, I conclude that non-human Others likewise exact this debt.

Keywords: Emmanuel Levinas, History, Temporality, Future.

Resumo: Ainda há tempo para a história? O que significa tratar do passado quando o futuro está em dúvida? Olhando para os efeitos cataclísmicos das mudanças climáticas, pode parecer “fora do tempo” contar com o passado, especialmente considerando a possibilidade de que em breve não haja mais ninguém para ler o que escrevemos. No presente ensaio, começo com a análise de Emmanuel Levinas da “filosofia do hitlerismo” (1934) em um esforço para explorar o que significa se envolver na história (ou na filosofia) quando o fim parece iminente. Tal como acontece com a Shoah, argumento, o trabalho do historiador consiste inteiramente em pagar uma dívida para com os mortos, qualquer que seja o futuro. Voltando à descoberta e colonização da Madeira no século XV, concluo que os Outros não-humanos também cobram esta dívida.

Palavras-chave: Emmanuel Levinas, História, Temporalidade, Futuro.

Resumen: ¿Todavía hay tiempo para la historia? ¿Qué significa tratar del pasado cuando el futuro está en duda? Enfrentándose a los efectos cataclísmicos del cambio climático, puede parecer “fuera de tiempo” confiar en el pasado, especialmente considerando la posibilidad de que pronto no quede nadie para leer lo que escribimos. En el presente ensayo, comienzo con el de Emmanuel Levinas de “la filosofía del hitlerismo” (1934) en un esfuerzo por explorar lo que significa dedicarse a la historia (o la filosofía) cuando el fin parece inminente. Al igual que con la Shoah, sostengo, el trabajo del historiador consiste enteramente en pagar una deuda con los muertos, sea cual sea el futuro.

Volviendo al descubrimiento y colonización de Madeira en el siglo XV, concluyo que los Otros no-humanos también cobran esta deuda.

Palabras clave: Emmanuel Levinas, Historia, Temporalidad, Futuro.

*Mien, tien. 'Ce chien est à moi,' disaient ces
pauvres enfants; 'c'est là ma place au soleil.'
Voilà le commencement et l'image de
l'usurpation de toute la terre*

Source: (Pascal, Pensées 126).

What is the time of history? How does this time link both to lived experience and to the poetic, rhythmic participation of art and narrative? What is history now, for historians facing down the distinct possibility of human extinction and with it the erasure of all previous causes, events, and outcomes? These are questions that perhaps logically emerge for a student of literature asked to reflect on history in the context of climate change and a global pandemic, but it is worth recalling that they would be (and were) pressing even in the absence of such exigencies.

Looking back to other times of heightened care and danger, one finds lessons. It was with this in mind that I recently revisited Emanuel Levinas's 1934 essay, published in the personalist journal *Esprit*, on the "philosophy of Hitlerism" in Germany. There is something uncanny about the essay now, written as it was after the Reichstag fire but while Paul von Hindenburg was still alive and serving as a theoretical check on Adolf Hitler's power. Things in Germany were bad and getting worse, especially for Jews, but there was still no way of knowing how much worse they would become nor how quickly it would all occur. Hitlerism is for Levinas a menace to be confronted, but it is not yet (at least from the vantage point of Paris) the endless night, the very absence of human being that it would soon reveal itself to be. Looking back, there was of course little time to spare, but then Levinas could not have predicted the multitude of conceptual and political failures (and acts of complicity) that would take place over the next few years, nor could he then imagine the barbaric depths to which the Hitlerists—and other European fascists with them—were prepared to go.

Do we find ourselves at a similar point? Is it still responsible to examine and historicize imminent threats such as climate change—identify its origins, its enabling concepts, and its historical contours—as part of a broader effort to arrest and remediate the damage? Is there time? Like Levinas in 1934, we have no way of knowing. We see a world on the horizon, coming into view, and it is monstrous. When will it reach us? When will we recognize that *soon* has become *now*? When, in Deleuzian terms, will the *milieux* of smoky skies, empty reservoirs, and facemasks become the territory of environmental ruin?

Living in the American state of California, one grows accustomed to contingency. Multiple earthquake faults zigzag below our feet here, and every Californian lives with the idea that the end can come at any time and with no warning. As in a disaster film, one can be bicycling to work when work, the road, the bike, and all else for miles is swallowed up by subterranean hands curling into fists. This is our baseline, one might say. Earthquakes are still a threat, of course, but now we add to them an eight-month wildfire season and an ever-worsening state of drought. Years ago, it was common to hear (white) Californians talk about moving to the

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wetter, more stable Pacific Northwest, but that has now largely ceased as heat waves and drought pull at that region, as well. The spread of Trumpism (our own, distinctly American form of Hitlerism) has also made large swaths of the American West uninhabitable for people of color and their allies, and racist zoning laws have placed housing out of reach in larger, more progressive areas such as Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Seattle. There is increasingly nowhere to turn and a growing fear that we no longer have time for history. Everywhere one is exhorted to act.

In an analogous way, Levinas had to sense that the time for analysis was ending, even by late 1933. His approach is unmistakably philosophical, to be sure, but there is nonetheless a current of urgency in his analysis of Hitlerism, and he does finish with a measured call to action. His decisive break with fundamental ontology and Martin Heidegger were still some years and a world war away, but Levinas was already aware that his former teacher at Freiburg had joined the Nazi party. He also knew that Maurice Blanchot, his good friend and philosophical co-conspirator from the University of Strasbourg, had become involved in far-right French politics and now espoused a form of fascism only moderately less brutal than that of the Germans. Blanchot would renounce politics altogether in 1945, but his writing before the war, as well as Heidegger's own Nazism, must have seemed to Levinas a clear sign that the earth was opening below his feet.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE "NEW WORLD"

To begin, it is worth pointing out that "Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism" is a follow-up to Levinas's less well-known analysis, first published in the Lithuanian journal *Vairas* in the summer of 1933, of spirituality in French and German culture. In the 1933 essay, Levinas examines how German thinkers had historically elevated the "biological" to the level of the spiritual (Hansel 313-14), a trend that Levinas considers unthinkable in France:

Il va de soi que, quel que soit l'abîme qui sépare le spirituel du vital, les Français, dans leur quotidien, ne renient pas ce dernier ni ne le dédaignent. En même temps cette séparation est pour eux absolue et radicale. Toute manifestation qui tiendrait à moitié du spirituel et à moitié du corporel serait pour eux équivoque. Nous verrons plus loin que les Allemands pensent autrement. ("La compréhension" 128)

[It goes without saying that whatever the abyss that separates the spiritual from the vital, the French, in their daily lives, do not deny the latter nor disdain it. At the same time, this separation is absolute and radical for them. Any manifestation that would be half-spiritual and half-corporeal would be wrong-headed for them. We will see further on that the Germans think otherwise.]

As Levinas sees it, German Romanticism effectively crystallized a mode of spirituality predicated upon a primordial inner drama. The source of this drama is the very care (*Sorge*) one feels for their existence, a mode of being directly shaped by the sensations and sentiments that one feels as part of lived experience. The soul plunges from its height into the shadowy realm of the body and finds itself historicized:

L'homme, c'est le 'moi' concret qui se préoccupe de son destin, qui s'inquiète devant la mort: en la regardant dans les yeux ou en la fuyant. L'inquiétude, les expériences relevant de nos sensations et de nos sentiments, toute la tragédie de notre existence humaine—amour, haine, passion, déception—forment un seul complexe dramatique. De ce drame surgit la spiritualité. Selon ce concept, l'âme n'est plus, comme chez Descartes, un observateur serein et froid suspendu au-dessus de la zone des clairs-obscur de nos instincts. ("La compréhension" 130)

[A human being is the concrete 'I' who is concerned with their destiny and who is worried about death: looking it in the eye or running away from it. Disquiet, the experiences related to our sensations and feelings, the whole tragedy of our human existence—love, hate, passion, disappointment—form a single dramatic complex. From this drama spirituality arises. According to this concept, the soul is no longer, as in Descartes, a serene and cold observer suspended above the chiaroscuro sphere of our instincts.]

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The distinctly German form of spirituality that Levinas sees emerging out of the very “tragedy of our human existence” (a marriage of body and spirit) runs counter to French thought, which maintains a fixed, hierarchical dualism between soul and body. It is in this respect, Levinas would likely suggest, that one may see Johann Gottfried Herder’s cultural nationalism—as well as his privileging of psychology and hermeneutics in the philosophy of history—as a conceptual bridge between the cosmopolitanism of the Enlightenment and the nationalism of the early twentieth century (Patten; Schmidt).

Levinas builds on his 1933 argument regarding the German “inner drama” throughout his 1934 essay. He begins with an account of the “simplistic” (*primaire*) character of Hitlerism, a “réveil des sentiments élémentaires” ‘awakening of elementary feelings’ that he argues should not be dismissed as mere contagion or madness (199). Levinas argues this precisely to develop further what he had written a year prior and with both Hitler and Heidegger in mind: while the French understanding of spirit revolves around abstract reason, German spirituality, with its great and most visible effulgence in Romanticism, places experience, sensibility, and the passions on the same plane as spirit. The result is a muscular form of worlded heroism on one hand (Heidegger) and brutish racism on the other (Hitler). For Joëlle Hansel, it is the difference between a Heideggerian view of spirituality that “turns existence into a drama and exalts the heroism that springs from it” and a Hitlerian view, which reduces this existential drama to a “struggle for survival” and dominion in the face of countless perceived threats (316). Levinas finds a striking example of this underlying drama, from which Heidegger’s philosophy and Nazism both emanate, in Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*. In this 1924 novel, the “sickness and death that poison the atmosphere of the Davos sanatorium where the plot takes place reveal an ‘inner life closely linked to the body’” (Hansel 317). It is this inner life, linked to the body and its existential passions, that forms the root of German spirituality for Levinas and paves the way for the Thule Society and then Hitler. But how does one move from Herderian ideas of *Volk* to the Aryan fantasies of the 1930s? One achieves this—makes this leap—principally by taking a notion of human being bound inexorably to the body and reducing it to consanguinity. To be properly human, the Nazis would argue, one must be German, and not as a matter of legal, national identity but of blood or Aryan “race.” In this way, the soul’s freedom—from the body, the passions, and even history—is definitively rescinded. For Levinas, such an abrogation of human freedom was then unprecedented in human history.

By reducing the universality of the (Christian) immortal soul and/or the dispassionate reason of the Enlightenment to a question of Aryan blood, the Hitlerists simultaneously placed under suspicion any “assimilation rationnelle ou communion mystique entre esprits qui ne s’appuie pas sur une communauté de sang” (Levinas, “Quelques réflexions” 207) ‘rational assimilation or mystical communion between spirits that is not based on a community of blood’ (Levinas, “Reflections” 70). How precisely does this universality work? How is it compatible—insofar as it makes serious claims regarding *universality*—with the unmistakably racist ideas that give it form? The answer, for Levinas, lies in a striking revision of the very definition of universality. No longer seeking the global expansion of ideology (e.g., religious conversion, Marxist revolution, etc.), it shifts to expansion by and as force, a worldwide relation of Aryan masters to mixed-race slaves. As Levinas puts it: “La volonté de puissance de Nietzsche que l’Allemagne moderne retrouve et glorifie n’est pas seulement un nouvel idéal, c’est un idéal qui apporte en même temps sa forme propre d’universalisation : la guerre, la conquête” (“Quelques réflexions” 208) ‘Nietzsche’s will to power, which modern Germany is rediscovering and glorifying, is not only a new ideal; it is an ideal that simultaneously brings with it its own form of universalization: war and conquest’ (“Reflections” 71).

It is tempting to look back at Levinas’s 1934 essay and question his decision to dignify the Nazi movement in Germany with the mantle of “philosophy.” As Hansel points out, Levinas himself would express some regret over this after the war (313). This is indeed a concern; however, there is also value in approaching

Nazism as something more than a spontaneous explosion of discriminatory violence. As Levinas sees it, this brutality has deeper, philosophical roots in Germany and is perhaps the inevitable consequence of having left specific forms of intellectual *habitus* to develop over the course of centuries.

BARBARITY AND THE DIVINE

In writing history, one is often torn between a desire to reach a deeper understanding of patterns and a sense of responsibility to survivors. What does it mean to speak of the "philosophy of Hitlerism" in the wake of the Shoah? What is lost or violated when one dignifies barbarism with such terms? What is gained? In the case of Levinas's 1934 account of German spirituality, it seems of unquestionable use to connect the political expansion of Hitlerism within Germany to broader historical and intellectual trends. There is the militarism of the First World War and the humiliations that followed defeat, of course, but there are also properly philosophical currents—most still taught in Western universities with little context—that flow together into the political and feed it. It is in light of this that Heideggerian notions of "authenticity" and "care" may come under new scrutiny, while the Platonic and Fichtean conceits of a poet like Friedrich Hölderlin (for whom earthly beauty was ever a reflection of the divine—a flash of the *Vernünfftwelt*) take on more ominous meaning (Woezik 190).

It may seem overly deterministic to see signs of danger in German thought and culture before the rise of Hitler. After the Shoah, however, it is also irresponsible not to do so. However one reads Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Hölderlin (or listens to Richard Wagner), it is an accepted historical fact that the support the Nazis enjoyed by the early 1930s did not spring fully formed from the head of Zeus, nor was that support limited to Munich beer halls. It takes time to cultivate such things, and the ground must be prepared over generations. Hitler's early speeches about German hammers and foreign anvils unquestionably made sense to many around him, and it seems logical to move beyond questions of economics and grudges over 1918 to explore what these people considered "sense" to be.

To be fair, the United States has its own troubles with sense and sensibility. In fact, the racist underpinnings of contemporary American politics require nothing like the focused archaeology that Levinas devotes to Germany. They are in the topsoil, so to speak, and one grows so accustomed to finding references to white supremacy in American thought and culture that it hardly seems worth pointing them out. From the Founding Fathers forward, our nation has been built on a wide range of undemocratic truths that white Protestants mostly found to be self-evident. This is not up for debate. What may cause surprise, however, is the extent to which American ideas about race shaped Nazi policies. James Q. Whitman has recently documented the extent to which Hitler's jurists drew direct inspiration from American race laws, and the results should give all Americans pause. Whitman presents the matter perhaps most succinctly in his introduction: "Nazi lawyers regarded America, not without reason, as the innovative world leader in the creation of racist law; and while they saw much to deplore, they also saw much to emulate. It is even possible, indeed likely, that the Nuremberg Laws themselves reflect direct American influence" (5). This is hardly a flattering assessment, and it bears repeating that Hitler's inner circle had little cause early on to consider the United States a potential enemy. In fact, American laws and rhetoric regarding communists, trade unions, and racial minorities likely suggested, at least to some of Germany's new elites, that there was a real possibility for meaningful alliances. The point here, to be clear, is not to normalize Nazi policies and rhetoric by linking them to features of American culture that have themselves become normalized. I merely wish to suggest that what has long passed as "normal" or "sensible" in American culture requires significant revision. When Nazi lawyers turn to you for racism lessons, it may well be time to admit you have a systemic problem.

CLIMATE OF CHANGE

What can historians take from Levinas's prewar analysis of German culture and philosophy? There is certainly a good deal to evaluate, specifically in relation to the facts to which Levinas refers in both essays. Beyond this, however, there is also the larger question of horizon. Is there still time, in the face of the looming climate disaster, to examine the steps—each a fragment, a machine set loose in the dirt—that led us to this moment? Like Levinas in 1934, are we to turn to reckon with the past, even as we are blown like a ripped kite (or an angel) into a future that has no place for us, our readers, or even our species?

What else can we do? Were there no time left at all, in fact, we would still have an obligation to employ our “weak messianic power,” as Walter Benjamin described it in his second thesis on history, to pay our debt to past generations (254). Seen this way, the work of the historian has never had a meaningful forward-looking element, no powers of prevention, and no ready-to-wear lessons for the future. Subsequent readers may construct lessons and pedagogical foundations from what historians write, and they might also adapt what they read to new circumstances and place in motion novel machines of prophylaxis and paideia. “Let us never forget and always strive to do better,” teachers may tell their students, upon having read the history of some past crime or massacre. Such lessons are necessary, but they lie beyond the purview of the historian, whose service is never to the living.

A historian is someone who takes responsibility for those who fell before. They care for the dead, raising them before the eyes and ears of others so that they might not languish in sleepless anonymity. They are *ngangas*, who commune with spirits and carry their weight. Every history is an orphan's kaddish. And now, facing the near certainty of our own annihilation, we nonetheless work to settle the affairs of others—we tend to their graves and reassemble what had been smashed or fragmented. This is perhaps the true meaning of ethics, at least in the Levinasian sense: we respond to the command of the dead knowing that there may well be no future generations to do the same for us. Our acts of care may never be recognized, and our own graves may never receive the attention they require. Responding to the command of the fallen, we acknowledge that the chain may well be broken. With Anchises and our household gods on our backs, we stumble through the smoke of Troy, never to escape. With the planet heating up at its current rate, there is increasingly no reason to expect that our descendants will pull us up from the ground or even exist in the first place. We may well be writing histories no one will read (something literary critics have grown increasingly used to, though for other reasons), but that is not the point. In doing this work, we will have lived as human beings, taking responsibility for those who are no longer able to be able. Our subjectivity, Levinas everywhere reminds us, was never about symmetry, balance, or a *quid pro quo*. We are given a heavy weight, and we carry it. That is all.

Looking to the past and the risks we now collectively face, we begin to get our affairs in order. Like Levinas, it makes good sense to examine how we got here in the first place. Who were the first victims of this long march to extinction? What patterns were locked in, what engines ignited and aimed at the earth? As with much of what we consider to be modern, this history has unmistakably Portuguese roots.

In his late fifteenth-century oral account of Portuguese maritime navigation (copied down in Latin by Martin Behaim), Diogo Gomes (c.1420-c.1502) provides details on the discovery and early settlement of Madeira. As with many stories of Portuguese navigation, his begins with a storm. “In the time of prince D. Henrique,” the story begins, “a ship, running from a storm, spotted a small, uninhabited Island near the Island of Madeira, which is now called Porto Santo” (26). The year was 1419 CE, and this Atlantic storm would push the expedition led by João Gonçalves Zarco and Tristão Vaz Teixeira into what is now the island of Porto Santo to seek shelter. Once back in Portugal, they reported to prince D. Henrique, sharing with him news of the island's natural bounty. The following year, D. Henrique ordered Afonso Fernandes to explore Porto Santo, and it is then that the Portuguese first encounter the nearby island of Madeira. Fernandes reports on the island's “extremely beautiful” landscape, especially around the area that is now Funchal. It is, he reports, an ideal space for settlement.

The only problem with the island, from Fernandes's perspective, was that dense cedar forests and foliage covered the ground so thoroughly that there was no way of knowing how suitable the land might be for growing crops: "They still could not determine the quality of the soil, since it was covered with trees, cedars, and other species" (26). Returning to Portugal, Fernandes informed D. Henrique of the state of things on this new island. Shortly afterward, João Gonçalves Zarco requested formal permission to return to Madeira as its governor and to settle the island with his family. D. Henrique readily granted this, supplying Gonçalves Zarco and others with transport and provisions (26). Soon afterward, the group disembarked near Funchal (27).

The first order of business for the settlers was to build wooden dwellings with thatched roofs. The job was made easy by an abundant supply of both wood and straw, and they soon had shelter in place. The next task was to determine if the land around them was suitable for growing crops. This was made nearly impossible by the dense brush and thick layers of leaves on the ground, and there seemed to be no obvious means to clear these away. The settlers then decided that a controlled burn would be the most effective method to clear the foliage and get a sense of whether the ground below them was fertile or not. Lighting torches, they touched them to the straw and leaves on the ground. The fire grew quickly, and soon it was completely out of control.

As the fire grew around Funchal, it threatened the settlers' newly constructed shelters. It soon consumed these, and Gonçalves Zarco and his companions found themselves forced to run for the water and get in up to their necks to avoid being burned alive. Even so, they seem to have just barely escaped the wildfire, which was now spreading fast across the island.

That was in 1419 or 1420 (the sources differ), and seven years later, the fire was still burning. The total damage caused by the fire is hard to assess, though it seems to have burned through 75 percent of the island's original growth. This included most of the island's laurel trees, bay trees, Madeira mahogany, lily-of-the-valley trees, faya, picconia, mountain orchids, shrubs, and ferns unique to Madeira. The one area not touched by the fire, the mountainous region now contained within the Parque Natural de Madeira, remains the only part of the island—roughly 200 km. (about twice the area of Manhattan)—with original growth. The animals of the island also suffered enormously from the fire, which deprived them of life as well as habitat. A good example of this loss was the trocaz pigeon, a grey pigeon with a pinkish breast and silver neck patch now found only in the remaining laurissilva forests of the Parque Natural. The Portuguese brought the trocaz pigeon to the brink of extinction through the destruction of its habitat (through fire and planting, hunting, and the inadvertent introduction of rats to the island). Its numbers have returned somewhat through legal protections since 1982, and it is no longer listed as endangered ("Pombo-trocaz").

What did the Portuguese settlers do with the land cleared by the fire? The answer is perhaps not difficult to imagine: the first sugar cane plantation in Funchal belonged to D. Henrique himself, established in 1425. It is also around this time that enslaved Africans begin arriving in Madeira to work that sugar cane. The first of these workers were Guanches captured in the Canary Islands, but by 1450 the overwhelming majority would come from the Atlantic coast of mainland Africa. In this way, the Transatlantic slave trade begins in Madeira, and the island would become by 1500 the world's largest exporter of sugar. This brought enormous wealth to the island, though the distribution of this wealth was limited to a small number of families who owned most of the arable land. As students of history know, this cycle of deforestation, planting, enslavement, consolidation, and export would find itself repeated over and over throughout the Atlantic.

What is "sensible" to a people who arrive at a place of astounding natural beauty and immediately set fire to it? What conceptual machinery needs to be activated for people to arrive someplace new and see primarily "resources"? How are such resources constructed, and how do they construct us in turn? (Michael Pollan has ideas about this) Beyond moments of discovery and first encounter, what is the logic that justifies the long-term use of an island like Madeira to cultivate sweetener for export while importing thousands of enslaved workers to harvest and process that sweetener? What underlying principles and concepts support the (apparently convincing) argument that all this is perfectly logical in light of the extreme wealth that it

produces for a few people? The implications of these questions of course go far beyond Madeira, and it is worth pointing out that for many it is still unthinkable to proceed in any other way.

Turning back to Levinas, one might ask what notions of “spirit” underlie the extensive destruction of nature that accompanied modernity’s first sub-tropical cries. If the German marriage of body and spirit led ineluctably to the Shoah, what sort of world took form through the soul/body hierarchy more commonly associated with European Christianity? It would seem that both paths lead to monstrous ends and reach them by means of a dogmatic distinction between what is properly human and what is not. In the case of Germany, it is a matter of race, while elsewhere it is a matter of race along with other, perhaps even more sweeping forms of exclusion. The point here is again not to present Nazism as some “lesser” sort of barbarism but to bring into focus the forms of barbarism in which we are all implicated. And to call attention once again to the work of the historian, bound to sift through the ash and sing the names of the dead.

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