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The Debacle or The Real Under Reduction: The “Scene of Alençon”

The drapes that fall in my scene of Alençon also concern things. Things decompose, lose their meaning: forests become trees – all that which forest meant in French literature – perishes. The ultimate decomposition of elements – the butts of wood that remain after the circus has left or on the stage [. . .]. But I do not want to speak simply of the end of illusions but rather of the end of meaning. {Meaning itself as illusion.} The concrete form of this situation: the empty houses and staying in these empty houses. Cheese and champagne at 5 in the morning.

[. . .]

The looting of shop windows – the people who carry away senseless things: a packet of letter-writing paper [. . .].

[. . .]

It is not the situation of the reversal of values that I want to describe – of the change in authority – but of the human nudity of the absence of authority. (Levinas 2009, 136)

“In a sense, all of X’s philosophy is there”: a sweeping statement of this kind will always be too inexact – except when one hears in this the risky attempt to grasp a gesture of thought at its living center and as a seminal decision. The hypothesis we should like to defend here is precisely the following: in what Levinas calls in his *Carnets de captivité* the – or “my” – “scene of Alençon” one can say that in “a sense all his philosophy is there.”

There are “thought-situations,” writes Levinas with respect to Proust, and he gives a precise definition of this with respect to the thought of death: “Proust has a notion of this thought by illness or by ageing, which are a positive {and appropriate} access to a notion and without which we can have only a negative concept” (Levinas 2009, 73). In this way, we can gain access to meaning only through the concreteness, the facticity of the existence of a situation. It is known that, as much in his Talmudic commentaries as in his practice of phenomenology, Levinas does not cease to promote a “drama of phenomena”

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according to which the concept should never be cut off from the singularity of situations and according to which, by the same movement, significations have to be deformalized (cf. Franck 2001, 152ff.). Of course, it is in no way a question of identifying the “situation” in an objective sense and of thus restricting it to an occurrence in the world that can be located in objective time. The “thought-situation” is at work as much, and doubtlessly more so, in the novel or even in the text claimed as philosophical, as it is in the objective exactness of the facts. Moreover, as one knows, the *Carnets* relate very few facts or ‘objective’ events . . .

The “scene of Alençon,” which appears in Levinas’s unfinished and unpublished novel *Tristes Opulences*, then in *Eros*,¹ is first of all a *situation* of this kind. One finds traces of it in the *Carnets*: either in the drafts and the fragments of this scene, or in explications of its meaning (formulated in the mode: “in my scene of Alençon” this means that; cf. Levinas 2009, 132, 135, 146). It bears witness to the strangeness of the “event” of the debacle. In truth, there is not much to relate. Initially, the buzz of the habitual occurrences and gestures of the world continues, albeit as if they were suspended (as if suspended on the edge of the abyss). It is rather the calm before the storm: the crowds have not yet been thrown onto the streets – we are in the imminence or in the premises of the upheaval that has not yet taken place. Nothing exceptional happens in the daily life of the town – even if soon the panic of flight and the looting that accompanies it will occur (these events, moreover, which Levinas constantly renders derisory, are barely present).² Something happens, however, when almost nothing has yet happened objectively; such is the disruptive “transcendental” or “metaphysical” nature of the event [*événementialité*] of the mundane non-event. Ordinary life is, *all of a sudden*, caught in the raw light of defeat. What happens? *Everything happens as if the operation of the suspension of the world-thesis were produced in the world (this is the situation)*.

In the narration of the events of his life, Levinas offers us few “objective” clues with regard to what he really experienced as the “scene of Alençon” (and, fundamentally, it is of little importance . . .). It is on another level that the

1 For factual clarifications regarding this novel and with respect to its status both in philosophy and in the course of Levinas’s works, one should refer to the preface, written by Catherine Chalié and Rodolphe Calin, to *Oeuvres I* (Levinas 2009, 14 and following) as well of course as the editing work of D. Cohen-Levinas and the preface by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Oeuvres III*.

2 On singular empirical event merits note here. It is a question of an event that is objectively not very momentous, involving a barber, of which Levinas will reveal the transcendental bearing and to which we will devote ourselves further below.

scene of Alençon is played out.³ When he evokes his writing of the novel taken in its global character and in its generality, one sees clearly that *all* fiction has the function of an *epochè*: an “irrealization” of the world in the sense of the neutralization of the thesis of existence. The claimed and many times declared attraction for fantasy in literature derives from this *index* or *this operation of neutralization*.⁴ And, from a certain point of view, the scene of Alençon gathers, carries to its highest point, and, so to say, “instantiates” this work of the *epochè*.

Therefore, the “thought-situation” of the debacle, embodied in the scene of Alençon, very clearly has the function of the phenomenological *reduction*. This reduction itself will not, in turn, emerge unscathed from such a recapitulation. Let us describe in detail this operation, this “Levinassian reduction” and what it gives access to.

Phenomenological reduction can be understood in various senses. The debacle as reduction leads to no foundation nor certainty (and certainly not towards that of the *ego* or of consciousness). On the contrary, it is expressed through a recurrent image: the “drapes that are ablaze and that fall.”⁵ The defeat – the defection of all power – has its ultimate power in removing the veil, in unveiling. Under Levinas’s pen, the play of the “fall” or the “blaze” of the “drapes” can be formulated, very classically, by the dichotomy of being and appearance – appearance being rendered the equivalent of “illusion.” However, this formulation is immediately corrected. Certainly, it is being that is revealed,⁶ but not in such a way that it could be opposed to the lack of being

3 In the *Carnets*, it is evoked rather than developed; in other published texts it is carried further, though, and particularly in one of these, to which we will return later. It is nonetheless the case that, in a general sense, this seminal scene is difficult to recognize and to assign. Without a doubt, it is a matter of the persistence or the resurgence of a moment actually lived by Levinas himself, but everything takes place as if this moment could not allow itself to be assigned to a simple origin nor to a precise and univocal mundane determination. This is, doubtlessly, not without relation to its status as a “transcendental” or “metaphysical” event: one is therefore more inclined to follow the occurrences of this “scene” in the works than its chronological resurgence since a datable moment in the life of Emmanuel Levinas and the history of France (that can really be objectified as the debacle of 1940).

4 Cf. for example, *Oeuvres* I (Levinas 2009, 150). In the latter, Levinas evokes what he calls his “literary procedures”: “The real event is described in a sober fashion. [. . .] But a small final image, on which one should never insist [. . .] makes something fantastic circulate in it like a rapid current of air. The whole ‘real’ situation appears above a precipice.” (Ibid., 190)

5 Calin and Chalier comment on this expression in their preface (Levinas 2009, 16).

6 From this point of view, one senses a true proximity to Heidegger’s problematic of the *a-letheia*, of being, and of the forgetting of being – which one would no doubt have to explore further on.

that is illusion. On the contrary, what the revelation shows is shown insofar as it does not present itself in full presence: its nudity or its truth is a matter of an essential characteristic of the foundation of being: *to not be enough or not really* (we shall return to this). And a crucial precision is made: if being in the debacle, being at issue because of the debacle or the defeat, as one could say, is deprived of something, it is not of a deceptive appearance that would have both hidden and clothed it, but of its meaning. *Being in its foundation, revealed as what it “is,” struggles to be and in the same movement, “is” senseless.*⁷

Under reduction, in the situation of the debacle, beings are presented as having two characteristics which are in appearance, and in appearance only, contradictory. From a certain point of view, the cold light of defeat outlines their contours in a too raw way, freezes their shapes into caricatures, and, by exaggerating their traits, reveals what is derisory about them. The cold light of the debacle makes the different beings get stuck in their being, prohibits them from freeing themselves or escaping. This is the reason why the crowds who take the road, encumbered by their baggage, are pathetic and derisory, as when circuses leave town, Levinas writes (cf. Levinas 2009, 104). Every word counts here. Each individual human is encumbered by their baggage and leaves traces in being – traces of being in being – that express the impossibility of escape (and therefore opposing themselves radically to the “trace of what has never taken place”).⁸ The debacle is the impossibility and incapacity of a departure from the world and from being; demobilization that is only the reverse side of mobilization, or movement of beings in being; being is revealed in the same movement for what it is: derisory circus, meaningless or absurd, stuck within itself, tangled up on itself. And this weight or burden, as being stuck, is the impossibility of foundation or of the hypostasis, or of substantiality. This is the reason for the second characteristic of these beings: their being tangled up in being – and this is contradictory only in appearance – in fact de-realizes them. They hardly exist, they struggle to exist: they are phantoms, caricatures of themselves, always on the edge of fading into an indeterminate existence.⁹

⁷ This is why the very term “scene” in Levinas’s expression “scene of Alençon” should be understood at least as much in the sense of theatre (even as far as its apparatus) as in the sense of the novel. Suddenly, the world appears as being nothing more than a stage on which a derisory game is played. As soon as one no longer adheres to the spectacle, or again, as soon as the circus is gone (the term “circus” used in this occasion by Levinas is certainly significant), there remains only a derisory stage voided of all substantial reality (the elements decompose themselves) and of all meaning.

⁸ On the heavy trace of “existence bearing baggage” cf. Levinas 2009, 133.

⁹ Cf. the motif of the “phantom,” evoked here with regard to the whole year in captivity (Levinas 2009, 126).

The over-determination of the role, the trait applied too heavily, are always on the edge of collapsing into what is neither truly being nor the frank negation of being, and certainly not “otherwise than being”: being that hardly exists, *il y a* – in its double characteristic of a deficiency of both being and meaning.

The *il y a*,¹⁰ of which Levinas shows precisely that it always “holds” itself “there” (as phantoms do – hardly, but inevitably and indefinitely) under the thin skin, the fine surface where the circus puts on its play: the play of being (of substance) and the play of meaning (of thematized signification).

Can one not read there, in the thought-situation of the debacle, the description of this “broken world” that provides the beginning of *Existence and Existants*, as Chalier and Calin note in their preface (cf. Levinas 2009) ? Can one not even maintain that, “shining” into the whole work, the “scene of Alençon,” so to say, “offers something to see,” “renders an image,” for the phenomenological descriptions of being that are mentioned at the beginning of *Totality and Infinity* (cf. Levinas 1979, 21), then in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (cf. Levinas 1991, chapter one, section II)?

Let us return to the description of the scene of Alençon. What strikes one is the underlying idea that the “drapes” are pomposity and decorum. They are the expression of the authority of the official order (of which it is suggested that it basically maintains itself in what should be only its sign or its appearance) or even of the officiality of order. One imagines the “golden insignia of the Republic” – this French Republic which, as we know, meant so much to the young Lithuanian Jew who had just taken up French citizenship.

In a sense, for Levinas, the real perfects itself and is accomplished in institutions: the French Republic, the State of Law, the homeland of Human Rights, where the signs are those of the legitimate authority that fundamentally guarantees the consistency of all that is real. Professors, judges, and lawyers inhabit and incarnate a world of education and justice guaranteed by a police force under the orders of a measured, enlightened, and legitimate power. They are authorities who watch over the social order, the cultural order, and the order of civility (where one goes to the theatre), the order of those who are active and industrious (where the “bakers bake” but also “where the viscounts tell the stories of viscounts”). Such is the very “consistency” of the real (an inauthentic consistency) in ordinary times. We know how much Levinas as a young man believed in this order, the one guaranteed by the French Republic, the guardian

10 For Levinas, as is well known, the notion of the *il y a* is like the dark side of the notion of the element or of the elemental. It is thus highly significant that he evokes the decomposition of things into elements and even the decomposition of the elements themselves, which occurs “after the circus has left or on the stage.”

of Human Rights, and how much Levinas as a mature man never stopped being loyal to this order that guarantees the real and ordinary life. But one measures how much in the same movement he emphasized its *insufficiency* – or again how much he emphasized that what truly counted in it never originated from it.

This is precisely what the Levinassian reduction reveals: being is not sufficient, is not sufficient for meaning – for signifying-ness – and not even, from a certain point of view, for being.

In the preface of *Totality and Infinity*, the pivotal image of the scene of Alençon returns, the scene of the “drapes ablaze.” And what does the fire reveal? I return to this well-known passage: “Harsh reality (this sounds like a pleonasm!), harsh object-lesson, at the very moment of its fulguration when the drappings of illusion burn war is produced as the pure experience of pure being” (Levinas 1979, 21).

One only needs to read the beginning of *Otherwise than Being* in order to find this description, that I will not reproduce in detail and of which I only indicate the main aspects: being is the confrontation of beings, each being persevering in its being, ineluctably colliding with others. This substantial confrontation derives from the indeterminate anonymity of the *il y a* as much as it threatens to return to it. In the order of being, the anonymous *il y a* is precisely neutralized and domesticated in an intrinsically fragile way. Being is order, distinguishing substances and juxtaposing them in space, retaining each of them in its limits. Being is *legein*, gathering, which produces thematized meaning (cultural significations) and civility, but also justice understood as a measure and a sharing guaranteed by a State. Being is peace, insofar as peace is only the reverse side of war and this war, which is the allergy and the collision of individual substances, can at every instant return them to the terrifying anonymity that ceaselessly threatens to lock them up in the phantom existence of the *il y a*.

The debacle thus reveals the foundation of being for what it is and, by contrast and as a consequence, it reveals the surface of being for what it is: the comedy of a harmonious order or the harmonious order as comedy, as theatre and in this sense a stage. It is on the “stage of being” that there is order, peace, and quite simply a world and a space where substances can arrange themselves next to one another. Being in the debacle, however, sees the official order collapsing, revealed to be nothing but a fragile, lacerated, and interrupted film: the stage of being is actually only a very thin surface where, doubling itself as *logos*, being strives to persevere. It is a surface that, once it tears, allows the worst and at the same time reveals itself as a fragile and derisory play. From this point of view, Levinas’s claim is radical. Along with this human order, which seemed guaranteed by reason from all eternity, along with this “reasonable world,” it is the world as such – beginning with perception – that collapses. The roads taken by

those who flee not only do not lead beyond being but, already, do not even lead from place to place; they belong to a bad *no man’s land* (not to an u-topia but to the indeterminacy of all place).¹¹ Without a doubt, one could go as far as saying that in a sense it is the peace of the *logos*, of the philosophers, the judges, and lawyers that “maintains” the world of perception.

If the thought-situation of the scene of Alençon, of the debacle, has this key role, if it truly embodies the “Levinassian reduction,” then it is not surprising that it is disseminated in a more or less explicit manner throughout Levinas’s texts: in the literary texts of course, but also in the philosophical texts and, in addition, in the texts that I would characterize as “Jewish.” I designate by this latter in a very precise sense all the texts that Levinas has written from the position of his being Jewish (and which are often addressed to the Jewish community).

Let us examine two occurrences of the scene of Alençon and let us attempt to clarify what they teach us and what the displacement and the transplantation to which they are submitted teach us about the Levinassian reduction as debacle. It is a matter of considering them “variations” of this scene and of the operation that it embodies.

1 Occurrence 1

“Sans nom,” a text published in *Les Nouveaux Cahiers* in 1966,¹² is, at least from a certain point of view, a Jewish text, in the sense that its author, and

¹¹ For a tracing and above all a very fine reading of Levinas’s texts on the place and the non-place, particularly on the *no man’s land* and its ambiguities, cf. Jean-Louis Chrétien, “Lieu et non-lieu dans la pensée de Levinas” (2007). Cf. also Sebbah, “Emmanuel Levinas. L’utopie du chez-soi” (2009).

¹² This text is republished in *Noms Propres* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1976). It is translated by Michael B. Smith as “Nameless” in *Proper Names* (1996, 119–123). The explicit and primary addressee is indeed – as it is called – the “Jewish community,” to which the text’s first publication in a journal that identifies itself with French Judaism, bears witness. Levinas, who addresses himself to a “we” to which he belongs, identifies himself as the sender of the text from the position of his being Jewish. It is no less the case, however, that by definition – as *published*, and capable of being read by everyone – this text is called to address the universality of the community of possible readers (something that, moreover, is testified by the fact that it is included in a collection with no privileged addressee other than its reader). It seems illuminating to distinguish the different kinds of texts written by Levinas according to his situation as sender and according to the privileged addressee. It is self-explanatory, however, that tracing the borders between types of texts produces necessarily a schematic identification and that such borders are, of course, not impermeable.

addressor, identifies himself from the position of his being Jewish and asks himself what should be communicated to the Jewish community concerning the experience of concentration camps and the clandestine Jewish experience after having survived the horrors of the Nazis.

I shall not take up the description in these pages of the abandonment that took place between 1940 and 1945. Let us simply indicate that, in this abandonment, everything appears as if the event of the debacle, the traumatic interruption that it constitutes, had been “continued” in a strange suspension.¹³ Everything is there, unchanged from a certain point of view, but deserted of all meaning, rendered derisory. “Interregnum or end of the Institutions, or as if being itself had been suspended. Nothing was official anymore. Nothing was objective. Not the least manifesto on Human Rights.” (Levinas 1996, 119–120) And for Levinas, as one knows, after this suspension, there was the feeling of the “unjustifiable privilege of having survived six million deaths” (Levinas 1996, 120). Life from then on was lived as a “stay of execution,” in which the “reality of normal life” reconstituted itself (newspapers, chats, values, and the force of public order to protect them), but in such a way that “nothing has been able to fill, or even cover over the gaping pit” (Levinas 1996, 120). In this way, the reduction of being, or to being (as *il y a*), that we have represented above as it is grasped by Levinas in the situation of the debacle which is in some way punctual and paroxysmal (there is something like an instant of the debacle, a before *and* an after: all things are in their place *and* the crowds are on the roads), is also the situation of *desolation* of the Jew, of the person who assumes being Jewish. The desolation temporalizes itself, first in the punctum of the debacle, then as duration of five years. More radically, in a sense, once revealed it always lasts: the debacle continues, the desolation is there. Nothing of the life that begins again (as legitimate inauthenticity) can really cover the abyss. Once the drapes have caught fire, the texture of a new coat of decorum, of authority, and of civility cannot but bear the indelible mark of rupture and let discern what it strives to cover up.

It is a question of radical desolation: not only that I am separated from the other or enclosed in my world, not only that I am alone in the world, but I am alone without even the world any longer. I am alone. The situation is not one where I am struck by injustice in such a way that the violence of its blow is

¹³ Here one finds a temporal characteristic of the phenomenological reduction distributed in its different stages, a characteristic expressed, moreover, by the emphases borne respectively by two translations of the term *epochè*: interruption and suspension. The reduction is a matter of a radical discontinuity and/then of a suspension of the time of the world (through which this interruption is paradoxically “continued”).

attenuated by the certitude that somewhere there is justice and there are just persons, other human beings who cannot hear me for the moment but whom I can hope to rejoin. The situation of radical desolation is such that the very idea of justice has collapsed.

In this way, one of the “variations” of the Levinassian reduction relates it to being Jewish, puts it to work under the particular guise of this facticity, of this specific situation. And what, then, do we learn from this? Something appears in this text that did not directly appear in other evocations of the “scene of Alençon”: as a residue of a reduction that has not been perceived hitherto.

Let us clarify what is at issue. The desolation is *also* designated as the internalization of the values that collapsed Outside and with this very Outside – an internalization in “the hidden recesses of subjective consciousness” (Levinas 1996, 119). The broken world, the real under reduction or in the debacle, where everything seems similar and is neutralized in its thesis of existence, is also a world, so to say, without its ethical orientation. This world no longer constitutes a world: “[w]e returned to the desert, a space without countryside” (Levinas 1996, 121).¹⁴ This annulling of the whole world, however, leaves a residue untouched: the irreducible “remainder” of the subjectivity that endures the trauma of such a reduction. Being Jewish allows the subjectivity in question to be understood in two ways. First, as being riveted. Being riveted means, first, “negatively” as a being that cannot escape, first of all from itself, or as a being for which its own being is a prison and a malediction (*il y a* as the hyperbole of the “being laden with baggage”). Such a being is assigned to a space, but it is by no means a question of being extended or deployed. On the contrary, it is a matter of space as receptacle, “a space made to measure – like a tomb – to contain us” (Levinas 1996, 121): suffocation in being and by its being – like being buried alive. Subjectivity about to succumb to the burden of its own being. But already – this is the second characteristic of this subjectivity – one can read, as if on dotted lines, the reversal of this assignation to oneself, of this being “riveted to oneself.” It is thus a question of what the reduction of being to being (of being and its order to the *il y a*) has no hold on, of what precisely does not belong to being: to *believe* in the return of values, a “feeling oneself responsible”

¹⁴ Let us indicate that the description proposed by the “Jewish” text is completely homologous to the one proposed in the “philosophical” texts (*Totality and Infinity, Otherwise than Being*) recalled in the first part: the human order that guarantees peace collapses and, with it, space itself, letting the desert emerge without place and orientation. One lesson is thus gained from this: the human being does not need civilization in order to live – the civilization that exhausts itself as a simple sign or appearance of itself, and not even of comfort . . . (cf. Levinas 1996, 121).

for values even when they have collapsed outside, along with anything else outside, with the whole World. The “inner life,” Levinas says, in ancient and conventional words in order to say that the true interiority is not of the World, and certainly not something as an “interior” that could again be “situated” in the World. Hope and responsibility resist when nothing in the world remains upright – or which does so only in the raw light of the derisory – because they are not from the World nor from being. Hope and responsibility through which, in a sense, interiority is evasion itself.¹⁵

2 Occurrence 2

I would like to consider another “transplant,” another variation of the scene of Alençon, of the debacle, this time in a text the reading of which clearly identifies as philosophical. As far as the texts published by Levinas are concerned I believe that it is the most explicit version of the evocation of the debacle. In particular, this version takes up the markers of this scene extremely clearly (the places, the details mentioned), and exhibits them. The same situations are evoked, exactly in the same terms, but in a more thorough manner than in the renderings of the scene more directly connected to what was experienced biographically.

When does Levinas live, as if for a second time, the “thought-situation of the debacle”? When does he live a second debacle – or rather relive the debacle? When reading Derrida. The effect of deconstruction on the world of significations is not only compared to the debacle of 1940 but it is in a sense identified with it. The text on Derrida of 1972, “Wholly otherwise”¹⁶ (which one can say is contemporary to *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*), is highly

¹⁵ Here, I leave out an issue that is, however, decisive: the relation between being Jewish in its particularity and the “human soul” in its generality, the relation between the situation of the Jew in the facticity of his/her existence and that of all human being. Cf. in particular “Être juif” (a text that appeared in the community revue *Confluences* in 1947) and was taken up again in “Judaïsme et altruisme” (Levinas 2003).

¹⁶ “Jacques Derrida / Tout autrement,” first published in *L’Arc* 2 (1973), and then in *Noms Propres*. The English translation, “Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise,” is included in *Proper Names* (Levinas 1996, 55–62). This text devoted to Derrida thus first appeared in the special number on Derrida of one of the leading journals concerned with what was “very contemporary” in the arts, literature, and philosophy in the 1970s. It is not without significance, certainly, that these two texts (“Nameless” and “Jaques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise”), whose heterogeneity we have emphasized, met each other in their “recovery” within the same issue, which is precisely to a large extent a “gathering” of “friends.”

eloquent on this matter. One finds all the characteristics of the debacle (this time “circumscribed” by the domain of thought): the abolition of place and the desolation of all landscapes – there are landscapes of thought – rendered uninhabitable. The image of the *no-man’s land* used in the *Carnets* returns: “In the meantime, we tread a *no-man’s land*, an in-between that is uncertain even of the uncertainties that flicker everywhere. [. . .] At the outset, everything is in place; after a few pages or paragraphs of formidable calling into question, nothing is left inhabitable for thought [. . .]. In reading him [Derrida], I always see the 1940 exodus again.” (Levinas 1996, 55–56) It is not in the notes of the *Carnets* nor in the other pages that here and there narrate and comment on historical events, but on page 56 of a text on Derridian deconstruction that one finds the most complete restitution of the scene of Alençon in the published work of Levinas. In this way, the “thought-situation” brings together the episode lived in the world by the man Levinas – *hardly* locatable empirically, “[s]omewhere between Paris and Alençon” in 1940 – and the situation of deconstruction. And if, according to the hypothesis guiding our reading, the debacle is indeed a guise of reduction (the “Levinassian reduction”), then one can measure how much deconstruction is related to reduction, remains a reduction, even if it is a reduction that “happens to” the subject rather than being operated by it – a Derridaean reduction in intimate affinity with the Levinassian reduction: the debacle or the real under reduction; deconstruction or the text under reduction (the one continues the other and vice versa).

What is at stake in this contact between debacle and deconstruction – what is the case of, using Levinas’s expression, “[p]hilosophy as defeat” (Levinas 1996, 57)? One can no longer believe in, nor adhere to, the regime of deconstruction, as is the case in the debacle: the thematized meanings collapse, leaving the order of the signifier voided of sense. Here, something is in play that is not a dialectic of being and appearance but – the terms are almost identical with those used in the description of what the debacle in the “scene of Alençon” reveals – a lack of “originary” presence that undermines being (the Derridaean text explicitly cited at the time by Levinas is *Voice and Phenomenon*).

One point deserves our attention: an episode sometimes mentioned in other versions of the debacle acquires an absolutely decisive status at the heart of the revisiting of Derridaean deconstruction. It is part of the event, literally as strange as anecdotal, that I was alluding to in the beginning (cf. footnote 5). It seems to me that one can accredit this event a bearing that is “transcendental” or “metaphysical” in the sense of Levinas. It is a strange episode: “[A] half-drunk barber invited the soldiers who were passing by on the road (the ‘boys’ [les ‘*petits gars*’] as he called them, in a patriotic language gliding above the

waters, or keeping afloat in the chaos) to come into his little shop for a free shave.” (Levinas 1996, 56) The hypertext is neither very “learned” nor very “old.” It concerns, very prosaically, “tomorrow one shaves for free.” It is with respect to this that the very title of the section, “Today is tomorrow,” gains its meaning. “Tomorrow one shaves for free or: ‘messianism!’” Levinas comments in these terms: “The essential procrastination – the future *difference* – was re-absorbed into the present. Time was reaching its end with the end, or the interim, of France.” (Levinas 1996, 56)

Let us extract the meaning of “tomorrow one shaves for free.” It is work done freely for the other, like a gift of oneself: this is what is impossible for the “calculating rationality” of the ordinary economy and social relations. That is what the expression in its ordinary usage denounces kindly but ironically: the illusory character of such a hope. The person who hopes for the advent of the impossible cradles himself in illusion. Now, in the event of the debacle – more or less continuous in its suspended duration – in the here and now of a place itself put into parenthesis (“[s]omewhere between Paris and Alençon”), the impossible as such takes place. It “takes place” in a manner that is necessarily strange and paradoxical: it dismantles time. It derives from the in-between-time (suspension of the normal course of time) and from counter-time: interruption but also upheaval and “crash” in the forced scansion of time. Today and tomorrow collide, melt into each other without, however, being absorbed into each other: a today that acquires the strength of a future after tomorrow as such, a “tomorrow” that takes shape as the present, as today, without cancelling itself as a pure to-come. An impossible advent that arrives as the advent of the impossible. Can one not identify here the very structure of the messianic moment, that to which the prophetic intervention opens?¹⁷

And what arrives is then certainly not a surplus of presence or a super-presence. The preceding descriptions of the debacle have taught us this – rejoining clearly from this point of view an idea that is at the heart of “deconstruction”: that what arrives is the defeat or the debacle of presence. Presence is missing the call: it defects. And this is why what comes in the debacle comes as if it were not coming. It is that of which the non-arrival constitutes the event and thus the *quasi*-presence. The collapse of presence is an event.

I shall not insist further here on the quasi-identity of the debacle and/or the defeat, on the one hand, and the messianic event, on the other. This is a proximity tied, if the description is correct, at the heart of the thought-situation

¹⁷ On the temporality of the prophetic and of the messianic cf. Gérard Benussan, *Le temps messianique* (2001), particularly page 57 and following.

of a certain phenomenological thought that reveals itself in this very movement as *closest* to Derridaean “deconstruction.”

The feeling attached to this debacle is characterized by its intrinsic ambivalence: it is a trial that afflicts you and that is not chosen (in contrast to the operation of the “phenomenological reduction” understood in the Husserlian sense – thus synonymous with mastery). It is a terrifying trial of desolation and collapse. And yet this trial is necessary because it does indeed carry out a reduction (despite everything that opposes it to the Husserlian *operatio princeps*). It is a reduction even in the sense that it opens and gives access – be it through desolation or the defection of presence.

The complexity of the relation of Levinas to Derrida has something to do with this ambivalence – with this “contact at the heart of a chiasmus” (Levinas 1996, 62).¹⁸ Up to a point, Levinas suggests that Derrida, in a sense better than anyone, “inscribes” the thought-situation of the debacle at the heart of philosophy. In Levinas’s description of deconstruction, there is, moreover, a quasi-confusion between these two gestures, as though intermingled with his own philosophical gesture. It is absolutely clear: certain sequences of the description of deconstruction, in the terms that are used as much as in the meanings that are suggested, are indiscernible from the descriptions to which Levinas proceeds in his “own” philosophical gesture. Deconstruction as the back-and-forth between Saying (the event of the otherwise than being) and the Said (*legein* gathering being), the “flickering” through which the Saying compromises itself with the Said – and already the “pullback” of the “Unsaid” that delivers, reduced to the Saying . . . In these lines that speak about the philosophical gesture, there is almost the avowal, the confession or perhaps – also indirectly addressed to Derrida – something like the implicit declamation of a “he is me and I am him.”

And yet nothing of the harshness that can be identified in the deconstruction of 1940, in the debacle, is effaced. The intermingling of the friendship between the gestures of thought, which cannot be unraveled, however, leads – without cancelling anything of itself – to the point of disagreement, or at least of extreme reticence. Without a doubt, Levinas shares with Derrida the idea that in a sense one does not rise up from defeat, that the debacle is without “*Aufhebung*” and does not promise new troops in combat formation – neither restoration nor revenge of substantial presence. Whoever has once been exposed to the devastating afflatus irreducibly remains locked in the feeling of the debacle (whether he be “covered up” again by the reconstituted veneer of

18 These are the final words of “Jacques Derrida / Tout autrement.”

the world and culture). However, as we have seen, this feeling is also hope and even the condition of possibility of hope: hope maintained at the heart of the impossible and even hope that cannot emerge as such except when it is at the heart of the impossible, against all odds. It is here that the point of the disagreement is located: Levinas, in his text of 1972, suspects that the defection of presence carried out in Derrida's deconstruction does not open onto a one-for-the-other, to "ethics," "goodness," or "love" (the terms and emphases have varied), which, for him, so to say, already break through the evidence of war and the trial of defeat – without, however, cancelling them.¹⁹

The two debacles, that of Levinas and that of Derrida, in fact do not coincide. The paths diverge. Levinas suspects that deconstruction, after having liquefied the world, demobilized beings, thrown on the roads the phantoms encumbered by their baggage, stops there and does not open onto the positivity of what has no subsisting presence but gives itself in this way precisely in its very positivity: in faces and ethics. Deconstruction would remain with the specters (and, indeed, in Levinas the motif of the specter always has a negative connotation – one has to avoid the world of specters – while Derrida attached himself to this motif, giving it the positive connotation of saying the absencing of all presence as the event).²⁰

Between the two debacles, that of Levinas and that of Derrida, there is indeed a point of contact at the heart of a chiasmus. One cannot fail to notice how, in the course of time, tangentially, a convergence tends to be produced within

19 One thus understands that Levinas ambivalently appreciated the deconstruction of his own text by Derrida, qualifying "Violence et métaphysique" (Derrida's commentary on *Totality and Infinity*) as an "assassination under anesthetic" rather than an unsaying leading back to the Saying.

20 It would be necessary, far more than we are doing here, to reflect on the *superposition* of the two exoduses – the biblical one and that of 1940. One knows that the event of the biblical Exodus is "inaugural and that of a matrix", that it "makes a metonym out of all the events that are homologous to it" (according to Bensussan's words in *Le temps messianique*). Yet, what the "original form" of the "prophetic event" promises is the interruption of the disaster through liberation and then redemption. Without a doubt, the trial of the suspension between 1940 and 1945, of that desert, would have disrupted Levinas's understanding of the messianic moment. The latter perhaps reveals itself to be terribly "without the promise of redemption," but, as we have insisted, not without hope – on the contrary! This is a fragile messianism, but it is maintained in this sense. The problem is not to be saved by a God whose death Levinas confirms with the horror of Nazism, but hope is preserved. Even more, hope only emerges from the depths of the abyss, in and through its very fragility: as the ethics of the face of the Other. Such would be the dispute with what Levinas suspects in Derrida: "deconstruction" would denominate the risk of an exodus that breaks any link with the Exodus . . . the exodus of phantoms without a face.

the very irreducibility of the gap. Levinas explicitly assumes proximity between deconstruction and his own practice of the unsaying (with which Levinas responds to Derrida’s critique with respect to the “ontological naivety” of *Totality and Infinity*). Inversely, one cannot fail to notice how Derrida understands “deconstruction” progressively as an “ethics” in the sense of Levinas: “deconstruction” that, in exposing itself to what does not arrive, exposes itself, however, to what arrives in this way (as not arriving) and says “yes” to it, “unconditionally.”

In conclusion, I hope that, despite the necessarily approximate and abusive manner of formulating this, there will have been some sense in saying that “all the philosophy of Levinas is there, in the scene of Alençon”, if this scene is indeed something like a – the? – seminal “thought-situation,” that of the debacle as reduction (and thus of the reduction as debacle). It is this seminal “thought-situation” that disseminates itself throughout the diversity of Levinas’s texts and that we have tried, for example, to designate at work in two moments of extreme importance, two decisive palpitations or flickers: in the description of being Jewish *and* in the contact with Derrida’s thought – a contact in which Levinas’s philosophical gesture is at play and displays its living center.²¹

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²¹ A name that mattered for Levinas as much as it did for Derrida, does not appear in this text. In a sense, it is missing to such an extent that one would have to justify its absence by the necessity of constructing another set of remarks: Blanchot. Indeed, in many respects, literary writing according to Blanchot and above all on the part of Blanchot – the “writing of the disaster” – is the debacle itself: beyond affirmation and negation, the arrival of that which only arrives by disappointing, by lacking its very presence (cf., for example, *L’attente, l’oubli*). While reading in Blanchot something of the ethical gesture, Levinas does not accompany his friend all the way because, precisely, Blanchot’s reduction as a debacle succeeds in a way only too well, since it no longer preserves the remainder of subjectivity as responsibility. Blanchot leads back to radical anonymity through literary writing at that point at which Levinas requires for philosophical writing a remainder of irreducible subjectivity – as responsibility and testimony to the trial of the otherwise than being. This bifurcation, which relies to a large extent on the possibility of distinguishing philosophical from literary writing, will doubtlessly have to be taken into account in understanding Levinas’s novel – and the difficult relation that he maintained, it seems, to his own literary writing.

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