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Author(s): Lars Iyer

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Lars Iyer
University of Newcastle upon Tyne

The disaster: break with the star, break with every form of totality ... (Blanchot, Writing of the Disaster, 75)

In Plato's *Laws*, the Athenian stranger claims that there are two arguments in particular that foster the belief in the gods – the antiquity and divinity of the soul and the order of the heavens under the control of reason. No one who has contemplated the heavenly bodies carefully could suppose that celestial events happen by necessity rather than divine intention (*Laws* 966d). And indeed, the stranger maintains, no one can govern the *polis* who does not understand that the stars are steered by a divine will and exist in harmony with customs and law [*nomos*] (*Laws* 968). But what happens when this contemplation reveals neither the order of the soul nor the order of the heavens? What happens with the awareness that the disarray of the universe mirrors the disarray of the soul and it is no longer possible to harmonize the affairs of state according to a *nomos* that encompasses heaven and earth? The *polis* is cast adrift and our condition becomes, in John D. Caputo's word, *disastrous*, since the stars, *astres*, have fallen (*Against Ethics* 6). One can discern a desire to address this fallenness in the search for a lost moral unity, with the cohesion and solidarity of a society founded on hard work and co-operation. One can also find it in the attempt to revive a threatened spiritual unity by seeking, for example, a new embodiment of the early Christian community or the Muslim caliphate. But these attempts to re-harmonize individual, familial and societal responsibilities occur amidst the reign of efficiency and optimization, where the hegemony of the marketplace threatens to overturn old models of being-together. We cannot simply restore the missing *nomos*, placing the stars back in the sky. Indeed, we are no longer sure whether we know who 'we' are – consumers? citizens? subjects? As Caputo reflects, "It is not a question of knowing what to put in their place, but of just getting along without such a place, of conceding that things are just 'decentered', 'disseminated', 'disastered'. I would say that we are in a fix, except that even to say 'we' is to get into a still deeper fix. We are in the fix that we cannot say 'we'" (*Against Ethics* 6). How then can we endure this "disastronomic, disastrological, deconstructive setback" without the model of a stellar *nomos*, a stellar *logos* that could serve as the image of the loftiness of the law? (*Against Ethics* 6)

I

We are too late for the gods and too / Early for Being, Being's poem / Just begun, is man. // To head toward a star – this only. // To think is to confine yourself to a / single thought that one day stands / still like a star in the world's sky ("The Thinker as Poet," 4)

In all the temples of the gods and in all sites of human habitation, this fire has its secure locale and, as this locale, gathers around it all that properly occurs [*sich ereignet*] and is bestowed. Through this fire, the hearth is the enduring ground and determinative middle – the site of all sites, as it were, the homestead pure and simple, toward which everything presences alongside and together with everything else and thus first is (*Ister* 105).

Heidegger would have us attend to the upsurge of the unhomely in this burning, that is, the illumination and brightness that permits the homely to appear. This emerging

and arising grants the opening of the *polis*; it is the origin that does not cease springing forth, surpasses the ordinary, familiar, “homely” conception of beings. The hearth is a kind of event, an *Ereignis*, a happening that properly occurs [*sich ereignet*], as the middle, gathering everything around it and bestowing a home, a site to all beings.

it could also be that the Germans – granted that they learn to use freely what is their own and do not evade the conditions required for such learning – might, in what is foreign to them [...] come to excel what is proper to the Greeks. If, that is, they have become more open, so that “what illuminates” (the heavens’ is “open to our open view” [...]) It could be that a “guest-house” and establishment might be founded and build for the gods, one that the Greek temples can no longer approach (*Ister* 124).

If it is impossible simply to reproduce Greece, to build temples to welcome the return of the Greek gods, or to open new hearths in the homes, how might dwelling become possible for the Germans? How can the hearth restore the relation to the sky and the earth?

the difference does not mediate after the fact by connecting world and things through a middle added on to them. Being the middle, it first determines world and things in their presence, i.e. in their being toward one another, whose unity carries out. (*On the Way to Language* 202)

In the sense in which Heidegger uses the word, *Dichtung* refers to a certain creative invention, a projective saying [*entwerfende Sagen*] that determines the forms of possible experience for a people, throwing it forward into the unhomely. *Dichtung* refers to something much more than poetry. To claim that language “is *Dichtung* in the essential sense” (“The Origin of the Work of Art” 61/199), is to link language to a saying [*die Sage*] or a showing [*die Zeige*] of what is possible for a people. It is even linked, Heidegger suggests, to saga and legends [*die Sagen*] (*On the Way to Language* 252/122). Language, as *Dichtung*, grants the co-belonging of gods, mortals, world and earth, the fourfold in which a people can make a habitation.

II

Modern humanist man is a man in a State. Such a man is not merely vulgar; he is religion's true antagonist within the State of Israel itself [...]. It is obvious that Israel asserts itself in a different way. Like an empire on which the sun never sets, a religious history extends the size of its modest territory, even to the point where it absorbs a breath-taking past. But, contrary to national histories, this past, like an ancient civilization, places itself above nations, like a fixed star. And yet we are the living ladder that reaches up to the sky. (“Difficult Freedom” 260)

Heidegger, with the whole of Western history, takes the relation with the Other as enacted in the destiny of sedentary peoples, the possessors and builders of the earth. Possession is pre-eminently the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine (*Totality and Infinity* 46).

For Heidegger, the Greeks build and thereby take possession of the earth, but the hearth remains cannot be so possessed. What is extraordinary about the Greeks for Heidegger

is the way in which they maintain the unhomely at the center of all relations.¹ In this sense, the Greeks belong to the *polis* because they do not seek to *determine* the hearth. Likewise, it is this that allowed them to experience the *polis* in a sense radically different to the politics of today as it answers to the canonical meditations of Plato and Aristotle. But what is questionable about Heidegger's exemplification of the Greeks, for Levinas, is the subordination he continues to maintain regarding the relation to the Other:

Heideggerian ontology, which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny. (*Totality and Infinity* 47-48)

Levinas does not dispute the fact that the *polis* provides a certain unity to the relations of the people who belong to it: it does indeed gather and bestow a unity upon the relation to the gods, to festivals, to sacrifice and battle, honor and glory, the relationship between master and slave. But it does not answer to the relation to the Other as *Autrui*; nor does it include the relation to the Levinasian God. The articulation of its unity is repressive; it constitutes an immanence or totality, closing itself off from the relation to which Levinas would attend. But might it be possible to answer this relation?

man is [...] the irruption of God within Being, or the bursting out of Being towards God; man is the fracture in Being which produces the act of giving, with hands which are full, in place of fighting and pillaging. This is where the idea of being chosen comes from, an idea which can deteriorate into pride, but originally expresses the awareness of an appointment which cannot be called into question; an appointment which is the basis of ethics and which, through its indisputability, isolates the person in his responsibility. ("Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" 202)

These dense sentences recapitulate the arguments of other texts, of the irruption into the order of being that receives, Levinas claims, its classic elaboration in Descartes' account of the idea of the infinite.² Unlike Descartes, Levinas does not suppose the idea of the infinite to refer to a being so perfect that it must exist, but opens beyond the totality of being. It is to this he alludes a few pages later:

The worry is induced by man by God's Infinity, which he can never contain, but which inspires him – inspiration being the original mode of worry, the inspiration of man by God constituting man's humanity; and the "within" of this "disproportionate within the finite" only becomes possible through the "here I am" of the man welcoming his neighbor. Listening to the Muse dictating one's songs is not the original form of inspiration; instead, it lies in obedience to the Most High by way of the ethical relationship with the Other. ("Revelation in the Jewish Tradition" 207)

¹Philolaus writes, "the first thing to have been connected, the one, in the middle of the sphere is called the hearth" (*Early Greek Philosophy* 218); Heidegger comments, "being is the hearth. For the essence of being for the Greeks is *phusis* – that illumination that emerges of its own accord and is mediated by nothing else, but is itself the middle. This middle is that which remains as commencement, that which gathers everything around it – that wherein all beings have their site and are at home as beings" (*Ister* 112-113). The hearth is the self-illumination of *phusis*, nature, the upsurge of a force that continues to gather the things around it, granting them a proper measure and place.

²Descartes' third *Meditation* is invoked many times in Levinas's writings (see *God, Death and Time* 213-218, "The Idea of the Infinite in us", *passim*).

Why does Heidegger heed the poetic Muse rather than the word of God?

III

It is the dark disaster that brings the light. (Writing of the Disaster, 7)

Notes

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Lars Iyer teaches philosophy in the Centre for Knowledge, Science and Society at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne in the UK, and has published many articles on contemporary European philosophy. He has a special interest in the notion of community.

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