

The Politics of Traumatic Temporality

Tina Chanter. *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001. xix + 294 pp.

Within Continental political philosophy, from Arendt's Heideggerianism to Kristevan aesthetics, there is a strain of thinking that diagnoses our own cultural predicament around problematics of time and history, and most significantly, with reference to problems of memory and forgetting in late modern civil society. This problematic, though diagnosed in the terms of multiple discourses, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, aesthetics, cultural studies, post-Holocaust studies, and discourses on the politics of difference, can be briefly summed up by Derrida's claim at the start of *Specters of Marx* that social and political philosophy today must concern itself with the articulation of "a politics of memory, inheritance, and generation."¹ The significance of Tina Chanter's new book, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger*,² should be situated here. *Time, Death, and the Feminine* stresses the importance of a philosophical interrogation of time for understanding Levinas' relationship to Heidegger, Levinas' and Heidegger's relationships to feminist, critical race, and political theory, and the importance of a contemporary reflection on time and history for thinking the relationship between democracy and difference. Further, Chanter provocatively situates her own practice of reading and writing within an inherited responsibility to the past.

Chanter's work has always insisted on the laborious reading of history and philosophy that feminist, critical race, and political theories must confront, as well as—against certain strains in philosophy that would render philosophy distinct from the social and the political—the importance of the historical context of philosophical thought. Against those who abandon philosophy and history in political analysis—in both its implications and ground—and those who maintain that philosophy is apolitical, Chanter treads an indispensable, though often sacrificed, border. Her work on Irigaray, Kristeva, Kofman, Levinas, Derrida, Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan (among others) never fails to question the rigorous ground from which feminist theory and political analysis must arise. Chanter's work is, moreover, exemplary in her willingness to confront the difficulty of figuring what it means to be a reader of philosophy and what it means to inherit a responsibility to the past in one's own thinking. Her latest book, *Time, Death, and the*

Feminine, is no exception to her quite relentless task of binding philosophy, history, and politics and is indispensable reading for those of us concerned with the destiny of Continental philosophy in political discourses.

Time, Death, and the Feminine traces the effect of Heidegger's critique of the traditional concept of time in the work of Levinas, and further interrogates the role of sexual difference in Levinas' reading of Heidegger and reconceptualization of time through the ethical relation. Heidegger criticizes the history of Western metaphysics according to its privileging of the now or of the present. He replaces the metaphysics of presence with an ecstatic temporality of past, present, and future based on Dasein's finitude as influencing the existential experience of time. In ecstatic temporality, the future is privileged, but not at the expense of the other temporal modalities that are co-extensive and equi-primordial. Rather, the dimension of the future highlights the interworkings and complexity of a more originary temporality. Levinas finds Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence to be insightful, but ultimately faults him for falling into the same kind of privileging as has happened within the history of metaphysics. For Levinas, Heidegger's privileging of death as the ultimate limit that gives meaning to my life in resoluteness returns him to a privileging of the same. Levinas insists against Heidegger that it is not my own death that gives meaning and individuates, but is rather the death of the other.

In chapter one, Chanter tracks the fate of sexual difference in the relationships among Heidegger's ontological difference, Levinas' rethinking of existence and ethics, and the ambiguity of the concepts of time that inhabit the relationship between Heidegger and Levinas. She demonstrates the centrality of the concept of sexual difference in Levinas' reworking of Heideggerian temporality. The centrality of sexual difference is constant throughout *Time, Death, and the Feminine* insofar as part of the task of this text is to argue that sexual difference is structurally resonant in Levinasian ethics. However, Chanter never abandons Levinas even in her most skeptical of moments. Rather, she moves beyond any naïve positionality of oneself as 'for' or 'against' Levinas and insists that Levinas' relationship to feminism must remain problematic, but must nevertheless remain. Nevertheless, though the title of Chanter's text promises to focus on concepts of time and sexual difference, Chanter does not dispense with the equally important dimension of materiality in Levinasian temporality and its relationship to Heideggerian ontology and the critique of metaphysical presence, which is the focus

of chapters two and three. In *Otherwise Than Being*,³ the culminating text of many years of thinking on time and materiality, the ethical relation itself is understood as sensibility. Further, it is precisely through an interrogation of materiality that Levinas' critique of Heideggerian time is made concrete—and its political implications thereby rendered visible. Levinas highlights the sense in which *Being and Time*⁴ lacks a materiality that exceeds the equipmental framework of the world and seeks a meaning in existence that overflows the utility of the thing, whether in enjoyment, horror, or delirium.

In chapter four, Chanter examines a shift in Levinas' rethinking of time through a reading of his relationship to Heidegger's critique of the metaphysics of presence. In the earlier works, Levinas criticized Heidegger's privileging of the future through an analysis of the dynamism of the instant as that which has been neglected by the history of philosophy. He sought an understanding of the present in which meaning overflows and resists presentation, and thereby re-presentation. Levinas' later thinking of temporality negotiates less the problematic of the instant and instead rests attention on the alterity of the past and of the future. In "Enigma and Phenomenon,"⁵ for instance, Levinas maintains that alterity is irreducible to the requisite phenomenality of phenomenology and instead marks alterity as a trace. Levinas' shift of attention in his later work emphasizes the future as tied to the Other and the past as an archaic past older than subjectivity or the presence of representation, a past that might be described as an inscription without memory that indelibly binds me to it as an inheritance and responsibility. Levinas' thinking of the ethical relation as the time of an archaic I/Other of responsibility challenges (with Heidegger) the traditional privilege of presence, but also challenges (against Heidegger) the conception of time of fundamental ontology.

Chapters five through eight reveal the ultimate significance of Chanter's examination of time in Heidegger, Levinas, and—more generally—social and political philosophy. In these chapters, I am most struck by Chanter's willingness as a philosopher to take seriously the psychoanalytic concept of trauma in relation to Levinas, Heidegger, and political theory, and moreover, to thematize her situation as a reader from within this very time. Many philosophers too quickly dismiss psychoanalysis, rather than confronting the seriousness of psychoanalysis as both a pervasive discourse in contemporary life and a radicalization of phenomenology that attempts to understand the historical conditions of emergence and significance of psychoanalytic dis-

course itself, as it appears, for instance, in the work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Psychoanalysis seeks to make visible the less visible dimensions of intersubjectivity as an exposure to alterity. Psychoanalytic discourse, as a historical discourse that does not claim metaphysical truth, is one of the only contemporary sites that can bring precision to problematics of time and difference in modernity. For Chanter, as well as for Levinas, the concept of 'trauma' is indispensable to contemporary attempts to figure the possibility of historical reflection in late modern society. In pushing the implications of Levinas' use of trauma as a marker for the ethical relation and time, Chanter further directs us toward the meaning of our own inherited responsibility. It is within a traumatic temporality that Chanter provocatively situates herself and her relationship to Heidegger and Levinas by asking what it might mean to be a reader, today, of these thinkers. What is one's responsibility to the past? How does one inherit an obligation to reading and re-reading, to thinking, and to confronting one's exposure to another? How does a reader undergo or suffer a text? And, what might be a legitimate response when legitimacy seems to have broken down in the rise of technological innovations in modern practices of violence? What does it mean to write ethically today? What might it mean to remember that which is precisely inscribed without memory, and how might one respond given that any response will always already betray and must betray?

Though Levinas outright rejects psychoanalysis rather than providing a more nuanced reading of its relationship to phenomenology and modernity as a historical discourse on the visible and the invisible, he makes use of 'trauma' in order to open a conception of time that refuses the linearity of Enlightenment thought and politics and the 'being-toward-death' of ontological temporality. Levinas insists that there is a traumatic temporality that is first and foremost ethical. The danger of refusing a reflection on time is well shown in the dominant political discourse in America, contract theory, and it is precisely the concept of trauma that foregrounds the necessity of a reflection on time in the philosophy of democracy. If the first social contract theorists recognized an immemorial past that complicated thinking the ground of modern civil society, the significance of immemoriality that pervades the thinking of that ground is collapsed through the importation of not just a Cartesian conception of the subject and an Enlightenment concept of reason, but also through the presupposition that the task of social and political philosophy is to *supplement* that

absence of the past in the present through linearity. Linear time, even in Rousseau's devaluation of 'progress', is established through certain naturalized 'kinds', i.e., sexual difference, heterosexuality, and the Western distinction between the 'primitive' and the 'civilized'—all of which are figured according to the (initially impossible) thought of a passage from nature to culture.⁶ Though Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud all demonstrate, in their own ways, the historically situated concept of 'nature' in modernity that affects the context of French and German philosophy, contract theory has remained dominant in American social and political philosophy—and to such an extent that French philosophy is often criticized for being apolitical rather than read with an eye to the insights it provides into social and political philosophy.

Both Levinasian ethics and psychoanalytic discourse provide a different understanding of the inscription of immemoriality, albeit understood quite differently, within the linear time of thought and language and its challenge to the epistemological subject of traditional political thought. The concept of trauma is significant today because it marks precisely a force within the present that refuses thematization and rationalism and complicates linear conceptions of time that ground much of social and political philosophy. Heideggerian ontology demonstrates an *existential* temporality that conditions and problematizes linear time through ontological difference. But further, Levinas' radicalization of phenomenology shows up a temporality that refuses even the Being of beings—thereby pointing to a sense in which Heidegger's thought remains indebted to a certain Western problematic of same-ing that refuses temporal recuperation, understood either traditionally or ontologically. Levinas' thinking of ethical, traumatic temporality demonstrates the necessity of a critique of rationalism in political philosophy, against those who are afraid that such a critique amounts to the ruination of democracy itself.

The notion of trauma marks the temporality in which reflection finds itself thrown. Levinas' use of the word 'trauma' conveys a temporality of relationality that exceeds the time of memory and history but is also in a complicated relationship to it. Levinas insists on a temporality of the ethical relation that exceeds the necessary 'recollections' that open a synchronization of the past, present, and future. Exceeding the present of representation, Levinasian 'trauma' gestures toward a conception of loss, though he refrains from using this word, in which the object of loss can never be properly established. If I use the term 'loss' to explicate Levinas' use of 'trauma', it is not in any nostalgic

sense of or hope for 'recovery', as it might be figured in Heideggerian, Arendtian, or Irigarayan *destruktion*, or Enlightenment rational *supplementation*, or Habermasian community. Rather, 'loss' would signal precisely, as it does in modern psychoanalysis, an absolute loss that eludes representation. The term loss can signal something once present, but in the psychoanalytic framework, because 'what' is lost always already evades, attention is turned to *who* has lost, a focus that reveals a further articulation of subjectivity as exposure to alterity. If we understand loss as the loss of something that was once present; then we essentially comply with an elaboration of loss and trauma that is in an easy relation to experience. Yet, it is precisely the understanding of experience, as well as subject 'positionality', that is put in question by the concept of trauma. What is traumatic about loss is that in loss something is essentially not experienced—which means that something is essentially not presented, the condition of possibility of any representation. Rather, trauma reveals the loss of experience itself. Representation is compromised not by not being able to re-present something that was once present, but by the fact that nothing was presented to begin with—a problematic realized most forcefully today in post-Holocaust art. Nevertheless, this would mean that loss involves a strange phenomenality, or perhaps more strongly, precisely the absence of phenomenality in its disruption of structures of intentionality, perception, and representation. Trauma signals the very disabling of our systems of representation, perception, the subject's 'positionality' within language, and our understanding of time and experience. For Levinas, the concept of trauma inscribes the very absence of experience within memory through a fundamental obsession. Trauma signals a perceptual system in crisis, a troubling of representation, but also a kind of 'memory' or 'temporality' that cannot know itself. Levinas formulates the 'non-experience' of the ethical relation in the concrete as that which *cannot be forgotten*, thereby establishing a "memory" of responsibility prior to the proper establishment of memory and forgetting as ordinarily, or even phenomenologically, understood.

If Chanter situates her reading of Levinas within the traumatic temporality of responsibility and inheritance, part of her *response* recognizes the importance of a critique from the perspective of sexual difference. In *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Re-writing of the Philosophers*,⁷ Chanter argues that Levinas' relationship to the feminine is one that is essentially linked to the eventual exclusion of *eros* in relationship to ethics. She claims that the development of Levinasian ethics from Levinas' earliest work

to his late magnum opus, *Otherwise Than Being*, is correlative to the devaluation of *eros* and the feminine as sites of access to alterity. Though he increasingly insists on the 'sensibility' of ethics, the erotic is increasingly downplayed in his thought. By the time of *Otherwise Than Being*, the feminine only appears as 'maternity'. In *Time, Death, and the Feminine*, Chanter further interrogates the structural role of the feminine in Levinasian ethics and finds the feminine to mark the distinction between ethics and politics in his thought, a distinction that makes problematic any easy relationship between Levinas and feminism.

In a footnote toward the end of the book, Chanter takes Levinas to task for unreflectively casting the dying mother in childbirth as the ultimate image of self-sacrifice in an interview with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger.⁸ Though Levinas consciously dissociates this 'ethical example' from the existence of concrete women, Chanter nevertheless insists on a suspicion that must accompany a reading of this claim. Chanter claims that it is quite impossible for a feminist consciousness to disassociate death from childbirth as the ultimate expression of ethical sacrifice from the history of violence against women and the institutionalization of gendered roles of self-sacrifice. Chanter's reflections on Levinasian ethics, time, and the feminine gesture toward a tension between 'self-sacrifice' as an ethical model that contributes to a reconceptualization of the political and subjectivity beyond Enlightenment emphases on analytical rationality, transcendental subjectivity, and linear conceptions of time and progress and those institutionalized forms of 'self-sacrifice' that perpetuate social injustice. Chanter's evaluation of the structural role of sexual difference in Levinas' thought leads her to claim that the bifurcation of ethics and politics in his thought is (problematically) indebted to the dubious appropriation of traditional representations of sexual difference.

Levinas' insistence that the imagery of the dying mother is to be dissociated from the existence of concrete existents quickly dismisses the difficulty raised by the ambiguity between transcendental and empirical violence that pervades his philosophical texts, especially *Otherwise Than Being*. His 'dissociation' of the transcendental from the empirical, of the ethical from the politically and historically charged concrete situation in relation to the feminine, results in a self-presentation of his work as insisting on a complete bifurcation of ethics and politics. Though Levinas wants to warn against any collapse of ethics and politics, here it seems that there is no tension at all. The somewhat careless use of the female body and the neglect of the history of violence against women in this context makes the relationship between the eth-

ical and the concrete all the more pressing. The relationship between historical violence, which shapes our concrete identities and memories, and the ethical relation that breaks with history becomes crucial.

As a final note, I would like to suggest not an alternative conclusion to Chanter's indispensable reading of the relationship between the ethics/politics split and sexual difference in Levinas' work, but rather to initiate a discussion for the further interrogation of the relationship between ethics and politics and feminism's uneasy relationship to Levinas through the problematic of violence I raised above. A stronger focus on the relationship between historical and ethical violence in the work of Levinas, especially in *Otherwise Than Being*, reveals an intertwining of ethics and politics that ultimately questions the foundational role of the feminine in his work up to that time. I do not mean to suggest that Levinas' positing of the feminine in his thought is then rendered digestible, but that Levinas' reflections on violence might ultimately provide the very feminist resources necessary to criticize his use of the feminine, especially in the context of a reflection on the tension between ethical and institutionalized sacrifice. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas' reflections on violence radically call into question the seeming bifurcation of ethics and politics in a way perhaps more forceful than does his theorization of the third, but of course not in its absence.

'Talk about ethics' in Levinas' work is always accompanied by images and descriptions of violence that recall concrete, institutionalized forms of violence. He makes use of images of violence generally associated with political injustice in order to signal those 'conceptual possibilities' that mark the ethical relation. The Other strikes, takes one hostage, persecutes, refuses to let sleep. What does it mean to juxtapose a description of the ethical relation specified as traumatic temporality with pervasive images of violence that forcefully recall that which cannot be recalled about the Shoah, but which is simultaneously inscribed as unforgettable? The ambiguity between Levinas' marking of the ethical through reference to historical memories, acts, images, and events of political violence and his insistence that the ethical is not to be confused with any historical event seems to radically oppose ethics to politics, ontology, and history. To confuse the ethical relation with a historical event is to reduce the ethical's 'non-coincidence' with history and politics to a moment in time in which the ethical could be represented, recollected, and synchronized. It is precisely the relation to the Other that breaks with the time of history and memory and reveals an immemorial past that has never traversed the present. However, Levinas also insists that we can never completely escape the

language of ontology, history, and politics. Thus, Levinas' choice of language takes on a specific meaning, especially in *Otherwise Than Being*, a text that attempts a saying irreducible to the said, a language that seeks the very undoing of thematization. How does the recollection of political horror function then?

The 'images' with which Levinas chooses to mark the ethical relation are images that, like the ethical relation, tend to exceed phenomenological description as well. What is common among his exemplifications of the one-for-the-other of substitution as being taken hostage, persecuted, smothered is that these very images also defy description. To speak of *these* images should be complicated and nowise make possible any easy dissociation of the ethical relation from concrete forms of violence. Indeed, it is only on the basis of certain images that the concrete meaning of the ethical relation is signaled. Levinas' images, one might say, turn against themselves. Like those traumatic images that haunt the memories of victims of violence, those images "remembered" fail to establish memory and imagery proper. What causes the remembered image to fail is memory's incapacity to know, to grasp, and to experience its object. Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being*, written under the sign of memory—specifically the memory of the Nazi horror as recounted in the dedication—gestures toward a conceptualization of the relationship between historical and ethical trauma that refuses any simple dissociation of ethics from politics, as he so easily dissociated the dying mother as ethical sacrifice from concrete mothers. Invoking images that cannot be dissociated from the Shoah, Levinas calls the ethical relation traumatic and thereby emphasizes a quite ambiguous and complex intertwining of ethics and politics. Indeed, this intertwining of the ethical and political through transcendental and empirical violence suggests that certain events and "experiences" provide access to a more fundamental 'relation without relation' of responsibility that ultimately grants social and political relations their meaning in the concrete. Is it precisely these traumatic events that give rise to a different conception of time indissociable from a social organization articulated as otherwise than responsibility? And does Levinas' treatment of the feminine throughout his work, but especially with reference to the dying mother, forget the empirical violence indissociable from transcendental violence in women's histories?

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NOTES

1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xix; originally published as *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1993), 15.
2. Tina Chanter, *Time, Death, and the Feminine: Levinas with Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or beyond Essence*, trans. A. Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981); originally published as *Autrement qu'être ou Au-delà de l'essence*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
4. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980); originally published as *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1979).
5. Emmanuel Levinas, "Enigma and Phenomenon," trans. A. Lingis with revisions by R. Bernasconi and S. Critchley, in *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 65-78; originally published as "Énigme et phénomène," in *En Découvrant L'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger* (Paris: Vrin, 1974), 203-16.
6. See especially Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994).
7. Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
8. Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, *Que dirait Eurydice? What would Eurydice say? Conversations avec/with Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger* (Paris: BLE Atelier, 1997), 27, quoted in *Time, Death, and the Feminine*, 293-94.

The Other Husserl and the Standard Interpretation

Donn Welton. *The Other Husserl: Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. xvi + 496 pp. Bibliography and Index.

Donn Welton's book, *The Other Husserl: Horizons of Transcendental Phenomenology*, is an impressive achievement.¹ It offers the reader a comprehensive survey of Husserlian phenomenology in all of its complexity and richness. Welton bases his reconstruction of the methodological shifts that mark various stages in Husserl's development on the full scope of his published works and on many as yet unpublished manuscripts. He also exhibits a remarkable command of various contemporary readings of Husserl. The thesis of the book is that the apparently diverse readings of Husserl by commentators from the contemporary traditions of analytic philosophy, deconstruction, and critical theory in fact share several common themes, that together make for a "standard interpretation" of Husserl. He makes the case that this standard interpretation offers "at best a truncated version of the scope of phenomenological method" because it tends to be founded almost exclusively

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